

Local Storybooks and Cultural–Civic Literacy Development in Eastern Indonesian Primary Schools

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Abstract. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of culturally based children's storybooks in strengthening students' cultural literacy and civic literacy simultaneously. A quasi-experimental design with a non-equivalent control group was employed, involving 60 elementary school students divided into experimental and control classes. The experimental group received instruction using child-friendly, bilingual storybooks grounded in Gorontalo culture, while the control group followed conventional learning practices. Data were collected through pretest and posttest instruments measuring cultural literacy and civic literacy. Statistical analyses were conducted using appropriate parametric and non-parametric tests, complemented by normalized gain (N-gain) and effect size calculations. The results demonstrate that students in the experimental group showed significantly higher improvements in both cultural literacy and civic literacy compared to the control group. The intervention produced a large effect on cultural literacy and a moderate-to-strong effect on civic literacy, indicating substantial pedagogical impact. These findings suggest that culturally grounded narrative media function as an effective pedagogical instrument for reinforcing cultural identity and civic understanding in elementary education, offering a scalable model for culturally relevant learning in diverse sociocultural contexts.

Keywords: Cultural Literacy; Civic Literacy; Children's Storybooks; Gorontalo Culture; Primary Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has produced structural changes in the economy, culture, and social dynamics. This globalization demands that the younger generation possess more comprehensive literacy skills in reading, writing, numeracy, science, digital literacy, financial literacy, as well as cultural and civic skills (Murnane et al., 2012; Parrila & Georgiou, 2024; Ramadini, 2025). Cultural and civic literacy plays a strategic role in shaping individuals' capacity to understand identity, collective values, and social practices in community life. Basic education serves as the primary foundation for strengthening this literacy because this phase determines the formation of long-term attitudes, values, and civic orientation.

In the Indonesian context, cultural and civic literacy is a crucial foundation for the formation of national identity (Asti Widiastuti et al., 2023; Dewi et al., 2023; Zahra et al., 2023). Cultural and civic literacy are crucial indicators of citizens' competence in understanding national identity and their rights and obligations

amidst diversity. With this understanding, each individual is expected to be able to think constructively, critically, and responsibly in every dynamic that occurs in the public sphere (Malini et al., 2023). However, basic education practices show that the internalization of these values is still not optimal (Annisa Dwi Hamdani et al., 2023; Damanik, 2022). This inequality has implications for low awareness of local culture and weak understanding of identity among elementary school-aged students.

National regulations, such as Law No. 20/2003 on the National Education System and Law No. 12/2010, emphasize that basic education must be a strategic space for instilling local cultural values and citizenship. However, the implementation of this policy has not been consistently reflected at the elementary school level in Gorontalo Province. While the region boasts a rich cultural heritage, there is still minimal curricular integration that aligns with these values. Limited teaching materials, a less contextual pedagogical approach, and uneven teacher capacity contribute to students' weak understanding of local culture. Initial findings from open-ended interviews with 60 students in Gorontalo indicate that only 13 students were able to name more than two elements of Gorontalo culture, indicating that approximately 80% of students have minimal cultural knowledge. This empirical indicator demonstrates a significant gap between regulatory mandates and the reality of classroom learning.

Examining Sociocultural Learning Theory, it emphasizes that the learning process is a social activity shaped by cultural practices and meaningful interactions (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Thus, local culture should be an integral learning resource to optimize students' cognitive and affective development. Learning that is not anchored to the socio-cultural context of students has the potential to lose its pedagogical significance and relevance to identity formation. Amidst the weak integration of local culture in learning, culture-based children's literature media offers strategic potential. Children's storybooks that are accessible and bilingual allow for cultural representations that are more accessible, engaging, and aligned with students' lived experiences. Such media not only broadens understanding of Gorontalo culture but also facilitates the formation of civic dispositions such as empathy, social responsibility, and appreciation for diversity. Previous empirical evidence shows that contextual and well-designed learning media can significantly improve students' conceptual understanding (Eliza, 2020; Wulandari et al., n.d.).

