



Implementation of contextual learning to strengthen the character of *gotong royong* and understanding of toraja culture in elementary schools

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Article info	Abstract
Keywords character education, contextual learning, elementary school, student understanding, toraja culture	Globalization has weakened the younger generation's attachment to local culture, including the value of mutual cooperation, which is a crucial part of character education. Elementary schools play a strategic role in reinstalling these values through contextual, meaningful learning. The <i>Tongkonan</i> concept is presented as a learning innovation based on Toraja culture to strengthen students' character and cultural understanding from an early age. This research aims to strengthen the character of mutual cooperation and increase students' understanding of Toraja culture as part of local identity. The research method uses a quantitative approach with a one-group pre-test-post-test quasi-experimental design. The research subject was grade VI elementary school students. Core activities include a miniature Tongkonan-making project and a field visit to the Tongkonan site. This program involves teachers and local community leaders as companions to the activity. Data collection techniques include participatory observation, pre- and post-tests, interviews, and assessment of student activity results. The results of the study show that contextual learning grounded in Toraja culture is effective in strengthening elementary school students' character and understanding of Toraja culture, fostering mutual cooperation.

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1. Introduction

Character education is a conscious, deliberate process to cultivate virtuous behavior in oneself and others (Ares & Cochell, 2022; Lamb & Brooks, 2026). Character education in Indonesia is currently facing serious challenges due to the influence of globalization, which is

increasingly eroding local cultural values (Chen et al., 2026; Herlina et al., 2024). In Toraja, in particular, this phenomenon is evident in the younger generation's declining understanding of the values of local wisdom, which are rich in high philosophy of life and morals. Research reveals that primary school children in Toraja are beginning to lose their connection to their ancestral culture, especially the values embodied in the Tongkonan philosophy, a traditional house that represents family ties, mutual cooperation, and shared responsibility (Mada et al., 2025). Dewi (2022) stated that the native knowledge of Indonesia, including that of the Toraja, is slowly fading as other cultures take over, which emphasizes the urgency of implementing local culture-based learning (Dewi et al., 2022).

The main problem schools face is the lack of character education programs that systematically integrate local Toraja wisdom into the learning process. Primary schools in the Toraja region still rely on a general approach to character education that does not accommodate local cultural values. This causes students not to have a strong emotional attachment to character learning materials, so that the internalization of moral values becomes less optimal (Feng et al., 2025; Sakti et al., 2024a).

The urgent need that needs to be met is the implementation of authentic, contextual, and meaningful character education for students by utilizing the richness of Toraja's local culture (Pradita et al., 2020; Sendana et al., 2025). This research was developed in response to this need by utilizing the concept of *Kasiuluran* (brotherhood), as reflected in *Tongkonan* life, as the basis for student character development. The *Tongkonan Sikola* is specifically a type of *Tongkonan* that functions as a center for traditional education and learning, as well as local science that is inherited from generation to generation in the Toraja kinship system (Hviid, 2022; Pajarianto et al., 2022).

Tongkonan, as a symbol of unity and kinship, has universal values that are very relevant to shaping children's characters, such as mutual cooperation, tolerance, responsibility, and the spirit of togetherness (Mada et al., 2025). These values can be a strong foundation to face the challenges of the globalization era while preserving local cultural identity (Ramdanil Mubarak et al., 2024; Wijaya, 2025). Research by Rombe (2022) explains that *Tongkonan* serves as the center of the Toraja bilateral family system, with ritual and symbolic knowledge passed down from ancestors. Without active nurturing through education and cultural practices, these core values have the potential to be forgotten by future generations (Rombe et al., 2022).

The main goal of this program is to apply *Tongkonan Sikola* as a form of contextual learning rooted in local culture, aiming to instill the value of mutual cooperation (*Tengka*) and improve students' understanding of Toraja culture. This program is designed to provide a meaningful learning experience that is close to students' real lives through collaborative activities that are full of cultural values (Downs, 2017; Sulvinajayanti et al., 2025). The expected benefits include increasing students' understanding of local culture, developing positive character through meaningful learning, and creating a young generation that has a strong cultural identity as well as good character (Sakti et al., 2024b).

