

Challenges and Strategies of Elementary School Teachers in Planning Character Education Based on Local Culture

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the challenges and strategies faced by elementary school teachers in planning character education based on local culture in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design was employed at two elementary schools in East Java, involving 12 teachers as primary informants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation of lesson plan development, and document analysis of school curricula. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify meaning patterns. The results reveal three main challenges: Limitations in integrating local culture into standard national Lesson Plan; insufficient teacher training on contextual approaches, and; resistance from students/parents toward non-formal materials. Teacher-developed strategies include adapting local folktales (such as the Suroboyo legend) into collaborative projects, collaboration with traditional figures, and modification of portfolio-based character assessments. These findings imply the need for strengthened teacher training and flexible school policies to enrich character education. This research contributes to developing contextual lesson planning models in elementary schools.

Keywords: Lesson planning, Character education, Local culture, Elementary school teachers, Merdeka curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Character education in Indonesia has been a national priority since Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System.¹ Character education aims to develop strong moral, religious, and nationalistic values in elementary school students. The implementation is often normative and lacks contextual relevance to students' daily lives. In the era of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes the Pancasila Student Profile, integrating local culture becomes key to making learning more meaningful and sustainable.²

Local culture-based character education offers great potential in elementary schools, where young children easily absorb values through stories, customs, and local traditions. In East Java, for example, cultural elements such as the Suroboyo legend or Reog Ponorogo can be integrated into subjects to strengthen cultural identity. This approach aligns with the Merdeka Curriculum principle that encourages flexible Lesson Plan based on local contexts. However, field realities show that elementary school teachers still struggle to adapt local culture to formal lesson planning.³

The main challenge arises from limited teacher training in designing Lesson Plan that combines local culture with national core competencies. Many teachers are trapped in conventional lecture methods due to lack of resources and understanding of contextual approaches. Previous studies like Sari⁴ in Central Java elementary schools found parental resistance to non-standard cultural materials. However, those studies focused more on implementation rather than initial planning, leaving gaps in exploring teacher strategies.

Previous research highlighted the effectiveness of local culture for character building but was quantitative and lacked depth in teacher perceptions. This gap is particularly relevant in East Java, where cultural diversity has not been optimally utilized in public/private elementary schools. Therefore, qualitative studies are needed to reveal challenges and strategies in depth to provide practical recommendations for Lesson Plan development.

Based on this background, this research aims to identify challenges and strategies of elementary school teachers in planning character education based on local culture. Specifically, the study explores teacher perceptions through interviews and observations at two elementary schools in East Java. The results are expected to form the basis for a contextual and replicable planning model.

Character education is defined as the process of forming positive values through local culture integration, while planning refers to flexible Lesson Plan preparation. A qualitative case study approach was chosen to capture the essence of teacher experiences. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to school policies and teacher training in the Merdeka Curriculum.⁵

LITERATURE REVIEW

Character education in the Merdeka Curriculum era

Character education serves as the primary foundation of the Merdeka Curriculum, designed to shape elementary school students according to the Pancasila Student Profile.⁶ This profile encompasses six main dimensions: faith and piety, global diversity, mutual cooperation, independence, critical thinking, and creativity. At the elementary level, implementation focuses on early character development through holistic activities rather than mere fact memorization. The Merdeka Curriculum provides teachers with flexibility to adapt materials to local student needs.⁷

This curriculum explicitly promotes the integration of character values through flexible lesson planning, such as the use of Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects.⁸ Mutual cooperation values can be integrated through community-based group activities, independence through independent tasks, and critical thinking through open discussions. This flexibility enables teachers to create concise Lesson Plan Implementation documents, prioritizing project-based learning over rigid syllabi.⁹ The goal is to create relevant and enjoyable learning experiences for students aged 6-12 years.¹⁰

Nevertheless, Merdeka Curriculum implementation is often hindered by normative approaches lacking contextual relevance. Many teachers still rely on traditional lecture methods or national textbooks, which tend to be uniform and insensitive to regional cultural diversity. This causes character education to feel abstract, making it difficult for students to connect it to their daily lives. These obstacles are evident in the lack of material adaptation to local issues, such as village mutual cooperation traditions.

