

**Designing A Children's Storybook at the A1 Level That Integrates Local Cultural Values  
Into Early Childhood Education**

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Received: 6<sup>th</sup> July, 2025

Accepted: 26<sup>th</sup> July, 2025

Published: 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2025

**Abstract:** *The limited availability of reading materials that align with early childhood literacy development and are culturally contextual presents a significant challenge in educational processes rooted in local values. Most A1-level books currently in circulation do not adequately represent children's cultural experiences in their daily lives, thereby risking a disconnect between the world of reading and the child's reality. This study aims to design an initial prototype of an A1-level children's storybook that integrates local cultural values as an initial effort to provide educational, contextual, and culturally grounded literacy materials. A qualitative research approach was employed using the design-based research (DBR) method in its preliminary stage. It involved a needs assessment through curriculum document analysis, interviews with educators, and a review of local cultural literature as the basis for developing story scripts, selecting diction, and supporting illustrations. This phase resulted in a prototype design of a children's storybook featuring simple language structures, contextual illustrations, and narratives that highlight characters, traditions, and the child's surrounding cultural environment. The novelty of this research lies in the development of a literacy medium prototype that not only aims to enhance early childhood literacy skills but also intentionally integrates character-building values that are socio-culturally contextualized. This distinguishes the study from prior works, which predominantly focused on cognitive aspects of literacy without explicitly addressing the incorporation of character education and local cultural relevance. Thus, this research offers an innovative contribution by proposing a holistic and context-sensitive literacy learning medium, which can serve as a model for fostering literacy education that is attuned to the developmental needs of young children within the framework of local cultural values.*

**Keywords:** *children's book prototype, A1 level, local culture, early literacy, early childhood education.*

**How to cite this article:**

Putra, A., Dwi Lestari, R., Bin Bahurudin Setambah, M. A., & Boriboon, G. Designing A Children's Storybook at the A1 Level That Integrates Local Cultural Values Into Early Childhood Education. *Jurnal Ilmiah Potensia*, 10(2), 216–227.  
<https://doi.org/10.33369/jip.10.2.216-227>

## **BACKGROUND**

Early childhood education (ECE) is a critical stage for laying the foundation of children's cognitive, affective, and social development (Buehler et al., 2016; Indrawan et al., 2022; Syofiyanti et al., 2024). One essential aspect of ECE is strengthening early literacy, which is a foundation for future academic success (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). However, a significant gap exists between the available reading materials and the contextual needs of children (Utami et al., 2018). Many books designed for beginner readers at the A1 language proficiency level commonly targeting this early childhood age group tend to overlook local cultural contexts and instead feature narratives derived from foreign cultures that are often disconnected from children's everyday experiences (Rahmawati, 2012). This highlights the need for age-appropriate (4–6 years), linguistically accessible (A1 level), and culturally relevant literacy materials to better support children's holistic development.

This mismatch hinders children's ability to connect book narratives with their sociocultural realities. Learning disregarding children's cultural backgrounds can impede emotional and cognitive engagement in the learning process (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 1992; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Therefore, the development of culturally grounded literacy materials is not only essential for strengthening literacy but also for instilling cultural values and identity from an early age.

In response to this issue, designing an A1-level storybook prototype that integrates local cultural values is a strategic step toward providing contextual and educational reading materials (Kurnia, 2020; Nurjanah et al., 2023). The development approach is grounded in the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes culture as a central element of learning (Belcher, 2023; Kintner-Duffy et al., 2022; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The book is designed to contain stories accessible to young children, accompanied by illustrations, characters, and settings that reflect their cultural realities. In Indonesia's richly diverse cultural landscape, a children's storybook based on local culture also serves to preserve local wisdom that is increasingly eroded by globalization (Gallo & Beckman, 2016; McLaughlin, 2021). As such, developing this prototype is expected to strengthen children's connection with their sociocultural environment through engaging reading activities. The objectives of this study are to: 1) Identify the need for contextual A1-level reading materials that align with the characteristics of early childhood learners. 2) Design a prototype of an A1-level children's storybook that integrates local cultural values. 3) Describe the prototype book's narrative structure, language use, and visual elements by early literacy principles and cultural identity reinforcement.

