

Ethno-Curriculum as a Vehicle for Preserving Cultural Identity in the 21st Century

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Abstract. The rapid global changes in the 21st century have brought serious challenges to the sustainability of local cultural identities. The modernization of education tends to standardize curricula, thereby displacing local values, knowledge, and practices that form the foundation of community life. This article examines the concept of the Ethno-Curriculum as a means of preserving cultural identity through the integration of indigenous knowledge and ethnopedagogy in the design and implementation of the curriculum. This research was conducted in the multicultural Dalaynese community (Dayak, Malay, Chinese) at school level using a qualitative literacy-exploration approach. The qualitative literacy approach was used for conceptual-critical purposes by reviewing recent literature on curriculum studies, ethnopedagogy, and cultural sustainability. Exploratory data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews. Both approaches position local culture as a source of learning, values, and meaning in the formal education process of schools. Analysis shows that the ethno-curriculum not only functions as a context-based educational instrument but also as a strategy for decolonizing knowledge that strengthens students' identities. In the multicultural context of Indonesia, the development of the ethno-curriculum can serve as a means of revitalizing, among others, Dalaynese local values at the practical level of education. The findings of this study emphasize that the preservation of cultural identity in the 21st century must be carried out through a transformation of the curriculum paradigm from merely transferring knowledge to imparting local values and wisdom. Thus, the ethno-curriculum plays an important role in building education that is rooted in culture while remaining adaptive to global challenges.

Keywords: Ethno-curriculum, indigenous knowledge, ethnopedagogy, cultural preservation, 21st-century education.

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INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century is marked by rapid globalization, digitalization, and cultural homogenization that reshape education. In Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, the pursuit of global competitiveness has pushed curricula to prioritize technological skills, economic efficiency, and standardized testing, often sidelining local cultural values, indigenous knowledge, and traditional wisdom that ground social and moral life (Parmin & Trisnowati, 2024; Gonzales, 2024). As outcomes are standardized, education risks severing young people from the cultural roots that shape identity, creating a tension between global adaptation and local preservation.

Safeguarding cultural identity through education is not only a pedagogical issue but a moral necessity. Indonesia's cultural plurality offers a basis for reimagining schooling as a medium of cultural sustainability rather than assimilation, yet global frameworks often overlook the epistemic richness of indigenous traditions. Integrating local wisdom into curricula becomes essential to balance modernization with cultural continuity (Akhmar et al., 2023; Mbelebele et al., 2024; Gandasari et al., 2025). Recognizing indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) as legitimate sources of learning enables schools to cultivate both global competence and cultural rootedness (Gandasari et al., 2024). The notion of ethno-curriculum embodies this vision and positions education as a bridge between local epistemologies and global challenges.

Although multicultural and culturally responsive education are increasingly promoted, they rarely ensure that indigenous knowledge is systematically embedded in national curricula. Such approaches foster inclusion, respect for diversity, and affirmation of students' cultural backgrounds, nurturing self-esteem and intercultural empathy (Rocha et al., 2024; Nnama-Okechukwu et al., 2022). However, they tend to remain confined to classroom practice rather than transforming curriculum structures, leaving local epistemologies marginal and vulnerable to erosion under globalized norms.

Policy and structural constraints further hinder the integration of indigenous knowledge. Decentralization in Indonesia, intended to empower local authorities, has been limited by national standards and top-down regulation (Tekleselassie & DeCuir, 2021). Weak institutional support, insufficient ethnopedagogical training, and resistance from dominant educational ideologies reinforce this marginalization (Acharibasam & McVittie, 2022; Photo & McKnight, 2024). These conditions highlight the need for a framework that positions local culture as a core curricular element rather than optional enrichment.

International experience shows both promise and difficulty. Intercultural programmes in Latin America and Indigenous Peoples' Education initiatives in the Philippines demonstrate that ethno-based curricula can strengthen identity and participation, whereas centralized systems, such as in Ethiopia, still hinder local adaptation (Rocha et al., 2024; Tekleselassie & DeCuir, 2021; Miole, 2024). These cases underscore the need for locally grounded yet nationally supported models—such as ethno-curriculum—to align educational development with cultural preservation.

