



## **Cultivating Global Citizens: Cultural Awareness, Critical Thinking, and Intercultural Competence in High School Education**

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the level of local cultural awareness of high school students in Karanganyar Regency and explore its relationship with critical thinking skills and intercultural competence. This study employed a quantitative approach with a survey design, collecting data through a 3-point Likert scale-based questionnaire consisting of factual and valence statement items, as well as additional indicators to measure critical thinking and intercultural competence. The research sample consisted of 110 high school students in Karanganyar Regency, selected purposively. The data were analyzed using descriptive quantitative techniques through percentage categorization and comparison of scores across variables. The results showed that 90% of students were in the medium cultural awareness category, 2.7% in the high category, and 7.3% in the low category. Notably, one student from the high category scored 98.1% for cultural awareness and achieved perfect scores for critical thinking and intercultural competence, while students from the low category only achieved 57.4% in cultural awareness, with critical thinking scores of 61.9% and intercultural competence scores of 72.2%. These findings suggest a tendency that students with high levels of cultural awareness also show better mastery of critical thinking and intercultural skills.

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## **Introduction**

Culture is interpreted as an identity inherent in every community and plays a role as a foundation in the formation of individual and community character (Arslan et al., 2024; Sakti et al., 2024; Strandberg & Ek Styvén, 2024). In scientific studies, culture is used to describe the mental software possessed by every human being, such as values, norms, and social behavior patterns (Strandberg & Ek Styvén, 2024). The term culture itself has various meanings related to the concept of civilization or purification of the mind, which is manifested through results such as education, art, and literature (Sakti et al., 2024). The preservation of local culture is becoming increasingly urgent amidst the current of globalization and the strong influence of foreign cultures (Levin & Mamlok, 2021).

Culture is not only a symbolic heritage of ancestors, but also reflects the perspective, values, and collective identity of society (Djono et al., 2023). Local culture shows the identity that distinguishes one community from another, as well as being an important instrument in the formation of the character and personality of the nation (O'CONNOR, 2024; Suharyanto & Wiflihani, 2024). The existence of culture, or in scientific language more familiarly called culture, becomes vital in the midst of society because of its urgency, which is considered the identity of a nation (Smith, 2023). This statement is in line with Haviland (1996), who defines culture as a set of rules and norms shared by members of society, which, if implemented by its members, will produce behavior that is considered appropriate and



acceptable to all people, so that it becomes the identity of a community group. It can be understood that local culture is the basis of cultural diversity, which becomes a national identity, reflecting a unique identity in each region.

Cultural awareness, especially local culture, is mandatory in efforts to preserve culture in general (Kartono, 2024; Novita et al., 2024). Cultural awareness is the ability of individuals to understand, appreciate, and adapt to cultural differences in social interactions (Alexandra et al., 2021; Baker, 2011). Cultural awareness includes the ability to recognize and understand cultural changes in individual values and behavior (Yusri & Afrida, 2022). Understanding and appreciation of everyday culture allows individuals to develop a sense of belonging to their nation. Popular culture and daily activities play a significant role in shaping and strengthening national identity (Edensor et al., 2002; Tolia-Kelly, 2009).

Cultural awareness is the main foundation in instilling a sense of belonging to local culture (Hossain, 2024; Rosa et al., 2021). An individual who is culturally aware will be able to integrate local values reflectively, understand the meaning behind tradition, and appreciate diversity as a wealth that must be preserved (Barrett, 2016). This is emphasized by J. A. Banks & Banks (2019) who states that multicultural education must begin with a complete understanding of one's own culture before being able to understand the cultures of others?. In the context of education, instilling local cultural awareness among high school students not only functions as an effort to preserve cultural heritage and maintain national identity, but also as a means to build national character and increase a sense of togetherness and tolerance (Wijayanti et al., 2025).

James A. Banks stated that education should provide students with an understanding of their own culture and the culture of others, so that they not only have a tolerant attitude, but are also able to think critically in assessing, interpreting, and responding to diverse societies (J. A. Banks & Banks, 2019). Critical thinking skills are an important competency in 21st-century education. Students are not enough to know cultural facts, but need to be trained to assess, compare, and evaluate cultural values rationally and reflectively (O'Reilly et al., 2022; Wang & Wu, 2023). In this context, critical thinking skills become important cognitive skills that enable students not only to accept cultural values passively, but to evaluate their relevance to modern life reflectively and rationally.

