The Importance of Introducing Local Culture to Develop the Character of Early Childhood

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Abstract

The introduction of local culture in Early Childhood Education (ECE) is regarded as a strategic approach to fostering character development from an early age. This article outlines both theoretical foundations and recent empirical evidence regarding the role of local cultural elements such as indigenous values, regional languages, folktales, rituals, and community practices in shaping children's core character traits, including religiosity, honesty, responsibility, discipline, empathy, cooperation, and patriotism. Through a narrative literature review and thematic synthesis of more than 40 scholarly sources, this study develops the "4L-CARE" conceptual model (Language, Lore, Local Practices, Landscape → Character, Agency, Relatedness, Empathy) that explains the linkage between local cultural experiences and character competencies in children aged 4–6 years. Furthermore, the article proposes practical strategies for implementing the Merdeka Curriculum within culturally contextual PAUD settings, including storytelling-based (masatua/folklore) activities, character assessment rubrics, and models of collaboration among teachers, parents, and local communities. The findings emphasize that authentic, repetitive, and meaningful integration of local culture supported by a safe and inclusive local language environment enhances the internalization of character values through play, storytelling, and community-based projects.

Keywords: *local culture, character education, early childhood, ECE, storytelling, local wisdom*

Introduction

Globalization, digital disruption, and cultural homogenization pose significant challenges to character education, particularly in early childhood education (ECE), which requires contextual and culturally grounded approaches. The rapid flow of global information through digital media has profoundly shaped children's mindsets, preferences, and behaviors from an early age, often without adequate value filtering. This condition may lead to identity confusion, declining social sensitivity, and the erosion of moral and cultural values. In this context, early childhood education plays a strategic role as the foundational stage for shaping children's character, attitudes, and identity, enabling them to grow into resilient, adaptive individuals who remain rooted in their cultural heritage (Bandura, 1999; Lickona, 1991).

The phenomenon of cultural homogenization resulting from the dominance of global culture has contributed to a declining appreciation of local wisdom, despite its crucial role as a foundation of national character and social cohesion. Previous studies indicate that the marginalization of local culture in educational practices weakens cultural identity and limits the internalization of moral values among children (Suryana & Yuliani, 2022). Therefore, early childhood education must move beyond a purely

cognitive orientation and emphasize value-based and character-oriented learning through meaningful and contextual experiences. Integrating local culture into ECE learning environments emerges as a relevant pedagogical strategy for fostering character development in a natural and sustainable manner (Yuliani et al., 2023).

Local cultural contexts such as regional languages, folklore (masatua), traditional symbols and rituals, traditional games, and ecological landscapes provide authentic experiences that support meaningful character development in young children. These cultural elements contain moral, social, and emotional messages that can be internalized through social interaction, imitation, and experiential learning, as emphasized in social learning theory (Bandura, 1999). Moreover, character education rooted in local culture aligns with Lickona's (1991) perspective, which highlights the importance of value learning through role modeling and real-life practices. Empirical studies demonstrate that folklore, traditional games, and culturally based activities effectively promote honesty, responsibility, cooperation, empathy, and social awareness among young learners (Handayani & Astuti, 2022; Putra et al., 2021).

Furthermore, local culture reflects distinctive social and ecological relationships within a community. Regional languages foster emotional closeness and empathy, folklore transmits moral values and life wisdom, while ecological landscapes introduce children to sustainability values and environmental responsibility. The integration of these elements into early childhood learning strengthens children's connections with their social and cultural environments and nurtures cultural awareness and a sense of belonging (Hendarwati et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2023). Thus, local culture functions not merely as a learning context but as a primary learning resource for holistic character development.

In line with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum, early childhood learning is oriented toward character development through authentic, context-based experiences that are developmentally appropriate. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes flexible learning, differentiation, and the utilization of local contexts as meaningful learning resources (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). This approach enables children to learn through exploration, reflection, and social interaction, fostering reflective thinking and cross-cultural empathy from an early age (Widodo & Fauziah, 2023). Moreover, the integration of local culture aligns with UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) agenda, which emphasizes values, identity, and local wisdom as core pillars of sustainable education (UNESCO, 2021, 2023).

