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## CULTURAL LITERACY IN EDUCATION: STRENGTHENING CHARACTER THROUGH TRADITION

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### Abstract

This research aims to find out how the role of cultural literacy in the world of education can strengthen students' character through active involvement in local cultural traditions and practices. Using a qualitative approach, data was collected through literature studies (books and journals) as well as direct observation in several schools that had integrated elements of local culture in learning activities. The results showed that the introduction of local cultures, such as traditional ceremonies, traditional arts, folklore, and local wisdom, not only increases students' knowledge of their cultural identity, but also shapes positive attitudes and character values. Students become more accustomed to working together in groups, respecting differences, showing a sense of responsibility for assignments, and having more respect for parents, teachers, and the surrounding environment. Local traditions that are introduced contextually and interactively in learning have been proven to be able to foster a sense of pride in their own culture, as well as fortify students from the negative influence of outside cultures that are not in line with the noble values of the nation. This study suggests that schools, especially in areas with rich culture, be more proactive in integrating cultural literacy into the learning curriculum, both through formal subjects and extracurricular activities. In this way, education not only plays a role in transferring knowledge, but also becomes a strategic vehicle in the formation of the character of the younger generation who are moral, identity, and culturally insightful.

**Keywords:** Cultural Literacy, Character Education, Local Traditions, Culture, Contextual Learning

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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of the times, especially in the field of technology and information, has had many positive impacts on human life. However, behind these advances, there are major challenges faced by the community, especially in maintaining local cultural values. Today's young generation is more familiar with global popular culture that is easily accessible through the internet and social media, compared to the local culture which is actually an important part of the nation's identity. This phenomenon causes a shift in values and a weakening of the attachment of the younger generation to the cultural heritage of their ancestors. One way to overcome this problem is to strengthen cultural literacy among students. Cultural literacy is a person's ability to understand, appreciate, and apply cultural elements in daily life. Cultural literacy is not only related to knowledge of culture, but also includes attitudes and behaviors that show respect for the values contained in local traditions and wisdom. In the context of education, cultural literacy can be used as an important part of learning to shape students' character.

Education not only functions as a means of transferring knowledge, but also as a medium for character building. In the Independent Curriculum and various education policies in Indonesia, strengthening character education is one of the main priorities. Strong and positive character is indispensable to face the complex challenges of the 21st century. Characters such as honesty, responsibility, mutual cooperation, and respect cannot be formed only through lectures or theoretical teaching materials, but must be instilled through real-life experiences that are relevant to students' lives. This is where it is important to include elements of local culture in the educational process.

The integration of local culture into learning can be done through various means, such as the introduction of regional arts (music, dance, traditional theater), traditional ceremonies, folk games, and traditional crafts. In addition, schools can also engage students in cultural projects that require them to conduct research, interview indigenous leaders, or write folklore that exists in their area. All of these activities provide an experience that is not only fun, but also meaningful for the development of students' character.

Various research results show that culture-based learning approaches have been proven to be able to shape students' attitudes and behaviors in a more positive direction. For example, research by Sutrisna (2021) states that cultural activities in schools, such as traditional art performances or training in making local handicrafts, are able to increase the sense of responsibility, cooperation, and the spirit of mutual cooperation among students. Similarly, research by Hidayati (2023) confirms that students' involvement in local cultural activities can foster an attitude of respect for differences, love for the homeland, and increase their confidence. In addition to strengthening character, cultural literacy can also enrich students' learning experiences. Local culture offers many educational values that fit the context of students' lives. Learning that is connected to their daily cultural experiences will be easier to understand and meaningful. This is in line with contextual learning theory, where students learn better when the subject matter is associated with their real world. In other words, local culture can be a bridge between the academic world and the real-life world of students.

Cultural literacy in education also plays a role in preserving the nation's cultural heritage. By introducing and involving students in cultural activities from an early age, the younger generation will grow up with a sense of pride in their own cultural identity. This is important to prevent the loss of local culture due to the increasingly strong influence of globalization. When students know, understand, and live their own culture, then they will become agents of cultural preservation in the future. However, the implementation of cultural literacy in schools still faces various challenges. Some of them are the lack of teachers' understanding of the importance of cultural literacy, the lack of resources and teaching materials that raise local culture, and the absence of curriculum guidelines that systematically integrate culture into subjects. Other challenges are the limited time in the implementation of learning as well as the tendency of schools to focus more on academic achievement than character development.