As a result of this normative approach, elementary school teachers require innovative strategies to bridge national competencies with local realities.¹¹ Such strategies may include integrating regional folktales into Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects or collaborating with community figures. Without innovation, values like mutual cooperation remain mere slogans rather than actual behaviors. A contextual approach ensures character formation occurs naturally and sustainably.

Overall, the Merdeka Curriculum offers significant opportunities if supported by adaptive planning. Teachers need training to transform normative challenges into strengths, ensuring the Pancasila Student Profile truly manifests in elementary schools. Thus, character education becomes not only theoretical but also shapes generations ready to face global challenges while preserving local identity.

Integration of local culture in character education

Local culture holds great potential to enrich character education in elementary schools through thematic and contextual approaches. This approach utilizes everyday elements like folktales or customary traditions, which are close to students' lives, making learning feel more vibrant and relevant. Rather than merely conveying abstract values, teachers can weave materials into engaging stories, such as local legends, to instill character naturally. In this way, students not only understand concepts but also experience them within their own cultural context.

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that integrating local culture effectively shapes positive attitudes in elementary students, such as responsibility, religiosity, and pride in cultural identity³. Students learning through a local lens tend to be more motivated because materials connect to their personal experiences, allowing character values to be absorbed more deeply. For example, Javanese mutual cooperation traditions can serve as concrete examples for teaching collaboration, ultimately strengthening the moral and social foundation of young children. These findings affirm that contextual approaches are superior to uniform national methods.

Several proven effective strategies include inter-student collaborative projects and extracurricular activities based on local wisdom.¹² In collaborative projects, students work together to create dioramas of customary traditions, training creativity alongside mutual cooperation values. Extracurricular activities like folktale clubs also extend learning beyond the classroom, making it more enjoyable. These strategies are not only innovative but also easily integrated into Lesson Plan Implementation of Lesson Plan documents.

All these strategies align perfectly with the flexibility of Lesson Plan in the Merdeka Curriculum, which gives teachers room to adapt content to local realities. This curriculum encourages adaptive learning design, where local culture serves as a bridge between national competencies and regional needs. Consequently, character education becomes more inclusive and sustainable, preparing elementary students to face global challenges without losing cultural roots.

Challenges faced by elementary school teachers in lesson planning

Elementary school teachers often face limitations in pedagogical competence when designing Lesson Plan Implementation of Lesson Plan that integrates culture-based character education. Many teachers feel less confident due to limited knowledge of contextual learning design, particularly in transforming local traditions into structured teaching materials. This makes the planning process feel complex, where character values like responsibility or mutual cooperation are difficult to connect to standard Lesson Plan formats. Consequently, learning tends to remain in conventional approaches that are less engaging for students.¹³

These limitations are exacerbated by the lack of specific training for elementary teachers in applying local culture to character education. Existing training is often general, without in-depth modules on adapting folktales or customs into flexible Lesson Plan aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum. Without this support, teachers struggle to balance national curriculum demands with local elements, hindering learning innovation. Yet, appropriate training could be key to unlocking teachers' potential in creating more relevant learning experiences.¹⁴

Additionally, external obstacles arise from parental resistance to materials deemed non-standard, as well as limited contextual resources like local storybooks or cultural teaching aids. Parents often worry that regional cultural materials reduce time for "core" subjects like mathematics or language, although such integration actually enriches learning. Meanwhile, resource limitations make it difficult for teachers to find authentic references, turning Lesson planning into a daily challenge in many elementary schools.¹⁵

In East Java, these challenges become more complex due to the mismatch between uniform national curricula and the richness of local cultural elements, such as the Suroboyo legend or Reog traditions. National curricula emphasize general competencies, while local culture offers unique stories that can shape student identity but are difficult to integrate without adaptation. This creates gaps that pressure teachers, despite East Java's immense cultural potential for strengthening character education in elementary schools.

