



Integrating Local Culture in Elementary Social Studies for Character Formation in Rural Manggarai

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study examines how integrating Manggarai local cultural values into elementary Social Studies can provide a culturally grounded pathway for social-emotional learning (SEL) and student character formation. The study involved three private elementary schools in rural Manggarai Regency, three Social Studies teachers teaching Grades III, IV, and V, participating students, and three principals as supporting informants. Data were generated through two classroom-observation sessions in each school, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, and then re-examined thematically through SEL-related dimensions while preserving the original empirical basis. Five interconnected themes emerged: cultural self-awareness and identity, social awareness and respect for others, relationship skills through cooperation and dialogue, responsible decision-making through deliberative practices, and emerging self-management. Local practices, including mutual cooperation, village deliberation, folklore, family traditions, traditional houses, clothing, and regional songs, created familiar contexts for students to discuss social values, exchange experiences, collaborate, and express cultural pride. Responsibility, mutual respect, tolerance, cooperation, and attachment to local identity were repeatedly visible as character-related manifestations across the themes. Self-management was less explicit than interpersonal dimensions and appeared mainly when teachers scaffolded attention, turn-taking, and participation. The findings position local culture not as supplementary content but as a pedagogical resource for contextualizing SEL within Social Studies and strengthening character-oriented learning. By connecting culturally familiar practices with classroom interaction, local culture enables students to develop social-emotional competencies through meaningful experiences rather than abstract instruction. The study highlights the potential of culturally grounded Social Studies to support character formation while maintaining students' connection to Manggarai identity and community values.

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■ INTRODUCTION

Elementary Social Studies occupies a distinctive position in primary education because it introduces children to social relationships, community life, cultural diversity, civic norms, cooperation, and responsibility. However, these aims can weaken when classroom practice remains predominantly teacher-centered and detached from students' lived environments. Lecture-oriented instruction and reliance on textbooks may limit opportunities for children to speak, negotiate meaning, connect concepts to everyday experience, and learn through interaction (Dietrich & Evans, 2022; Hirsh et al., 2022; Ssemugenyi, 2023). In such conditions, Social Studies can be reduced to

information transmission, even though the subject is inherently concerned with how people live together. A more contextual approach is therefore needed, particularly in elementary classrooms where concrete experience remains an important bridge between abstract social concepts and students' understanding (Astawa & Widiana, 2025; Ruto et al., 2021).

One promising direction is to connect Social Studies with social-emotional learning (SEL). SEL broadly refers to educational processes that help students understand themselves, relate to others, participate constructively in groups, make responsible choices, and manage behavior and emotions in learning and social contexts. Evidence from a

contemporary meta-analysis of 424 studies across 53 countries and 575,361 students indicates that universal school-based SEL interventions are associated with significant improvements in social-emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, peer relationships, school functioning, school climate, and academic achievement (Cipriano et al., 2023). Earlier meta-analytic evidence involving 213 school-based programs and 270,034 students likewise reported improvements in social-emotional competencies, behavior, and academic performance, including an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement relative to controls (Durlak et al., 2011). Follow-up evidence also suggests that SEL-related benefits can persist well beyond the immediate intervention period (Taylor et al., 2017). These findings make SEL highly relevant to Social Studies, where communication, cooperation, perspective-taking, responsibility, and social judgment are central to the curriculum. Recent evidence from an Asian elementary-school context also supports the relevance of SEL: a four-month program involving 181 treatment and 185 control students produced significantly higher self-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making scores in the intervention group, with an overall effect of approximately one-quarter of a standard deviation (Shi & Cheung, 2024).

However, SEL is not culturally neutral. Social norms and community practices shape how children interpret responsibility, respect, cooperation, identity, emotion, and decision-making. For this reason, culturally responsive approaches to SEL are especially important in settings where local values remain strongly present in everyday life. McCallops et al. (2019) argued that culturally responsive pedagogy can strengthen SEL's relevance by connecting social-emotional development to students' cultural backgrounds and school experiences. In the Indonesian context, local wisdom offers a particularly rich basis for such contextualization because values such as mutual cooperation, deliberation, respect, communal responsibility, and attachment to place are already embedded in many community practices. Cross-cultural scholarship further cautions against treating SEL as culturally uniform. Hayashi et al. (2022) argue for an emic approach in which local values, beliefs, customs, and community participation shape SEL design, while a recent systematic review and meta-analysis found a positive overall effect for culturally responsive SEL programs (Hedges' $g = 0.36$) and emphasized deliberate cultural adaptation in implementation (Lim et al., 2026).