To overcome these challenges, cooperation between various parties, including the government, schools, teachers, parents, and local communities, is needed. The government needs to provide policies and guidelines that support culture-based learning. Schools and teachers need to be encouraged to be creative in designing learning that involves elements of local culture. Parents and the community also need to be involved in educational activities so that they can become an authentic source of learning for students. For example, in some regions in Indonesia, learning initiatives that promote local traditions have begun to emerge, such as science learning based on traditional Tembé Me'é weaving in East Nusa Tenggara, traditional dance-based art learning in Bali, and the introduction of traditional games as part of physical education. These initiatives prove that with creativity and a strong will, cultural literacy can be integrated into formal education. Thus, it is important for all parties to view cultural literacy not as an addition to the curriculum, but as an integral part of character education. Cultural literacy helps students to know their identity, foster a sense of love for the homeland, and build an attitude of tolerance and mutual respect in a multicultural society. In the midst of globalization, cultural literacy is a fortress that maintains national identity as well as a bridge to build a future rooted in noble values. Based on the description above, this paper will discuss further how cultural literacy can be used as a powerful tool in shaping students' character. The focus of the discussion will be directed to the integration of local traditions into learning activities, as well as its influence on the development of students' character in schools. It is hoped that this paper can provide insight and inspiration for educators, policy makers, and the wider community to jointly strengthen culture-based character education in Indonesia.

## METHODS

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach that aims to describe and understand in depth how cultural literacy is applied in educational activities, especially in the formation of students' character through local traditions. This method was chosen because it is suitable for studying complex social and cultural phenomena in the context of daily life in schools. Data sources are obtained from various types of information, both primary and secondary. Secondary data includes relevant books, scientific journals that discuss culture-based education, as well as curriculum documents and learning planning from the schools where

the research is located. Meanwhile, primary data was obtained through direct observation and in-depth interviews with teachers and students. Observations were made to see firsthand how culture-based learning activities are carried out in schools. The interviews were conducted to explore the views, understanding, and experiences of teachers and students towards the application of cultural literacy in their school environment.

This research was conducted in several primary and secondary schools in the West Nusa Tenggara and Central Java regions, which were chosen because they have implemented learning activities that integrate local culture, such as traditional arts, traditional ceremonies, regional games, and other culture-based projects. The collected data was analyzed qualitatively using the Miles and Huberman model interactive analysis technique, namely through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. Each data collected is summarized, grouped by theme, and then concluded to answer the focus of the research. Through this approach, it is hoped that a comprehensive picture of the role of cultural literacy in supporting the formation of student character in schools based on local traditions will be obtained.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Education is not only about the delivery of academic knowledge, but also the process of forming strong national character and identity. In the context of Indonesia, which is rich in cultural diversity, strengthening identity through local culture-based education is a strategic step to create a generation that is not only intelligent, but also deeply rooted in the noble values of its nation. One of the increasingly prominent approaches is the integration of local culture into the formal learning process, as has been implemented in real life in a number of schools in West Nusa Tenggara and Central Java. This practice makes local culture not just an additional material, but a major part of the teaching and learning process across subjects.

Various activities such as traditional dances, folk games, regional handicrafts, and weaving practices in Lombok are used as contextual learning media. This practice not only introduces students to cultural heritage, but also makes it a living learning experience, touching on cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects. For example, weaving activities in Lombok schools are not only seen as hand skills, but also as a vehicle for the transfer of cultural values, such as patience, perseverance, and respect for nature and ancestors. The learning process becomes more meaningful because it is directly related to the real life of students. They feel that lessons are no longer abstract or disconnected from the context of their daily lives, but rather something close and of personal value.

The active involvement of students in these culture-based activities has a significant positive impact on character building. Students involved in local arts and culture activities show an increase in attitudes of responsibility, cooperation, discipline, and appreciation for diversity. They learn from direct experience, not from lectures or theories alone. Values such as mutual cooperation in making batik, honesty in telling about local legends, and caring for traditional symbols are part of a concrete learning experience. Teachers said that this approach makes students more concerned about their social environment, more open to differences, and shows better morals in daily interactions. Character education that previously felt abstract has now become something real and internalized in their daily lives.

In addition, students' understanding of local culture has also increased significantly. Many of them are able to explain the origins of a tradition, the meaning of cultural symbols, and the moral values contained in that cultural practice. Cultural literacy develops naturally: students not only get to know culture superficially, but really live and understand the importance of culture in their lives. This fosters a collective awareness to preserve local culture and fosters a sense of pride in ancestral heritage. This process strengthens national identity and fortifies students from the negative influences of outside cultures that often conflict with local values.