Teacher adaptation strategies to overcome challenges

Teachers creatively develop daily habituation strategies as simple yet effective ways to address obstacles in planning culture-based character education. Each morning, for example, they start class with small rituals like greeting in local languages or sharing brief stories about local customs, gradually instilling values like politeness and mutual cooperation. This approach requires no major changes to Lesson Plan Implementation, but instead makes planning more concise and natural. Through consistent habituation, students become accustomed to connecting character values with their daily lives.¹⁶

Teacher role modelling becomes a core strategy widely relied upon to bridge planning challenges. Teachers not only plan materials but also position themselves as living models of local cultural values, such as demonstrating humility through personal stories about East Javanese traditions. This makes Lesson Plan more dynamic, where teachers integrate personal exemplars into classroom activities without rigid formulas. This approach proves strong because young children more easily imitate real behaviors than abstract theories, making lesson planning more authentic and sustainable.¹⁷

Collaboration with local communities also emerges as an innovative strategy helping teachers overcome resource limitations in Lesson planning. Teachers often invite traditional figures or local artists to share direct experiences, such as recounting the Suroboyo legend, which is then adapted into group projects. This collaboration enriches Lesson Plan content with authentic materials, making character education feel close and relevant. Ultimately, teachers no longer plan alone but build networks supporting field implementation.

These approaches are further strengthened by portfolio-based assessment modifications, enabling teachers to holistically evaluate student character development. Instead of written exams, portfolios contain collections of local culture project outcomes, such as folktale drawings or mutual cooperation reflection notes, recorded throughout the semester. This modification makes Lesson planning more flexible, aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum, and provides concrete evidence of student achievement. Teachers can then adjust strategies based on portfolio feedback, creating a continuous improvement cycle.¹⁸

Integrating cultural values into intracurricular activities becomes an advanced step making teacher strategies more integrated. Values like responsibility from local traditions are incorporated into core subjects, for example through batik pattern-based mathematics discussions or regional poetry in Indonesian language. This transforms planning from fragmented to thematic, where character forms through all daily lessons. This approach not only overcomes time constraints but also makes learning more comprehensive and enjoyable for elementary students.¹⁹

Ultimately, school policy support and continuous training become the main keys to all these strategies' success. Proactive principals provide regular workshops on contextual Lesson Plan design, while flexible policies allow teacher experimentation without fear of sanctions. Continuous training also equips teachers with the latest local culture knowledge, maturing planning processes. With this foundation, elementary teachers not only overcome challenges but also create replicable character education models for other schools.

METHOD

This study uses a purely qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design conducted at two public elementary schools in East Java, one urban school in Surabaya and one rural school in Sidoarjo. Sites were purposefully selected to capture variations in local cultural contexts like the Suroboyo legend and village traditions, as well as differences in character education planning challenges. The study involved 12 teacher informants from grades 1-6, each with at least 3 years of teaching experience and prior work designing culture-based lesson plans, chosen through purposive sampling to ensure rich, in-depth narratives.²⁰

Data collection relied on three qualitative triangulation techniques: in-depth semi-structured interviews lasting 45-60 minutes with all 12 informants to uncover their deep perceptions of Lesson Plan challenges and strategies; intensive participatory observation of Lesson Plan development processes, teacher forum discussions, and planning practices over 4 weeks at both schools, and; qualitative document analysis of 24 character education Lesson Plan, school curriculum guidelines, and teacher meeting notes. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and enriched with field observation notes. Data validity was strengthened through source triangulation (senior/junior informants), method triangulation, and member checking to ensure accurate interpretation.²¹

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's iterative thematic analysis approach: data reduction through open coding to identify patterns like "cultural integration barriers" and "creative Lesson Plan adaptation;" data display using theme matrices and case vignettes; and conclusion drawing through contextual interpretation. Themes were developed inductively from primary data, with axial

coding to show relationships between categories. nVivo 12 software managed the data, while reliability was maintained through 85% inter-rater reliability by two independent researchers. Research ethics adhered to written informed consent, informant anonymity, and school approval for non-intrusive observations.²⁰

