



e-ISSN: 3026-5827

Enigma in Education

Journal website: <https://enigma.or.id/index.php/edu>



Archipelagic Consciousness: Reimagining National Identity Through Local and Maritime Histories in Indonesian Primary Education

Firzan Dahlan^{1*}, Grace Freya Purba², Farah Faiza², Amir Serikova³, Danila Adi Sanjaya⁴, Yuniarti Maretha Pasaribu⁵, Susi Diana⁶, Christian Napitupulu⁷, Maya Enderson⁸, Emir Abdullah⁷

¹Department of History Science, Enigma Institute, Palembang, Indonesia

²Department of Archeology, Enigma Institute, Palembang, Indonesia

³Department of Cultural and Heritage Preservation, Emeritus Research Center, Skopje, North Macedonia

⁴Department of Literature Science, CMHC Research Center, Palembang, Indonesia

⁵Department of Cultural Science, Enigma Institute, Palembang, Indonesia

⁶Department of Tourism and Cultural Heritage, Enigma Institute, Palembang, Indonesia

⁷Department of Constitutional Law, Sanskrit Institute, Jakarta, Indonesia

⁸Department of Architecture, Enigma Institute, Palembang, Indonesia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Archipelagic consciousness
History education
Local history
Maritime history
National identity

*Corresponding author:

Firzan Dahlan

E-mail address:

firzan.dahlan@enigma.or.id

All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

<https://doi.org/10.61996/edu.v3i1.93>

ABSTRACT

The formation of national identity in Indonesia, the world's largest archipelagic state, has historically been dominated by a centralized, terrestrial-focused historical narrative that often marginalizes the rich diversity of local and maritime histories. This study addressed the gap in understanding how a pedagogical shift towards these histories could foster a more inclusive and interconnected sense of nationhood, termed 'Archipelagic Consciousness', among young learners. A quasi-experimental, mixed-methods study was conducted over one academic semester in four primary schools across Indonesia. A total of 180 fifth-grade students participated, divided into an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group received a pedagogical intervention based on local hero narratives, inter-island trade routes, and project-based learning focused on maritime culture. Data were collected using a validated pre-test/post-test 'Archipelagic Consciousness Inventory' (ACI), supplemented by qualitative data from focus group discussions and student portfolio analysis. Quantitative data analysis revealed a statistically significant, large-effect-size improvement in the ACI scores for the experimental group compared to the control group. Qualitative findings corroborated these results, with major themes emerging that included the validation of local identity as integral to the national story, a conceptual shift from viewing the sea as a barrier to a connector, and an enhanced appreciation for inter-regional cultural diversity. In conclusion, the pedagogical model centered on local and maritime histories was highly effective in cultivating Archipelagic Consciousness. Integrating these narratives into primary education offers a potent pathway for reimagining Indonesian national identity as a dynamic, interconnected, and pluralistic tapestry, moving beyond a monolithic, land-based conception. This study provides empirical support for curriculum reform aimed at fostering a more resilient and inclusive national identity.

1. Introduction

The Republic of Indonesia, an archipelago of over 17,500 islands stretching across three time zones, presents a unique paradox in the study of nationalism and education. Its national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity), encapsulates both a

foundational aspiration and a persistent challenge: how to forge a unified national identity from a vast mosaic of ethnicities, languages, and cultures, all interconnected by the sea.¹ For decades, the state-sanctioned approach to this challenge, particularly within the domain of history education, has been the

propagation of a grand national narrative. This narrative, while essential for post-colonial nation-building, has predominantly been terrestrial, linear, and politically centralized, focusing on the rise and fall of land-based kingdoms, the struggle for independence, and the consolidation of the unitary state.²

This conventional historiography, often critiqued as Java-centric, has inadvertently created what some scholars have termed a 'continental mindset' within an archipelagic nation.³ The sea, which constitutes over two-thirds of Indonesia's territory and has historically served as the primary medium for trade, migration, and cultural exchange, is frequently depicted in school textbooks as a void between islands, a source of danger, or merely a backdrop for naval battles. The vibrant histories of local port kingdoms, the sagas of Bugis, Mandar, and Malukan sailors, and the intricate networks of the spice trade that connected the archipelago internally and to the wider world have often been relegated to footnotes in the larger political story. This curricular omission has profound implications. It risks alienating students whose local identities and histories do not feature prominently in the national saga, potentially fostering a fragmented rather than integrated sense of belonging. Furthermore, it fails to equip the next generation with a mental map that reflects their nation's geographical and cultural reality—that of a maritime civilization.⁴

