

Critical Pedagogy Approach to Teaching the History of the 17 August 1945 Proclamation: Enhancing Multicultural Awareness and Historical Empathy

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Abstract

This study investigates the implementation of a critical pedagogy framework in teaching the history of Indonesia's Proclamation of Independence on August 17 1945, aiming to cultivate multicultural awareness and historical empathy among senior high school students. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with a history teacher, focus group discussions with students, and analyses of instructional documents and student reflective writings. The thematic analysis revealed that the critical pedagogy intervention, characterized by problem-posing dialogue, interrogation of dominant nationalist narratives, and engagement with marginalized voices from diverse ethnic and social groups, significantly transformed students' historical understanding. Three overarching themes emerged: (1) the deconstruction of a monolithic national narrative toward a pluralistic conception of the independence struggle (2) the development of multicultural awareness marked by the recognition of the roles of ethnic minorities, women, and youth organizations and (3) the cultivation of historical empathy through perspective-taking and affective connection with historical actors. The findings underscore the potential of critical pedagogy to disrupt the banking model of history education and foster a more inclusive and empathetic historical consciousness. This study offers practical insights for history curriculum reform in multicultural societies, highlighting both the affordances and challenges of enacting critical approaches within examination-oriented educational systems.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, history education, Proclamation of Independence, multicultural awareness, historical empathy

I. INTRODUCTION

History education occupies a paradoxical position in contemporary nation states. On the one hand, it is entrusted with transmitting a shared heritage, cultivating national identity, and socializing the younger generation into a collective memory that legitimizes the existing political order. In contrast, the discipline of history demands critical thinking, evidence-based reasoning, and openness to multiple interpretations—capacities that often unsettle the very certainties upon which official nationalism depends (Miskawi & Dhalia Soetopo, 2024). This tension is acutely visible in Indonesia, a vast archipelagic nation whose motto “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” (Unity in Diversity) belies its deep-seated ethnolinguistic, religious, and cultural heterogeneity. Indonesian history education, particularly the teaching of the Proclamation of Independence on August 17, 1945, has long been mobilized as an instrument of nation-building, constructing a linear, hero-centered narrative that foregrounds the roles of two dominant figures—Soekarno and Mohammad Hatta—while systematically obscuring the contributions of a diverse array of youth activists, local militias, women, and ethnic minority groups. Such a monolithic historical script, delivered through what Freire (1970) termed the “banking model” of education, not only impoverishes students' historical understanding but also undermines the very multicultural ethos that the Indonesian state purports to cherish.

Historically, the pedagogical landscape of Indonesian secondary schooling has been characterized by teacher-centered instruction, rote memorization, and a prescribed curriculum that privileges factual recall over interpretive engagement (Bjork, 2005; Zuhdi, 2018). In the subject of history, this translates into a delivery of the national narrative as a closed, incontestable account—what Wertsch (2002) describes as a “schematic narrative template” that reduces complex historical events to a set of standardized storylines. The events surrounding the Proclamation of Independence are rendered as a triumphant moment of unified national will, eliding the intense intra-nationalist debates, the coercion exerted by radical youth groups (pemuda) over the older leaders, the active role of female activists such as S.K. Trimurti and Fatmawati, and the participation of ethnic Chinese and Arab Indonesian youth who risked their lives in the revolutionary struggle (Dewi E et al., 2025). Furthermore, the regional dimensions of the proclamation—how the news was received, interpreted, and acted upon in places like Aceh, Papua, and Sulawesi—

are largely absent from standard textbooks, thereby reinforcing a Java-centric perspective that fails to resonate with the lived experiences of students in Indonesia's outer islands (Nyathi, 2026).

This pedagogical tradition is increasingly at odds with the demands of Indonesia's contemporary democratic and multicultural society. The post-Reformasi era (since 1998) has witnessed a resurgence of ethnic and religious conflicts, an upsurge in identity politics, and widespread anxiety about national disintegration (Bertrand, 2004; Aspinall, 2010). In this context, educators, policymakers, and scholars have called for a reorientation of history teaching from a vehicle of narrow nationalist indoctrination to a platform for critical citizenship education that acknowledges the multiplicity of Indonesian experiences and cultivates empathy across cultural boundaries. Critical pedagogy, a transformative educational philosophy pioneered by Freire (1970) and further developed by Giroux (2011) and McLaren (2015), offers a compelling theoretical and practical framework for such reorientation. Critical pedagogy conceptualizes education not as the passive transmission of depoliticized knowledge but as a dialogic process of problem-posing, in which learners and teachers together interrogate dominant discourses, unveil hidden power relations, and construct counter-narratives that recognize marginalized voices. Applied to history education, critical pedagogy demands that students move beyond the consumption of a single official narrative and engage actively with diverse primary and secondary sources, examine conflicting interpretations, and reflect upon how historical knowledge is produced and for whose interests it serves (Win & Jeffrey Dawala Wilang, 2025).

