



Merti Dusun ceremony as a local culture-based strategy for strengthening elementary character education

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the implementation of local culture-based character education through the Merti Dusun tradition in elementary schools and to explore its contribution to students' character development. A descriptive qualitative design was employed. The research was conducted in Sampang Village, Sempor District, Kebumen Regency, and involved teachers, the school principal, students, and a local cultural leader, all selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The findings reveal that character education is implemented through three interconnected strategies: integrating local cultural values into classroom learning, cultivating character through school cultural practices, and strengthening partnerships between schools and the local community. The Merti Dusun tradition serves as a medium for contextual learning that promotes responsibility, discipline, cooperation, gratitude, social awareness, and respect for cultural heritage. Students internalize these values through direct participation in cultural activities and community interactions. The study concludes that locally culture-based character education provides meaningful, experiential learning that supports both character formation and cultural preservation. These findings imply that schools should integrate local cultural traditions into educational practices to strengthen character education while maintaining cultural sustainability.

Keywords: education character, local culture, Merti Dusun, school basics, ethnopedagogy

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Introduction

Basic education is the most fundamental stage in the formation process of personality and character in young people. In this phase, participants begin to internalize moral, social, and cultural values that will form the foundation of their future behavior (Handoko et al., 2024; Poerwanti & Marmoah, 2021). Not surprisingly, this issue has attracted the attention of academics from various countries and cultural backgrounds (Rokhman et al., 2014). From Austria, the United States, Brazil, and Iceland to China, studies on Character Education show improvement, extraordinary intensity, and relevance (Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025).

Character building focuses not only on the formation of moral behavior but also on strengthening integrity and responsibility and fostering social and cultural awareness in the face of global challenges (Sakti et al., 2024). Resilience is something a nation demonstrates in the face of social, technological, and cultural factors largely shaped by the power of a nation's character (Palennari et al., 2023; Roza et al., 2022). Therefore, integrating local cultural values into the education system is an important strategy to ensure the relevance and sustainability of education in the era of globalization (Andriani et al., 2023).

Various studies have confirmed that cultural dimensions significantly influence practice management education, leadership schools, and student behavior (Ouyang et al., 2025). In this case, the local culture, rooted in harmony among humans, nature, and spirituality, provides a source of authentic

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learning for the implementation of universal moral values. Approach education based on known culture, using ethnopedagogy, to encourage participants to educate themselves and to understand values and culture as integral parts of the learning process (Tassell-Matamua, 2025). Through this approach, learning becomes more meaningful because it leaves the context close to social life (Dunham & Oti, 2025). Integration values culture not only to foster workplace equality, tolerance, and responsibility, but also to address social issues, and aligns with universal principles for character formation (Sakti et al., 2024).

However, in Indonesia, there is still a gap between the potential of local culture, rich in its implementation, and its practice in school-based education (Nurasiah et al., 2022). Most teachers have not utilized local traditions and values as a source of study, contextual support, character formation, and student development (Karatas, 2020). As a result, learning is often abstract and detached from reality, social culture, and the public (Ratri et al., 2024). As a result, learning is often abstract and detached from reality, social culture, and the public.

One of the traditional locals with potential for a big role in education is Merti Dusun, a form of wisdom in local Javanese society that reflects gratitude to the Lord as well as harmony between humans and nature. Tradition: This involves collective activities such as prayer, processions, feasts, and cross-cultural cooperation. It contained sublime values like work, responsibility, solidarity, and gratitude, which are highly relevant to the objective of education at the school level (Agriawan et al., 2023; Puspitasari & Falikhatun, 2026).

Although several anthropological studies have discussed the religious and social meanings of Merti Dusun (Haedar, 2016; Setyawati, 2016), few studies examine how these traditional values can be systematically integrated into the formal learning process at the basic school level. Furthermore, studies examining local traditions in education often remain conceptual or descriptive, focusing on value identification rather than on instructional integration. There remains a lack of empirical research on how the values embedded in the Merti Dusun tradition can be translated into structured learning activities, learning strategies, or character education programs within the elementary school curriculum. This is where the location research gap is intended to be bridged by studies.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the values of education and the characters embedded in the traditional Merti Dusun culture, and to formulate strategies to strengthen character-based education at the local school level. This study is expected not only to contribute to development theory and ethnopedagogy in the context of the global south, but also to provide a model of practice-learning context that can be applied in various regions of Indonesia and other countries with rich cultural similarities.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore and describe in depth the implementation of local culture-based character education strategies in elementary schools. The qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to understand educational phenomena within their natural settings and to reveal the meanings, values, and social practices embedded in local culture-based learning processes comprehensively (Kamal et al., 2025). Through this approach, the study examined how character values such as cooperation, discipline, responsibility, and social care are integrated into school activities and learning practices. Furthermore, qualitative inquiry offers opportunities to capture participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of the implementation of local culture-based character education, yielding rich, contextualized findings (Yulika, 2023).

