The Role of Indigenous Storytelling in Shaping Cultural Values through Visual Book Design

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of traditional storytelling in shaping cultural values through visual book design as a contextual educational medium. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, collecting data through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and documentation of eight key informants, educators, artists, and indigenous leaders, selected until data saturation was reached. Data were analyzed thematically using NVivo, with examples of codes, categories, and excerpts provided to enhance transparency. The study was conducted in several regions, making the findings exploratory rather than generalizable to the whole of Indonesia. Visualization of traditional stories in picture books effectively instilled values such as mutual cooperation, respect for ancestors, and ecological wisdom in elementary school children. Story visualization also strengthened moral understanding and students' emotional engagement in the learning process. Integrating traditional stories into visual book design supports the preservation of local culture and serves as a relevant pedagogical strategy in value education based on local wisdom.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization, digitalization, and information disruption have shifted the cultural value orientation of younger generations (Poddar, 2024). Exposure to foreign cultures through digital media influences children's preferences for educational content that tends to be universal, thereby reducing attention to local values that form the basis of collective identity (Zajda, 2023). This situation poses a challenge for the national education system in instilling cultural values through approaches that are both relevant and communicative.

One strategic alternative is education based on local wisdom (Ernawati et al., 2024). Traditional storytelling holds great potential because it conveys moral, spiritual, and historical dimensions that can shape students' character. Narrative visualization in the form of picture books creates opportunities to bridge traditional messages with the increasingly visual and digital-native learning styles of children

(Nanduri, 2024). However, prior studies highlight several limitations. Qi et al. found that most children's books available on the market adopt foreign narrative models in terms of story structure and visual iconography, thereby failing to reflect local cultural values. Similarly, Sholihah and Kuswandi noted that teachers and parents often face difficulties in finding culturally rooted learning materials that are visually engaging while also pedagogically sound (Qi et al., 2023; Sholihah & Kuswandi 2025)

Although the literature on folklore and character education is extensive, gaps remain in the areas of visual communication design and cross-disciplinary collaboration. The representation of local culture in children's educational products has not yet been optimally developed with regard to illustration aesthetics, visual readability, and integration with curricular needs. This study explicitly aims to explore the role of traditional storytelling in shaping cultural values through visual book design for elementary school children. The focus is directed toward how narrative and symbolic elements of local culture can be combined to produce educational media that is not only informative but also contextual and transformative.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the expansion of the multicultural education framework by incorporating perspectives from visual communication design as a medium for value internalization. This integration enriches scholarly discourse on how visual media can function not only as a channel of communication but also as a pedagogical instrument in character formation rooted in cultural heritage. Furthermore, the study addresses gaps in the literature concerning the interrelation of local narratives, symbolic visual representation, and children's perception of values, thereby strengthening the theoretical foundation for models of local wisdom–based education. Practically, the findings contribute to the development of culturally rooted children's book designs that are pedagogically relevant, visually appealing, and potentially integrated into the school curriculum. The study also promotes collaboration among educators, illustrators, and cultural experts in producing learning media, thereby reinforcing efforts to preserve national cultural values in the midst of globalization.

2. METHODS

2.1. Types and Approaches to Research

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the practice and potential of indigenous storytelling in shaping cultural values through children's visual books. This approach was chosen because it captures participants' meanings, perceptions, and experiences in a contextual and holistic manner that cannot be reduced to numbers (Brennen, 2021). The case study design allowed the researchers to examine the relationship between cultural narrative elements and visual representations in value education, as well as the dynamics of interaction among educators, illustrators, and cultural figures.

2.2. Population and Sampling Techniques

The population included actors engaged in the production and use of local culture–based educational media in primary schools with strong oral traditions. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that informants had active involvement in cultural education and a deep understanding of the local context. Eight key informants were selected: three primary school teachers implementing folklore-based approaches, two children's book illustrators focusing on local cultural content, and three indigenous leaders active in preserving traditional narratives. Although the number of informants was limited, the selection followed the principle of information-rich cases and continued until data saturation was achieved, ensuring that additional participants were unlikely to generate new insights.