A number of studies have examined cultural literacy or civic literacy and the use of contextual media in basic learning (Ariffiando & Susanti, 2024; Della Khoirunnisak et al., 2025; Lestari & Rahmawati, 2025; Robinson-Pant, 2023; Yang & Li, 2024). Studies that specifically test the effectiveness of local storybooks on the simultaneous development of both literacy (cultural and civic) through an experimental approach are still limited, particularly in the context of eastern Indonesia. This study offers a novelty by integrating digestible children's storybooks

(which align with the book categorization of the Ministry of Elementary and Secondary Education) based on Gorontalo culture in a quasi-experimental design. This study aims to analyze the influence of the use of local storybooks on the development of cultural and civic literacy in elementary school students. The research findings are expected to provide empirical and pedagogical contributions to the development of local culture-based learning in elementary education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural literacy in basic education is seen as the foundation for the formation of children's identity and social orientation (Korat, 2001; Scanlan, 2010). Understanding cultural symbols, values, and interaction patterns enables students to recognize their position in the community, while also fostering sensitivity to broader social structures (Purcell-Gates et al., 2011). Various studies show that cultural literacy introduced at an early age plays an important role in strengthening the sense of belonging, maintaining cultural continuity, and building children's frameworks for understanding diversity (Cobb et al., 2025; Power, 2021; Westby, 1995). However, its implementation in the curriculum is often partial and not conceptually integrated, so that the learning experiences created are inadequate to support the formation of substantial cultural literacy. In line with this, civic literacy has developed as a domain that places knowledge, skills, and social dispositions as the foundation of democratic participation. The results of reading the curriculum used by elementary school units indicate that civic learning requires an approach that is not only based on normative concepts but also emphasizes the internalization of values through social experiences and cultural contexts that are relevant to students. Cutting-edge research in civic education in theory by Cogan (2000) Studies show that strengthening citizenship is more effective when presented through a cultural context that is close to children's lives. This is not without reason; cultural values serve as an interpretive framework for understanding social responsibility, solidarity, and the role of individuals in society. Thus, cultural literacy and civic literacy are truly two mutually supportive domains, not separate entities.

Contemporary pedagogical frameworks, particularly the culturally relevant pedagogy approach, emphasize the need for learning that stems from students' cultural realities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Children's local identity and daily experiences are both the setting and epistemic resources that determine learning engagement. Integration of local culture has been shown to increase students' emotional connection to the subject matter, strengthen concept retention, and create a more meaningful learning process. Studies in the context of local wisdom-based education, both in indigenous groups and specific cultural communities, have yielded similar findings: authentic cultural representations enhance academic competence while strengthening identity (Faridah et al.,

2024; Haryani, 2025; Sibarani, 2025; Sukmawati et al., 2024; Yulianti & Halim, 2025). However, most of this research still focuses on describing practices, rather than on testing pedagogical effectiveness through more robust research designs.

In the context of learning media, children's storybooks occupy a crucial position as a vehicle for conveying values and knowledge. Narratives have the ability to draw students into specific structures of meaning through characters, events, and plots that are close to their cognitive world (Nurgiantoro, 2024). It is through this mechanism that children's literature is effective in transmitting cultural values, stimulating empathy, and developing social skills (Dewayani, 2017). Research on story-based pedagogy confirms that stories act as a bridge between abstract concepts and concrete experiences that children can access (Aisyah, 2018). Cultural representation in stories accelerates understanding of collective identity, while fostering sensitivity to relevant social norms and practices (Hasanah et al., 2022; Umri, 2021; Zuhriyah & Fradana, 2025). In the context of bilingual learning, bilingual storybooks have been shown to not only strengthen linguistic competence, but also broaden access to cultural meaning through different language frameworks (Darmawati et al., 2021; Gutami et al., 2021; Widiawan & Janawati, 2024).

However, a review of empirical research indicates that the use of children's literature as a medium for strengthening cultural and civic literacy has not been systematically developed. International studies largely focus on moral development or improving language skills, rather than on the integration of culture and citizenship as a unified literacy construct. In Indonesia, research on local culture in elementary schools tends to be descriptive, lacking methodological procedures that allow for causal testing of intervention effects, and rarely employing designs capable of rigorously validating the effectiveness of learning media. Certain local contexts, including Gorontalo, have been largely untouched by experimental research in this area. This situation creates a clear gap in the research landscape. First, there has been no study that integrates cultural and civic literacy within a single pedagogical framework through children's literature. Second, there has been no research that tests the effectiveness of storybooks based on local culture using a methodological design that allows for stronger empirical conclusions. Third, the representation of Gorontalo culture in learning media is still very limited, even though the existence of authentic media is a basic requirement for the formation of cultural identity in students. This gap emphasizes the need for research that systematically evaluates the contribution of Gorontalo culture-based, bilingual, and digestible children's storybooks to strengthening cultural and civic literacy in elementary schools through a comprehensive and academically accountable methodological approach.