Vygotsky's social development theory emphasizes that children learn most effectively through social interaction and meaningful symbols within their cultural context (L. Vygotsky, 2011; L. S. Vygotsky & Cole, 1978; Wertsch & Sohmer, 1995). Storybooks that incorporate symbols, values, and narratives from children's cultural environments are more readily understood and internalized in this context. The emergent literacy approach also posits that early exposure to books and storytelling directly contributes to formal literacy development (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). An effective children's book teaches letters and words and conveys moral and social messages through relevant stories. Within this framework, integrating local cultural values into children's stories supports academic learning while fostering empathy, identity, and a sense of connection with the community (Nieto, 1992). The outcome of this research is a prototype A1-level children's storybook

based on local culture, which offers an alternative reading resource that is more contextual and relevant for use in ECE settings. This book has the potential to function not only as a literacy development tool but also as a medium for cultural preservation and character education from an early age. Furthermore, this study is expected to serve as a foundation for developing other literacy media grounded in local wisdom within formal and nonformal education contexts.

## **METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative approach using the Design-Based Research (DBR) method, which is specifically utilized to develop educational solutions tailored to contextual needs (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Easterday et al., 2014; Euler & Sloane, 2014; Juuti & Lavonen, 2006). The selection of DBR was based on its iterative, reflective, and context-sensitive orientation in developing applicable learning products (Christensen & West, 2017). However, in this research, the application of DBR was limited to the prototype development phase of an A1-level children's storybook that integrates local cultural values derived from the Sekujang tradition. In other words, the study did not cover the implementation or field testing of the product in early childhood education institutions. The research involved three adapted key phases of the DBR cycle, namely:

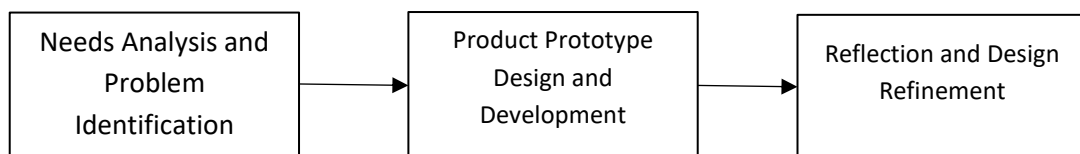


Figure 1. Research Diagram

- 1) Needs analysis and problem identification were conducted to evaluate the limitations of early childhood literacy materials relevant to the local cultural context of Bengkulu.
- 2) Product prototype design and development, involving the preparation of narrative content, visual design, and child activities integrated into the story; and
- 3) Reflection and design refinement were carried out through expert reviews and discussions with early childhood educators and local cultural practitioners to ensure the pedagogical and cultural appropriateness of the book content.

The researcher acted as the developer throughout all stages, employing a participatory approach. The researcher actively explored needs through interactions with informants, composing story content, aligning illustrations with local values, and revising designs based on qualitative feedback from experts. The primary subject of the study was the development product in the form of an A1-level children's storybook while supporting informants, including early childhood educators, heads of early childhood education units, and cultural figures or practitioners from the Serawai community in Bengkulu. Data were collected using qualitative techniques, namely initial field observations (to identify the existing learning context), semi-structured interviews with educators and cultural practitioners, and document studies on relevant teaching materials and folktales. The main instrument was the researcher, assisted by observation guidelines, interview protocols, and product review sheets. The content and construct validity of the book prototype were obtained through expert validation by specialists in early childhood education and local

culture, who evaluated the appropriateness of the story content, language, visualization, and integration of moral values.

The research was conducted over four months in Central Bengkulu Regency, Indonesia. The location was purposively selected based on the presence of early childhood education institutions attentive to local culture, although product implementation was not conducted in this study. Data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis approach involving data reduction, categorization of findings, presentation of results, and conclusion. Source triangulation and inter-researcher discussions were employed to ensure data validity, along with cross-checking between observation, interview, and product development document results.