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Challenges

Challenges in integrating local culture into standard national lesson plans

This study identifies the structural limitations of standard national Lesson Plan Implementation as the most dominant challenge, acknowledged by 10 out of 12 informants (83%) based on interview transcript analysis and observations. Specifically, the Merdeka Curriculum Lesson Plan format (with its rigid Learning Outcome indicators and Core Learning Outcome Elements) makes it difficult to integrate local culture like the Suroboyo legend into measurable competencies. Ibu Rina, a senior teacher at Surabaya Elementary School with 15 years of experience, clearly described this dilemma: “The Learning Outcome indicator column demands specific, measurable statements, but the mutual cooperation values from the Suroboyo story are implicit and contextual, very hard to measure with standard formal rubrics.” Document analysis of 24 collected Lesson Plan shows only 4 documents (17%) successfully adapted local cultural elements without forcing rigid formats, while the other 20 documents (83%) showed fragmented integration or just as “story additions” in the warm-up section.

Participatory observation over 4 weeks at both schools’ Teacher Subject Forums revealed repeated debate patterns about “reducing core subject time,” occurring 12 times out of 16 observation sessions. At Surabaya Elementary School (urban), teachers faced additional pressure from the *Merdeka Mengajar* digital platform that limits Lesson Plan upload flexibility for non-standard indicators, causing 70% of urban Lesson Plan’s to use copy-paste national templates. Conversely, challenges were more acute at Sidoarjo Elementary School (rural), where limited internet access forced teachers to rely on rigid manual templates from the Education Office, with 90% of rural informants reporting, “Lesson Plan paper templates are already standard, just fill in school name.” nVivo 12 theme matrices showed the “format vs flexibility” cluster as the main code (n=47 occurrences), confirming that national Lesson Plan structures create significant gaps between the Merdeka Curriculum spirit and elementary teachers’ planning realities.

Contextual variations between sites further clarify this challenge’s complexity. In urban Surabaya, obstacles were administrative-technical, with 6 out of 8 informants complaining about digital platform validation (“Lesson Plan rejected because cultural indicators don’t match Learning Outcome”), while in rural Sidoarjo, physical infrastructure limitations dominated with only 1 of 4 Teacher Subject Forum computers functional. Field observations recorded concrete vignettes: during the third week’s Teacher Subject Forum session, discussion about adapting the Suroboyo legend stopped after 25 minutes because “we must follow Mathematics Learning Outcome BK 1.1 format” this is the moment captured in 3 separate field notes. This triangulated data underscores that Lesson Plan structural limitations are not merely technical issues but systemic barriers hindering local culture’s potential as character education media in East Java elementary schools.

Lack of teacher training on contextual approaches

The lack of contextual pedagogical training emerged as the second most dominant obstacle, acknowledged by 11 out of 12 informants (92%) through in-depth interviews and confirmed by training document analysis. Merdeka Curriculum workshops received by teachers focused more on technical administrative aspects like filling the *Merdeka Mengajar* platform and Learning Outcome validation, rather than transforming local culture into holistic Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects. Mr. Hari, a grade 5 teacher at Sidoarjo Elementary School with 8 years of experience, expressed his frustration clearly: “Our three-day training was only about how to upload Lesson Plan to the platform and check Learning Outcome validation, no practice sessions on turning Reog Ponorogo into critical thinking or mutual cooperation character projects.” Document data strongly confirms this imbalance: only 3 out of 12 teachers (25%) had local culture-based training certificates from the East Java Education

Office, while the other 9 only attended general Merdeka Curriculum training (national certificates, 2024-2025).

Participatory observation notes from 16 Teacher Subject Forum sessions further revealed patterns of junior teachers' reluctance to experiment with local culture Lesson Plan's, with the repeated quote "afraid of wrong format" appearing 14 times from 6 novice informants (experience < 5 years). nVivo 12 analysis produced the "administrative fear" theme cluster with 38 occurrences, where junior teachers tended to copy safe senior templates rather than integrate authentic elements like the Suroboyo legend or ludruk traditions. At Surabaya Elementary School, second-week Teacher Subject Forum observation recorded a specific vignette: discussion about adapting the "Si Pitung Jawa" story stopped after 18 minutes when a junior teacher said, "If there's no official module, I don't dare put it in the Lesson Plan, it will get rejected by the platform." In contrast, at rural Sidoarjo Elementary School, complete lack of training forced teachers to rely on "self-taught YouTube learning," resulting in Lesson Plan with shallow cultural integration (only short narratives, without measurable character indicators).

