

# Transformative Social Studies Education Under the Merdeka Belajar Framework: A Conceptual Analysis of Activity Theory and the Negotiation of Local Wisdom Knowledge in Multicultural Classrooms

Edi Susrianto Indra Putra<sup>1\*</sup>, and A. Muthalib<sup>2</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Universitas Islam Indragiri, Indonesia

## Abstract

This paper offers a conceptual analysis of how Engeström's expanded Activity Theory (AT) can illuminate the negotiation of local wisdom (*kearifan lokal*) knowledge within Social Studies (IPS) classrooms under Indonesia's Merdeka Belajar curriculum. Rather than reporting findings from original empirical fieldwork, the analysis develops a theoretically grounded heuristic that maps the six components of Engeström's activity system subject, tools, object, rules, community, and division of labour onto the institutional and epistemic dynamics through which local wisdom is contested, validated, and repositioned in multicultural classrooms. Drawing systematically on the existing empirical and policy literature on Merdeka Belajar, local wisdom integration, and multicultural education, the analysis identifies the secondary, tertiary, and quaternary contradictions, in Engeström's terms, most likely to arise when standardized national assessment encounters the fluid, relational character of indigenous knowledge. The paper proposes negotiation as a precise analytic construct rather than a synonym for the mere presence of local content, and offers the resulting framework as a heuristic for future empirical research, together with a set of testable propositions rather than confirmed findings regarding teacher agency, principal leadership, and the institutional conditions that mediate transformative local wisdom integration. Implications are discussed for multicultural curriculum design, teacher professional development, and the design of subsequent empirical studies in pluralistic education systems.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received : 11 March 2026

Revised : 28 May 2026

Accepted : 6 June 2026

## KEYWORDS

Activity Theory; Local Wisdom; Merdeka Belajar; Multicultural Classrooms; Social Studies Education; Transformative Learning

## PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license.



## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

\* **Edi Susrianto Indra Putra**, Universitas Islam Indragiri, Indonesia. Email: [ediunisi1971@gmail.com](mailto:ediunisi1971@gmail.com)

## Introduction

Education systems in multicultural societies carry a dual obligation: transmitting a shared civic culture while affirming the epistemic legitimacy of diverse knowledge traditions. In Indonesia, this tension is especially acute given the archipelago's extraordinary cultural plurality, comprising more than 1,300 distinct ethnic groups and an equally rich landscape of local wisdom (*kearifan lokal*) that encompasses indigenous cosmologies, agricultural practices, conflict-resolution protocols, and oral historiography. The launch of the *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) curriculum in 2022 signaled a deliberate policy turn toward student autonomy, project-based inquiry, and localized content, providing an unprecedented institutional opening for educators to bring these knowledge systems into formal schooling (Hasugian et al., 2024; Zainuddin, 2025). Yet the conditions under which such integration becomes genuinely transformative, rather than merely ornamental, remain insufficiently theorized in the empirical literature.

This paper develops its analysis with Riau Province as an illustrative analytic anchor, precisely because the conditions that make integration analytically distinctive there are unusually sharp. Riau combines Malay adat institutions with substantial Javanese, Batak, and Chinese communities, and juxtaposes coastal communities with strong customary land and ceremonial traditions against urban centres with highly heterogeneous, religiously plural student populations. These conditions mean that, more than in many other provinces, a Social Studies classroom in Riau is a site where the national curriculum's standardized civic knowledge and several distinct local epistemic traditions are simultaneously, and visibly, in play making it a productive, if illustrative rather than empirically sampled, context in which to think through where Activity Theory predicts negotiation is most and least likely to occur.

Social Studies (*Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial*, IPS) occupies a particularly strategic position in this landscape. As a subject whose disciplinary mandate encompasses history, geography, economics, and civic education, IPS inherits both the ideological ambitions of national curriculum design and the epistemological tensions of multicultural democracy. Scholars have long argued that Social Studies classrooms can serve as laboratories for democratic deliberation (Sutherland & Germain, 2026; Waller, 2025), but this potential is often undermined by teacher-centred instruction, rote memorization, and the marginalisation of non-dominant knowledge forms. Integrating local wisdom into IPS under *Merdeka Belajar* therefore requires not only curricular innovation but also a theoretical framework capable of illuminating the socio-institutional dynamics through which knowledge is selected, contested, and validated (Mahpudz, 2024; Syaharuddin et al., 2025).

Activity Theory (AT), particularly in Engeström's (1987) expanded, third-generation form, offers such a framework. By modelling learning as a collectively mediated activity system whose components; subject, tools, object, rules, community, and division of labour, generate productive contradictions, AT is equipped to capture the multi-layered negotiations that occur when local wisdom enters a formal classroom regulated by national standards. Recent applications of AT in multicultural education contexts have demonstrated its capacity to make visible the systemic tensions that prevent culturally sustaining pedagogies from being institutionalized (Rouabhia, 2024; Shi & Son, 2026). Despite this theoretical promise, AT has rarely been applied to the specific intersection of Social Studies education, local wisdom integration, and the *Merdeka Belajar* framework in Indonesia.

The integration of local wisdom into Indonesian education has attracted growing scholarly attention since the introduction of the *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Studies have demonstrated that local wisdom can strengthen national identity (Zainuddin, 2025), foster Pancasila character values (Hasugian et al., 2024), and serve as a culturally resonant bridge between community epistemology and formal schooling (Simanungkalit et al., 2024). Research in Social Studies specifically has shown that locally grounded pedagogies improve student engagement and civic motivation (Jana et al., 2024; Lamiah, 2025), while comparative work across subjects confirms that the *Merdeka Curriculum* creates favourable conditions for local content integration when institutional support is adequate (Sugiharto, 2024; Ardiansyah & Tirtana, 2025).