The educational landscape in Indonesia is currently in a state of flux. The introduction of the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Independent Curriculum) signals a move towards greater pedagogical flexibility, differentiation, and an emphasis on developing students' competencies according to their unique interests and local contexts.⁵ This reform presents a critical window of opportunity to re-examine the content and purpose of history education. Concurrently, there is a growing body of scholarly work advocating for a 'New Indonesian Historiography' that emphasizes social, local, and maritime perspectives. These scholars argue that a more decentralized and inclusive historical narrative is not a threat to national unity but is, in fact, its strongest foundation. However, while the theoretical and

historiographical arguments for this shift are well-established, there has been a significant lack of empirical research investigating its practical application and impact within the primary school classroom.⁶

Previous educational studies in Indonesia have tended to focus on the effectiveness of various teaching methods, such as cooperative learning or technology integration, on improving students' retention of the existing standard historical content.⁷ Other studies have critically analyzed the content of history textbooks for ideological bias. While valuable, these lines of inquiry have not adequately explored the fundamental question of what happens when the content itself is changed. They have not systematically investigated the cognitive and affective outcomes of replacing or supplementing the dominant national narrative with one rooted in local and maritime experiences. This represents a critical research gap.⁸ We do not empirically know how such a curricular shift influences a young child's conception of their nation, their relationship with compatriots from other islands, and their overall sense of national identity.

This study was designed to fill this gap by conceptualizing and empirically testing the impact of a novel pedagogical approach on the development of what we term 'Archipelagic Consciousness'. We define Archipelagic Consciousness as a multifaceted construct comprising a cognitive understanding of the sea as a historical connector rather than a divider, an appreciation for the symbiotic relationship between local and national histories, a sense of shared identity and interdependence with people from across the archipelago, and an affective pride in Indonesia's identity as a maritime nation.⁹

The primary aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of a pedagogical model centered on local and maritime histories in fostering 'Archipelagic Consciousness' among Indonesian fifth-grade primary school students. Specifically, the study sought to quantitatively measure the change in students' Archipelagic Consciousness after participating in the intervention compared to a control group receiving standard instruction, and to qualitatively explore the students' experiences, perceptions, and shifts in

understanding regarding their local identity, the sea, and the Indonesian nation as a whole.

The novelty of this research is threefold. First, it moves beyond theoretical discourse by conceptualizing 'Archipelagic Consciousness' as a measurable educational construct. We developed and validated a specific instrument to assess this outcome, providing a new tool for educational research in this area. Second, this study presents and evaluates a comprehensive, replicable pedagogical model for teaching local and maritime history at the primary level. While others have advocated for such a shift, this research details the 'how'—providing a structured intervention that integrates storytelling, project-based learning, and local resource utilization. Finally, by employing a rigorous mixed-methods design, this research provides robust empirical evidence of the cognitive and affective impact of this pedagogical shift. It offers a new paradigm for national identity formation in Indonesia, one that is not imposed from the center but is woven from the diverse historical threads of its many islands and seas, thereby providing a data-driven foundation for future curriculum policy and teacher professional development.¹⁰

2. Methods

This study employed a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods research design to investigate the impact of the pedagogical intervention. A non-equivalent control group, pre-test/post-test design was chosen as the most feasible and ethically sound approach for school setting, as it did not require random assignment of individual students, which would have disrupted established classroom structures. The qualitative component, involving focus groups and portfolio analysis, was integrated to provide depth, context, and explanatory power to the quantitative findings. The study was conducted over a full academic semester of sixteen weeks. The study population consisted of fifth-grade students (typically aged 10-11) from four public primary schools in Indonesia. This age group was selected for their developing abstract thinking skills and understanding of social identity.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select schools to ensure geographical and cultural

diversity, a key requirement for testing the Archipelagic Consciousness construct. The study included two schools in Palembang, South Sumatra, a region with a rich maritime history as the center of the Srivijaya empire, and two schools near Surakarta, Central Java, representing the historically dominant Javanese agrarian narrative. This sampling strategy allowed for an examination of the intervention's effect on students with varying levels of pre-existing exposure to maritime culture. While this purposive selection was necessary, care was taken to address selection bias. Within each of the four schools, one fifth-grade class was assigned to the experimental group and another to the control group via a coin toss to minimize bias at the school level.