Research in elementary Social Studies has shown that local culture can support contextual understanding, cultural identity, and character education. Niman et al. (2020), for example, found that local cultural content in Social Studies textbooks was often insufficiently contextualized, suggesting that the mere presence of cultural material does not guarantee meaningful learning. Darong et al. (2021) further demonstrated that values embedded in the Manggarai *penthi* tradition include religious, social, and ecological dimensions that can be incorporated through teaching approaches, methods, techniques, and learning materials to support character formation. More recently, Niman (2025) specifically examined local culture as a pathway for SEL in primary Social Studies and reported constructive contributions to social awareness, self-management, social relationships, and responsible decision-making, while also noting that self-awareness was less optimally supported. These studies indicate that local culture can provide a culturally grounded structure for developing both social-emotional competencies and character.

The relevance of local culture is particularly strong in Manggarai, Flores, where community life continues to be shaped by practices of cooperation, deliberation, ritual, kinship, storytelling, and collective responsibility. Such practices can provide concrete examples through which elementary students learn what it means to listen, help, negotiate, respect difference, act responsibly, and identify with their community. In Social Studies classrooms, these cultural resources can shift from descriptive content to interactive learning experiences. When students discuss mutual cooperation, share family traditions, compare community practices, or interpret local stories, they are not only learning about culture; they are also practicing communication, perspective-taking, collaboration, identity formation, and social judgment.

Previous research on culture-based elementary learning has often emphasized conceptual understanding, cultural appreciation, learning outcomes, or general character education (Aulia et al., 2024; Eliyanti et al., 2024; Mahayanti et al., 2024). Less attention has been given to the micro-level processes through which local cultural content becomes a social-emotional learning resource during classroom interaction. This distinction is important. A culturally familiar example may make content easier to understand. However, its deeper educational value lies in whether it creates opportunities for students to recognize values, articulate feelings and perspectives,

collaborate with peers, make responsible choices, and practice respectful interaction. A stronger analytical connection between local culture, SEL processes, and character formation is therefore needed.

The present study revisits a qualitative case of local culture integration in elementary Social Studies in rural Manggarai and reframes the findings through a social-emotional and character-development lens. Rather than treating participation and classroom interaction as ends in themselves, the analysis examines what those interactions reveal about culturally situated self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and self-management. Character formation is examined through recurring manifestations of responsibility, mutual respect, tolerance, cooperation, and cultural pride. Importantly, this reframing does not introduce standardized SEL scores or causal claims; the study remains qualitative and interpretive, grounded in observed classroom practices, participant accounts, and learning documents.

Accordingly, the study addresses three questions: how Manggarai local cultural values are integrated into elementary Social Studies learning; what social-emotional competencies are supported through culturally contextualized classroom interaction; and how these social-emotional processes contribute to students' character formation. The study contributes theoretically by linking culturally grounded Social Studies pedagogy with SEL and character education, and practically by illustrating how teachers can use local stories, community practices, cultural media, and collaborative discussion as pedagogical resources.

Literature Review

Social-emotional learning and character formation in elementary education

SEL is increasingly understood as a core dimension of whole-child education rather than an optional add-on. Large-scale syntheses show that well-implemented SEL is associated with improvements in students' interpersonal competencies, attitudes, behavior, relationships, school functioning, and academic performance (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011). These outcomes are relevant to character education because dispositions such as responsibility, respect, empathy, cooperation, and ethical decision-making are enacted through social-emotional processes rather than acquired only as declarative knowledge. Character formation therefore depends not only on what values are taught, but also on whether

classroom routines give students opportunities to practice those values in authentic interactions. This equity-oriented perspective is also supported by Ramirez et al. (2021), whose content analysis of 33 widely used PreK-5 SEL programs showed that mainstream SEL materials still do not consistently address culture, identity, and structural inequities, reinforcing the need for context-sensitive approaches.

