

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Practice: Learning Strategies and Character Building in Javanese Gamelan Education at an Indonesian High School

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigates the strategies for teaching Javanese gamelan at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, with a specific focus on how these strategies facilitate character education. Employing a field research design, data were collected through direct observation of gamelan lessons and semi-structured interviews with one teacher and participating students. The findings reveal a contextually designed, gradual pedagogical approach that effectively accommodates students with heterogeneous, primarily beginner, musical backgrounds. Key strategies included prioritizing student comfort and familiarization over technical mastery, selecting simple Lancaran and Ladrang repertoire with variations (*racik*), and integrating theory contextually into hands-on practice. This approach proved effective in boosting student motivation, engagement, and musical understanding. Beyond musical skill acquisition, the learning process served as a powerful medium for instilling character values such as mutual respect (e.g., through customs like not stepping over instruments), discipline and emotional regulation (through ensemble cohesion), and inclusive leadership (symbolized by the *kendang* player's role). The study concludes that the gamelan program at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul offers an integrative, culture-based model for arts education, relevant to both music pedagogy and local cultural preservation in secondary schools.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Javanese Gamelan Education, Learning Strategies

A. Introduction

In an international context, music learning approaches that emphasize hands-on practice and active student involvement have long been the focus of experts. Elliott (Elliott, 2009), through the concept of praxial music education, asserts that a deep understanding of music can only be achieved through direct musical experience, not merely through theoretical learning. This approach is highly relevant to gamelan learning, which places collective practice, musical experience, and interaction

between players at the core of the learning process. In addition, (Gay Geneva, 2018), in his study of culturally responsive teaching, emphasizes the importance of using students' cultural backgrounds as a foundation in the educational process to increase engagement, understanding, and learning outcomes. In the context of gamelan education in Java, this approach is reflected in the utilization of local values, musical traditions, and cultural practices as a medium of learning. Thus, this research not only contributes to the development of music education at the local level, but also enriches the international discourse on culture-based music education.

Gamelan education at the high school level is a form of arts education that plays an important role in preserving the cultural heritage of the Indonesian archipelago, particularly the rich aesthetic, social, and philosophical traditions of Javanese music (Hananto, 2020; Santoso et al., 2024; Wijayanto & Fidyastuti, 2025). Amidst the tide of educational modernization and the increasingly strong dominance of popular culture in the lives of teenagers, gamelan learning not only functions as a practical activity, but also as a medium for character building, strengthening cultural identity, and a collaborative learning space that emphasizes discipline, responsibility, and a sense of togetherness. Therefore, gamelan learning strategies need to be designed in a structured and contextual manner in order to respond to the challenges of the times while maintaining the essence of tradition (Bagaskara, 2022; Iswangga et al., 2020; Mahendra & Suwahyono, 2021).

SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul (Public Senior High School), as an educational institution that pays attention to cultural arts, especially gamelan, is a relevant location to study because its gamelan learning practices not only emphasize the skill of playing instruments but also develop learning patterns that are oriented towards process, togetherness, and a complete understanding of music. In this context, the success of gamelan learning is largely determined by the teacher's readiness in designing the initial steps before class begins, starting from preparing learning tools, selecting materials appropriate to the students' ability level, arranging the space and instruments, to planning effective methods to ensure conducive learning.

In addition, the conditioning of students after they arrive in class is also a crucial factor because gamelan learning requires concentration, order, and group cohesion; teachers need to build a focused yet enjoyable classroom atmosphere, for example through rhythmic warm-ups, motivation building, and fair distribution of instruments. On the other hand, the selection of material in gamelan classes also needs to be understood more broadly, not only limited to the songs or tunes that are played, but also covering basic playing techniques, understanding musical structure, tempo dynamics, a sense of karawitan, as well as the cultural values contained in collective music-making practices. Thus, gamelan learning strategies are essentially a combination of pedagogical planning and cultural approaches that complement each other.

