



Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy through Banyuwangi Arts in Elementary Education

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Abstract

This study presents the design and development of a culturally sustaining pedagogical model in elementary education by integrating Banyuwangi's traditional arts into a thematic learning framework. Using a Design-Based Research (DBR) methodology, this study systematically develops, tests, and refines an instructional model incorporating traditional arts such as the Gandrung and Barong dances and culturally resonant learning media like puzzles, multimedia, and puppets. This approach emphasizes character development alongside academic learning, fostering values such as empathy, respect, and cultural identity. The model incorporates culturally resonant media—including puzzles, multimedia, and puppets—featuring iconic local characters, Tole and Jebeng, to engage students and connect lessons to their cultural heritage. Observational data from classroom applications reveal enhanced student motivation, social identity, and moral reasoning. Teachers and educational experts rated the model highly for its feasibility, relevance, and impact on character and cognitive development. Despite challenges such as the need for specialized teacher training and scalability across diverse cultural contexts, the findings underscore the transformative potential of integrating local arts into educational curricula. This research contributes to the discourse on culturally responsive education by providing a replicable framework that aligns academic rigor with the preservation of cultural heritage, equipping students with essential values for navigating a globalized world. Future work is recommended to evaluate long-term impacts and adaptations for broader cultural settings.

Keywords: culturally sustaining pedagogy; Banyuwangi; elementary education; cultural integration in curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

Character education has emerged as a crucial element in modern educational frameworks worldwide, focusing on instilling values, ethics, and social responsibility to prepare students for meaningful citizenship (Aningsih et al., 2022; Huda et al., 2023; Sarbini et al., 2021). This approach

has influenced Indonesia's educational reforms, most notably with the introduction of the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*) by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2014). This curriculum reform emphasizes an educational vision that transcends traditional academic achievements, aiming to shape individuals with

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qualities such as empathy, respect, and cultural awareness (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2014). Indonesia's approach signifies a move toward a more holistic education model, integrating character development alongside academic learning to create well-rounded individuals capable of positive social impact.

In a globalized era where cultural diversity is increasingly accessible, educational systems are tasked with preserving local values and identities while equipping students to thrive in interconnected societies. For Indonesia, a nation rich in cultural diversity, this task entails embedding local cultural values within the education system (Jeon et al., 2022; Kasiyan, 2019). The sector faces various challenges, such as insufficient course hours, limited topics, as well as inadequate number and expertise of teachers. With the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation has become even more precarious. To solve these problems, ARCOLABS organized an alternative arts and culture education program for local public-school students in 2020 as part of the Official Development Assistance (ODA). This approach seeks to strengthen national pride and cultural identity by including regional arts and cultural traditions. Banyuwangi, a region known for its vibrant cultural heritage, provides an ideal context for implementing such an integrated educational model. Traditional arts, like the Gandrung and Barong dances of Banyuwangi, embody values of resilience, unity, and mutual respect. Integrating these cultural expressions within elementary education creates a platform for teaching character traits essential for harmonious social interaction.

Educational research increasingly supports that effective character education requires approaches beyond traditional, rote-based learning models (Novianti, 2022; Suciptaningsih & Haryati, 2020; Suherman, 2018; Tohri et al., 2022). Students benefit from engaging with curriculum content that reflects real-world, culturally relevant contexts. In Indonesia, the rapid influence of globalization and digital me-

dia has exposed young learners to diverse cultures, potentially conflicting with local traditions (Connor & Vickers, 2013). Schools are essential in anchoring students' identities in local culture, an approach particularly impactful in regions like Banyuwangi. Traditional arts embedded in the curriculum allow students to connect with their heritage and develop a sense of community responsibility and pride (Aziz et al., 2022). Engaging with traditional arts helps students internalize values that contribute to a solid moral foundation about how they perceive themselves and relate to others.