Given the limitation of the product development stage, the outcome of this research is a culturally-based children's storybook prototype that has undergone an educational design process and content validation. This prototype can be used as an initial literacy material and character development tool in early childhood education settings after further field testing in subsequent studies.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS**

This study developed a children's storybook prototype at the A1 level that integrates local cultural values through the traditional Sekujang narrative. The product development process was conducted iteratively based on a Design-Based Research (DBR) approach involving needs analysis, design, implementation, and reflection. The research findings are presented through several subtopics, highlighting the main discoveries and their relevance to the study's focus.

### **1. Needs Identification and Relevance of the *Sekujang* Traditional Story**

Observations conducted in early childhood education (ECE) centres in Central Bengkulu, Indonesia, revealed that using folktales as part of learning practices was virtually non-existent. Conventional approaches still dominated learning activities, such as singing national children's songs, identifying pictures and colours, and reading stories from Indonesian or translated foreign books. These materials did not reflect cultural identity, even in potentially suitable activities such as storytelling, role-playing, or shared reading sessions.

Interviews with several ECE teachers revealed that Bengkulu's folktales are rarely used in early childhood learning. The limited use of such stories is due to the lack of teaching resources, inadequate teacher training, and the absence of systematic guidance for integrating folktales into daily lesson plans (RPPH). ECE Teacher A stated: *"We have never used Bengkulu folktales because there are simply no books or sources available. We only use books provided by the government, which usually contain general stories or foreign tales."* (Interview, ECE Teacher A, May 15, 2025)

This was reinforced by ECE Teacher B, who said: *"We actually want to introduce local culture to the children, but we don't know which folktales to use. There's no training or guidance from the education office either."* (Interview, ECE Teacher B, May 16, 2025)

ECE Teacher C further highlighted the lack of learning infrastructure, especially in libraries: *"Our school library only has general children's books, none that contain folktales from Bengkulu. So, we just use whatever is available."* (Interview, ECE Teacher C, May 17, 2025)

However, significant potential emerged for developing local wisdom-based learning, as expressed by ECE Teacher D: *"If there were teaching materials or children's books from Bengkulu, I would definitely use them. The children would surely enjoy stories that are familiar to their environment."* (Interview, ECE Teacher D, May 18, 2025)

ECE Teacher E also noted that children are more enthusiastic when hearing stories related to their daily lives: *"When I told the story about the origin of a nearby lake, the children were instantly engaged, and they asked many questions. If we had local folktales like that, it would be really enjoyable."* (Interview, ECE Teacher E, May 18, 2025)

These findings indicate a gap between the local cultural potential and educational practices in the field. The use of folktales to strengthen cultural identity and develop early literacy has not been optimally realized. According to the principles of local wisdom-based education, folktales can serve as effective media for character building, fostering a love for culture, and enhancing children's language skills. The lack of training and access to local educational resources remains a major barrier. This underscores the need for collaboration between local governments, PAUD curriculum developers, and academic institutions to create and disseminate contextual, age-appropriate teaching materials based on local folktales.

This condition supports the (Wiyani, 2014) assertion that early childhood character development should be rooted in stories that reflect children's real-life environments. As a form of collective cultural expression, folktales have high educational value and can be used to instil moral, social, and emotional values in children (Nurgiyantoro, 2018). However, these values have not been systematically utilized in ECE settings, including those in Bengkulu. Moreover, Tilaar's concept of local wisdom-based education emphasizes that education should not be detached from its cultural roots (*local wisdom-based education*) sebagaimana dikemukakan oleh Tilaar justru menekankan bahwa pendidikan seharusnya tidak tercerabut dari akar budaya masyarakat (Tilaar & Mukhlis, 1999). Therefore, the Sekujang narrative, a traditional annual practice of the Serawai community rich in spiritual, familial, and ancestral respect values, holds significant potential to become a meaningful learning resource in early childhood education.

