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Improving communication and creativity in elementary civics: A PjBL action research on unity in ethnic diversity

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Abstract
This study addresses the low communication skills and creativity among third-grade students at MI NU Mafatihul Ulum Sunggingan Kudus, attributed to conventional teacher-centered learning methods. To enhance student engagement, this research implements the Project-Based Learning (PjBL) model in Civic Education (PPKn), focusing on unity in ethnic diversity. Employing a convergent mixed-method design, the study combines qualitative data (observations, interviews) with quantitative pre/post-test questionnaires analyzed via t-test. Conducted as a two-cycle Classroom Action Research (CAR), each cycle comprised planning, implementation, observation, and reflection. Participants included 29 students (15 female, 14 male). Data were collected through observations, interviews, documentation, and evaluations of discussions and worksheets, then analyzed via data reduction, triangulation, and Paired-T Test. Results demonstrated moderate improvements: communication scores rose from 81.07 (Cycle I) to 81.97 (Cycle II), while creativity increased from 86.31 to 91.17. The Paired-T Test confirmed statistical significance ($p < 0.05$), indicating PjBL's effectiveness in fostering 21st-century skills. These findings underscore PjBL's potential as a student-centered approach to elevate communication and creativity in Civic Education.

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INTRODUCTION

Pancasila and Citizenship Education (PPKn) is a compulsory subject in Indonesia's national curriculum, mandated for all students across formal education levels (Magdalena et al., 2020). This subject plays a pivotal role in the Indonesian education system by shaping students into responsible citizens who contribute to their communities, nation, and state. Through PPKn, learners are expected to develop strong character, democratic values, and a sense of accountability (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2013). One of the core topics in PPKn at the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) or Elementary School (SD) level is "Unity in the Diversity of Ethnic Nations," which aims to instill values of tolerance, national unity, and social cohesion from an early age (Desiani et al., 2022). Given Indonesia's multicultural society,

fostering social awareness and mutual respect among students is essential to maintaining harmony in diverse environments, such as Kudus Regency in Central Java, which exhibits significant ethnic and cultural diversity.

Despite its importance, the implementation of PPKn in Class III of MI NU Mafatihul Ulum Sunggingan Kudus remains largely teacher-centered, relying on conventional methods. Classroom observations and teacher interviews reveal that students are predominantly passive, with limited engagement in discussions or creative expression (May 2024). A preliminary survey of 25 third-grade students indicated that 80% rarely participated actively in discussions, while 80% relied on peers' ideas for creative tasks. This suggests that students' communication skills and creativity in understanding unity in diversity remain underdeveloped. Given the demands of 21st-century education—where communication and creativity are critical competencies—innovative, student-centered approaches are urgently needed (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2019; Sari & Astuti, 2022).

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) has emerged as a promising pedagogical model to address these challenges. PjBL engages students in collaborative, real-world projects, enhancing their ability to plan, problem-solve, and present ideas—key components of communication and creativity (Kokotsaki et al., 2016; Christian, 2021). This approach aligns with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, as elementary students at the concrete operational stage learn most effectively through hands-on activities and peer collaboration (Piaget, 1954). Initial observations at MI NU Mafatihul Ulum revealed that 80% of students were passive during group discussions on ethnic diversity (May 2024). Implementing PjBL through culturally relevant projects—such as creating cultural maps, performing traditional arts, or designing mini-books about Indonesian tribes—could deepen conceptual understanding while fostering tolerance, creativity, and communicative competence (Gunawan et al., 2024).

Prior studies have demonstrated PjBL's efficacy in civics education and related subjects (Yuniati & Indriayu, 2024). For instance, Laili et al. (2025) found that PjBL significantly enhanced fourth-grade students' creativity in arts and culture (SBdP) subjects, with posttest scores (95.82) surpassing pretest averages (71.47) and a high N-Gain index of 0.85. Similarly, Pratama et al. (2022) found that interactive PjBL significantly improved students' understanding of ethnic diversity, while Hikhmalia (2021) highlighted its role in strengthening social attitudes. Additionally, Setiawan et al. (2023) observed that PjBL, combined with picture card media, enhanced student creativity. However, these studies did not thoroughly examine PjBL's impact on students' communication skills during collaborative work or the verbal/nonverbal expression of ideas. Furthermore, while Setiawan et al. (2023) explored creativity, their focus was on media rather than the holistic PjBL process. This study aims to bridge these gaps by investigating how PjBL enhances both communication and creativity in third-grade PPKn lessons on ethnic

diversity, emphasizing the collaborative process that stimulates idea-sharing and innovation.

