

Integrating Silih Asah, Silih Asih, and Silih Asuh in Primary School Character Education

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Abstract

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Character education is a foundational pillar in students' moral and social development, particularly at the primary education level. This study examined the role of Sundanese local wisdoms *silih asah* (mutual enlightenment), *silih asih* (mutual affection), and *silih asuh* (mutual care) in shaping students' character across the cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions. A qualitative case study design was employed to enable an in-depth exploration of how these values are integrated into the learning ecosystem of a public primary school in Nunuk Baru Village. Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis conducted within the school setting. Qualitative data were systematically analyzed using NVivo software to support coding, thematic analysis, and data triangulation. The findings indicate that teacher empathy accounted for 30% of compassion-based interactions, peer support behaviours emerged in 25% of observed incidents, and practices reflecting *silih asuh*, such as a buddy system, were documented 21 times. In addition, spontaneous acts of care and active participation in extracurricular communal activities reflected the authentic internalization of these values. This study highlights the importance of embedding local wisdom into formal schooling as a sustainable approach to fostering prosocial behaviour and strengthening students' moral resilience amid the challenges of globalization.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Character education is widely recognized as a foundational pillar of national development, providing the moral and ethical grounding essential to life in society, the nation, and the state (Berkowitz, 2011; Halstead, 2005). The success of character education at the elementary school level is particularly critical, as it lays the groundwork for students' personality development in subsequent educational stages and their broader social lives (Indriani & Asfia, 2023; Siregar et al., 2018). As primary institutions in children's formal education, elementary schools strategically internalize moral values through systematic, context-based learning (Hand, 2017; Schuitema et al., 2008). Without robust character education, schools risk becoming fertile ground for conflict, social alienation, and the erosion of moral values (Birhan et al., 2021; Osman, 2019). Therefore, strengthening character formation must

be prioritized within primary education to cultivate not only knowledgeable but also cultured and civilized individuals (Bebeau & Thoma, 1999; Haq et al., 2022; Sakti et al., 2024; Suhartini et al., 2019).

Character values can be meaningfully derived from local wisdom, as such cultural heritage embodies universal values revered by humanity and is manifested in attitudes, behaviours, and everyday social norms (Hatima, 2025; Sabir et al., 2025). However, the accelerated currents of globalization, modernization, and digital information flows have contributed to the erosion of local cultures, leading to a decline in cultural identity and a diminished appreciation among younger generations for ancestral values (Inkeles, 2022; Ullah & Ho, 2021; Urbaite, 2024). In many cases, young people have become increasingly detached from their regional traditions, reflecting a cultural identity crisis stemming from the unchecked dominance of foreign cultural influences and rapid social transformation (Manurung et al., 2022; Rubab et al., 2020; Sarwar, 2023). This phenomenon can potentially give rise to a broader character crisis, as evidenced by increasing moral degradation among students, manifested in violence, intolerance, and deteriorating ethical conduct in educational settings (Chaeroh, 2024; Lessy et al., 2024). Integrating local wisdom values into educational frameworks, particularly in character education, has become increasingly essential to address these challenges. Such integration fosters cultural preservation and reinforces students' moral development within a meaningful and contextualized learning environment (Zidny et al., 2020). As Indonesia seeks to shape future generations who are both morally grounded and culturally rooted, leveraging the pedagogical potential of local wisdom in elementary education represents both a strategic and ethical imperative.

Problem of the Study

The decline in character values among younger generations, particularly students at the elementary education level, has emerged as a critical concern, closely linked to the diminishing internalization of local wisdom in daily life (Bhat, 2020; Hafidhi et al., 2024). Although formal educational institutions hold significant potential for cultivating character, schools have yet to fully optimize their role in revitalizing and embedding cultural values within educational processes (Hasanah et al., 2023; Suastini & Sumada, 2022). This gap is especially troubling given that local wisdom constitutes a rich and meaningful source of character education that, if managed systematically, could simultaneously strengthen cultural identity and establish a robust moral foundation for students (Tohri et al., 2022). The growing apprehension regarding the adverse effects of globalization, particularly the erosion of indigenous culture and national identity, is increasingly justified, as external values often displace the noble traditions embedded in local heritage (Agus et al., 2021; Yeh et al., 2021). In the face of such cultural dislocation, the absence of a substantive and contextually grounded strategy to integrate local wisdom into educational practice raises profound pedagogical and sociocultural concerns. Many educational initiatives remain symbolic or ceremonial rather than transformative, failing to cultivate deeply rooted values among learners.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for educational efforts that are not merely normative but strategically anchored in local cultural strengths. Such initiatives must go beyond tokenistic inclusion to embody structured character education management that is culturally responsive, contextually relevant, and pedagogically effective (Ridho et al., 2025). Addressing this challenge will ensure that elementary school character education contributes meaningfully to the formation of morally sound, culturally rooted, and socially responsible individuals.