Intercultural competence is key in character education, besides thinking skills. Intercultural competence emphasizes the ability to interact with individuals from different cultural backgrounds with an open attitude, empathy, and the ability to adapt well (Deardorff, 2009; Lugman, 2023), states that IC is not only important in social interactions, but also in local environments that are pluralistic. As time goes by, the challenges in maintaining local cultural values are increasingly complex. Various external factors, such as the influence of foreign cultures through mass media and information technology, have the potential to shift cultural identities that have been built for a long time. This demands a strategic role for educational institutions, especially high schools, to become a space for the reconstruction and revitalization of local culture. The formation of Intercultural Competence which demands the ability of individuals to understand, adapt, and interact effectively in a multicultural environment, is very important. IC is not limited to interactions between nations, but also includes cultural diversity at the local and national levels so that it is relevant in strengthening students' cultural identities in a pluralistic society (Deardorff, 2009). In conclusion, a deep understanding of the level of local cultural awareness among students is an important indicator in assessing the effectiveness of the role of education in maintaining local culture.

Karanganyar Regency is one of the regions in Central Java Province with unique cultural richness, so it has great potential to be used as a case study related to the dynamics of



local cultural awareness. The richness of traditions, rituals, and local wisdom in Karanganyar not only reflects the long history of the region, but also creates a unique and valuable cultural ecosystem. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on examining local cultural awareness among high school students in Karanganyar Regency, Central Java Province, by linking it with critical thinking skills and intercultural competence an area that has received little attention in previous studies. Unlike prior research that mainly highlights cultural knowledge at a surface level, this study provides deeper insights into how students understanding of their own cultural values influences essential 21st-century competencies.

The purpose of this study is to describe the level of students's local cultural awareness and to analyze its relationship with critical thinking and intercultural competence, thereby offering an empirical basis for the development of more inclusive and contextual educational programs to preserve local culture in the era of globalization. Through this study, it is hoped that the extent of local cultural awareness among students can be identified, which can then be used as a reference in developing more inclusive and contextual curricula and learning programs. In addition to describing the level of students' cultural awareness, this study also examines aspects of critical thinking skills and intercultural competence as reflected in the way students analyze, evaluate, and reflect on local cultural values. Through empirical findings, this study is also expected to contribute to the literature on education and cultural studies, especially in efforts to preserve cultural heritage through formal education.

## **Research Method**

This study uses a quantitative approach with a survey design to determine the level of local cultural awareness of senior high school students in Karanganyar Regency. This approach was chosen because it allows for objective and systematic measurement of variables. The quantitative approach is used to study a specific population or sample, with research instruments and statistical data analysis to test the established hypothesis. The survey design was used because it is appropriate to describe students' attitudes and understanding of local culture. Creswell (2014) explains that a survey is a quantitative research method that provides a numerical picture of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population through a study of samples from that population.

The research involved 110 purposively selected high school students in Karanganyar Regency, a sample size considered adequate for descriptive quantitative analysis following Creswell's (2014) guideline for survey research. Data collection was carried out through a questionnaire distributed online using Google Forms to students from several high schools selected purposively. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive quantitative techniques. Students's responses to the 3-point Likert scale questionnaire were converted into numerical scores and categorized into three levels: high ( $\geq 81\%$ ), medium (61–80%), and low ( $\leq 60\%$ ). The distribution of students across these categories was calculated in percentages to illustrate the overall level of local cultural awareness. To further test the research assumptions, comparative descriptive analysis was conducted by examining differences in scores of cultural awareness, critical thinking, and intercultural competence between students in high and low categories. This procedure provided a clearer understanding of the relationship among the variables and the extent to which local cultural awareness is associated with higher levels of critical thinking and intercultural competence.

## **Results and Discussion**

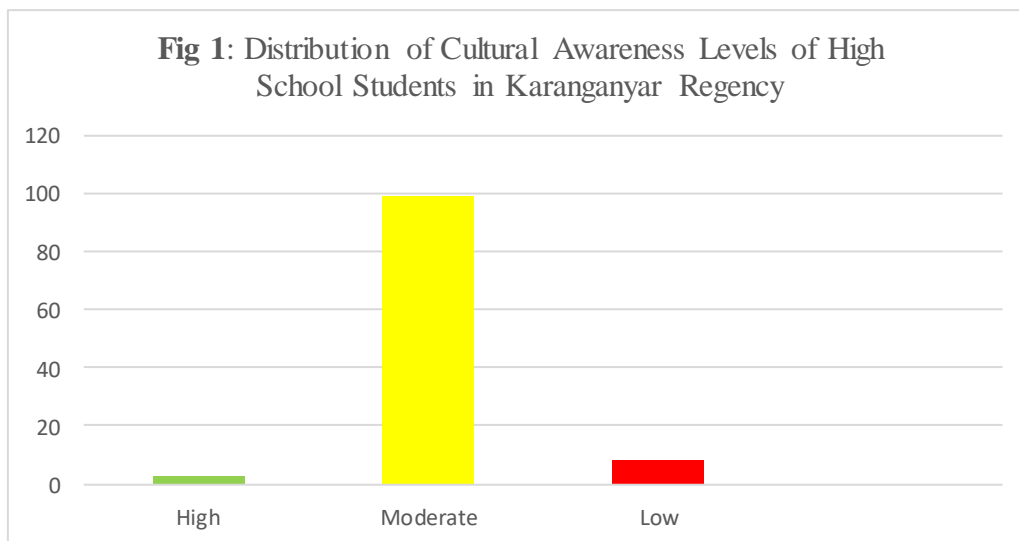
The results of the study indicate that the level of cultural awareness of high school students in Karanganyar Regency is in the medium to high category. The majority of students

