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Project-Based Learning as Transformative Practice: Restructuring Classroom Social Relations at MI Ma'arif Banteran

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Project-Based Learning (PjBL) as a transformative practice that restructures classroom social relations at MI Ma'arif Banteran. The study addresses the persistence of teacher-centered instruction and the challenge of integrating digital learning in a resource-constrained madrasah. Using a descriptive qualitative case-study design, data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews with the madrasah head, classroom teacher, and students, and analysis of curriculum documents, teaching modules, rubrics, and student products. The findings show that PjBL in Indonesian Language, Mathematics, and Fine Arts redistributed classroom authority by positioning students as active producers of knowledge. It increased engagement, creativity, and autonomy, although initial student disorientation and unequal digital access created operational friction. The madrasah managed these constraints through heterogeneous peer tutoring and an offline-first workflow. The study contributes a contextual model of PjBL as social reorganization, not merely instructional variation.

1. Introduction

The development of contemporary basic education requires a shift from instruction that merely transfers information to learning that enables students to investigate, negotiate meaning, and produce knowledge through concrete activity. In many elementary classrooms, including Islamic elementary schools, the teacher is still often positioned as the main source of authority, while students are expected to listen, copy, and complete tasks according to fixed instructions. This pattern may produce administrative order, but it does not always cultivate the capacities most needed in twenty-first-century education: critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, communication, self-regulation, and ethical participation. Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is important in this context because it moves learning from verbal explanation toward inquiry, production, reflection, and public presentation of student work (Burhan et al., 2025). This orientation is consistent with transformative learning design that treats classroom activity as a space for social change rather than mere knowledge transfer (Hanif, 2014a).

PjBL is not only a method for making learning more attractive. At a deeper level, it reorganizes the social relations of the classroom. In a conventional classroom, authority is concentrated in the teacher: the teacher explains, evaluates, and determines what counts as valid knowledge. In a project-based classroom, authority is redistributed through group decision-making, peer negotiation, practical problem solving, and student responsibility for learning products. This redistribution does not eliminate the teacher's role; rather, it transforms the teacher into a facilitator who designs the learning environment, scaffolds

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student inquiry, and ensures that activities remain connected to competency targets. Previous studies show that PjBL supports critical thinking, creativity, readiness, and learning outcomes when it is implemented with clear planning, assessment rubrics, and meaningful project contexts (Dinaryanti et al., 2025; Isnani, 2024).

For Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, the issue is more complex because learning innovation must be aligned with academic competence, religious character, classroom discipline, and local institutional culture. The Kurikulum Merdeka creates space for contextual, differentiated, and student-centered learning; however, the translation of this policy into everyday practice depends heavily on teacher competence, school leadership, learning resources, and digital infrastructure. In this sense, curriculum reform must be read not only as a technical document but also as a philosophical and sociological transformation of learning culture (Hanif, 2014b; Hanif & Ussa'adah, 2026).

Digitalization adds another layer to this transformation. Digital media may increase engagement, expand learning resources, and allow students to produce multimodal artifacts, but it may also reproduce inequality when students have different levels of access to devices, internet connection, and digital literacy. This tension is particularly visible in semi-urban and semi-rural madrasah contexts where the expectation of digital learning often exceeds the available infrastructure. Studies on digital citizenship and Islamic educational technology show that technology integration must be supported by ethical guidance, realistic facility management, and pedagogical design (Hanif & Salsabillah, 2024; Hanif et al., 2025).

Based on this background, this article examines the implementation of PjBL at MI Ma'arif Banteran as a transformative practice that restructures classroom social relations. The study focuses on three questions: how PjBL is planned and implemented across subjects, how it affects student engagement and autonomy, and how the madrasah manages obstacles related to psychological readiness and digital infrastructure. The article argues that the significance of PjBL lies not only in the products created by students, but also in the transformation of classroom authority, participation, and learning responsibility.

2. Methods

This study used a descriptive qualitative design with a case-study approach. The design was selected because the research aimed to understand PjBL as an institutional and classroom practice rather than to measure learning outcomes statistically. A case study allows the researcher to examine planning, implementation, classroom interaction, student experience, and institutional response within a specific educational context.