Character education and SEL overlap but are not identical. Character education typically emphasizes moral, civic, and cultural values, whereas SEL focuses more directly on competencies that enable students to understand themselves, interact constructively, and make responsible choices. In practice, the two can reinforce each other. Responsibility becomes visible when students regulate participation and complete shared tasks; respect is enacted through attentive listening and acceptance of difference; cooperation requires relationship skills; and cultural pride can contribute to a positive sense of identity. This functional relationship makes SEL a useful analytic lens for examining how character values become visible in everyday classroom practice.

Local culture as a contextual resource for social studies

Local culture can strengthen Social Studies when it is used as a context for interpreting social concepts rather than as decorative or supplementary content. Niman et al. (2020) found that local cultural elements in Indonesian Social Studies textbooks were unevenly represented and did not adequately meet teachers' and students' contextual needs. This finding suggests that cultural relevance requires more than adding local examples; teachers must actively connect cultural knowledge with students' experiences, classroom dialogue, and learning goals. Contextual teaching studies similarly indicate that learning becomes more meaningful when students can relate curricular ideas to familiar situations and real social environments (Astawa & Widiana, 2025; Ruto et al., 2021). Indonesian evidence provides a parallel argument: ethnopedagogical integration of local wisdom has been shown to strengthen children's cultural awareness and character formation by embedding community values in the learning process (Sakti et al., 2024).

In Manggarai, cultural practices offer a particularly meaningful source of values. Darong et al. (2021) identified religious, social, and ecological values in the penti ceremony and argued that such values can support student

character when integrated through learning methods and materials. Niman (2025) subsequently demonstrated that local culture in primary Social Studies can support several SEL-related dimensions, including social awareness, social relations, self-management, and responsible decision-making. Together, these studies provide a strong basis for examining local culture as a mediator between curricular content, social-emotional development, and character formation. Comparable findings have been reported in Indonesian elementary education. Mansur and Sholeh (2024) found that local-wisdom-based character education was reinforced through teacher practice, school routines, curriculum support, and parental involvement, while Afriyadi et al. (2024) showed that Piil Pesenggiri values in elementary Social Studies supported respect for diversity, cooperation, achievement motivation, and equality.

Culturally grounded SEL in classroom interaction

Classroom interaction is the mechanism through which culturally grounded SEL becomes observable. Cooperative discussion, question-and-answer exchanges, storytelling, peer work, and reflection create opportunities for students to articulate perspectives, listen to others, regulate turn-taking, solve interpersonal problems, and negotiate shared meaning. Positive teacher–student relationships also extend the effect of instructional content by shaping whether students feel able to contribute and whether disagreement can occur respectfully (Claessens et al., 2016). In this sense, cultural content becomes pedagogically powerful when it generates social interaction rather than remaining an object of memorization.

Culturally responsive SEL matters because people interpret social-emotional concepts through cultural expectations. McCallops et al. (2019) found that culturally responsive pedagogy can strengthen SEL interventions by making social-emotional learning more relevant to students' identities and lived experiences. For rural elementary students, locally grounded stories and community practices can therefore serve as developmentally appropriate prompts for discussing responsibility, cooperation, fairness, respect, and belonging. This study adopts this premise and examines how these processes appear in ordinary Social Studies learning rather than in a stand-alone SEL program. This position is consistent with Denston et al. (2022), who found that culturally and linguistically sustaining social-emotional

frameworks should be informed by Indigenous models of wellbeing and teachers' understandings of both their own and students' social-emotional competencies. Likewise, Goforth et al. (2024) demonstrated that culturally adapting SEL for Indigenous learners requires community voice, cultural strengths, relationships, respect, and reciprocity. Lau and Shea (2024) similarly propose integrating students' worldviews, identities, lived experiences, and cultural assets into ordinary classroom instruction rather than treating SEL as a decontextualized stand-alone activity.

