

From Local Stories to Historical Inquiry: Exploring Students' Engagement in Community-Based History Projects

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ABSTRACT

History education in Indonesian secondary schools continues to grapple with persistent student disengagement, driven largely by textbook-centred instruction that strips historical content of its local relevance and personal meaning. This qualitative case study examines how community-based history projects (CBHPs) shape student engagement and the development of historical inquiry skills among Grade 11 students at SMAN 2 Yogyakarta. Thirty-two students participated in structured projects involving oral history interviews, archival visits, and community storytelling documentation over ten weeks. Data were collected through student project portfolios, reflective journals, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis identified four dominant patterns of engagement: narrative curiosity, identity-linked motivation, investigative persistence, and collaborative meaning-making. Students demonstrated measurable growth across three dimensions of historical inquiry: source analysis, perspective-taking, and historical argumentation. The findings establish that grounding historical inquiry in local stories creates conditions for substantive student engagement that is difficult to achieve through conventional history instruction. The study contributes an empirically grounded framework for integrating community-based projects into the Indonesian secondary history curriculum within the Kurikulum Merdeka policy context.

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INTRODUCTION

History education occupies a paradoxical position in Indonesian secondary schooling. It is constitutionally significant, mandated at every level of formal education as a vehicle for national identity formation, and yet it remains among the subjects most frequently cited by students as disengaging, irrelevant, and intellectually uninspiring. The dominant pedagogical mode in Indonesian history classrooms continues to be teacher-centred delivery of chronologically organised factual content, where student activity is largely limited to note-taking and memorisation in preparation for standardised examinations (Miskawi et al., 2025). This mode of instruction generates a form of civic amnesia: students accumulate historical facts without developing the capacity to think historically, and they consume national narratives without recognising the local stories that give those narratives texture, complexity, and personal meaning.

The concept of historical inquiry, defined here as the set of disciplinary practices through which students engage with evidence, construct interpretations, assess multiple perspectives, and produce historical arguments, has been established in the international literature as the most effective pathway toward genuine historical understanding (Pantazidis & Bantiou, 2026; Parada-Ulloa & Burgos-Videla, 2025). Historical inquiry positions students not as passive recipients of completed historical narratives but as active investigators who must grapple with incomplete evidence, contested interpretations, and the fundamental uncertainty that characterises all historical knowledge. When conducted in relation to locally meaningful content, historical inquiry has the additional capacity to connect students' academic learning to their lived social worlds, generating a quality of engagement that abstract national history rarely achieves (Nafi'ah & Djono, 2024; Hill, 2024).

Local history as a pedagogical resource has received increasing scholarly attention in Indonesia, particularly following the introduction of Kurikulum Merdeka and its associated Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) framework. Miskawi et al. (2025) demonstrated that the integration of local and national history in Indonesian secondary schools produces a more holistic understanding of the past and a stronger sense of historical identity among students than national history instruction alone. Danugroho (2024) further argued that local history plays a critical role in strengthening national identity in the era of Society 5.0, precisely because it provides the particular and the proximate against which broader national narratives can be understood and evaluated. Despite these insights, most Indonesian studies on local history integration focus on curriculum design and teacher practice rather than on the quality and character of student engagement with local historical content and inquiry processes.

Community-based history projects represent a specific form of local history engagement that moves beyond the classroom to involve students in direct contact with community members, archival materials, and living historical memory. In this approach, students identify historical questions embedded in their local community, gather evidence through oral history interviews, site visits, and document analysis, and produce historical narratives or analyses that are grounded in community sources rather than textbook content. The pedagogical rationale for this approach draws from multiple traditions. These include the inquiry-based learning tradition that emphasises epistemic authenticity in historical education (Pantazidis & Bantiou, 2026), the place-based education tradition that foregrounds the connection between learning and the social geography of students' lives (Penn GSE Perspectives, 2024), and the oral history tradition that positions community memory as a legitimate and generative form of historical evidence (Fern et al., 2025).