The activities consist of two main components: a group project to build a mini *Tongkonan* and field trips to traditional *Tongkonan* houses. Both activities are designed to provide a holistic learning experience, ranging from theoretical understanding to practical application of local wisdom values in daily life. Through this approach, students not only learn about culture from books, but also experience firsthand learning processes that are reflective, collaborative, and contextual (Afendi et al., 2025). In line with Dendo's findings in 2024, learning based on cultural practices such as the *Tongkonan* mini construction is effective in restoring emotional connections and cultural understanding (Dendo et al., 2024).

Learning that emphasizes active interaction, collaboration, and connection to students' realities aligns closely with *Tongkonan Sikola*'s approach. Through local culture-based activities, learning becomes more meaningful and effective in instilling the value of mutual cooperation and strengthening students' understanding of Toraja culture (Zufriady et al., 2025). Through the *Tongkonan* approach, students are invited to understand their own culture more deeply (as the foundation of cultural identity), as well as learn to appreciate differences through collaborative activities, such as cultural projects (Salu et al., 2025; Tulak et al., 2019).

Various previous studies have found the importance of integrating local culture in learning as part of character education (Putra et al., 2024; Richards, 2018). However, research specifically identifying *Tongkonan* as a context for learning to strengthen character and mutual cooperation at the elementary school level remains severely constrained. The novelty of this research lies in using *Tongkonan* traditional hoelementary school learning to strengthen character and mutual cooperation uses as a center for cultural learning activities. Integrated activities include a project to miniaturize *Tongkonan* and an educational visit to *Tongkonan* cultural sites, designed to build character and strengthen understanding of culture. Thus, *Tongkonan Sikola* is a potential contextual and applicative approach to instill the value of mutual cooperation and strengthen students' cultural identity from an early age.

The expected benefits from the implementation of this program include: (1) the growth of the character of mutual cooperation in students through cooperative practices in the context of local culture; (2) increasing students' knowledge and appreciation for Toraja cultural heritage; and (3) the implementation of learning that is relevant to the social and cultural environment of students, so that it can uphold their cultural identity from an early age.

2. Method

This study uses a quantitative approach with a quasi-experimental design of one group (One Group Pre-test – Post-test Design). In this design, students are provided a pre-test before treatment and a post-test after the activity is completed to assess changes in aspects of mutual cooperation and understanding of local culture. Data collection uses pre- and post-test instruments, participatory observation sheets, and assessments of student activity products. The series of contextual learning activities included a mini *Tongkonan* making project and a field trip to the *Tongkonan* traditional house site. The data obtained were analyzed statistically, descriptively, and inferentially (t-test) to determine the difference in scores before and after treatment (Helaluddin et al., 2020; Sugiyono, 2020).

The research subject involved grade VI students located at SDN 10 Kesu' North Toraja. The partner schools were selected based on their willingness to cooperate, the heterogeneity of students' social backgrounds, and their openness to supporting Toraja crocodile-based programs. The sample selection uses the Purposive Sampling technique, with the consideration that the school area still has access to *Tongkonan* as a learning resource.

The program was carried out over four days through several stages of activities. The first stage focuses on introducing Toraja cultural values and the *Tongkonan* philosophy, which serve as the foundation for learning. In the second stage, students are divided into groups to discuss character values relevant to the local cultural context. The third stage is a field visit to the *Tongkonan* traditional house in Ke'te' Kesu, which provides direct experience of local wisdom. The fourth stage involved each group carrying out a project to build a miniature *Tongkonan*, designed to foster the value of mutual cooperation through collaborative work. The program concludes with a reflection stage and a presentation of the work, allowing students to reflect on their learning

experiences and internalize the character values they have learned.

3. Results

3.1 Character of *gotong royong*

Before the program's implementation, pre-test data were collected through assessments and classroom teacher interviews to determine students' initial attitudes toward mutual cooperation. After the program was implemented, post-test data were collected through observation of student behavior during intervention activities and assessment of miniature *Tongkonan* produced in groups. The difference in data sources is intended to ensure that the measurement results not only reflect teachers' perceptions but also provide concrete evidence of students' mutual cooperation practices in the context of culture-based learning.