■ METHOD

Participants

This study involved three Social Studies teachers teaching Grade III, Grade IV, and Grade V; students who participated in the observed learning activities; and three principals who served as supporting informants. The teachers were selected because they were directly involved in local culture-based learning and had at least five years of teaching experience. Students were included through their participation in observed lessons and interview activities. In contrast, principals were included because they could provide school-level perspectives on learning practices and the institutional use of local culture.

Research Design and Procedures

This study employed a qualitative bounded case study design to investigate how local cultural values were integrated into Social Studies learning and how the resulting classroom processes could be interpreted in relation to SEL and character formation. The study was conducted in three private elementary schools in Manggarai Regency. The schools were purposively selected because they were located in rural communities where local cultural practices remained visible, had experience incorporating local culture into classroom learning, and were willing to provide access to classroom observations, learning documents, teachers, students, and school leaders. The design was appropriate because the research focused on the meaning of naturally occurring classroom interaction rather than on estimating causal treatment effects. Participation was voluntary, and the study explained its purpose and procedures before data collection.

Instrument

Data were collected through participatory classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Two classroom-observation sessions were conducted

in each school, with each session lasting approximately 35 minutes. Observation focused on teacher–student and student–student interaction, dialogue, cooperation, participation, sharing of experiences, and the use of local cultural content. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the three teachers, selected students, and principals. Each teacher interview lasted approximately 25 minutes. Student interviews used age-appropriate, non-evaluative prompts and concrete references to observe classroom activities to minimize pressure to provide socially desirable answers. Documentary data included lesson plans, student worksheets, teaching media, and photographs of classroom activities. Lesson plans were examined for explicit integration of cultural values and for planned opportunities for discussion, cooperation, question-and-answer interaction, and sharing of culturally grounded experiences.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically through data preparation, reduction, initial coding, categorization, theme development, and interpretation, following the general procedures described in the source study. The coded material was re-examined through a deductive–inductive SEL lens while preserving the original meaning units. Evidence was grouped around five analytical dimensions: cultural self-awareness and identity, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and self-management. Character values were treated as cross-cutting manifestations rather than as a separate outcome scale. Thus, responsibility, mutual respect, tolerance, cooperation, and cultural pride were traced across observations, interviews, and documents. Credibility was supported through source, technique, and time triangulation together with member checking. Information from teachers, students, and principals was compared with classroom observations and documentary evidence. Discrepancies were examined rather than automatically treated as confirmation. Preliminary interpretations were returned to relevant informants for member checking.

■ RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The thematic reframing produced five interconnected themes that align local cultural pedagogy with social-emotional processes: (1) cultural self-awareness and identity, (2) social awareness and respect for others, (3) relationship skills through cooperation and dialogue, (4) responsible decision-making through deliberative cultural practices, and (5)

emerging self-management. Table 1 presents the details. These themes were not independent competencies measured by a scale; rather, they represent recurring patterns in observations, interviews, and learning documents. Responsibility, mutual respect, tolerance, cooperation, and cultural pride appeared across several themes as character-related manifestations, as displayed in Figure 1.

Cultural Self-Awareness and Identity

Students responded most readily when the lesson drew on cultural references they recognized from family and village life. Local folklore, traditional houses, clothing, songs, and community traditions served as identity-bearing materials rather than neutral teaching aids. This familiarity helped students connect Social Studies concepts to personal and collective experience. In the source data, students described greater enthusiasm when classroom content referred to traditions they encountered in their village, and one student explicitly associated learning local culture with pride and respect for difference. This pattern reflects culturally grounded self-awareness because students positioned themselves in relation to their own community and recognized local culture as part of who they were.