Sustainable pedagogic design is important in education systems to remain adaptable, culturally relevant, and capable of fostering long-term positive impacts on learners and society (Bascopé et al., 2019; Louhapensang & Noobanjong, 2021). Sustainable pedagogical approaches prioritize culturally integrated, student-centered learning experiences that enhance engagement and knowledge retention (Slimbach & Whalen, 2023). In the context of character education and local arts integration, sustainability in pedagogic design refers to developing teaching methodologies that preserve cultural heritage while accommodating modern educational needs.

Educators can create adaptable learning models that incorporate interdisciplinary and experiential learning that allow students to apply knowledge to real-world contexts (Joyce & Calhoun, 2024). Thematic and integrated learning approaches serve as key components of sustainable pedagogy for students, as academic knowledge, develops critical thinking, empathy, and social responsibility (Mbeshu-Mhlauli & Fikelepi-Twani, 2024). Integrated thematic learning, which organizes education around central themes rather than isolated subjects, effectively achieves these educational goals. This approach encourages interdisciplinary thinking to students to draw connections across subjects in "meaningful" and practical ways (Andriani et al., 2023; Moran, 2002). Thematic learning enhances cognitive engagement and criti-

cal thinking, encouraging students to apply knowledge to real-world contexts (Qian et al., 2023; Sen, 2022). For elementary students in Indonesia, themes based on local cultural heritage offer an immersive learning experience, linking academic subjects to the arts and humanities (Perdana et al., 2021; Wiratmoko & Sampurno, 2021). This approach provides students with opportunities to develop academic skills while learning the values of empathy and cultural sensitivity through direct engagement with the cultural context around them.

Banyuwangi's local arts provide a rich resource for integrating thematic content in elementary education (Rofiq et al., 2019). The region's traditional dances, music, and visual arts serve as conduits for teaching cultural values beyond academic knowledge, reflecting collective ethics and social norms. Through direct participation in dance, music, and other forms of creative expression, students gain hands-on experiences that strengthen social-emotional skills (Hadzantonis, 2019). For instance, learning a dance like Gandrung teaches students about discipline, teamwork, and commitment to enhance social awareness and emotional resilience while promoting an understanding of the values necessary for responsible citizenship (Iswanto et al., 2023; Relin DE, 2017; Wessing, 2019).

Studies on educational practices playing with local culture highlight the impact on student engagement and motivation (Camper Moore, 2021; Karmini et al., 2021; Sampurno, 2023). Students who encounter culturally relevant content exhibit more enthusiasm for learning and a more profound sense of identity. This connection between the curriculum and their cultural background cultivates a sense of ownership and pride in their education. In other educational settings, similar models have shown that cultural engagement enhances motivation, which supports a positive attitude toward learning. For students in Banyuwangi, exposure to their regional arts in the classroom strengthens their connection to their community and helps them understand the significance of cultural traditions within their society.

ral traditions within their society.

While integrating local arts within elementary education offers substantial benefits, practical challenges persist. One significant challenge is the need for educators trained in cultural pedagogy. Many teachers, particularly in rural or under-resourced areas, need the necessary skills to teach cultural arts within a structured academic framework (Ana et al., 2020; Harbon, 2022). Addressing this issue requires specialized training programs that prepare teachers to deliver culturally integrated content that aligns with academic objectives. Through targeted training, teachers can learn to implement local cultural themes effectively, enhancing students' educational experiences with knowledge and character development lessons.

Another challenge arises from balancing character education with academic standards in a system where cognitive achievement is often prioritized (Li et al., 2020). Teachers may struggle to allocate time for character-building activities alongside rigorous academic content (Tusiime et al., 2020). Integrating cultural arts into the curriculum requires careful planning to ensure these elements support educational objectives without detracting from academic outcomes. Studies suggest that structuring cultural arts as thematic anchors across subjects allows teachers to meet academic goals while providing students with meaningful character-building experiences (Lee et al., 2022). Schools are uniquely positioned as cultural custodians, especially in regions where traditional values may be at risk due to global influences. By integrating elements of Banyuwangi's traditional arts into classroom activities, schools help students connect with their heritage, creating a lasting sense of pride and responsibility for preserving local culture. This connection fosters a lasting sense of pride and responsibility for preserving local culture, reinforces cultural identity, and provides students with a sense of belonging within their communities – an essential foundation for sustaining traditions across generations.