The analysis reveals that most students are in the medium category. As outlined in Table 1, the average overall pre-test score is 65.7. After four days of program implementation, students are again provided a post-test. The results indicate a significant improvement, with the average overall score reaching 85.7. The improvement is seen consistently on all indicators, as follows:

Table 1. Graph of improvement of pre-test to post-test score

Indicators	Pretest	Posttest
Collaborate	63	87
Tolerance	65.5	84
Social Care	71	86
Likes to Help	64	85
Respecting Others' Opinion	65	86.7
Average	65.7	85.7

The results of the paired sample t-test reveal a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores ($p < 0.05$). In addition to the questionnaire scores, observations during the *Tongkonan* miniature-making activity indicate that more than 80% of the group work collaboratively with a clear division of roles. The accompanying teacher also assesses that students are increasingly active in offering help and showing empathy for friends who are experiencing difficulties. The results of interviews with numerous students reveal that they feel more comfortable working with friends because of the hands-on experience of sharing tasks and completing group projects.

Overall, the research results indicate that a Torajan culture-based program incorporating cultural values, field trips, and a miniature *Tongkonan* project significantly improved students' sense of mutual cooperation. This improvement was evident not only in test scores but also in observations, product assessments, and student reflections.

3.2 Model validity overview

Students' understanding of Toraja culture is measured based on 5 aspects, namely: the function and structure of the *Tongkonan* house, the symbolic meaning of traditional carvings and colors, the importance of maintaining local culture, how to get to know the culture directly, the value of local wisdom such as *Kasiuluran* (brotherhood), *Tengka* (mutual cooperation), *Tallu Bakaa* (the three glories), *Siri'* (self-respect), and *Kabassaran* (generosity). The study found a significant increase in students' understanding of Toraja culture after participating in local culture-based learning programs. In the initial stage (pre-test), students' understanding is still

limited. After interventions including field visits to *Tongkonan* and miniature-making projects, students' understanding improved comprehensively across knowledge, attitudes, and direct experience. This improvement in understanding is evident in the following table.

Table 2. Comparison of students' pre-test and post-test average scores

Student Names	Pretest	Posttest
S1	80	100
S2	60	90
S3	50	80
S4	50	90
S5	50	80
S6	60	90
S7	70	100
S8	50	90
S9	20	70
S10	40	80
S11	80	100
S12	60	90
S13	50	80
S14	40	80
S15	60	100
Average	54.67	88

In addition to the table, the difference in results is also visualized on the bar graph to clarify the trend of increasing student understanding.