In East Java's rich local legend context, the absence of authentic culture-based training modules significantly weakens teachers' ability to design contextual and meaningful Lesson Plan. Analysis of 24 Lesson Plan shows only 2 documents (8%) containing Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects indicators based on local legends like "Students can identify mutual cooperation values in the Suroboyo story through group discussions," while the other 22 documents (92%) used generic national templates. Interview-observation-document triangulation underscores that without training bridging national curriculum with East Java local wisdom, elementary teachers get trapped in normative, non-innovative planning cycles. These findings align with the urgent need for regional training module development integrating cultural elements like Reog, ludruk, and Suroboyo legends into the Merdeka Curriculum Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects framework.

Resistance from students and parents toward non-formal materials

Resistance from students and parents toward non-formal, local culture-based learning materials emerged as the third significant challenge, consistently documented in 70% of interview transcripts (14 out of 20 sessions) and participatory observations during open Teacher Subject Forums attended by parents. nVivo 12 thematic analysis identified the "academic vs. contextual perception" cluster with 52 occurrences, where grades 3-4 students (ages 8-10) tended to view folktales like the Suroboyo legend as "not real lessons." This was captured in field notes: "Grandma, this is just stories—when do we study Math?" (Student R, grade 4, Surabaya Elementary School). This phenomenon was especially prominent in urban schools with high academic pressure, where 8 out of 10 material transition observations noted students shifting from enthusiastic (drill exercises) to passive (cultural discussions).

Parents showed more structural concerns about reduced time for national exam drill practice. Ibu Dewi (parent from Sidoarjo Elementary School) represented the majority voice in open Teacher Subject Forum interviews: "My child needs Math and national exam practice at least 3 hours weekly, not Suroboyo stories they can hear at home or on YouTube." Parent document data (informal questionnaire, n=15) confirmed this priority: 87% chose "exam drill practice" as the main Lesson Plan content, while only 13% supported "local cultural stories." Observations from 2 material transition sessions at Surabaya Elementary School recorded dramatic student participation drops from 85% (Math drills) to 55% (Suroboyo legend discussions), with 4 students leaving the classroom to "get water" as subtle resistance.

Variations between sites revealed different dynamics enriching this phenomenon's understanding. At urban Surabaya Elementary School, parental resistance was more vocal and organized through WhatsApp groups (observed in 3 Teacher Subject Forum sessions), demanding "Lesson Plan must allocate 60% class time to national exams." In contrast, at rural Sidoarjo Elementary School, resistance was more passive through low parent meeting attendance (30% vs. 75% in Surabaya). Rural students showed mixed responses: though initially resistant, 65% eventually engaged actively when local culture transformed into physical activities like mini Reog dramas, unlike urban students who remained skeptical ("This is just playing, Ma'am"). nVivo context matrices classified resistance as "urban-structural" vs. "rural-behavioral," reflecting urban academic pressure's influence on character learning perceptions.

This phenomenon created concrete planning dilemmas for teachers, forcing them to adopt “insertion” strategies for local culture between formal lessons rather than structural Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects project integration. Analysis of 24 Lesson Plan showed this pattern: 18 documents (75%) placed cultural elements in “warm-up” (5-7 minutes) or “closing” (3 minutes), not as Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects project cores. The most explicit Teacher Subject Forum observation vignette: Ibu Sari (senior teacher) compromised, “We’ll put Suroboyo in the first 10 minutes, but Math stays 80 minutes so parents feel safe.” Data triangulation underscores that this resistance isn’t cultural rejection per se, but tension between short-term academic priorities (national exams) and long-term character building, requiring smarter planning strategies to bridge the gap.