The research was conducted at MI Ma'arif Banteran during the even semester of the 2026 academic year. The informants were selected purposively because they were directly involved in the implementation of PjBL. They included the Head of the Madrasah, Tin Susneti; the classroom teacher, Nur'aini Latifah; and sixth-grade student representatives, namely Ainun, Azalva, and Hakim. These informants represented institutional leadership, pedagogical facilitation, and direct learner experience.

Data were collected through three techniques. First, non-participant classroom observation was conducted to examine student participation, teacher facilitation,

classroom organization, group interaction, use of learning media, and religious habituation in the madrasah environment. Second, semi-structured interviews were used to obtain reflective narratives from the madrasah head, classroom teacher, and students. Third, document analysis was carried out by reviewing teaching modules, learning objective flows, assessment rubrics, curriculum documents, and student products.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Observation notes, interview summaries, and documents were reduced into thematic categories, displayed in narrative matrices, and interpreted in relation to the research focus. Data credibility was strengthened through source triangulation and technique triangulation by comparing interview statements, classroom observations, and documentary evidence.

3. Literature Review

Project-Based Learning and Student Agency

Project-Based Learning is generally understood as a pedagogical model that organizes learning around authentic problems, inquiry processes, collaborative activity, and the creation of concrete products. Students are not merely asked to remember concepts; they are required to use concepts in the process of designing, producing, revising, and presenting learning artifacts. This model is closely related to constructivist learning because students build understanding through interaction with materials, peers, teachers, and real-world contexts (Milla, 2025). In religious learning contexts, project-based products such as comics have also been shown to strengthen student creativity when project design is connected to meaningful content (Karimah & Hanif, 2026). In the taxonomy of learning outcomes, PjBL can move students beyond remembering and understanding toward applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2017).

Student agency is a central dimension of PjBL. Agency refers to the capacity of learners to make choices, regulate their own participation, contribute ideas, and take responsibility for outcomes. In project-based environments, students are expected to plan tasks, divide roles, negotiate decisions, and evaluate the quality of their work. This process strengthens self-regulation and autonomy because students learn to manage time, materials, peer relations, and performance targets (Stefanou et al., 2013). In elementary education, agency must be carefully scaffolded because children may not immediately have the confidence or skills to make decisions independently. The strengthening of independent character and critical thinking in elementary Islamic education further confirms that autonomy requires pedagogical structure, not spontaneous release from teacher guidance (Yuliani & Hanif, 2026).

PjBL in Islamic Elementary Education

In Islamic elementary education, PjBL must be understood as both pedagogical innovation and character formation. Projects should not be detached from the moral and social values cultivated by the madrasah. When students collaborate, respect different abilities, use local materials, and present their work responsibly, they are simultaneously practicing academic competence and social ethics. This is relevant to studies that emphasize how Islamic values are internalized through school culture, symbols, language, and everyday interaction in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (Wildaaa & Hanif, 2026).

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The Kurikulum Merdeka encourages teachers to design contextual learning based on student readiness, local wisdom, and meaningful assessment. In this framework, PjBL is not an optional decorative method, but one of the most relevant pathways for transforming curriculum from document to practice. Studies on PjBL and Kurikulum Merdeka demonstrate that project-based learning can make curriculum implementation more concrete when teachers are able to connect learning objectives with student products, formative assessment, and classroom reflection (Turohmah & Hanif, 2024).

Digital Media, Infrastructure, and Learning Inequality

Digital media may strengthen PjBL because it allows students to document processes, create videos, complete online assessments, and share learning products. Empirical studies on digital media show that applications and online platforms can improve student engagement when they are used with appropriate pedagogical design (Handina & Parisu, 2025; Ifliadi et al., 2024). Studies on Quizizz-based learning and technology-based Islamic education also indicate that digital tools become meaningful when they support interaction, feedback, and learner participation rather than simply replacing conventional worksheets (Hanif et al., 2022; Hanif & Masngud, 2025). However, digital integration also produces implementation challenges, especially when schools face unstable internet networks, limited devices, and unequal student familiarity with technology (Meng et al., 2023).

For madrasahs, digitalization should therefore be treated as a managed ecosystem rather than a simple instruction to use online tools. Teachers need to combine online and offline strategies, create heterogeneous groups, and ensure that students with limited digital access are not excluded from learning. This approach places digital learning within the broader ecology of institutional capacity, teacher creativity, peer support, and inclusive classroom management.