Despite the robust theoretical underpinnings of critical pedagogy, empirical studies examining its application in Indonesian history classrooms—particularly regarding the foundational event of the Proclamation of Independence—remain conspicuously scarce. The existing literature tends to either offer prescriptive arguments for multicultural history curricula without detailing classroom implementation or focus on broader issues of national identity construction without explicitly framing pedagogical intervention in critical theory (e.g., Abdulgani, 2015). Moreover, the concepts of multicultural awareness and historical empathy, while well-established in international history education scholarship, have rarely been empirically examined in the context of Indonesian secondary schools using a critical pedagogical design. In this study, multicultural awareness is defined as the ability to recognize, value, and critically reflect upon the cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity that constitutes a society, as well as an understanding of how historical narratives have privileged certain groups while marginalizing others (Bainiashova, 2025). Historical empathy goes beyond mere affective sympathy; it encompasses a cognitive-affective process of perspective recognition, contextualization, and ethical use of historical evidence to understand the thoughts, feelings, and decisions of people in the past within their own temporal and cultural constraints.

The present study addresses this gap by designing, implementing, and evaluating a critical pedagogy unit focused on the history of the August 17, 1945 Proclamation in a senior high school in Medan, North Sumatra—a city renowned for its ethnic diversity (Malay, Batak, Javanese, Chinese, Indian, and Arab) and its history of interethnic coexistence and tension. The unit was co-constructed with an experienced history teacher and comprised eight class sessions that utilized problem-posing dialogue, analysis of silenced narratives (including the roles of pemuda from diverse ethnic backgrounds, female activists, and ethnic Chinese youth), and the creation of counter-narrative historical accounts by the students. The research was guided by the following three interrelated questions:

How is a critical pedagogy approach implemented in teaching the history of the Proclamation of Indonesian Independence in a multicultural classroom?

In what ways does this pedagogical approach influence students' multicultural awareness of the independence struggle?

How does the critical pedagogy intervention foster historical empathy among students?

By providing a rich, qualitative account of classroom processes and students' meaning-making, this study not only contributes to the theoretical elaboration of critical pedagogy in history education but also offers practical insights into how teachers can negotiate the tensions between an official, examination-driven curriculum and the emancipatory goals of critical multicultural education. The findings are expected to be of particular relevance to history curriculum developers, teacher educators, and policymakers in Indonesia and other post-colonial multicultural societies grappling with similar challenges of historical representation and social cohesion (Huiling, 2025).

The significance of this research lies in its potential to demonstrate that even a foundational national myth, such as the Proclamation of Independence, can be pedagogically transformed from a tool of ideological closure into a site of critical inquiry, empathy, and multicultural appreciation in the classroom. At a time when populist nationalisms across the globe are reinvigorating exclusionary historical narratives, the Indonesian case offers a microcosm of how critical history teaching might fortify democratic dispositions and intercultural understanding within the school system. The remainder of this article is structured as follows: a review of relevant literature on critical pedagogy, history education, multicultural awareness, and historical empathy; a description of the qualitative methodology; a presentation of findings enriched with data tables and figures; an in-depth discussion linking results to theoretical frameworks; and a concluding section that outlines the implications and limitations.

II. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design (Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, 2018)), which is well-suited for exploring a complex pedagogical intervention within its real-life context, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The case was a single Senior High School (SMA) class in Medan, North Sumatra, during the second semester of the 2023/2024 academic year, where a specially designed critical pedagogy unit on the Proclamation of Independence was implemented in the class. The case study approach enabled an in-depth, holistic understanding of the processes, interactions, and meaning-making that unfolded, allowing the researcher to capture the nuanced ways in which the critical pedagogy approach fostered multicultural awareness and historical empathy. The school, referred to by the pseudonym SMA Harapan Bangsa, was purposively selected because of its demographic profile: the student body represented at least eight ethnic groups (Batak Toba, Karo, Javanese, Malay, Minangkabau, Chinese Indonesian, Acehnese, and Nias), with religious affiliations including Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Buddhism. This heterogeneous setting provided fertile ground for observing whether and how a critical approach to a national historical event resonated with diverse identity positions.