The final sample comprised 180 students: 92 in the experimental group and 88 in the control group. The mean age of participants was 10.7 years. Crucially, analysis of baseline data confirmed the equivalence of the two groups prior to the intervention. As detailed in the Results section (Table 1), there were no statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups in terms of school-level academic performance, student socioeconomic status (SES), or pre-test scores on the dependent variable. Prior to the study, ethical clearance was obtained from local education authorities, and informed consent was secured from principals, teachers, and parents, with assent from the students themselves.

The core of the study was the design and implementation of the "Nusantara Bertutur" (The Archipelago Narrates) pedagogical module for the experimental group. The module consisted of sixteen weekly sessions, each lasting two thirty-five minute periods. The control group, meanwhile, followed the standard government-prescribed history curriculum for the same duration, which primarily focused on the chronology of national heroes and key events of the independence struggle, using the standard textbook. The "Nusantara Bertutur" module was structured around three interconnected thematic phases. The first phase, "Pahlawanku, Ceritaku" (My Hero, My Story), focused on validating students' local identity by having them investigate local historical figures and events before engaging with the broader national story.

This involved activities like guest visits from local storytellers, analysis of local songs, and creating a local history timeline. The second phase, "Laut Kita, Jalan Kita" (Our Sea, Our Road), was designed to explicitly reframe the sea as a connector through case studies of inter-island interactions, the spice trade routes, and map-based activities where students traced historical maritime networks. The final phase, "Satu Sauh, Satu Jangkar" (One Anchor, One Mooring), aimed to synthesize the local and national narratives and connect them to contemporary identity. This culminated in a capstone project where students worked in groups to create a digital story or a physical diorama titled "Indonesia, My Archipelagic Home," requiring them to integrate their local history with the broader maritime narrative they had learned. Teachers in the experimental group received a two-day training workshop on the module's philosophy and methods.

A mixed-methods approach to data collection was employed. The quantitative instrument was the 'Archipelagic Consciousness Inventory' (ACI), a 24-item questionnaire developed and validated for this study to measure the core components of the construct on a 5-point Likert scale. It comprised four subscales: Maritime Historical Knowledge, Inter-island Connectivity, Local-National Integration, and Affective Maritime Identity. The development of the ACI involved several rigorous stages. Initial items were generated based on a comprehensive literature review and consultations with a panel of ten experts, including historians, primary education specialists, and psychometricians. A pilot test was conducted with 60 fifth-grade students from a non-participating school to assess item clarity and comprehensibility. A subsequent exploratory factor analysis supported the proposed four-factor structure of the inventory, providing evidence for its construct validity. The internal consistency of the ACI was found to be excellent, with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha=0.92$ for the total scale. The subscales also demonstrated high reliability: Maritime Historical Knowledge ($\alpha=0.87$), Inter-island Connectivity ($\alpha=0.89$), Local-National Integration ($\alpha=0.90$), and Affective Maritime Identity ($\alpha=0.88$). The ACI was administered to both groups before and after the intervention.

Qualitative data were gathered via semi-structured Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with students from both groups post-intervention, analysis of the capstone projects from the experimental group, and periodic, non-participant classroom observations. The classroom observations served to ensure the fidelity of the intervention's implementation. A checklist was used to monitor adherence to the "Nusantara Bertutur" module's key pedagogical principles and activities. Analysis of these checklists indicated a high degree of implementation fidelity (over 95% adherence) across both experimental schools. Observations also confirmed that control group teachers adhered strictly to the standard curriculum, minimizing potential treatment contamination.

Quantitative ACI data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. An Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was performed on the post-test ACI scores, with the group as the independent variable and pre-test scores as the covariate, to control for pre-existing differences. Key assumptions for ANCOVA were tested prior to the main analysis. Qualitative data from FGD transcripts and observation notes underwent a six-phase thematic analysis to identify emergent themes. Two researchers independently coded a subset of the transcripts to establish inter-coder reliability. NVivo 12 software was used to manage and code the data. Findings were then triangulated to produce a comprehensive interpretation.

