

Building Early Childhood Collaboration through Cultural Projects: A Descriptive Study in a Local Learning Context

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Abstract

A 21st-century skill that must be taught from a young age is collaboration. This skill emphasizes social values, empathy, and shared responsibility in the context of early childhood education. It also includes group cooperation. The purpose of this study is to explain how a cultural project based on local knowledge from Riau Malay might encourage cooperation among young children in a kindergarten setting. The research employed a descriptive design and a qualitative methodology. Teachers and students at a kindergarten in Pekanbaru who used the cultural initiative in their lesson plans made up the research subjects. Participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation were used to gather data, which were subsequently subjected to data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing methodologies for analysis. The findings demonstrated that children's empathy, shared responsibility, and positive social connections may be fostered through local culture-based activities like folktale performances, traditional games, and the creation of regional musical instruments. Teachers served as facilitators, directing group dynamics and incorporating cultural values from the area into the educational process. These results attest to the effectiveness of the local wisdom-based cultural initiative in fostering early childhood teamwork and promoting the preservation of Riau Malay culture.

Keywords: collaboration, early childhood, cultural project, local wisdom, Malay Riau

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration is one of the most important 21st-century skills to cultivate from a young age (Sudarti & Diana, 2023). The development of social, communication, and problem-solving skills—all essential components of holistic learning in the current era—begins with collaboration (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Collaboration in early childhood education (PAUD) encompasses more than just teamwork; it also involves learning to value diversity, hear what others have to say, and create shared meaning via social interaction (Rahma et al., 2023). Regretfully, research indicates that individualistic learning approaches are still prevalent in many Indonesian early childhood education facilities (Rantina et al., 2023). Learning exercises frequently place more emphasis on individual success than group results. Instead of working as a team, children are frequently instructed to finish chores alone. Consequently, their capacity to collaborate, bargain, and reach decisions is still restricted (Hasanah & Nurjanah, 2022).

One possible tactic for encouraging teamwork from a young age is the project-based learning (PjBL) method (Anisa et al., 2024). Through practical experiences, small-group collaboration, and the creation of concrete items that are applicable to their daily lives, this paradigm promotes learning in youngsters. PjBL fosters social skills, communication abilities, and a sense of shared responsibility in addition to cognitive development (Thomas, 2000; Kurnianto et al., 2024). Project-based learning can be combined with regional values in Indonesia's rich and varied cultural setting to increase the learning's significance and relevance. There are several chances to establish contextual cooperation through local customs and cultural practices (Majid, 2021; Sinaro et al., 2023). The incorporation of Riau Malay culture into early childhood education activities is one intriguing example.

Strong social qualities including respect for others, cooperation, and debate are hallmarks of Riau Malay culture (Halim & Syarif, 2022). Collaboration is naturally encouraged by these ideals since everyone in the community is educated to support one another and keep the peace. Introducing this culture can help establish the cooperative habit at a young age in the setting of early childhood education (PAUD). Clogs and cublak-cublak suweng are examples of traditional games that can be utilized as an enjoyable, cooperative learning tool (Sewi & Mailasari, 2023). Through these games, kids learn how to plan as a group, adjust to their classmates, and control their emotions. The Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum's active and contextual learning tenets are in line with these activities (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Apart from games, cultural project activities like painting Malay songket themes, acting out folktales, or building tiny traditional dwellings also offer significant collaboration spaces (Rantina et al., 2023). Along with learning about their ancestry, children also learn how to work together to create art from conception to completion.

In early childhood learning groups, social ties are strengthened through the use of local language and symbols (Satwiko et al., 2023; Nur et al., 2023). Using Malay words like "gotong royong" or "sepakat" in the classroom can enhance the meaning of cooperation in a local setting and foster a sense of cultural belonging.

