

Managing Local Culture-Based Learning to Foster Character Development in Early Childhood Education

Hajeni, Nur Saqinah Galugu, Hikrawati

^{1,2,3}Universitas Muhammadiyah Palopo, Indonesia

e-mail: hajeni@umpalopo.ac.id, nursaqinah@umpalopo.ac.id, hikrawati@umpalopo.ac.id

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ABSTRACT. This study aims to describe the management of culture-based learning to strengthen early childhood character, focusing on planning, implementation, and evaluation. This research employed a qualitative case study design, conducted at TK Al-Kahfi in Kota Palopo. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis involving the principal and teachers. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model through the processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, while data credibility was ensured through source and method triangulation. The findings indicate that teachers have a good understanding of the concept of local culture-based learning and systematically integrate it into learning planning through the Daily Lesson Plan. The learning implementation uses interactive and participatory approaches, such as traditional games and group projects, allowing children to engage directly with cultural practices. Learning evaluation is conducted holistically through observation and anecdotal records, with parental involvement in assessing children's character development. This study contributes to strengthening sociocultural perspectives within the context of Bugis-Toraja culture and highlights the pedagogical value of traditional games in fostering early childhood character development. The findings also have practical implications for developing more contextually relevant curricula, strengthening teacher training in culture-based learning design, and fostering partnerships between schools and local cultural communities.

Keywords: *Local culture-based learning, character education, early childhood education, learning management*



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INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization and digital transformation, the education sector faces significant challenges in balancing technological advancement with the preservation of cultural values (Ismail et al., 2023; Anggraini et al., 2024; Hasanah & Yusoff, 2024; Rudenko et al., 2025; Filipović & Dumančić, 2025). The rapid flow of information and the homogenization of global culture have the potential to erode local identities and the character values that underpin social life. UNESCO emphasizes that twenty-first-century education should not only focus on academic achievement but also prioritize the strengthening of cultural identity, character development, and socio-emotional competencies as integral components of sustainable human development (Dhir, 2021; Bravo et al., 2021; Celume & Maoulida, 2022). In this context, countries with high cultural diversity, including Indonesia, face the challenge of ensuring that younger generations maintain a strong sense of identity and character amid global dynamics. Education serves as a strategic instrument for transmitting noble values, ensuring they remain relevant and adaptable to changing times.

Early Childhood Education (ECE) serves as the foundational stage in shaping children's character (Tussubha & Hadiyanto, 2020). Character development during early childhood is considered a fundamental basis for the formation of personality, self-identity, and moral and religious values, which evolve through children's early experiences in thinking, feeling, and behaving (Junaidi et al., 2024). Character education in this study is understood as a set of moral and social values internalized through habituation, social interaction, and meaningful experiences. In early childhood, character education is not merely the transmission of normative values, but rather a process of developing moral dispositions that are integrated into everyday learning activities. At this stage, character development encompasses religious, social, and emotional values. Religious values such as compassion, trust, justice, and responsibility (Utomo et al., 2025) serve as the foundation for fostering positive behavior in children (Nasih et al., 2020).

Children's character is shaped not only through cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development but also through social and cultural experiences in everyday life (Noventue et al., 2024). The social constructivist perspective of Lev Vygotsky emphasizes that child development occurs through social interaction within specific cultural contexts. This implies that the cultural environment in which children grow up plays a significant role in shaping their values, attitudes, and sense of identity (Rubtsov, 2020). Therefore, early childhood education institutions have a strategic responsibility to design learning experiences that not only prepare children for the next level of education but also foster character development rooted in social and cultural values.

Indonesia, a country rich in diverse local cultures, possesses significant cultural values that can support character education. Noble values such as tolerance, politeness, cooperation, and responsibility (Margaretha, 2022) are highly relevant to the goals of character education in early childhood (Sumadi et al., 2021; Hasanah & Fajri, 2022; Zulela et al., 2022; Yusuf et al., 2025), which emphasize the holistic development of children through the integration of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects in order to form individuals who are intellectually capable, emotionally balanced, and grounded in strong moral values (Kulkarni & Karim, 2022). Amid the rapid pace of globalization, cultivating character values rooted in local culture has become increasingly important. The integration of local culture into learning aims to preserve cultural identity, strengthen national identity, and prepare younger generations who possess strong character and the capacity to adapt to global challenges.