Based on these considerations, this article aims to: (1) formulate the pedagogical rationale for introducing local culture in early childhood education as a foundation for character education; (2) map empirical evidence on the influence of local culture on children's character development; (3) propose the 4L-CARE conceptual model (Language, Lore, Local Practices, Landscape → Character, Agency, Relatedness, Empathy) as a novel theoretical contribution; and (4) offer implementable strategies for instructional design, character assessment, and collaborative partnerships among teachers, parents, and communities within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum.

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a narrative literature review, which aims to integrate theoretical perspectives, empirical research findings, and local culture–based character education practices in Early Childhood Education (ECE). This approach was selected because it is able to provide a comprehensive overview of the relationship between local cultural values and the contextual development of early childhood character (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Snyder, 2019).

The research procedure was conducted through four main stages:
1. Identification and selection of literature. Sources were obtained from academic databases such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, Garuda, and Scopus, using the following criteria: publications from 2000–2025 and a focus on early childhood education, character education, and local culture. A total of 52 scholarly articles and academic books were used as sources of analysis.
2. Thematic coding. Each article was analyzed using thematic synthesis by identifying key themes, including cultural values, local practices, character assessment, and school–community partnerships (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3. Synthesis analysis. The data were categorized based on similarities in concepts, patterns of relationships, and the direction of cultural contributions to early childhood character development (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

4. Development of a conceptual model. Based on the synthesis results, the 4L-CARE conceptual model (Language, Lore, Local Practices, Landscape → Character, Agency, Relatedness, Empathy) was developed as an integrative theoretical framework for local culture–based character education in Indonesian early childhood education.

The credibility of the findings was strengthened through source triangulation and expert validation, involving three early childhood education lecturers and two experienced practitioner teachers. This approach enabled the researchers to construct comprehensive findings that are relevant to the practical needs of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in educational settings (Hendarwati et al., 2024; Kemdikbudristek, 2022).

Results and Discussion

1. Theoretical Rationale: Local Culture as a Foundation for Character Formation

From a theoretical perspective, character formation in early childhood is deeply rooted in Bandura's (1999) social cognitive theory, which emphasizes that children learn values, attitudes, and behaviors through observation, imitation, and socially mediated meaning-making. In early childhood contexts, children are particularly sensitive to social cues embedded in their immediate environment, including language use, interaction patterns, and culturally embedded practices. These socially constructed experiences function as powerful mechanisms through which moral norms and behavioral standards are internalized. Complementing this view, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory highlights language and social interaction as primary mediators in the internalization of moral and cultural values. Language, in particular, serves not only as a communication tool but also as a cultural artifact that transmits shared meanings, ethical norms, and collective identity.

Recent empirical studies further demonstrate that engagement with local cultural experiences such as the use of regional languages, participation in traditional games, and exposure to folklore plays a critical role in fostering moral agency and prosocial behavior among young children (Handayani & Astuti, 2022; Nurhasanah, 2023). These cultural practices create emotionally meaningful learning situations that allow children to practice empathy, cooperation, and responsibility in authentic social contexts. Consequently, local culture–based education should not be understood merely as a process of value transmission, but rather as a dynamic process of identity construction through repeated, meaningful, and socially situated experiences. This perspective aligns with Rogoff's (2003) notion of cultural participation, in which children develop competencies and values through guided participation within their cultural communities, as well as with contemporary findings emphasizing the role of local culture in strengthening children's cultural identity and character development (Yuliani et al., 2023).

2. The "4L-CARE" Conceptual Model: Integrating Cultural Values and Character Development

The 4L-CARE model represents a synthesis of empirical evidence and sociocultural theory that explains the pathways through which local culture influences character development among children aged 4–6 years. This model conceptualizes local culture as a multidimensional system comprising four interconnected elements Language, Lore, Local Practices, and Landscape that collectively shape four key character outcomes: Character virtues, Agency, Relatedness, and Empathy. Language. The use of regional or local languages in early childhood settings strengthens children's sense of belonging and cultural identity, while also enriching moral expression and social-emotional communication. Through local language use, children learn culturally appropriate ways of expressing respect, gratitude, and care for others, which in turn fosters social empathy and emotional attunement (Fauziah, 2023).

Lore. Folklore, including traditional stories such as masatua and local legends, contains moral narratives that support the development of ethical imagination and moral reasoning. These stories enable children to explore concepts of right and wrong, consequences of actions, and social responsibility in symbolic and age-appropriate ways (Putra et al., 2021).

