



## **Malay Culture-Based Education and Cultural Identity Formation in Early Childhood**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Cultural identity is a crucial foundation for children's self development from an early age, especially amid globalization and technological change. This study investigates the relationship between exposure to Malay culture-based education in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and the cultural identity formation of children aged 5-6 years in Pekanbaru City. A quantitative correlational design was applied, using questionnaires distributed to teachers and parents from four ECE institutions. The sample was selected through purposive sampling, involving respondents directly engaged in Malay culture-based learning. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation. The results show a significant positive relationship between Malay cultural exposure and cultural identity ( $r = 0.62$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). These findings highlight the theoretical importance of integrating sociocultural perspectives in early childhood education and the practical implication of embedding local culture through language, folklore, pantun, and traditional games to strengthen cultural identity.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Cultural identity is a complete psychological concept that refers to an individual's understanding and affirmation of their own culture. This identity includes emotional attachment and spiritual support within a cultural group, as well as the expansion of personal identity to a higher and more abstract level as a member of that culture. The main focus is helping children connect their cultural heritage with their sense of self, so they feel close and confident about their heritage, and encourage active participation, expression, and creation that integrates their personal experiences and needs (Zheng & Guo, 2024). Building cultural identity is very important in facing the globalisation era, where the challenge of keeping cultural uniqueness is getting bigger. By understanding and teaching local cultural values through education, children can better know who they are and actively take part in preserving cultural heritage. This helps ensure that cultural identity isn't easily washed away by the spread of global uniformity (Wijayanti et al, 20250).

Developing children's cultural identity can be done through education that focuses on local culture. A local culture curriculum is designed to introduce and instill the values, traditions, and habits



of the local community to children from an early age. Implementing this curriculum not only enriches their cultural experiences but also helps children build a sense of belonging and identity with their local culture. This is reflected in efforts to integrate community activities and resources into the learning process to increase awareness and appreciation of local culture (Shih, 2022). In line with this (Alam & Ogawa, 2025), it is said that the cultural values included in early childhood education curricula help children understand their own cultural identity. Specifically, in the part that talks about the importance of introducing culture to children so they can learn about their true selves, it is mentioned that "culture and education are two things that cannot be separated" and that "culture has a significant impact on early childhood education in our country, giving children a sense of who they are and the ideas behind their habits and beliefs. This finding shows how important it is to have a curriculum based on local culture in early childhood education, as it forms the foundation for developing cultural identity.

Education based on local culture helps children understand their cultural roots and build pride and a sense of identity as part of a society rich in traditions and high values. This enables them to preserve their heritage despite the changes brought by modern times and globalization (Wijayanti et al, 2025). Implementing local cultural practices into the early childhood curriculum is important for strengthening children's cultural identity, although there are various challenges in implementing this at the institutional level (Mehmood et al., 2025). To support the proper preservation of cultural heritage, UNESCO has developed a World Heritage Education Program (WHEP). This program aims to develop new approaches, methods, and educational materials to introduce and strengthen world heritage education in the curricula of most UNESCO member countries. By integrating cultural heritage education into school curricula, the program aims to encourage young people to engage with and appreciate cultural and natural heritage globally, helping them build a strong cultural identity. The process of transmitting Melayu Riau culture, including through education, plays a key role in the development of children's character and identity, enabling them to understand and preserve these cultural values in the era of Society 5.0 (Kurniady & Harun, 2024).

Implementing a rich cultural environment in learning can be done by integrating local cultural values into educational activities. One example is the application of Malay culture in the learning process. Research by Tambak et al. (2018) shows that the integration of Malay culture has been carried out in learning that covers various aspects, such as the core curriculum, extracurricular activities, local content, and incidental activities. This indicates that Malay culture has been accommodated and implemented within the education curriculum. Previous studies on the implementation of Malay cultural values were also conducted by Hasbi et al. (2023), who concluded that the application of Malay culture serves as moral advice and messages that carry Islamic values, delivered through poetry, rhymes, and proverbs, becoming a pattern for building character and moral values in the younger generation to shape their personal identities. Sinthya et al. (2023) also found that the application of culture not only enriches students' understanding of local culture but also strengthens their identity, character, and love for ancestral heritage. Through the integration of culture, learning becomes more relevant to students' environment, can increase interest in learning, and helps create a generation with cultural identity and competitiveness in the global era.