are familiar with local cultural forms such as traditional dances, historical sites, and local traditions such as Dukutan and Pasar Kumandang. However, their understanding is generally limited to visible aspects, such as the name and physical form of the culture, without a deep understanding of the values and philosophies behind the culture.

The respondents involved in this study were 110 students, with the following quantitative data:

- 1). 3 students (2.7%) have a high level of cultural awareness ( $\geq 81\%$ )
- 2). 99 students (90%) are in the medium category (61 – 80%)
- 3). 8 students (7.3%) are in the low category ( $\leq 60\%$ )

This distribution is visualized in the following graph:



These findings indicate that the majority of students already have basic knowledge of local culture, but their understanding is still superficial. Students know the names of cultures such as Cetho Temple, Jaran Gedrug, and Kumandang Market, but have not been able to explain the philosophical values and social functions contained therein. The tendency for most students to fall into the medium category of cultural awareness may be influenced by several factors. First, cultural education in schools often emphasizes factual knowledge rather than deeper values and meanings, which limits students's reflective understanding. Second, the strong exposure to global popular culture through digital media may reduce students's engagement with local traditions. Third, opportunities for direct involvement in cultural practices, such as rituals or performances, are limited, causing students's experiences to remain superficial. These factors suggest that cultural awareness requires not only cognitive exposure but also experiential and value-based learning to reach higher levels. This condition reflects the early stages in the cultural awareness development model developed by Bennett (2017) in the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), namely the ethnocentrism stage. At this stage, individuals tend to view culture from their cultural perspective and are not yet fully able to understand diversity in depth. More specifically, most students are in the minimally ethnocentric phase, such as the denial or defense stage, where they begin to acknowledge the existence of other cultures but have not yet developed a complete appreciation of these differences. Pedagogical efforts are needed to encourage the transition to the ethnorelativism stage, namely the understanding that every culture has equal value and meaning and is worthy of respect.

The comparison between students with high and low cultural awareness is seen through significant differences in characteristics. The three students with high cultural awareness showed:

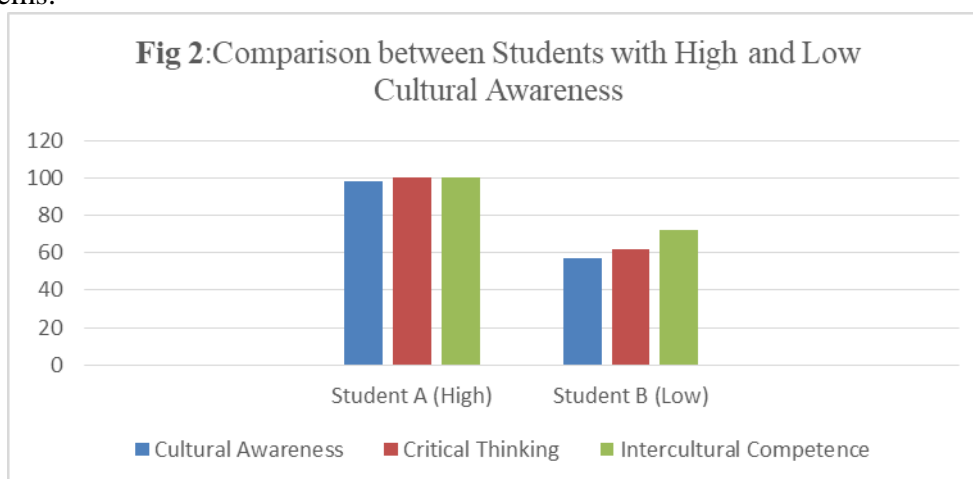
- 1). Comprehensive knowledge of local culture
- 2). Ability to explain social values and philosophical meanings behind a culture
- 3). Theoretical and appreciative responses to the importance of cultural preservation

An example of the form of cultural awareness possessed by students is when they are able to explain that the Dukutan tradition is not just village entertainment, but also the implementation of local wisdom in the form of mutual cooperation and social solidarity. Students are also able to connect local cultural practices with global issues, such as diversity and cultural identity.

At the opposite pole, eight students with low cultural awareness tend to:

- 1) Give limited answers, such as knowing “in passing” or “hearing but don’t know the meaning.”
- 2) Are unable to mention local culture specifically
- 3) Do not show an attitude of concern for local culture in their statements.