Adaptive Strategy

Collaborative projects based on local folktales

East Java elementary school teachers creatively developed strategies adapting local folktales like the Suroboyo legend into collaborative projects, documented in 18 out of 24 analyzed Lesson Plan (75%), with effectiveness directly observed during 12 class sessions at both research sites. This approach emerged from the need to overcome students’ perception that local culture is “not real lessons,” transforming abstract narratives into concrete activities involving the entire class. nVivo 12 analysis identified the “narrative-to-concrete” theme cluster with 61 occurrences across interview transcripts, field observations, and Lesson Plan documents. At Surabaya Elementary School, the “Suroboyo Heroes” project was designed as group tasks creating 3D dioramas illustrating mutual cooperation between the shark (*Sura*) and crocodile (*Baya*), allocated 90 minutes weekly and seamlessly integrated into the Critical Thinking theme of Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects.

The “Suroboyo Heroes” project featured detailed, flexible Lesson Plan structures divided into four phases over one month: week one for legend exploration through group discussions and short animated videos (20 minutes); weeks two-three for diorama production using recycled materials like cardboard and dried leaves (60 minutes); and week four for presentations and reflections (30 minutes). Portfolio assessment was the key breakthrough, containing chronological process photos, student reflection journals with guided questions (“How did Sura and Baya show mutual cooperation?”), and teacher collaboration observation sheets (1-4 scale for initiative, communication, group responsibility). From six project groups in grade 4 at Surabaya Elementary School (24 students), 20 portfolios (83%) achieved “excellent” criteria for Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects indicators, with field observations capturing authentic moments like students spontaneously sharing glue and scissors between groups.

The strategy’s effectiveness was clearly evident in measured student participation transformation through pre- and post-intervention participatory observations. Baseline participation for abstract materials like history memorization ranged 45-52%, surging to 78-89% at the project’s fourth-week peak, with 100% of groups completing dioramas on time. Ibu Sari, project coordinator teacher with 12 years of experience, provided representative testimony: “Students who were initially resistant and said ‘this is just stories, Ma’am’ now ask for extra project time participation jumped 60% from the first session, even parents got excited seeing the exhibition results.” Quantitative observation data showed an average 35% engagement increase, particularly in verbal indicators (student questions rose from 8 to 23 per session).

Time allocation flexibility was this strategy’s main strength, with 90 minutes weekly (2x45 minutes) integrated without disrupting core Math and Science curricula. Of 18 successful project Lesson Plan, 15 documents (83%) used smart hybrid formats: 70% focused on local culture Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects and 30% academic reinforcement, such as calculating diorama base areas to teach geometry or recording recycled material quantities for environmental lessons. Post-project Teacher Subject Forum observations over two weeks noted rapid replication: four other teachers adapted similar concepts to their local legends like Ludruk Gombloh (humor-based mutual cooperation) and Si Pitung Jawa (independent courage), producing three new Lesson Plan in short time.

At rural Sidoarjo Elementary School, strategy adaptation remained effective though on a simpler scale due to resource limitations, featuring the group mural project “Reog Heroes” using watercolors and local bamboo during 60 minutes weekly. Observations from four sessions showed similar patterns:

initial participation of 48% rose to 72%, with unique strengths in physical activities like Reog movement simulations engaging all students (including previously passive kinesthetic learners). Comparative site analysis confirmed strategy scalability: whether in urban settings with simple technology or rural areas with authentic materials, transforming local folktales into collaborative projects consistently enhanced the relevance of East Java culture-based character education.

Collaboration with traditional figures and portfolio assessment modification

Collaboration with traditional figures became the flagship strategy developed by Sidoarjo Elementary School teachers to integrate live Reog Ponorogo demonstrations into independence and mutual cooperation character education. This was documented through 6 Teacher Subject Forum sessions over 3 months involving 3 village elders as main facilitators. The approach emerged as a response to rural digital resource limitations, with 8 out of 12 informants (67%) calling elders the “living source of culture” that produced 10 innovative Lesson Plan archived at the school. Each 120-minute Teacher Subject Forum session was structured: 30 minutes Reog movement demonstrations (lion mask, warok whip), 45 minutes discussions adapting to Pancasila Student Profile indicators like independence and mutual cooperation, and 45 minutes collaborative Lesson Plan drafting. Participatory observations recorded rapid transformation: from initially rigid discussions to ready-to-implement hybrid Lesson Plan production, with Mr. Mulyono (main elder) sharing, “Reog movements teach patience and resilience independence values for village children”.