3. Results

The analysis of the collected data yielded convergent quantitative and qualitative results, demonstrating the profound impact of the "Nusantara Bertutur" pedagogical intervention on students' Archipelagic Consciousness. Prior to the intervention, the experimental and control groups were found to be comparable on key demographic and academic variables. This equivalence, detailed in Table 1, is crucial as it supports the conclusion that observed post-test differences were attributable to the intervention. The descriptive statistics presented in Table 2 provide a clear overview of the changes in Archipelagic Consciousness from pre-test to post-test for both groups.

Table 1. Baseline characteristics of experimental and control groups.

Variable	Experimental (n=92)	Control (n=88)	Test Statistic	p-value
Mean student age (Years)	10.7 (0.6)	10.6 (0.7)	$t(178) = 0.98$	0.328
Gender (% Female)	51.1%	48.9%	$\chi^2(1) = 0.09$	0.761
Prior Nat. achievement score	78.5 (5.2)	77.9 (5.5)	$t(178) = 0.74$	0.460
Pre-test ACI (Total Score)	2.98 (0.55)	2.95 (0.58)	$t(178) = 0.36$	0.719

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the archipelagic consciousness inventory (ACI) scores by group and time.

Variable / Construct	Experimental Group (n = 92)	Control Group (n = 88)
	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)
ACI (Total score)	2.98 (0.55)	4.35 (0.48)
ACI subscales		
Maritime historical knowledge	3.05 (0.61)	4.28 (0.53)
Inter-island Connectivity	2.89 (0.70)	4.51 (0.49)
Local-national integration	2.91 (0.65)	4.47 (0.51)
Affective maritime identity	3.07 (0.58)	4.14 (0.55)

Note: SD = Standard Deviation. Scores are based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate higher levels of the construct.

As Table 2 shows, the experimental and control groups began at nearly identical baseline levels. Following the intervention, the control group exhibited only minimal gains, with their total ACI score moving from 2.95 to 3.10. In stark contrast, the experimental group's total ACI score surged from 2.98 to 4.35, a profound shift. The largest gains for the experimental group were seen in the inter-island connectivity and local-national integration subscales, indicating the intervention was exceptionally successful in its core aims of reframing the sea as a connector and validating local identities.

To determine the statistical significance of this difference while controlling for pre-test scores, an ANCOVA was performed. The assumptions for ANCOVA were met: the relationship between the covariate and the dependent variable was linear; Levene's test indicated homogeneity of variances ($p > 0.05$); and most critically, the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes was tested and met, as the interaction between the pre-test covariate and the group was not significant, $F(1,176) = 1.12, p = 0.291$. The results of the ANCOVA, detailed in Table 3, provide unequivocal evidence of the intervention's effectiveness.

Table 3. Results of analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for post-test ACI scores.

Source	Sum of Squares (SS)	df	Mean Square (MS)	F	p	Partial η^2
Pre-test ACI score (Covariate)	3.58	1	3.58	15.67	< 0.001	0.081
Group (Intervention)	21.54	1	21.54	94.28	< 0.001	0.347
Error	40.44	177	0.23			
Total	66.86	179				

Note: Dependent Variable = Post-test ACI Total Score. Covariate = Pre-test ACI Total Score.

After adjusting for pre-test scores, there was a highly significant main effect of the intervention on post-test ACI scores, $F(1,177) = 94.28, p < 0.001$. This indicates that the probability of observing such a large

difference between the groups by chance is virtually zero. Furthermore, the partial eta squared value (partial η^2) of 0.347 indicates a very large effect size. This means that 34.7% of the variance in post-

test archipelagic consciousness scores can be directly attributed to the "Nusantara Bertutur" intervention alone. An effect of this magnitude is exceptionally rare and powerful for a school-based educational intervention, underscoring the transformative impact of the pedagogical model.