“I use local stories, pictures of traditional houses and clothing, and regional songs. These familiar materials make the lesson more engaging and help students connect the topic with the culture they know.” (Teacher 2 (Grade IV Teacher))

“I am more enthusiastic when Social Studies discusses traditions that I see in my village because the lesson feels close to my own life.” (Student 1)

Social Awareness and Respect for Others

A second theme involved students’ awareness of other people, particularly through listening to classmates’ family experiences and comparing cultural practices. Local culture did not always produce identical experiences; students brought different stories, levels of familiarity, and family practices into the classroom. These differences created opportunities to recognize that classmates could interpret or experience the same tradition differently. The source data repeatedly emphasized tolerance, mutual respect, and respect for differences as character outcomes. In SEL terms, this pattern most closely corresponds to social awareness because students were invited to attend to others’

Table 1. Thematic analysis of local culture pedagogy

SEL-oriented theme	Cultural/classroom evidence	Observed pattern	Character manifestations
1. Cultural self-awareness and identity	Local folklore; family and community traditions; regional symbols	Students related lesson content to familiar experiences and expressed greater confidence and pride when discussing their own cultural environment.	Cultural pride; identity; confidence
2. Social awareness and respect for others	Comparing traditions; listening to different family experiences; cultural diversity.	Students encountered differences in experiences and were encouraged to recognize, listen to, and respect peers' perspectives.	Respect; tolerance; empathy-related awareness
3. Relationship skills through cooperation and dialogue	Mutual cooperation; group discussion; teacher–student dialogue	Students collaborated, exchanged stories, answered questions, and participated in two-way classroom communication.	Cooperation; mutual respect; communicative responsibility
4. Responsible decision-making	Village deliberation; shared responsibility; discussion of community practices	Teachers used deliberative practices to discuss collective responsibility and appropriate social action, linking social concepts to community norms.	Responsibility; fairness; collective orientation
5. Emerging self-management	Turn-taking; sustained attention; responding to teacher scaffolding	Self-management was less explicit than interpersonal dimensions. It appeared mainly when students regulated participation and re-engaged after teacher prompts.	Discipline; persistence; behavioural regulation

experiences and interpret cultural diversity as something to discuss rather than ignore.

“Learning about our local culture makes me proud, and it also reminds me to respect differences when friends have experiences that are not the same as mine.” (Student 3)

“Integrating local cultural values into Social Studies supports responsibility and mutual respect because students learn how people are expected to live and work with others in the community.” (Principal 1)

Relationship Skills Through Cooperation and Dialogue

The strongest and most consistently observed SEL-related pattern concerned relationship skills. Group discussion, question-and-answer interaction, storytelling, and the sharing of family experiences shifted classroom communication away from a purely one-directional format. Students had opportunities to speak to classmates, listen, respond, and construct meaning collaboratively. Mutual cooperation was especially important because it functioned both as lesson content and as a mode of participation. Thus, students discussed



Figure 1. Interconnected themes

cooperation while simultaneously practicing it through shared tasks and conversational exchange. Classroom observations indicated that culturally familiar prompts increased student talk and made participation easier for many students.

"I encourage students to share family experiences about community traditions during group discussions so they can listen to one another; compare experiences, and learn together." (Teacher 3 (Grade V teacher))

"Since local culture has been incorporated into lessons, we observe more student participation and stronger collaboration, especially when the activities invite them to talk about experiences they know." (Principal 3)

Responsible Decision-Making Through Deliberative Practices

Village deliberation and communal responsibility provided culturally recognizable entry points for discussing how decisions are made and why individuals must consider the group. Teachers connected Social Studies material with mutual cooperation and village deliberation to make abstract social concepts more concrete. This was not a formal decision-

making intervention, but the classroom use of deliberative cultural practices created opportunities to discuss listening, collective responsibility, and appropriate participation in shared affairs. Responsibility therefore appeared not only as a moral label but as a practical expectation embedded in community examples.

"I relate Social Studies topics to mutual cooperation, village deliberation, and local folklore so students can see how people help one another; discuss problems together; and take responsibility in daily community life." (Teacher 1 (Grade III teacher))

"We encourage teachers to use local stories and cultural media so learning is contextual and students can discuss the values behind community decisions and relationships." (Principal 2)

Emerging Self-Management and Its Limits

Self-management was the least directly evidenced dimension. Observations showed that culturally familiar material often increased engagement, but responses were not uniform across all students or activities. Some students were less involved when discussions depended on lengthy folklore narratives or when

examples felt overly familiar. In those moments, teachers needed to vary questions, discussion formats, and media to re-engage students. The available evidence therefore supports only a cautious interpretation: self-management appeared in students' turn-taking, sustained attention, and responsiveness to teacher scaffolding rather than in explicit instruction about emotion regulation or goal setting.