Responding to this context, the present study examines ethno-curriculum as a strategic framework for preserving cultural identity in 21st-century Indonesian education. Focusing on

the multicultural communities of Dayak, Malay, and Chinese in Sintang Regency, West Kalimantan, it employs qualitative conceptual–critical analysis to synthesize indigenous knowledge, ethnopedagogical principles, and curriculum theory. The study proposes a conceptual model of ethno-curriculum that redefines education as cultural inheritance and identity strengthening, and argues that preserving cultural identity today depends on reimagining education as a dialogue between tradition and modernity, between the local and the global.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, literacy-based, descriptive-analytic design to explore the conceptual, cultural, and pedagogical foundations of an ethno-curriculum framework for cultural identity preservation. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of meaning, context, and value systems in specific sociocultural settings rather than focusing on numerical data. As Acharibasam and McVittie (2022) note, qualitative methods—particularly thematic and interpretive analysis—are well suited to indigenous-based educational models, as they allow researchers to capture complex cultural narratives and communal experiences with nuance. This flexibility supports the exploration of multi-layered realities in educational contexts, embracing both personal and collective perspectives (Jacob et al., 2024).

An ethnopedagogical lens was applied to examine how local knowledge systems inform formal education processes. Ethnopedagogy, as described by Krempig and Enoksen (2024), emphasizes integrating cultural values, traditions, and indigenous worldviews into educational practices so that curricula reflect learners' cultural realities. The study adopted an exploratory-critical approach that combined conceptual analysis with empirical insights, synthesizing indigenous knowledge and curriculum theory to construct a contextualized ethno-curriculum model. Ethnopedagogical research, as highlighted by Hong and Islam (2024), not only documents cultural learning systems but also strengthens community resilience by embedding local knowledge into educational design and implementation (Martadani et al., 2024; Verawati & Wahyudi, 2024; Gandasari et al., 2024; Gandasari et al., 2025). This methodological orientation aligns directly with the study's aim of bridging traditional wisdom and formal schooling.

The research was conducted in Sintang Regency, West Kalimantan, Indonesia—an area inhabited predominantly by Dayak, Malay, and Chinese communities. Sintang was chosen as

the research site because it represents a living landscape of cultural plurality where diverse belief systems and educational traditions coexist. Geographically, the regency is characterized by extensive tropical forests and the Kapuas–Melawi river system, which form the backbone of local livelihoods and cultural practices. Communities maintain traditional ecological farming systems and communal forest management that embody ecological balance and spiritual ties to nature. These characteristics provide a rich context for examining how cultural and ecological knowledge can inform curriculum development.

Each cultural group in Sintang possesses distinctive educational traditions. Dayak communities transmit moral and ecological values through customary institutions such as pantang (taboos), adat basa (customary speech), and tembawang (traditional agroforestry systems). Malay communities center education in religious instruction, particularly surau-based learning and Qur'anic study circles. Meanwhile, the Chinese community draws on Confucian principles emphasizing moral self-cultivation, discipline, and filial piety. This constellation of practices renders Sintang an ideal social laboratory for investigating how multicultural knowledge systems can be translated into a coherent ethno-curriculum framework.

A total of 27 participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to ensure relevance to both educational practice and cultural leadership. Participants comprised three main groups: (1) educational practitioners (teachers, principals, and curriculum developers) responsible for embedding cultural content in schools; (2) cultural leaders—elders and adat authorities from Dayak, Malay, and Chinese communities—who act as guardians and transmitters of local traditions; and (3) academic experts specializing in indigenous knowledge, ethnopedagogy, and curriculum studies. This sampling strategy allowed triangulation across policy, practice, and culture, thereby enriching the analytical depth of the study.

Three primary qualitative methods were used: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document review. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' understandings of ethno-curriculum, experiences with culture-based education, and views on its feasibility in formal school settings. Participant observation involved researchers' direct engagement in rituals, craft activities, and school events that integrate traditional practices, allowing them to observe cultural learning processes in situ. Document review examined local curricula, teaching materials, policy documents, and scholarly literature to situate empirical insights

within broader theoretical and policy debates. The combination of these methods provided methodological triangulation, enhancing credibility and depth (Acharibasam & McVittie, 2022).

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), involving three iterative stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During data reduction, interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were coded inductively and deductively into thematic categories such as indigenous knowledge, pedagogical practices, and curriculum components. In the data display stage, the coded material was organized into thematic matrices and diagrams to identify relationships between cultural knowledge and educational structures. In the final stage, patterns and themes were synthesized into a conceptual model showing how ethno-curriculum can operationalize cultural identity preservation in formal education.

Interpretive ethnographic techniques were used to uncover latent meanings embedded in cultural narratives and practices. This approach is consistent with Nnama-Okechukwu et al. (2022), who stress that indigenous narratives must be interpreted within their sociocultural context to reveal underlying educational philosophies. Through iterative comparison between empirical data and theoretical constructs, the study generated an integrated model grounded simultaneously in local knowledge and established curriculum theory.