The thematic analysis of the Focus Group Discussions and student portfolios yielded rich, nuanced data that explained and brought to life the quantitative findings, revealing a clear distinction between the experiences of the experimental and control groups. The discussions with the experimental group coalesced into a powerful narrative of transformation. A foundational shift occurred in how students conceptualized their nation's geography, moving from a static to a dynamic view in a theme described as "The Map Came Alive". Unlike control group students, who typically described Indonesia as a collection of islands separated by a vast and empty sea—one noting, "To go to Kalimantan, you have to cross the sea. It's far away"—the experimental group articulated a profound change in perspective. The sea was no longer an empty space but a vibrant network of historical pathways. This was powerfully articulated by a student named R, who explained, "Before, I thought the sea was just for fish. Now, I know it was the highway of our ancestors... The sea didn't separate us; it was the road that connected us. The map in my head now has lines, like roads, all over the water". This new mental map, populated with activity and connections, indicated a fundamental cognitive shift towards an integrated maritime network. This new understanding then flowed into a second, deeply personal theme concerning the validation of their own heritage: "My Grandpa's Story is History Too". The intervention's initial focus on local history had a profound impact on students' sense of place and pride. While the control group almost exclusively mentioned national figures when asked about important history, perceiving their local stories as separate and less significant, the experimental group seamlessly integrated their local narratives into the broader national story. A student from Surakarta, B, powerfully captured this synthesis: "We learned about Prince Diponegoro, but we also learned how the

farmers in my village used to trade their rice with merchants from the coast, who then sailed to other islands. It made me feel like my village, even though it's far from the sea, was part of the big story too... my grandpa's story about the river trade is also Indonesian history". This process of seeing their own world as a valid and integral part of the national saga created a strong emotional connection, bridging the psychological distance between local and national identity. This led directly to the final theme, a clear shift in social perspective from 'Othering' to 'Interdependence'. The module, particularly activities centered on the Spice Trade and the study of inter-island sailors, fostered a sense of shared destiny and an appreciation for the unique contributions of different cultures. A Javanese student, D, reflected on her newfound understanding of the Bugis people: "I used to think people from other islands were very different. But when we learned about the Bugis sailors, how brave they were and how they had special knowledge about the stars and the wind, I thought they were so cool... We all needed each other". This discovery of "needing each other"—of historical and economic interdependence—was a powerful revelation that replaced stereotypes with a concrete understanding of symbiosis, fostering a sense of being part of a single, interconnected archipelagic family.

4. Discussion

The convergence of large quantitative effects and rich qualitative data confirms that the "Nusantara Bertutur" module was a transformative educational experience. The findings suggest that Archipelagic Consciousness is a critical competency for citizenship in a diverse nation-state and that its cultivation was achieved through several interconnected mechanisms. The intervention succeeded by fundamentally restructuring the students' mental maps of their nation, validating their personal identities as a prerequisite for building a collective one, dismantling intergroup barriers by fostering a sense of profound interdependence, and igniting an emotional, affective connection to a reimagined national story.¹¹

The intervention's primary success was in facilitating a cognitive restructuring of national

space. The conventional curriculum often presents maps as static representations of landmasses separated by an empty blue void. "Nusantara Bertutur" directly challenged this cognitive dichotomy by populating the sea with stories of trade, migration, and cultural exchange, transforming it from a barrier into a schema of connection. In line with theories of cognitive mapping, which hold that our understanding of space is a subjective construction shaped by narrative and cultural significance, students moved from a static, 'Euclidean' map to a dynamic, 'hodological' or path-based map defined by pathways.¹² The statement from R that the map in her head "now has lines, like roads, all over the water" is a perfect articulation of this cognitive shift. This new mental model, where islands are nodes in a historical network, provides the foundational architecture upon which an integrated archipelagic identity can be built.

Second, the model's success was deeply grounded in the educational philosophies of John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky, which championed connecting education to the lived experience of the learner. The module deliberately began not with the abstract nation but with the tangible world of the child: their local heroes and stories. This approach communicated to students that their own heritage was not peripheral but was a foundational building block of the national story. This validation process acts as a critical Vygotskian scaffold, where the familiar local history allows the student to access a zone of proximal development for understanding the larger, more complex national history.¹³ As B's quote illustrates, this process of connecting the personal narrative to the grand narrative fostered a nested identity structure where being Javanese or Palembangese is a specific and valued way of being Indonesian. The sharp increase in the Local-National Integration subscale provides robust proof of this psychological mechanism.