In the context of rapid globalization and increasing digital dominance, traditional values and local identities are increasingly vulnerable to erosion, particularly in urban areas such as Pekanbaru. Early childhood represents a critical period for identity formation, during which cultural values need to be introduced consistently and meaningfully to prevent cultural disconnection in later developmental stages (Novianti & Rahma, 2023; Nurhayati et al., 2022). However, globalization-driven educational practices often prioritize universal competencies while marginalizing local cultural content, resulting in limited exposure to indigenous cultural values among young children (Yetti, 2024). Although national education in Indonesia emphasizes the integration of local wisdom into school curriculum, empirical evidence indicates that implementation policies in early childhood education (ECE) institutions remain inconsistent in both depth and frequency, with local culture often treated as a supplementary activity rather than an integral part of daily learning experiences (Yunita & Ibrahim, 2021).

This inconsistency is particularly concerning in Riau Province, where Malay culture—characterized by pantun, traditional games, folk stories, and etiquette grounded in harmony and respect across religious differences—offers strong pedagogical potential aligned with young children's



developmental needs (Novianti & Rahma, 2023). Previous studies have shown that culturally rich learning environments positively influence children's social behavior, moral development, and sense of belonging (Nurhayati et al., 2022; Shih, 2022). Nevertheless, most existing research in this area has relied on qualitative or descriptive approaches, focusing on classroom practices, teacher perceptions, or curriculum implementation without empirically measuring developmental outcomes. For example, Nurhayati et al. (2022) examined cultural influences on children's social behavior through observational methods, while Yunita and Ibrahim (2021) analyzed policy implementation challenges without quantitative assessment of children's cultural identity. Similarly, Shih (2022) discussed culturally responsive curricula at a conceptual level without examining specific local cultural contexts or their measurable impact on identity development.

Despite these contributions, a notable gap remains in the literature. There is limited quantitative and correlational research that systematically examines how the frequency and intensity of exposure to local cultural education relates to the development of cultural identity in early childhood, particularly within the indigenous Malay cultural context of Riau. Moreover, existing international studies on cultural identity in early childhood tend to focus on multicultural or immigrant settings, with minimal attention to indigenous cultural frameworks in Southeast Asia (Suri & Chandra, 2021). Addressing this gap, the present study offers a novel contribution by employing a quantitative correlational design to investigate the relationship between exposure to Malay cultural education—operationalized through concrete indicators such as language use, traditional expressions, and cultural values—and children's cultural identity development in the urban context of Pekanbaru. By providing empirical evidence on this relationship, this study not only fills a methodological gap in the literature but also offers context-specific insights to inform culturally responsive pedagogy and policy development in early childhood education amid ongoing global influences.

## METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a correlational design to examine the relationship between exposure to Malay cultural education and the development of cultural identity in early childhood. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to measure the degree and direction of association between variables as they naturally occur, without experimental manipulation. The correlational design was considered appropriate to identify whether variations in children's cultural identity are associated with differing levels of exposure to Malay cultural education within early childhood education settings.

The data collected in this study consisted of quantitative data obtained from teachers and parents of children aged 5–6 years enrolled in four Early Childhood Education (ECE) centers in Pekanbaru, namely TK Negeri Pembina 3, TK Pertiwi Kota, TK Ihsan Kids, and TK FKIP UNRI. These schools were selected through purposive sampling to represent institutions with varying degrees of integration of Malay cultural content in their learning programs.

Data were collected from March to June 2025 using structured, closed-ended questionnaires distributed to teachers and parents. The questionnaire comprised two main variables. The first variable, exposure to Malay cultural education, was measured through indicators including: (a) use of Malay language expressions in daily activities, (b) introduction of traditional values and norms, (c) engagement in traditional games, (d) exposure to folk tales and rhymes, and (e) participation in cultural rituals or practices. The second variable, children's cultural identity development, was assessed using indicators such as: (a) cultural awareness, (b) sense of pride in local culture, and (c) internalization of culturally appropriate behaviors in daily interactions.

The research instruments were reviewed by experts in early childhood education and Malay local culture to ensure content validity. Instrument reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha, resulting in a coefficient of 0.87, indicating strong internal consistency. Data analysis was conducted using Pearson's product-moment correlation to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between exposure to Malay cultural education and children's cultural identity development.