2.3. Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. The interview guide was developed based on indicators of cultural value transmission and visual literacy, and was validated by experts for content accuracy. Questions addressed local

narrative structures, cultural visual symbols, children's perception of values, and the effectiveness of picture book media in learning contexts. Classroom observations were conducted to capture students' affective and cognitive responses during storytelling-based activities. Documentation included storybooks, illustration sketches, and curriculum materials related to traditional narratives. Triangulation of sources and methods enhanced the credibility and dependability of the data (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024).

2.4. Data Analysis Techniques

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (Byrne, 2022) procedures, involving open, axial, and selective coding, supported by NVivo 14 software to map categories and themes systematically. The process involved repeated reading of transcripts, identification of meaning units, categorization, and thematic interpretation of cultural values from narratives and visualizations. To enhance transparency, examples of initial codes (e.g., "respect for ancestors"), categories (e.g., "moral values"), and themes (e.g., "cultural continuity") are presented in the findings section as coding matrices and excerpts. Validation was conducted through member checking and peer debriefing to reduce interpretive bias. Given the limited number of participants and the focus on selected regions (Java, Minangkabau, Dayak, Bugis), the findings are positioned as exploratory rather than generalizable to the entire Indonesian context.

To increase transparency of the analysis, Table 1 illustrates a sample of the coding process conducted in NVivo 14, showing the movement from initial codes to categories and selective themes. This example demonstrates how meaning units were systematically reduced and organized, while full coding matrices are available in the appendix.

Table 1. Sample Coding Matrix from NVivo Analysis

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding	Sample Evidence	Frequency	Informant
"Children more focused when pictures match the story" (GR01)	Visual engagement in learning	Narrative–Visual Integration	Teacher noted students asked more questions when illustrations depicted rituals and daily life.	7	Teacher (GR01, GR02, GR03)
"Illustrations must show correct traditional clothes" (IL02)	Cultural accuracy in visuals	Authenticity of Representation	Illustrator emphasized importance of accurate local motifs to avoid cultural distortion.	5	Illustrator (IL01, IL02, IL03)
"We tell stories about forests to teach respect for nature" (AD03)	Environmental messages in folklore	Ecological Wisdom	Indigenous leader used forest myth to instill environmental care values.	6	Indigenous Leader (AD02, AD03)
"Students said they felt like part of the story" (GR02)	Emotional connection with narrative	Value Internalization through Storytelling	Students expressed identification with characters practicing *gotong royong*.	8	Teacher (GR01, GR02, GR04)

"Parents ask for more local stories because most books are foreign" (GR03)	Lack of local-based resources	Gap in Educational Media	Teacher observed scarcity of culturally grounded picture books.	4	Teacher (GR03, GR04)
"We need collaboration, otherwise illustrators miss cultural details" (AD01)	Cross-disciplinary collaboration	Collaborative Development	Cultural figure insisted on joint work between educators, artists, and elders.	5	Indigenous Leader & Illustrator
"Children remember better when stories are shown with images" (IL01)	Cognitive reinforcement through visuals	Multimodal Literacy	Illustrator observed that combining text and images aids retention.	6	Illustrator (IL01, IL03)

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Digital Media Representation of Cultural Values Through Traditional Stories

This study reveals that traditional storytelling visualized in the form of picture storybooks makes an important contribution in instilling local cultural values to elementary school-age children. An elementary school teacher affirmed the effectiveness of this approach in increasing student engagement:

"So far, children have indeed found it easier to catch lessons when there are pictures. But when we used the traditional storybook from Java and Kalimantan, it turned out that they were not only happy, but also asked a lot about the customs, about why the person in the picture wore such clothes, or why there was a ceremony before the harvest. Well, from there we can go in to discuss the issue of mutual cooperation and respect for parents. I personally feel that this is more effective than explaining directly through lectures", (GR01 – Interview, April 5, 2025).