According to earlier studies, project-based learning that incorporates local culture can help young children develop their social and teamwork abilities (Anisa et al., 2024; Rahma et al., 2023). Through project activities, kids learn how to support one another, encourage the ideas of their friends, and work together to solve issues. However, as facilitators who establish a collaborative learning environment, instructors are essential (Yuni et al., 2024). Teachers must create engaging yet difficult activities, encourage constructive interactions among students, and guarantee that all students have the chance to take part. The ability of teachers to comprehend local culture is essential to increasing the significance of learning. An excellent social laboratory for studying how traditional values might be incorporated into contemporary teaching methods is the Malay-rich local environment of Riau (Halim & Syarif, 2022). Teachers can restore local knowledge values that have started to wane in the face of globalization by implementing a cultural project model.

The kindergarten culture-based collaborative learning process was mapped using qualitative descriptive study (Kurnianto et al., 2024). Researchers were better able to comprehend classroom dynamics—how kids cooperate, how teachers encourage it, and what elements encourage or impede teamwork—through observation, interviews, and recording. This study also emphasizes the part cultural initiatives have in forming kids' personalities. Children gain social skills and a sense of pride in their local identity when they work together on cultural projects (Majid, 2021). This is essential to creating a generation of cooperative people who are rooted in their culture. It is anticipated that early childhood education (PAUD) teachers will find the research findings useful in creating project-based learning that incorporates local knowledge. Local culture can be used by educators as a valuable and pertinent contextual learning tool for kids.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how early childhood collaboration can be fostered within a local learning context through the implementation of a Riau Malay cultural project. It is anticipated that the results will support the more humanistic, cooperative, and culturally grounded early childhood education (PAUD) paradigm.

METHOD

In order to fully characterize the process of fostering collaborative abilities in young children through cultural project activities carried out in a locally based learning environment, this study employs a qualitative approach using descriptive methods. Because children's collaboration is a complicated social process that can

only be comprehended by observing behavior, interactions, and the surrounding cultural environment, this method was used (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Sugiyono, 2022). Therefore, the goal of this study is to comprehend children's collaborative dynamics while they participate in project activities that uphold Riau Malay traditional values rather than to verify a hypothesis.

The researcher's involvement in this study was participatory; they were the main tool, serving as both a facilitator and an observer while being on the ground (Moleong, 2019). In order to create a relaxed and natural environment throughout the activities, the researcher built strong relationships with both the teachers and the children. In addition to gathering data, the researcher also observed the children's facial expressions, body language, and social interactions throughout group projects. Because young children need the presence of familiar adults to create authentic conduct during observations, this strategy is deemed essential.

Two kindergartens in Pekanbaru City, Riau Province, that have continuously used local culture-based learning were the sites of the study. Because the schools were actively executing thematic project activities that include Malay cultural components, like traditional sports, creating local musical instruments, and presenting folktales, the settings were purposefully chosen. Pre-observation, the execution of a cultural project, and post-activity evaluation were all included in the three-month study, which ran from March to May 2025. Every activity took place in classrooms, schoolyards, and outdoor spaces that the kids utilized for their projects.

Forty children in group B, ages five to six, participated actively in the project activities. Two principals and three more class instructors served as key informants. The children who participated were chosen on the basis of their ability to interact socially in a school setting and their attendance at early childhood education for a minimum of one year. The participating teachers had completed project-based learning training and had over five years of classroom experience. Purposive sampling was employed in the subject selection process, which was based on the features' fit with the study's goals (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2018).

Both primary and secondary data were used in this investigation. In-depth interviews with teachers to examine learning methodologies and children's responses, participant observation of children's cooperative activities during cultural projects, and activity documentation in the form of images, videos, and children's work were all used to gather primary data. Project portfolios, teacher notes, and

lesson planning documents (RPPH) were examples of secondary data. The utilization of this combination of data kinds allowed for a more thorough comprehension of the children's collaboration process.

Researchers created the study tools based on the learning context of cultural initiatives and early childhood collaboration theory. A collaboration observation sheet with indicators of the capacity to cooperate, exchange tasks, communicate, and exhibit empathy served as the main tool (Nurjanah & Hasanah, 2022). Teachers' viewpoints were also investigated using a semi-structured interview guide, and choosing supporting visual evidence was made easier with the use of a documentation guide. To guarantee content validity, three specialists in early childhood education and Malay culture approved each instrument before it was used. Field readability testing, editorial correction, and indication evaluation were all part of the validation process.