The research was conducted from July 25 to September 25, 2025, in Sampang Village, Sempor District, Kebumen Regency, Indonesia. The location was selected through purposive sampling for its strong preservation of local cultural traditions and relevance to the research objectives. The selection criteria included: (1) schools implementing programs or policies that support local culture-based character education; (2) active involvement of community leaders, traditional leaders, and parents in cultural and educational activities; and (3) consistent integration of local cultural values into both curricular and extracurricular learning activities by school leaders and teachers.

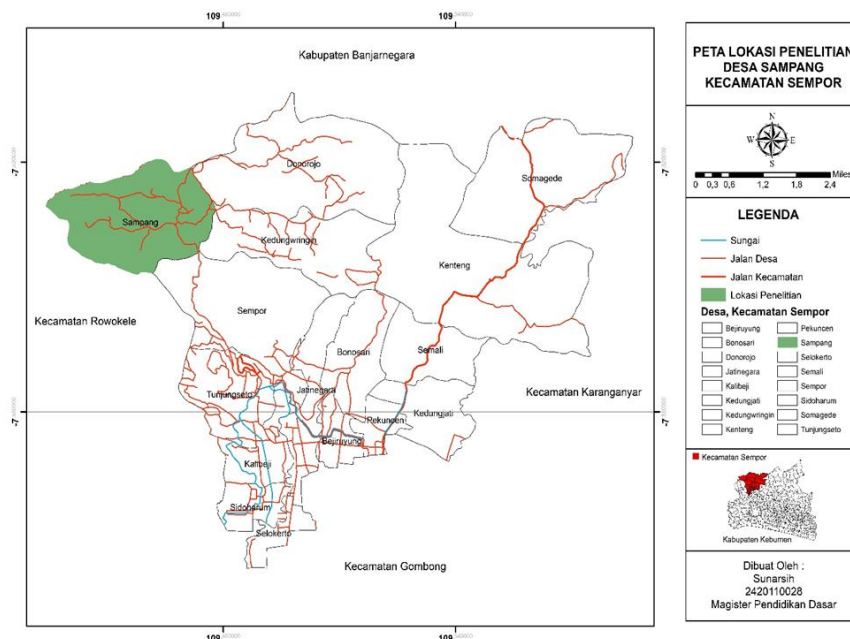


Figure 1. Map of Sampang Village, Sempor District, Kebumen Regency

The research participants consisted of two elementary school teachers, one school principal, two students, and one local cultural or community leader. Participants were purposively selected for their direct involvement in and knowledge of local culture-based character education practices. The number of participants was determined using the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection was concluded when no substantial new information emerged.

Data was collected through three techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, the principal, students, and community leaders to gather information on perceptions, experiences, and strategies related to implementing character education. Second, participant observation was carried out to examine learning activities and school cultural programs directly. Third, document analysis was conducted on curriculum documents, teaching modules, school policies, and records of cultural activities to strengthen and contextualize the findings. Triangulation of sources and methods was applied to enhance data validity by comparing information obtained from different participants and data collection techniques (Carter et al., 2019).

The research instruments included interview guides, observation sheets, and documentation checklists. These instruments were designed to collect information concerning educational strategies, implementation processes, stakeholder involvement, and character values developed through local cultural activities. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Ardelia et al., 2023). Data reduction involved selecting and organizing relevant information from interviews, observations, and documents. Data were displayed through descriptive narratives and thematic categorization to facilitate the interpretation of patterns and relationships among the findings. Finally, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified throughout the analysis to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the interpretation.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through source and method triangulation, while member checking was conducted by confirming the findings with research participants (Gunbayi, 2024). Ethical principles were maintained throughout the study by ensuring participant confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, and using all collected data solely for academic purposes.

Results and Discussion

Results

Study finds that the Merti Dusun activity is one of the most real implementations of educational strategies, characterized by a culture-based, local school culture and basic activities. This is implemented every year as a form of gratitude to the public for the results of the earth and to preserve the traditions of ancestors. In the context of education, Merti Dusun serves as a vehicle for learning, integrating character values and cultural, social, and spiritual aspects into students' lives through direct participation and relevant, activity-based learning in schools. At the time that G3 (P03) conveyed.