Cultural education also contributes to broader societal benefits, encouraging community cohesion and a collective understanding of shared values. When students learn about their culture within an educational framework, they develop respect for the traditions that define their communities. This respect translates to greater social harmony as students grow to appreciate the diversity within their society. In Indonesia, where diverse cultural identities form a crucial aspect of national identity, cultural education strengthens social bonds by highlighting the richness of each community's contributions (Adisaputri et al., 2022; Soewarlan, 2019).

The integrated thematic model based on Banyuwangi's local arts aligns with academic goals while supporting character development in elementary education and offers a holistic approach where students gain cognitive, emotional, and social skills through culturally immersive learning experiences. Engaging with Banyuwangi's cultural heritage within the academic setting cultivates a sense of self-awareness and social empathy, equipping students with values and competencies essential for personal growth and responsible citizenship. The learning environment provided by this approach creates a platform for students to engage with their identities while achieving academic success.

This study takes a different approach by designing, developing, and testing a structured thematic learning model that actively embeds Banyuwangi's cultural heritage into early education. Rather than simply promoting cultural appreciation, this research builds an evidence-based framework that connects academic learning, social development, and character-building through hands-on, interactive methods and character development while preserving Indonesia's cultural legacy through refining a prototype; this study provides a tangible model that can be replicated, adapted, and further expanded to strengthen cultural education across diverse educational settings in Indonesia and beyond.

METHOD

The study employs a qualitative research approach with a developmental focus to create an integrated thematic learning model that strengthens character development in elementary school students. A Design-Based Research (DBR) framework was used to guide the process, enabling a fluid model that evolves through classroom applications, feedback, and continuous improvement (Reinking, 2021). DBR's alignment with philosophical principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy, as described by Reinking (2021), makes the model contextually grounded in Banyuwangi's cultural richness, fostering educational experiences that validate and extend students' cultural identities.

Located in SD Model Banyuwangi, a nationally recognized school in Indonesia, the research benefits from Banyuwangi's deep cultural heritage. The vibrant blend of Javanese and Balinese influences provides a culturally immersive environment for students, making Banyuwangi's local arts an ideal foundation for educational approaches emphasizing identity, respect, and social values. Culturally sustaining pedagogy offers a theoretical basis that prioritizes educational practices affirming students' heritage, aiming to empower students through culturally relevant and meaningful content.

The study includes 30 first-grade students, ages 6-7, selected from five classrooms. This age group is essential for character education due to its developmental phase, which is open to forming social and moral foundations. Culturally embedded learning, especially during early education, enhances identity, empathy, and responsibility for a model based on meaningful cultural engagement.

Preliminary Research and Analysis

The process begins with an in-depth curriculum review to locate areas where character education objectives intersect with cultural content. Interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and policy

reviews form a comprehensive needs analysis, identifying gaps in existing character education resources that engage students culturally. Findings underscore a need for culturally specific and age-appropriate lessons, highlighting the importance of thematic, experiential activities that resonate with students' developmental needs. Concepts from culturally relevant pedagogy from Bonifacio-Ramolete & Tiatco (2024), Emdin (2017 and 2020), support this stage, emphasizing the significance of aligning curriculum with students' cultural backgrounds to foster deeper learning connections. A demographic analysis of the student cohort helps to understand their cognitive and emotional stages, validating their readiness to engage in activities that involve cultural narratives and social values.