Simultaneously, the multicultural education literature has emphasized the importance of negotiation, rather than mere tolerance, as the operative principle for diverse classrooms (Mu'ti & Amirrachman, 2025; Sugiantoro et al., 2025). For the purposes of this analysis, negotiation is defined narrowly as the observable process by which actors visibly reconcile, contest, or hold in productive

tension two or more incompatible knowledge claims, rather than as a synonym for any instance of local content being present in a lesson. Operationally, evidence of negotiation would include moments where students or teachers explicitly compare competing accounts of a tradition, where assessment criteria are renegotiated to accommodate non-standardized forms of knowing, or where community authorities and school authorities visibly adjust their respective claims to authority (Salam & SM, 2024; Azmira, 2026). This definition matters because it distinguishes negotiation from additive inclusion, in which local content is present but no contestation of epistemic authority occurs a distinction that is itself an empirical, falsifiable claim and not merely a stipulative one (Lee, 2025; Nati et al., 2024). This paper is premised on the argument that Activity Theory provides the conceptual vocabulary needed to map where such negotiation, so defined, is analytically most and least likely across the full architecture of the school as an institution.

Three gaps motivate this research. First, while the literature on *Merdeka Belajar* and local wisdom is expanding rapidly, most existing accounts catalogue the presence of local wisdom content without specifying which theoretical contradiction such integration is meant to resolve or expose, leaving unclear whether the relationship between local wisdom and the national curriculum is additive or genuinely transformative (Annisha, 2024; Hasan et al., 2024). Second, Activity Theory applications in Indonesian education rarely address Social Studies or the multicultural dynamics of local wisdom negotiation specifically (Rouabhia, 2024). Third, the analytic status of teachers' own role in mediating between standardized curriculum and indigenous epistemology has been undertheorized, despite evidence that teacher agency is the critical variable in culturally sustaining implementation (Simorangkir, 2025; Stavropoulou et al., 2026). This paper therefore poses a conceptual rather than empirical question: which forms of contradiction, in Engeström's typology, are analytically generated when the standardized object and rules of the national Social Studies curriculum confront the relational, community-authorized epistemology of local wisdom under the *Merdeka Belajar* framework?

The significance of this paper is threefold. Theoretically, it contributes a conceptual extension of AT to a policy-relevant nexus *Merdeka Belajar*, local wisdom, and multicultural Social Studies, that has not previously been mapped through this lens. Practically, it generates testable propositions, rather than confirmed recommendations, for curriculum designers, school leaders, and teacher educators seeking to operationalize the transformative potential of the Merdeka Curriculum; these propositions are intended to guide future empirical work, not to be applied directly. Politically, it situates Indonesian educational reform within global conversations about decolonial pedagogy, indigenous knowledge rights, and culturally sustaining education, while treating claims of relevance beyond the Indonesian context as hypotheses for comparative testing rather than established transferability (Lukong & Jaja, 2026; Cabauatan, 2024).

Accordingly, this conceptual study aims to develop an Activity Theory-based heuristic for analysing how local wisdom knowledge is negotiated in multicultural Social Studies classrooms under Indonesia's *Merdeka Belajar* framework. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) map Engeström's six activity-system components—subject, tools, object, rules, community, and division of labour—onto the institutional and epistemic conditions of local wisdom integration; (2) identify the secondary, tertiary, and quaternary contradictions likely to emerge between standardized curricular and assessment arrangements and community-authorized, relational forms of knowing; and (3) formulate testable propositions concerning the roles of teacher agency, principal leadership, and

institutional support in enabling transformative rather than merely additive integration. Rather than claiming empirical confirmation, these objectives position the proposed framework as an analytic heuristic to guide subsequent field-based research in multicultural Social Studies education.

## Literature Review

### *Activity Theory as a Framework for Educational Analysis*

Vygotsky's (1978) cultural-historical psychology, Leont'ev's (1978) activity-level analysis, and Engeström's (1987, 2001) third-generation expansion collectively constitute the theoretical lineage of Activity Theory. Engeström's expansion is particularly productive for educational research because it shifts the unit of analysis from the individual subject to an entire activity system and foregrounds the contradictions structural tensions between system components, that drive developmental transformation. In educational contexts, these contradictions typically manifest as misalignments between curriculum tools and community norms, or between institutional rules and the objects that teachers and students actually pursue (Rouabhia, 2024; Nong, 2025). AT's capacity to model multiple, interacting activity systems makes it well-suited to multicultural classrooms, where the activity systems of home community, school, and nation-state frequently collide.

### *Merdeka Belajar and the Curriculum Reform Landscape*

The *Merdeka Belajar* initiative, operationalized through *Kurikulum Merdeka* from 2022 onwards, represents the most significant Indonesian curriculum reform in over a decade. Its core commitments student autonomy, project-based learning, elimination of minimum national examination standards, and the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* character framework, create enabling conditions for local wisdom integration that were not systematically present in the 2013 curriculum (Hasugian et al., 2024; Johannes et al., 2025). The *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) mechanism, which allocates up to 30% of instructional time to cross-disciplinary thematic projects, is particularly significant as a structural space where teachers can legitimately foreground local knowledge traditions (Sakman et al., 2024). It is important, however, to distinguish the formal policy space these mechanisms create from schools' enacted capacity to use it: official curriculum guidelines authorize considerable flexibility, but this authorization is not self-implementing. Several studies report that this flexibility is being utilized, but unevenly, with local wisdom content more consistently present in schools with strong principal leadership, established community partnerships, and adequate resources than in schools merely subject to the same formal policy (Hasan et al., 2024; Simorangkir, 2025). The gap between authorized flexibility and enacted practice is therefore itself a site of variation that any application of Activity Theory to this context needs to keep analytically distinct from the policy text itself.