"Activity Merit Dusun during this has been utilized as a learning medium directly for implanting moral character in students through involvement in an active cultural activity. Merti Dusun is not just a traditional event, but has become a means of forming character in students, such as cooperation, discipline, and love of culture ."

Implementation activity Merti Dusun covers various cultural activities, such as carnival culture, mountain results earth, puppet skin show, feast together, and prayer together. Activities: These are held in several locations, namely the hall village, the field, and the hermitage White Wadas, each of which has its own symbolic meaning in the life of the community. Teachers and students participate and play an active role in preparation and implementation activities, said. One of the outstanding aspects of their involvement is their appearance as *gamelan* players, a result of the routine extracurricular *gamelan* activities conducted at school (Figure 2). Through this activity, students not only study skills in art, music, and tradition, but also internalize values of discipline, work, and responsibility. This is related to narrative G1 (P01).

"Practicing playing the *gamelan* helps children study discipline, patience, and work together because they must come to exercise at an appropriate time, following the rules of rhythm, and adapt with friends in one group. Students are also accustomed to waiting their turn, receiving direction, and mutual support. The sound of *gamelan* playing is compact and harmonious ."



Figure 2. Extracurricular Activities, such as *Gamelan*, which is Performed Regularly at School

Apart from involvement in activity culture society, teachers also relate the theme of Merti Dusun to in-class learning. In the subject social studies and civics lessons, students were invited to discuss the meanings of cooperation, gratitude, and concern as reflected in Merti Dusun. In Indonesian language lessons, students write descriptive texts about cultural activities, while in Arts, Culture, and Crafts lessons, they make miniature mountains from recycled materials. Through the integration of cross-eye lessons, students gain experience in learning that is contextual, meaningful, and rooted in their local culture. And confirmed by G2 (P03) who conveyed that:

"After activity Merti Dusun, we invite our students to discuss the meaning of gratitude, togetherness, and caring in social studies and civics lessons. They are invited to discuss the values of cooperation, gratitude, and caring socially. In Indonesian, students write a story about Merti Dusun, while in Art and Cultural Education, they make miniature mountains from the materials used. With this method, learning becomes more real, meaningful, and close to life"

The observation results also show that the activity at Merti Dusun contributes to the formation of a character-based school. Students show strong enthusiasm and pride in their cultural area and value

behavioral traditions and societal figures. Teachers assess the effectiveness of this activity in instilling values like cooperation, responsibility, religiosity, and national culture. Activity-based culture like this is an integral part of the school program, strengthening educational character while preserving local cultural heritage (Figure 3). Then narrative from S1 (P04) and S2 (P05) stated that:

“*Gamelan* practice is indeed tiring, especially if the training is long and must be repeated over and over again, but I feel happy and proud because I can appear at village events and be seen by many people.”

“I am learning to work the same with friends so that our game is compact, as well as studying so as not to come late, because being late can disrupt practice, and that practice helps me gain more discipline .”



Figure 3. Children's Performance at the Merti Dusun Event

The involvement of society is also an important factor in the successful implementation of this activity. Parents, the device village, and customs officials participate in planning and implementation activities, creating synergy between schools and communities in the educational process. Collaboration: This shows that education is not only insufficient to meet the school's needs, but also insufficient to address the broader public by cultivating young people with a cultured, noble personality. The narrative from T1 (P06) reinforces the idea that when children are involved, culture No will not be extinct, and they study politeness as well as togetherness (Figure 4).

“If the children are involved directly in an active culture, then the culture will easily become extinct because there are no generations to continue and maintain traditions that are still alive. Through involvement in this, children not only follow and enliven the event but also learn many important matters, such as being polite in interactions with older people, valuing each other, and understanding the meaning of togetherness in work and in participating in society together. With such activities, culture not only functions as entertainment, but also becomes a means of learning character for children from an early age.”



Figure 4. Following the activity, Carnival culture, Gunungan, and Kenduren

Overall, Merti Dusun activities represent a living, contextualized form of culture-based character education embedded in a vibrant, dynamic local community. Rather than functioning merely as a ceremonial tradition, Merti Dusun operates as an educational ecosystem in which cultural values,

moral principles, and social norms are transmitted through collective participation and shared experiences. This cultural practice demonstrates how education can extend beyond the formal classroom setting and become an integral part of everyday social life, where learning occurs naturally through interaction, observation, and participation in communal rituals.

