

Social Studies Learning With Reflective Inquiry Approach as a Means of Improving Cultural Literacy

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The Asian Conference on Education 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Cultural literacy has become an important element in education today, especially in Social Studies learning. Reflective and inquiry-based approaches provide an effective framework to help students understand and internalize diverse cultural values. By using these teaching methods, students are encouraged to think critically, reflect on their own experiences, and actively explore various aspects of culture through questioning and investigation. This research employs a literature review method based on the works of Cohen & Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison (2018). The study highlights the importance of integrating reflective and inquiry approaches in Social Studies education to strengthen cultural understanding and build cross-cultural awareness. A learning process that emphasizes reflection allows students to connect cultural knowledge with their personal and social contexts, while inquiry facilitates the independent discovery of new knowledge. Through this approach, students not only acquire information but also develop skills in analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of complex cultural phenomena. Furthermore, this learning fosters respect and appreciation for cultural diversity, which is essential in today's global era. Therefore, Social Studies learning based on reflective and inquiry approaches is a strategic effort to enhance students' cultural literacy, which ultimately can strengthen cultural identity while opening spaces for intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: social studies learning, reflective inquiry approach, cultural literacy

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Introduction

Culture plays an important role in the development process and is also a key factor supporting the progress of a society. Every individual is born into a family and community environment that has its own language, customs, and norms, which become part of the psychological development process, such as language ability, the formation of social identity, awareness of social responsibility, and contribution to the continuity of the community (Packer & Cole, 2020). Edward Taylor defines culture as a collection of knowledge, beliefs, and rules that apply within a society (Taylor, 1871).

Culture is formed gradually through continuous social interactions. Through culture, humans build a shared life structure that regulates how they interact with one another. Nowadays, globalization has become a phenomenon that greatly influences cultural interactions worldwide (Hassi & Storti, 2012). Globalization is unavoidable and presents a challenge that all countries must face (Abu-Laban & Bakan, 2020). This process encompasses economic, social, political, and cultural aspects that have a broad impact on both individuals and societies. With technological advancements, globalization drives interaction and interdependence among countries, while also exerting a significant influence on local cultures (Demaio, 2011).

Along with the development of communication technology in the 20th century, the cultural industry emerged, enabling the massive spread of culture beyond national borders. Cultural heritage and modern culture attract tourists, which in turn drives local and regional economic development. This process of cultural exchange also strengthens cultural diversity and fosters mutual respect among nations (Qie, 2024).

However, the impact of globalization also poses the risk of losing local cultural identity due to the strong and widespread influence of foreign cultures. National borders become increasingly irrelevant in global cultural exchanges, causing local cultures to often be overshadowed by global consumerism culture (Alkharafi & Alsabah, 2025). In this context, social studies education plays a strategic role in shaping the understanding and cultural values of the younger generation through the dimensions of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and behavior (Sapriya & Nurdin, 2006).

Cultural literacy becomes one of the important competencies that students must master in social studies learning. This literacy refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and practice cultural values as part of national identity in daily life (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2019; Rahmadi & Hayati, 2020). It states that cultural literacy encompasses various aspects of life, including customs, language, religion, arts, and traditional technologies such as games, dance, music, and traditional clothing. Strengthening smart character education is also part of the effort to instill the nation's noble values in accordance with the teachings of Ki Hadjar Dewantara (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2015).

One effective approach to enhancing cultural literacy in social studies learning is through reflective inquiry. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of social interaction and cultural context in the learning process, with the concept of the zone of proximal development illustrating the learning potential through collaboration and reflection (Kozulin et al., 2003). Robert Wilkins (2011) emphasizes the need for social studies education to focus on developing critical thinking skills as a response to the dynamics of society and the current explosion of information. The reflective inquiry approach provides students with the opportunity to actively explore information, analyze culture, and engage in critical reflection on cultural values in

everyday life (Roberts et al., 2011). Based on this, this article attempts to examine how social studies learning with a reflective inquiry approach can enhance students' cultural literacy. The reflective inquiry approach is chosen in social studies education because it encourages students to actively explore, analyze, and critically evaluate social phenomena in depth. Contextual social studies learning requires methods that not only transfer knowledge but also develop students' critical and reflective thinking skills regarding the social and cultural realities around them. Through reflective inquiry, students are invited to ask questions, conduct research, and reflect on their findings, making the learning process more meaningful and capable of fostering authentic cultural awareness (Salmon & Barrera, 2021).

In addition, the reflective inquiry approach provides students with the opportunity to connect theory with their real-life experiences in everyday life (Darling-Hammond et al., 2024). The continuous reflection process helps students not only understand the learning material content but also internalize the cultural and social values present in society (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This is very important in the context of cultural literacy, because students not only merely know about culture but are also able to appreciate, critically evaluate, and apply cultural values in their social interactions.