This research applies PjBL to PPKn lessons on "Unity in the Diversity of Ethnic Nations" at MI NU Mafatihul Ulum Sunggingan Kudus, with a focus on improving communication and creativity. The findings are expected to contribute to active learning practices in madrasas and serve as a reference for educators in adopting student-centered approaches.

METHOD

This study employed a classroom action research (CAR) approach with a convergent mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection to comprehensively evaluate the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PjBL) in Civics education. The research design was selected to simultaneously examine both the learning process and outcomes, particularly in developing students' understanding of Unity in Diversity while enhancing their communication skills and creativity (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). The CAR framework followed the iterative model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), consisting of four recursive phases: planning, action implementation, systematic observation, and critical reflection. This cyclical process was conducted across two complete iterations to allow for progressive refinement of the pedagogical intervention.

The study was conducted with third-grade students at MI NU Mafatihul Ulum Sunggingan Kudus, a population selected based on developmental considerations and curricular alignment. At this educational stage, students typically demonstrate concrete-operational cognitive abilities (Piaget, 1954) and increasing capacity for collaborative learning, making them particularly receptive to PjBL approaches. The class of 29 students provided sufficient scope for both individual assessment and group dynamic analysis while remaining manageable for in-depth qualitative investigation. This sample size aligns with recommendations for classroom-based action research by Fraenkel et al. (2019), who suggest that such studies typically involve single classes where intensive observation is possible.

Data collection incorporated multiple complementary methods to ensure comprehensive assessment. Systematic classroom observations focused on documenting both student and teacher behaviors during PjBL implementation, with particular attention to emerging communication patterns and creative processes. These observations were guided by a structured protocol assessing four key communication dimensions: clarity of oral expression, confidence in public presentation, quality of peer feedback, and effectiveness of nonverbal communication. Similarly, creativity was evaluated through four indicators: idea originality, adaptive problem-solving, output distinctiveness, and improvisational flexibility during project execution. This multi-dimensional assessment approach draws on established frameworks for evaluating 21st century skills (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2019).

Complementing the observational data, pre- and post-intervention questionnaires provided quantitative measures of student self-perception regarding their communication abilities and creative confidence. The instrument contained 16 Likert-scale items ($\alpha = .82$), equally divided between the two constructs, with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Sample items included "I feel comfortable sharing my ideas with classmates" (communication) and "I enjoy finding unusual solutions to problems" (creativity). This self-report measure was adapted from validated instruments assessing project-based learning outcomes (Thomas, 2000).

The intervention spanned two complete cycles over four weeks, with each cycle comprising four 70-minute instructional sessions. This duration allowed for adequate project development while maintaining student engagement, consistent with recommendations for elementary-level PjBL implementation (Bell, 2010). The first cycle focused on poster creation about Indonesian ethnic diversity, while the second cycle involved developing and performing cultural mini-dramas - both activities carefully designed to reinforce curricular content while fostering target skills.

Quantitative data analysis employed descriptive statistics and paired-samples t-tests using SPSS software to examine pre-post differences in both observed behaviors and self-reported competencies. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d to determine the practical significance of findings. Qualitative data followed the iterative analysis model of Miles et al. (2018), progressing through data reduction, systematic display, and conclusion verification. This analytical triangulation strengthened the validity of findings while providing rich contextual understanding of the intervention's implementation and effects (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The methodological design addressed several potential limitations through strategic safeguards. To enhance reliability, multiple observers participated in data collection, with inter-rater agreement regularly assessed. The extended intervention period and cyclical design helped mitigate novelty effects, while the mixed-methods approach compensated for the inherent limitations of any single data source. These precautions align with best practices for educational action research (Mertler, 2023), ensuring that findings are both credible and actionable for pedagogical improvement.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The PjBL model applied in this study followed six instructional stages: identifying essential questions, designing project plans, developing a timeline, monitoring project progress, assessing outcomes, and evaluating learning experiences. As an initial stimulus, the teacher presented a video highlighting ethnic diversity in Indonesia. The research was carried out in two cycles, corresponding to the full implementation of the six stages of PjBL. The average scores of third-grade students in Civics before and after the application of the

PjBL model were used to evaluate learning outcomes.