Through direct student involvement, Merti Dusun provides experiential learning opportunities that enable learners to internalize character values in authentic contexts. Students participate in various cultural activities, such as cultural parades, the preparation of offerings and agricultural produce, traditional music and performances, and communal prayers, which help them learn responsibility, cooperation, discipline, respect, and gratitude in practical ways. These experiences facilitate moral learning that is not abstract or imposed, but lived and felt, making character education more meaningful and sustainable. As a result, students develop a deeper understanding of ethical values through concrete actions rather than solely through cognitive instruction.

The integration of cultural values into classroom learning further strengthens the educational impact of Merti Dusun. Teachers utilize local cultural practices as learning resources across subjects, encouraging students to reflect on the meanings embedded in tradition, discuss moral values such as cooperation (*gotong royong*), social harmony, and respect for nature, and express their understanding through writing, art, and creative projects. This contextual and thematic integration ensures that cultural learning is aligned with academic objectives while remaining relevant to students' lived experiences. Consequently, learning becomes more engaging, reflective, and transformative, as students can connect knowledge to real-life cultural contexts.

Equally important is the support and active involvement of the local community, including parents, traditional leaders, artists, and village elders. Their participation reinforces the continuity between values taught at school and those practiced in daily life within the community. This collaboration creates a coherent moral environment that supports students' character development across multiple social contexts. Education thus becomes a shared responsibility, strengthening intergenerational learning and ensuring the sustainability of cultural values amid modernization and globalization.

In this holistic process, Merti Dusun presents an educational model that transcends the traditional boundaries of schooling. It not only promotes the acquisition of knowledge and skills but also contributes significantly to the formation of students' personalities, cultural identities, and sense of national belonging. By engaging with local traditions, students develop pride in their cultural heritage while cultivating values that foster social cohesion, empathy, and collective responsibility. This dual emphasis on local identity and national character demonstrates that a strong national identity is best nurtured through respect for cultural diversity and a rootedness in local wisdom.

Ultimately, Merti Dusun exemplifies how culture-based character education can function as a dynamic and sustainable educational practice. It highlights the potential of local cultural traditions to serve as powerful educational resources that shape not only intellectually capable learners but also morally grounded individuals with a strong sense of identity and citizenship. In an era of global cultural homogenization, such practices offer a meaningful pathway for preserving cultural heritage while fostering character education that is relevant, inclusive, and transformative.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the Merti Dusun ceremony not only serves as an annual cultural ritual for rural communities but also holds strong pedagogical significance as a medium for character education rooted in local culture. This tradition embodies noble values passed down through generations and internalized through social practices across all segments of the community. From an educational perspective, Merti Dusun serves as a *living curriculum* that enables students to learn character values not through normative instruction, but through authentic experiences and direct participation in the cultural life of their community.

The various activities of Merti Dusun demonstrate that character development occurs through genuine social engagement, not merely through verbal instruction. This finding suggests that students find it easier to understand the meaning of responsibility, cooperation, and gratitude when these values are embodied in collective activities they experience firsthand. In other words, local culture serves as a pedagogical medium that bridges abstract values with students' concrete experiences, thereby making the process of character internalization more profound and sustainable.

The various sequences of Merti Dusun activities, such as cultural parades, the presentation of agricultural produce (*gunungan*), wayang kulit performances, and collective prayers, represent holistic forms of character learning. Cultural parades, for instance, reflect values of togetherness, collective responsibility, and respect for tradition. The *gunungan* of agricultural products teaches gratitude, social care, and ecological awareness of nature as a source of life. Wayang kulit performances serve as a medium for moral education, rich in messages of ethics, leadership, and life wisdom, while collective prayers instill values of spirituality, humility, and transcendental awareness. These findings reinforce the perspectives of Berkowitz & Bier (2004) and Nucci & Narváez (2008), who argue that effective character education must be contextual, meaningful, and grounded in students' social experiences (Revivals, 2018).

In the context of elementary education, students' participation in these cultural activities demonstrates that experience-based character learning (*experiential character learning*) yields stronger internalization than purely instructional approaches. Children do not merely understand value concepts cognitively, but also internalize them through concrete actions. This aligns with moral development theories that emphasize that character formation occurs optimally when individuals are actively engaged in meaningful, repetitive social practices (Revivals, 2018).

