

## Ethno-Learning and Character Formation: Values and Morals through Culture-Based Education in Cirebon

Ade Cahyaningsih<sup>a,1</sup>, Encep Syarief Nurdin<sup>a,2</sup>, Dasim Budimansyah<sup>a,3\*</sup>, Yadi Ruyadi<sup>a,4</sup>, Jagad Aditya Dewantara<sup>b,5</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia

<sup>b</sup> Universitas Tanjungpura, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup> budimansyah@upi.edu\*

\*korespondensi penulis

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores how formal education preserves local culture through an ethno-learning approach in government-based schools in Cirebon, Indonesia. Using a multisite ethnographic method, the research was conducted over one year in four secondary schools known for integrating Cirebonese cultural values into teaching. The integration of local culture such as *tari topeng* (mask dance), gamelan, the Cirebonese language, and the *Jelajah Budaya* (Cultural Exploration) program helps strengthen students' cultural identity, develop moral character, and foster positive social dispositions. Teachers act as cultural mediators, connecting tradition with contemporary education. Student engagement varies depending on family background and cultural exposure outside school. Challenges include limited resources, inconsistent student interest, and the need for more adaptive, student-centered pedagogies. The study highlights that culture-based education is not merely supplementary but foundational in forming character, reinforcing identity, and promoting cultural sustainability. It argues for a more contextual, humanistic model of education that aligns with local realities while addressing global educational demands.

### ABSTRAK

### Kata-kata kunci:

Ethno-Learning;

Pendidikan Karakter;

Budaya Lokal

Cirebon; Disposisi

Positif;

Pendidikan Berbasis

Nilai;

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**Etno-Pembelajaran dan Pembentukan Karakter: Nilai dan Moral melalui Pendidikan Berbasis Budaya di Cirebon:** Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana pendidikan formal berperan dalam melestarikan budaya lokal melalui pendekatan ethno-learning di sekolah-sekolah berbasis pemerintah di Cirebon, Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan metode etnografi multisitus, penelitian ini dilakukan selama satu tahun di empat sekolah menengah yang dikenal aktif mengintegrasikan nilai-nilai budaya Kacirebonan dalam proses pembelajaran. Integrasi budaya lokal seperti tari topeng, gamelan, penggunaan bahasa Cirebon, dan program Jelajah Budaya membantu memperkuat identitas budaya siswa, membentuk karakter moral, dan menumbuhkan disposisi sosial yang positif. Guru berperan sebagai mediator budaya yang menghubungkan tradisi dengan pendidikan modern. Tingkat keterlibatan siswa bervariasi tergantung latar belakang keluarga dan eksposur budaya di luar sekolah. Tantangan yang dihadapi meliputi keterbatasan sumber daya, minat siswa yang tidak merata, serta perlunya pendekatan pembelajaran yang lebih adaptif dan berpusat pada siswa. Studi ini menegaskan bahwa pendidikan berbasis budaya bukan sekadar pelengkap kurikulum, melainkan fondasi penting dalam pembentukan karakter, penguatan identitas, dan keberlanjutan budaya. Pendidikan yang kontekstual dan humanistik dibutuhkan agar relevan dengan realitas lokal sekaligus menjawab tuntutan global

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## Introduction

Local cultural practices in Indonesian society are greatly influenced by local wisdom, traditions, and customs that have become ingrained in everyday life. (Fatmawati & Dewantara, 2022). This is reflected in various social phenomena inherent in Indonesian society, such as belief in myths and superstitions, which are still often found in the practice of community life. (Olendo et al., 2022; Syam et al., 2024). However, the influence of local culture is not only limited to aspects of beliefs such as myths and superstitions but also plays an important role in forming positive attitudes and dispositions, as well as norms and ethics in social life (Efriani, Dewantara, et al., 2020). This phenomenon can be seen clearly in the society of Cirebon City, which is rich in multiculturalism. Cirebon has an acculturation of two major cultures, namely Sundanese and Javanese culture, which form the distinctive character of its people (Hutama, 2003). The influence of this culture is not only reflected in daily life but also in the world of education in schools in Cirebon. Schools in Cirebon highly uphold cultural values and ethical norms in the implementation of learning. Education in secondary schools in Cirebon has succeeded in integrating local culture into the learning process, including in science and social subjects (Ewing, 2001).

Science, which generally only focuses on the transfer of naturalistic knowledge without involving social and cultural elements, is transformed into a more holistic one by combining aspects of local culture. Teachers in Cirebon high schools are able to package science learning that is not only based on scientific knowledge but also includes local cultural values. This integration has a positive impact on students' personal development. Not only do they master science, students also grow into better and more humanistic individuals, with a deeper understanding of the social and cultural norms that exist in their environment. Science learning that is integrated with local culture encourages students to appreciate local wisdom more and strengthen their positive dispositions, both in the context of education and everyday social life. Cultural integration in science learning is an example of education in schools that can be a bridge between science and culture, creating a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent, but also wise in social life. Thus, local cultural practices in Cirebon are not only an identity that enriches society, but also an important foundation in the formation of student character through education.

In this paper, we aim to present a detailed overview of research on local cultural practices implemented in government-based schools in Cirebon City, Indonesia. The review presents questions, theoretical and methodological approaches. Our criteria for selecting studies were based on the age of the students (up to 16 years old) and the object of study, namely cultural and educational practices in the school environment. Ultimately, we were able to analyze several related publications that included various studies on the implementation of Cirebon local culture in schools. From the number of studies that we reviewed, the approaches used were diverse, including qualitative and ethnographic approaches. Overall, we found that these studies focused on four main areas: (1) the meaning of implementing Cirebon culture in schools; (2) the impact of culture on student character formation; (3) the role of teachers as agents in integrating local cultural values; and (4) the influence of local culture on the social and educational environment in schools.