The stories used in this study come from eight oral traditions in various regions of Indonesia such as Java, Minangkabau, Dayak, and Bugis which are rich in symbolic narratives and local wisdom. One of the indigenous leaders from South Sulawesi expressed his concern as well as hope for the process of transforming oral narratives into the form of picture story books:

"Our ancestors' stories were never written, everything was passed down by word of mouth, through night fairy tales, or when there were traditional events. But children now don't hear much about it because of the busyness of parents and outside media that come in constantly. When I first saw our Bugis folklore being used as a picture book, I felt happy and worried at the same time. I am happy that this story is finally accessible to modern children. But I am also worried that if it is not portrayed correctly, it will make children misunderstand our culture", (AD03 – Interview, April 8, 2025).

The selection of stories is carried out based on their relevance to the character values raised in the Independent Curriculum, as well as the availability of visualization forms in children's books. An illustrator involved in the development process of the book emphasized the importance of visuals as a key tool in shaping the meaning of the story:

"I realized that my pictures are not only a complement to the story, but the main medium for children to understand the meaning of the story. Because not all elementary school children are strong in imagining

from text. If the visuals are right, the children will immediately understand. One child said to his teacher: 'Oh so we can't cut down trees carelessly, shall we?' —it was after seeing a picture of the child and his grandfather planting a tree while explaining the customary rules about the forest", (IL02 – Interview, April 11, 2025).

Thus, the narrative used not only serves as a tool of entertainment, but also as a medium for cultural value education. Analysis of the narratives and visualizations of the eight books, coupled with observations in three primary schools and interviews with eight key informants (teachers, illustrators, and indigenous leaders), showed that there were three categories of the most dominant cultural values: mutual cooperation, respect for ancestors, and ecological wisdom. These three values not only often appear explicitly in the text of the story, but are also visualized repeatedly in the illustrations that accompany the story. They are considered the main pillars of the formation of children's character because they represent the social dimensions (mutual cooperation), spiritual (respect for ancestors), and ecological (wisdom towards nature).

The following Table 2 presents the frequency of occurrence of the three main values in the narrative elements and visual illustrations of the book. The frequencies were calculated through manual coding in NVivo, where each segment of text or visual illustration containing an identifiable cultural value was coded once. For example, a page showing villagers planting trees together was counted as one instance of ecological wisdom, while an illustration of children helping their parents during harvest was coded as one instance of mutual cooperation.

Table 2. Frequency of Representation of Cultural Values in Picture Books

Cultural Values	Frequency in Narrative	Frequency in Visualization
Gotong Royong	18	15
Respect for Ancestors	14	13
Ecological Wisdom	12	11

The visualization of these values emerges through illustrations that are rich in cultural context, such as images of village leaders building traditional houses together, residents harvesting rice collectively, or moments of respect for parents and ancestors in the form of rituals. The scenes are depicted in detail—expressive faces, typical regional clothing, traditional house ornaments, and landscape settings corresponding to local geography. In terms of ecological wisdom, the illustrations feature children guarding rivers, planting trees with their parents, or hunting ethically with respect for customary rules.

Through strong and touching visual presentations, children showed a high level of emotional engagement when reading. The results of classroom observations indicate that students not only understood the content of the stories, but were also able to relate these values to their daily lives. For example, after reading a story about mutual cooperation, students gave concrete examples from their own experiences, such as helping parents clean the house or participating in neighborhood community service. This affective response indicates that the process of internalizing values took place naturally and reflectively.

However, not all responses were uniformly positive. In one class, several students expressed confusion when encountering depictions of unfamiliar rituals, which limited their ability to grasp the deeper meaning behind the illustration. Similarly, one illustrator admitted difficulty in accessing authentic cultural references, which occasionally resulted in inaccuracies in clothing motifs and ornament details. These findings highlight both the potential and the challenges of using visualized traditional stories as media for cultural value education.