Participants

The primary participants were one history teacher, Ibu Ratna (pseudonym), and her class of 32 grade XI social science students (18 female, 14 male) aged 16–17 years. Ibu Ratna had 14 years of teaching experience, held a Master's degree in History Education, and had previously attended workshops on student-centered learning but had never formally implemented critical pedagogy. She was selected based on her expressed interest in transforming her practice and willingness to collaborate in the design of the unit. The students had varying academic performance levels and had studied Indonesian history for two years using the standard national curriculum. All participants provided informed consent (parental consent for students), and the study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the affiliated university.

The Critical Pedagogy Intervention

In collaboration with Ibu Ratna, the researcher co-designed an eight-session unit (each session lasting 90 minutes) to replace the standard textbook chapter on the Proclamation of Independence. The design was grounded in Freirean principles of problem-posing, dialogue, and praxis and incorporated the following key elements:

Session 1-2: Elicitation and Problematization. Students were invited to share their existing knowledge and narratives about the Proclamation, which were then collectively displayed as a “narrative map.” The teacher problematized the map by posing the question “Whose voices are present in this story? Whose might be missing? Who wrote the history that we read?”

Session 3-4: Engagement with Silenced Voices. The groups analyzed curated primary and secondary sources: excerpts from the memoirs of Sukarni and Sayuti Melik, a short biography of S.K. Trimurti, a letter from a Chinese Indonesian youth activist, photographs of the flag-sewing by Fatmawati and other women, and regional press reports on how the Proclamation was received in Aceh and Makassar. Each group was assigned a specific perspective for reconstruction.

Session 5-6: Dialogue and Counter-Narrative Construction. Using a structured academic controversy format, groups presented their findings, after which the class engaged in a whole-class dialogue about how these plural perspectives changed their understanding of the Proclamation. Students then drafted, in groups, a “counter-narrative” of the Proclamation event that consciously included multiple ethnic and gender perspectives.

Session 7-8: Reflection and empathy tasks. Students wrote individual reflective essays guided by prompts such as, “Choose one historical actor from a marginalized group and describe what they might have felt, feared, and hoped for on 16-17 August 1945. How does their experience shape your view of Indonesian independence?” These essays were shared in small circles, and the unit concluded with a class discussion on the lessons for contemporary multicultural Indonesia.

Throughout the unit, the teacher played the role of a facilitator, refraining from providing definitive answers and instead encouraging students to question sources, acknowledge uncertainty, and respect divergent interpretations.

Data Collection

Multiple data sources were triangulated to enhance credibility and completeness

Classroom Observations. All eight sessions were videotaped and observed by the researcher using a non participatory observation protocol. Field notes captured discursive exchanges, student interactions, emotional reactions, and the teachers' facilitative moves. Particular attention was paid to moments of evident empathy and multicultural recognition.

Semi-structured Teacher Interviews. Ibu Ratna was interviewed three times: pre-implementation (to capture her baseline beliefs and expectations), mid-implementation (after Session 5), and post-implementation. The interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and covered her perceptions of student engagement, changes in student thinking, and challenges of enacting critical pedagogy.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Students. At the end of the unit, five focus groups of 6-7 students each were conducted, homogeneously composed to create safe spaces for expression (two groups with female students, two with male students, and one mixed). The FGDs explored students' experiences of the unit, their evolving views of the Proclamation narrative, their awareness of ethnic and gender diversity in the struggle, and their empathy. Each FGD lasted approximately 50 min.

Document Analysis. The corpus included all student-produced materials: initial narrative maps, group counter-narrative texts, and individual reflective essays (n=32). The teachers lesson plans and reflective journal were also analyzed.

Pre- and Post-Unit Questionnaire. While the study is primarily qualitative, a brief 10-item Likert-type questionnaire was administered before and after the unit to gauge self-reported levels of multicultural awareness (e.g., "I understand that many ethnic groups contributed to the Proclamation") and historical empathy (e.g., "I can imagine the feelings of historical figures during the Proclamation"). These served to provide a broad-stroke descriptive backdrop and to triangulate the qualitative findings. (See Table 2 for a summary.)