An ethnographic approach to cultural practices in Cirebon schools is the basis of our research. In this study, the school environment is constructed as a place for not only academic learning but also as a place where local cultural values are applied in everyday life. Teachers,

school staff, and students all take part in this process, where they collectively construct the school's cultural identity. The hierarchical relationship between teachers and students and their respective positions of power are also evident in daily interactions, including in traditional rituals and ceremonies. In this study, we found that the Cirebon culture applied in schools creates a more conducive environment for the formation of students' character. Cultural practices such as the use of polite language, manners, and respect for teachers and parents are important pillars of education in these schools. Relationships between generations, especially between teachers and students, are built through values that prioritize respect and manners (Dewantara et al., 2024; Qulub et al., 2023). In addition, the sense of belonging to the school and the local identity of Cirebon is strengthened through cultural-based activities such as mask dance, gamelan, and the introduction of Cirebon specialties in school programs.

Further research conducted by several academics also highlighted the spatial and design aspects in Cirebon schools. For example, the layout of classrooms and social spaces in schools is designed in such a way as to reflect local nuances, such as incorporating traditional cultural elements in classroom decorations. This effort is intended to create a sense of comfort and a familiar atmosphere for students, as if the school is their second home. In a more in-depth study, researchers found that the influence of Cirebon culture is also seen in students' daily lives at school. For example, daily activities such as eating together in the school canteen or formal events at school are filled with local cultural etiquette. Teachers play a central role in guiding students, providing good examples, and ensuring that these cultural values are adhered to by students in their daily interactions. In addition, local cultural practices are also used to facilitate the formation of communities within schools, where a sense of togetherness and solidarity between students and teachers is continuously developed. Through culturally based joint activities, students are taught to work together, appreciate differences, and maintain good social relationships. In these schools, culture becomes a powerful tool to create harmony and reduce potential conflicts such as bullying. Ultimately, all of these studies show that the implementation of Cirebon culture in government-based schools in Cirebon not only enriches students' education but also serves as an important medium for reproducing broader social values. By integrating local culture into the curriculum and daily life at school, students are not only taught academic skills but are also equipped with strong ethics and values that they will carry into their future lives.

Our research goes beyond the institutional boundaries of formal education and examines how these cultural practices become an integral part of students' lives outside of school, creating continuity between personal, social, and academic life. We believe that by better understanding how local culture interacts with education, we can create better educational models that are relevant to local needs and global developments.

## Method

This study adopts an ethnographic approach with multi-site methods to understand local cultural practices in government-based schools in Cirebon City, Indonesia. (Dewantara & Budimansyah, 2024). The study was conducted from early 2024 to late 2024 in four high schools in Cirebon that are known for their emphasis on Cirebon's religious and mannered local cultural values. These values cover important aspects of daily life, such as manners in social interactions, respect for parents and teachers, and the integration of tradition and religion into the school environment. By studying four different schools, we aimed to explore how these values are

internalized by students and teachers, and how they affect school life. This study used a multi-site method, namely by conducting observations and interviews in four different schools. The main reason for choosing a multi-site was to capture variations in the implementation and understanding of local culture across schools. Cirebon City has diverse social and cultural backgrounds, and each school has a unique context in terms of policies, curriculum, and social influences. With a multi-site approach, we were able to explore differences and similarities between schools in teaching and implementing Cirebon cultural values, as well as gain a more comprehensive picture of the local influence and educational institutions on student character formation. The multi-site approach also allows us to compare how educational policies are implemented differently in these schools depending on local conditions and socio-cultural background (Fetterman, 2010). For example, some schools emphasize the integration of religious values in depth, while others focus more on manners and the formation of good social attitudes. This approach provides space to explore the complexities and dynamics that exist, and provides broader insights into the application of local culture in various educational contexts. Thus, through this multi-site study, the research does not only focus on one particular location or context, but is able to provide a broader perspective on how local culture is integrated into different educational systems. Data collection in this study was carried out through several methods, namely participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. During one year of research, we conducted direct observations in the four schools involved. Researchers were actively involved in various curricular and extracurricular activities at school, including religious holiday celebrations, local cultural events, and daily activities in the classroom. This participant observation allowed us to see directly how Cirebon's local cultural values were applied in daily interactions between teachers, students, and school staff. These observations were recorded in detail in field notes, which were then processed into a research report. Interviews were conducted with four teachers, three students, and the principal at each school. These interviews were designed in a semi-structured manner, focusing on the participants' experiences related to the local cultural values taught in schools. Teachers were interviewed to understand their views on the importance of teaching local cultural values and the challenges they face in integrating these cultures into the curriculum. Students were interviewed to explore how they understand and apply these values in their daily lives, both at school and outside of school. Meanwhile, interviews with school principals focused on the policies and strategies implemented by schools in maintaining and developing local culture in the educational environment. In addition to observations and interviews, we also collected various forms of documentation, such as photos of cultural activities at school, written notes from teachers, and materials used in teaching local cultural values. This documentation provides a visual and written description that complements the data from observations and interviews. Data analysis in this study was carried out systematically using a multi-site approach. All written data, such as field notes, interview transcripts, and activity documentation were analyzed using open and axial coding to identify key themes related to the implementation of Cirebon local culture in schools. We also analyzed visual data, such as photos of activities and cultural documentation that depict important celebrations and daily interactions at school. This analysis was carried out in several stages. First, we conducted an initial description of each data separately without considering the context of the other data. Next, we linked this data with the results of observations and interviews to gain a more comprehensive understanding. The final step was to code the data with a system that had been developed to understand general

patterns and variations in the implementation of local cultural values in different schools. This research was conducted in accordance with strict ethical standards (Blasco & Wardle, 2007). All participants provided written informed consent to participate in the study, and the names and identities of the schools and individuals in the study were anonymized to maintain their privacy. The study was also approved by the university ethics committee, and the entire research process was conducted in accordance with applicable data protection guidelines in Indonesia. Using a multi-site approach and various data collection methods, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive picture of the implementation of Cirebon local cultural values in government-based secondary schools in Cirebon. The results of this study are expected to provide deeper insights into the importance of local cultural education in shaping students' characters, as well as how schools can continue to develop local cultural practices amidst the challenges of an ever-changing era. In addition, this study also shows how important it is to maintain traditional values in formal education as a means to strengthen cultural and social identity among the younger generation.