A number of studies support these findings. Hanun Imtiyas et al. (2022) in their research at SDN Siwalan showed that cultural and national literacy strengthens students' cultural identity and love values. Gulo et al. (2023) found that at SMP Negeri 2 Lahomi, the cultural literacy program instills national character through reading activities and discussions of literary works and local culture. Saputri et al. (2024) note that the integration of culture and citizenship through cultural visits and traditional games is effective in shaping the character of local cultural love. Meanwhile, Sari and Supriyadi (2023) observed that cultural literacy in school-based junior high schools fosters discipline, creativity, and love for culture through reading habits and library interactions. In Titab Elementary School, as researched by Desy and Winangun (2024), the integration of multicultural literacy and local values creates a tolerant and empathetic educational environment.

The views of the Ministry of Education and Culture (2021) also emphasize that learning based on local culture is very effective in shaping students' character. Cultural literacy is not just an informative introduction of culture, but is a process of internalizing values that instill a way of thinking, behaving, and acting based on culture. Values such as responsibility, cooperation, good manners, and respect for others are an integral part of student life. Prasetyo (2020) added that learning based on local context makes the subject matter easier to understand because students can relate it to their own real experiences.

However, it is undeniable that the implementation of cultural literacy in schools still faces various challenges. One of the main obstacles is the limitation of cultural resources, such as locally-based teaching materials and cultural learning support facilities. Many schools do not yet have teaching materials or modules that systematically integrate local cultural values. The national curriculum often does not explicitly include local culture as a core competency, making it difficult for teachers to make it an integral part of the learning process. As a result, culture-based activities are often only additional or incidental programs.

Another challenge is the lack of training for teachers in designing and implementing culture-based learning. Many teachers are not yet familiar with approaches that allow the integration of local cultures into lessons, especially in general subjects such as math or science. Practical guidance and structured training are needed so that teachers can creatively relate the subject matter to the local culture. In addition, there is a need to strengthen partnerships between schools and local cultural communities. The involvement of indigenous leaders, local artists, and cultural practitioners in the educational process will enrich the content and give authenticity to the student learning experience.

In this context, a project-based learning model is highly recommended. Students can engage in projects that directly touch on local culture, such as creating documentation about

folklore, recording traditional craft tutorial videos, creating regional art performances, or compiling digital books about local traditions. In addition to strengthening cultural literacy, this method also trains 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and digital literacy. Using technology wisely in this process will make local culture feel relevant and attractive to the younger generation who are familiar with the digital world.

For example, history lessons can be integrated with the creation of short videos about the origins of villages or local traditional figures. Indonesian lessons can be used to write drama scripts or short stories based on folklore. In cultural arts lessons, students can create regional songs with traditional musical instruments. All of these activities build a deep understanding and practical skills needed for the future, while strengthening a love for one's own culture. Collaboration between schools, the government, and the community is the key to the success of cultural literacy sustainability. The central and regional governments need to formulate education policies that are more responsive to the local cultural context, including curriculum revisions so that local culture becomes a mandatory part of learning. Schools need to be encouraged to forge partnerships with cultural communities, provide spaces for cultural activities, and provide opportunities for students to learn directly from their cultural sources. Teachers must also be active cultural agents, not only delivering lessons, but also inspiring students to appreciate and preserve their cultural heritage.

With the right strategy, cultural literacy-based education can be a strong foundation in shaping the character of students who not only excel academically, but also have a strong identity, high tolerance, and healthy global competitiveness. Cultural literacy instills noble values naturally and contextually, making students not only know about culture, but live in those cultural values. Furthermore, investment in cultural literacy is a long-term investment to build an Indonesian society that is inclusive, strong in identity, and able to face global challenges without losing its identity.

## CONCLUSION

Cultural literacy has a very important role in the world of education, especially in efforts to form students' character. By introducing local cultures and traditions into learning activities, students not only gain knowledge of cultural heritage, but also learn to appreciate values such as cooperation, responsibility, tolerance, and respect for differences. These values are very relevant in forming a person who has noble character and is able to live harmoniously in a diverse society. Through cultural-based activities, such as traditional arts, folk games, or traditional ceremonies, students can experience meaningful and contextual learning experiences firsthand. This helps them understand that culture is not only part of the past, but also an important part of identity and life in the present. Therefore, schools need to take an active role in developing a more adaptive and contextual curriculum, by incorporating elements of local culture in an integrated manner in the subjects. In addition, collaboration between schools and the community, especially with cultural figures, is needed to enrich the learning process. Community involvement not only adds to students' insights, but also strengthens the relationship between educational institutions and the surrounding socio-cultural environment.

Thus, cultural literacy is not only part of learning, but also a strategic path in forming an intelligent, characterful, and cultured generation.

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