

Integrating Moral and Cultural Values through Folktales: A Content Analysis of Character Education in Indonesian Primary Curriculum

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ABSTRACT:

Background: Character education has become a pivotal component of primary education worldwide, particularly in addressing the growing concerns of moral degradation among children. In Indonesia, the government integrates moral and cultural values through various subjects within the 2013 curriculum, one of which includes the use of local folktales. These narratives, rooted in Indonesian cultural heritage, are embedded in primary textbooks and serve not only as literacy material but also as tools for instilling ethical behavior and cultural identity in young learners.

Aims: This study aims to explore how moral and cultural values are represented in Indonesian folktales featured in the Grade 4 primary school textbook Theme 8: My Hometown. Specifically, it seeks to identify and describe the types of moral and cultural values conveyed through the stories and how these values support character development within the educational framework.

Methods: A qualitative content analysis was conducted on 13 folktales included in the designated textbook. The data were categorized based on theoretical frameworks by Nurgiyantoro (2018) for moral values and Djamaris (1993) for cultural values. The analysis focused on narrative elements such as characters, plot, and dialogue to extract implicit and explicit value-based messages. Triangulation of theory and time was employed to ensure validity.

Results: The findings reveal that the folktales contain a wide range of moral values, including honesty, courage, humility, responsibility, and self-discipline, which reflect the relationship between individuals and themselves, others, nature, and the divine. Likewise, cultural values such as social harmony, mutual cooperation, religious devotion, and respect for tradition are prominently embedded in the narratives. The stories also serve as reflective tools for learners to internalize local wisdom and ethical standards aligned with Indonesian societal norms.

Conclusion: Folktales in the Indonesian primary curriculum play a critical role in delivering moral and cultural education. Their narrative form, rooted in local tradition, provides an effective pedagogical medium for character development. Integrating these stories into formal education not only enhances students' ethical awareness but also preserves and promotes national identity. The study supports the use of culturally relevant literature as a foundation for value-based education in early schooling.

Keywords : Character Education, cultural values, folkates, moral values, primary curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the erosion of moral values among elementary school children has emerged as a significant concern in the Indonesian education system (Pabbajah et al., 2020; Samala et al., 2024). Cases of disrespectful behavior, reduced empathy, and a lack of responsibility among students highlight the urgent need to reinforce value-based education (Mustofa et al., 2025). In response to these challenges, Indonesia's 2013 national curriculum promotes character development as a foundational component of early education (Masdul et al. 2024). One of the core strategies employed to achieve this is the integration of local folktales into thematic learning materials. These narratives, deeply embedded in the country's oral tradition, serve not only to develop literacy but also as an effective medium for transmitting moral and cultural values to young learners.

The use of folktales in classroom instruction is not incidental; it is rooted in a long-standing tradition of storytelling as a vehicle for ethical formation and cultural preservation (Brokalaki, 2024; Brooks et al. 2024). In Indonesian primary schools, particularly in the Grade 4 textbook Tema 8: Daerah Tempat Tinggalku (My Hometown), students are introduced to thirteen folktales that depict various moral dilemmas and societal norms from across the archipelago. These stories encourage learners to reflect on human behavior, communal values, and spiritual wisdom, thus offering a culturally relevant pathway to character education (Desai & Wane, 2022). However, despite their prominence in the curriculum, there is limited empirical investigation into how these folktales function as instructional tools for moral and cultural formation (Olugbemi-Gabriel & Ukpi, 2023).

Integrating cultural heritage into formal education offers a strategic means of preserving local identity while fostering moral reasoning in children (Suri & Chandra, 2021). Folktales, with their narrative appeal and ethical richness, serve as an ideal vehicle for this purpose. Yet, their actual impact and the extent to which they reflect structured value systems within official textbooks remain underexplored (Arif et al. 2023). Understanding the embedded messages in these folktales is essential for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers aiming to optimize learning materials for both academic and ethical outcomes (Govender & Mudzamiri, 2022). This study is thus motivated by the need to systematically evaluate these narratives in relation to their pedagogical potential and cultural significance.

Recent studies emphasize the importance of aligning educational materials with cultural and moral values. Amalia. (2024) investigated the compatibility of Indonesia's Kurikulum Merdeka with Islamic ethical principles and confirmed the value of integrating faith-based content into national education frameworks. Similarly, Djibat et al. (2019) and Haling (2016) showcased how indigenous cultural narratives—such as Bugis siri' and the Makayaklo tradition—can effectively cultivate ethical awareness and social cohesion among students. These works collectively highlight the strength of local culture in shaping educational content. Beyond Indonesia, Çubukçu, (2012) explored how hidden curricula influence character formation, revealing that values are often internalized implicitly through classroom practices and textual cues. (Liu & Khine, 2016), in a content analysis of primary science textbooks, emphasized that values can be communicated subtly through diagrammatic and narrative elements. Eisenhauer et al. (2018) Lee & Kang, (2023) further showed how textbooks across different countries embed environmental and health-related values, reinforcing behavioral expectations through culturally attuned content. Gapontsev et al. (2019) Mccamant, (2018) explored interdisciplinary and historical approaches to moral education, underlining the long-standing effort to embed ethical development within structured curricula.