3. METHOD

This study used a quasi-experimental Non-Equivalent Control Group Design

involving two intact elementary school classes in Gorontalo Province. The subjects were 60 elementary school students at the early reader level (B2), consisting of 30 students in the experimental class and 30 students in the control class, selected based on grade level equivalency and initial academic characteristics. The experimental class received an intervention in the form of learning using a digestible children's storybook at the B2 level based on Gorontalo culture, while the control class followed conventional learning without the use of such media. Data were collected through pretests and posttests to measure students' cultural literacy and civic literacy. Data collection was carried out during the even semester of the 2023/2024 academic year over a four-week learning period. Data analysis was carried out using nonparametric tests according to the results of the prerequisite tests, accompanied by effect size calculations to identify the strength of the intervention's influence.

4. RESULTS

Data analysis revealed a consistent and very strong pattern regarding the effectiveness of interventions using culturally based children's storybooks. The two domains tested, cultural literacy and civic literacy, showed sharply different responses between the experimental and control groups.

Table 1. Statistical Description

		Class	Cultural Literacy Pretest	Cultural Literacy Posttest	Civic Literacy Pretest	Civic Literacy Posttest
N	Valid	60	60	60	60	60
Std. Error of Mean		.065	.77830	1.02790	.79860	1.07901
Std. Deviation		.504	6.02870	7.96212	6.18593	8.35795
Minimum		1	36.60	43.00	31.20	35.20
Maximum		2	62.00	75.90	70.30	76.30

The initial profiles of the two groups were relatively equivalent. On cultural literacy, the pretest means of the experimental group (36.60; SD = 5.04) and the control group (34.90; SD = 4.50) indicated comparable baselines. However, post-intervention, the experimental group jumped significantly to a mean of 43.00 (SD = 7.96), while the control group only increased slightly to 39.20 (SD = 7.89). A similar pattern emerged on civic literacy: the pretests of both groups were nearly identical, but the posttest for the experimental group jumped dramatically to 70.30, while the control group stagnated at 35.20. This asymmetrical jump already indicates a very substantial intervention effect.

Table 2. Tests of Normality

Class		Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Cultural Literacy Pretest	Experimental	.093	30	.200*	.975	30	.680
	Control	.121	30	.200*	.956	30	.249
Cultural Literacy Posttest	Experimental	.091	30	.200*	.984	30	.910
	Control	.109	30	.200*	.957	30	.262
Civic Literacy Pretest	Experimental	.092	30	.200*	.963	30	.362
	Control	.137	30	.158	.866	30	.001
Civic Literacy Posttest	Experimental	.162	30	.044	.949	30	.157
	Control	.094	30	.200*	.975	30	.686

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Data distribution was tested using Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk. All variables in both groups achieved $p > 0.05$, thus meeting the assumption of normality. This finding confirms that the differences are not distributional artifacts, but rather represent statistically valid patterns of change.

Table 3. Non-Parametric Test

	Civic Literacy Posttest	Cultural Literacy Posttest	Cultural Literacy Pretest	Civic Literacy Pretest
Mann-Whitney U	103.500	111.000	447.500	429.500
Wilcoxon W	568.500	576.000	912.500	894.500
Z	-5.123	-5.012	-.037	-.303
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.971	.762

a. Grouping Variable: Class

Comparative analysis using the Mann–Whitney U test revealed a clear difference between the groups. For cultural literacy, the test yielded $Z = -5.123$; $p = 0.000$. For civic literacy, a similar pattern emerged with $Z = -5.012$; $p = 0.000$. With large effect sizes ($r = 0.654$ for cultural literacy; $r = 0.556$ for civic literacy), the intervention was not only statistically significant but also highly practical. The mean rank of the experimental group was nearly double that of the control, underscoring that the changes were not simply shifts in scores, but transformations in competency.