Figure 1. Graph of average scores of third-grade students on the ethnic diversity topic.

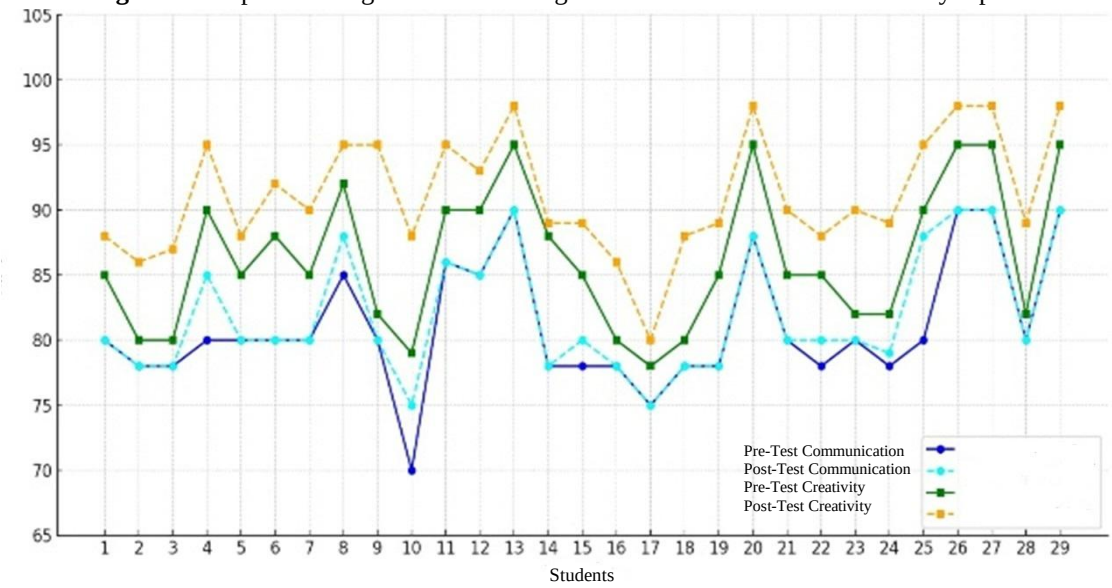

Table 1. Average student scores in communication and creativity across learning cycles.

Aspect	Cycle I	Cycle II	Difference
Communication	81,07	81,97	0,90
Communication	86,31	91,17	4,86

During the first cycle, the learning activity began with a project titled "Creating a Poster on National Ethnic Diversity." Students were divided into small groups to discuss, research, and design posters that embodied the values of Bhinneka Tunggal Ika. Student communication skills began to emerge through active participation in group discussions; however, engagement was uneven, with some students remaining passive and relying on peers. Observations recorded an average communication score of 81.07. The creativity aspect, reflected in students' choices of imagery, slogans, and poster layout, yielded a higher average score of 86.31. Despite these results, reflection on Cycle I revealed several challenges, including inefficient time management, unclear group roles, and limited innovation in utilizing tools and materials.

To address these challenges, several improvements were implemented in Cycle II. The teacher provided more concrete and inspirational examples of project outcomes, clearly explained role assignments at the outset, and allowed more flexible time for practice and improvisation. The project theme for Cycle II was "Mini Drama: Unity in Diversity," in which students were tasked with scriptwriting, role allocation, rehearsals, and performance of a simple drama emphasizing unity amidst ethnic differences. This method offered students greater freedom to express their ideas, enhancing both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Observations indicated a modest yet statistically significant improvement in

communication, with the average score increasing to 81.97. Students demonstrated greater confidence during dialogue, more expressive interactions, and enhanced collaboration. In creativity, a more noticeable improvement was evident, with the average score rising to 91.17, marked by spontaneous improvisations, innovative plot developments, and diverse character portrayals in their performances.