Three primary steps were taken in order to obtain the data. The first method is participant observation, in which researchers watched firsthand how kids worked together at different points during the project, from preparation and execution to work presentation. Second, teachers were interviewed in-depth to learn about their responsibilities in promoting a culture of respect for diversity, sharing, and cooperation throughout the project. Third, the findings' validity was reinforced by the use of activity documentation to back up the field data. After that, all of the data was collected and organized into thorough field notes.

Data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing were all part of the interactive data analysis process that followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2018) approach. Following the selection of pertinent data at the start of the data collection procedure, the researchers organized the data into thematic categories such "collaboration in small groups," "role sharing," and "social responses to peers." Descriptive narratives that depicted the children's real conduct in the field were used to display the categorized data. Researchers came to conclusions from this presentation that were related to the ideas of local culture-based learning and collaboration theory.

Triangulation of sources, methods, and time was used to ensure the validity of the data. By contrasting the findings of teacher interviews and activity documentation with the findings of children's observations, source triangulation was carried out. While time triangulation used repeated observations in various project

activities to evaluate the consistency of children's collaborative behavior, technique triangulation involved using multiple data collection methods for the same occurrence (Moleong, 2019). In order to make sure that the researcher's interpretations matched the real circumstances in the field, the analysis results were also sent back to the teachers via a member check procedure.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural Project Activities as a Space for Children to Collaborate

According to observations, cultural project activities used in two Pekanbaru kindergartens give kids a good opportunity to practice teamwork. Children are actively involved in the planning and execution of teacher-developed projects. For instance, youngsters work in small groups of four to five to create mini *kompany*, a type of wooden box, using discarded materials. They talk about assigning responsibilities, including who will cut the can, decorate it, and play with the final product.

This practice illustrates how cultural initiatives function as a social space where kids may learn how to handle relationships, make concessions, and take responsibility in addition to imparting local knowledge. This result is consistent with study by Rantina et al. (2023), which claims that project-based learning gives kids the chance to learn via collaborative, contextual experiences. To put it another way, kids not only do a task but also form deep social bonds in the process.

Additionally, Malay learning is characterized by a sense of cooperation, which is fostered by cultural activities like group weaving of coconut leaves and Zapin dancing. Teachers play the role of facilitators, teaching kids to respect and listen to one another's opinions. This bolsters the research findings of Anisa et al. (2024), which show that instructors can help youngsters develop a feeling of social responsibility by serving as collaborative facilitators.

The Ways in Which Children Interact and Communicate When Working Together

Children's communication styles evolve from simple interactions to cooperative communication during the course of the project. Children typically work alone in groups throughout the early phases, but with instructor assistance, they start to talk and come to an agreement. Children debate the paint colors to be used and who

will be in charge of affixing the ornaments, for instance, when working on a project to build a tiny Malay traditional house.

According to Parten's (1932) theory of children's social play stages, this shift signifies a shift from parallel play to cooperative play. This is supported by recent research by Nurjanah and Hasanah (2022), which shows that cooperative projects can hasten the development of social interactions in children ages 5 to 6.

Teachers also noted that after participating in group conversations, formerly silent kids started talking more. This supports Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development, which holds that children pick up knowledge through social interactions with more experienced adults and their peers. Cultural programs therefore act as sociocultural settings that foster children's social and linguistic development.

The Function of Teachers as Cooperative Mediators

In order to create a collaborative environment in the classroom, teachers are essential. According to the results of the interviews, teachers serve as social mediators, introducing kids to the cooperative principles and local cultural experiences. Malay folktales, like "Putri Kaca Mayang," which is replete with the idea of helping one another, are told by teachers to start off activities. They then relate these tales to the next group activity. Teachers use a reflective approach in every assignment, such as asking students how they feel about their classmates who assist them in finishing a task, to help them understand the value of their peers' contributions. This strategy is in line with study by Rahma et al. (2023), which discovered that children's empathy and social awareness are increased when teachers foster social reflection. Teachers often modify project-based learning techniques to fit the local environment. For example, they might use Riau-sourced natural materials (coconut shells, rattan, and leaves) for art projects. Through the experience of sharing common values, learning that is anchored in local culture helps children develop a sense of community and improves their identity (Sudarti and Diana, 2023).