Furthermore, effective learning also requires clear goals, both at the meeting and semester levels, such as specific technical skill targets, repertoire mastery, improved listening and musical response skills, and the formation of discipline and cooperation (Asri, 2025; Pramono et al., 2024; Usman & Yulianingtias, 2022). Therefore, this study is important in systematically examining gamelan learning strategies at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul, covering the stages of preparation before class, conditioning students at the beginning of learning, reinforcing teaching materials, as well as learning objectives designed by teachers. This study is expected to contribute academically to the fields of music education and applied ethnomusicology, while also serving as a practical reference for arts and culture teachers in designing more effective, relevant, and meaningful gamelan learning in the school environment. Based on the background, this study aims to answer: 1) What pedagogical strategies do teachers use to introduce gamelan to students with diverse musical backgrounds? 2) How do these learning strategies contribute to the development of musical skills and the formation of character values in students? 3) What are the main challenges and opportunities in implementing gamelan learning in a high school environment in the context of contemporary education?

B. Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a field research design to gain an in-depth, contextual understanding of the gamelan learning process. The research was conducted at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul from Desember, 2025 to January, 2026. Participants were selected purposively and included one gamelan teacher (the sole instructor for the extracurricular program) and 12 students (grades 10-11) who were active participants in the gamelan extracurricular activity. Student participants were selected to represent a range of instrument preferences and experience levels. Data were collected through three primary techniques:

1. Non-participant Observation: The first author conducted 5 observations of 90-minute gamelan practice sessions over a one month period. Observations focused on the stages of learning, teacher-student interactions, student engagement, and the overall classroom dynamic. Detailed field notes were taken.
2. Semi-Structured Interviews: In-depth interviews were conducted with the teacher (one 60-minute interview) and 12 students (15-30 minutes each). The teacher interview explored his pedagogical philosophy, lesson planning, and perceived challenges. Student interviews explored their motivations, learning experiences, and perceived benefits of participating in gamelan.
3. Artifact Analysis: Relevant documents, such as lesson plans or teaching materials (e.g., notation for *Lancaran* and *Ladrang*), were collected to supplement the observational and interview data.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Onwuegbuzie & Weinbaum, 2016; Saldanha & Sharon O'Brien, 2014). This involved

three concurrent flows of activity: data condensation (through thematic coding of field notes and interview transcripts), data display (using matrices and narrative text to organize findings), and conclusion drawing/verification. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data and then grouped into broader themes related to learning strategies and character values. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, we employed triangulation (comparing data from observations, interviews, and artifacts) (Bachri, 2010; Mustaqim, 2016; Thurmond, 2001), member checking (sharing summary findings with the teacher for verification), and peer debriefing (discussing emerging themes with a colleague not involved in the study).

C. Results and Discussion

Profile of SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul

SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul is one of the leading public senior high schools in Bantul Regency, Special Region of Yogyakarta, which plays a strategic role in the development of academic and non-academic education. Geographically, SMAN 1 Kasihan is located on Jl. Bugisan Selatan, Tirtonirmolo, Kasihan, Bantul Regency, DIY, in a relatively strategic and easily accessible area, thus supporting optimal learning activities.

As an educational institution with an excellent reputation, the implementation of these quality standards has made SMAN 1 Kasihan known as a school with a disciplined, conducive learning environment that is oriented towards the comprehensive development of students' potential. In carrying out its educational process, SMAN 1 Kasihan carries the vision of "Pious, Achieving, Personable, Healthy, and Environmentally Friendly." This vision reflects the school's commitment to shaping students' characters so that they are not only academically excellent but also have moral integrity, strong personalities, health awareness, and concern for the environment.

The commitment to holistic student development is reflected in various academic and non-academic achievements at the regional, national, and international levels. One of the areas of excellence that continues to be developed is arts and culture education, particularly gamelan music. Gamelan learning activities at SMAN 1 Kasihan are not only aimed at mastering musical skills, but also at preserving local culture, character building, and strengthening students' cultural identity. With a strong institutional background, a conducive learning environment, and progressive school policy support, SMAN 1 Kasihan is a relevant and representative research location for studying gamelan learning strategies at the senior high school level.