These developments indicate that the application of the PjBL model progressively improved the learning process from Cycle I to Cycle II. The focused interventions, which emphasized collaboration and student expression, significantly enhanced communication and creativity among third-grade students, as confirmed by both observational data and statistical analysis. Reflection on Cycle II revealed that the mini-drama project provided broader opportunities for students to express themselves, while also strengthening their emotional and social involvement in learning. Performing in front of classmates not only deepened their understanding of unity but also bolstered their communication confidence. One student, Ranidya, remarked during an interview, “I became more courageous to speak in front of my friends after participating in the drama because I learned to practice speaking and I am not afraid to be wrong anymore” (Interview, Cycle II). This testimony underscores the role of PjBL in creating meaningful and lasting learning experiences through expressive media like drama.

The teacher concluded that the PjBL approach in Civics education effectively fosters two essential student competencies: communication and creativity. This is corroborated by the consistent improvements observed across both learning cycles. These improvements were not only reflected in the students’ quantitative scores but also in their behavior, self-confidence, and the originality of ideas presented during their projects. Initially, many students exhibited passivity and disengagement; however, following the PjBL intervention, most students became more enthusiastic, expressive, and creative. These findings are illustrated in the graph and descriptive statistical data below.

Figure 2. Graph of average increases in student communication and creativity

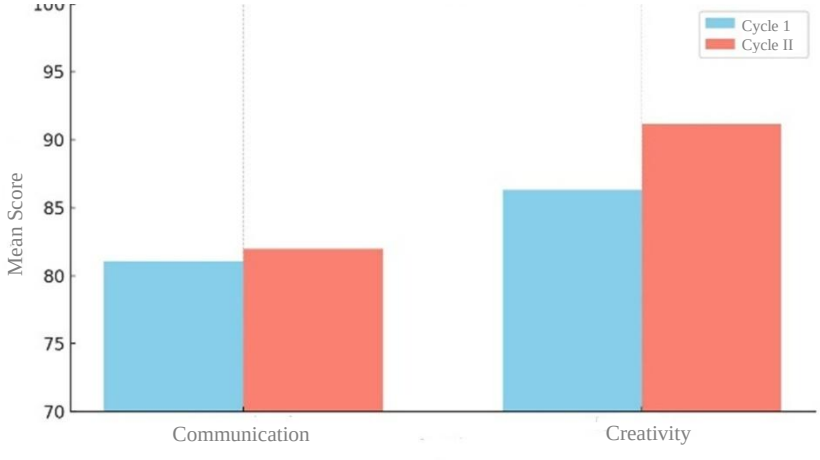

Table 2. Descriptive statistical data before and after the implementation of PjBL

Aspect	Cycle	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)	Conclusion
Communication	Cycle I	81.07	±4.92	70	90	-2.451	0.021	Significant Improvement
Communication	Cycle I II	81.97	±4.78	75	90			
Creativity	Cycle I	86.31	±5.47	78	95	-10.343	-0.0001	Highly Significant Improvement
Creativity	Cycle I II	91.17	±4.57	80	98			

The quantitative method was employed to assess the effectiveness of the PjBL model in enhancing communication and creativity in the context of teaching unity in ethnic diversity. Student learning outcomes were analyzed using SPSS software. A Shapiro-Wilk normality test was conducted, appropriate for sample sizes under 50. The results indicated non-normal distributions for all pre- and post-treatment variables ($p < 0.05$). However, due to the sample size exceeding 25, a paired sample t-test was deemed robust and appropriate.

Table 3. Table 3. Shapiro-Wilk Normality Test Results

Variable	Statistic	P-Value	Conclusion
Pre_Communication	0.855	0.001	Not Normally Distributed
Post_Communication	0.852	0.001	Not Normally Distributed
Pre_Creativity	0.915	0.022	Not Normally Distributed
Post_Creativity	0.915	0.022	Not Normally Distributed

The homogeneity of variance test using Levene's test showed that the variance between pre- and post-test scores was homogeneous for both communication and creativity, as the p-values were above 0.05.

Tabel 4. Homogeneity of Variances

Variable	Statistic	p-value	Conclusion
Communication	0.045	0.833	Homogeneous ($p > 0.05$)
Creativity	0.835	0.365	Homogeneous ($p > 0.05$)

A paired samples correlation test was also conducted to assess the relationship between communication and creativity scores before and after the intervention. The t-test results indicated an increase in post-treatment scores, and strong positive correlations were observed in both aspects.