To ensure rigor, the study adopted Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through data and method triangulation, member checking with key participants, and repeated observations. Transferability was supported by thick descriptions of context and participants, enabling other scholars to judge relevance to similar settings. Dependability was maintained via an audit trail documenting data collection and analysis procedures, while confirmability was enhanced through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing (Acharibasam & McVittie, 2022; Jacob et al., 2024).

Given its engagement with indigenous communities, the study strictly adhered to ethical standards. Research procedures followed principles of informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. Cultural sensitivity guided all stages; the research team sought approval from adat institutions and observed local protocols when entering community spaces. Ethical conduct drew on WHO (2011), CIOMS (2016), CARE (Carroll et al., 2020), and OCAP (FNIGC, 2014) frameworks, which emphasize respect, reciprocity, and indigenous data sovereignty. Following Hong and Islam (2024) and Conrad (2022), the study aimed to avoid

cultural appropriation and misrepresentation by prioritizing community benefit and collaborative interpretation.

Overall, this methodological design integrates empirical rigor with cultural responsiveness. By combining ethnopedagogical theory with qualitative inquiry, it supports the decolonial objective of repositioning indigenous knowledge within curriculum development and ensures that the proposed ethno-curriculum model authentically reflects the voices and values of the communities involved.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the Dayak, Malay, and Chinese communities in Sintang Regency possess rich and interrelated indigenous knowledge systems that can serve as the core foundation of an ethno-curriculum for the 21st century. These knowledge systems are not merely collections of cultural artifacts, but integrated frameworks of values, ecological wisdom, ethics, and social practices that shape how communities understand the world and educate the next generation. When systematically mapped and analyzed, they offer strong potential to transform formal schooling from a vehicle of cultural homogenization into an instrument of cultural continuity and identity formation.

Indigenous Knowledge Domains and Their Educational Potential

The research identified twelve main domains of indigenous knowledge shared across the three ethnic communities: history, language, literature, art, craft, customary law, technology, environment, medicine, food, clothing, and sport. Each domain embodies specific meanings and practices that can be translated into curricular content.

In the domain of history, Dayak narratives about origins and longhouse traditions, Malay stories of the sultanate, and Chinese accounts of migration and acculturation provide rich material for local history learning. These narratives help students situate themselves within a long civilizational continuum rather than viewing history only through a national or Western lens. Likewise, the coexistence of Dayak sub-ethnic dialects, Malay regional dialects, and Hakka or Hokkien varieties creates fertile ground for multilingual literacy programs that both preserve linguistic diversity and strengthen metalinguistic awareness.

Literary traditions—such as Dayak folklore and myths, Malay pantun and hikayat, and Chinese proverbs and Confucian tales—can be integrated into language and character education. They teach moral reasoning, aesthetic appreciation, and cultural pride. In the artistic domain,

sape music and war dances, zapin and Islamic calligraphy, and barongsai and Chinese calligraphy offer powerful resources for arts education that link creativity to identity and spirituality.

Traditional crafts, such as rattan weaving, mandau forging, ikat textiles, boat building, pandan weaving, porcelain making, and wood carving, not only preserve local skills but also open pathways for ethno-entrepreneurship and creative industries aligned with contemporary economic needs. Customary law, including Dayak adat councils, Malay marriage and inheritance customs, and Chinese family ethics and ancestor veneration, offers authentic content for civic, moral, and religious education rooted in lived practices rather than abstract rules.

Indigenous technology and environmental practices—ranging from traditional farming techniques, longhouse architecture, and river transport to trade tools and energy-efficient housing—can be connected to STEAM learning, environmental science, and geography. Local medicinal knowledge, culinary traditions, clothing systems, and physical activities further enrich the curriculum with content that unites body, mind, culture, and ecology. Together, these domains show that indigenous knowledge is not peripheral or “supplementary”, but capable of structuring a comprehensive, interdisciplinary curriculum.

Structural Strengths of the Ethno-Curriculum Model

The analysis of interview data, observations, and documents revealed five key strengths of the proposed ethno-curriculum model.

First, it integrates moral, ecological, and social values into learning. Rather than teaching values as separate “character education” topics, the model embeds them within concrete cultural practices: communal work in Dayak villages, Malay religious observances, and Chinese ethical discipline all become living contexts for learning collaboration, responsibility, and respect.