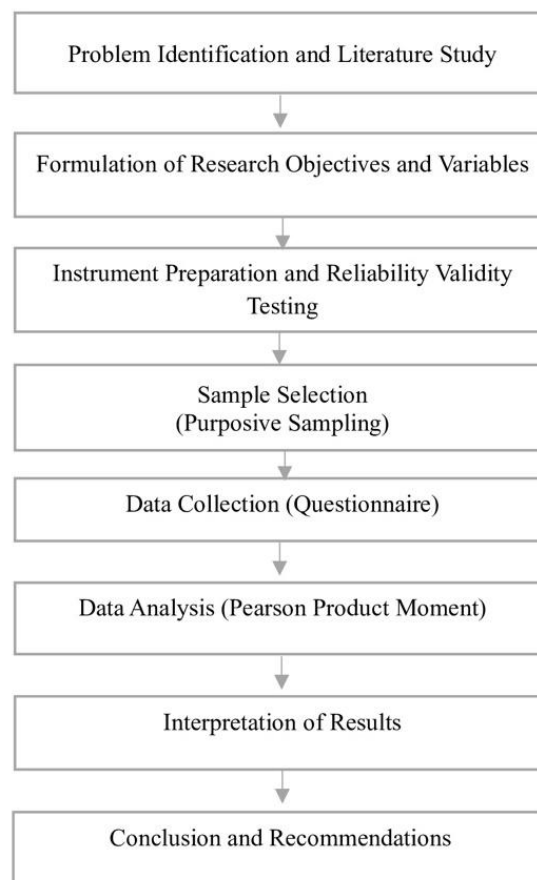


Figure 1. Research Flow

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of data analysis using the Pearson correlation technique in this study indicate that there is a very significant positive relationship between exposure to Malay culture-based education and the development of cultural identity of children aged 5-6 years in Pekanbaru city, namely ( $r = 0.62$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). The data from this analysis indicate that the more frequently children are exposed to learning activities containing Malay cultural elements, the stronger the children's cultural identity that can be developed and displayed. To see in detail the results of the relationship between exposure to Malay culture-based education and the cultural identity of children aged 5-6 years, it has been analyzed based on the level of achievement categories of exposure to Malay culture-based education, namely low, medium, and high categories. The average score of cultural identity in each category can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Cultural Identity Scores Based on the Level of Exposure to Malay Cultural Education

| Level of Exposure | Mean Cultural Identity Score |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| Low               | 62.3                         |
| Medium            | 73.5                         |
| High              | 85.1                         |

Based on the results in Table 1 above, it can be seen that children with a high level of cultural exposure category obtained the highest average cultural identity score, namely (Mean = 85.1), while the group with low level of cultural exposure showed a lower average score, namely (Mean = 62.3). These



results strengthen the hypothesis that children with meaningful and consistent exposure to Malay cultural content materials and elements are able to improve the cultural identity of children aged 5-6 years. Furthermore, the results of this study also measure cultural identity in four indicators, namely, (1) Children's pride in cultural symbols, (2) Children are able to use local expressions, (3) Children are able to understand the values of togetherness and politeness, and (4) Children are able to actively participate in cultural activities. The results of the average scores for each indicator based on cultural education exposure can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Scores of Early Childhood Cultural Identity Indicators Based on the Level of Exposure to Malay Cultural Education

| Indicator of Cultural Identity                      | Low Exposure (Mean) | Medium Exposure (Mean) | High Exposure (Mean) | Means |
|---|---------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Pride in cultural symbols                           | 60.8                | 72.1                   | 85.4                 | 72.8  |
| Use of local expressions                            | 61.5                | 74.3                   | 86.7                 | 74.2  |
| Acceptance of values of togetherness and politeness | 63.2                | 73.6                   | 84.9                 | 73.9  |
| Participation in cultural activities                | 63.7                | 74.0                   | 83.3                 | 73.7  |
| Overall Cultural Identity Mean Score                | 62.3                | 73.5                   | 85.1                 | 73.6  |

Based on the results in table 2, it shows that children in the high cultural education exposure category consistently obtained the highest scores on all indicators, especially on the indicator of the use of local expressions (Mean = 86.7). However, on the contrary, children in the low Malay cultural education exposure category showed the lowest scores, especially on the indicator of children's pride in cultural symbols (Mean = 60.8). The results of this study confirm the evidence that more intensive and consistent exposure to Malay culture-based education plays a very important role in building a sense of pride in culture, the use of local expressions, social acceptance, and active participation of children in cultural activities which overall constitute a cultural identity in early childhood, especially children aged 5-6 years.