The international literature on community-based history projects documents a consistent pattern: when students investigate historical questions that are connected to their own communities, their engagement quality changes in ways that extend beyond motivational surface effects. Fern et al. (2025) found in a participatory action research project centred on oral history interviews that students positioned as active collaborators in the co-creation of historical narratives developed a qualitatively different sense of responsibility toward the past than students who consumed pre-packaged historical accounts. The pedagogical potential of oral history specifically as a tool for cultivating historical consciousness has been documented in multiple contexts, with studies consistently noting that the encounter with living memory challenges students' assumptions about historical certainty and invites genuine epistemological reflection (Oral History and Education, 2017). Pantazidis & Bantiou (2026) in a participatory model of history education found that commoning practices in the history classroom, including collaborative inquiry and co-creation of historical knowledge, strengthened both historical thinking skills and democratic dispositions among students.

In the Indonesian context, technology-based and project-based innovations in history education have begun to generate empirical evidence supporting the shift from transmission to inquiry. Technology-based history learning studies have documented improvements in historical awareness, identity formation, and critical reflection when students engage with authentic historical materials rather than textbook summaries (Anthon, 2026). Nafi'ah and Djono (2024) demonstrated through a project-based learning model on multiculturalism in history that structured project work in the secondary history classroom produces significantly stronger historical thinking outcomes than conventional instruction. Rahayu et al. (2025) showed that digital history books grounded in local wisdom significantly increased students' local historical consciousness when compared to standard curricular materials. These findings collectively point toward community-connected, inquiry-oriented project work as a productive pedagogical direction for Indonesian history education reform.

Student engagement in history education has been theorised as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. Behavioural engagement refers to students' active participation in learning activities and their persistence in the face of challenging tasks. Cognitive engagement refers to the depth and quality of intellectual processing that students bring to historical questions, including their willingness to consider multiple sources, question surface interpretations, and construct evidence-based arguments. Emotional engagement refers to the affective investment students bring to their learning, including interest, curiosity, a sense of personal relevance, and identification with the subject matter (Lee, 2023; Rehman et al., 2024). Community-based history projects are theoretically positioned to activate all three dimensions simultaneously: they require active

participation in community research activities, they present genuine intellectual challenges that demand careful source evaluation and interpretive judgment, and they connect historical content to students' personal and social identities in ways that generate authentic affective investment.

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting inquiry-based and community-connected approaches to history education, significant gaps remain in the Indonesian secondary school literature. Most existing studies are either curricular in focus, examining what is taught rather than how students engage, or they measure learning outcomes using standardised tests without capturing the qualitative character of student engagement during the inquiry process itself. The mechanisms through which local stories generate historical inquiry, the specific forms of engagement that community-based projects activate, and the barriers students encounter in transitioning from passive consumers to active investigators of local history remain underexplored. This study was designed to address these gaps through a qualitative case study that examines, in depth and from students' own perspectives, how engagement unfolds when secondary school history students are positioned as community historians investigating the local past.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the nature and character of student engagement in community-based history projects within a single secondary school setting. The case study approach was selected because it enables rich, contextualised analysis of a bounded phenomenon, in this case, the ten-week CBHP implementation, through multiple data sources and from the perspectives of the participants themselves. This design is well-suited to exploratory research questions that seek to understand how and why a phenomenon unfolds in a particular context, rather than to measure the magnitude of a predetermined effect (Miskawi et al., 2025; Nafi'ah & Djono, 2024).

Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at SMAN 2 Yogyakarta, a public senior high school in the city of Yogyakarta, Special Region of Yogyakarta. Yogyakarta was selected as the research site because of its exceptionally rich local historical landscape, including colonial-era archives, active community historical societies, and a dense network of community elders with living memory of the city's twentieth-century social transformations. SMAN 2 Yogyakarta was selected through purposive sampling based on the school's history teacher's prior engagement with project-based learning approaches and the school's location in a neighbourhood with dense archival and community resources suitable for student investigation. Participants were 32 Grade 11 students enrolled in the history subject during the 2023–2024 academic year. Informed consent was obtained from students and their parents or guardians, and the school principal approved the research protocol prior to commencement.