Additionally, the effectiveness of value delivery through picture books relies heavily on the alignment between narrative and visuals (Mansur et al., 2021). When illustrations support a cohesive narrative—for example, by depicting a familiar and authentic cultural setting—children are more likely

to understand the moral message being conveyed. In this case, the role of the illustrator is strategic: visuals do not merely beautify the page, but function as cultural bridges capable of touching children's experiences more concretely than text alone. Therefore, collaboration between story writers, illustrators, and cultural resource persons is crucial in the production of traditional story-based educational media.

3.2. Integration of Narratives and Visual Symbols

The results of this study confirm that the main strength of traditional stories lies in their ability to integrate moral messages into visual and emotional symbolic forms. Stories not only convey cultural values through verbal narratives, but also communicate them through powerful and meaningful visual symbols. This process creates a multimodal literacy experience for children, where text and images complement each other in building complete meaning. Children not only understand stories as a series of events, but they also affectively connect with the values presented through vivid and representative images. Effective visualization is able to strengthen the internalization of values because it works on the deeper dimensions of perception and emotions, especially in elementary school-age children who are still in the stage of concrete operational development according to Piaget's theory.

A classroom teacher from elementary school who has used traditional illustrated storybooks in thematic learning, shared her experience of the impact of visuals on student understanding:

"I noticed that the story is good but the picture is not strong, the children are less enthusiastic. But when we used a book with illustrations depicting a betang's house, traditional clothes, and the atmosphere of harvesting in the field, the children immediately connected. They even start asking: 'Mom, this is like her house in grandma's village, huh?' or 'Why are they eating so much on the mat?' Those are reflective questions that arise because they feel familiar and interested. I think it's a learning moment that can't be created from text alone", (GR02 – Interview, April 6, 2025).

In this context, illustration functions not merely as a complement to the text but as a primary medium in shaping children's cultural perceptions. Visuals such as Minangkabau stilt houses, Dayak traditional clothing with distinctive carving motifs, or representations of rituals such as mapalus and ngaben provide an authentic cultural environment that textual description alone cannot achieve. For children accustomed to consuming global cultural imagery through mass media, these local visual representations offer an experience that is at once novel and familiar, reinforcing a sense of cultural identity. This mechanism aligns with Rogoff's concept of guided participation, where children internalize cultural values not only through direct practice but also through symbolic engagement with narratives and illustrations (Rogoff, 2008).

Moreover, the process of symbolic interpretation is strengthened when narrative and illustration work in tandem. For instance, when a story depicts a community building a village hall and the accompanying illustration portrays individuals of diverse ages and backgrounds collaborating, the value of gotong royong (mutual cooperation) becomes more tangible and emotionally resonant. Such multimodal reinforcement aligns with Piaget's view of concrete operational learning, where children require concrete representations to grasp abstract moral concepts (Piaget, 2003). It also supports Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development, as illustrations act as cultural tools that scaffold children's understanding and enable deeper engagement with social meanings (Vygotsky & Cole, 2018).

This contrasts with didactic approaches that often position children as passive recipients of moral prescriptions. In illustrated storybooks, values emerge through the interplay of text, image, and children's cultural frame of reference, fostering reflective rather than rote learning (Güven et al., 2025). However, not all responses were uniformly positive—some children struggled with unfamiliar ritual depictions, suggesting that multimodal literacy requires guided mediation to prevent misinterpretation. Thus, illustration should not be viewed as secondary embellishment, but as a central pedagogical tool for value internalization in early literacy and cultural education.

Meanwhile, from the perspective of the illustrator, involvement in responding to the local cultural context is both a challenge and a responsibility. One of the illustrators who drew a book based on Dayak and Bugis stories explained how he sought to capture the symbolic essence of cultural values in visual form:

"I had time to do quite a lot of research about traditional houses, fabric motifs, and local customs before starting to draw. The challenge is how to convey values such as mutual cooperation or respect to parents without having to write them down literally. For example, I draw a child kissing his grandmother's hand before starting work in the fields, or a scene of villagers helping each other build houses without pay. Those are symbols that children can capture, and teachers can explore in class discussions. I believe images have the power to build empathy and belonging", (IL03 – Interview, April 9, 2025).