## **2. Design of a Storybook Based on Local Cultural Values**

The development of the children's storybook Sekujang stems from the identified need for a literacy medium that is not only visually and linguistically engaging but also enriched with culturally contextual values appropriate for early childhood learners in Bengkulu, Indonesia. The book is designed as a learning tool grounded in character education and local culture, in alignment with the Guidelines for Character-Based Early Childhood Education (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020), which emphasize that character education must be rooted in the real-life contexts of children. The development process of this culturally-based storybook considered several key aspects. The Sekujang storybook exemplifies the use of traditional folktales from local heritage, specifically the cultural tradition of Sekujang, as the core narrative. Through this approach, the book is intended to serve as both an educational and cultural medium, promoting local identity, transmitting values, and strengthening early literacy skills in a way that resonates with children's social and cultural environments.

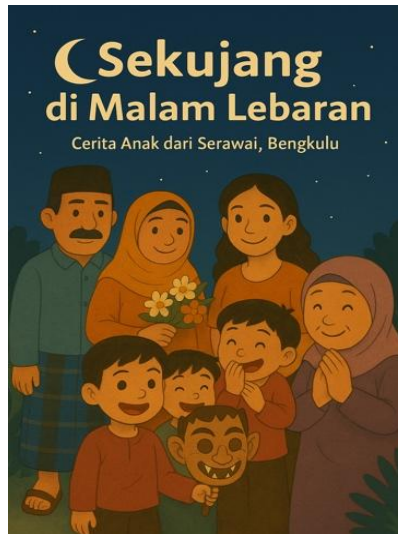


Figure 2 Book Cover Depicting the Sekujang Story Theme


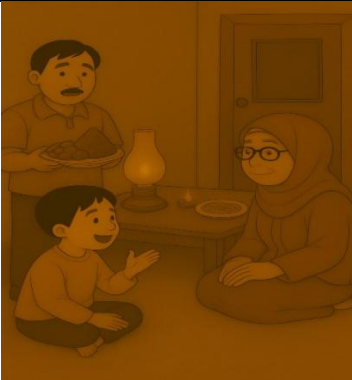


The book cover illustration captures a warm and intimate atmosphere of familial togetherness on the eve of Eid in a traditional village in Serawai, Bengkulu. At the centre of the image stands a young boy, the story's main character, with a joyful expression and dressed in traditional attire. Surrounding him are his family members, father, mother, and grandmother, also clad in customary clothing, reflecting a strong sense of kinship and local wisdom. The background features a stilt house typical of the region and a night sky adorned with a crescent moon and stars, evoking a traditional and spiritual ambience. The use of warm tones and soft lighting creates a serene and emotionally evocative impression, visually reinforcing the cultural values, the spirit of the Sekujang tradition, and the importance of preserving ancestral heritage. This cover serves as a visual introduction to the heart of the story: a child's journey of growing up embraced by tradition and familial love on a night of profound meaning. Furthermore, the illustration of a local child protagonist is intentionally designed to foster cultural pride and enhance contextual relevance for early childhood readers. (Alexander et al., n.d.).


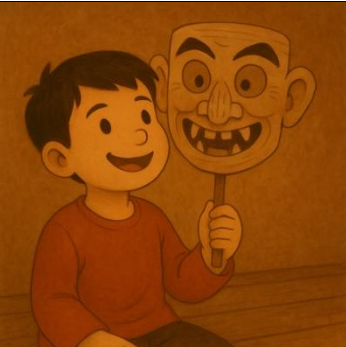
Table 1. Design Elements of the Children's Storybook *Sekujang*

Narrative Aspect	Visual Illustration	Children's Activities
Simple, repetitive language with moral meaning	Soft colour palette; local characters and settings; cultural symbols of Bengkulu, Indonesia	Reflection on values, drawing story content, role-playing of moral values

The book's narrative structure is crafted using language appropriate to the linguistic development stage of children aged 4–6 years. It incorporates repetitive elements, syntactic simplicity, and clear moral meanings that are tangible and comprehensible for young readers. For instance, the child protagonist in the story faces a minor dilemma that reflects core values such as cooperation (gotong royong), social empathy, and respect for parents.