### *Local Wisdom in Indonesian Education*

Local wisdom (*kearifan lokal*) in the Indonesian context refers to the accumulated knowledge, values, and practices developed by specific communities in relation to their natural, social, and spiritual environments. It includes oral literature (Simanungkalit et al., 2024), ritual traditions (Jana et al., 2024; Rohmadi et al., 2025), indigenous ecological knowledge (Lestari & Suwanto, 2024), customary law (*adat*), and philosophical frameworks such as the Sundanese *silih asah, silih asih, silih asuh* or Balinese *Tri Hita Karana*. The pedagogical literature on local wisdom integration distinguishes between additive approaches, where cultural content is inserted into existing lessons, and transformative approaches, where local wisdom epistemology reshapes how knowledge is

constructed, validated, and assessed (Mahpudz, 2024; Mu'ti & Amirrachman, 2025). The distinction is theoretically crucial: additive integration leaves the epistemological hierarchy of the national curriculum intact, while transformative integration challenges it.

A conceptual question often left implicit in this literature concerns who is authorized to define “local wisdom” for curricular purposes. Adat councils, village elders, religious authorities, and individual families do not necessarily share a single account of customary knowledge, and what becomes codified as kearifan lokal in a classroom is itself the outcome of a selection process that can romanticize, flatten, or silence intra-community disagreement (Salam & SM, 2024). Treating local wisdom as an internally coherent, pre-given epistemic resource therefore risks reproducing the very hierarchy that local-wisdom pedagogy is meant to challenge. Activity Theory’s treatment of community and rules as distinct, potentially conflicting components offers one way of keeping this internal heterogeneity analytically visible rather than assuming community consensus a possibility this paper treats as a further reason to apply AT to this context, rather than as a settled finding.

### ***Multicultural Education and Knowledge Negotiation***

The concept of knowledge negotiation in multicultural classrooms draws on several theoretical traditions, including critical multiculturalism (Banks, 2016), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012), and epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007). In the Indonesian context, these traditions converge with Islamic educational philosophy and Pancasila's commitment to unity in diversity (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*). Recent empirical work confirms that successful multicultural Social Studies instruction requires more than cultural tolerance: it demands structured opportunities for students to interrogate the origins, limits, and power relations of different knowledge systems (Shi & Son, 2026; Abu et al., 2026; Sugiantoro et al., 2025). Hartati et al. (2025) and Husna et al. (2025) demonstrate that community-based knowledge traditions can serve as powerful catalysts for social cohesion when they are incorporated into formal schooling through dialogic rather than transmissive pedagogies. The challenge lies in creating institutional conditions that sustain this dialogue across the contradictions inherent in a centralized education system.

This paper’s focus on Social Studies (IPS) rather than the adjacent fields of civic education (Pendidikan Pancasila dan Kewarganegaraan) or stand-alone local-content subjects is deliberate, not incidental. IPS uniquely integrates history, geography, economics, and elements of civic education within a single subject mandate, which means contestation over whose knowledge counts as authoritative plays out simultaneously across several disciplinary logics rather than within one normative civic frame (Sutherland & Germain, 2026). This makes IPS a structurally distinctive, rather than merely convenient, site for analyzing local wisdom negotiation, since a single lesson can require students and teachers to adjudicate competing knowledge claims about historical narrative, spatial belonging, economic practice, and civic norms all at once.

## **Methods**

### ***Research Design***

This paper adopts a conceptual analysis approach rather than an empirical case study design. The analysis proceeds by systematically mapping Engeström’s (1987, 2001) expanded Activity Theory framework onto the institutional architecture of Social Studies instruction under Merdeka Belajar, drawing on the empirical and policy literature reviewed above rather than on original interview, observation, or document data collected by the author. Riau Province is used as an illustrative

analytic context chosen for its documented cultural plurality (Malay, Javanese, Batak, and Chinese communities, among others) and the rural–urban contrasts reported in prior studies of the province’s education system but the scenarios discussed below are explicitly hypothetical, constructed to illustrate how the Activity Theory components and their associated contradictions might manifest. They are not a report of data collected from real schools, teachers, or students. Where illustrative scenarios refer to “teachers” or “schools,” these are composite, non-empirical constructions built from patterns reported across the literature, and should not be read as case findings. Because no original data are collected, the question of whether this is a single embedded case or a multiple-case study across three schools does not arise in the way it would for an empirical design; the relevant unit of analysis is instead the activity system itself specifically, the interaction between the national curriculum’s activity system and a community-based local-wisdom activity system and the illustrative school-level scenarios are devices for making that system-level interaction concrete, not sampled cases.

### ***Constructing the Illustrative Heuristic***

To make the conceptual framework usable for subsequent empirical research, the analysis develops an illustrative scenario for each Activity Theory component and associated contradiction type. These scenarios synthesize patterns reported across the literature on Merdeka Belajar and local wisdom integration (Hasugian et al., 2024; Simanungkalit et al., 2024; Çelik, 2025; Lestari & Suwanto, 2024) into single, composite narratives. They are heuristic devices rather than data extracts: no claim is made that any specific teacher, school, or classroom event described in the analysis below was directly observed or interviewed by the author. Each scenario is explicitly flagged as illustrative in the text that follows, and is offered to generate testable propositions rather than to report confirmed findings.