Design of the Learning Model

Designing "Tole" and "Jebeng" focused on visual elements that immediately resonated with young students while conveying essential values (Figure 1). Large, clear eyes on both characters are a deliberate choice, as they symbolize transparency, eagerness to learn, and openness to new experiences. These are foundational characteristics for character education in early learning. The cheerful facial expressions of Tole and Jebeng were crafted to be warm and welcoming, encouraging students to engage actively with the materials and connect with the characters.

Additionally, colour choices were carefully selected to maintain vibrancy without overwhelming the illustrations. Primary colours like red, yellow, and blue, used in children's visual learning environments, were balanced with earthy tones to stay authentic to Banyuwangi's cultural palette (Elliot, 2015; Wessing, 2019). This blend of colours reflects the lively spirit of Banyuwangi's traditional festivals and artistic expressions, adding depth to the characters and making them visually engaging (Suharti et al., 2023; Yashi et al., n.d.).



(a) Tole (male figure)(b) Jebeng (female figure)
Figure 1. Tole and Jebeng

As the male figure, Tole is depicted with large, expressive eyes that communicate curiosity and openness, traits essential in promoting a mindset ready for learning. To further ground his character in the cultural context, Tole is dressed in a traditional Banyuwangi sarong draped across his shoulder, complemented by a *kopiah* to symbolise values such as respect, spirituality, and cultural connectedness, anchoring him firmly in Banyuwangi's community-oriented traditions. His cheerful expression enhances these qualities, signalling to students that character strength also encompasses kindness and openness. Each aspect of Tole's attire and demeanour was purposefully selected to model respect and responsibility, core values that resonate throughout the educational materials he appears in.

Jebeng, Tole's female counterpart, is designed with similar attention to cultural and educational symbolism. As a lively young girl with a radiant smile, Jebeng embodies joy and curiosity, which are especially beneficial for young learners as they engage with new concepts. Her traditional Banyuwangi attire --including a dress adorned with specific patterns and colors of the region and her neatly tied ponytail-- speaks to her authenticity and connection to local identity. This visual presentation does more than connect Jebeng with her heritage; it empowers female students by reinforcing cultural pride while embodying

values of discipline and respect for tradition.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Initial Needs Analysis of the 2013 Curriculum

An analysis of the 2013 Curriculum revealed that its instructional standards employ an integrated thematic approach emphasizing active learning to foster students' character development (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2014). The analysis identified several issues in implementing the 2013 Curriculum in elementary schools (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2014), including (a) standardized themes and sub-themes for first graders across Indonesia, which lack contextual relevance to students' local environments; (b) the cognitive development of first-grade students is still within the concrete operational stage, yet instructional content is not fully contextualized within their environment; (c) existing learning media in schools is often subject-specific, although the instructional approach is intended to be integrated and thematic; and (d) learning media is not always designed with a child-centred orientation, especially in terms of size, illustration, materials, and colour.

Stages of Developing the Integrated Thematic Learning Model Based on Arts and Culture to Foster Student Character

The development of the learning model follows these stages:

a. Conducting a needs analysis, analyzing Core Competencies (*Kompetensi Inti in Indonesian*) (KI) and Basic Competencies (*Kompetensi Dasar*) (KD), analyzing learning challenges, examining child development psychology, and analyzing the characteristics of Banyuwangi arts and culture. The chosen theme in the book, "My Favorite Activities," includes a sub-theme of "Singing and Dancing."

b. Formulating the conceptual framework for an integrated thematic learning model based on cultural arts, which consists of three principles: 1) Integration

– intended to create meaningful learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate; 2) Contextualization with Banyuwangi local culture – to help students connect knowledge with real-life applications; and 3) Character development – aiming to foster students' moral growth.

c. Developing learning tools based on Banyuwangi culture to nurture student character, including (a) lesson plans, teacher books, and student books; (b) learning media such as puzzles, multimedia, posters, and puppets; and (c) packaging all learning tools cohesively.

d. The teacher and student books begin by defining the primary characters, Tole and Jebeng, who play central roles.