The Malay cultural values provide as a basis for cooperation

According to field research, children's collaborative conduct is based on Riau Malay cultural values like togetherness, civility, mutual collaboration (gotong

royong), and collective responsibility. For instance, in the age-old game "Bakiak Panjang," kids learn to sync their steps to the beat of the group so they may all cross the finish line simultaneously. These qualities are not just recreational pursuits; they are also traditional representations of societal peace (Majid, 2021; Sinaro et al., 2023).

Children benefit from the project's cultural integration by learning that cooperation, not rivalry, is the key to group success. This supports Satwiko et al.'s (2023) research findings that social cohesion is fostered from an early age through schooling based on local culture. In this regard, early childhood education (ECE) focuses on developing social character via the absorption of cultural values in addition to academic success.

Children can jointly generate knowledge through culture-based collaborative experiences, according to social constructivism. Through social interactions, children not only mimic but also negotiate cultural meanings. According to Papert (1993), this process is known as constructionism, and it refers to the learning that takes place when kids actively produce something significant within their social and cultural environment.

Collaboration and Strengthening The Social Empathy of Children

Cultural project activities also have an effect on children's social empathy, according to teacher observations and thoughts. Youngsters who had previously acted selfishly started to care for their friends who were having difficulties. For instance, while creating Malay masks, a number of kids unasked to assist a classmate who was struggling with cutting paper. As an early sign of empathy, this shows the emergence of spontaneous helping behavior (Denham et al., 2018). This phenomena shows how group projects foster a healthy emotional environment where kids may learn controlling their emotions and empathizing with others. International research published in the Early Childhood Education Journal by Han et al. (2021) supports this finding, indicating that group-based project activities can enhance young children's social-emotional competence. As a result, working together in a local cultural setting helps youngsters grow morally by strengthening their empathic character characteristics and social abilities. Future prosocial behavior will be more sophisticated as a result of this empathy.

Implications for Cultural Preservation and Contextual Learning

The findings of this study have significant ramifications for how early childhood education institutions teach, especially when it comes to creating models that include regional culture into cooperative learning strategies. It has been demonstrated that cultural initiatives, like those carried out at the research kindergarten, enhance children's educational experiences, give learning greater purpose, and aid in the preservation of Riau Malay values in the contemporary world.

Since the cultural context offers a natural scaffold for children to learn the idea of unity, teachers should be consistently encouraged to create activities that are anchored in the local culture. According to UNESCO (2022), contextual early childhood education fosters the development of tolerant and cooperative global citizens while fortifying cultural identity. Thus, this study supports the notion that a cultural project-based learning method might be a calculated substitute for maintaining local knowledge in educational settings while encouraging cooperation in kids from a young age.

Overall, the study's conclusions show that active participation in neighborhood cultural initiatives run by teachers fosters early childhood teamwork. Children learn how to work together, communicate, and exchange cultural meanings through cultural projects. While Riau Malay cultural norms provide a moral basis for cooperative behavior, teachers act as mediators, assisting kids in navigating their social duties. These results highlight the significance of incorporating social constructivism and local wisdom pedagogy into Indonesian learning practices, while also addressing the research challenge and extending collaborative learning theory in the context of early childhood education based on local culture.

CONCLUSION

Through activities including creating traditional musical instruments, playing folk games, and reciting folktales, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of cultural initiatives based on native Riau Malay wisdom in fostering early childhood collaborative abilities. Along with learning how to collaborate, kids also absorb societal ideals like accountability, respect for one another, and harmony within the group. Teachers are essential in fostering meaningful, inclusive, and contextual

learning while bolstering kids' cultural identities. These results support the social constructivism theory of Vygotsky, which holds that social skills are formed via meaningful interactions in a cultural setting. One pedagogical approach that combines social constructivism and local wisdom pedagogy is cultural project-based learning. Therefore, in order to educate intellectual, socially characterized, and cultured children, early childhood education institutions are encouraged by laws that support the sustainable implementation of culture-based education and are urged to include local wisdom into cooperative activities.

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