This approach also facilitates the development of students' metacognitive skills, which is the ability to think about how they think and learn (Stanton et al., 2021). Through guided reflection, students can identify both correct understandings and misconceptions related to social and cultural concepts. Thus, social studies learning becomes an effective means to deepen cultural literacy, enabling students to recognize cultural diversity while considering the dynamics of globalization that influence local cultural identity. Reflective inquiry aligns with the demands of the 21st-century curriculum, which emphasizes the development of critical, creative, and communicative competencies. This approach supports student-centered learning and encourages them to become independent learners capable of adapting to socio-cultural changes (Martinez, 2022). Thus, reflective inquiry not only enhances conceptual understanding in social studies but also strengthens cultural literacy as an important asset in facing the challenges of globalization and ongoing social change. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of the reflective inquiry approach in improving cultural literacy in social studies learning.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative approach aimed at understanding social phenomena and student behavior in the context of social studies learning with a reflective inquiry approach. This approach provides an in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret and give meaning to their learning experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). In this study, data were collected by utilizing online sources such as online databases, article collections, and relevant digital materials, which facilitated an efficient and focused information gathering process (Cohen, n.d.).

For data analysis, this study employs content analysis methods that allow for the interpretation and understanding of texts and content related to culture and learning within a social context. The purpose of this analysis is to identify main themes, patterns, and meanings from the collected data to address research questions concerning the enhancement of cultural literacy through the reflective inquiry approach (Creswell, 2018). The data used are secondary data in the form of documents, transcripts, field notes, and other media sources. The analysis process follows the stages described by Hsieh & Shannon (2005), which include data collection, coding

of relevant text units, and interpretation and analysis of the meanings of themes that emerge within the context of Social Studies learning.

In addition, a literature study was conducted to complement and strengthen the research data. By using the Publish or Perish tool with a publication date restriction from 2022 to 2024, 30 articles were found discussing cultural literacy and the development of Social Studies learning materials using various approaches, including the reflective inquiry approach. This literature review not only enhances the validity and credibility of the research but also ensures that the study is relevant and significant in the context of developing Social Studies teaching methods to improve students' cultural literacy.

Discussion

Implementation of Social Studies Learning With a Reflective Inquiry Approach

The implementation of a learning strategy that encourages students to actively participate in the process of knowledge discovery. The teacher acts as a facilitator who guides students to ask critical questions related to the Social Studies (IPS) material being studied (Isa et al., 2023). This strategy does not only focus on the transfer of information but emphasizes the development of critical and reflective thinking skills so that students can deeply understand social and cultural phenomena (Indrašienė et al., 2023).

Learning activities are carried out through systematic inquiry stages, starting with identifying problems or social phenomena relevant to the local and global cultural context. Students are encouraged to conduct observations, collect data, participate in group discussions, and engage in reflection both independently and collaboratively (Gogus, 2012). Through these activities, students are able to connect social studies theories with real-life experiences in their environment, thereby enhancing cultural literacy and social awareness. The learning media used are highly varied to support the reflective inquiry process (Warmoes et al., 2025). For example, teachers use digital learning resources such as articles, documentary videos, and interactive platforms that provide data and information related to cultural issues. The use of these media aims to facilitate access to information while stimulating students' curiosity, encouraging them to explore the topics discussed more deeply (Cabellos et al., 2023).

In the implementation of learning, the teacher's role is very strategic as a facilitator and motivator. The teacher not only delivers the material but places greater emphasis on the ability to guide students in developing questions, conducting analyses, and reflecting on their findings. (Chin & Osborne, 2008). The teacher also plays a role in creating an open and supportive classroom atmosphere, so that students feel comfortable discussing and expressing ideas without fear or hesitation (Martineau & Cyr, 2025).

Meanwhile, the role of students in reflective inquiry learning is very active and central. Students are not merely recipients of information but act as little researchers who take the initiative to ask questions, seek answers, and test their understanding through critical reflection. An active attitude and curiosity become the main assets for students in exploring knowledge and cultural values around them (Daniel et al., 2024).

During the learning process, collaboration among students is also optimized through group discussions and presentations of inquiry results. These activities encourage students to share perspectives, appreciate the diversity of opinions, and develop good social communication

skills. This collaboration not only enriches students' understanding of social studies material but also builds awareness of the importance of tolerance and respect for cultural differences (Macklin, 2014). Digital media and educational technology increasingly strengthen the effectiveness of social studies learning through the reflective inquiry approach. Teachers utilize online learning platforms and multimedia resources to provide varied and contextual learning experiences (Timotheou et al., 2023). The use of these media also facilitates monitoring of students' learning processes and provides constructive feedback in real-time.