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, which was conducted primarily by the researcher with regular peer debriefing sessions. The phases were: (1) familiarization with data through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes; (2) generation of initial open codes, using both deductive codes derived from theoretical constructs (e.g., "perspective-taking," "recognition of ethnic diversity") and inductive codes emerging from the data (e.g., "shock at kidnapping," "admiration for women's courage"); (3) searching for themes by collating codes into broader patterns; (4) reviewing themes in relation to coded extracts and the full data set; (5) defining and naming themes, resulting in a final thematic map; and (6) producing the report with illustrative excerpts. NVivo 14 software was used to manage data organization. To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement (the researcher spent three months at the school, including pre-intervention rapport building), triangulation of sources, and member checking (the themes were presented to Ibu Ratna and a subset of students for feedback). Dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail of the research decisions and raw data. Thick descriptions enable readers to make transferability judgments..

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are organized into three major themes that correspond to the research questions: (1) implementation processes of the critical pedagogy approach (2) development of multicultural awareness and (3) cultivation of historical empathy. Each theme was supported by descriptive data, illustrative quotations, and tabular or graphical representations. Table 1 provides an overview of the data sources and coding frequencies that underpin the thematic structure.

Table 1. Data Sources and Coding Distribution

Data Source	Number of Items	Total Code Segments	Main Themes Addressed
Classroom Observations (8 sessions)	8 transcripts	346	Implementation, Empathy, Multicultural
Teacher Interviews (3)	3 transcripts	178	Implementation, Challenges
Student Focus Groups (5)	5 transcripts	289	Multicultural Awareness, Empathy
Student Reflective Essays (n=32)	32 documents	415	Empathy, Multicultural Awareness
Group Counter-Narratives (n=8)	8 documents	152	Multicultural Awareness

Data Source	Number of Items	Total Code Segments	Main Themes Addressed
Pre/Post Questionnaire	32 paired responses	—	Quantitative descriptive

Note. Codes were allowed to be assigned to multiple themes if content was overlapping. The category “Implementation” refers to pedagogical moves, dialogic processes, and observed challenges.

The most pronounced outcome of the intervention was a marked expansion in students’ multicultural awareness of the Indonesian independence movement’s composition. The initial narrative maps (pre-intervention) were strikingly monolithic: 94% of students (30 out of 32) identified only Soekarno and Hatta by name, and no student included any ethnic minority, female figure (besides a vague reference to “Fatmawati sewed the flag”), or regional actor. Post-unit documents and FGDs revealed profound shifts. The second major theme, “Recognition of Plural Agency in the Proclamation,” comprised three sub-themes: (a) acknowledgment of ethnic and regional diversity among youth activists; (b) recognition of women’s substantive political contributions; and (c) critical reflection on the constructed nature of the official national narrative.

Table 2. Sub-Themes of Multicultural Awareness with Illustrative Quotations.

Sub-Theme	Description	Student Quote Source
1. Ethnic/Regional Diversity	Students recognized the multiethnic composition of the <i>pemuda</i> and the varied regional responses to the Proclamation.	“I never knew that Sukarni had Balinese blood. It changes my image of the revolution—it wasn’t just Javanese people fighting.” (FGD 3, Male, Batak)
2. Women’s Political Agency	Students moved beyond domestic framing of women’s roles to appreciate their political risk-taking.	“S.K. Trimurti wasn’t just a helper; she was a journalist who spread the news under Japanese censorship. She could have been killed. I didn’t know women could be that brave in politics at that time.” (Reflective Essay 14, Female, Minang)
3. Narrative as Construction	Students critically noted how textbook selectivity distorts historical truth and contemporary perceptions.	“The textbook makes it look like only two people mattered. But after reading the sources, I think many groups made independence possible. It’s like the government wants us to see a simple picture.” (FGD 1, Female, Javanese)

These sub themes were pervasive across the data. In the group counter-narratives, all eight groups explicitly included at least three different ethnic groups and at least one female figure as active agents in their history. One group’s counter-narrative was titled “The Many Faces of August 17” and featured vignettes from the perspective of a Minangkabau youth, a Chinese Indonesian activist, and a female Javanese courier. The descriptive statistics from the pre- and post-questionnaires, while only ancillary, corroborate this transformation. Table 3 displays the mean scores for multicultural awareness items.

Table 3. Pre- and Post-Unit Self-Reported Multicultural Awareness (n=32)

Questionnaire Item (Scale 1-5: Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree)	Pre-Mean (SD)	Post-Mean (SD)	Mean Increase
I understand that the Proclamation involved many ethnic groups.	2.41 (0.87)	4.38 (0.61)	+1.97

Questionnaire Item (Scale 1-5: Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree)	Pre-Mean (SD)	Post-Mean (SD)	Mean Increase
I can name at least three figures besides Soekarno-Hatta who contributed.	2.13 (0.91)	4.59 (0.56)	+2.46
I believe women played significant roles in the independence.	3.25 (1.02)	4.72 (0.46)	+1.47
History textbooks present a complete picture of the Proclamation.	3.81 (0.82)	1.91 (0.86)	-1.90

Note. The reversal of the final item indicates a critical turn from uncritical acceptance to questioning.