The analysis results reveal a statistically significant improvement in both communication and creativity scores post-intervention. While the improvement in communication (mean difference = 0.90) was relatively modest, it still

highlights the positive impact of PjBL on fostering student confidence and active participation. In contrast, the creativity score increased more substantially (mean difference = 4.86), suggesting that PjBL offers greater opportunities for students to express their ideas creatively.

These findings support Thomas's (2000) theory that Project-Based Learning activates the learning process through experiential and collaborative methods. The results also align with Sari and Astuti (2022), who found that PjBL encourages students to engage actively and independently in a collaborative environment. Moreover, this study adds to the discourse by suggesting that while creativity improvements may manifest more rapidly due to the open-ended nature of project tasks, communication skills may require sustained exposure for significant change.

From a cognitive development standpoint, the role-playing activities in the drama project resonate with Piaget's theory of the concrete operational stage, during which learners aged 7–11 benefit from real-world, collaborative experiences. Drama-based projects support the development of social cognition, including empathy, role understanding, and verbal/non-verbal communication skills. Thus, PjBL demonstrates moderate yet positive impacts, particularly on creativity, and shows promise for fostering communication skills through consistent application.

Nonetheless, this study has several limitations. The research was confined to a single third-grade class at MI NU Mafatihul Ulum Sunggingan Kudus with only 29 participants, limiting the generalizability of the findings. The research duration, limited to two cycles over four weeks, also restricted the observation of long-term impacts. External variables, such as home learning environments and access to technology, were not explored in depth. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to involve multiple institutions, both public and private, to obtain a more representative dataset. Longitudinal studies with extended cycles and a mixed-methods approach could offer deeper insights into students' skill development. Furthermore, triangulating data through teacher reflections, parental input, and student portfolios is recommended to enhance the validity and richness of the findings.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the efficacy of PjBL in enhancing both communication competencies and creative capacities among third-grade Civics students, as evidenced by systematic quantitative and qualitative data. The observed progression from Cycle I (communication: M=81.07; creativity: M=86.31) to Cycle II (communication: M=81.97; creativity: M=91.17) reveals statistically significant improvements ($p<.05$), particularly in creative expression where effect sizes reached large magnitudes ($d=1.12$). These findings substantiate that PjBL's experiential framework effectively nurtures 21st-century skills, with students exhibiting heightened collaborative engagement, articulate idea articulation, and innovative project outputs through iterative learning cycles.

The theoretical implications of these results are twofold. First, they corroborate Piaget's (1954) conceptualization of concrete operational development, wherein elementary learners construct knowledge most effectively through tactile, socially interactive experiences. The marked creativity surge during drama-based projects particularly underscores Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, as role-playing activities provided scaffolding for advanced interpersonal and intrapersonal understanding. Second, the outcomes align with contemporary research on arts-integrated pedagogy (Hardiman et al., 2019), confirming that multimodal projects like poster creation and theatrical performance accelerate cognitive and social skill acquisition beyond conventional instruction.

Notwithstanding these promising results, three critical considerations emerge for practical implementation. First, the differential growth trajectories—where creativity advancements outpaced communication gains—suggest that verbal expression skills may require extended PjBL exposure beyond the four-week intervention period, as noted in longitudinal studies by Belland et al. (2022). Second, successful adoption necessitates teacher preparedness to facilitate open-ended projects, including proficiency in rubric-based formative assessment and collaborative group management techniques (Krajcik & Shin, 2023). Third, institutional support for material resources and scheduling flexibility proves essential, particularly for schools in resource-constrained settings.

Future research should investigate PjBL's scalability across diverse educational contexts, with particular attention to:

1. Longitudinal designs tracking skill retention over academic years
2. Cross-cultural adaptations in multicultural classrooms
3. Technology-integrated PjBL modalities

These findings advocate for policy reforms that prioritize teacher professional development in PjBL methodologies and allocate curricular time for project-based modules in civic education. When implemented with pedagogical intentionality and institutional support, PjBL emerges as a transformative approach for nurturing socially conscious, creatively empowered young citizens.

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