SEKUJANG ON EID FITR A Folktale from Serawai, Bengkulu	
	<p>Page 1</p> <p><i>Arrived at Grandma's house.</i> (Illustration: A small child stands before a traditional stilt house at night, holding flowers with their mother.)</p>
	<p>Page 2</p> <p><i>It was warm and full of people inside.</i></p> <p>(Illustration: Family members gathered in the living room, chatting under an oil lamp light, with food on the table. Father comes in carrying rice.)</p> <p>(Visual: Father brings a small cone-shaped rice dish (tumpeng) and a glass of water.)</p>
	<p>Page 3</p> <p><i>Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.</i> (Illustration: Someone knocks. Everyone looks toward the door.)</p> <p><i>"A ghost!" I shouted, Grandma held me tight.</i> (Illustration: The child looks frightened. A shadow of a masked figure appears behind the window.)</p>
	<p>Page 4</p> <p><i>We slowly stepped outside. There stood Sekuro, dressed like a ghost.</i> (Illustration: A person wearing a scary mask and costume, holding a container.)</p> <p>Father asked, "What should you do when someone comes asking for food?" Then...</p> <p>Father gave cookies and rice to Sekuro. (Illustration: Father handing a jar of cookies and a small tumpeng rice dish.) "For the spirits who've passed on," Father whispered. "So they are not forgotten."</p>

		<p><i>(Illustration: A quiet scene. Sekuro bows in prayer. The atmosphere is respectful.)</i></p> <p>Grandma smiled. "That's Sekujang, our tradition."</p> <p><i>(Illustration: Grandma sits on the porch, explaining the tradition to her grandchild under the soft glow)</i></p>
		<p>Sekuro danced and sang funny rhymes. <i>(Illustration: Sekuro dancing in the yard. Children laugh.)</i></p> <p>The night grew deeper, but the laughter and Sekujang songs still echoed. <i>(Illustration: Sekuro walks to the next house under a full moon.)</i></p>
		<p>I want to be Sekuro when I grow up. To keep this tradition alive. <i>(Illustration: The child smiles while looking at a handmade cardboard mask.)</i></p>

Narrative readability is prioritized to ensure that children can comprehend and retain the storyline while simultaneously implicitly fostering a sense of morality. Repetitive structures serve as a pedagogical strategy to strengthen memory retention and expand children's vocabulary. The visual elements of this A1-level book are designed to support narrative comprehension and introduce the cultural identity of Bengkulu, Indonesia. The illustrations depict characters and settings that reflect the everyday life of the local community, such as traditional stilt houses and tropical landscapes. Soft colour palettes and friendly illustration styles aim to create visual comfort and maintain children's attention on the story.

The representation of local children wearing traditional clothing is intended to foster a sense of cultural pride from an early age. These visual contexts do not function merely as decorative elements but as **textual extensions** reinforcing the meaning of the text through visual media. Integrated reflective activities, including open-ended questions, drawing tasks, and role-playing simulations, accompany each part of the story. These activities are not merely repetitions of the story but are designed to stimulate critical thinking, emotional expression, and social competence in children.



Integrating reflective activities such as drawing, answering questions, and role-playing follows a **constructivist approach**, which positions children as active agents in the learning process (Miettinen, 2000; Piaget, 1973). Questions such as “*What would you do if you saw someone asking for food?*” aim to prompt value-based reflection. Meanwhile, drawing and role-playing activities facilitate creative expression and interpersonal communication. Through this approach, children are recipients of the story and **active participants** in moral learning. These activities do not merely stimulate empathy but also foster critical thinking and the development of moral reasoning from an early age (Lickona, 2019).

### 3. Development of A1-Level Storybook: Initial Outcomes and Reflections

This study focuses on the initial development phase of a children’s storybook at the A1 level, integrating local cultural values through the traditional tale of *Sekujang*. Following the Design-Based Research (DBR) approach, the study has completed several stages, including needs analysis, initial design conceptualization, story content development, and the contextual illustration of visual elements. However, it should be emphasized that the research has not yet reached the implementation or product trial phase within early childhood education (PAUD) settings. Thus, the discussion in this section centres on the development outcomes and initial reflections on the design prototype.