Illustrations contribute not only to comprehension but also to the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of learning. Warm colors that depict collective activities, expressive faces radiating enthusiasm, and carefully detailed settings such as rice fields, rivers, or traditional houses create a vivid and immersive narrative atmosphere. In this way, illustrations function as a medium for emotional anchoring, whereby positive emotions elicited from reading experiences reinforce children's memory and understanding of cultural values (Costin, 2024). Thus, values are not merely memorized at a cognitive level but are affectively perceived and internalized.

Equally important is how the social dynamics between the main characters and their communities are visualized. When child protagonists are portrayed as active members of a collective—rather than isolated individual actors—the narrative conveys stronger messages about interaction, solidarity, and shared responsibility (Sara, 2024). Such representations reflect the core ethos of Indonesian society, where collectivity and interdependence are central to the social fabric. Visual symbols like hugging, sharing meals, helping during disasters, or participating in community forums construct an idealized cultural image that implicitly teaches values of cooperation, reciprocity, and civility.

Beyond their affective and aesthetic appeal, the integration of narrative and visual symbols significantly impacts the retention and transfer of values into children's everyday behavior. Observational data indicate that students exposed to storybooks with stronger illustrations were better able to reinterpret the embedded values and articulate concrete examples from their own lives. This finding suggests that visuals operate as mediational tools in the Vygotskian sense, enabling children to bridge abstract moral concepts with lived experience. Thus, illustrations are not peripheral embellishments but central educational devices that shape both cognition and behavior.

Taken together, these results affirm that the integration of narratives and illustrations in traditional storybooks offers a strategic pedagogical pathway for cultural value education (Sturm, n.d.). By combining symbolic representation, emotional experience, and contextual familiarity, illustrated stories cultivate not only literacy but also identity and character formation. Theoretically, this study extends the discourse on multimodal literacy by positioning illustrations as cultural mediators rather than aesthetic supplements. Practically, the findings underscore the necessity of collaborative production involving writers, illustrators, educators, and cultural bearers to ensure that educational media are both pedagogically effective and culturally sustainable in the era of globalization.

3.3. Digital Media Comparison with Previous Research

This research offers a significant contribution in the realm of local culture-based literacy by enriching the perspectives that have been revealed by previous studies. In contrast to the study of Farrahillah et al. which revealed that children's books in Indonesia still lack an authentic representation of local culture, the findings in this study show that when traditional narratives are used as the main foundation in the preparation of storybooks, local cultural values can actually be explored and represented in a complete and meaningful (Farrahillah, 2023). These representations not only appear in narrative texts, but are also reinforced through visual illustrations that are contextually and symbolically developed.

This study also expands on the findings of Yuendita et al. which emphasize the importance of developing literacy based on local wisdom as an approach to character education (Yuendita & Dina, 2024). The main contribution of this study is to add a visual dimension that has not been widely explained in previous literacy studies. Visualization in traditional storybooks acts as a link between children's experiences and their cultural world, bridging the understanding of values through affective and contextual symbolic language. This provides a stronger pedagogical dimension because it involves the emotional realm and visual perception of children in understanding the meaning of cultural values.

One of the teachers who was involved as a collaborator in this research, explained that illustrations in traditional books are able to bridge students' understanding of values that were previously considered abstract:

"When we only read stories without pictures, children can repeat the story but don't understand the meaning. But once there is an illustration that depicts traditional ceremonies or mutual cooperation in the fields, they can relate it to activities in their own homes or villages. So values such as respect for ancestors or protecting nature feel more real. The children asked a lot of questions and told back about their own experiences. It's a remarkable effect of images that fit the cultural context," (GR03 – Interview, April 13, 2025).