The table shows substantial increases in all items measuring recognition of diversity and a sharp decline in the belief that textbooks are complete. A paired-samples t-test (not the focus of this qualitative report but noted) revealed that all changes were statistically significant ($p < .001$). Students' qualitative explanations in FGDs elaborated on these shifts in their learning. A Chinese Indonesian female student reflected, "Before, I felt like this country's history was not mine—my ancestors were always pictured as outsiders. However, I now know that there were Chinese youth who fought for Indonesia. It makes me feel more connected to the nation." Similarly, a male Karo student expressed, "It is not just about Javanese or Jakarta. In Sumatra, our local fighters immediately supported the proclamation. Our regional pride is part of national pride." This demonstrates not only awareness but also a reconstruction of identity affiliation.

The data revealed a rich cultivation of historical empathy, aligning with Endacott and Brooks's (2013) tripartite model of historical empathy. This superordinate theme comprised three sub themes: (1) cognitive perspective-taking and contextualization (2) affective connection and (3) ethical reflection on past actions. Table 4 provides a coding frequency summary for empathy-related codes, and Figure 2 displays a bar chart of the frequency of empathy expressions across different historical actors selected by the students in their essays.

Table 4. Distribution of Empathy Expressions Across Sub-Themes in Reflective Essays (n=32).

Empathy Dimension	Number of Essays (%)	Example Code
Cognitive (contextualization, perspective-taking)	28 (87.5%)	"If I were in his position, with the Japanese soldiers still armed and the Allies coming, I would be terrified to announce independence."
Affective (emotional language, caring)	31 (96.9%)	"I felt a lump in my throat imagining how Trimurti must have felt typing those articles knowing any knock could be the Kempetai."
Ethical (judgement, moral reflection)	22 (68.8%)	"Kidnapping is wrong, but in that situation, when the older leaders were too cautious, maybe it was a necessary action. It's complicated."

The cognitive dimension was profoundly evident when students actively attempted to reconstruct the mental world of historical actors while paying attention to temporal and situational constraints. An excerpt from a student essay (Male, Javanese) concerning Sukarni illustrates this: "Sukarni was only about 20 years old, but he was the leader of a radical group. He believed that independence should be announced by Indonesians themselves, not as a gift from the Japanese. From his perspective, Soekarno and Hatta were too willing to wait for the Japanese PPKI scheme to materialize. I can understand why he thought that kidnapping was the only way to force their hand. In that chaotic time, with the power vacuum after Japans surrender, every hour of delay could mean disaster. Sukarni was not being disrespectful; he was desperate for the nation's freedom." Here, the student demonstrates contextualized reasoning, eschewing presentist moral condemnation in favor of understanding the logic of the time period.

The affective dimension was even more frequently coded, and was often interwoven with cognitive reasoning. Emotional language permeated the essays and FGDs. A female Batak student wrote: "When I read that Trimurti had to write coded messages and distribute bulletins in the middle of the night, hiding from Japanese military police, I felt real fear. She was not just brave; she must have been exhausted and at times wanted to give up. But she didn't. That kind of sacrifice, from a woman in a male-dominated movement, makes me cry. I am proud that a woman like her exists in my nation's history." The teacher confirmed this affective resonance in her interview: "I saw several students with wet eyes during the small circle sharing. They were not just analyzing documents; they were connecting as humans across time."

The ethical dimension emerged as students grappled with the moral ambiguity of historical actions, which is a key marker of mature historical empathy. The Rengasdengklok kidnapping was especially productive for ethical reflection as it troubled simplistic heroic narratives. An FGD exchange between two male students (one Acehnese, one Minangkabau) captured this: Student A: "At first I thought the youth were rude to kidnap the founding fathers. I saw them as villains." Student B: "But after reading about Japan's plan to keep Indonesia as a puppet, I think the youth were right to be impatient. Sometimes you need radical action for the greater good." Student A: "Yeah, it's not black and white. It's grey. I still think Soekarno-Hatta must have felt betrayed and scared, but without that push, maybe the Proclamation would not have happened on August 17. I can see both sides now." This kind of nuanced, empathetic deliberation—recognizing multiple legitimate perspectives without collapsing them into a single "correct" view—was a high point of the unit's impact on the students.