Several studies support this urgency. Anggita et al. (2024) demonstrate that integrating local culture into learning enhances children's character development through active participation in cultural activities. Martadi et al. (2025) emphasize that integrating local arts serves as a foundation for fostering empathy, respect, responsibility, and cultural identity. Anatasya et al. (2023) found that traditional games are effective in developing discipline, honesty, and responsibility. Similarly, Aisyah et al. (2024) argue that integrating traditional games, storytelling, and local arts into learning activities can cultivate values such as honesty, responsibility, and cooperation. However, these studies primarily focus on the use of culture as a medium or instructional method. Limited research has explicitly examined how local culture is integrated into the entire learning management cycle holistically. This gap is problematic because the effectiveness of character education largely depends on the consistency and systematic implementation of the learning process.

Addressing this gap, the present study offers a conceptual contribution by positioning local culture as an integral component of learning management, encompassing planning, implementation, and evaluation. Without systematic management, the integration of local culture risks becoming incidental and symbolic rather than functioning as a sustainable element within the learning system. Therefore, integrating local culture into learning management is essential for strengthening children's character development from an early age (Zhou, 2022). Based on this perspective, this study aims to describe how local culture-based learning management is implemented to strengthen character development in early childhood.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation of local culture-based learning management to strengthen the character development of early childhood. This approach was chosen because it enables researchers to capture phenomena in a natural, contextual setting, thereby allowing the dynamics of educational practices to be comprehensively analyzed in real life. Using a case study design, the research seeks to holistically explore the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of learning that integrate local cultural values in early childhood education.

The research was conducted at Al-Kahfi Kindergarten in Palopo City, which was selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) the early childhood education institution explicitly integrates local culture into learning activities, (2) it possesses documented culture-based learning plans, and (3) it is willing to provide access for classroom observations and in-depth interviews. The research participants consisted of five informants, including one principal and four classroom teachers. The selection criteria for informants were: (1) having at least two years of teaching experience, (2) being directly involved in the planning and implementation of learning activities, and (3) being willing to participate in in-depth interviews.

The study was conducted over one month and involved three main data collection techniques. First, participatory observation was conducted, in which the researcher directly observed classroom activities related to local culture-based learning. The observations focused on (a) the integration of cultural values in learning planning, (b) classroom implementation strategies, and (c) forms of character evaluation. Observations were conducted across eight learning sessions. Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal and teachers using an interview guide to gather information on the planning, implementation, and evaluation of local culture-based learning. An interview questionnaire was also used as an additional source of information. Third, document analysis was conducted to examine learning planning documents, including the curriculum, daily lesson plans, students' learning evaluation records, and other relevant documents related to local culture-based learning.

The data were analyzed qualitatively using the interactive model proposed by Huberman and Miles (2022), which includes three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection to ensure the depth and accuracy of the findings. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and method triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing interview data obtained from the principal and teachers, while method triangulation involved comparing data collected from interviews, observations, and document analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Based on data obtained from interviews with five participants consisting of school principals and kindergarten teachers, and supported by the results of classroom observations and document analysis, four main findings were identified, namely: (1) planning local culture-based learning, (2) implementation of local culture-based learning, (3) evaluation of local culture-based learning, and (4) various challenges in implementing local culture-based learning. These four findings indicate that integrating local cultural values into learning does not occur solely at the implementation stage, but also involves systematic planning and ongoing evaluation. In addition, these findings reveal pedagogical dynamics that influence the success of implementing culture-based learning in early childhood education environments. A summary of these main findings is presented systematically in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of Findings on the Management of Local Culture–Based Learning for Strengthening Children’s Character