4. Results and Discussion

Authority Reconstruction: From Teacher Dominance to Collaborative Ecosystem

The implementation of PjBL at MI Ma'arif Banteran changed classroom social dynamics by repositioning students as active participants in knowledge construction. The teacher did not disappear from the learning process, but her authority was reconstructed from directive domination into pedagogical facilitation. This transformation was visible in three cross-subject projects that required students to plan, discuss, produce, and present concrete learning artifacts.

The first project was implemented in Indonesian Language through a Figure of Speech Tree project. Students were not positioned as passive note takers who copied grammatical explanations from the board. Instead, they discussed examples, cut and pasted materials, classified direct and indirect sentences, and arranged fable texts into a decorative tree medium. The project transformed grammar from an abstract rule into a collaborative visual artifact.

Figure 1. Student group displaying the Figure of Speech Tree poster board.

The second project was implemented in Mathematics through contextual geometry. Rather than relying exclusively on abstract explanation, students used protractors to measure angles on objects around the classroom. This activity made mathematical concepts visible in the immediate environment and enabled students to connect symbolic knowledge with physical experience.

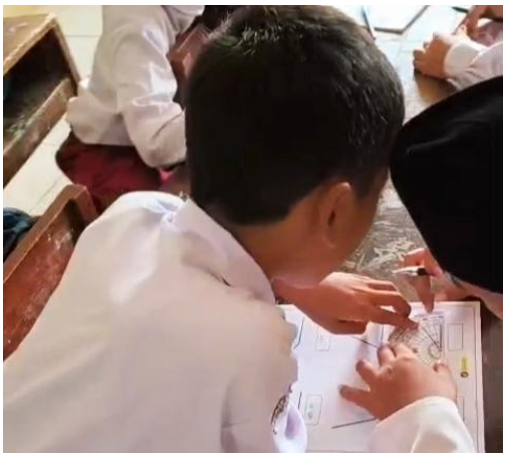

Figure 2. Students practicing contextual geometry using physical measuring tools.

The third project was implemented in Fine Arts through exploration of natural materials. Students collected organic objects from the madrasah environment and transformed them into artistic collages. This activity trained creativity while also strengthening sensitivity to the surrounding environment. The project also showed that PjBL does not always require expensive materials; it can be built from local resources when teachers design the activity creatively.

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Figure 3. Student artwork using natural materials gathered from the school environment.

Student Engagement, Creativity, and Autonomy

The projects produced visible changes in student engagement. Students showed enthusiasm because learning required movement, discussion, practical work, and product creation. The student representatives stated that project-based learning was more enjoyable because they could practice directly rather than only listen to teacher explanation. This response indicates that PjBL supports affective engagement by making students feel involved in the learning process. For Generation Z learners, Islamic education design also needs to acknowledge expressive, participatory, and media-rich forms of learning (Hanif, 2025).

Creativity appeared in the way students selected materials, arranged visual designs, and presented their products. In the Indonesian Language project, students transformed grammatical categories into visual organization. In Fine Arts, they converted natural materials into aesthetic products. These activities demonstrate that creativity in elementary education does not have to be separated from curriculum targets; it can emerge when curriculum objectives are translated into meaningful production tasks.

Autonomy developed gradually. At the beginning, students were not fully accustomed to making learning decisions. However, repeated project routines encouraged them to divide group roles, manage time, and negotiate ideas. This confirms the argument that self-regulation in PjBL is not automatically present at the start, but is cultivated through structured opportunities to make decisions and experience consequences.

Field Reality: Psychological Resistance and Digital Infrastructure Constraints

The transformation of classroom relations was not free from friction. During the initial phase, students experienced psychological resistance and disorientation. Many

students were accustomed to one-way instruction and step-by-step teacher direction. When they were asked to make group decisions, select materials, and organize work independently, some students became hesitant and waited for explicit instruction. This indicates that a student-centered model requires gradual adaptation, especially among elementary learners.