The integration of multicultural awareness and empathy was particularly striking in essays that linked historical empathy to contemporary interethnic relations. A female Chinese Indonesian student reflected on the Chinese youth activist: "Empathizing with him made me realize that my community's belonging to this country is not a new question. He risked his life for Indonesia, even though the Japanese and some pribumi were suspicious of Chinese loyalty. Knowing this, I feel more confident to say, 'I am Indonesian, not an outsider. If he could be so brave back then, we should continue his spirit of unity now.'" Here, historical empathy transcends the past to inform the present identity and multicultural solidarity.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that the critical pedagogy unit not only successfully disrupted the banking model but also produced demonstrable, multi-faceted outcomes in multicultural awareness and historical empathy, as evidenced by triangulated qualitative data and descriptive quantitative trends.

Discussion

The results of this study provide compelling evidence that a critical pedagogy approach to teaching the history of the August 17 1945 Proclamation can significantly foster both multicultural awareness and historical empathy among Indonesian high school students. These findings extend existing theoretical frameworks and offer nuanced insights into the mechanisms through which such transformation occurs, while also revealing the inherent challenges of implementing critical pedagogy in an educational system structured around high-stakes national examinations and a centralized curriculum.

The observed shift from a monologic, teacher-centered transmission to a dialogic, problem-posing classroom (Theme 1) resonates profoundly with Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model. In the initial sessions, students' narrative maps functioned as a concrete manifestation of what Wertsch (2002) termed a "schematic narrative template"—a pre-packaged, culturally transmitted story pattern that resists detail and complexity. The map's uniformity, featuring only Soekarno and Hatta, corroborates Purwanta's (2017) analysis of Indonesian textbooks as producers of a narrow elite-focused national narrative. The teacher's simple yet powerful problem-posing question—"Whose voices are missing?"—acted as what Giroux (2011) calls a "pedagogy of disruption," opening a space for students to recognize the partiality of official knowledge. The initial confusion that students exhibited is a well-documented phenomenon in critical pedagogy literature; learners habituated to banking education often experience a disorienting dilemma when confronted with the demand to question authoritative texts (Mezirow, 1997). However, the gradual transformation of student engagement from mute acceptance to vigorous inter-group argumentation illustrates the capacity of dialogic pedagogy to build intellectual agency. This finding aligns with Segall's (2006) contention that when history is taught as an ongoing inquiry rather than a closed record, students transition from passive recipients to active historical sense-makers (Manik & Harahap, 2025).

The cyclical process depicted in Figure 1 bears a strong family resemblance to Freire's praxis—the iterative movement between reflection and action. The "codification" of the existing narrative, its "decoding" through marginalized sources, and the "re-codification" in student counter-narratives constitute a form of historical praxis that is both cognitive and political. Students were not merely acquiring new facts about diverse actors; they were engaging in an act of re-authoring the national story, a process that Segall (2006) describes as central to critical historical literacy. The teacher's role as a facilitator rather than a dispenser of truth was critical, mirroring the Freirean "teacher-student" and "student-teacher" dynamics, where authority over knowledge is shared. However, the study also highlighted the emotional and professional toll on the teacher who navigated the tension between meeting curricular mandates and

pursuing an emancipatory agenda. This finding supports McLaren's (2015) caution that critical pedagogy cannot be reduced to a set of techniques; it requires the educator to act as a transformative intellectual, a role that is both institutionally constrained and personally demanding (Smakhanova, 2025).

The transformation in students' multicultural awareness was among the most striking outcomes of this study. The pre-intervention invisibility of ethnic minorities, women, and non-Jakarta actors in students' historical consciousness reflects what Banks (2009) calls the "mainstream-centric curriculum" that structures the dominant culture's perspective as normative and renders others invisible. The post-intervention proliferation of diverse names and the clear articulation of sub-themes concerning ethnic diversity, women's agency, and narrative construction suggest that the critical pedagogy unit successfully enacted the knowledge construction dimension of multicultural education. Students moved beyond superficial "heroes and holidays" inclusion to interrogate why certain groups had been marginalized, thereby engaging in the critical thinking that Banks posits as essential for a genuinely multicultural society (Fitra Ramadani et al., 2025).