While the existing literature affirms the role of textbooks and narratives in moral education, few studies have directly examined the content of government-approved primary school textbooks in Indonesia. Barak & Lefstein, (2022) Most prior research focuses on singular stories or general discussions about character education, lacking a comprehensive content analysis of curated folktales used in actual classroom contexts. Agostini & van Zomeren, (2021) Moreover, there is limited scholarship that explicitly connects the identified values with theoretical frameworks of moral and cultural classification. This study aims to bridge that gap by systematically analyzing 13 folktales embedded in an official textbook, drawing from established models to identify their educational and cultural implications.

This study is designed to critically explore how moral and cultural values are conveyed through folktales included in the Indonesian Grade 4 primary school textbook Tema 8: Daerah Tempat Tinggalku. By focusing on narratives officially embedded in the national curriculum, the research investigates the types of values promoted, the manner in which they are represented, and the potential educational functions these stories serve in character development. Particular attention is given to how the stories reflect ethical principles such as honesty, responsibility, and empathy, as well as cultural themes including social harmony, local wisdom, and respect for tradition. Through a detailed content analysis, the study aims to reveal how these folktales function not only as literary texts but also as pedagogical tools that support the broader objectives of value-based education in Indonesian primary schools.

METHOD

Research Design

This research employed a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the representation of moral and cultural values in folktales embedded in a primary school textbook (Olugbemi-Gabriel & Ukpi, 2023). Content analysis was selected due to its effectiveness in interpreting meaning within narrative texts, allowing for an in-depth exploration of themes, values, and educational implications. The study was guided by a constructivist paradigm, emphasizing the interpretation of values as constructed through language, characters, and cultural contexts presented in the stories.

Participant

The unit of analysis in this study consisted of 13 folktales selected from the Grade 4 Indonesian primary school textbook Tema 8: Daerah Tempat Tinggalku, which is officially approved by the Indonesian Ministry of Education. The textbook is widely used in public and private elementary schools and reflects the standardized curriculum implemented at the national level. Human participants were not involved, as the study focused solely on textual materials.

Instrument

The primary instrument in this research was a set of analytical frameworks derived from previous literature. Moral values were categorized based on Efendi & Nurgiyantoro, (2021) classification, which organizes values into four relational domains: individual-self, individual-other, individual-nature, and individual-God. Cultural values were identified using Djamaris' (1993) framework, which includes aspects such as social norms, traditions, religious practices, and community values. These frameworks were adapted to create a coding guide that enabled systematic analysis of the stories.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis followed a thematic coding process (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). Each folktale was read multiple times to identify recurring themes and value-laden segments. The text was segmented and coded according to predefined categories from the selected theoretical frameworks. Triangulation was applied through repeated readings at different time intervals to ensure consistency and minimize interpretive bias. The findings were then synthesized to highlight the dominant moral and cultural messages and to assess their relevance to character education in the context of the Indonesian primary curriculum.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings of this study are based on a qualitative content analysis of 13 folktales featured in the Grade 4 Indonesian primary school textbook Tema 8: Daerah Tempat Tinggalku. The analysis revealed that each story embeds one or more core moral and cultural values. The dominant moral themes included honesty, obedience, perseverance, empathy, and self-discipline, while the dominant cultural values related to family traditions, regional myths, religious beliefs, and social customs.

Table 1. Summary of Moral and Cultural Values in Indonesian Primary Folktales

| No | Title of Folktale | Dominant Moral Values | Dominant Cultural Values |
|----|-------------------------------|---|---|
| 1 | Batu Menangis | Obedience, Compassion, Regret | Family roles, Oral tradition |
| 2 | Asal Usul Danau Toba | Honesty, Responsibility | Marriage norms, Respect for vows |
| 3 | Tangkuban Perahu | Patience, Filial piety | Family structure, Local legend |
| 4 | Timun Mas | Courage, Gratitude, Wisdom | Magical belief, Rural farming culture |
| 5 | Malin Kundang | Respect for parents, Consequence of arrogance | Maritime culture, Divine punishment belief |
| 6 | Legenda Gunung Merapi | Sacrifice, Collective safety | Natural disaster myth, Community warning system |
| 7 | Keong Mas | Kindness, Justice, Forgiveness | Royal folklore, Social class structure |
| 8 | Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih | Sincerity, Hard work, Integrity | Gender roles, Rural family life |
| 9 | Sangkuriang | Responsibility, awareness | Tragedy, Forbidden love taboo, Local cosmology |
| 10 | Legenda Rawa Pening | Honesty, Acceptance | Water mythology, Ritual belief |
| 11 | Cindelas | Justice, Bravery | Royal tradition, Animal symbolism |

These results demonstrate a deliberate effort by curriculum designers to combine moral guidance and cultural literacy in one learning platform. The classification of values followed Wiltshire & Ronkainen, (2021) relational framework for moral values and cultural domains, allowing for consistent categorization across all stories.