This asymmetry across SEL dimensions is analytically important. The cultural integration observed in these classrooms most clearly supported interpersonal competencies (social awareness, relationship skills, and collective responsibility), while intrapersonal self-management was more emergent. The pattern resembles Niman's (2025) finding that culturally grounded Social Studies supported several social-emotional dimensions but did not optimize all components equally. It also prevents overclaiming: the study provides qualitative evidence of SEL-relevant processes, not proof that every SEL competency improved.

The findings show that the pedagogical value of local culture extends beyond contextualizing Social Studies content. When cultural practices were used to structure discussion, storytelling, collaboration, and reflection, they created social situations in which students could enact social-emotional competencies and character values. This is the study's central contribution. Local culture operated simultaneously as content, context, and interactional resource. Students learned about cooperation while cooperating, encountered deliberation while participating in dialogue, and developed cultural pride while listening to peers whose experiences were not always identical to their own. Such processes help explain why culturally familiar learning can become socially and emotionally meaningful rather than merely interesting.

The strongest pattern concerned relationship skills and social awareness. This aligns with the social nature of Social Studies and broader evidence showing that SEL is associated with improved peer relationships, social-emotional skills, and school functioning (Cipriano et al., 2023). The Manggarai classroom data add a cultural mechanism to that evidence. Students did not practice interaction through decontextualized role-play; they interacted around community stories, local practices, and family experiences. This matters because culturally responsive SEL emphasizes that social-emotional development is interpreted through culturally specific norms and identities (McCallops et al., 2019). In these

classrooms, familiar cultural references narrowed the gap between curricular concepts and students' social worlds and made material more accessible for dialogue. This interpretation is further supported by Lim et al. (2026), who found that culturally responsive SEL programs yielded a positive pooled effect and that stronger cultural responsiveness in implementation was associated with more promising outcomes.

The findings also reinforce Niman's line of scholarship on local culture in Social Studies. Niman et al. (2020) showed that local culture can be insufficiently contextualized when it appears in textbooks without adequately responding to teacher and student needs. The present study demonstrates what fuller contextualization can look like: teachers transform cultural references into interactive pedagogical resources by asking students to compare experiences, tell stories, discuss mutual cooperation, and relate deliberative values to classroom life. Niman (2025) further reported that local culture can support social awareness, self-management, social relations, and responsible decision-making in primary education. The present findings strongly converge with that argument, especially for social awareness, relationship skills, and responsibility, while also suggesting that intrapersonal dimensions require more intentional pedagogical support.

Character formation emerged as a cross-cutting outcome of these social-emotional processes. Responsibility, tolerance, mutual respect, cooperation, and pride in local culture were not isolated themes; students enacted them through classroom participation. This interpretation is consistent with Darong et al. (2021), who argued that Manggarai cultural values can contribute to student character when integrated into teaching and learning. The present analysis extends that claim by specifying the interactional pathway through which character may be formed. A value such as respect becomes educationally meaningful when students listen to different experiences, wait for others to speak, and respond without dismissing difference. Responsibility becomes visible when students take part in group tasks and discuss the communal implications of decisions. Cultural pride becomes constructive when it is paired with tolerance rather than exclusivity. Indonesian studies likewise show that character values become more meaningful when local wisdom is embedded in school practices and Social Studies contexts rather than presented as detached moral statements (Afriyadi et al., 2024; Mansur & Sholeh, 2024; Sakti et al., 2024).

The relationship between character education and SEL is therefore complementary. SEL offers a competence-oriented explanation of how values are practiced, while character education provides moral and cultural direction on which behaviors are considered desirable. In rural Manggarai, local wisdom gives those desirable behaviors recognizable social meaning. Mutual cooperation, for example, is not simply equivalent to generic teamwork; it carries a culturally situated expectation of helping, reciprocity, and shared obligation. Village deliberation similarly offers a culturally meaningful representation of listening, collective judgment, and social responsibility. These practices ground SEL in local moral vocabulary rather than importing it as an abstract universal framework.