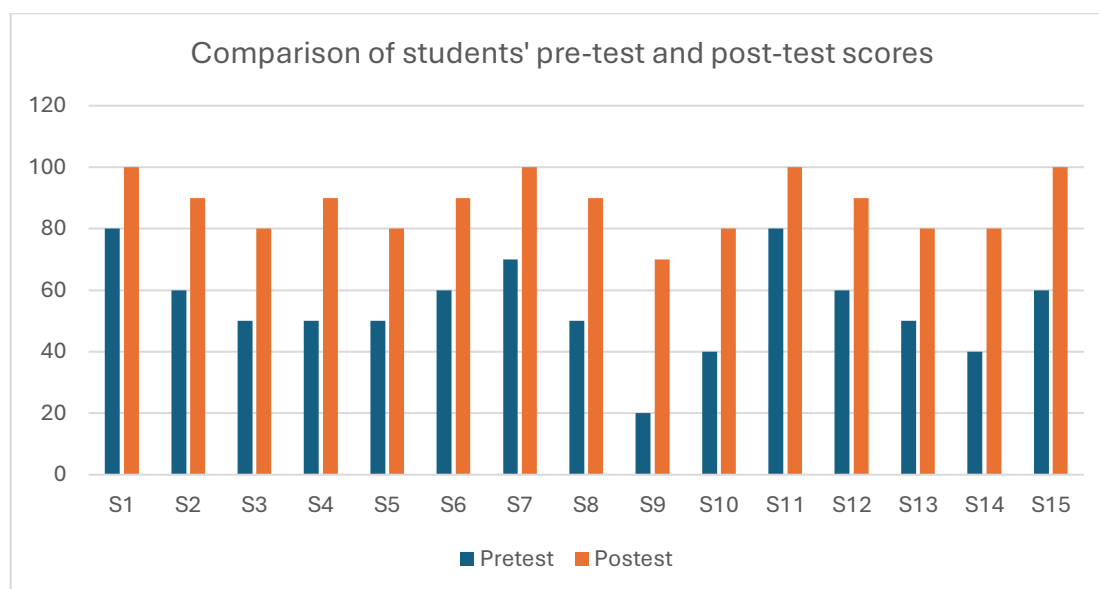


Figure 1. Comparison of students' pre-test and post-test scores

As visualised in the tables and graphs above, students' average scores across all aspects increase from 54.67 in the pre-test to 88 in the post-test. This indicates that the culture-based contextual learning approach can strengthen students' cultural understanding at the elementary school age.

4. Discussion

The research results reveal that Toraja culture-based learning, especially through the *Tongkonan* miniature-making project and field visits, has a positive impact in strengthening the character trait of mutual cooperation and increasing students' understanding of local culture. These findings are in line with the view that character education is effective if it is associated with social and cultural contexts that are close to students' lives (Rachmadyanti, 2017). Thus, the incorporation of local culture not only enriches the teaching materials but also reinforces students' sense of identity as part of the Toraja community.

In terms of strengthening mutual cooperation, data reveal increased student involvement in group work, task sharing, mutual help, and effective communication. This supports the theory that the value of mutual cooperation can be instilled through real collaborative activities, not just through verbal explanations (Prasetyo, 2024). In Toraja society, *Tongkonan* culture is not only a physical aspect but also a symbol and social practice that promotes family relationships, brotherhood, and mutual cooperation (Pasapan, 2025; Lembang, 2020). The *Tongkonan* miniature project provides students with a hands-on practice space to interpret the importance of cooperation, empathy, and concern for friends. Strengthening the character of mutual cooperation, in turn, affects more collaborative class dynamics. During the *Tongkonan* miniature project, students become more active in offering help, paying attention to friends' difficulties, and showing empathy—no longer just completing individual tasks but focusing on mutual success.



Figure 2. Making of *Tongkonan* Miniatures Works



Figure 3. Miniature *Tongkonan* Student

These findings are supported by research (Nuraeni, 2024) showing that learning methods integrating local wisdom or collaborative work positively affect the character of mutual cooperation. The integration of local culture into the curriculum and classroom practice increases students' character of mutual cooperation (Rismawati, 2025). Similarly, research by Amalia (2024) indicates that students involved in the P5 project experience increased awareness and practice of mutual cooperation in group assignments. The research results are consistent with findings that habituation to routine activities and projects is highly effective in fostering a culture of mutual cooperation. Thus, character is formed through social experiences.

In the era of globalization and digitalization, where popular and foreign cultures often dominate media content and lifestyles, students who receive a locally culture-based education are better able to value cultural preservation as essential to the identity and sustainability of their communities. The introduction of local values in schools increases students' love for culture and concern for cultural heritage (Iswatiningsih, 2019).

Meanwhile, the increase in students' understanding of Toraja culture is evident in the pre-

test and post-test results. The students' increased cognitive understanding is evident in their ability to identify parts of the Tongkonan house and to understand the traditional architecture and its social functions, previously known only to the general public. Interventions such as direct observation and miniature-making activities certainly strengthen the connection between theory and real-world experience, enabling students to delve deeper into the material.



Figure 4. Field trip to the *tongkonan* traditional house

The improvements depicted in the tables and graphs align with constructivist views, which emphasize that knowledge is more easily understood when students directly experience the object or phenomenon under study (Azzahra, 2025). In this context, the observation experience in the *Tongkonan* traditional house and involvement in the miniature-making project provide an authentic learning opportunity, enabling students not only to receive information but also to build their own understanding.