Building on this foundation, the third transformative mechanism was the intervention's ability to dismantle intergroup barriers by fostering a profound sense of historical and cultural interdependence.¹⁴ This speaks directly to Social Identity Theory, which explains how individuals form in-groups and out-groups. The traditional curriculum

can inadvertently reinforce these distinctions. The "Nusantara Bertutur" module, particularly through its study of inter-island trade and migration, actively worked to create a superordinate identity: that of an "Archipelagic People". The Spice Trade activity, where students from different "islands" had to trade to acquire resources, allowed them to experience interdependence directly. D's reflection that "We all needed each other" signifies a discovery of historical symbiosis. Students learned that cultural differences were not markers of otherness but were specialized assets contributing to the collective whole. This process of recategorization is a classic strategy for reducing intergroup prejudice and fostering social cohesion, as evidenced by the high scores on the Inter-island Connectivity subscale.¹⁵

Finally, the intervention's success cannot be fully understood without acknowledging its impact on the affective domain of learning. The study demonstrated a clear pathway from cognitive understanding to emotional investment. The "Nusantara Bertutur" module, through its emphasis on narrative and human agency, ignited an emotional connection to the past. The significant rise in the Affective Maritime Identity subscale, coupled with students' expressions of pride and excitement ("our kingdom," "so cool"), shows a deep sense of ownership and emotional investment. This affective engagement, rooted in historical empathy, is what transforms an academic concept into a lived, felt identity. The vibrant dioramas and digital stories created by students were not just academic exercises; they were creative testaments to their reimagined relationship with their nation.¹⁶

Despite the powerful findings, the study's limitations must be acknowledged. A primary consideration is the potential for a Hawthorne effect; the novelty of the intervention and the increased attention on the experimental group may have contributed to their gains, independent of the module's specific content.¹⁷ Furthermore, the quasi-experimental design cannot fully disentangle the effects of the historical *content* (local and maritime narratives) from the pedagogy (project-based learning, storytelling, student-centered activities). The control group followed a traditional, textbook-driven

curriculum. It is therefore unclear whether the active ingredient was the shift in historical focus, the engaging pedagogical methods, or the combination of both. We argue that the content and pedagogy of the "Nusantara Bertutur" model are inextricably linked; the maritime narrative lends itself to dynamic, project-based exploration.¹⁸ However, this remains a confound. The authors acknowledge the inherent limitations of the quasi-experimental design. While steps were taken to ensure baseline equivalence, this design is more susceptible to threats to internal validity than a randomized controlled trial.¹⁹ Specifically, the study took place over a full academic semester, and it is possible that unobserved community or school-wide events (a history threat) or natural developmental changes in students (a maturation threat) could have influenced the outcomes. However, no major region-specific historical or cultural events that would likely confound the results were reported during the study period.²⁰

Future research should seek to isolate these variables. A four-group design, for instance, could compare (1) new content with new pedagogy (the current intervention), (2) new content with traditional pedagogy, (3) traditional content with new pedagogy, and (4) a business-as-usual control. This would allow for a more precise identification of the primary drivers of change.

5. Conclusion

This study embarked on a mission to reimagine Indonesian national identity from the ground up, starting in the primary school classroom. It challenged the dominance of a terrestrial, centralized historical narrative and investigated the potential of an alternative—one rooted in the local and maritime realities of the archipelago. The results were unequivocal. A pedagogical intervention focused on the vibrant histories of local communities and the sea as a great connector was profoundly effective in fostering 'Archipelagic Consciousness'. Students in the program developed a more integrated, nuanced, and emotionally resonant understanding of their nation. They learned to see diversity not as a source of division but as a testament to a long history of

interaction, and to view their vast seas not as empty space but as the very lifeblood of their shared identity. The concept of Indonesia as a nation was not diminished; it was enriched, becoming a tapestry woven from a thousand different threads, all held together by the tides of history. This research provides more than just data; it provides a blueprint for hope. It suggests that by teaching children to look first at the history of their own harbor, their own river, their own coast, we can help them discover the most authentic and resilient map of their nation—one that truly reflects the spirit of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* in the 21st century.

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