The finding that a Chinese Indonesian student re-evaluated her community's national belonging after learning about historical Chinese youth activists is particularly significant. It illustrates the interplay between historical representation and contemporary identity that much of multicultural theory emphasizes but that empirical classroom studies rarely capture so vividly. This re-identification process, from feeling like an "outsider" to claiming a legitimate place in the national narrative, exemplifies how critical history pedagogy can contribute to what Modood (2007) terms "multicultural nationalism"—a form of national identity that is inclusive of minority histories and cultures rather than erasing them. Moreover, students from different ethnic backgrounds (Batak, Karo, and Javanese) expressed regional pride as part of national pride, indicating that the unit did not fragment national identity but enriched it by revealing its plural foundations. This aligns with Barton and McCullys (2005) argument that exposure to multiple perspectives in history education need not undermine national attachment; instead, it can foster a more mature, critical, and inclusive patriotism that is resilient in the face of diversity (LIJUAN, 2025).

The sharp decline in students' belief that textbooks present a complete picture (Table 3, item 4) signals a nascent critical consciousness regarding the politics of knowledge production. When students articulate that "the government wants us to see a simple picture," they are engaging in a proto-analysis of power and representation, which is the heart of Freirean *conscientização* (conscientization). This is not cynicism but an empowered skepticism that equips learners to question the official narratives they encounter in media and political discourse. In the Indonesian context, where the state has historically deployed a heavy-handed "history of the nation" to suppress regional and political dissent (Adam, 2009), such critical awareness is a prerequisite for democratic citizenship.

The study's findings on historical empathy provide a vivid empirical illustration of Endacott and Brooks's (2013) three-component model while also revealing how empathy can be deepened through a multicultural lens. The cognitive perspective-taking demonstrated in students' essays, such as the nuanced analysis of Sukarni's dilemma, shows a clear advance from the simplistic empathy that Wineburg (2001) warns against—the mere projection of contemporary feelings onto the past. Instead, students engaged in rigorous contextualization, considering the power vacuum, constraints of the Japanese occupation, and the youth's revolutionary ideology. This kind of cognitive empathy, as Barton and Levstik (2004) note, is an intellectual achievement that depends on engagement with substantive historical detail and multiple sources, precisely what the critical pedagogy unit provided (Syahr et al., 2025).

The overwhelming presence of affective connection (96.9% of essays) is noteworthy and pedagogically important. Affective engagement has sometimes been viewed with suspicion by traditional historians who fear that it breeds sentimentality and presentism. However, as Endacott and Brooks (2013) argue, affect, when tethered to cognitive analysis, makes history meaningful and motivates ethical concern. The student who "felt a lump in my throat" reading about Trimurti did not stop at emotion; she connected that feeling to broader pride and a reconstruction of women's historical agency. The combination of cognition and affect appears to have produced what might be termed an "empathic investment" in historical actors, which then fueled the ethical reflection that was so richly present in the Rengasdengklok discussions. The ethical wrestling over whether the kidnapping was justified—where students could hold multiple, contradictory ethical positions—demonstrates a high level of what Kohlberg (1984) would recognize as post-conventional moral reasoning applied to historical contexts. This ethical dimension is perhaps the most transformative aspect of the unit, as it moves history education beyond the dualistic narratives of heroes and villains into a genuine moral deliberation that respects the complexity of human agency (Dunbar & Smith-Cruz, 2025).

Notably, empathy data intersected powerfully with multicultural awareness. Students' choice to empathize with Sukarni, Trimurti, and the anonymous Chinese youth activist—rather than Soekarno or Hatta—suggests that critical pedagogy's foregrounding of marginalized perspectives directly shaped the objects of empathy. This finding extends the work of Endacott and Brooks by demonstrating that selecting historical subjects for empathy tasks is a political act. By inviting students to empathize with those who have been historically silenced, the unit enacted an "empathy of recognition" that may serve as an antidote to what Hartmann and Gone (2014) call "historical trauma" the intergenerational psychic wound caused by historical invisibility. For the Chinese Indonesian student, empathic connection to a Chinese activist became a vehicle for healing perceived historical exclusion and reclaiming belonging.

This suggests that in multicultural societies, pedagogical choices regarding whom we ask students to empathize with are ethically and politically charged.

Despite the largely positive findings, this study also revealed significant challenges that merit discussion. The teacher's initial anxiety about examination coverage reflects a real structural constraint: in Indonesia, the national exam (Ujian Nasional, though being reformed) continues to exert pressure on teachers to "cover" content efficiently. Critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on depth, dialogue, and meandering inquiry, stands in tension with curricula organized around discrete factual outcomes. This tension is widely reported in the literature (e.g., Crocco & Costigan, 2007) and is not easily resolved. The solution adopted in this study whereby the teacher covered required factual content through the critical unit was feasible because the unit length matched the standard allocation, but it required considerable planning and support that may not be scalable without systemic reform.