The scale or comparison of quantitative data between students with high and low levels of cultural awareness is visualized in a diagram. This comparison includes aspects of Critical Thinking and Intercultural Competence based on each student’s response to the relevant statement items.



The results of further analysis showed significant differences between students with high and low levels of cultural awareness in terms of critical thinking and intercultural competence. One student with a high level of cultural awareness scored 106 out of a maximum total of 108, which when converted into a percentage, is 98.1%. The student also showed maximum performance in the aspects of critical thinking and intercultural competence, each scoring 21 out of 21 (100%) and 36 out of 36 (100%). A comparison was made with one student from the low category who only scored 62 out of 108, or 57.4% in cultural awareness. In the aspect of critical thinking, this student scored 13 out of 21, which is equivalent to 61.9%, while for intercultural competence, he scored 26 out of 36 or 72.2%.

These findings indicate that high cultural awareness is not only a reflection of knowledge, but also an important foundation for the development of students' critical thinking skills and intercultural competence. Students with a cultural awareness score of 98.1% are not only able to recognize and internalize local cultural values, but it seems to affect students' thinking skills so that they are able to demonstrate the ability to evaluate, compare, and process cultural information in a systematic way as indicated by high critical



thinking skills. In addition, perfect mastery of the IC aspect indicates that a deep understanding of one's own culture also strengthens empathy, tolerance, and cross-cultural communication skills. In contrast, students with low CA (57.4%) tend to have a more limited framework of thinking. The CT score of 61.9% illustrates their difficulty in assessing and criticizing cultural phenomena, while the IC score of 72.2% indicates that although they have some ability to interact, they are less consistent in applying an open and adaptive attitude in the context of cultural differences. This pattern supports the idea that cultural awareness serves as a cognitive and affective catalyst, that is, the more deeply students understand and appreciate their own culture, the better they are at thinking critically and establishing intercultural relationships, which in turn becomes an important asset in multicultural education and global character building.

The data obtained in this study indicate that cultural awareness plays a very important role in students' personal and cognitive development. One of the main contributions of cultural awareness is its ability to support the formation of critical thinking patterns (Lun et al., 2010; Othman & Ali, 2023). Students who understand culture in depth, not only accept values passively but are also able to analyze, evaluate, and take a stand on the diversity that exists around them (J. Banks, 2001; Feitosa et al., 2022). Cultural awareness is also an important foundation in shaping students as citizens who recognize and appreciate their identity as part of the Indonesian nation, which is rich in culture. This understanding not only fosters a sense of pride in local and national identity but also encourages students to be open to other cultures without losing their own cultural roots. Teachers and educators need to actively strive to instill cultural awareness in the learning process, both through integration in the curriculum and contextual approaches that are close to students' lives. Education is expected not only to be a means of transferring knowledge but also a vehicle for forming cultural character and social skills that are relevant to the challenges of today's multicultural society.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the level of local cultural awareness of high school students in Karanganyar Regency is mostly in the moderate category and shows that students have known elements of local culture but their understanding is still limited to the surface aspect. Only a small number of students reach the high category, while a small number of others are in the low category. The results of in-depth analysis show that students with a high level of cultural awareness also show maximum scores in critical thinking and intercultural competence. These students can associate local culture with reflective values, demonstrate analytical thinking, and have the ability to interact amidst cultural diversity. In contrast, students from the low cultural awareness category show limitations in evaluating cultural values, show an open attitude, and are less tolerant of other cultures. These findings reinforce the idea that local cultural awareness is not only related to cultural knowledge but also has a significant contribution to strengthening students' critical thinking skills and intercultural competence. Therefore, local cultural education needs to be integrated contextually in the learning process to shape the character of students who are able to think critically, are tolerant, and are ready to face the challenges of a multicultural society.

The findings of this study have important implications for both education and cultural preservation in Karanganyar Regency. Teachers need to integrate local wisdom into classroom practices more systematically, for example by incorporating cultural sites, traditional arts, and rituals into history and social studies learning for education. For cultural preservation, schools can collaborate with local cultural communities and government



institutions to create programs that allow students to experience local traditions firsthand. Such efforts not only strengthen students's cultural identity but also contribute to the sustainability of Karanganyar's unique cultural heritage.

### Recommendation

Several follow-up recommendations can be proposed based on the findings. Teachers need to integrate local cultural content more contextually into classroom learning through experiential activities and reflective discussions to strengthen students' critical thinking and intercultural competence. Educational policy makers should design curricula and policies that prioritize local wisdom, supported by teacher training and collaboration with local cultural institutions in Karanganyar. Further researchers are encouraged to expand the study to a wider scope, apply mixed-method approaches, and examine additional factors such as family background and media exposure to provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' cultural awareness.

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