Community-Based History Project Design

The CBHP was implemented over ten weeks as an integrated component of the regular history curriculum. Students formed eight project groups of four members each, and each group selected a local historical topic from a menu of options co-developed by the teacher and the research team. Topic options included the history of a local kampung (urban neighbourhood) during the colonial period, oral history of community members who lived through the 1965 political events, the history of local batik production and its economic transformations, the history of a community market and its role in neighbourhood social life, and the development of local religious institutions and their community functions. Each group was required to conduct at minimum two oral history interviews with community members, visit at least one archival or heritage site related to their topic, collect and analyse at least five primary or secondary source documents, and produce a final written historical narrative accompanied by an annotated source portfolio. Structured reflection sessions were held every two weeks to facilitate metacognitive processing and peer learning across groups.

Data Collection

Data were collected through four instruments. First, student project portfolios including research notes, interview transcripts, annotated source analyses, and final written narratives were collected from all

eight groups at the end of the project. Second, individual reflective journals were collected from 32 students on four occasions throughout the project, capturing their evolving understanding of historical inquiry and their personal responses to community engagement. Third, classroom observations were conducted by the research team during seven structured sessions, with field notes focusing on patterns of student interaction, discussion quality, and visible indicators of engagement. Fourth, semi-structured interviews of approximately 30 minutes each were conducted with 12 purposively selected students after the project's completion to explore their experiences in greater depth.

Data Analysis

All data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase procedure: familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. Portfolio data and journal entries were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns of engagement and markers of historical inquiry skill development. Observation field notes were analysed to identify behavioural indicators of engagement that corroborated or complicated the self-reported data. Interview transcripts were analysed deductively against the emerging thematic framework from journal and portfolio analysis, with attention to disconfirming cases. Member-checking was conducted with four student participants who reviewed the preliminary thematic findings and confirmed their alignment with their own experiences. Trustworthiness was further strengthened through researcher triangulation, with two members of the research team independently coding a subsample of data before resolving discrepancies through discussion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Participating Students and Project Topics

The 32 participants represented a diverse range of prior engagement with history as a subject. Table 1 presents the student profile alongside the distribution of project topics selected by the eight research groups.

Table 1. Profile of Participants and Distribution of Community-Based History Project Topics (n=32)

Category	Subcategory	n	%
Gender	Female	19	59.4
	Male	13	40.6
Grade	11 – Science stream	18	56.3
	11 – Social stream	14	43.8
Prior interest in history	High	11	34.4
	Moderate	13	40.6
	Low	8	25.0
Prior CBL experience	Yes	7	21.9
	No	25	78.1
Family connection to local history	Yes (stated)	21	65.6
History of local kampung (colonial period)	2	8	Oral history + site visit
Oral history: community memory of 1965	2	8	Oral history interviews
Local batik production history	2	8	Document analysis + interviews
Community market and neighbourhood life	1	4	Oral history + archives
Local religious institution history	1	4	Document + site analysis
Total	8	32	

Source: Primary research data, 2023–2024.

Table 1 reveals that the majority of participants (65.6%) reported low or moderate prior interest in history as a school subject, establishing that CBHP engagement was not primarily a function of pre-existing enthusiasm for the subject. The selection of topics was notably skewed toward topics with strong oral history components (kampung history and 1965 oral history together accounted for 50% of groups), reflecting students' initial instinct to approach local history through living memory rather than documentary archives.

Patterns of Student Engagement

Thematic analysis across the four data sources identified four dominant patterns of engagement that characterised students' experience of the CBHP. Table 2 presents these patterns, their defining characteristics, and their frequency of occurrence in the data corpus.