Research's State of the Art

Prior studies have consistently highlighted the urgency of integrating local wisdom values into character education, particularly at the elementary school level. Such integration is strategically significant for reinforcing cultural identity and cultivating students' moral integrity through real-life experiences (Faiz & Soleh, 2021; Wulandari et al., 2024). Local wisdom encompasses noble and universal values that can be effectively internalized through formal educational settings (Maisaroh et al., 2022). These values are often transmitted through culturally embedded pedagogical strategies, including folklore, customary practices, and religious rituals deeply rooted in community life (Halutti, 2024; Kusmana et al., 2020; Rahmawati et al., 2023). Empirical evidence also demonstrates that such values have been implemented through culturally responsive thematic instruction, including in inclusive elementary school environments (Sumarni et al., 2024; Syamsi & Tahar, 2021). Ardi et al. (2024) further emphasize that culturally based educational approaches shape student character and

revitalize local identities amid globalizing educational paradigms. These findings collectively affirm that local wisdom is strategically positioned to develop adaptive, community-rooted national character (Sumartias et al., 2020).

Within the Sundanese cultural context, core values such as silih asah (mutual enlightenment), silih asih (mutual affection), and silih asuh (mutual care and guidance) have traditionally been embedded in social interactions across generations. These values embody the intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions of character formation, offering significant pedagogical potential as a foundation for school-based character education (Ekajati, 1995; Uribe-Zarain et al., 2025). However, research examining the integration of these Sundanese values into elementary school curricula is scarce. Ardi et al. (2024) reiterate the importance of local cultural approaches not only for character development but also for preserving cultural identity amid the increasing pressures of globalization. Consequently, there is a critical need for studies focusing specifically on the internalization of silih asah, silih asih, and silih asuh within formal instructional settings. Such inquiries are essential for bridging existing theoretical and practical gaps and advancing a form of character education that is both contextually grounded and culturally embedded.

Gap Study and Objective

While numerous studies have underscored the significance of integrating local wisdom into character education (Huda et al., 2023; Kurniawan et al., 2022; Merina et al., 2023; Prawiyogi et al., 2023), most of these inquiries remain generalized and lack focused exploration of specific cultural frameworks, particularly those rooted in Sundanese traditions. The Sundanese values of silih asah (mutual intellectual cultivation), silih asih (mutual affection), and silih asuh (mutual care and guidance) represent a culturally embedded ethos encompassing the cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of character formation (Fauzia et al., 2020; Susanti & Koswara, 2019). Despite their pedagogical richness, these values have not been systematically examined or operationalized within elementary school curricula as a structured pedagogical framework. In contrast, the contextual integration of traditional values in other cultural settings, such as the rewang tradition in Jotosanur (Huda et al., 2023), indigenous concepts in South Nias (Harefa, 2024), and cultural values from Mandailing-Angkola (Hidayat, 2020), has demonstrated a substantial contribution to reinforcing students' identity and supporting character development. These studies indicate that embedding indigenous wisdom in educational settings can serve as a transformative tool to counter cultural erosion and moral degradation (Syahrial et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2022). However, a notable theoretical and practical gap persists regarding the specific application of Sundanese values in formal education, particularly in curriculum design, teaching strategies, and character development.

This research addresses that gap by developing a conceptual understanding and practical implementation of character education grounded in the Sundanese local wisdom of silih asah, silih asih, and silih asuh, specifically within elementary education contexts. The study aims to identify the meanings and character dimensions embedded in these values as an integral foundation of Sundanese local wisdom, and to describe the pedagogical strategies used to integrate them into integrated learning approaches in primary schools. Furthermore, this research analyzes the contributions of these values to the contextual and sustainable development of students' character in primary school settings. Ultimately, this study seeks to move beyond normative frameworks of character education by proposing a culturally grounded and transformative model of moral development that is responsive to local contexts and capable of nurturing culturally competent, ethically grounded, and socially responsible learners.

METHOD

Type and Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate the integration of Sundanese local wisdom silih asah (mutual intellectual nurturing), silih asih (mutual affection), and silih asuh (mutual guidance) into character education in primary schools. This design was selected to enable an in-depth, context-sensitive exploration of pedagogical and cultural dynamics within a localized educational setting. The research was conducted at a public primary school in Nunuk Baru Village,

Majalengka Regency, West Java, a cultural heritage village (desa buhun) recognized for its sustained transmission of ancestral traditions, communal harmony, and ecological awareness. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Majalengka (Approval No. 201/KEP/FKIP/XI/2025).

Data and Data Sources

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through interviews with students ($n = 24$), teachers ($n = 3$), and the headmaster ($n = 1$); participant observations of teaching–learning processes; and focus group discussions with community cultural leaders. Secondary data were drawn from lesson plans, local curriculum documents, school culture artifacts, and ethnographic field notes on community rituals (e.g., ruwatan bumi, mipit-mipit, and ngabumi ceremonies).

The following Table 1 summarizes the participant details.

Table 1. Participant composition

Group	Participants	Description
Students	24	Grade 4 and Grade 5 students at a public primary school in Nunuk Baru Village
Teachers	3	Homeroom teachers and subject-specific instructors
School Principal	1	School leader involved in curriculum management
Cultural Elders	2	Local figures from Lembaga Adat who advised on school life

Data Collection Technique

Multiple qualitative techniques were employed to obtain comprehensive, contextually rich data, each contributing to a deeper understanding of how local wisdom was integrated into a public primary school in Nunuk Baru Village. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, school administrators, parents, and community elders. These guided conversations were designed to explore participants' perceptions, lived experiences, and interpretations of local wisdom, specifically focusing on the meanings and applications of silih asah, silih asih, and silih asuh in school contexts. The interview questions probed participants' conceptual understanding of these values and their practical relevance in fostering student character.