Figure 2. Character of Tole and Jebeng

Tole is depicted as a smart and creative village boy with curly hair and a cheerful personality represented by his round eyes (Figure 2). His religious nature is symbolized by his wearing a sarong and cap. Meanwhile, the character Jebeng is a beautiful village girl with a ponytail, simple yet neat in appearance, kind-hearted, and always cheerful.

Generally, the characteristics embodied by these imaginary characters reflect the character education goals, including religious observance, neatness, kindness, responsibility, intelligence, creativity, and compassion.

The thematic book "*Kegemaranku*" ("My Favorite Activities") (Figure 3) cover design for Grade 1, showcases three key icons representing Banyuwangi's culture and character: two local children and a Barongan art symbol. The bright composition and colours reflect Banyuwangi's friendly,

joyful culture, with a layout dominated by illustrations that make the cover increasingly “eye-catching” for children.

e. Based on studies on material characteristics, child development, and design concepts, further research was conducted on (a) typography, (b) colour, (c) illustrations, (d) book size to suit children’s needs, and (e) cultural elements of Banyuwangi. For media development, in addition to considering these five aspects, research was also conducted on child-friendly materials and puzzle sizes appropriate to elementary school children’s ergonomics.

Table 1. Selected font for thematic book

Font name: Calibri
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ 1234567890
Font name: Comic Sans
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ 1234567890

Typography, or font choice, is also a significant consideration, as appropriate fonts enhance usability. Selected fonts balance readability and aesthetics. A simple font aids reading ease, while an artistic font encourages visual interest and reading motivation. Victorian LET was chosen for headlines, adding a traditional touch through decorative accents at each end. Calibri was used for sub-headlines due to its readability and professional appearance, providing clarity for explaining headline content (Table 1) (Günay, 2024). Comic Sans was chosen for the main text, as its child-friendly appearance gives a cheerful, relaxed, flexible, and informal impression (Zhou et al., 2022).

The cover design of the thematic book “*Kegemaranku*” (“My Favorite Activities”) for Grade 1 features three main icons representing Banyuwangi culture and character: two children from Banyuwangi and a Barongan art form (Figure 3), dominated by bright red colours that symbolize the Banyuwangi spirit and childlike qualities

of warmth, enthusiasm, and cheerfulness.



Figure 3. Study of color and book cover illustration

The cover layout design is based on the developmental characteristics of children aged 4-7, focusing on certain parts of objects, schema development, sensory integration, and decorative use of colours like red, green, yellow, blue, and black (Sanyoto, 2009). The layout’s dominant illustrations make the cover increasingly “eye-catching” for children (Gupta, 2021; Samara, 2023).

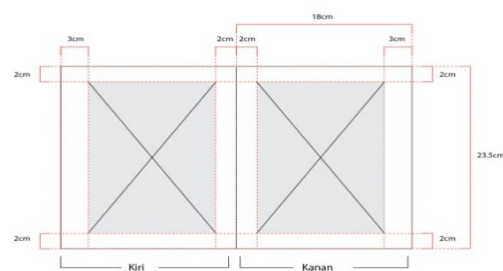


Figure 4. Study of book size and layout

The book size of 23.5 cm x 18 cm was specifically chosen for ergonomic considerations, providing comfort for first graders when holding the book (Figure 4). The cover paper thickness is 210 grams, and the internal pages are 80 grams, ensuring durability and resistance to tearing during use.



Figure 5. Book layout

The book layout prioritizes images over text with a 60:40 ratio, as first graders are generally more interested in visuals and are still learning to read. Images help students understand the material more easily, especially those who still need to become fluent in reading (Figure 4 and 5). Commands like “Ayo baca” (“Let’s Read”), “Ayo belajar” (“Let’s Learn”), or “Ayo menyanyi” (“Let’s Sing”) are accompanied by illustrations, facilitating comprehension for students (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Set of book “Kegemaranku” (“My Favorites Activity”)

Hand dimensions increase with age, showing that older individuals tend to have larger hand measurements than younger individuals. Similarly, males typically have larger hand dimensions than females. For instance, the maximum handgrip diameter for a 5-year-old boy is 45 mm, while for a girl of the same age, it is 43 mm, resulting in a difference of 2 mm (Chen, 2022; Samara, 2023)in response to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs. Based on this study of hand

anthropometry for 5-year-old children, each puzzle cube was designed with dimensions of 4.5 cm, deemed relatively suitable for first-grade students’ hands from an anthropometric perspective.