Local Practices. Children's participation in community rituals, traditional celebrations, and collective cultural activities promotes discipline, responsibility, and cooperation. Through direct involvement in these practices, children experience moral values as lived behaviors rather than abstract

concepts, reinforcing their understanding of social roles and communal obligations (Hendarwati et al., 2024).

Landscape. Engagement with local social and ecological environments strengthens emotional connections to place and nurtures environmental awareness. Cultural landscapes such as traditional villages, sacred sites, and natural surroundings—provide meaningful contexts for learning about sustainability, care, and interdependence between humans and nature (UNESCO, 2023).

Together, these four cultural dimensions contribute to the development of Character virtues, children's sense of Agency in moral decision-making, Relatedness in social relationships, and Empathy toward others and the environment. The learning mechanism underlying this process is experiential and reflective, whereby cultural values are internalized through social interaction, symbolic play, and meaningful engagement (Widodo & Fauziah, 2023; Denham et al., 2012).

3. Implementation Strategies within the Merdeka Curriculum Context

The integration of local culture within the Merdeka Curriculum can be operationalized through culturally based thematic projects lasting approximately two to four weeks. These projects emphasize experiential learning and community engagement, and may include the following strategies:

1. Mapping local cultural assets, such as regional folklore, local languages, traditional games, and community rituals, as foundational learning resources.
2. Contextual learning activities, including storytelling (masatua) using locally themed puppets, cooperative traditional games (e.g., megoak-goakan), and cultural literacy activities such as practicing traditional scripts (e.g., Balinese script writing).
3. Educational field visits to cultural heritage sites or local art communities to strengthen children's sense of belonging and social empathy.
4. Formative character assessment, utilizing observation rubrics, anecdotal records, and reflective portfolios involving both children and parents.

Recent empirical findings by Hendarwati et al. (2024) indicate that the implementation of local culture–based projects in early childhood education significantly improves children's responsibility, empathy, and cooperation indicators by approximately 30–40%. These results demonstrate that local culture integration can effectively enhance the character development targets outlined in the Merdeka Curriculum.

4. Challenges and Implications

Despite its potential benefits, several challenges hinder the optimal implementation of local culture–based character education, including limited teacher competencies in cultural contextualization, a lack of culturally relevant teaching materials, and insufficient local policy support (Suryana & Yuliani, 2022). Addressing these challenges requires the development of community-based professional learning initiatives (communities of practice), the creation of verified repositories of local stories and cultural resources, and stronger collaboration among schools, local governments, and cultural leaders (UNESCO, 2023).

The implications of this study extend beyond enriching theoretical discourse on culture-based character education. The proposed 4L-CARE model offers an implementable framework that can be adapted across diverse early childhood settings in Indonesia. Ultimately, integrating local culture into early childhood education represents a sustainable strategy for strengthening children's character while simultaneously preserving and revitalizing the nation's cultural heritage.

Coclusions

The integration of local culture in Early Childhood Education (ECE) has been shown to play a strategic role in fostering children's holistic character development. Through a comprehensive literature analysis and thematic synthesis of more than 50 scholarly sources, this study demonstrates that local cultural values such as regional languages, folklore (masatua), traditional games, and community rituals serve as effective vehicles for the internalization of moral and social values in early childhood. The 4L-CARE conceptual model (Language, Lore, Local Practices, Landscape → Character, Agency, Relatedness, Empathy) developed in this study offers a novel theoretical contribution to the field of local culture–based character education. This model elucidates experiential, culture-based learning mechanisms that

facilitate the development of four core character competencies in young children: virtues (moral character), agency (responsible initiative), relatedness (social connectedness), and empathy (emotional concern for others). From a practical perspective, the findings indicate that the authentic, repeated, and meaningful integration of local culture within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum strengthens cultural identity, fosters cross-cultural empathy, and enhances children's reflective capacity toward their social environment. This approach positions early childhood education not merely as a space for cognitive learning, but as an ecosystem for value formation and character development grounded in national cultural heritage. Overall, these findings reinforce the role of Early Childhood Education as a frontline institution for cultural preservation and moral development among Indonesian children in the face of globalization, technological disruption, and cultural homogenization (Hendarwati et al., 2024; Yuliani et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023).

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