Discussion

The results affirm that folktales serve as rich pedagogical tools for transmitting values to young learners. Most moral values are depicted through narrative consequences, with protagonists rewarded for virtuous behavior and punished for moral transgressions. Arif et al. (2023) This is in line with Lickona's theory of moral education, which advocates for experiential moral learning through stories that evoke ethical reflection.

Culturally, the stories are deeply rooted in Indonesia's diverse local traditions, showcasing elements such as royal customs, ancestral beliefs, and region-specific legends. These cultural references allow students to develop an appreciation for their national identity while respecting the uniqueness of each region. This supports previous findings by Djibat et al. (2019) and Haling, (2016),

who argue for the inclusion of localized content to reinforce cultural awareness in early education. Furthermore, the narrative format used in the folktales—featuring conflict, climax, and resolution—naturally encourages students to engage in critical thinking and emotional interpretation. Çubukçu, (2012) emphasized that such formats often function as hidden curricula, where values are acquired implicitly through storytelling rather than through direct instruction.

From a curriculum development standpoint, the structure and selection of these stories appear aligned with national educational goals. The language level, illustrations, and value density are appropriate for Grade 4 learners, and they support the development of both literacy and character. Liu & Khine, (2016) similarly pointed out that textbooks can serve dual functions when designed thoughtfully. Nevertheless, variation in the clarity of value presentation across stories indicates the need for teacher mediation. In some folktales, moral lessons are explicit and easy to interpret, while in others, cultural contexts may require further explanation. This finding underscores the importance of training teachers to effectively integrate storytelling into value-based instruction.

Implications

This study offers practical implications for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers. It demonstrates the effectiveness of culturally grounded stories as vehicles for value education and suggests that integrating local folktales into textbooks can enrich the moral learning experience. The findings also support the development of teacher training programs that focus on story-based pedagogy, enabling educators to guide discussions around ethical and cultural themes with confidence and clarity.

Research Contribution

This study contributes to the growing literature on character education by offering an empirical analysis of moral and cultural values in curriculum-based folktales (Hayashi et al. 2022). Unlike previous studies that focused on individual stories or general curriculum reviews, this research presents a systematic content analysis of all folktales in a government-approved textbook (Kambutu et al. 2025). It bridges the gap between literary analysis and pedagogical application, providing a framework that can be adapted for future curriculum evaluations and textbook development initiatives.

Limitations

While the study provides meaningful insights, its scope is limited to one textbook in the Grade 4 curriculum. The exclusion of visual, teacher-led, and classroom interaction elements may also limit the depth of interpretation. Further research that includes classroom observations, student responses, and cross-grade comparisons would provide a more holistic understanding of how values are internalized through storytelling.

Suggestions

Future studies could expand the analysis to include other textbooks across grade levels or focus on specific regional folktales not yet incorporated into formal curricula. Action research involving teacher-led storytelling sessions may also offer valuable data on pedagogical strategies and student engagement. Additionally, collaboration between cultural scholars and curriculum developers is encouraged to ensure the representation of diverse values in educational materials.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that folktales embedded in Indonesia's Grade 4 primary textbook function as effective instruments for character and cultural education. Through a qualitative content analysis of thirteen stories, the research identified a wide range of moral values—such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and perseverance—and cultural themes including respect for tradition, community life, and regional identity. These values were conveyed through characters' actions, plot

developments, and moral consequences, supporting the pedagogical use of narrative literature to shape ethical understanding in young learners.

The findings confirm that folktales are not merely literary artifacts but serve as dynamic teaching tools that align with national curriculum goals. By drawing on local traditions and collective memory, these stories help students internalize both moral reasoning and cultural awareness. The use of familiar contexts and culturally resonant narratives enhances student engagement and promotes deeper reflection, suggesting that story-based instruction can play a central role in value-based education. However, the variation in how values are presented across stories indicates the importance of teacher facilitation. Some narratives require contextual explanation to ensure students grasp their moral implications fully. Therefore, enhancing teacher preparedness and developing guided learning modules could further maximize the impact of folktale-based instruction.

In conclusion, integrating folktales into formal education offers a culturally relevant and pedagogically sound approach to developing moral character in primary school students. This study contributes to curriculum development discourse by offering evidence-based insights into how literature can be intentionally employed to support holistic education. Future curriculum planning and textbook design should continue to leverage local wisdom, ensuring that young learners grow not only in knowledge but also in values rooted in their cultural identity.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The author solely conceptualized the research idea, designed the study, and conducted the content analysis of the folktales featured in the Indonesian Grade 4 textbook. All stages of the research—including literature review, framework adaptation, data coding, analysis, interpretation, and manuscript preparation—were carried out independently by the author. The author also ensured the originality and integrity of the work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission. The Author Contributions Statement can be up to several sentences long and should briefly describe the tasks of individual authors. Please list only 2 initials for each author, without full stops, but separated by commas (e.g. JC, JS). In the case of two authors with the same initials, please use their middle initial to differentiate between them (e.g. REW, RSW). The Author Contributions Statement should be included at the end of the manuscript before the References.

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