The results of this study indicate a significant positive relationship between exposure to Malay cultural education and the formation of cultural identity in early childhood, especially the 5-6 year old age group in Pekanbaru city. These findings are in line with Vygotsky's sociocultural theoretical framework which emphasizes that child development is inseparable from social interactions and cultural contexts in the child's environment. Children learn and internalize values through social practices, language, and cultural activities that they experience daily (Vygotsky, 2012). This is in line with what was stated by Rohman, (2024) that the integration of cultural elements through routine learning activities successfully forms a child's identity both regionally, nationally, and individually. Children who are more often actively involved in culture-based activities will grow a love of culture so that they can develop their cultural identity (Ukala & Agabi, 2017). Therefore, it can be concluded that children who are very often exposed to local cultural content, the stronger the internalization of values in the cultural elements taught in early childhood learning in forming their cultural identity.

In the context of globalization, children in urban areas like Pekanbaru face a rapid flow of global information and culture that often displaces local values. This situation poses the risk of cultural identity erosion from an early age. Therefore, local culture-based education in early childhood education institutions has strategic urgency as a bulwark of cultural preservation and a means of developing children's identity. The findings of this study indicate that children with high levels of exposure to Malay culture tend to be more proud of cultural symbols, use local expressions more frequently, and are more active in cultural activities. This proves that cultural identity can be fostered effectively through meaningful and contextual learning. Developing cultural identity in children through meaningful, direct experiences and actively involving children in learning about cultural heritage can gradually develop children's behaviors, starting from recognizing local cultural characteristics, understanding their





meaning and relationship to survival, to participating in cultural creation and expression. This contextual, culture-based approach to education aims to build a sense of closeness, pride, and a solid understanding of children's cultural identity from an early age (Zheng & Guo, 2024).

The findings of this study extend and empirically substantiate previous research by demonstrating how cultural identity in early childhood is actively constructed through meaningful engagement with local cultural practices. Consistent with Ezekwem-Obi, Blythe, and Grace (2025), cultural identity is not merely a cognitive construct but develops through emotional involvement and embodied participation in everyday cultural experiences. In the context of this study, culturally grounded learning—such as traditional games, regional songs and dances, folk tales, advice, and values of politeness—enabled teachers to connect abstract cultural concepts with children's lived experiences. This alignment between learning content and daily life was found to foster children's sense of belonging, pride, and emotional attachment to their cultural heritage, reinforcing cultural identity formation at an early age (Fadillah et al., 2025).

These findings also support Shih's (2022) argument that culturally responsive curricula enhance children's cultural belonging and identity development. Importantly, this study highlights that the effectiveness of culturally informed learning does not depend solely on curriculum content, but on teachers' pedagogical competence in designing and implementing culturally meaningful learning experiences. From a theoretical perspective, these results empirically support Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which posits that identity and higher psychological functions develop through cultural mediation and social interaction. In this regard, Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) plays a critical role, as teachers who integrate appropriate planning, concrete cultural activities, independent exploration, direct observation, and reflective practices are better able to facilitate inclusive and contextual learning (Pamularsih et al., 2025). Thus, this study contributes empirical evidence demonstrating how local cultural contexts, specifically within early childhood education settings in Pekanbaru, function as mediating tools in identity development.

From a practical and policy perspective, the findings suggest the need for early childhood education curricula that systematically integrate local cultural content, particularly Malay culture, into daily learning activities. Elements such as rhymes, folktales, traditional games, proverbs, and values of politeness can serve as developmentally appropriate learning resources that support both cultural preservation and identity formation. Nevertheless, this study acknowledges certain limitations, including its focus on a limited sample of four schools in Pekanbaru and its emphasis on Malay cultural contexts, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Despite these limitations, the results offer important implications for educational policy, highlighting the potential value of incorporating local cultural heritage into national early childhood education frameworks. Such integration can strengthen children's cultural identities while equipping them to navigate global influences without losing their local cultural roots.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows there is a significant positive relationship between exposure to Malay cultural education and the development of young children's cultural identity in young children, especially those aged 5 to 6 years old. The results highlight that the more often children engage with local cultural elements such as the Malay language, which includes rhymes, folk stories, traditional games, and expressions of shared values, the stronger their cultural identity indicators become. This includes pride in cultural symbols, use of local expressions, and acceptance of collective values in society. These findings align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cultural context in children's development. Cultural-based education is not just a way to preserve cultural heritage, but also helps build a sense of ownership and strong identity in young children. In the context of increasing globalization, these findings stress the importance of strengthening local wisdom-based curricula in early childhood education institutions. Consistent implementation can be an effective strategy to balance the influence of global culture with the strengthening of children's self-identity through their own cultural roots.



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