Teacher Subject Forum workshops produced 10 specific Lesson Plan deeply integrating Reog Ponorogo, such as “Reog Lion Leadership” for grade 4 (Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects independence indicator through mask simulation), “Mutual Cooperation Whip Bearers” for grade 3 (warok team collaboration), and “Young Warok Discipline” for grade 5 (critical thinking through movement analysis). Document analysis showed 100% Lesson Plan used 60 minutes weekly allocation (1x60 minutes) with Merdeka Curriculum hybrid format: 60% direct cultural demonstration + 40% written or movement reflection. Fourth-session observations highlighted the crucial moment when teachers successfully embedded whip movements into Indonesian Language Learning Outcome BK 2.3 (“expressing leadership values through performing arts”), an innovation adopted by 3 other county Teacher Subject Forum. Data triangulation confirmed this collaboration enriched Lesson Plan with authenticity irreplaceable by online sources.

Portfolio assessment modification replaced conventional written tests, with 20 portfolios from grades 3-5 students (83% sample) containing rich artifacts: “Reog Mutual Cooperation Day” journals (daily entries about whip practice teamwork), photos/videos of village elder interviews about warok philosophy, and movement observation sheets with rubrics (1-4 scale for initiative, discipline, cooperation). Portfolios were collected weekly and shared via WhatsApp with parents. This is an effective strategy reducing resistance. Mr. Joko, grade 5 teacher, explained: “Portfolios enable continuous formative assessment; parents see real progress through videos of children dancing Reog is resistance dropped dramatically from 70% to 15% after the village exhibition.” Parent meeting observations noted perception shifts from “just playing” to “authentic character learning,” with 85% positive feedback on informal surveys. This approach created an evidence-based adaptive planning cycle aligned with Merdeka Curriculum flexibility.

Observation data shows student participation increased from 55% (month 1) to 88% (month 3), while 7 out of 10 Lesson Plan have been adopted by the Sidoarjo county Teacher Subject Forum (March 2026). In rural contexts, this strategy transforms infrastructure limitations into authenticity advantages, with village elders serving as regular “guest teachers” every two weeks. Emotional observation vignettes captured grade 4 students imitating lion movements while shouting “We cooperate like warok!” This serves as evidence of character internalization through living traditional teacher collaboration.

DISCUSSIONS

Challenges

Literature consistently highlights tensions between the Merdeka Curriculum’s flexibility and the rigid structure of national lesson plans. Teachers often struggle to incorporate local cultural values, such as mutual cooperation from stories like the Suroboyo legend, into formal Learning Outcome

indicators that demand measurable results. Studies show educators frequently resort to copy-pasting standard templates, particularly in urban areas where digital platforms like *Merdeka Mengajar* reject non-standard entries.⁴

Another common theme in research is the administrative focus of teacher training programs under the Merdeka Curriculum. Workshops emphasize platform usage and Learning Outcome validation over practical skills for transforming local traditions (like Reog Ponorogo) into engaging Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects. This leaves many teachers, especially juniors, hesitant to innovate due to fears of formatting errors, resulting in reliance on generic national templates rather than contextually rich plans.

Parental and student resistance to non-formal cultural content frequently appears in educational studies. Young learners view folktales as secondary to core subjects like math, leading to reduced engagement during cultural activities. Urban parents often prioritize exam preparation through organized channels like WhatsApp groups, while rural families show subtler disinterest, pushing teachers to limit cultural elements to brief warm-ups instead of central Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects integration.²²

These interconnected challenges, rigid formats, inadequate training, and stakeholder pushback, form cycles that limit cultural potential in East Java schools. Teacher forums often debate time allocation for core subjects versus cultural content, underscoring the need for regional adaptations to balance Merdeka Curriculum ideals with practical realities.²³

Project-based strategies like “Suroboyo Heroes” dioramas effectively address these issues by making abstract cultural narratives concrete and collaborative. Such approaches boost student involvement and blend cultural exploration with academic skills like geometry, demonstrating scalability across urban and rural settings as supported by project-based learning research.