In addition, these findings support Ki Hajar Dewantara's view that education must be rooted in culture as the basis for forming the nation's character (Harini, 2023). By introducing Toraja's cultural functions, symbols, and values through contextual learning, primary schools play a crucial role in instilling awareness of local identity while strengthening students' character.

The existence of products (miniatures) is not only a work assignment but also a medium for representing local culture, enhancing understanding through the activities of making, discussing, and presenting. In creating the project, students must consider the structure, symbols, the meanings of colors, and cultural values, thereby reinforcing their understanding through active engagement. In addition, the application of local values such as *Kasiuluran*, *Tengka*, *Siri'*, *Tallu Bakaa*, and *Kabassarani* in a real context provides an effective foundation that makes students feel emotionally connected to their culture. This emotional connection helps internalize these values (Rambe, 2024).

In addition to expanding cognitive knowledge, this learning fosters an affective appreciation of Toraja culture, thereby motivating students to maintain and preserve local identity. This reveals that education based on local wisdom not only enhances understanding but also internalizes relevant character values, such as togetherness, brotherhood, and mutual cooperation (Jubaedah, 2025).

Overall, this study emphasizes that contextual learning grounded in local culture is not only effective in strengthening the character of mutual cooperation but also in improving students' understanding of Toraja culture as a local identity. Cultural integration in basic education has been proven to foster meaningful learning, support the preservation of local wisdom, and

cultivate a young generation with strong character and cultural identity. Thus, elementary schools play a strategic role as agents of cultural preservation and in strengthening the nation's character.

The practical implication of these findings is that primary schools adopting a local cultural learning approach should design programs that integrate theory and practice in a balanced way. Learning materials on Toraja culture must be accompanied by activities that allow students to experience the culture directly (e.g., visits, projects, discussions, reflections).

This research emphasizes the need for the involvement of various teachers, indigenous peoples, cultural leaders, and parents so that an understanding of local culture and the spirit of mutual cooperation becomes part of students' daily lives, not just temporary activities. Sustainability and integration into the official curriculum extend the positive effects observed in this study.

5. Conclusion and implications

This study highlights that contextual learning based on Toraja culture, especially through the *Tongkonan* miniature-making project and field trips, is effective in strengthening elementary students' character of mutual cooperation. During activities, students consistently demonstrate improvements in active participation, balanced task division, mutual help among members, more open group communication, and greater empathy and care. This confirms that the value of mutual cooperation can be taught theoretically and internalized through contextual learning experiences rooted in local culture.

In addition, this research reveals an increase in students' understanding of Toraja culture. The results of the pre-test and post-test underscore that students were increasingly able to explain the function and structure of the *Tongkonan*, understand the symbolic meanings of traditional carvings and colors, and recognize the importance of preserving local culture as part of their identity. Furthermore, students also understand and appreciate the five main values of Toraja culture, namely *Kasiuluran* (brotherhood), *Tengka* (mutual cooperation), *Tallu Bakaa* (three glories), *Siri'* (self-respect), and *Kabassaran* (generosity).

Thus, integrating Torajan culture-based learning strengthens students' mutual cooperation and enhances their understanding of local cultural heritage. This implies that elementary schools have a strategic role in preserving culture while shaping the character of the younger generation through contextual, collaborative, and meaningful learning.

Credit authorship contribution statement

First Author: Conceptualization, Theoretical Framework, compiling instruments. **Second Authors:** Data Collection, Methodology Design, Data Interpretation. **Last Author:** Literature Review, Final Manuscript Review

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Statement of Transfer of Responsibility

The preparer/editor did not received the necessary data or information required to complete and verify the following sections: declaration of competing interest, data availability statement, ethical approval/ethical

declaration, and AI disclosure statement. Accordingly, full academic and legal responsibility for the content and accuracy of these statements is hereby transferred to the authors, including any consequences arising from non-compliance with the target journal's policies and applicable ethical standards.

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