The second challenge concerns the handling of sensitive identity issues. The moment when a Javanese student expressed initial defensiveness highlights the risk that problematizing national myths can be perceived as an attack on particular group identity. The teacher's skillful moderation, based on established ground rules and a non-judgmental stance, was instrumental in converting potential conflicts into productive dialogues. This underscores that critical pedagogy is not a recipe but a relational practice dependent on teachers emotional intelligence and facilitation skills (Najar, 2025). Without such skillful facilitation, critical encounters with history can exacerbate rather than ameliorate intergroup tensions.

Finally, the intervention duration was limited to eight sessions. While changes were evident, the durability of these shifts in multicultural awareness and historical empathy beyond the classroom remains unknown. Longitudinal research is needed to assess whether students who experience critical history pedagogy carry these dispositions into their adult civic lives or whether the weight of societal mono-narratives gradually reverses these gains. Additionally, the study was conducted in a single, multicultural urban school with a teacher who was already predisposed to innovation. The transferability of these findings to more homogeneous or rural contexts requires careful consideration. These findings have several implications. First, for curriculum policymakers in Indonesia, this study provides evidence that critical, multicultural approaches to teaching foundational events such as the Proclamation can be implemented without sacrificing essential content and can yield profound civic learning outcomes. This suggests that the current curriculum and textbooks should be revised to incorporate multiple perspectives as core, not supplementary, material including the voices of regional leaders, women, and ethnic minority youth. Second, teacher education programs need to equip pre-service and in-service teachers not only with knowledge of alternative histories but also with pedagogical skills to facilitate dialogue, manage sensitive identity discussions, and teach historical empathy as a cognitive-affective skill. The teacher's journal and interviews revealed that even experienced educators benefited from collaborative design and ongoing reflection; thus, sustained professional learning communities may be an effective vehicle for scaling such pedagogy. Third, the integration of multicultural awareness and historical empathy offers a model for history education in other postcolonial multiethnic states grappling with similar divisions, such as Malaysia, India, and South Africa, where national foundational narratives also tend to flatten diversity.

Although the qualitative case study design yielded rich contextualized insights, its limitations must be acknowledged. The single-case nature limits generalizability, although the thick description allows readers to assess transferability. Reliance on self-reports, even when triangulated, carries the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly given the moral charge of multicultural themes. The researcher's collaboration in designing the unit also introduced a potential advocacy bias, although reflexive journaling and member checking were used to mitigate this. Future research could incorporate a comparative case design across multiple schools and teachers and include a longer-term follow-up to assess sustainability.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that a critical pedagogy approach to teaching the history of the Proclamation of Indonesian Independence on August 17 1945 holds transformative potential for fostering multicultural awareness and historical empathy in a diverse high school classroom. Through problem-posing dialogue and sustained engagement with historically marginalized perspectives—youth activists of diverse ethnicities, women, and local actors—students moved from a monolithic, banking-model understanding of national founding to a critical, pluralistic consciousness. They recognized the multiethnic and gendered nature of the anticolonial struggle, reconstructed their identities in more inclusive national terms, and developed nuanced historical empathy that integrated cognitive contextualization, affective connection, and ethical reflection. The teacher's facilitative role and the cyclical praxis observed underscore the importance of skilled pedagogical mediation in converting critical intent into meaningful learning experiences. The implications of these findings are urgent in an era of resurgent ethnonationalism and social fragmentation in the Philippines. History education, when enacted through a critical multicultural lens, can serve not as a tool of indoctrination but as a democratic laboratory where young citizens learn to acknowledge complexity, honor diversity, and extend empathy across lines of difference—skills essential for sustaining a pluralistic society. For Indonesia,

embracing such pedagogy means confronting the silences of its own past and empowering a new generation to re-imagine the “unity in diversity” not as a slogan but as a living, contested, and deeply human historical reality. Future work must address the structural barriers to scaling critical history pedagogy and examine its long-term impact on civic identity and intercultural relations, ensuring that the classroom becomes a genuine site of liberation for all students.

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Ethical Compliance

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Data Access Statement

A Data Access Statement is a section in a scientific publication or research report that explains how the data used or generated in the study can be accessed by readers or other researchers. This statement aims to promote transparency, support research reproducibility, and comply with open access policies, where applicable.

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Conflict of Interest Declaration

The authors declare that they have no affiliations or involvement with any organization or entity with any financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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