## Result and Discussion

Theoretically, local cultural practices are understood as part of everyday behavior (Jailani et al., 2021). The 'everyday life behaviour' approach considers all of an individual's actions in their daily lives as well as their interactions with their environment and surrounding community (Fatmawati & Dewantara, 2022). This approach explores the relationship between routines, rules and activity structures associated with local culture in government-based schools (Dewantara et al., 2025). In this context, the family, school environment, and social relationships in Cirebon are considered as daily arrangements that are connected to form an overall order that functions as a social norm in society.

The local cultural practices examined in this study include "the implementation of ceremonies, the maintenance of traditional values, language, and the expression of art and customs" as individual sub-practices. These local cultural practices should be viewed as combined practices involving various organized activities that have significant time and space dimensions. In the analytical model of culture, placing time and space as important dimensions of social interaction, where culture is not only seen as a set of rules and rituals, but also as the result of living and continuously evolving experiences (Hidayat et al., 2023). These local cultural practices go beyond scheduled rituals and also include everyday interactions that are less bound by formal rules (Sada et al., 2019). Therefore, these cultural practices are analyzed in the context of diverse social interactions, both formal and informal, so that forms of cultural practices that are more flexible in terms of space and time are taken into account (Casmana et al., 2023). This comprehensive analysis of cultural practices considers what, how, when, where, and with whom local culture is taught, practiced, and maintained, as well as how these cultural values are perceived and appreciated by the younger generation in government-based schools in Cirebon.

As mentioned, this project aims to explore the local cultural practices lived by students in government-based schools in Cirebon. These practices are embedded in the students' daily lives, where they learn, preserve, and practice local culture in various forms. We understand the regulation of everyday behavior in schools as part of the students' lifeworld, where they interact with friends, teachers, and the surrounding community. This contribution focuses on how students interact with local culture outside the formal school environment. Thus, we examine the relationship between the various lifeworld contexts in which local cultural practices occur,

both in school and outside school. For example, in the context of extracurricular activities, students participate in traditional dances, regional music, and customary rituals that strengthen their cultural identity. At home, they continue these practices with their families. This relationship reflects the importance of the integration between the school and home environments in shaping students' cultural identities. As life has returned to normal, cultural activities in government-based schools in Cirebon have returned to normal. Students have again participated in various cultural activities directly, including traditional art performances, traditional ceremonies, and cultural festivals. With the return of face-to-face interactions, the relationship between students, teachers, and the community in preserving local culture is further strengthened. The integration of culture into daily life in Cirebon is increasingly evident, both inside and outside the school environment.

Cirebonan culture is the result of a harmonious blend of Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies that has been going on for centuries. The city of Cirebon, located on the north coast of Java, was one of the important centers in the process of Islamization in the 15th century, especially thanks to the role of the Wali Songo, especially Sunan Gunung Jati (Hutama, 2003). However, before the arrival of Islam, Cirebon was already an area with strong Hindu and Buddhist influences, which have colored many aspects of local culture. The acculturation that occurred in Cirebon created rich and diverse traditions and norms, combining elements of the three cosmologies into a unique cultural system that is still highly respected to this day (Titisari Danielaini et al., 2019).

Before Islam entered Cirebon, Hindu and Buddhist cosmology greatly influenced the spatial planning, architecture, and social system of Javanese society in general. This influence is reflected in the layout of the city, rituals, and arts and culture that developed in the region. The concept of cosmologically structured city planning, as found in the *Negarakertagama* manuscript, which describes the layout of the Majapahit palace and cities in Bali, also influenced the layout of settlements in Cirebon before Islamization. Urban patterns based on Hindu-Buddhist cosmology involve the division of space that follows ritual and symbolic orientations that are closely related to mountains and seas as centers of spirituality and cosmic balance. Traces of Hinduism and Buddhism in Cirebon can be seen in a number of traditions that are still ongoing, such as the earth alms ceremony, which is a form of gratitude to nature and ancestral spirits, as well as the use of various sacred symbols in art and architecture. The influence of Hindu-Buddhist architecture can also still be seen in the form of temple gates and ornaments on ancient buildings around Cirebon, although they have been widely absorbed into the Islamic framework (Ewing, 2001).

Significant changes occurred when Islam entered and became the official religion of the Cirebon kingdom in the 15th century. Wali Songo, especially Sunan Gunung Jati, played a major role in spreading Islam in this region. The process of Islamization in Cirebon was not confrontational, but rather more towards a process of assimilation and adaptation, where Hindu-Buddhist elements were not completely removed but were merged into the framework of Islamic teachings. This made Islam in Cirebon develop with a very inclusive and flexible character. The Cirebon Palace, which until now is still the center of culture and spirituality of the Cirebon community, reflects this blend. As an Islamic kingdom, the Cirebon Palace adopted local customs that had been colored by Hindu-Buddhist influences and Islamized them. In this context, customs and Islam complement each other and become inseparable aspects of social and religious life. For example, in important processions such as

wedding ceremonies at the Kacirebonan Palace, symbols and procedures originating from ancestral traditions are still maintained, but modified in accordance with Islamic teachings.