Table 2. Dominant Engagement Patterns Identified in Community-Based History Projects

Engagement Pattern	Defining Characteristics	f (n=32)	% of Participants
Narrative curiosity	Surprise and fascination upon discovering divergence between local community sources and textbook national narratives; increased investigative motivation	31	96.9%
Identity-linked motivation	Growing personal identification with community members and local place as fellow inhabitants of a shared past; intrinsic investment in the project topic	27	84.4%
Investigative persistence	Voluntary work beyond minimum requirements: additional interviews, independent archive visits, and iterative source re-analysis when faced with puzzling historical questions	25	78.1%
Collaborative meaning-making	Productive inter-group discussion and peer questioning during reflection sessions; active sharing and challenging of developing historical interpretations across project topics	23	71.9%

Source: Thematic analysis of reflective journals, portfolios, observations, and interviews, 2024.

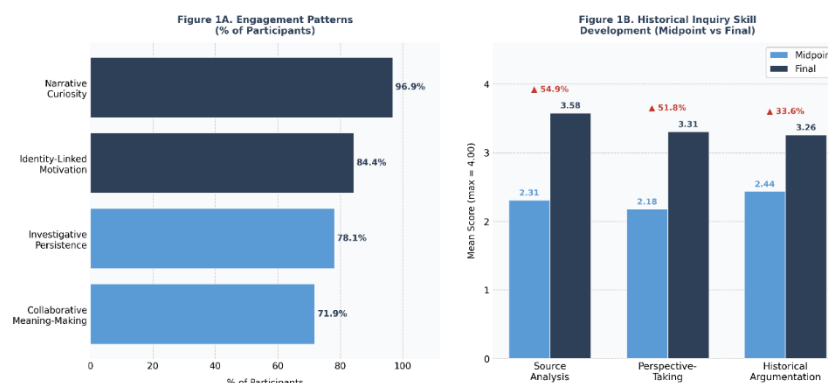


Figure 1. presents the frequency distribution of engagement pattern evidence across the four data sources

The most pervasive engagement pattern was narrative curiosity (present in 96.9% of participants' data), characterised by students' expressed surprise and growing fascination upon discovering that the local stories they encountered in the community diverged significantly from the simplified national narratives they had absorbed through textbook instruction. Journal entries consistently described moments of cognitive dissonance, including what one student described as finding out that what happened here was completely different from what the book says, that triggered deeper investigative motivation rather than confusion or withdrawal. This pattern aligns with Pantazidis's (2026) observation that genuine historical inquiry is most powerfully activated when students encounter the irreducible complexity of the past in ways that challenge prior assumptions.

Identity-linked motivation (84.4%) emerged as the second most pervasive pattern, particularly among students investigating topics connected to their own family histories or neighbourhood communities. Students working on the kampung history and local batik production projects showed the strongest expression of this pattern, consistently describing their growing identification with community members as fellow inhabitants of a shared place with a shared past. This finding resonates with Miskawi et al.'s (2024) argument that local history integration in Indonesian secondary education activates a sense of historical identity that national history alone cannot generate, because it provides the personal and the proximate within which broader national processes become comprehensible and emotionally meaningful.

Investigative persistence (78.1%) was characterised by students' willingness to work beyond the minimum requirements of the project, including seeking additional interviews, visiting archives independently outside school hours, and returning to source materials repeatedly to refine their analyses, when they encountered genuinely puzzling historical questions. This pattern was most strongly expressed among the groups investigating the 1965 oral history topic, where the complexity and sensitivity of community memories motivated intensive cross-source verification. Fern et al. (2025) documented a comparable pattern in oral history projects, where students' responsibility toward the co-creation of historical narratives generated a quality of investigative commitment that exceeded what conventional assignments typically produce.