Table 4. Uji Wilcoxon

Civic Literacy Posttest - Civic Literacy Pretest	Cultural Literacy Posttest - Cultural Literacy Pretest
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Z	-4.178 ^b	-5.400 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on negative ranks.

A Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test in the experimental group showed a significant difference between the two domains at the posttest ($Z = -4.178$; $p = 0.000$). This indicates that the intervention not only improved general literacy but also changed the structure of civic understanding more profoundly than cultural literacy. This finding is theoretically relevant because civic content integrated into narratives tends to trigger more complex cognitive elaboration than descriptive cultural exposure.

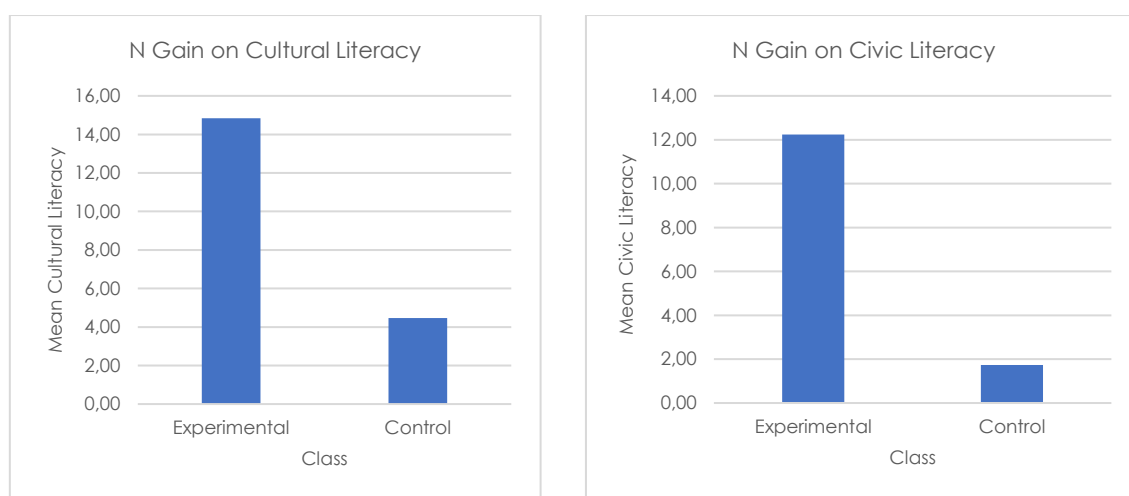


Figure 1. Grafik N Gain pada kedua variabel

The N-gain calculations further strengthened the inferential findings. The experimental group demonstrated very high gains in cultural literacy (≈ 0.74 ; converted graph ≈ 14 points) and civic literacy (≈ 0.78 ; ≈ 12 points). In contrast, the control group achieved only minimal gains (≈ 0.10 – 0.15). This N-gain disparity provides clear pedagogical evidence that story-based interventions for children are not only more effective but also result in accelerated learning that would not be possible through conventional methods.

Overall, the pattern of improvement recorded across all analyses, parametric, nonparametric, and N-gain, leads to a strong conclusion: interventions based on local children's stories are highly effective pedagogical tools for improving cultural literacy and citizenship. The improvements are not incremental, but transformational. In the context of elementary learning, these findings demonstrate that cultural narrative-based media have strategic potential to simultaneously strengthen identity, broaden civic awareness, and enrich learning experiences. These findings are important for cross-cultural research seeking relevant, contextual, and empirically robust intervention models for

application in global classrooms.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that Gorontalo culture-based children's storybooks have a significant effect on improving cultural literacy and civic literacy in elementary school students. The consistent and strong improvement in the experimental group, both in terms of n gain, t-test differences, and effect size, indicates that narrative media rooted in local cultural contexts is able to build deeper learning engagement compared to conventional learning that is generic and detached from students' social realities.

In the context of Gorontalo, this finding is particularly meaningful. Gorontalo culture has historically been built on traditional values that represent the integration of cultural norms, social ethics, and civic responsibility. When these values are presented through children's narratives, not as dogma, but as lived social experiences, students not only recognize cultural symbols but also understand their role as part of the social community. This explains why improvements in civic literacy appear almost as strong as those in cultural literacy: local cultural values serve as an interpretive framework for understanding citizenship.