The Cirebon community has various traditions that reflect this cultural acculturation. One of the most striking traditions is *Grebeg Syawal*, a celebration held after Eid al-Fitr. Although *Grebeg Syawal* is an Islamic celebration, it still includes various elements of Hindu-Buddhist traditions, such as offerings and a procession of mountains filled with agricultural products and food. This event is intended as a form of gratitude to God, as well as respect for ancestors and the universe. In addition to *Grebeg Syawal*, there is also the *maulidan* tradition which is a commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, but with a very local touch that is typical of Cirebon. In this celebration, the community decorates the mosque and the surrounding area with traditional ornaments and holds processions and recital of praise poems. This tradition is an example of how Islamic teachings in Cirebon are conveyed with a unique cultural approach and are full of symbolic meaning. In terms of art, the Cirebon *Wayang Kulit* is one example of a traditional art form that shows this acculturation. Although *wayang kulit* originates from the Hindu tradition, the stories presented in wayang performances in Cirebon often feature stories from Islamic history or moral stories taken from religious teachings. This shows how Hindu culture was adapted into an Islamic framework without losing its local essence.

The norms and manners of the Cirebon community are strongly influenced by values derived from Islamic teachings. Manners in speaking, acting, and interacting are highly maintained, especially in social relationships that involve respect for parents, leaders, and others. The processing of language in everyday communication reflects the highly respected manners. The Cirebon language has levels like Javanese, where the use of polite language or "krama inggil" is used as a form of respect for older or more respected interlocutors. In everyday life, the norms that are firmly held by the Cirebon community include the values of politeness, respect, and togetherness. Politeness, both in language and in action, is an important legacy taken from Islamic teachings and applied in community life. The tradition of mutual cooperation, which is a legacy from the pre-Islamic era, also remains alive and is increasingly strengthened by Islamic teachings about togetherness and helping each other. In Cirebon, the customs and norms that have developed have been Islamized, so that all forms of traditional and cultural activities always have a religious basis. For example, in the Cirebon traditional wedding ceremony, the advice given not only touches on worldly aspects but also spiritual ones. *Pitutur* (advice) in marriage is not only aimed at establishing a harmonious husband-wife relationship, but also to build a household life based on piety to God (Priowirjanto et al., 2024).

That morning, my colleague and I arrived at SMP 5 Cirebon with great enthusiasm. After months of preparing for this research, we finally arrived at one of the schools that was the focus of our research, which emphasized the cultivation of local Cirebon values that are religious and full of manners. I remembered how important this research was for a deeper understanding of how local cultural values are integrated into students' daily lives, especially in government-based schools. As soon as we arrived at the school gate, we were immediately greeted with extraordinary warmth by the teachers and students. The atmosphere that morning seemed to emphasize how special the day was for us. In front of the gate, the teachers stood with full smiles, showing the typical friendliness of the Cirebon people. The students also stood neatly in a line, waiting for our arrival with expressions full of respect. This welcome felt not only as a formality, but as a symbol of the cultural values that had been embedded in them. Not long

after that, a traditional Sundanese dance was presented to welcome us. My colleague and I were truly touched by the beauty of the dance. Every graceful movement of the dancers, accompanied by the strains of traditional music that accompanied it, felt so stunning. I was very amazed by how every movement of the dance not only displayed its aesthetic beauty, but was also full of cultural meaning. There were local values implied in the movements, such as respect, politeness, and appreciation for guests. This really left a deep impression on me.

In Cirebon, we began to realize that culture is not just a heritage maintained through ceremonies or traditions but is also deeply embedded in everyday life, including in the school environment. This dance and welcoming are a reflection of deeply rooted local cultural values. In Eastern traditions, the values of manners, politeness, and respect for guests are very important, and we felt all of that in our interactions with the teachers and students at SMP 5 Cirebon. When we entered the school, the atmosphere of familiarity was increasingly felt. The teachers introduced themselves and briefly explained the programs they run at this school, which are indeed very focused on cultivating Cirebon values. One of the teachers we interviewed that day, Mrs. Ratna, explained that their school not only emphasizes academic achievement, but also pays close attention to character values based on local culture. According to her, the learning they do always inserts elements of Cirebon culture, both in religious subjects, language, and other subjects.

Mrs. Ratna said that at SMP 5 Cirebon, character education is not just limited to theory. For example, in daily activities such as flag ceremonies, students are expected to always behave politely, respect each other, and speak politely. This attitude, she said, has become part of the long tradition of the Cirebon community, which highly upholds the values of politeness and respect. One of the students we interviewed, Dina, a grade IX student, said that these values have become part of their identity. She told how since she was little, she had been taught to always respect her elders, be humble, and watch her words. According to her, these values are very important, especially in today's modern era, where the influence of foreign cultures is getting stronger. However, at SMP 5 Cirebon, students are encouraged to maintain and preserve local culture, both through extracurricular activities, classroom lessons, and daily activities.

Interestingly, Cirebon's religious and well-mannered local culture is not only implemented in schools, but is also very much felt in the relationships between school residents. One of the principals we interviewed, Mr. Jaya, explained that the school strives to create a harmonious atmosphere between teachers, students, and parents. He believes that by instilling strong local cultural values, students will not only grow into high-achieving individuals but also have good character, who are able to maintain their social relationships with others. During our visit to the school, we noticed how the interactions between students and teachers were very friendly but still respectful. The students seemed comfortable talking to their teachers, but still maintained their manners. This shows that even though the school atmosphere is quite informal and friendly, the values of manners are still very much maintained. We also had the opportunity to observe teaching and learning activities in class. One of the classes we visited was studying the history of Cirebon, including the history of the Cirebon Kingdom and cultural values inherited from the past. The teacher who taught in the class used an interactive approach, where students were invited to discuss and share their opinions about the importance of maintaining local culture amidst the flow of globalization. The students seemed very enthusiastic, and we felt that this topic was really relevant to them, especially since they live in a city rich in culture and history.