Meanwhile, from the illustrator's side, the involvement of traditional figures in the depiction process turned out to provide new nuances in their creative work approach. A senior illustrator who worked on three of the eight books analyzed in the study revealed his reflection:

"I usually just accept the script and immediately draw according to my interpretation. But in this project, we were asked to discuss with teachers and traditional leaders before starting to draw. For example, when drawing ulos cloth or the shape of a Tongkonan house, I got a direct explanation from a local figure about the symbolic meaning behind the patterns and colors. As a result, the images I make are not just decorative, but carry a sense of meaning. Children also become more appreciative because they feel that this is a story about themselves," (IL04 – Interview, April 15, 2025).

More than merely reinforcing narratives, this study advances the critical argument that the transmission of cultural values cannot rely solely on text to foster children's understanding and emotional attachment. In this regard, illustration assumes a central role in meaning construction, functioning as a primary mode of cultural mediation rather than a decorative supplement (Park et al., 2021). Rich depictions of cultural symbols, such as vernacular architecture, traditional attire, community rituals, and human–nature interactions, produce affective effects that are difficult to replicate through narrative text alone. These findings align with multimodal literacy theory (Sikitime, 2023), which emphasizes that learning becomes more effective when multiple representational modes—text, visuals, and symbols—work together to shape comprehension.

Beyond theoretical enrichment in visual communication design and cultural pedagogy, this study also contributes methodologically through its collaborative research approach. Unlike earlier works that predominantly relied on descriptive content analysis, this research actively engaged multiple stakeholders: teachers as mediators of value learning, illustrators as creators of visual forms, and cultural leaders as custodians of authenticity. Such collaboration fosters cross-disciplinary dialogue, ensures contextual accuracy, and demonstrates that cultural representation in educational media requires both artistic and ethical accountability.

This participatory framework allowed the study not only to evaluate the final product (the storybook) but also to trace the creative and pedagogical processes underlying its development. As such, it strengthens the principle of participatory design in locally grounded educational media—an approach still rarely operationalized in basic education practices. This methodological distinction represents a significant contribution by offering a replicable model for producing culturally responsive learning resources that are inclusive, reflective, and community-rooted.

The implications extend beyond Indonesia. In an era dominated by globalized cultural content, embedding authentic local narratives in educational media becomes essential for nurturing children's cultural identity and resilience (Gennaro & Miller, 2021). Thus, the integration of traditional storytelling

with visual illustration is not only a strategy for literacy and character education but also a mechanism for cultural sustainability. Theoretically, this study expands the discourse on multimodal literacy by positioning illustration as a cultural mediator; methodologically, it introduces a participatory design framework; and practically, it offers an educational model capable of balancing aesthetic quality, pedagogical function, and cultural authenticity.

3.4. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

The success of conveying cultural values through picture storybooks is highly determined by the synergy between various key actors in the education ecosystem, namely teachers, illustrators, and traditional figures. The collaboration between the three forms an important link in the process of production, presentation, and interpretation of cultural meaning to children. The teacher acts as the main mediator who not only conveys the content of the story, but also facilitates the reflection of values through discussions and follow-up activities in the classroom. When teachers are actively involved in reading sessions together, they are able to elaborate on the cultural context of the story and bridge the child's understanding of local symbols that may be unfamiliar. For example, when reading a story that features a specific traditional ceremony, teachers who have a cultural understanding can explain the meaning of the ritual and relate it to the values of daily life that are relevant to the child. From the illustrator's side, the main challenge lies precisely in access to authentic and verified cultural references. A freelance illustrator involved in an adaptation project of an indigenous story from East Kalimantan revealed the limitations he experienced in creating culturally accurate images:

"I was asked to draw characters in Dayak traditional stories, but there was not enough visual documentation. I just rely on online searches that are often inconsistent. Finally, I just drew based on intuition and film references. But after I sent it, there was a traditional leader who said that the motif of his clothes was not suitable. It makes me feel guilty. Since then, I have always asked for assistance from local people if I can get a similar project," (IL06 – Interview, April 20, 2025).