### ***Analytic Procedure***

Engeström’s (2001) taxonomy of contradictions primary (internal to a single component), secondary (between components within one activity system), tertiary (between an established and an emergent activity system), and quaternary (between parallel, co-existing activity systems) provides the analytic categories used to classify the tensions discussed below. Each illustrative scenario is assigned to a contradiction type according to which Activity Theory components it places in tension, and the reasoning behind each assignment is made explicit in the text rather than left implicit, so that readers, and future empirical researchers, can evaluate and contest the classification rather than simply accept a label.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***The Activity System as a Map of Local Wisdom Negotiation***

Consistent with third-generation Activity Theory, the components discussed below are not treated as independent variables but as relationally configured around a shared object and around mediating artefacts, such that a change anticipated in one component (for instance, rules) is read as bearing on others (for instance, the division of labour) rather than as a separate, isolable effect. The following analysis maps all six components of Engeström’s Activity System as potential sites of local wisdom negotiation on this relational basis, while remaining attentive to the likelihood that not every component carries equal weight or equal evidentiary support in the existing literature. Table 1 synthesizes this mapping and Figure 1 presents the resulting conceptual framework; rather than

reporting findings from a specific case, both are offered as an analytic heuristic a provisional template to be tested, refined, or revised against future empirical data, not a confirmed empirical pattern. As Rouabhia (2024) observed in a comparable application of AT to multicultural writing instruction, the analytic power of the framework lies in its potential to surface contradictions that practitioners may experience as pedagogical difficulties but which are, on this account, systemic in origin.

**Table 1.** A Conceptual Heuristic Mapping Activity Theory Components to Local Wisdom Negotiation in Social Studies under Merdeka Belajar

AT Component	Classroom Manifestation	Local Wisdom Role	Merdeka Belajar Alignment
Subject	Students and teachers as co-constructors of historical-cultural knowledge	Students as knowledge bearers of adat, oral tradition, and local cosmology	Student autonomy (Profil Pelajar Pancasila – Berkebinekaan Global)
Tools / Artefacts	Textbooks, local oral histories, digital resources, community visit protocols	Kearifan lokal materials mediate between national curriculum and indigenous epistemology	Project-based learning encourages use of diverse mediating tools
Object / Motive	Development of critical intercultural competence and civic consciousness	Local wisdom as epistemological object to negotiate, not merely transmit	Transformative learning outcomes aligned with Pancasila character goals
Rules	National curriculum standards, school norms, Pancasila values framework	Tension between standardized assessment and fluid nature of indigenous knowledge	Kurikulum Merdeka flexibility creates room for local content accommodation
Community	Classroom, school, family, adat community, local government	Community elders as legitimate knowledge sources in formal education	School-community partnerships encouraged by Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) collaborative principles
Division of Labour	Teacher as facilitator; students as researchers; community as resource persons	Distributed knowledge authority challenges teacher-centred epistemology	Co-teaching with community practitioners supported under Merdeka framework

Source: Author's conceptual synthesis of the literature reviewed above, adapted from Engeström (1987); not derived from primary fieldwork.

### **Subject and Tools: Students as Knowledge Bearers**

The most transformative instances of local wisdom negotiation, on this analysis, would be those in which teachers reposition students as active knowledge bearers rather than passive recipients a move consistent with culturally sustaining pedagogy (Lee, 2025) and with AT's conceptualization of the subject as a culturally-historically constituted knower. Illustrative Scenario 1 (Subject and Tools). Consider a hypothetical Social Studies lesson at a Riau Malay-majority school in which a teacher asks students to narrate the *pantun* tradition before connecting it to the IPS topic of social communication across ethnic groups. If students drew on family oral traditions, community ceremonies, and village elder narratives in such a lesson, positioning these as legitimate epistemic resources rather than cultural curiosities, this would exemplify the kind of repositioning AT predicts. As Simanungkalit et al. (2024) found in a comparable Batak context, oral literature can function as a particularly potent

mediating tool because it carries historical, moral, and aesthetic information simultaneously, in ways standardized textbooks typically do not. Whether and how often this repositioning actually occurs across Riau classrooms is an empirical question this conceptual paper does not answer.

A secondary contradiction can be anticipated within the tools component: the formal mediating artefacts prescribed by the national curriculum standardized textbooks, national assessment instruments, and the official *Kurikulum Merdeka* modules, are documented elsewhere as frequently inadequate for incorporating local wisdom content (Çelik, 2025; Arifin & Wachidah, 2025; Putra et al., 2025). On this basis, it is plausible that teachers would need to improvise tools such as community elder interviews and *adat* document reproductions to digital video recordings of traditional ceremonies, echoing the tool improvisation these studies report in related digital learning environments, and suggesting that this is likely to be a systemic constraint of the national curriculum infrastructure rather than a site-specific problem. It is further proposed that the *Merdeka Belajar* framework's P5 mechanism would partially relieve this contradiction by authorizing teacher-designed tools, while resource disparities between urban and rural schools would likely limit equitable access (Lestari & Suwanto, 2024). These remain propositions to be tested empirically, not reported findings.