The second challenge concerned digital literacy and technical infrastructure. When the madrasah integrated assignments through Google Forms and cultural study-tour vlogs, differences in student technological familiarity became visible. Some students had access to devices and editing skills, while others were still unfamiliar with digital platforms. This problem was intensified by unstable internet connection, which disrupted uploading and online submission. Similar challenges have been found in madrasah contexts where unequal access to technology can reproduce learning inequality (Salim & Hanif, 2026).

These obstacles are important because they prevent the study from romanticizing innovation. A project-based classroom is not automatically democratic simply because students are asked to work in groups. Without careful facilitation, confident students may dominate, digitally skilled students may become privileged, and students with limited access may be pushed to the margins. Therefore, the success of PjBL depends on how the teacher manages unequal readiness among learners.

Obstacle Management: Peer Tutoring and Offline-First Workflow

MI Ma'arif Banteran managed these obstacles through two practical strategies. The first strategy was heterogeneous peer tutoring. Students with better digital access and stronger editing skills were deliberately paired with students who needed more support. This grouping reduced the digital literacy gap and created horizontal knowledge transfer among students. Peer tutoring also strengthened social solidarity because students were required to help rather than compete. Such peer-based support reflects the educational value of social capital in improving school quality and collective learning capacity (Hanif, 2022).

The second strategy was an offline-first workflow. The madrasah did not force every stage of project completion to depend on internet connection. Storyboarding, discussion, editing, and product construction were carried out offline as much as possible. Online submission was scheduled in more stable signal areas or supported by teacher assistance. This strategy is pedagogically significant because it converts technological limitation into a design principle. Instead of treating weak internet access as a reason to abandon digital projects, the school reorganized the workflow to make digital learning more inclusive.

These strategies show that innovation in madrasahs should be measured not only by the sophistication of technology, but also by the institution's capacity to adapt technology to social reality. In this sense, PjBL at MI Ma'arif Banteran represents a pragmatic model of educational transformation: ambitious in learning goals, but realistic in operational design. This is consistent with studies emphasizing that digital learning quality depends on innovative management of facilities, infrastructure, and institutional support (Warsito & Hanif, 2026).

Voices from the Madrasah Ecosystem

The institutional perspective was represented by the Head of the Madrasah, Tin Susneti She supported the use of creative learning methods and digital media

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because they provide students with early exposure to educational technology. Her support is important because teacher innovation requires institutional legitimacy. Without administrative support, teachers may hesitate to experiment with project-based methods because projects require time, flexibility, and tolerance for classroom noise and movement.

The pedagogical perspective was represented by the classroom teacher, Nur'aini Latifah She observed that students became more active when project-based methods and educational games were used. She also noted that time management in projects indirectly trained students to think critically, quickly, and analytically. This perspective confirms that PjBL is not simply activity-based learning; it is structured activity directed toward competency achievement.

The learner perspective was represented by Ainun, Azalva, and Hakim. They stated that project-based learning was more enjoyable because they could practice directly rather than only listening to explanations. Their response demonstrates that the affective dimension of learning matters. When students feel involved, they are more willing to think, ask, produce, and revise. In this sense, PjBL transforms not only classroom structure but also the emotional climate of learning.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that Project-Based Learning at MI Ma'arif Banteran functions as a transformative practice that restructures classroom social relations. The teacher's role shifts from dominant knowledge transmitter to facilitator, while students become active participants who plan, discuss, create, measure, classify, present, and reflect. Through projects in Indonesian Language, Mathematics, and Fine Arts, learning becomes more contextual and participatory. Student engagement, creativity, and autonomy increase because learners are given concrete responsibility for the production of learning artifacts.

The transformation, however, is not automatic. The study found two significant constraints: initial psychological resistance among students accustomed to teacher-centered instruction and digital inequality caused by uneven literacy, device access, and unstable internet connection. MI Ma'arif Banteran responded to these constraints through heterogeneous peer tutoring and an offline-first workflow. These strategies show that educational innovation requires adaptive management, not merely methodological enthusiasm.

The implication of this study is that PjBL should be understood as a social reorganization of learning. Its success depends on the capacity of the madrasah to redistribute classroom authority, support teacher facilitation, design realistic projects, and protect students from exclusion caused by unequal digital access. Future research may compare several madrasahs with different infrastructure levels to examine how institutional context shapes the sustainability of PjBL.

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