Illustrators hold a central responsibility in translating narrative texts into culturally meaningful visuals. However, interview findings indicate that many still rely on personal imagination rather than ethnographic references. The use of generic visuals risks misconceptions or even distortions of local culture. For example, traditional clothing is sometimes drawn without reference to authentic motifs and colors, and house architectures are illustrated by blending elements from different regions, thereby weakening cultural authenticity. This highlights the urgency of strengthening illustrators' capacity in visual ethnography through access to archives, cultural documentation, and targeted training (Handoko et al., 2021).

On the other hand, teachers face limitations in accessing traditional story sources adapted for children's learning. Although many teachers express interest in using folklore, available materials are often linguistically complex, lack visual support, or fail to reflect the local context (Pratiwi & Suwandi, 2021). On the other hand, teachers face limitations in accessing traditional story sources adapted for children's learning. Although many teachers express interest in using folklore, available materials are often linguistically complex, lack visual support, or fail to reflect the local context (Sultana et al., 2023). The absence of standardized visual modules based on cultural values also makes implementation ad hoc, relying heavily on individual teacher initiative without systemic backing from curricula or institutions (Sultana et al., 2023). In fact, within the Independent Curriculum framework, culture-based learning is emphasized as an important avenue for differentiation and character development. A classroom teacher from elementary school explained the difficulties she often faced when finding teaching materials that were appropriate for the local cultural context:

"I once tried to insert Bugis folklore in Indonesian lessons, but the material was too difficult for children to understand. The language is too high-pitched, and there are no supporting illustrations. The children are not interested in the end, even though the grades are good. If there was a version of the story that had been adapted to the children's world and there were pictures, I am sure they would be more enthusiastic. We need ready-to-use sources but still respect the authenticity of the culture," (GR05 – Interview, April 18, 2025).

The teacher's statement shows the gap between the potential of local cultural richness and the availability of relevant and applicable educational media in the classroom. The absence of visual guidance and adaptive texts is one of the main obstacles in the integration of traditional narratives into the teaching and learning process.

In addition to technical obstacles, this study identifies structural challenges that hinder the optimal use of traditional stories as educational media. At the policy level, there is still no explicit regulation encouraging collaboration between schools and cultural communities in the development of teaching materials. Consequently, indigenous leaders, who serve as custodians of traditional narratives and local philosophical knowledge, are rarely integrated into formal educational processes (Horsthemke, 2021). This omission reduces opportunities for intergenerational cultural continuity and diminishes the richness that collaborative knowledge production could bring. From the perspective of curriculum developers, the absence of clear technical guidelines for embedding local cultural elements into flexible learning designs remains a significant barrier (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, several supporting factors emerged from the findings. Schools that foster partnerships with local artist groups and cultural preservation institutions demonstrate higher-quality learning materials and stronger student engagement with culture-based illustrated stories. Teachers who have undergone multicultural education training and gained access to validated story sources are more successful in designing contextual, meaningful lessons. Similarly, illustrators who collaborate directly with indigenous figures during the creative process produce visual works that are not only aesthetically appealing but also culturally authentic, and these products receive enthusiastic responses from both students and parents.

Taken together, these findings underline the importance of systemic and collaborative support in advancing culture-based education. Strengthening networks among schools, cultural communities, illustrators, and curriculum developers is a critical prerequisite for ensuring sustainability and broader impact. Furthermore, the establishment of an open-access database of local cultural illustrations would provide teachers and illustrators with reliable visual references, minimizing cultural inaccuracies and enhancing pedagogical effectiveness. Ultimately, culture-based character education should not remain a fragmented initiative of individual schools but evolve into a collective movement, supported by policy infrastructure, shared visual resources, and continuous professional development.