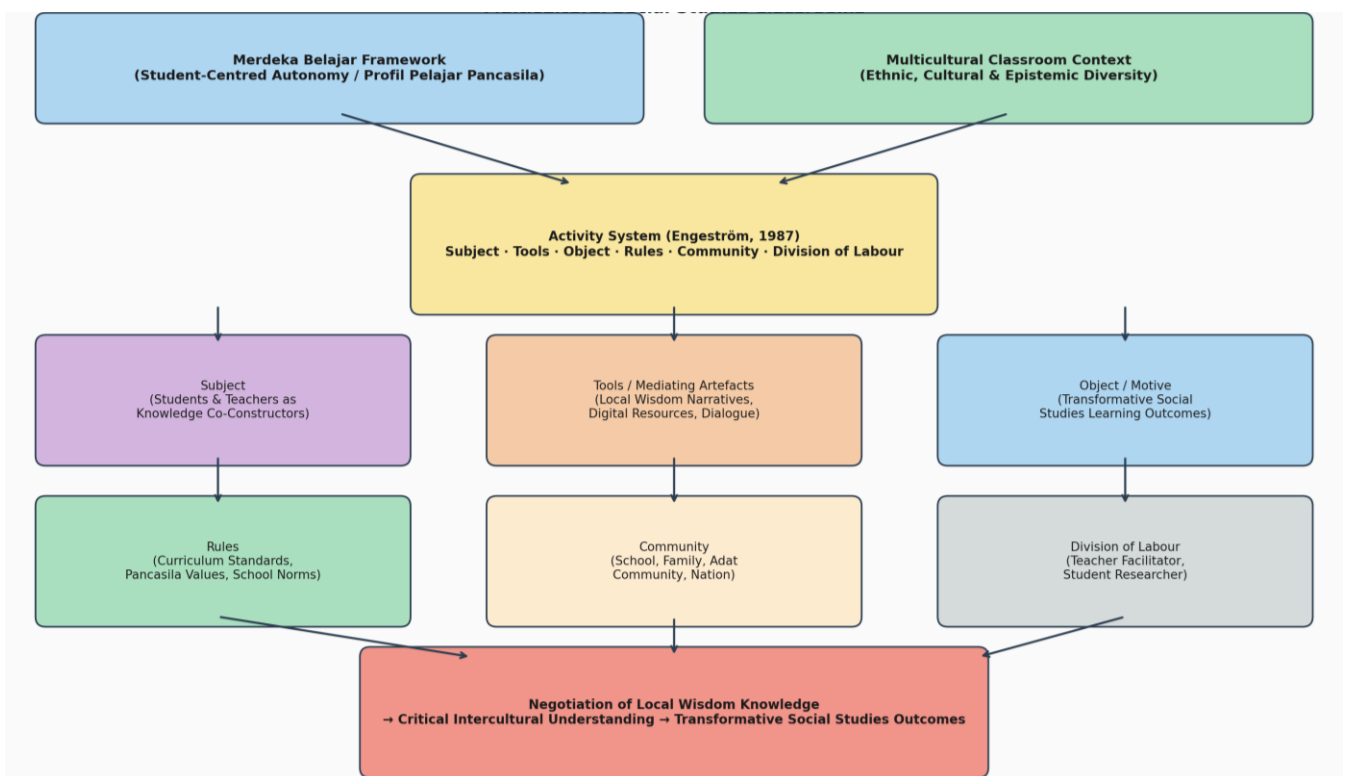
### ***Object, Rules, and Community: The Transformative Horizon***

The object component the motive and desired outcome of the activity system is, on this analysis, likely to be the most contested site of negotiation. National IPS objectives are framed in terms of standardized competencies measurable through written assessment, while local wisdom epistemology tends toward practical, relational, and holistic forms of knowing that resist this measurement framework (Mahpudz, 2024; Nong, 2025). A tertiary contradiction can be anticipated in schools where teachers internalize local wisdom integration as a transformative educational goal but find that the rules component, including national assessment protocols and school grading policies, remains anchored in a textbook-transmission model. This expectation resonates with Sutherland & Germain's (2026) analysis of how systemic pressures constrain teachers' pedagogical agency even within ostensibly progressive curricular frameworks, though it is offered here as a proposition rather than a confirmed pattern.

Illustrative Scenario 2 (Community and Division of Labour). The community component is, on this analysis, likely to be among the most consequential sites of negotiation. Consider a hypothetical case in which the *Merdeka Belajar* framework provides a new legitimacy for community engagement that had previously been informal or marginal in a given school. In such a scenario, a teacher might incorporate village elders as guest educators within P5 projects, or a school might establish a standing partnership with the local *adat* council to provide narrative resources for IPS topics on customary law and land rights. Such arrangements would be consistent with the findings of Husna et al. (2025), Rohmadi et al. (2025), and Hartati et al. (2025), who document the transformative potential of community-embedded local wisdom as a force for social cohesion and educational vitality in related settings. In this scenario, the division of labour would be correspondingly reconfigured: the teacher's role would shift from knowledge authority to knowledge broker, while community practitioners would assume a legitimate pedagogical status within the activity system. Whether and how often this reconfiguration actually occurs is, again, an empirical question for future research, not a finding reported here.