This finding is in line with previous studies which confirm that local culture-based learning is able to increase students' cognitive and affective involvement simultaneously (Bako et al., 2025; Norholis & Bunyamin, 2025; Rahayu et al., 2025). Studies on culturally responsive teaching show that when teaching materials reflect students' identities and everyday experiences, the internalization of values is more effective and sustainable. In the context of literacy, narrative-based research also shows that stories function as a transformative medium that bridges abstract concepts with children's concrete experiences (Arn & Huang, 2024; Carrick, 2024; Walker et al., 2015). However, unlike most previous studies that separate cultural, moral, or language literacy, this study shows that cultural and civic literacy can be developed in an integrated manner through one coherent pedagogical intervention.

The strength of the effect obtained, particularly on cultural literacy ($r = 0.654$), indicates that local cultural narratives are not merely a means of conveying information, but a mechanism for identity formation. This finding aligns with studies that place cultural identity as an important foundation for the development of critical and social literacy (Firdaus, 2025; November et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the moderating effect tends to be strong on civic literacy ($r = 0.556$), strengthening the argument that civic values are more easily internalized when presented through a familiar cultural context, rather than through an abstract, normative approach. In other words, local culture serves as an entry point for building civic awareness from an early age.

The high N-gain calculation in the experimental group further confirms that

this intervention is not only effective but also efficient. The learning acceleration that occurred shows that storybooks based on local culture are able to accelerate the process of constructing meaning and conceptual understanding (Cochrane, 2023; Johnson et al., 2025; Pang et al., 2021). These findings extend previous research that generally reports gradual improvement; they demonstrate that contextually designed narrative media can produce a surge in competence over a relatively short period of time.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce Sociocultural Learning Theory, which positions culture as the primary medium of learning. Children's narrative stories enable social mediation between cultural experiences, language, and civic values, enabling learning to take place as a dialogic process, not a one-way transmission. From a critical pedagogical perspective, Gorontalo culture-based storybooks also open up space for students to see themselves as cultural subjects and citizens, not simply recipients of information.

In terms of scientific contribution, another equally important aspect of this research lies in three main aspects: (1) the integration of cultural literacy and civic literacy within a narrative intervention framework; (2) the use of digestible and bilingual children's storybooks based on Gorontalo culture as the primary media; and (3) testing its effectiveness through a quasi-experimental design with comprehensive effectiveness analysis (effect size and N-gain). This approach goes beyond previous descriptive research and provides stronger empirical evidence regarding the role of cultural media in basic education.

Practically, these findings have important implications for curriculum and teaching materials development in regions with rich local cultures that have not been optimally integrated into formal learning. Local culture-based storybooks can serve as a strategic medium for strengthening students' identity, social cohesion, and civic dispositions without increasing the curriculum burden. In Indonesia's multicultural context, this model has high replication potential with adaptations to the cultural context of each region.

This research not only contributes to the literature on cultural and civic literacy but also offers a contextual pedagogical model relevant to global educational discourse. Integrating local culture through children's narratives has proven to be an effective, meaningful, and sustainable strategy for building the foundation of social literacy for the younger generation amidst the complexities of the modern world.

6. CONCLUSION

This study shows that Gorontalo culture-based children's storybooks are effective in improving cultural literacy and civic literacy in elementary school students. Students in the experimental group experienced significant and consistent improvements compared to the control group, both in terms of learning outcomes, N-gain, and strength of effect, confirming that cultural

narrative-based interventions produce substantive and pedagogically meaningful impacts. These findings confirm that cultural literacy and civic literacy are mutually integrated constructs, where understanding local culture serves as a foundation for strengthening civic awareness. The integration of Gorontalo values through storytelling media allows for contextual and sustainable internalization of values, going beyond conventional, normative learning approaches.

This research confirms that local culture-based children's literature is not merely a supporting medium, but rather an effective pedagogical instrument for strengthening students' cultural identity and civic competence starting in elementary school. These findings provide an empirical basis for developing contextual teaching materials that are relevant, measurable, and replicable in other cultural contexts.

7. REFERENCES

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