Reflections on the development process were conducted through discussions with early childhood educators and reviews by experts in children's literacy and local culture. Feedback from educators and experts was used to identify the strengths and areas for improvement in the prototype storybook. Overall, the narrative, simple, repetitive, and embedded with moral values, was considered appropriate to the principles of readability for the A1 level (ages 4–6). The visual elements, featuring traditional Bengkulu settings such as stilt houses, the atmosphere of *Malam Lebaran*, and the *Sekuro* character, effectively fostered an emotional connection with the story and contextualized learning within the children's sociocultural environment.

Nevertheless, several critical observations from experts and practitioners served as key points for reflection. For example, certain local terms such as “*demo putus*” and “*Sekuro*” were found to require additional explanation or the inclusion of a simple glossary to avoid confusion during shared reading sessions with parents or teachers. Furthermore, a usage guide for educators or parents was deemed essential to support story reading and facilitate the following reflective activities. This is crucial for optimizing the book's role as a value-based learning medium rather than merely a source of entertainment.

The product has not yet undergone direct trials in early childhood settings; validation remains limited to expert reviews and conceptual reflection. In other words, the book's effectiveness in fostering early literacy and character development based on local culture in young children still requires further empirical investigation. The researchers acknowledge that the implementation phase is critical for evaluating factual readability, child engagement, and the ease of integrating the book into daily learning activities in PAUD contexts. Therefore, the development of *Sekujang di Malam Lebaran* in this study serves as an initial prototype that has undergone pedagogical and cultural design processes but has not yet been field-tested. This product is expected to be a foundation for future development through empirical trials and data-driven improvements. Accordingly, this research is strategically positioned to lay the groundwork for culturally relevant learning media and advancing contextual literacy in early childhood education in Indonesia.

## CONCLUSION

This study fundamentally identifies the need for contextualized reading materials for A1-level children, designs a prototype of a culturally grounded early childhood storybook, and describes the narrative structure, language, and visual components that support early literacy and the reinforcement of cultural identity. Based on the analysis and development process results, it was found that the current reading materials used in early childhood education (PAUD) settings remain largely disconnected from the children's sociocultural context. The available books are predominantly derived from non-local sources, failing to foster a strong connection between children and the cultural values embedded within their communities. These findings underscore the importance of developing teaching materials that are not only linguistically accessible to young children but also rich in representations of local culture.

The prototype storybook, *Sekujang di Malam Lebaran*, developed in this study demonstrates that local folktales can be designed educationally and engagingly through the use of simple, repetitive, and meaningful narratives; illustrations that depict the child's cultural environment and reflective activities that deepen value comprehension. Initial validations from educators and cultural experts indicate that the book is pedagogically and culturally relevant, with strong potential for use in early literacy activities in PAUD contexts. By integrating local cultural elements into the story structure, this book serves a dual purpose: as a literacy learning tool and a medium for transmitting local wisdom. The book's design also reflects the principles of culturally responsive pedagogy, which places the child's cultural identity at the heart of the learning experience. Thus, this product not only addresses the need for contextual reading materials but also contributes to cultural preservation efforts in the era of globalization.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that early childhood educators and curriculum developers begin integrating culturally-based teaching materials into early literacy activities in order to foster stronger emotional and cognitive engagement in children toward learning content. Local governments and educational policymakers are also encouraged to support the development and distribution of children's storybooks that reflect the local wisdom of various Indonesian regions through initiatives such as book assistance programs and continuous teacher training. Furthermore, subsequent research should be conducted to empirically test the effectiveness of this prototype within actual PAUD learning environments. Future evaluations should focus on visual appeal, value comprehension, and the impact on children's early literacy skills to ensure that the product's benefits are validated in real-world contexts.

Collaboration between academics, educators, illustrators, and local cultural figures is also crucial to enhancing the development process of children's books. This multi-stakeholder synergy will ensure that the final products are not only pedagogically sound but also culturally authentic, thereby fully representing the rich cultural diversity of Indonesia. Through these collective efforts, culturally-based storybooks can emerge as compelling and meaningful instructional alternatives and as strategic instruments in shaping a literate, character-driven generation of Indonesian children deeply rooted in their cultural identity. The utilization of such books can enrich children's learning experiences while reinforcing the vital role of education in preserving the nation's cultural heritage.

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