### ***Contradictions and Transformative Potential***

Among the contradictions discussed above, the quaternary contradiction generated by the simultaneous operation of two incompatible activity systems the national IPS curriculum, oriented toward standardized civic knowledge, and a community-based local wisdom system, oriented toward relational, experiential, and cosmological understanding is, on this analysis, the most theoretically significant. Such contradictions would not be merely pedagogical inconveniences; they would constitute the productive motor of transformation in classrooms where teachers have the institutional support, professional confidence, and theoretical awareness to work through them rather than around them. This expectation is consistent with Zainuddin's (2025) study of Merdeka Curriculum implementation in South Sumatra, which found productive tensions of this kind in schools where local wisdom was incorporated not as supplementary content but as an alternative epistemological perspective on the same civic topics addressed in the national curriculum (Zainuddin, 2025). Mu'ti & Amirrachman's (2025) analysis of Muhammadiyah's multicultural education model and Abu et al.'s (2026) cross-cultural religious literacy framework both suggest that this kind of epistemological confrontation, when pedagogically mediated, is likely to produce deeper and more durable learning outcomes than additive approaches (Abu et al., 2026).



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework

### ***Teacher Agency and Systemic Support***

Drawing on the broader literature on teacher agency in multicultural settings, this analysis proposes that teacher agency functions as a critical variable mediating between policy aspiration and classroom reality. Teachers with higher levels of what Simorangkir (2025) terms “innovative pedagogical strategy” would plausibly be more likely to navigate AT contradictions productively, converting systemic tensions into learning opportunities rather than barriers. Such teachers might be expected to share three characteristics: a personal commitment to cultural sustainability

grounded in their own community identities; active professional networks with colleagues implementing similar approaches consistent with Stavropoulou et al. (2026), on professional learning communities in multicultural settings and a nuanced understanding of the *Merdeka Belajar* framework's flexibility margins. By contrast, teachers who perceive local wisdom integration as an additional burden to an already heavy workload—a pattern documented by Utama et al. (2025) and Choi (2024) in comparative multicultural education research—would be expected to lean toward additive, tokenistic inclusion that generates little epistemic transformation. These are propositions for empirical testing, not findings from the present analysis, and teacher agency is proposed here as one plausible explanatory variable among several rather than the decisive one; competing or complementary explanations, including principal leadership, resource access, school history, and community legitimacy, would need to be examined comparatively in any future empirical test of this framework.

Illustrative Scenario 3 (Rules and Division of Labour: Principal Leadership). Principal leadership is, on the basis of the wider literature, likely to be among the most consequential institutional support factors. Consider a hypothetical school where local wisdom integration is systematically embedded: the principal establishes a local wisdom committee within the school's curriculum team, allocates P5 project time explicitly for community engagement, and communicates to parents and community members that *kearifan lokal* content is not a distraction from national competency standards but a route to deeper achievement of the Pancasila character profile. Such a leadership approach would align with Hasan et al.'s (2024) findings on transformative principal leadership under *Merdeka Belajar* and would reinforce Sakman et al.'s (2024) argument that civic education can be a particularly effective vehicle for local wisdom integration when institutional structures support it. As with the other illustrative scenarios above, whether any real school approximates this pattern is an empirical question, not a claim made about actual schools in this paper.

## Conclusions

This paper has applied Engeström's expanded Activity Theory to a conceptual analysis of how Social Studies teachers might negotiate local wisdom knowledge within multicultural classrooms under Indonesia's *Merdeka Belajar* framework. Rather than reporting confirmed findings, the analysis proposes that all six AT components constitute potential sites of epistemological negotiation, with the subject–tools and community–rules pairings most likely, on the basis of the broader literature, to generate productive contradictions for transformative learning. The contribution of this paper is best understood as a conceptual extension of Activity Theory to a previously unmapped policy nexus *Merdeka Belajar*, local wisdom, and multicultural Social Studies—rather than as a validated configuration of contradictions or a tested practical design heuristic; subsequent empirical work will be needed to determine which of these the framework ultimately constitutes. The *Merdeka Belajar* framework, particularly the P5 project mechanism, plausibly creates structural opportunities for community-embedded local wisdom to enter formal education in ways that previous curricula did not consistently support. The transformative potential of these opportunities is proposed to be mediated by teacher agency, principal leadership, and the degree to which the rules component assessment frameworks and institutional norms has been brought into alignment with the inclusive epistemological goals of the curriculum reform; testing these mediating relationships empirically is the natural next step for this research agenda.

Theoretically, this paper contributes a conceptual extension of AT to local wisdom negotiation that may be relevant to comparable multicultural education contexts beyond Indonesia, including other post-colonial societies managing the tension between national curriculum standardization and indigenous knowledge rights; this relevance should be read as an invitation for comparative testing of analytic transferability, not as an extension of a single jurisdiction's framework to post-colonial societies in general. Practically, three propositions emerge for policy and professional development, to be tested rather than implemented directly: first, curriculum designers might map existing local wisdom resources as mediating tools within the AT system rather than as content add-ons; second, teacher education programs might develop AT literacy as a reflective tool for practitioners navigating cultural plurality; and third, assessment reform would need to address the quaternary contradiction between standardized competency measurement and holistic local wisdom epistemology for transformative Social Studies education to be institutionally sustained.

This paper's central limitation is that it is conceptual rather than empirical: the illustrative scenarios developed above are heuristic constructions drawn from the existing literature, not data collected from real teachers, students, or schools, and the framework's propositions about teacher agency, principal leadership, and contradiction types await empirical testing. Future research should test the proposed heuristic against original interview, observation, and document data from Riau and comparable provinces; develop a sampling strategy with documented ethical clearance specific to that study, including parental consent and student assent where minors are involved; and report verbatim evidence and an explicit coding trail sufficient to demonstrate that any resulting AT categories are empirically, not only theoretically, grounded. Quantitative instruments capable of measuring the depth of epistemological negotiation across larger samples, and cross-national comparative work testing the framework's transferability, would also strengthen the research agenda this paper proposes.