First experience at SMP 5 Cirebon gave me a lot of insight into how local culture is not only preserved, but also brought to life and made an integral part of the educational process in schools in Cirebon. The values of politeness, friendliness, and respect are not only taught as theory, but also practiced in everyday life by students and teachers. This is one example of how education not only functions to transfer knowledge, but also to shape students' characters to become civilized individuals with strong values. As a researcher, we feel very honored to be a part of this experience and witness firsthand how local cultural values are still upheld in an increasingly modern society. This experience also made me even more convinced of the importance of preserving local culture through education, so that future generations will continue to have strong roots in their culture and traditions. Siti, a 16-year-old student, talked about her involvement in cultural activities at school, especially in Cirebon mask dance and gamelan practice, which are part of the mandatory extracurricular activities. Although she initially found it difficult to dance in front of many people, she now feels proud because these activities help preserve local culture. Although she rarely participates in cultural activities at home, Siti sometimes performs at weddings or village festivals, and takes part in rebana activities at the mosque with her mother. She feels that the activities at school give her a deeper understanding of Cirebon culture, including the history behind the dances and music she learns. The school where she studies has gamelan instruments and dance costumes, although some are old and need repair, but the teachers still try to keep the students' spirits up. Siti also mentioned that her school sometimes gets help from the cultural office for special events, although the daily practice is managed by the teachers. Regarding her friends, Siti said that some of them like these cultural activities because of their families' involvement.

The story and experiences of Siti, a high school student, provide insight into how local culture, particularly Cirebon mask dance and gamelan, are inherited and learned through formal education. Cultural activities at her school, which are part of a mandatory extracurricular activity, demonstrate the educational institution's commitment to preserving traditions. Although initially feeling awkward, regular involvement in rehearsals has boosted Siti's confidence and provided a deeper understanding of the history and meaning behind Cirebon dance and music. The school, despite limited resources such as old gamelan instruments and dance costumes, continues to maintain the spirit of cultural preservation through the support of teachers. Additional support from the cultural office for special events shows that cultural preservation does require cross-sector collaboration, although in daily practice it is managed by school teachers. Furthermore, although Siti is rarely involved in cultural activities at home, she remains active in weddings, village festivals, and rebana activities at the mosque with her mother. This reflects that Cirebon culture is still alive in the community, although it is not the main focus of daily life. Involvement in various environments, both at school and in religious activities, shows a harmonious relationship between local culture and religious values that also shape the character of the younger generation. However, Siti realized that her friends had different views on these cultural activities, some appreciated them because of their family's involvement, while others only considered them as school obligations.

These differences reflect the challenges in engaging younger generations more deeply in cultural preservation, where there needs to be a more relevant and engaging approach for students who have less cultural exposure outside the school environment (Schnee et al., 2016). Nevertheless, Siti felt that the activities at school had given her a deeper understanding of the history and cultural significance of Cirebon. This is important to ensure that cultural

preservation is not mechanical but based on an understanding and appreciation of the wider heritage. This interview shows the important role of formal education in preserving local culture and the importance of collaboration between schools, families, and communities in passing on traditions to the younger generation (Sulistyarini et al., 2022).

Our research continued in one of the high schools in Cirebon, I met a student named Fajar, a 14-year-old teenager who is active in cultural activities at his school. This school is known to have a mandatory extracurricular program that focuses on preserving local culture, especially the Kecirebonan culture. We chatted in a classroom full of gamelan musical instruments, while several Cirebon mask dance costumes hung in the corner of the room, waiting to be used in the afternoon practice.

"Fajar, a high school student, shared his active involvement in cultural activities at his school, particularly in practicing the Cirebon mask dance and playing gamelan since grade 10. Although initially hesitant and embarrassed, he gradually developed a sense of pride in preserving the rich cultural heritage of Cirebon. He explained that these extracurricular activities are mandatory at his school, with regular weekly practices and performances during events like Kartini Day and school anniversaries. While cultural engagement at home is limited to religious activities like playing rebana at the mosque, school has become the main space for him to explore and appreciate Cirebon culture. Fajar emphasized the uniqueness of Cirebon culture, which blends Hindu-Buddhist traditions with Islamic values, especially visible in traditional ceremonies and performances. Despite challenges such as aging instruments and costumes, the dedication of teachers and occasional support from the cultural office help sustain the program. He observed that students' interest in cultural activities varies—some are passionate due to family background, while others join out of obligation. Personally, Fajar feels a deepened connection to his cultural roots and believes it is vital for the younger generation to help preserve local traditions."

Our conversation ended with a satisfied smile from Fajar. We could feel how big his role was as a student who not only received academic lessons but also a valuable cultural heritage. His experience shows that formal education has a big role in maintaining and preserving local culture, especially among the younger generation who may be less exposed to culture outside of school. Fajar and his friends, despite facing challenges in resources and varying interests, remain enthusiastic about preserving the Kecirebonan culture that has become an inseparable part of their identity.

An interview with Fajar reveals how formal education plays a role as an agent for preserving local culture through a structured and contextual ethno-learning approach (Dewantara et al., 2023). Students' involvement in cultural activities such as mask dance and gamelan at school not only increases their cognitive understanding of the history and philosophy of Cirebon culture, but also forms affective attachments that strengthen cultural identity (Byram, 2012). This finding confirms that schools are not merely places for the transmission of academic knowledge, but also social spaces that enable the transformation of values and morals through direct cultural experiences (Dewantara et al., 2020). The differences in interest levels between students, as mentioned by Fajar, indicate an imbalance in cultural exposure outside of school, which requires a more adaptive and engaging approach to reach students with different cultural backgrounds (Craig A Cunningham, 2007). Although limited facilities such as outdated musical instruments are a challenge, the enthusiasm of teachers and

limited support from the cultural service show that the sustainability of culture-based education is very dependent on cross-actor collaboration (Judiani, 2010). Fajar's experience represents the importance of integrating local culture into formal education as an effective strategy for forming positive dispositions in students and ensuring that cultural preservation does not stop as an administrative obligation, but becomes a living and sustainable collective consciousness (Borkovic et al., 2020).