Thema	Analytical Categori	Evidence (Condensed Verbatim)	Inform ants	Main Challenges
Planning	Conceptual understanding	Teachers understand local culture–based learning as integrating local language, traditions, arts, and cultural values into classroom activities.	G2, G3, G4	Lack of specific instruments for culture-based character assessment
	Program planning	Annual learning programs are collaboratively designed by the principal, teachers, and parents.	KS, G1-G4	
	Integration into lesson plans	Cultural elements and character indicators are embedded in weekly and daily lesson plans.	KS, G1-G4	
Implement ation	Character targets	Cooperation, responsibility, politeness, honesty, self-confidence, and independence.	KS, G1-G4	Limited instructional time, dense national curriculum, diverse student abilities, and limited learning media
	Learning strategies	Interactive and participatory activities such as playing, singing, dancing, and group projects.	G2, G3	
	Cultural learning media	Traditional games (<i>lejja/ dende, congklak</i>), Indo’logo dance, traditional foods, and traditional clothing.	G2, G4, G5	
Evaluation	Experiential learning	Children actively participate and demonstrate cooperation and confidence when performing cultural activities.	G2, G3	Evaluation remains general and does not specifically measure cultural value outcomes.
	Assessment techniques	Observation, anecdotal records, checklists, and portfolios are used to assess children’s character development.	G3, G5	
	Parental involvement	Character evaluation is conducted through communication between teachers and parents.	G3, G5	

The findings indicate that local culture–based learning at Al-Kahfi Kindergarten is managed systematically through three main stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation, although several challenges were identified during its implementation. At the planning stage, teachers demonstrated a clear understanding of locally culture–based learning as the integration of local language, traditions, arts, and cultural values into the learning process. Planning was conducted through the development of annual programs involving the principal, teachers, and parents. Cultural elements and character indicators were explicitly incorporated into the Weekly Lesson Plan and the Daily Lesson Plan. The targeted character values included cooperation, responsibility, politeness, honesty, self-confidence, and independence.

At the implementation stage, learning activities were conducted through interactive, participatory strategies such as play, singing, dancing, and group projects. Cultural learning media included traditional games (such as *lejja/ dende* and *congklak*), the Indo’logo dance, traditional foods, and traditional clothing. Children actively participated in these activities and demonstrated cooperative attitudes and confidence when performing. However, several challenges were encountered, including limited instructional time due to the dense national curriculum, differences in students’ abilities, and limited availability of local culture–based learning materials.

At the evaluation stage, teachers applied authentic assessment techniques, including direct observation, anecdotal records, character development checklists, and student portfolios. The evaluation process also involved parents through communication regarding children’s character development at home. Indicators of learning success included children’s increased appreciation of local culture and positive behavioral changes, such as politeness, responsibility, and cooperation. The findings demonstrate that local culture–based learning is implemented in a structured and

integrated manner within the learning management system, with a strong focus on strengthening early childhood character development.

Discussion

Local Culture-Based Planning as a Pedagogical Framework for Character Formation

The findings of this study indicate that the planning of local culture-based learning at Al-Kahfi Kindergarten is systematic, with cultural values integrated into the Weekly Lesson Plan and the Daily Lesson Plan. This planning process not only targets academic achievement but also explicitly internalizes character values such as *sipakatau* (mutual respect), *sipakainge* (mutual reminding), and *sipakalebhi* (mutual appreciation).

Conceptually, these findings reinforce the sociocultural perspective that positions culture as a primary medium for constructing children's meaning and identity. Through direct interaction with cultural practices, children gain an understanding of social norms and ethical values that contribute to the formation of character (Sofni et al., 2024). Research on Fostering Cultural Sustainability in Early Childhood Education through a Neighborhood Project also demonstrates that authentic cultural contexts strengthen children's self-regulation, social identity, and prosocial development through meaningful learning experiences (Hu & Ødemotland, 2021). Similarly, Suri and Chandra (2021) argue that the introduction of local cultural values integrated into learning activities supports the development of tolerance and children's social character. In addition, Anggita et al. (2024) found that the comprehensive integration of local cultural values into learning planning and implementation effectively strengthens balanced character development, mutual respect, and cultural identity.

Therefore, culture-based planning should not be viewed merely as a curriculum adaptation but rather as a pedagogical strategy aligned with contextualized developmental theory. These findings contribute to the international literature by providing empirical evidence from Eastern Indonesia, a context that remains underrepresented in the global discourse on Early Childhood Education (ECE).