The results also clarify the importance of teacher mediation. Local culture did not automatically produce meaningful interaction. Some students became less active when cultural narratives were too long or when the examples were so familiar that they no longer generated curiosity. This finding is pedagogically significant because it rejects a simplistic assumption that culturally relevant content is inherently engaging. Teachers must still design questions, vary media, structure group work, and create opportunities for participation. This observation aligns with contextual learning literature showing that relevance must be translated into active learning processes rather than assumed from content alone (Astawa & Widiyana, 2025; Ruto et al., 2021). It also supports evidence that implementation quality moderates SEL intervention outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011). This need for intentional mediation echoes culturally sustaining SEL research emphasizing teacher capacity, community participation, and adaptation to learners' cultural contexts (Denston et al., 2022; Goforth et al., 2024; Lau & Shea, 2024).

The comparatively weaker evidence for self-management points to an important boundary of the existing classroom model. Students demonstrated behavioral regulation through turn-taking, sustained attention, and re-engagement, but little explicit evidence showed structured reflection on emotions, impulses, personal goals, or coping strategies. This distinction should guide future instructional development. Teachers could retain local cultural content while adding reflective prompts such as identifying feelings in a folklore character, discussing how community members manage disagreement, or asking students to set a personal goal for cooperative work. Such activities would deepen the

intrapersonal dimension without disconnecting SEL from the cultural context.

The study also has implications for Social Studies curriculum design. Local cultural content should not be confined to a separate heritage lesson. Instead, cultural values can be integrated across topics such as community organization, diversity, cooperation, rights and responsibilities, decision-making, and social change. A locally grounded SEL approach would therefore embed social-emotional practice in ordinary subject teaching. This is especially relevant for elementary schools that may not have the time or resources to implement separate SEL programs. The classroom itself can become a site for social-emotional practice when teachers intentionally design culturally meaningful interaction.

Several limitations should be considered. The study was conducted in three private elementary schools in one cultural region, limiting transferability to other contexts. The qualitative design identifies patterns of meaning and interaction but does not quantify change in SEL competencies, character, or academic achievement. Student participants were involved through observed activities and interviews, but the dataset did not include parents or wider community members whose perspectives could strengthen cultural interpretation. In addition, because the present manuscript reframes an existing dataset through an SEL lens, the analysis is constrained by the original interview questions and observations, which were not designed as a dedicated SEL assessment. Future research should combine culturally grounded qualitative analysis with validated age-appropriate SEL measures, longitudinal observation, and broader stakeholder participation.

■ CONCLUSION

The integration of Manggarai local culture into elementary Social Studies created a culturally grounded environment in which social-emotional learning and character formation could develop through ordinary classroom interaction. The clearest patterns involved cultural self-awareness and identity; social awareness and respect for others; relationship skills through cooperation and dialogue; and responsible decision-making through culturally familiar practices of mutual cooperation and deliberation. Responsibility, mutual respect, tolerance, cooperation, and cultural pride emerged across these processes as character-related manifestations. Self-management was present more cautiously, mainly through turn-taking, sustained participation, and responsiveness to teacher

scaffolding, indicating that intrapersonal SEL requires more explicit instructional design. These findings extend previous research by Erna Mena Niman and colleagues by showing not only that local culture can be included in Social Studies, but also how it can mediate interactional processes that support social-emotional and character development. Local stories, family experiences, cultural media, community traditions, and deliberative practices become educationally powerful when teachers use them to generate discussion, perspective-taking, collaboration, reflection, and shared responsibility. The study therefore positions local culture as a pedagogical resource rather than supplementary content. Because the evidence is qualitative and context-specific, the findings should not be interpreted as standardized gains in SEL. Future research should test culturally grounded SEL models across diverse elementary-school settings using mixed methods, longitudinal designs, and measures that capture both social-emotional competencies and culturally situated character development.

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