Participant observation enabled the researchers to directly witness classroom dynamics, teacher–student interactions, and ceremonial school practices that embodied local cultural values. Observations focused on how moral messages were conveyed during lessons, assemblies, and informal school rituals, providing a naturalistic view of the processes of value internalization.

Document analysis involved systematically reviewing school-related materials, including curriculum maps, thematic lesson plans, and extracurricular activity reports. This approach allowed the researchers to identify how and to what extent local cultural content was formally embedded in the school's educational design and activities. Field immersion was also employed, with the researchers actively participating in various village-based cultural events and communal practices. This ethnographic engagement provided first-hand insights into the sociocultural roots of the values studied and their significance in the community's everyday life. Through this immersive approach, the researchers gained contextual grounding for interpreting the educational implications of local wisdom.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006), was employed to derive meaning from the qualitative data collected in this study. The process commenced with verbatim transcription and familiarisation with the dataset, followed by open coding to identify recurring patterns, culturally embedded expressions, and indicators relevant to local values. The codes were then grouped into thematic clusters, which were subsequently synthesized around three central dimensions representing the cognitive, affective, and behavioural values embedded in Sundanese local wisdom. Data triangulation was conducted across multiple sources, including interviews, classroom observations, and documentation, to ensure analytical depth and coherence. NVivo 14 software supported the process by enabling efficient coding, thematic visualization, and mapping. The analytical flow followed

a sequential process: (1) raw data collection, (2) transcription and coding, (3) theme development, (4) cross-source triangulation, and (5) interpretation and cultural contextualization (see Figure 1).

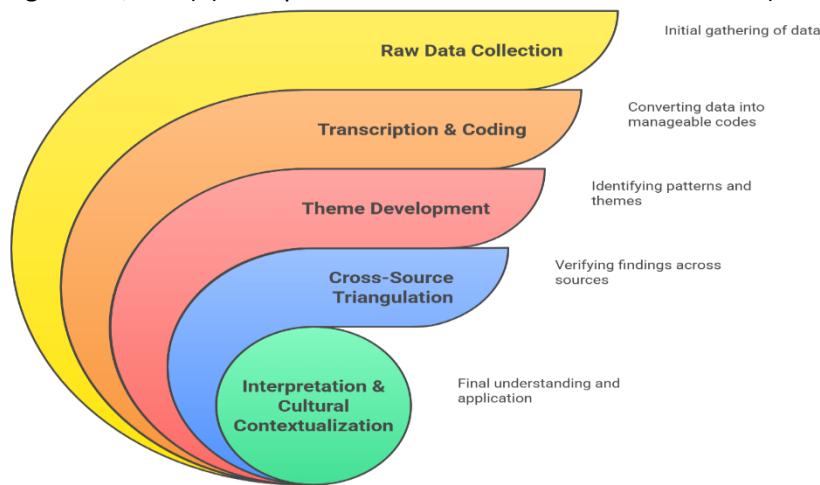


Figure 1. Analytical flow of the study

The integration of silih asah (mutual enlightenment), silih asih (mutual affection), and silih asuh (mutual nurturing) into the curriculum was implemented through thematic learning across various elementary school subjects, including Civics, Bahasa Indonesia, and local content (muatan lokal), to ensure alignment with community-based moral constructs. Pedagogical strategies included the use of storytelling and folklore, such as Ciung Wanara and Sangkuriang, as reflective learning tools, as well as community-based projects such as collective farming activities (gotong royong) to promote environmental awareness rooted in traditional practices. Cultural immersion activities, such as participation in Sundanese rituals, greetings, and traditional attire, were also organised under the guidance of local elders to foster experiential learning. To ensure methodological rigour, the criteria of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985) were applied through prolonged field engagement, member checking, data triangulation, rich contextual description, transparent audit trails, reflexive journaling, and inter-rater reliability checks, thereby strengthening the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study.

RESULTS

Silih Asah (Mutual Enlightenment) as a Character Education Practice in Primary Schools

The findings of this study indicate that the value of *Silih Asah*, understood as mutual enlightenment and knowledge sharing, has been internalised within the educational practices of the primary school in Nunuk Baru Village. This value is manifested across multiple dimensions of the learning environment: structurally, through lesson planning; culturally, through daily school practices; and socially, through interactions between students and teachers. Data from interviews with classroom teachers ($n = 3$) and the school principal ($n = 1$) revealed that collaborative learning strategies were consistently implemented across teaching practices. Teachers regularly organised students into heterogeneous groups and encouraged high-performing students to act as peer tutors for their classmates. One teacher noted: "We believe that every child has the potential to teach their peers. So, we create learning groups to help them support and sharpen each other." (Teacher A, Grade 5)

Field observations across eight learning sessions in Grades III and V over four weeks supported these claims. Approximately 78% of student group interactions involved active collaboration, including peer explanation, error correction, and feedback exchange. For instance, during a project on "Environmental Preservation," students were assigned roles within their groups, such as writer, illustrator, and presenter. This activity enhanced collective responsibility and demonstrated a horizontal distribution of knowledge and mutual empowerment. "When I worked as a presenter, my friend helped me with the words. I also gave ideas to the illustrator. We worked like a team." (Student 3, Grade 5). These findings illustrate how the principle of *Silih Asah*, mutual care and guidance, was

embedded in daily classroom practices, fostering a culture of shared learning, empathy, and inclusive participation. The integration of student responsibility and teacher scaffolding created a social climate in which cooperation and moral accountability were jointly cultivated (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of thematic codes based on nvivo analysis