Collaborative meaning-making (71.9%) was characterised by productive inter-group discussion and peer questioning during structured reflection sessions, where students actively shared and challenged each other's developing historical interpretations across different community topics. This pattern was notably weaker in the early weeks of the project and grew stronger as students accumulated sufficient community evidence to engage substantively with alternative interpretations, suggesting that collaborative engagement in historical inquiry requires a foundation of evidential richness that community-based projects are uniquely positioned to provide (Lee, 2023; Hill, 2024).

Development of Historical Inquiry Skills

Table 3 presents the assessment of student performance on three historical inquiry skill dimensions across the project cycle, as evaluated through the project portfolio rubric applied at midpoint and at project completion.

Table 3. Student Performance on Historical Inquiry Skill Dimensions: Midpoint and Final Assessment

Historical Inquiry Dimension	Midpoint Mean (max=4.00)	Final Mean (max=4.00)	Mean Gain	Gain (%)
Source analysis	2.31	3.58	1.27	54.9%
Perspective-taking	2.18	3.31	1.13	51.8%
Historical argumentation	2.44	3.26	0.82	33.6%
Overall mean	2.31	3.38	1.07	46.8%

Source: Project portfolio rubric assessment, 2024. Rubric scale: 1 = Beginning, 2 = Developing, 3 = Proficient, 4 = Advanced.

The most substantial improvement occurred in the source analysis dimension (mean score increase from 2.31 to 3.58 out of 4.00, a gain of 54.9%), reflecting students' rapid development of source evaluation competencies when confronted with the interpretive challenges of oral testimony, community documents, and physical heritage sites that cannot be absorbed passively but must be actively interrogated.

Perspective-taking showed the second largest improvement (from 2.18 to 3.31, a gain of 51.8%), driven by the direct encounters with community members whose personal memories of past events required students to understand historical experience from positions very different from their own. Historical argumentation showed the smallest but still substantial improvement (from 2.44 to 3.26, a gain of 33.6%), consistent with the observation that the construction of evidence-based historical arguments is the most demanding cognitive task in the inquiry process and benefits from sustained practice across multiple drafts rather than single-exposure instruction.

Discussion

The findings of this study converge on a central argument: local stories function as generative entry points into historical inquiry because they possess properties that abstract national history typically lacks, including personal proximity, narrative complexity, evidential ambiguity, and the possibility of direct encounter with the people and places that constitute the historical subject. Narrative curiosity, the most pervasive engagement pattern identified, emerged specifically from the gap between what students encountered in community sources and what they had been taught through textbooks. This gap is not a pedagogical problem to be resolved; it is the productive dissonance that drives genuine historical investigation (Parada-Ulloa & Burgos-Videla, 2025).

The strong emergence of identity-linked motivation as an engagement driver reinforces Danugroho's (2024) argument about local history's role in strengthening national identity in the contemporary Indonesian context. Students did not engage with local history in spite of its specificity but precisely because of it. The batik production group's description of their growing sense of responsibility toward the artisans they interviewed, the kampung history group's discovery of their neighbourhood's colonial-period social structure, and the 1965 oral history group's encounter with the silences and partial memories of community elders all generated forms of personal investment that national history's scale and abstraction cannot replicate. Rahayu et al. (2025) found comparable dynamics in their digital local history intervention, noting that students' emotional engagement with locally grounded historical content significantly exceeded their engagement with standard curricular materials.

The development of historical inquiry skills documented in Table 3, most substantially in source analysis and perspective-taking, reflects the specific epistemic demands that community-based projects place on students. When students work with oral testimony, they must simultaneously assess the reliability of memory, recognise the positionality of the narrator, and triangulate testimonial evidence against documentary sources in ways that no textbook exercise can authentically replicate (Fern et al., 2025; Oral History and Education, 2017). Nafi'ah and Djono (2024) found that project-based learning approaches in history education produce stronger historical thinking outcomes than conventional instruction precisely because they position students as genuine historians, people who must make interpretive decisions under conditions of evidential uncertainty rather than simply retrieving correct answers from authoritative texts. The relatively smaller gain in historical argumentation skills reflects the well-documented pattern in historical inquiry research that argument construction is the competency that develops most slowly, requiring iterative practice and expert feedback across multiple drafting cycles rather than the ten-week window available in this study.