Furthermore, students' involvement in extracurricular *karawitan* (traditional *gamelan* music) activities reflects the concrete implementation of a culturally responsive education approach. Gay (2010) asserts that culturally responsive learning enhances student engagement, self-confidence, and the meaningfulness of education. In this study, students' roles as *gamelan* players are not merely artistic activities but also serve as a means of character education that emphasizes discipline, cooperation, perseverance, and collective responsibility. The *karawitan* practice process, which requires rhythmic synchronization and harmony among players, reflects the Javanese life philosophy that upholds the principles of *rukun* (social harmony) and *tepa salira* (mutual respect and empathy) (Wahidatus Sa'diyah, 2024).

Consistent with the findings of Ladson-Billings (2021), learning rooted in local culture fosters students' sense of belonging to both school and community. Students do not feel alienated from the educational process, as their learning experiences align with their cultural identities. Thus, cultural activities such as Merti Dusun serve as a bridge among home, school, and community while strengthening students' cultural identities amid globalization (Marosi et al., 2021).

The integration of Merti Dusun into thematic classroom learning also reflects the application of contextual learning principles. Teachers utilize students' socio-cultural realities as learning resources, making learning more relevant and meaningful. Activities such as writing descriptive texts about Merti Dusun, discussing the values of cooperation, or creating miniature *gunungan* allow students to construct moral understanding through authentic experiences. This approach supports Banks (2004) view that culturally based education plays a crucial role in fostering social empathy, multicultural awareness, and students' reflective capacities regarding life values (Supriyanti, 2025).

Moreover, the practice of Merti Dusun within the school context reflects *community-based character education*, which actively involves partnerships between schools and the community. Collaboration among teachers, school principals, parents, and traditional leaders strengthens continuity between the moral values taught in schools and those lived within the community. These findings align with Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological systems theory, which emphasizes that children's moral development is shaped by dynamic interactions among multiple environmental systems, including family, school, and cultural community (Purwo et al., 2025).

A comparative study in Singapore similarly demonstrates that integrating local cultural values into school curricula strengthens social cohesion and enriches intergenerational learning (Tan & Tan, 2014). Thus, culture-based character education not only impacts individual students but also strengthens social capital and broader community harmony.

In this practice, the role of teachers expands in meaning. Teachers function not only as transmitters of academic knowledge but also as cultural mediators and custodians of cultural values. Emphasize that teachers who can draw on the community's funds of knowledge are more effective at creating meaningful learning experiences (Spiteri & Spiteri, 2024). In the context of Merti Dusun, teachers serve as bridges between local cultural heritage and formal education systems, ensuring that traditional values remain relevant in modern educational settings. This role supports the concept of *transformative character education*, in which character education not only shapes individual moral

behavior but also fosters cultural awareness, social justice, and collective responsibility (Rohandi, 2016).

Nevertheless, this study also identifies challenges in implementing local culture-based character education. In line with the findings of Wang and Liu (Hadi et al., 2025) and Kim and Park (Asri & Deviv, the primary challenges lie in sustainability, consistency, and adaptation to social change. Teachers require clear policy support, continuous professional development, and adequate learning resources to ensure that the integration of cultural values is not merely incidental or ceremonial. Without systemic support, culture-based character education practices risk being marginalized by academically driven demands focused on cognitive achievement.

Therefore, the development of locally culture-based character education models, such as Merti Dusun, must be carried out in a planned and systematic manner through cross-sector collaboration among the government, educational institutions, and cultural communities. Educational policies should provide greater space for schools to develop contextual curricula rooted in local culture, without neglecting national education standards.

Overall, the findings of this study affirm that local culture-based character education holds significant potential as an alternative paradigm for moral education in the global era. Through activities such as Merti Dusun, students not only learn universal values such as responsibility, cooperation, and social care, but also internalize them within their own cultural contexts. This demonstrates that character cannot be taught in isolation from culture, but rather grows through human interaction with tradition, environment, and community (Marosi et al., 2021; Revivals, 2018)

Thus, this study enriches the global literature on character education by presenting a non-Western perspective that emphasizes social harmony, communal spirituality, and local wisdom as core elements of character formation. This model is relevant for further development as a culturally just and sustainable educational practice amid the challenges of educational globalization.

Conclusion

This study found that local culture-based character education in elementary schools is implemented through three interconnected strategies: integrating local cultural values into classroom learning, cultivating character through school cultural practices, and collaborating between schools and local communities. These strategies enable students to internalize character values such as responsibility, discipline, cooperation, social awareness, and respect for cultural traditions through meaningful and contextual learning experiences. The findings indicate that local culture serves not only as a learning resource but also as an effective medium for character formation, connecting educational processes to students' social and cultural realities. Therefore, locally culture-based character education contributes to both character development and the preservation of cultural heritage, demonstrating its relevance as an educational approach in elementary schools.

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