In Cirebon, science and social science teachers who teach in junior high schools with a majority of Sundanese students have integrated a Sundanese cultural approach into the learning process and the inculcation of local values in schools. They utilize local wisdom to help students understand natural phenomena in Natural Sciences and social sciences and humanities subjects. This culture-based approach not only enriches learning, but also succeeds in forming students' positive dispositions towards nature and the environment. This approach results in changes in students' characters to be more humanistic. Previously, many students had an anthropocentric view, where humans were seen as the center of the universe and nature was only considered an object to fulfill human needs. However, through teaching that prioritizes Cirebon cultural values, students' views changed to become more ecocentric. In the ecocentric view, humans are considered part of a wider ecosystem, which has the responsibility to maintain the balance and sustainability of nature.

Science teachers in Cirebon emphasize to students the importance of exploring the cultural and philosophical values contained in Sundanese traditions. For example, in Sundanese culture there are many folktales, myths, and traditional agricultural practices that teach the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. These values are then applied in the context of science learning, so that students not only learn about scientific concepts, but also understand the importance of environmental ethics.

This integrated learning approach brings about a significant change in the way students view nature. They no longer see nature as a resource that can be exploited without limits, but rather as an entity that must be respected and protected. This creates awareness of the importance of sustainability and ecological responsibility. In addition, the integration of local cultural values into science learning also has a positive impact on students' social and moral aspects. Students not only show a positive disposition towards nature, but also show improvements in their ethics and social norms. They become more socially capable, show a humanistic attitude, and appreciate diversity. For example, they work more easily in groups, value the opinions of their friends more, and care more about the welfare of others. With this approach that combines science and local culture, students in Cirebon not only gain a better understanding of nature and the environment, but also experience more holistic character development. They not only become smarter academically, but also become more caring, ethical, and responsible individuals. This approach shows that science education integrated with local culture can create students who are not only intellectually intelligent, but also wise in maintaining their relationship with nature and the surrounding community.

We found that the integration of local cultural knowledge into science learning had a significant impact on both teachers and students. Teachers in Cirebon not only taught science as a discipline based on empirical data and global theories, but also as a science related to local realities that are close to students. They used local cultural knowledge and practices as a bridge to explain complex scientific concepts, making learning more relevant and meaningful. For example, in a discussion on climate change, students were invited to think critically about the

ideal environmental order and how to maintain the balance of the ecosystem. Teachers began the discussion by exploring traditional knowledge and local cultural values that focus on harmony between humans and nature. They then connected it to global issues, such as carbon emission policies and their impact on climate change, including the melting of ice in the Arctic. In this process, students not only learned about science in a theoretical context, but also actively engaged in formulating real solutions that were relevant to their lives. They were encouraged to think about policies and actions that should be taken to protect the environment, such as reducing carbon emissions, reforestation, and adopting a more environmentally friendly lifestyle.

The result of this approach is the creation of a positive perception of nature and the relationship between humans and their environment. Students begin to understand that they have a responsibility to preserve nature and that their actions can contribute to the sustainability of the global environment. They no longer see nature as something separate from human life, but as an integral part of life that must be respected and protected. This approach also influences the way students view science. They realize that science is not just about technical knowledge and data, but also about how science can be applied to solve real problems faced by society. This integration of local culture gives legitimacy to the sources of knowledge they have and helps them build a stronger relationship with science, while encouraging them to play an active role in preserving the environment.

We provide an overview of two main perspectives on the relationship between humans and nature, known as the "despotic view" and the "responsible dominion view." These two perspectives reflect how humans interact with and manage nature in everyday life. The first perspective, the despotic view, describes a tyrannical view of nature. In this view, humans act as tyrants or dictators who use nature and all its contents solely for personal gain. Nature is exploited without regard for long-term impacts, with natural resources being used up to meet human needs without regard for their sustainability. This view ignores the balance of nature and often causes severe environmental damage, such as deforestation and environmental pollution. In contrast, the second perspective, the responsible dominion view, emphasizes responsible management of nature. In this view, humans dominate nature by considering sustainability and environmental sustainability. Humans not only benefit from nature, but are also responsible for preserving it. Examples of the application of this view are reforestation efforts after deforestation, wise use of resources, and maintaining the balance of the ecosystem. The responsible dominion view shows that humans have a moral responsibility to protect nature for future generations.

These two views are distinguished by John Passmore, and basically, have long been integrated into local cultures in various regions in Indonesia, including Cirebon. One example of the application of the responsible dominion view in local cultural practices is through Traditional Agricultural Culture in Cirebon. The Cirebon community practices agriculture based on local wisdom, such as the use of an agricultural calendar based on the lunar cycle. This practice not only reflects the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, but can also be applied in science learning, especially in the fields of astronomy and biology. This traditional agricultural culture also teaches the principles of ecology, sustainability, and environmental management, including organic farming and soil conservation. In addition, the philosophy of Sunan Gunung Jati, one of the Wali Songo, also plays a role in shaping the way the Cirebon community views nature. Sunan Gunung Jati teaches about the importance of togetherness and

balance in life with nature. These teachings can be integrated into ethical learning in science, especially related to environmental and sustainability issues. By teaching students to respect nature and preserve it, this philosophy helps create a positive disposition towards the environment in science learning in schools. Cirebon's local culture, both in traditional agricultural practices and spiritual philosophy, reflects the view of responsible dominion that treats nature with full responsibility. This cultural integration in education in Cirebon not only enriches science learning, but also shapes students into individuals who care about the environment and are aware of the importance of sustainability.

Many anthropologists and comparative educationists have emphasized the cultural differences between schools and national school systems. It is important to recognize that the Indonesian school system has adopted a variety of local and global values, whereas schools in other parts of the world have been influenced by European or American colonialism. Although school policymakers at both the regional and central levels draw on some common sources when introducing schools, I argue from these findings that schools inevitably reflect national cultures and that the experiences of school life must be able to transform them into local realities that are in line with good norms. Rather, these findings suggest that while ideas about education may have spread from common sources, schools around the world, including in Cirebon, have become more similar over time in terms of the adoption of local values. The world culture approach illustrates how the mass education model emerged in Europe as part of nation-building, but in Cirebon, schools have successfully integrated Kacirebonan culture into their curriculum and school culture. This suggests that despite pressures to conform to global education models, local schools can maintain their identities and create environments that are more relevant to their students.