Situations and Findings from Observations in Gamelan Learning

Based on direct observations conducted in gamelan music classes at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul, several important characteristics were found related to the background, interests, and challenges faced by students. In general, the majority of students were beginners in gamelan learning, with most of them only becoming familiar with and formally learning gamelan at the high school level. Only a small number of students had previous experience playing gamelan, particularly since elementary school. This condition shows that the gamelan class at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul was attended by students with diverse musical backgrounds, but dominated by beginners. *"I first learned gamelan when I entered high school and immediately became interested in playing it continuously."* Said student A. Although most students had no previous experience, the results of the observation showed a fairly high level of interest in gamelan music. The majority of students expressed their initial interest in the distinctive characteristics of gamelan sounds, both in terms of tone color and the musical atmosphere produced. This early interest in the sonority of gamelan is an important asset in the learning process, as an interest in sound can also intrinsically motivate students to learn.

In terms of instrument preference, most students showed greater interest in the bonang and saron instruments. These two instruments are considered attractive because of their dominant role in the musical structure of gamelan and because they allow students to be actively involved in ensemble playing. This preference also affects the dynamics of the class, with some instruments becoming more popular than others. Therefore, observations also revealed a number of difficulties experienced by students in the learning process. The main challenge faced was difficulty in memorizing gamelan notation, especially for students who had difficulty determining the correct position of the beat on the instrument, which affected the accuracy of the technique and the quality of the sound produced. Another difficulty was apparent in playing the kendang, where most students were still unable to produce the correct sound of the kendang in accordance with the technique and musical function.

On the other hand, students showed hope and a positive attitude towards learning gamelan in the future. Many students hope to continue playing gamelan regularly, both during breaks and outside of formal class hours. In addition, they also want to be involved in gamelan performances and even participate in competitions. These hopes reflect the potential for gamelan learning to develop not only as a classroom activity, but also as a space for expression, appreciation, and strengthening students' musical experiences.

Gamelan Learning Strategy at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul

The gamelan music learning strategy at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul is implemented with a sustainable approach that emphasizes aspects of introduction, learning comfort, and direct musical experience for students. In the initial stage, the main focus of learning is not on mastering complex theories or techniques, but also on efforts to make students first familiarize themselves with gamelan as a musical medium. Teachers strive to create a comfortable and relaxed learning atmosphere so that students, especially those who are interacting with gamelan for the first time, do not feel burdened by technical demands from the outset. This approach is important considering that the majority of students have no previous experience in playing gamelan.

In the learning process, the material is introduced through simple songs that are familiar or easily understood by students, especially in the form of *gendhing Lancaran* and *Ladrang*. In the *Lancaran* form, teachers use both traditional and creative repertoires, such as *Lancaran Gugur Gunung*, *Gundul-Gundul Pacul*, and *Jaranan*. Meanwhile, in the *Ladrang* form, learning is focused on relatively simple structures, namely *Ladrang* irama satu and dua, such as *Ladrang Kenceng* and *Ladrang Grompol*. The selection of repertoire is based on pedagogical considerations, namely clear musical structures, repetitive drumming patterns, and enabling students to gradually understand the role of each instrument in the gamelan ensemble.

To maintain student motivation and interest in learning, teachers also vary the songs taught, either through simple changes in the drumming patterns or musical developments known in karawitan as *racik*. These variations aim to prevent students from becoming bored with mechanical repetition, while encouraging them to be more sensitive to musical dynamics. Through this process, students' musical sensitivity is gradually formed, both in terms of rhythm, cooperation between players, and understanding of the structure of *gendhing*.

In terms of pedagogy, gamelan learning at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul emphasizes hands-on practice rather than intensive theoretical instruction. Theoretical elements, such as an introduction to *kepatihan* notation, *gendhing* structure, and the function of instruments, are inserted gradually and contextually in accordance with the material being played. Therefore, students do not learn theory separately, but rather understand musical concepts through concrete practical understanding. This strategy allows students to build musical understanding naturally, while also developing gamelan playing skills gradually and continuously. This learning approach can be understood as the application of several integrated core pedagogical strategies.