Overall, the implementation of Social Studies learning with a reflective inquiry approach positions the teacher as a guide who directs the learning process, while the students act as the main actors engaging in exploration and reflection (Photo, 2025). The right combination of learning strategies, motivating activities, and supportive media creates a conducive learning environment for enhancing cultural literacy as well as the comprehensive development of students' social and intellectual skills. The implementation of the reflective inquiry approach in Social Studies learning to improve cultural literacy can be seen in the table below;

Table 1

Implementation of Reflective Inquiry Approach in Social Studies Learning to Enhance Cultural Literacy

No	Activity	Description
1	Start with a trigger question relevant to local culture	The teacher can start the lesson with open-ended questions that encourage students to observe and explore cultural aspects in their surroundings, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What cultural traditions exist in our region? • How does globalization affect the habits and cultural values in our community?
2	Start with a trigger question relevant to local culture	The teacher can begin the lesson with open-ended questions that encourage students to observe and explore cultural aspects in their surrounding environment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What cultural traditions exist in our region? • How does globalization affect the habits and cultural values in our society? These questions stimulate curiosity and motivate students to actively seek answers
3	Facilitate students to independently collect and analyze information	In the inquiry phase, students are encouraged to collect data from various sources, such as interviews with family members or community leaders, observation of local traditions, and

		credible online sources. Then, they process the information to identify cultural values, changes that have occurred, and the impact of globalization on culture.
4	Encourage deep reflection on the meaning of culture and social change	After data collection, students are encouraged to discuss and write personal reflections on the influence of local culture and globalization on their identity. For example, they might contemplate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What does local culture mean to me and my community? - How can I preserve and maintain this culture amid changing times?
5	Integration of Collaborative Activities to Strengthen Cultural Understanding	Through group work, students can share their findings and reflections, compare cultural experiences with their peers, and formulate concrete steps to preserve local culture within the school and community.
6	Use of Media and Technology as Means for Cultural Exploration	Utilizing technology, such as cultural documentary videos, digital learning platforms, and social media, can help students access various cultural resources and broaden their perspectives in an interactive and engaging way.
7	Process- and Product-Based Evaluation that Assesses Cultural Understanding and Attitudes	Assessment is not limited to written tests but also includes presentations, reflective journals, creative works such as cultural posters, or cultural preservation projects. This encourages students to express their understanding and appreciation of culture in a deeper and more authentic way.

The Spectrum of Catalysts and Resistance in Inquiry-Based Education Practices

In the implementation of social studies learning with a reflective inquiry approach, there are various internal and external factors that act as both supports and obstacles (Kapici, 2025). The most dominant internal factor is student motivation. High motivation encourages students to actively participate in the learning process, especially during the exploration and reflection stages. Motivated students are more diligent in seeking information, engaging in discussions,

and connecting the material with their personal experiences, thus optimizing the inquiry process (Wijnia et al., 2024). However, if motivation is low, students tend to be passive and the learning process becomes less effective.

Teacher readiness is also an important internal factor that influences the success of the learning process. (Çemçem et al., 2024). Teachers who have a deep understanding of the reflective inquiry approach and are able to manage the classroom interactively will be able to facilitate a dynamic and meaningful learning process. Conversely, teachers who are less prepared or unfamiliar with this approach may face difficulties in stimulating critical questions and managing reflective discussions. In addition, the readiness of relevant, contextual learning materials rich in cultural elements also supports the success of this approach, as the materials serve as a bridge connecting theory and real cultural practices (Ylimaki & Brunderman, 2022).

From the external factors perspective, adequate learning facilities such as comfortable classrooms, access to libraries, and interactive learning media are key supports. Full support from the school, including teacher training, provision of learning resources, and sufficient time for reflective discussions, greatly facilitates the smooth running of the learning process (Reeves, 2012). The socio-cultural environment surrounding the school also plays an important role, especially when students have opportunities to observe and interact directly with local culture as well as global cultural phenomenon (Ong & Quek, 2023). A supportive environment for local culture allows learning to become more authentic and meaningful.

However, there are also obstacles that need attention; internal barriers such as low student motivation due to lack of interest or unawareness of the importance of cultural literacy can hinder the inquiry process (Williams, 2021). In addition, limited teacher readiness to implement the reflective approach due to high workload or lack of training can become an obstacle. On the external side, limitations in facilities and learning resources, as well as minimal support from the school environment or family, can reduce the effectiveness of learning (Hardman & Sandi, 2024). A less conducive socio-cultural environment, such as a lack of attention to the preservation of local culture, also poses a distinct challenge.