Theme	Description	Frequency (%)	Sample Participant Quote
Teacher Empathy toward Students	Expressions of concern, support, and emotional understanding by teachers	30%	<i>"My teacher always asks how I feel before we start class." (Student 7)</i>
Students' Social Responsibility (Peer Support)	Voluntary actions to help peers in academic or emotional tasks	25%	<i>"If someone does not understand, we do not leave them behind; we explain again." (Student 2)</i>
Caring and Inclusive School Culture	Daily routines and institutional practices promoting mutual respect	20%	<i>"At school, no one is left alone. We play and study together." (Student 5)</i>
Affirmative Teacher-Student Relations	Positive reinforcement, acknowledgement, and recognition in classroom talk	15%	<i>"When I answered wrong, my teacher said, 'Good try! Let us think again.'" (Student 4)</i>
Cooperative Practices in Extracurricular Activities (Gotong Royong)	Mutual assistance in non-academic tasks such as cleaning, gardening	10%	<i>"In the gardening club, we take turns watering the plants even after school." (Student 6)</i>

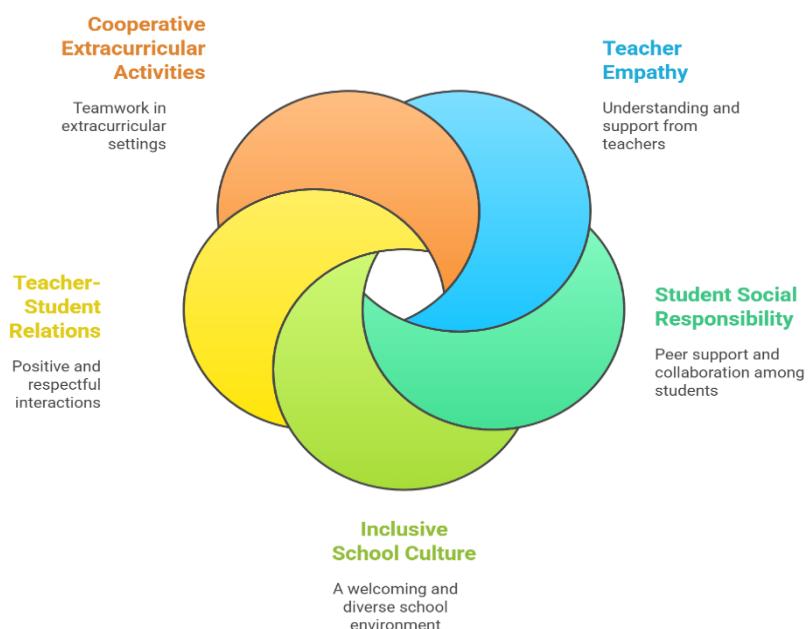


Figure 2. Distribution of key themes identified through nvivo coding

Based on Figure 2, thematic coding in NVivo 14 revealed that teacher empathy (30%) was the most frequently occurring category, reflecting teachers' attention to students' emotions and well-being. Students frequently mentioned that teachers noticed when someone was quiet or distressed. One student explained: "I did not bring my book, but the teacher smiled and asked if something happened. She did not get angry." (Student 9, Grade 3). The second dominant theme was students' social responsibility (25%), which was notably manifested in peer tutoring and inclusive group work. This pattern was evident during formal learning sessions, break times, and extracurricular engagements. For instance: "When my friend got sad because her drawing was torn, we all helped make a new one together." (Student 1, Grade 3)

The remaining themes, school culture of care, affirmative interactions, and extracurricular cooperation jointly represented the institutional and interpersonal dimensions of *Silih Asuh* in practice. These findings offer empirical grounding for the idea that moral character education in rural schools can be organically nurtured through relational processes rather than solely through formal instruction. An analysis of lesson plans (RPP) and locally contextualised curriculum documents revealed that the value of *Silih Asah* mutual intellectual growth was explicitly integrated into indicators of students' social learning outcomes. For example, within the thematic unit "Living Clean and Healthy", one affective assessment indicator stated: "Students can cooperate and assist one another in completing group tasks." This reflected a deliberate pedagogical emphasis on collaborative learning as both a moral and social competency.

In addition, school-based cultural artefacts such as the "Daily Sundanese Wisdom Board" and collaboratively assigned classroom duty schedules served as institutional efforts to embed local values into the fabric of school life. These practices exemplified how character education rooted in local wisdom was normalised through both formal curriculum and informal cultural routines. Using the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun & Clarke (2006), the data were examined through five sequential phases: (1) verbatim transcription, (2) open coding, (3) thematic clustering, (4) triangulation, and (5) contextual interpretation. Using NVivo 14, the researchers identified 28 primary codes, which were subsequently grouped into three overarching themes: cognitive values (knowledge sharing), affective values (building empathy), and behavioural values (collaboration and mutual support). The following Table 3 provides a synthesised dummy dataset to illustrate the empirical grounding of the thematic findings:

Table 3. Synthesis of thematic analysis findings on *silih asah* values in elementary education contexts

Thematic Category	Example Code	Frequency of Occurrence	Primary Data Source
Cognitive	Explaining to one another	17 times	Student interviews, classroom observations
Affective	Responding with empathy	11 times	Teacher focus group discussions, field notes
Behavioural	Dividing group tasks	24 times	Lesson plan documentation, project-based observations

Triangulation across student interviews ($n = 24$), teacher insights, and direct classroom observations enhanced the trustworthiness of the themes. Furthermore, in a focus group discussion (FGD) involving local cultural figures ($n = 2$), the *Silih Asah* value was interpreted as an expression of *gotong royong* (cooperation) and collective responsibility, core tenets of Sundanese communal ethos that, ideally, should be sustained through primary education.