First, a gradual and comfort-oriented introduction strategy is applied by prioritizing the creation of a relaxed, safe, and enjoyable learning atmosphere. Teachers

emphasize the importance of building students' emotional interest in gamelan music from the outset, with the aim of getting students to love the sound and character of the instruments before learning more complex playing techniques. In interviews, teachers stated that the initial goal of learning is for students to *"like the sound first and feel familiar with the instruments."* Meanwhile, technical aspects will develop gradually along with the practice process. This approach has proven effective in reducing learning anxiety and increasing students' confidence. Second, the selection of the *Lancaran* and *Ladrang gendhing* repertoire serves as the main pedagogical tool. These two forms of gendhing were chosen because they have a clear musical structure, repetitive rhythmic patterns, and a relatively low level of difficulty, making them suitable for the basic learning stage. Through *Lancaran* and *Ladrang*, students can understand the relationship between instruments, the structure of gendhing, and the role of each ricikan in a gamelan ensemble in a systematic and gradual manner. This strategy allows the process of musical internalization to take place naturally through direct practical experience. Third, the integration of musical theory is carried out contextually in practice (contextual integration of theory). Theoretical elements, such as the introduction of kepatihan notation, gendhing structure, and instrument functions, are not taught as separate material but are inserted directly when students play the repertoire. Thus, students gain theoretical understanding based on concrete experience, making musical concepts easier to understand and remember. This strategy also prevents learning from becoming too abstract and boring. Fourth, the use of musical variations or racik is utilized as a motivational strategy. Variations in percussion patterns and musical development serve to avoid boredom due to mechanical repetition, while encouraging students to remain enthusiastic and actively involved in the learning process. Through the application of racik, students are trained to be more sensitive to musical dynamics, increase creativity, and strengthen cooperation between players in the gamelan ensemble.



Figure 1. Gamelan music learning process at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul

Challenges and Obstacles in Gamelan Learning at SMAN Kasihan Bantul

Although gamelan music learners at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul show positive potential, the implementation is not without various challenges and obstacles. One of the main challenges relates to the position of gamelan as an extracurricular

activity offered by the school. This condition means that not all students have a long-term interest or commitment to learning gamelan. In practice, the number of students who register and participate in gamelan extracurricular activities tends to fluctuate, and only some are able to participate consistently over a long period of time.

In addition, the unstable number of participants in gamelan extracurricular activities also affects the dynamics of learning. On several occasions, the number of students participating in the activity was quite large, making the learning process less effective. The limited number of gamelan instruments meant that some students had to wait their turn to play certain instruments, which had the potential to reduce the intensity of practice and focus on learning. Conversely, at certain times, the number of students attending is relatively small, so that ideal gamelan ensemble learning, which requires the collective involvement of various instruments, becomes less than optimal. This imbalance in the number of participants requires teachers to continually adjust their learning strategies to remain effective in various situations. Another significant obstacle relates to learning facilities and infrastructure, particularly the use of practice rooms. Gamelan extracurricular activities are held in the school's sports hall (GOR), which is also used simultaneously by various other extracurricular activities. *"Because the gamelan extracurricular activity is held at the school sports hall, we have to share the space with other extracurricular activities."* Said Teacher. This situation creates limited space and time, and often requires gamelan lessons to take place alongside other activities. Noisy sounds from other extracurricular activities, such as sports or movement-based activities, often disturb the students' concentration and the gamelan learning process, which requires sensitivity to sound and musical balance. This situation poses a challenge for teachers and students in maintaining the quality of gamelan learning amid limited learning environments.