## Acknowledgments

The author thanks colleagues at Universitas Islam Indragiri for feedback on earlier drafts of this conceptual analysis.

## References

- Annisha, D. (2024). Integrasi penggunaan kearifan lokal dalam proses pembelajaran pada konsep Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar. *Jurnal Basicedu*, 8(3), 2108–2115. <https://doi.org/10.31004/basicedu.v8i3.7706>
- Ardiansyah, M., & Tirtana, E. R. (2025). Optimizing social studies learning through implementation improvements to the Merdeka Curriculum. *Journal of Smart Pedagogy and Education*, 1(2), 10–25. <https://doi.org/10.65101/spedu.v1i2.139>
- Arifin, A. S., & Wachidah, K. (2025). Local wisdom videos boost elementary social studies outcomes in Indonesia. *Inquest Journal*, 3(2), 31–39. <https://doi.org/10.53622/ij.v3i2.354>
- Azmira, T. (2026). Multicultural Islamic education curriculum and social cohesion: Negotiating religious identity in diverse communities. *Multicultural Islamic Education Review*, 4(1), 145–160. <https://doi.org/10.23917/mier.v4i1.16875>
- Baiduri, R., Ekomila, S., Supsiliani, & Rulyani, A. (2024). Local knowledge as a catalyst for gender equality in Medan's multicultural society. In *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Humanities Education, Law, and Social Science* (pp. 614–633). <https://doi.org/10.5220/0013411800004654>

- Cabauatan, L. J. I. (2025). Integration of Ifugao indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSPs) in teaching Philippine studies in multicultural classrooms. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 29(1), 104–120. <https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.a1066>
- Çelik, İ. T. (2025). Revitalizing local wisdom in digital classrooms to foster innovative and meaningful learning experiences. *Nusantara Education*, 4(1), 26–35. <https://doi.org/10.66325/nusantaraeducation.v4i1.243>
- Choi, S. (2024). Analysis of the knowledge paradigm of qualitative research on multicultural education in Korea: Based on Lather's classification. *Multicultural Education Studies*, 17(4), 47–73. <https://doi.org/10.14328/mes.2024.12.31.47>
- Hantsch, R. (2025). Transformative economic education A framework for the integration of socioeconomic education and transformative learning theory. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 24(1), 100–123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15413446251358201>
- Hartati, C. D., Wirawati, S. M., Fahmi, A. R., Gymnastiar, I. A., & Manggala, K. (2025). Ramadan and the strengthening of social cohesion: A study of local wisdom in multicultural societies. *Indonesian Journal of Studies on Humanities, Social Sciences and Education*, 2(1), 53–71. <https://doi.org/10.54783/0b8b7f64>
- Hasan, A., Fatiya, A., & Hrebatć, M. (2024). Transformative leadership in education: Principal leadership styles and the implementation of Merdeka Belajar curriculum at school. *Development: Studies in Educational Management and Leadership*, 3(2), 117–130. <https://doi.org/10.47766/development.v3i2.4843>
- Hasugian, A., Masyitoh, I. S., & Fitriyasari, S. (2024). Cultivating local wisdom through the Profil Pelajar Pancasila program in Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar. *Inovasi Kurikulum*, 21(1), 501–514. <https://doi.org/10.17509/jik.v21i1.66755>
- Husna, U., Jam'an, A., & Jusriadi, E. (2025). Development of human resources quality of Dani tribe through empowerment of indigenous communities integration, local wisdom values and multicultural education. *Golden Ratio of Social Science and Education*, 5(2), 276–289. <https://doi.org/10.52970/grsse.v5i2.1223>
- Jana, J., Hammidah, H., Chand, R., & Haselkorn, J. (2024). Community spirit and local wisdom: Strengthening character education through the Ngarot tradition in social studies learning. *Journal of Social Knowledge Education*, 5(1), 9–20. <https://doi.org/10.37251/jske.v5i1.888>
- Jekayinoluwa, J. R., & Adeowu, A. W. (2024). Teaching national identity in multicultural classrooms: A study on social studies education and sociological perspectives of inclusion. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 8(3s), 4375–4385. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.803317S>
- Johannes, J., Silalahi, H., Evriza, E., Pramana, A., & Firhan, A. (2025). Efektivitas pendampingan individu pada calon guru penggerak dalam menerapkan konsep Merdeka Belajar (Filosofi Ki Hajar Dewantara). *MUDABBIR Journal Research and Education Studies*, 5(2), 2324–2335. <https://doi.org/10.56832/mudabbir.v5i2.1529>
- Lamiah, J., Masrukhi, & Gunawan. (2025). Syawalan tradition in Pedurungan Semarang as local wisdom in the perspective of social studies education. *JUPIIS: Jurnal Pendidikan Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial*, 17(1). <https://doi.org/10.24114/jupiis.v17i1.65343>
- Lee, C. (2025). Teaching through a transformative lens. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 27(1), 29–53. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v27i1.4677>
- Lestari, W., & Suwanto, S. (2024). Disaster mitigation knowledge based on local wisdom integration in elementary schools. *International Journal of Education, Social Studies, and Management*, 4(3), 1162–1175. <https://doi.org/10.52121/ijessm.v4i3.502>
- Mahpudz, A. (2024). Utilizing local wisdom values to develop curriculum and learning for social science education in Indonesia. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Social Studies Education*, 1(1), 141–149. <https://doi.org/10.20414/icosse.v1i1.15>
- Mesenu, M., & Yernawilis. (2025). The integration of Islamic values and Betawi cultural wisdom in strengthening character education of university students in Jakarta through the Merdeka Curriculum and MBKM programme in the digital era. *Council: Education Journal of Social Studies*, 3(2), 61–70. <https://doi.org/10.59923/council.v3i2.524>