Silih Asih (Mutual Affection) in Fostering a Humanistic School Climate

The findings of this study indicate that the value of *Silih Asih*, understood as mutual affection, respect, and the cultivation of care for others, was deeply internalized within the social and cultural practices of a public primary school in Nunuk Baru Village. This value was evident across various interpersonal interactions, student solidarity practices, and school activities that prioritized empathy and social harmony. The presence of *Silih Asih* was systematically identified through NVivo data coding, as summarized in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Themes, subthemes, and codes identified in qualitative data on *silih asih*

Main Theme	Subtheme	NVivo Codes (Representative Nodes)	Data Sources
<i>Silih Asih</i>	Empathy in Daily Interactions	Students greeting sad peers, offering support, and encouragement	Interviews & Observation
	Spontaneous Acts of Care	Sharing stationery, helping peers without being asked	Observation

Main Theme	Subtheme	NVivo Codes (Representative Nodes)	Data Sources
	Habitualization of Caring	Circle time and character-building activities in instruction	Lesson Plan
	Attitudes		Documents
	Collective Sharing	"Friendship Care Box"; classroom	Documents &
	Programs	charity events	Observation
	Local Cultural Values	Quotes from traditional leaders on the importance of compassion	FGD

Interviews with teachers and school leaders revealed strategies for cultivating empathy from an early age. One teacher explained: "We train our students to understand each other's feelings. For example, if someone feels sad, we teach their peers to greet them, offer encouragement, or stay with them. We want them to learn to be affectionate and caring towards one another" (Interview, Grade 4 Teacher). This strategy was enacted in daily routines such as circle time, during which students expressed their feelings and received supportive peer responses. Participant observation also captured spontaneous student behaviours that reflected *Silih Asih*, including: (1) a student assisted a peer who was struggling to carry a stack of books, (2) two other students immediately lent their stationery to a classmate who had lost a pencil, and (3) the teacher acknowledged and praised these acts as concrete examples of social compassion.

A visualisation of the coding frequency for *Silih Asih* values in NVivo is presented in the following graph: (Figure 3)

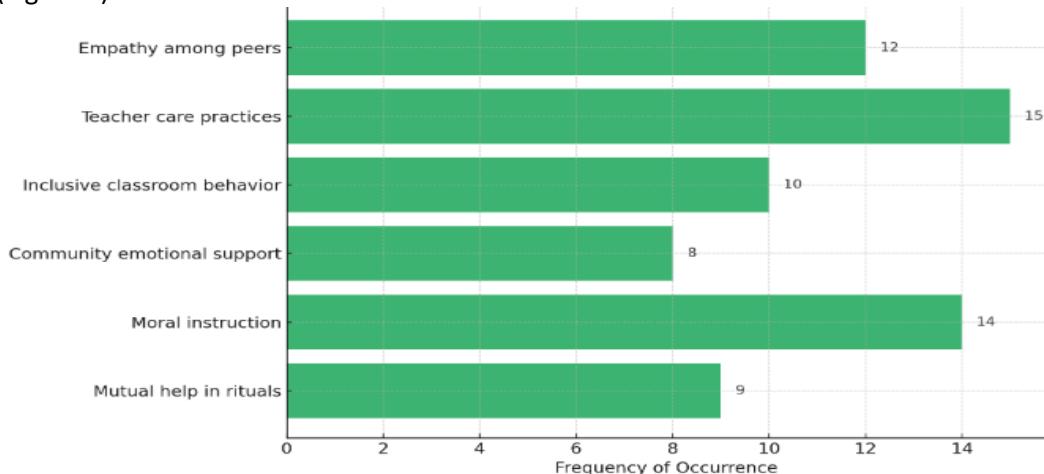


Figure 3. Frequency of thematic codes related to *silih asih* based on interviews, observations, and document analysis

Beyond daily practices, school documentation also reflected the integration of this value into the curriculum and broader school programs. A lesson plan under the theme "The Beauty of Togetherness" included a socio-affective indicator: "Students demonstrate care for peers and their surrounding environment". The Friendship Care Box program further institutionalized this value through collective action. Managed collaboratively by the student council and teachers, the initiative invited students to donate stationery or food items for peers in need. Findings from focus group discussions (FGD) with traditional leaders confirmed that *Silih Asih* was not merely a social ethic but a foundational element of Sundanese philosophy. One cultural figure stated: "*Silih asih* is vital for teaching children not to be selfish. They must learn to think and feel for others. It is rooted in our cultural heritage (FGD, Traditional Leader)."

This value was also embedded in local rituals such as mirit-mirit and ruwatan bumi, emphasizing the importance of compassionate balance between human beings and nature. From a theoretical perspective, the practice of *Silih Asih* aligns with prosocial character education approaches (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005), emphasizing empathy and moral responsibility. In the local context, *Silih Asih* is an effective vehicle for nurturing compassionate, cooperative individuals. More importantly, *Silih Asih* represents a non-transactional social ethic grounded in love and recognition of human dignity. In the

face of modern school cultures often dominated by competition and individualism, *Silih Asih* demonstrates its potential as a sociocultural force to foster a more humanistic and inclusive educational climate.