After World War II, many countries adopted a uniform model of education, but Cirebon provides an example of how education systems can be reshaped to reflect local cultural characteristics. This emphasizes increasing commonality in educational principles, policies, and practices, but in Cirebon, the uniqueness of the Kacirebonan culture is integrated into learning. For example, the use of the Kromo Inggil language in school interactions not only enriches students' learning experiences but also builds positive dispositions that value local values. Overall, schools in Cirebon demonstrate that despite strong global influences, there is still room for adaptation and integration of local cultural elements. By adopting and celebrating the Kacirebonan culture, schools not only contribute to the formation of students' cultural identities but also create a positive environment and support their character development. This highlights the importance of cultural diversity in education, where schools are not only places for the dissemination of knowledge, but also a place to preserve and strengthen local values that are important for future generations.

In Cirebon, schools are not only the result of adopting the colonial education system, but also reflect local cultural values that have existed for a long time. The education system in Cirebon, although influenced by the colonial model and globalization, still tries to integrate elements of local culture, thus creating a learning environment that is more relevant and rooted in local traditions. Schools in Cirebon show how local cultural values, such as traditions and local languages, can be integrated into the curriculum and cultural life of the school. Although European colonization introduced a new education system, the local community has transformed the system, making it more appropriate to their cultural context. For example, the practice of using *bebasan* language, which is a form of polite language in Cirebon culture, has

been applied in communication in schools, shaping the character and behavior of students to better appreciate the values of politeness.

On the other hand, although some national schools adopt educational systems derived from colonialism and globalization, they often ignore important elements of local culture. This can lead to a gap between the curriculum taught and the needs and identities of students who come from rich cultural backgrounds. Although there are similarities in the institutional forms and ideologies of education at the national level, in Cirebon, a more holistic and integrative approach can create more meaningful learning experiences and build positive dispositions in students. I argue to highlight the importance of considering local culture can play a role in the formation of educational identity. Does true educational reform occur at the national policy level, or is real change more felt at the school and classroom level, where local culture plays a role in shaping everyday learning experiences? This is to better understand the dynamics between the influence of local culture and the wider education system, and how the two can interact to create a richer and more relevant learning environment.

The most important motive for integrating ethno-learning with acculturation in Cirebon schools is to change students' characters to be more civilized (Haryanto et al., 2024). During the interviews, I noted that this approach not only aims to introduce local culture, but also to form strong moral values in students. This observation shows that ethno-learning-based learning provides students with the opportunity to understand and appreciate the traditions and norms that exist in their society. For example, by teaching Cirebon etiquette, students are trained to be polite in everyday interactions. This includes how to greet elders and communicate in polite language. Furthermore, I found that activities such as "Jelajah Budaya Kota Cirebon" are very effective in increasing students' awareness of their cultural identity. By going directly to historical sites, students not only learn about history, but also feel an emotional connection to their cultural heritage. This changes the way they see themselves and their surroundings. The use of traditional musical instruments and Cirebon dances in the classroom is also part of this process. students show great interest when involved in art activities. They not only learn about techniques, but also understand the meaning and values contained in each movement and melody. what I took from this interview is that the integration of cultural values into the education system is not just an additional curriculum. This is a real effort to form a young generation that is not only academically intelligent, but also has good character, appreciates local culture, and is ready to contribute positively to society.

Education in Cirebon reflects a blend of national educational systems with deeply rooted local cultural values. Although the modern education system has been inherited from colonialism and influenced by globalization, schools in Cirebon have successfully adapted it to their cultural context. This is evident in the integration of cultural elements into daily learning practices. The following table summarizes various educational aspects where Cirebon culture has been significantly integrated:

Table.1 Integration of Local Culture in Education in Cirebon

| Educational Aspect         | Example of Cirebon Cultural Integration                    | Purpose / Impact                    |
|----------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| Language and Communication | Use of 'bebasan' (polite) language in school communication | Instilling politeness in daily life |

|                            |  |  |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Learning Activities        | Teaching Cirebon etiquette such as greeting elders and using polite language | Training students to behave respectfully in everyday interactions              |
| Extracurricular Activities | Regular practice of gamelan and Cirebon mask dance                           | Fostering pride and active participation in cultural preservation              |
| Field Activities           | 'Cultural Exploration of Cirebon City' program visiting historical sites     | Enhancing students' awareness of cultural identity and emotional connection    |
| Character Values           | Instilling politeness, respect for culture, and good behavior in students    | Shaping a generation that is academically intelligent and has strong character |

Based on the observations and interviews conducted, it is evident that the integration of cultural values into the education system is not merely an additional curriculum component. Rather, it is a genuine effort to shape a young generation that is not only academically competent, but also possesses strong character and a deep appreciation of local culture. This shows that true educational reform is often most tangible at the school and classroom level, where local culture is alive and enriches everyday learning experiences Tabel.1.

Approximately 1 hour we conducted FGD and discussion to explore information related to ethno-learning. I interviewed a student informant from SMP 7 Cirebon, he explained, in Cirebon City, the government has begun to integrate local culture, such as the use of Cirebon language in daily activities at school. This is a positive step to instill children's love for their own culture, so that future generations do not forget their mother tongue. One of the existing initiatives is the habit of dressing in Cirebon traditional clothes. This helps children to love their culture more. At school, teachers also carry out various activities to increase appreciation for Cirebon culture. One of them is the "*Jelajah Budaya Kota Cirebon*" program, where students are invited to tour historical places such as Sunyaragi Cave, the Palace, and the Grand Mosque. We also provide art facilities, such as a music room with traditional Cirebon musical instruments and a dance studio. Here, students are taught Cirebon dances which are part of the local cultural wealth. In addition, we have Cirebon language lessons to ensure that students understand and can use the language. Unfortunately, currently many children feel embarrassed to speak Cirebon.