The emergence of collaborative meaning-making as a pattern that strengthened over time has important implications for the design of community-based history projects. The temporal trajectory of this pattern, weak in early weeks and strong by project completion, suggests that productive collaborative inquiry requires an accumulation of shared evidential richness before students have sufficient material to engage substantively with each other's developing interpretations. This finding aligns with Pantazidis's (2026) theoretical framework for commoning in history education, in which the co-creation of historical knowledge becomes possible only when students have collectively accumulated sufficient engagement with primary sources and community encounters to have something genuinely worth deliberating about. Hill (2024) similarly found in enquiry-based history teaching that the quality of student collaboration in historical discussion improved substantially once students had moved beyond the initial phase of question formation into the evidence-gathering and interpretive phases of their projects.

The study also surfaces important pedagogical challenges that community-based history projects introduce. The 1965 oral history group navigated the political sensitivity of their topic carefully, with community members sometimes declining to speak or speaking with visible emotional difficulty about

events that remain contested in Indonesian public memory. This pedagogical complexity, including the encounter with trauma, silence, and contested memory, represents both a challenge and an opportunity in community-based history education. Handled with appropriate pedagogical scaffolding, these encounters constitute some of the most powerful learning moments the project afforded, teaching students that the historical record is always incomplete, always shaped by power, and always in need of critical interpretation. The technology-based history learning literature from the Indonesian context similarly identifies teacher scaffolding as the critical variable determining whether engagement with complex or sensitive historical sources generates productive inquiry or unresolved confusion (Anthon, 2026; Lee, 2023). Taken together, the four engagement patterns and the skill development trajectories documented in this study establish community-based history projects as a pedagogically viable and evidentially grounded approach to transforming history education in Indonesian secondary schools from a site of factual transmission to a site of genuine historical investigation (Miskawi et al., 2025; Rahayu et al., 2025; Parada-Ulloa & Burgos-Videla, 2025; Sulistiyo et al., 2025; Pantazidis & Bantiou, 2026).

CONCLUSION

This study establishes that community-based history projects constitute an effective pedagogical strategy for generating substantive student engagement with historical inquiry in Indonesian secondary school history education. The four engagement patterns identified, namely narrative curiosity, identity-linked motivation, investigative persistence, and collaborative meaning-making, demonstrate that local stories activate dimensions of student engagement that conventional history instruction consistently fails to reach: personal investment in historical questions, commitment to evidential rigour, and collaborative deliberation about competing interpretations. These patterns are not incidental to the community-based design of the projects; they are structurally generated by the specific epistemic properties of local historical inquiry, including its narrative complexity, evidential ambiguity, and proximity to students' own social identities and communities.

The skill development data further confirm that community-based projects produce meaningful growth in source analysis and perspective-taking, the two historical inquiry competencies most directly activated by oral history interviews and community archive work. The more gradual development of historical argumentation skills signals a direction for future pedagogical design: students require sustained, iterative practice in constructing and revising evidence-based historical arguments, suggesting that community-based projects should be embedded in longer instructional sequences that include explicit argumentation instruction and multiple drafting cycles rather than implemented as standalone projects.

These findings carry direct implications for the ongoing implementation of Kurikulum Merdeka and the P5 framework in Indonesian secondary schools. The policy space created by these reforms explicitly supports project-based community engagement as an educational mode, and this study provides empirical grounding for prioritising community history projects within that space. Teacher professional development should focus on building the scaffolding competencies, particularly around sensitive historical content, oral history methodology, and evidence-based argumentation instruction, that determine the quality of student inquiry experience. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of CBHP participation on students' historical consciousness and civic identity, the scalability of this model across diverse regional contexts in Indonesia, and the moderating role of teacher facilitation quality on the character of student engagement.

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