Silih Asuh (Mutual Nurturing) in Internalizing Responsibility and Discipline

The findings of this study indicate that *Silih Asuh*, understood as mutual care, protection, and guidance within compassionate social relations, was effectively actualized within the educational ecosystem of Nunuk Baru's primary schools. This value manifested through the daily practices of both teachers and students, encompassing academic and socio-emotional contexts. School leaders intentionally cultivated a nurturing environment that mirrored familial care. As one principal explained: "We strive to create a school atmosphere like a family where the strong protect the weak, and the older guide the younger." (Principal Interview). Teachers served not only as content deliverers but also as emotional caregivers, guiding students through personal and academic challenges with empathy and moral attentiveness. Classroom ethnographic data reinforced these observations. For instance, when a student experienced anxiety before a presentation, the teacher offered personal support, provided affirmations, and encouraged classmates to offer emotional reinforcement. A buddy system was also observed in lower-grade classrooms (Grades 1 and 2), whereby more advanced students voluntarily supported peers who were still struggling with lessons.

Further evidence from lesson plans and school culture documents illustrated that *Silih Asuh* was implicitly embedded in classroom management strategies and school programs. For example, in the school's Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening document, there was an explicit emphasis on "fostering empathy and tolerance among students, a direct reflection of *Silih Asuh* principles. Likewise, in extracurricular initiatives such as Ngamumule Sakola (School Care Activities), students rotated responsibilities for maintaining the school environment, reinforcing collective accountability and equity in participation. The frequency of these nurturing practices was systematically captured through triangulated data collection. Table 5 below summarises the occurrence of *Silih Asuh*-related behaviours across interviews, classroom observations, and school documentation:

Table 5. Frequency of *silih asuh* practices based on data collection methods

Type of <i>Silih Asuh</i> Practice	Interviews (Teachers/ Students)	Classroom Observations	Lesson Plans (Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran)/ Cultural Documents		Total
Teachers guiding students with empathy	12	8	4		24
Peer learning through the buddy system	9	10	2		21
Students comforting or encouraging peers	6	7	1		17
Joint classroom care by teachers and students	4	9	3		16
Responsibility for teaching in P5 projects	5	6	6		14

These numbers provide a robust empirical foundation for validating the integration of *Silih Asuh* across both academic and non-academic domains of schooling. This behavioural evidence is further illustrated through direct participant quotes: "If a friend is struggling, we help them together. It feels wrong to leave someone behind. Like when my classmate could not memorize a lesson, I helped him every break (A Grade 5 Student)". "I always remind my students: we are a family in this school. Friends should be protectors and encouragers if someone is sick, sad, or scared" (Mrs L, Grade 2 Teacher). "During cleaning days or planting flowers, the kids who are usually naughty are the most excited. They feel responsible for taking care of the school, too" (Mr B, Principal).

To support these qualitative data, the following bar chart presents the simulated NVivo coding frequencies for key *Silih Asuh* practices:

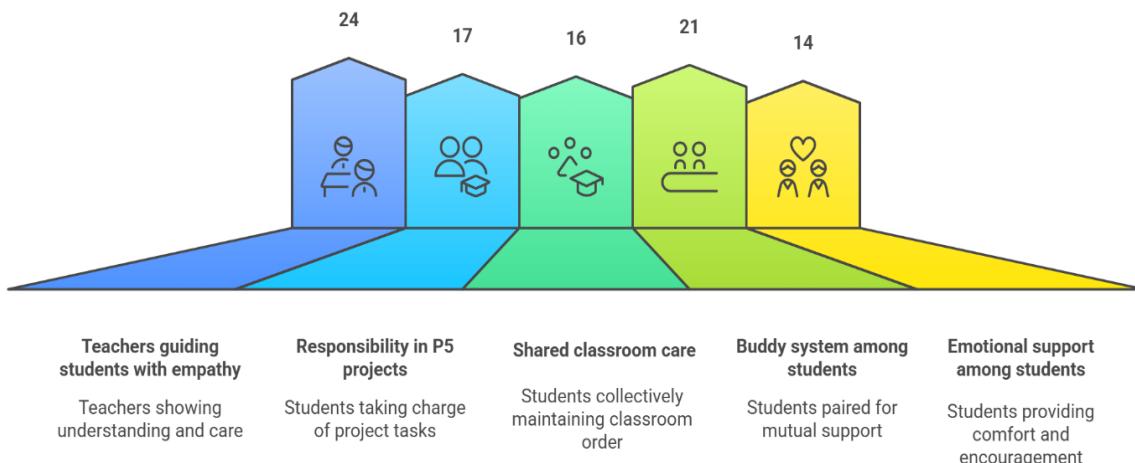


Figure 4. Frequency of thematic codes related to *silih asuh* practices across multiple data sources

In support of the qualitative findings, Figure 4 visually depicts the thematic code frequencies for *Silih Asuh* practices, derived from triangulated data sources. The coding process identified six dominant themes that characterized the operationalization of *Silih Asuh* within the school ecosystem. The most frequently occurring theme was Teacher Care Practices ($n = 15$), underscoring teachers' proactive role in providing emotional support and holistic guidance that extended beyond academic instruction. This was closely followed by Moral Instruction ($n = 14$), suggesting that values-based education was not supplementary but intrinsically embedded in daily pedagogical interactions. The theme of Empathy Among Peers ($n = 12$) emerged prominently in instances in which students provided emotional or academic support to peers, particularly in contexts of distress or difficulty. Inclusive Classroom Behaviour ($n = 10$) and Mutual Help in Rituals ($n = 9$) further demonstrated that collective responsibility and cultural participation fostered social cohesion and mutual respect among students.