The interview began with the principal, who explained in depth about the school's vision in integrating Cirebon's local cultural values into everyday life in the educational environment. According to him, this cultural integration program is an important part of the educational strategy initiated by the Cirebon City government. With the background of concerns about the increasing erosion of local cultural values due to the rapid flow of globalization, the school feels the need to take a greater role in preserving Cirebon culture, while also forming students' characters who are more civilized and respect their own identities. Ethno-learning-based learning is at the heart of this program. The principal explained that the ethno-learning implemented in this junior high school aims to foster awareness of local culture, encouraging students to understand and love their own cultural heritage.

The integration of Cirebon cultural values is carried out through various activities in schools, from formal teaching to extracurricular activities. The clearest example of the application of ethno-learning is how schools design a curriculum that places aspects of Cirebon

culture in several subjects. Subjects such as language and history specifically highlight local elements related to Cirebon, such as the use of the Cirebon language, folklore, and the history of the Cirebon kingdom. In the context of education, local cultural practices play an important role in shaping students' positive dispositions towards learning. Government-based schools in Cirebon City utilize local cultural practices to strengthen social ties and promote values of togetherness and belonging. Some students reported that they were involved in various cultural activities with their families and friends on weekends, while others participated in similar activities at school without regular times, depending on events or special days held at the school.



**Figure 2:** Collaborative Practices in Cultivating Positive Dispositions

Such experiences do not only occur at home, but also at school. Students in government-based schools in Cirebon are often involved in cultural activities that involve understanding and appreciating their cultural heritage. Activities such as cultural festivals, traditional art exhibitions, and music competitions are important venues for them to express their cultural identity while building a positive disposition towards learning. In the context of learning, these activities motivate students to better understand local history and values, while developing creativity and pride in their cultural identity. With school facilities and teacher support, cultural practices such as these become more structured and allow students to develop deeper cultural skills. Schools in Cirebon provide space for students to express their culture in organized forms, such as traditional dance practice, music performances, and local art exhibitions. Just as Amelie feels more connected to her family when baking cakes at her mother's house, students at school also feel a strong emotional connection when they participate in cultural activities at school. This connection clarifies how they build bonds with their local culture through practices that are integrated into everyday life at school. (Budimansyah & Dewantara, 2025; Efriani, Hasanah, et al., 2020).

"We do not want students to just know, but also understand the meaning of what they learn. In this way, students are expected to be able to internalize the noble values of Cirebon culture and apply them in everyday life"

These cultural practices are not only limited to formal activities in the classroom, but also include informal social interactions among students, teachers, and the community. Thus,

local cultural practices in government-based schools in Cirebon serve as an important means of shaping students' positive dispositions towards their learning and social life, strengthening cultural identity, and promoting values of togetherness and respect for local heritage (Dewantara, 2024).



**Figure 2:** Students Visit the Historical Site of *Keraton Kasepuhan* as Part of Culture-Based Contextual Learning

One of the most prominent practices is the Cirebon City Cultural Tour program, where students are invited to visit historical sites such as the Kasepuhan Palace, Sunyaragi Cave, and the Tomb of Sunan Gunung Jati Figure 1. This activity is not just an excursion or ordinary visit, but is designed as part of a more comprehensive learning. Students are asked to observe, take notes, and then reflect on what they learned from the visit. Through this activity, students can see firsthand the form of Cirebon culture, such as the architecture of historical buildings, carvings, and understand the important role of local history in the development of national culture. The principal emphasized that the Cultural Tour program aims to instill a deep understanding of local historical and cultural values in students. Activities like this are also considered effective in fostering a sense of pride in their cultural identity, which in turn strengthens students' character (Martono et al., 2021).

## Conclusion

This study shows that formal education in Cirebon City has successfully integrated local cultural values into the learning process through an ethno-learning approach. This integration not only enriches students' learning experiences cognitively but also strengthens the affective and moral aspects, which are important foundations in character formation. By using *Kacirebonan* culture as a medium of learning, government-based schools in Cirebon have created an educational space that not only transmits academic knowledge but also passes on traditions, values, and norms embedded in the lives of local communities. This study reveals that *ethno-learning* is not merely a pedagogical approach rooted in local culture but a dynamic process through which education functions as a site of cultural reproduction and identity reconstruction amid the pressures of global homogenization. In this context, schools are not just formal institutions of knowledge transmission but arenas of negotiation between inherited

traditions and contemporary realities. Positive student dispositions toward values, morality, and social relationships do not emerge through normative instruction alone, but are cultivated through embodied and reflective cultural experiences embedded in the daily life of the school. Theoretical contribution of this study lies in reframing character education from a normative paradigm to a cultural-situational one. It underscores the necessity of grounding educational values in the lived cultural contexts of learners. *Ethno-learning*, therefore, offers an epistemological foundation for developing socially and historically relevant curricula, in which local culture is not treated as a static object of preservation but as an active agent in shaping students' cognitive and affective structures. Furthermore, the study highlights the evolving role of teachers as *cultural mediators*—not only as instructional facilitators but as interpreters, curators, and revitalizers of tradition within the learning environment. This redefines the teacher's function in educational theory, positioning them as cultural agents who design meaningful learning experiences that connect heritage with modern life. It opens up a space for reconceptualizing teacher agency as pedagogically autonomous and culturally embedded. The research demonstrates the significance of multisite ethnography in capturing the nuanced, intersubjective dynamics of cultural practice in education. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the lived, contextual realities within which students and teachers engage with culture—an understanding often inaccessible through quantitative or macro-level studies. As such, the study affirms the need for deep, context-sensitive, and participatory qualitative research in localized educational settings. Overall, this research contributes to a broader conceptualization of value-based and culture-driven education by positioning schools as dynamic cultural spaces. Education is not simply a process of instilling universal norms but a collective endeavor of producing meaning through interaction with cultural heritage. From this foundation, a more adaptive, dialogic, and locally grounded model of education can be envisioned—one capable of preparing students for an increasingly complex and changing world.

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