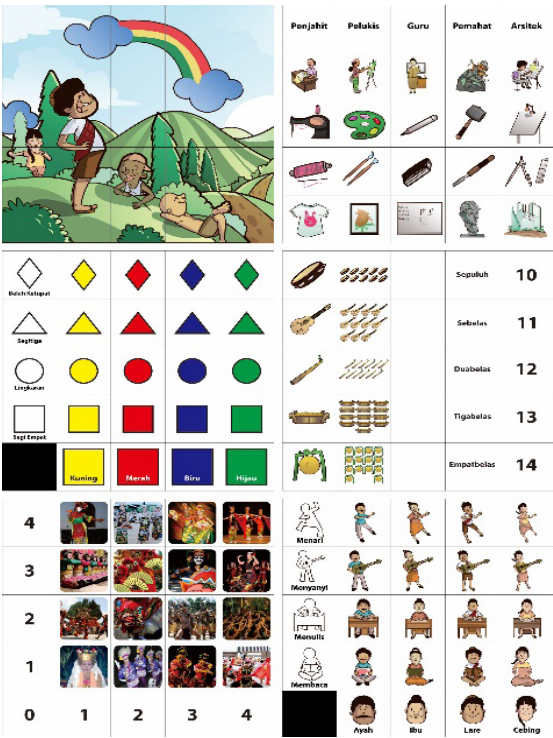


Figure 7. Learning media content using of puzzles and interactive videos

The puzzle pieces are made from moulded plastic (Figure 7 and 8). Plastic was chosen because it is lightweight, durable, widely available, inexpensive, and safe for children. Additionally, plastic is technically easy to shape according to specific requirements.



Figure 8. Puzzle and video as set of learning media

Three experts validated the reada-

bility of the developed thematic learning model: a) a learning media expert, b) an elementary education expert, and c) an expert in Banyuwangi arts and cultural education. From the material feasibility aspect, 87% of validators rated it with a score of 4 (Very Good), while 13% rated it with a score of 3 (Good), as illustrated in the following graph. Regarding graphical feasibility, 89% of expert validators rated it as 4 (Very Good), and 11% rated it as 3 (Good), as shown in the accompanying graph. Regarding readability validation, the experts awarded 90% of the ratings a score of 4, with the remaining 10% rating as 3. For media feasibility, 99% of responses from expert validators indicated that the media met the required standards, with only 1% rating it as non-compliant.

Following improvements based on expert input, a limited trial was conducted at SD Model Banyuwangi. The trial results showed high student engagement, with students displaying a strong interest in the developed media and teachers noting that the learning tools were effective and appealing. Regarding material feasibility, teachers rated 49% of the materials with a score of 4 and 51% with a score of 3. 61% of teachers scored 4 for graphical feasibility, while 39% rated it as 3. Regarding readability, 90% rated it as 4, and 10% rated it as 3. Media feasibility ratings indicated that 100% of respondents deemed the media suitable regarding content relevance, appeal, appropriateness for children, and alignment with Banyuwangi arts and culture.

Based on feedback from experts and teachers involved in the trial, the overall assessment of the learning model under development was positive. Most experts rated it as Very Good. Teachers also gave high ratings for aspects of media feasibility, graphical quality, and instructional content. Specifically, regarding media feasibility, all teacher respondents (100%) agreed that the developed learning model was appropriate, indicating that it was suitable for content, appeal, child-friendliness, and alignment with Banyuwangi arts and cul-

ture. Similarly, 99% of expert opinions also deemed the media feasible, with only 1% of expert respondents finding it unsuitable. More specifically, in terms of readability, most expert respondents (90%) rated the learning model as Very Good, with the remainder giving it a Good rating.