Meanwhile, although less frequently cited, Community Emotional Support ($n = 8$) illustrated the involvement of the wider school community, teachers, parents, and local figures in nurturing a supportive environment through informal interactions and non-academic engagements. Taken together, these frequencies not only reinforced the centrality of *Silih Asuh* as both a pedagogical and cultural value but also demonstrated its multidimensional implementation across formal curricula and informal school life. Therefore, the visualization in Figure 3 strengthened the empirical basis for recognizing *Silih Asuh* as a core construct that facilitates affective, ethical, and relational development in primary education.

DISCUSSIONS

Meanings and Character Dimensions Embedded in Sundanese Local Wisdom

The results of this study indicate that the values of Sundanese local wisdom, namely *silih asah*, *silih asih*, and *silih asuh*, form a framework of values that are mutually integrated in the development of students' character across the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. These three values did not stand alone but rather reinforced each other to form a complete and contextual character. This finding aligns with the view that children aged 6–12 years are in a critical phase of internalizing values, so that character education at the elementary school level plays a strategic role in the formation of morals and personality (Cubukcu, 2012; Demirel et al., 2016). In this context, Sundanese local wisdom served as a value system close to students' life experiences, so the process of character meaning unfolded naturally through daily social and cultural interactions at school.

The value of *silih asah* in this study was primarily manifested in the cognitive dimension of students' character development. This was reflected in the consistent implementation of knowledge-sharing practices, peer tutoring, and heterogeneous group work throughout the learning process. The results section indicates that most group interactions were collaborative, involving peer explanations,

joint error correction, and collective responsibility for completing tasks. These practices demonstrate that *silih asah* was not merely understood as an individual and competitive learning process, but rather as a practice of mutual intellectual enrichment that fostered collective awareness in learning through direct experience and social interaction, which constitute key prerequisites for the formation of moral character (Lickona, 1991). Accordingly, *silih asah* functioned as a social learning mechanism that built cognitive interdependence among students.

Meanwhile, *silih asih* was primarily reflected in the affective dimension of students' character. NVivo coding results indicate that teacher empathy and mutual care among students were dominant themes in school social interactions. Various spontaneous behaviors such as sharing stationery, offering emotional support, and greeting peers who were experiencing difficulties demonstrate that the value of *silih asih* had been authentically internalized. These behaviors did not emerge as mere compliance with formal rules, but rather developed from a warm and supportive emotional climate within the school. These findings underscore that the affective dimension of character developed effectively through meaningful interpersonal relationships and emotional role modelling, thereby positioning empathy and social care as integral components of students' moral awareness (Babu & Fatima, 2025; Postolache, 2020).

In addition, *silih asuh* strongly contributed to the behavioral dimension of character, particularly by shaping responsibility, discipline, and reciprocal care. Practices such as implementing a buddy system, allocating roles in P5 projects, and maintaining the school environment reflected values of mutual guidance and protection, which were concretely enacted in everyday school life. In this context, *silih asuh* was not merely understood as a hierarchical relationship, but rather as a form of collective responsibility in sustaining the learning community. This value encouraged students to act proactively in helping, guiding, and protecting one another. Accordingly, *silih asah*, *silih asih*, and *silih asuh* formed a holistic character system in which knowledge, empathy, and action mutually reinforced one another during students' character development. This framework aligns with holistic character education approaches that emphasize integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions into educational practice (Faisol et al., 2024; Ramadhan et al., 2024).

Pedagogical Strategies for Integrating Sundanese Values into Learning

The research findings indicate that the integration of the values of *silih asah*, *silih asih*, and *silih asuh* was not presented as separate content or a distinct subject, but rather was internalised through integrated pedagogical strategies embedded in thematic learning, school culture, and students' everyday activities. This approach aligns with the principles of ethnopedagogy, which conceptualise local culture not merely as learning content but as a pedagogical framework that shapes ways of learning, interacting, and acting (Dirgantari & Cahyani, 2023; Selasih & Sudarsana, 2018). Accordingly, character values were not taught declaratively but presented contextually through learning experiences closely connected to students' social and cultural lives. This strategy enabled students to understand values as part of lived practices rather than as abstract concepts.

In the practice of *silih asah*, the most prominent pedagogical strategies included collaborative learning, peer tutoring, and role distribution within group tasks. Teachers intentionally designed learning activities that encouraged students to share knowledge, provide explanations, and assume collective responsibility for group outcomes. These findings suggest that the learning process was not solely oriented toward individual academic achievement, but also toward the development of collective thinking skills and mutual support. In this way, cooperative learning within the context of *silih asah* functioned not only as an academic strategy, but also as a means of strengthening cognitive-social character, where learning success was understood as the result of interaction and shared contributions among students. This finding is consistent with the study by Mehmood et al. (2025), which demonstrates that cooperative learning strategies significantly enhance social skills among elementary school students, and supports the findings of Turan & Alemdar (2022), who emphasise the role of cooperative learning in fostering students' social, emotional, and moral development.