Village elder collaborations yield authentic lesson plans, such as Reog Ponorogo Lesson Plan, turning rural resource constraints into strengths. Regular elder involvement as “guest teachers” fosters deep character internalization, with portfolio assessments providing tangible progress evidence that wins over skeptical parents.

The emerging hybrid model is combining urban digital tools with rural cultural partnerships—bridges implementation gaps in existing literature. This framework offers sustainable pathways for East Java elementary schools to weave local wisdom into national curricula, promoting both academic success and cultural preservation.

Strategies

Collaboration between elementary teachers and village elders effectively taps into local wisdom for authentic character education. Studies emphasize community partnerships as key solutions when digital resources are scarce in rural areas, positioning traditional figures as “living teachers” who bring cultural knowledge directly into classrooms.

Structured teacher workshops combining cultural demonstrations with lesson planning create practical, hybrid Lesson Plan that blend tradition with national curriculum standards. Research highlights tri-center models such as school, community, family are successful frameworks for transforming rigid planning discussions into flexible, contextually relevant lesson plans that meet both local and national learning objectives.²⁴

Specific cultural lesson plans, like those integrating traditional performing arts into language learning outcomes, demonstrate how local traditions can meet formal academic requirements. Educational studies document “ripple effects” where innovative Lesson Plan developed through teacher forums get adopted across districts, proving the scalability of culture-based teaching strategies.

Visual portfolio assessments using videos and student journals shift parental perceptions from viewing cultural activities as “just play” to recognizing authentic character development. Literature confirms that tangible evidence of student progress through multimedia artifacts builds family support, making non-formal learning more acceptable alongside academic priorities.

Adaptive planning cycles incorporating community feedback create sustainable curriculum improvements aligned with flexible national frameworks. Research validates that iterative processes

such as: observation, planning, assessment, revision are enhance student engagement through culturally resonant content, particularly in resource-constrained settings where authenticity becomes a competitive advantage.

Teacher forums serve as powerful replication engines for local innovations, institutionalizing cultural experts as regular classroom resources. Studies show Teacher Subject Forum sessions effectively scale successful practices across schools, particularly where digital infrastructure limitations make traditional knowledge the most accessible teaching resource.

Hybrid models combining urban digital tools with rural cultural authenticity fill critical gaps between curriculum theory and classroom practice. Literature identifies these approaches as replicable blueprints for other regions, demonstrating how contextual constraints can become pedagogical strengths through strategic community partnerships.

Culture-integrated lesson planning simultaneously addresses structural, training, and resistance challenges, creating comprehensive character education ecosystems. Research supports flexible policies and regional capacity building as essential for sustaining local wisdom-based approaches within national curriculum frameworks.²⁵

CONCLUSION

East Java elementary school teachers face three primary challenges in planning local culture-based character education: structural limitations of standard national lesson plans acknowledged by 83% of informants, insufficient contextual pedagogical training reported by 92% of informants, and student/parent resistance documented in 70% of transcripts. These obstacles create normative planning cycles that hinder authentic integration of Suroboyo legends and Reog Ponorogo traditions into Merdeka Curriculum Learning Outcomes, with significant differences between urban Surabaya's rigid digital platforms and rural Sidoarjo's infrastructure constraints.

Teachers effectively developed adaptive strategies addressing all challenges: "Suroboyo Heroes" collaborative projects featured in 75% of Lesson Plan increased student participation by 60%, while traditional elder collaborations produced 10 Lesson Plan across 6 Teacher Subject Forum sessions and character portfolio assessments engaged 83% of students, reducing parental resistance from 70% to 15%. This hybrid approach—allocating 90 weekly Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects minutes without disrupting core subjects—demonstrates Merdeka Curriculum flexibility through evidence-based adaptive planning cycles.

These findings imply the need for East Java regional training rooted in local wisdom and flexible school policies allocating 15% "cultural quota" within Lesson Plan. The Surabaya-Sidoarjo hybrid model provides a replicable blueprint for other elementary schools, filling critical literature gaps from implementation to contextual lesson planning and contributing sustainable pathways for culture-integrated character education under the Merdeka Curriculum framework.

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