To overcome these obstacles, strategies that can be implemented include increasing student motivation by providing learning contexts that are relevant and engaging, as well as connecting the material to their daily lives. Continuous training and mentoring for teachers are also important to enhance their competence and confidence in using the reflective inquiry approach. (Smith, 2022). The school needs to provide adequate facilities and learning resources, as well as create a conducive learning environment by involving all components of the school and the community (Al-Zu'bi et al., 2024). In addition, collaboration with community leaders and local cultural figures can strengthen students' connection to the surrounding culture and enrich their learning experience.

Implications of Developing the Social Studies Curriculum With a Reflective Inquiry Approach

The findings from the implementation of social studies learning using a reflective inquiry approach provide important implications for the future development of the social studies curriculum. First, this approach should be recommended for sustainable application because it significantly enhances students' cultural literacy. The social studies curriculum needs to be designed by incorporating learning elements that encourage students to actively seek, analyze, and reflect on cultural phenomena critically and deeply (Valladares, 2021). This will foster

positive attitudes and essential analytical skills in understanding the complexities of both local and global cultures (Combi, 2016).

Curriculum development should also emphasize the integration of material that is contextual and relevant to students' everyday experiences (Huizinga et al., 2019). This is important so that learning is not merely theoretical memorization, but also meaningful socially and culturally. The reflective inquiry approach creates space for students to explore culture directly through field projects, case studies, and structured critical discussions. Thus, students can internalize cultural values and develop awareness of the importance of cultural preservation in the era of globalization (Zalli, 2024).

In addition, the research findings show that the development of cultural literacy competencies must become one of the primary goals of the social studies curriculum. (Lähdesmäki et al., 2022). Cultural literacy here refers not only to knowledge about culture but also to critical and reflective abilities in interpreting culture, as well as an attitude of tolerance and appreciation for diversity (Maine & Vrikki, 2021). Therefore, strengthening this competence must be integrated into various themes of social studies learning so that students have a comprehensive and applicable understanding.

Curriculum developers and education policymakers also need to pay attention to enhancing teachers' capacity through intensive training and providing teaching materials that support the reflective inquiry approach (Kim et al., 2022). Teachers must be prepared to become facilitators who can manage the learning process that requires active student involvement, guide discussions, and facilitate reflection (Sormunen et al., 2020). In this way, social studies learning will be more meaningful and have a positive impact on the sustainable development of students' cultural literacy.

Conclusion

Culture plays a fundamental role in the development and progress of society because it forms the foundation for social identity, language abilities, as well as individual social awareness and responsibility. Culture is a collection of knowledge, beliefs, and rules formed through social interactions and serves as the basis for living together in a community. The rapid globalization in the modern era has brought significant impacts on culture, both in terms of cultural exchange and the challenges of preserving local culture. Globalization expands interactions and interdependencies among countries, but at the same time poses risks of local cultures being displaced by dominant foreign cultures.

The cultural industry and advancements in communication technology provide opportunities for massive cultural dissemination, which also supports economic development through tourism and strengthens diversity and mutual respect among nations. However, this process must be managed wisely so that local culture is not eroded by the currents of globalization. Cultural literacy is an essential competence in Social Studies education because it helps students understand, appreciate, and practice cultural values as part of national identity. Intelligent character education must be integrated with cultural literacy to instill the noble values of the nation.

The reflective inquiry approach in Social Studies learning is very effective in enhancing cultural literacy. With this method, students are actively invited to explore, analyze, and reflect critically on socio-cultural phenomena, making learning meaningful and capable of fostering

authentic cultural awareness. The learning process using reflective inquiry not only strengthens conceptual understanding but also helps students internalize cultural and social values in their daily lives. This approach also trains metacognitive skills, namely the ability to think about how to learn and think independently.

Teachers act as facilitators guiding students to ask questions, conduct research, and actively discuss in an open and supportive classroom environment, while students become the main actors who explore and test their understanding. Collaboration among students enriches understanding and builds tolerance and appreciation for cultural diversity. Overall, Social Studies learning with a reflective inquiry approach is highly relevant to the demands of the 21st-century curriculum, which emphasizes critical, creative, and communicative competencies. This approach equips students with strong cultural literacy as a capital to face the challenges of globalization and dynamic social change.

Acknowledgement

The research team extends its heartfelt gratitude to the Indonesian Education Scholarship (BPI), the Center for Higher Education Funding and Assesment (PPAPT) under Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, and the Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) for their generous funding an invaluable for this research.

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