In the context of *silih asih*, pedagogical strategies were realised and implemented through classroom routines such as circle time, teacher-led positive reinforcement, and the cultivation of caring attitudes in everyday interactions. These practices cultivated a safe and supportive socio-emotional

climate in which students felt valued and had opportunities to express their feelings and listen to peers' experiences. Teachers functioned not only as content deliverers but also as models of empathy and facilitators of the classroom's emotional climate that supported affective learning. These findings align with the study by Abrams et al. (2022) which indicates that social-emotional learning approaches are effective in enhancing empathy through structured relational experiences. Furthermore, Bond (2017) affirm that emotionally and reflectively based experiential learning promotes deeper development of social care. Therefore, the internalisation of *silih asih* occurred through meaningful and sustained interpersonal relationships, allowing empathy and social concern to develop as integral components of students' moral consciousness rather than as mere normative responses to rules.

Meanwhile, *silih asuh* was integrated through classroom management strategies and school programs that emphasised shared responsibility, reciprocal care, and the habituation of social roles within the learning community. Activities such as Ngamumule Sakola, P5 projects, and peer mentoring systems demonstrate that the values of guiding and protecting were not taught abstractly but enacted through concrete practices that involved students' active participation. In this context, students were not merely recipients of rules but learning subjects who held roles and responsibilities for sustaining the learning environment. Direct involvement in collective activities encouraged students to understand the meaning of social responsibility in a contextualised manner. Thus, the pedagogical strategies employed were contextual and applicable, rooted in local culture and students' everyday experiences. This approach supports the sustainable internalisation of character values through classroom learning experiences and school social practices (Kadir & Alka, 2025; Rahmawati & Khusniyah, 2025).

Contributions to Contextual and Sustainable Character Development

The findings of this study demonstrate that character education grounded in Sundanese local wisdom made a significant contribution to the development of students' character, in a contextually and sustainably meaningful way. One of the main findings was the emergence of spontaneous prosocial behaviours without direct teacher intervention, particularly within the practice of *silih asih*. Behaviours such as helping one another, sharing, and providing emotional support indicate that character values were not merely understood normatively, but had been internalised as part of students' moral awareness. These findings emphasise that sustainable character formation emerged through lived social experiences embedded in everyday school life, rather than solely through formal instruction or rule-based reinforcement.

Another important finding was the absence of significant differences in empathetic behaviour between Grade IV and Grade V students, despite differences in the duration of their involvement in the character education program. This suggests that the sustainability of character development was not determined by the length of program exposure, but rather by the quality of pedagogical interactions and the emotional relevance of students' learning experiences. Accordingly, character develops more effectively through meaningful, consistent, and authentic relationships than through the repetitive implementation of procedurally driven programs.

A further significant contribution concerns the role of cultural figures, such as traditional leaders, in shaping a school climate that supported the internalisation of character values. Although direct interactions between cultural figures and students were relatively limited, their symbolic presence strengthened the legitimacy of *silih asah*, *silih asih*, and *silih asuh* as socially recognised and collectively upheld norms. This finding indicates that sustainable character education requires a strong connection between schools and their surrounding cultural communities, ensuring that the values taught in schools align with those lived in society. These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasising that the internalisation of Sundanese local wisdom values in elementary schools occurred contextually and sustainably through social practices integrated into school culture (Ansori et al., 2024).

Overall, the results of this study affirm that character education based on Sundanese local wisdom holds strong potential as an adaptive foundation for addressing the challenges of globalisation and digitalisation. Local values functioned as moral anchors that preserved cultural identity while simultaneously equipping students with social competence, empathy, and responsibility relevant to contemporary demands. Therefore, the integration of *silih asah*, *silih asih*, and *silih asuh* in elementary

education contributed not only to the formation of individual character but also to the development of socially and culturally sustainable character.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the field of character education by demonstrating that the Sundanese local wisdom values *silih asah*, *silih asih*, and *silih asuh* were meaningfully integrated into the elementary school learning ecosystem and operated across students' cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions. In contrast to conventional character education approaches that separate moral development from academic instruction, the findings indicate that character formation could emerge organically through learning practices, social relationships, and school culture grounded in local contexts. Accordingly, this study enriches the theoretical understanding of character education by affirming that local cultural values are not only compatible with established character education frameworks but also offer context-sensitive and sustainable modes of implementation. This study was limited by its focus on a single elementary school within a Sundanese cultural context and by the relatively short duration of data collection. Consequently, the findings were context-specific and could not yet be generalised broadly. In addition, perspectives from stakeholders beyond the school setting, such as parents and policymakers, were not examined in depth. Future research is recommended to involve multiple schools across diverse cultural settings, conduct cross-regional comparative studies, and employ longitudinal designs to examine the sustainability of local wisdom internalisation in students' character development over time. The findings suggest that integrating Sundanese local wisdom into everyday school life holds strong potential to strengthen contextual and sustainable character education. The values of *silih asah*, *silih asih*, and *silih asuh* were shown to support students' character development through thematic learning, teacher-student interactions, and routine school social practices. Therefore, educators are encouraged to regard local wisdom as a primary pedagogical resource for character education rather than as supplementary content. Policymakers should provide greater flexibility for culturally responsive character education approaches, particularly in rural and culturally rich contexts. Furthermore, teacher education institutions and curriculum developers may consider incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy and community-based character education as integral components of efforts to enhance the quality of elementary education.

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