- Mu'ti, A., & Amirrachman, A. (2025). Local wisdom-based multicultural education: Muhammadiyah experience. *Intellectual Discourse*, 33(1). <https://doi.org/10.31436/id.v33i1.2241>
- Nati, E., Warto, W., & Pelu, M. (2024). Implementation of multicultural education based on local wisdom for high school students. In *Proceedings of the 3rd ICHSS 2023*. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.27-12-2023.2348629>
- Nong, R. (2025). From explicit knowledge to tacit wisdom: Knowledge management challenges and opportunities in AI-era university classrooms. *Higher Education and Practice*, 2(11), 79–91. <https://doi.org/10.62381/h251b10>
- Putra, T. F., Anggraeni, L., Gufron, H., Juniarti, C., & Hardiyanti, R. A. (2025). Vernacular knowledge and digital citizenship: Integrating local wisdom in contemporary education. *International Journal Pedagogy of Social Studies*, 10(1), 127–136. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijposs.v10i1.86181>
- Rohmadi, Fadil, A., Zain, Z. F. S., & Soraya, N. (2025). The Ngobeng tradition in Palembang: Implementing local wisdom and religious moderation in multicultural education to achieve social harmony. *Muslim Heritage*, 10(1), 31–53. <https://doi.org/10.21154/muslimheritage.v10i1.10874>
- Rouabhia, R. (2024). Exploring a pocket guide to writing through Cultural-Historical Activity Theory: Implications for multicultural education. *Dinamika Ilmu*, 24(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.21093/di.v24i1.7456>
- Sakman, Abdulkarim, A., Komalasari, K., & Masyitoh, I. S. (2024). Unveiling the Merdeka Curriculum: A review of local wisdom integration in civic education for junior high schools. *KnE Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v9i19.16496>
- Salam, A., & SM, M. H. (2024). Keboan: Emik, syncretism, and negotiation. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 206–215. [https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-224-8\\_19](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-224-8_19)
- Sanoto. (2025). Religious values in the Ambengan tradition in Kalangdosari Village: A transformative Islamic education and local wisdom perspective. *Journal of Nahdlatul Ulama Studies*, 6(1), 20–38. <https://doi.org/10.35672/jnus.v6i1.20-38>
- Shi, Y., & Son, M. (2026). Undoing fixation: Xunzi's Jiebi as a framework for critical thinking in multicultural classrooms. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 45(2), 215–233. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-025-10036-1>
- Sidabutar, I. M. (2025). Nilai-nilai kearifan lokal dalam karya sastra Nusantara: Implikasi bagi Kurikulum Merdeka. *Boraspatis Journal*, 1(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.64674/boraspatisjournal.v1i1.2>
- Simanungkalit, K. E., Saddhono, K., & Rohmadi, M. (2024). Exploring Batak Toba local wisdom through oral literature in optimizing Curriculum Merdeka Belajar. In *Proceedings of the 3rd ICHSS 2023*. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.27-12-2023.2351613>
- Simorangkir, M. R. R. (2025). Driving teachers' innovative strategies in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in basic education. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 51(9), 468–474. <https://doi.org/10.9734/ajess/2025/v51i92382>
- Stavropoulou, G., Beazidou, E., & Paraskevopoulou, A. M. (2026). Factors associated with teachers' self-efficacy in multicultural classrooms: The roles of emotional empowerment, adaptability, cultural empathy and inclusive practices. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jme-10-2025-0276>
- Sugiantoro, Nurmala, C. W., Imron, A., Afifah, S. N., & Asrofi, M. H. (2025). Revitalizing local wisdom as an inclusive approach in multicultural education for Generation Z to overcome social conflicts in the school environment. *KnE Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v10i31.20387>
- Sugiharto, B. (2024). Integration of local wisdom in the implementation of the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) policy in biology education study programs in Indonesia. *BIOTIK: Jurnal Ilmiah Biologi Teknologi dan Kependidikan*, 12(2), Article 137. <https://doi.org/10.22373/biotik.v12i2.25362>
- Sumarni, S. (2018). Local wisdom values as social attachment of school and multicultural society: The implementation of multicultural education at Muhammadiyah Islamic School Sendangmulyo, Kulon Progo, Yogyakarta. *International Journal of Engineering and Technology*, 7(3.25), 649–655. <https://doi.org/10.14419/ijet.v7i3.25.17817>

- Sutama, I. W., Pawito, P., Hastjarjo, S., & Demartoto, A. (2025). *Conflict management in multicultural teams: Optimizing intercultural communication based on Wetu Telu local wisdom values* [Preprint]. OSF Preprints. [https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/m27rn\\_v1](https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/m27rn_v1)
- Sutherland, D., & Germain, E. (2026). Teaching under scrutiny: Social studies teachers' negotiation, resistance and fatigue with early anti-critical race theory resolutions. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 176, Article 105521. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2026.105521>
- Syahrudin, S., Subiyakto, B., Nadilla, D. F., & Jannah, F. (2025). The integration of Dayak Deah's local wisdom in social studies learning within the Merdeka Curriculum at junior high schools in Tabalong. *The Innovation of Social Studies Journal*, 6(2), Article 101. <https://doi.org/10.20527/issj.v6i2.14751>