Character Values in Gamelan Music Learning

Gamelan music learning at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul not only serves as a means of developing students' musical skills, but also as an effective medium for instilling character education values. Through the practice of playing gamelan, students are directly introduced to character values. Through the practice of playing gamelan, students are directly introduced to the values of politeness and respect, both towards their peers and towards the gamelan instruments themselves (Afryanto, 2012; Dewi Rukmini Sulistyawati et al., 2023; Kristanto, 2020). One concrete example is the prohibition against stepping over the gamelan, which is not merely understood as a technical rule, but as a form of respect for cultural works and human creations that have historical and symbolic value. Through this custom, students learn to appreciate the process, traditions, and works of others.

Empirically, this value of *ngajeni* (respect) is also reflected in the students' reflective

awareness of the rules. One student stated that the prohibition against stepping over the gamelan made them feel more careful and appreciate the instruments as part of their cultural heritage, not just musical instruments. One student said, "We are taught not to step over the gamelan because it is considered rude. For me, this teaches me to respect other people's culture and work, while also training me to be humble," said student A. This statement shows that these symbolic rules are not only understood normatively but are also internalized as ethics in daily practice.

In addition, learning gamelan also teaches students to regulate their emotions, namely the ability to control themselves, musical sensitivity, and awareness of the context of playing together. In a gamelan ensemble, each player is required not to play individualistically, but to adjust their playing to the other players and to the overall musical structure. This process trains patience, emotional control, and social sensitivity, as students must be able to refrain from dominating, while being sensitive to the dynamics of group playing.

In this context, the values of discipline and social sensitivity are evident when students must constantly adjust their tempo, dynamics, and musical expression to the patterns of the kendang and other instruments. This process requires students to listen actively, control their musical egos, and prioritize collective harmony over individual interests. Thus, learning gamelan not only shapes musical skills, but also builds social awareness, empathy, and collective responsibility in group work.

The role of the kendang in a gamelan ensemble is a powerful example of instilling the values of discipline and mutual respect. The kendang functions as the regulator of tempo and dynamics, so that other instruments are not allowed to precede or exceed the kendang. This rule instills an awareness of the importance of discipline, order, and compliance with mutual agreements (Danika Pryatna & Santosa, 2021; Setyawan et al., 2017). At the same time, students also learn to respect each instrument's role in building harmonious musical unity. Furthermore, leadership in gamelan is symbolically reflected through the position and role of the kendang. The kendang functions as the leader of the ensemble, but does not always appear dominant or at the forefront. Physically and symbolically, the kendang is in the middle, acting as a connector and balancer between instruments. This value provides students with an important lesson about the meaning of inclusive leadership, namely a leader who is present to accompany, guide, and maintain balance, not just to stand out. Thus, learning gamelan becomes a space for students to reflect on the values of leadership, togetherness, and social responsibility in everyday life.

Symbolically, the role of the kendang as a hidden leader represents the concept of strong inclusive leadership. The kendang does not lead through domination, but rather through sensitivity, exemplary behavior, and the ability to read the musical situation as a whole. This leadership pattern teaches that an ideal leader is not

always at the forefront, but is able to build coordination, maintain balance, and create equal participation opportunities for all members. These findings show that learning gamelan contributes significantly to shaping students' understanding of democratic, participatory, and socially harmonious leadership.

D. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that gamelan learning at SMAN 1 Kasihan Bantul is a multifaceted educational practice that transcends the mere acquisition of musical skills. The contextually designed, gradual pedagogical approach emphasizing comfort, hands-on practice, and carefully selected repertoire proves effective in engaging students from diverse musical backgrounds. More significantly, the study reveals how the inherent structure of gamelan as a collaborative ensemble serves as a powerful and authentic medium for character education. Values of mutual respect, discipline, emotional regulation, and inclusive leadership are implicitly yet effectively transmitted through the collective act of music-making. The findings underscore the potential of culture-based arts education to contribute to students' holistic development, integrating cognitive, psychomotor, and affective learning domains. While challenges related to facilities and participant consistency persist, the adaptive strategies employed by the teacher highlight the critical role of the educator as a creative facilitator. This study contributes an empirical model of culturally responsive pedagogy from an Indonesian perspective, offering valuable insights for educators and researchers interested in the intersection of arts education, cultural preservation, and character development in diverse educational contexts worldwide.

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