Regarding instructional content, 87% of experts rated it as Very Good, while the remaining percentage gave a Good rating. For graphical aspects, 89% of experts assigned the maximum score of 4, indicating Very Good, and 11% rated it as Good or a score of 3. Approximately half of the teachers conducting the trial (49%) believed the instructional content was Very Good, while 51% rated it as Good. For graphical quality, 61% of teachers gave a Very Good rating, while 39% rated it as Good. Regarding readability, teacher users rated it as Very Good (90%), with the remainder giving it a Good rating.

The developed instructional materials were rated as effective due to their emphasis on local cultural wisdom (Banyuwangi) and alignment with students' abilities, thus motivating students to become familiar with, study, and preserve Banyuwangi's regional culture. Key strengths of this learning media include a) contextually organized content aligned with local wisdom, b) a child-friendly language style that is easily understood and stimulates curiosity, c) images that aid student comprehension, showing a blend of text and illustrations in attractive colours, d) a parent guidebook that helps monitor school learning, and e) puppets representing Jebeng (a term for a girl in Banyuwangi) and Tole (a term for a boy in Banyuwangi), which captivate students and encourage learning.

The findings of this study underscore a novel approach to culturally embedded education, which repositions local culture as an integral pedagogical foundation rather than a supplementary element. Banyuwangi's local arts show narratives and symbols; this model redefines character and academic development by directly challenging the limitations of standardized

approaches. These approaches often neglect the personal and cultural dimensions essential to holistic student development. Reframing the educational objective, this model extends beyond knowledge acquisition, aiming to cultivate ethically grounded, socially aware individuals with a profound cultural identity. The integration of local culture is not merely additive; it provides a formative basis for character-building and cultural preservation in a manner that traditional curricula rarely achieve.

A significant aspect of this model's novelty lies in its alignment with culturally sustaining pedagogy, tailored explicitly to elementary education, a crucial period for identity formation and social awareness. Young learners benefit deeply from direct exposure to local cultural practices—via hands-on activities and interdisciplinary lessons—as this exposure offers an authentic form of character education that resonates personally (Schroeder et al., 2020). Where traditional character education often abstracts values, this model provides tangible, lived experiences. For instance, students do not engage with the value of respect as a distant concept but actively embody it within Banyuwangi's cultural contexts, such as the community-centred performances. This direct engagement enhances their connection to these values, a deeper and more intuitive moral development.

Further novel is the model's dual focus, concurrently addressing academic, cultural, and ethical growth. This culturally embedded model protects against the homogenizing forces of globalization, which often overshadow local cultural identities, especially among younger generations (Kringelbach & Skinner, 2012). Through integration rather than isolation, the model maintains cultural heritage as a relevant and dynamic part of students' lives. Cultural elements are not reserved for extracurricular activities or occasional lessons; they permeate daily learning, transforming culture from an academic topic into a lived, continuous experience. This strategy directly contrasts with tra-

ditional pedagogical practices, frequently disconnecting students from their cultural foundations.

The model's thematic and interdisciplinary framework also represents a departure from the typical compartmentalized approach to subjects in elementary education. Students understand knowledge as interconnected rather than discrete by linking cultural narratives with academic subjects like language, social studies, and art. This integrative approach does not simply append cultural content to academic topics; it weaves it through the academic structure, inviting students to holistically synthesize cultural and academic understandings. Such integration encourages the development of higher-order thinking skills as students learn to link cultural meanings with academic concepts, thereby nurturing analytical, reflective, and synthesizing skills from an early stage. This approach supports intellectual flexibility and reveals young learners' capacity to engage with complex, integrative thinking models, provided these models are rooted in cultural relevance.