Implementation: Cultural Play as Experiential Character Education

The implementation of learning through traditional games such as *lejja/dende*, *congklak*, and clap-based games demonstrates that character development occurs through embodied experiences and social interaction. Children do not merely learn about cultural values but actively practice them through cooperation, discipline, confidence, and responsibility during the activities. These findings are consistent with ethnopedagogical studies conducted in early childhood institutions in Yogyakarta, which show that traditional games and cultural activities serve as effective media for internalizing values such as cooperation, responsibility, and respect through everyday experiences rather than through purely declarative instruction (Anggita et al., 2024).

Furthermore, Bergan et al. (2021) demonstrate that integrating local culture into early childhood educational practices contributes to cultural sustainability while simultaneously supporting the development of children's social identity. In this regard, traditional games in the present study function as: (a) a medium for the transmission of cultural values, (b) a means of developing executive functions and self-regulation, and (c) a mechanism for the intergenerational preservation of local culture. An important contribution of this study is the demonstration that Bugis-Toraja cultural values possess not only anthropological significance but also universal pedagogical relevance in fostering children's character development.

Structural and Pedagogical Constraints

This study also identified structural barriers, particularly limited instructional time due to the dense national curriculum. The tension between national curriculum standards and local contextual

needs has also been highlighted in the study by Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), which emphasizes the importance of curriculum flexibility to support contextual and culture-based learning. In addition, differences in children's levels of understanding require differentiated learning strategies. As noted by Major et al. (2021), adaptive and responsive approaches that address individual learning needs can enhance the effectiveness of experiential learning. Similarly, Creemers and Kyriakides (2018) argue that dynamic adjustments to each child's needs and developmental progress significantly improve learning effectiveness.

Resource limitations also emerged as a significant constraint. Research by Cobian et al. (2024) indicates that institutional support and community collaboration are key determinants of the successful implementation of culture-based education at the local level. This finding suggests that the effectiveness of this model requires an ecosystemic approach, rather than relying solely on individual teacher initiatives.

Evaluation as Holistic Character Assessment

Learning evaluation was conducted through anecdotal records, checklists, portfolios, and parental involvement, which aligns with the principles of authentic assessment that emphasize observing children's performance in real learning contexts in early childhood education settings. Authentic assessment views children as active learners and requires documentation of learning processes in everyday situations, such as during play and peer interaction, allowing teachers to assess cognitive, social-emotional, and behavioral engagement more holistically (Ritoša et al., 2023; Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016).

The use of portfolios, including e-portfolios, is increasingly recognized as a comprehensive documentation tool that enables the systematic collection of children's learning outcomes, as demonstrated in studies by Bedel et al. (2024) and Zheng (2021). Furthermore, research by Karta and Rasmini (2021) indicates that observation-based authentic assessments, such as anecdotal records and portfolios, provide a more appropriate approach for evaluating the comprehensive development of young children than formal testing. Parental involvement also strengthens the validity of character development evaluation, as character formation occurs simultaneously within both home and school contexts. These findings contribute to the international literature by highlighting a community-based evaluation model embedded within the context of Indonesian local culture.

CONCLUSION

This study. The findings indicate that the management of local culture-based learning at Al-Kahfi Kindergarten is implemented through three interconnected stages: planning, implementation, and evaluation. In the planning stage, teachers design learning programs through Weekly and Daily Lesson Plans that integrate various elements of local culture, such as traditional games, clothing, dances, songs, traditional houses, and local foods, to strengthen children's character values, including cooperation, respect, and responsibility. The collaborative involvement of the principal, teachers, and parents further enhances the contextual relevance of these cultural values in the learning process. During the implementation stage, teachers employ interactive and participatory approaches, including play-based activities, singing, and group projects, enabling children to experience and appreciate local cultural practices directly. In the evaluation stage, assessment is conducted holistically through authentic methods such as observation, anecdotal records, and portfolios, with active parental involvement to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of children's character development. Theoretically, this study contributes to strengthening sociocultural perspectives in the context of Bugis-Toraja culture, highlighting the pedagogical value of traditional games for character development and proposing a collaborative school-parent evaluation model. In practice, the findings suggest the need for greater contextual flexibility in the

national curriculum, the integration of culture-based learning design into teacher training programs, and stronger partnerships between schools and local cultural communities. However, since this study was conducted at a single early childhood education institution, the generalizability of the findings remains limited; therefore, future research is recommended to conduct comparative studies across different regions or to apply longitudinal approaches to examine the long-term sustainability of character development outcomes.

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