3.5. Implications of Scientific Findings and Contributions

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of cultural literacy in locality-based basic education. The findings demonstrate that traditional narratives, when supported by culturally accurate visualizations, function not merely as storytelling media but as pedagogical instruments for shaping children's cultural awareness and identity. Through this multimodal approach, values such as gotong royong, respect for ancestors, and ecological wisdom are not only communicated but also internalized affectively and cognitively, supporting transformative rather than merely informative learning (Zhou et al., 2025). This aligns with Vygotsky's social constructivism, where meaning is constructed through social and cultural interaction (Vygotsky, 2018). Visualized traditional stories act as a bridge between cognitive knowledge and socio-cultural context, thereby facilitating learning within the child's zone of proximal development (Ismail, 2024).

Practically, the research highlights the potential of culture-based picture books as inclusive and empowering learning media. In the context of Indonesia's Independent Curriculum, such media support differentiation, project-based learning, and character education, while fostering creativity and collaboration (Wang et al., 2023). For example, classroom projects that retell folklore through images can integrate literacy, arts, and moral reflection. In addition, this study emphasizes the role of visual communication design in education. Illustration should be recognized not as a decorative element but as an integral part of meaning-making and cultural transmission. This underscores the need for systematic teaching modules and learning resources that integrate narratives and visuals across diverse regional contexts, in both print and digital forms (Syahfitri, 2024). Finally, the research encourages

cross-sector collaboration among educators, illustrators, and cultural institutions to produce pedagogically sound and culturally authentic media, thereby reinforcing children's cultural identity and resilience in the era of globalization.

3.6. Limitations and Recommendations

This study has several limitations that provide direction for future research. First, the scope of participants and cultural representation remains limited to certain regions in Indonesia, whereas cultural diversity extends across islands, provinces, and even districts. Future studies should adopt a broader multicultural approach, particularly by involving underrepresented regions such as Eastern Indonesia (Fitriadi et al., 2024).

Second, children's role in this research was largely observational, without active involvement in evaluating story media. Considering that children's interpretations cannot be fully captured through adult observation, further research should actively engage children using participatory methods—such as short interviews, expressive drawing tasks, or simple reflection sheets—to obtain more valid insights (All et al., 2021). Third, there is a need to develop evaluation instruments that measure the authenticity and effectiveness of cultural illustrations in children's storybooks. Such tools should be multidisciplinary, covering not only aesthetic quality but also symbolic depth, cultural accuracy, and the impact on value formation. This will contribute to much-needed quality standards for culture-based educational media.

Finally, integrating digital technology—including interactive e-books, augmented reality, or gamified applications—offers opportunities to create immersive, multisensory learning experiences (Sanfilippo et al., 2022; Lampropoulos et al., 2022). For example, children could explore 3D models of traditional houses, hear regional music, or engage with interactive storylines. However, technological innovation must remain grounded in authentic cultural values, requiring cross-sector collaboration between educators, cultural communities, illustrators, and developers to ensure both relevance and substance.

4. CONCLUSION

This research shows that picture storybooks based on traditional narratives are an effective educational medium in instilling local cultural values in elementary school children. The integration between narrative and contextual visual illustrations not only improves cognitive understanding, but also builds the child's emotional attachment to values such as mutual cooperation, respect for ancestors, and ecological wisdom. When illustrations are able to represent cultural symbols authentically and attractively, children are more likely to relate the message of the story to their own life experiences.

The success of this approach is largely determined by the collaboration between teachers, illustrators, and traditional leaders. Teachers act as facilitators of value learning, illustrators as visual translators of culture, and traditional leaders as guardians of the authenticity of traditional meanings. However, various challenges are still faced, such as the limitation of accurate visual references, the absence of age-appropriate story sources for children, and the lack of institutional policies that support cross-sector synergy in the production of cultural-based learning media.

Conceptually and practically, this research makes an important contribution to the development of locality-based curriculum and teaching media. These findings encourage the need for a multimodal literacy approach, strengthening teacher and illustrator training, and creating teaching tools that combine the power of narrative and visual in a culturally sensitive way. In the digital and global era, this approach is an important strategy in building a strong children's identity rooted in the noble values of the nation.

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