Moreover, emphasizing active cultural participation—rather than passive cultural consumption—constitutes a major pedagogical innovation. Students are not passive recipients of cultural knowledge; they actively reinforce their cultural identities by performing traditional dances, creating culturally inspired artwork, and participating in culturally significant practices. This shift from a didactic to a participatory approach redefines students as co-creators of knowledge rather than mere recipients (Orekhova et al., 2019; Septiana et al., 2019). Such an approach aligns with cultural-historical activity theory, which recognizes the central role of cultural activities in cognitive and social development. This participatory model situates cultural engagement as an educational practice with inherent value, emphasizing that active involvement enhances learning and identity formation.

Additionally, this model provides a practical, adaptable framework that can

respond to diverse educational contexts, addressing typical challenges in character education, such as engagement and logistical feasibility. Where conventional moral education can often feel detached and prescriptive, this model organically integrates moral and ethical values within culturally relevant narratives and activities. The model's inherent flexibility empowers educators to adapt lessons to the specific needs of their classrooms, enhancing engagement by ensuring lessons remain meaningful and contextually relevant. This adaptability not only broadens the model's applicability but also represents an advancement in character education by making it responsive to local cultural contexts and the varying developmental needs of students.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the transformative role of culturally embedded thematic learning in elementary education, particularly through integrating Banyuwangi's rich local arts and traditions. The developed learning model, which combines academic content with character-building values, has proven effective in fostering empathy, responsibility, social awareness, and pride in cultural identity among early-grade students. By embedding culturally relevant narratives and symbols into the curriculum through characters such as Tole and Jebeng and interactive learning tools like puzzles, puppets, and thematic books, the model offers an engaging and meaningful educational experience that resonates with students' real-life environments. The positive reception from educators and experts further affirms the model's feasibility and alignment with both pedagogical goals and students' socio-cultural contexts.

Beyond instructional success, the model carries important implications for broader educational practices. It is a practical response to the need for character education that moves beyond rote learning and engages students through culturally relevant and emotionally resonant con-

tent. Integrating local culture enriches the academic experience and contributes significantly to identity formation and social-emotional learning during a critical developmental phase. The findings suggest that such culturally sustaining pedagogy can bridge the gap between standardized academic goals and the diverse cultural realities of Indonesia's student population, potentially reshaping how character education is implemented in schools.

However, several challenges must be acknowledged. One of the most prominent is the limited availability of teachers trained in culturally responsive pedagogy. Without adequate professional development, educators may struggle to implement the model with the depth and nuance required to ensure its effectiveness. Logistical constraints, such as distance from cultural hubs like Banyuwangi and shifting national education policies, also pose practical barriers to consistent implementation. Furthermore, while the model shows strong promise in Banyuwangi, its replication in other regions would require careful adaptation to preserve cultural authenticity and relevance. To maintain the model's impact, each community's unique traditions, symbols, and values must be reflected in localized learning materials.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of culturally embedded education on students' moral reasoning, academic achievement, and community engagement. Comparative studies across various Indonesian regions could provide valuable insights into how cultural heritages shape student development and learning outcomes. Additionally, developing scalable frameworks for teacher training and low-cost resource production will be essential for expanding the model's reach, particularly in under-resourced or remote areas. Integrating digital platforms and interactive technologies may further support accessibility, engagement, and continuity, especially in contexts where physical materials are difficult to distribute.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a growing body of evidence supporting

the integration of local culture as a core element in holistic education. It shows that culturally responsive curricula enhance academic learning and nurture students' sense of belonging, self-awareness, and ethical grounding. As educational systems worldwide seek more inclusive, relevant, and humanistic approaches, the model presented here offers a replicable and adaptable strategy for balancing academic rigor with cultural preservation and character development. Doing so lays the groundwork for more sustainable, identity-affirming education for students to grow as learners, responsible members of their communities, and custodians of their cultural heritage.

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