Second, the model operates across multiple subjects and levels of schooling. Cultural themes can be woven into science, social studies, language, arts, and physical education, avoiding the pitfall of isolating “local content” in a single subject with limited hours. This multi-layered structure makes the curriculum more coherent and meaningful.

Third, the ethno-curriculum aligns with 21st-century skills. Practices such as gotong royong cultivate collaboration; deliberative traditions such as bepakat nurture critical thinking and negotiation skills; artistic and literary creativity fosters innovation and communication. These

competencies emerge organically from indigenous practices, showing that cultural rootedness and global readiness are mutually reinforcing.

Fourth, the model supports the decolonization of education. By recognizing indigenous epistemologies as legitimate sources of knowledge, the curriculum counters the dominance of Western-centric content and teaching methods. Students learn that their own cultural heritage generates valid theories, ethics, and technologies.

Fifth, the ethno-curriculum revitalizes multicultural identity in Sintang. Because it integrates Dayak, Malay, and Chinese knowledge systems in a balanced way, it does not privilege one group over another. Instead, it builds a shared space where each culture contributes to a collective educational project, strengthening interethnic respect and social cohesion.

These strengths are operationalized through five interconnected curricular components identified in the study: (1) goals focused on cultural awareness and ethical identity; (2) content integration of local knowledge into mainstream subjects; (3) ethnopedagogical methods such as storytelling, field-based learning, and community apprenticeship; (4) holistic assessment of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development; and (5) sustained partnerships between schools, cultural institutions, and local experts.

Ethno-Curriculum, Identity, and 21st-Century Competence

The results highlight that local wisdom is not in tension with 21st-century education; instead, it is a powerful vehicle for achieving its core aims. Dayak ecological practices teach systems thinking, resilience, and sustainability, directly resonating with global discourses on climate change and sustainable development. Malay moral codes encourage respectful communication, empathy, and social harmony, which are central to global citizenship and peace education. Chinese cultural emphasis on discipline, perseverance, and entrepreneurial ethics supports lifelong learning, innovation, and adaptability.

These findings show that ethno-curriculum can contribute to global agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Education that draws on ecological knowledge in forest and river management supports SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land), while community-based learning models contribute to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Rather than being “traditional” in an outdated sense, indigenous knowledge provides conceptual and practical tools for addressing contemporary planetary challenges.

At the same time, anchoring learning in local culture strengthens students' sense of identity and belonging. They see themselves not as passive recipients of external knowledge but as heirs and future custodians of a living heritage. This identity grounding fosters psychological resilience, motivation, and pride. It also enables what can be called “glocal competence”: the ability to engage global issues and technologies while remaining rooted in one's cultural and ecological context.

Tri-Value Philosophy and Intercultural Dialogue

A distinctive contribution of this study is the formulation of the Tri-Value Philosophy—Selaras (Harmony), Santun (Morality), and Seimbang (Balance)—as the ethical core of the ethno-curriculum model. These three values synthesize key ethical orientations from each community.

Selaras reflects harmony with nature and community, derived strongly from Dayak philosophies of living in balance with forests, rivers, and spirits as well as with fellow villagers. Santun represents moral refinement and courteous behavior emphasized within Malay Islamic culture, where speech, dress, and social interaction are guided by norms of respect and modesty. Seimbang captures the notion of balance and disciplined order associated with Chinese Confucian traditions, where individual aspirations are harmonized with family, community, and social obligations.

By uniting these values, the Tri-Value Philosophy becomes both a common ground and a dialogic space where differences are acknowledged and appreciated. It guides the design of learning experiences, codes of conduct in schools, and the evaluation of student growth. Rather than promoting a superficial multiculturalism, it cultivates deep intercultural understanding: students learn not only about “others”, but also how diverse value systems can coexist and support a shared vision of a just and sustainable society.

Decolonial and Theoretical Implications

The findings underscore the ethno-curriculum's role as a decolonial educational paradigm. Historically, formal education in many postcolonial contexts has privileged Western ways of knowing, presenting local knowledge as folklore or informal practice rather than as rigorous and systematic. In contrast, the ethno-curriculum reframes indigenous knowledge as a legitimate epistemic system that informs theory, method, and practice.

This reorientation has at least three theoretical implications. First, it positions curriculum as a site of epistemic justice, where marginalized knowledge traditions are restored to visibility and

authority. Second, it reconceptualizes learning as a relational process that connects humans to nature, ancestors, and community, challenging individualistic and purely cognitive models of education. Third, it integrates cultural sustainability into the heart of curriculum theory, viewing education as a vehicle for transmitting values, practices, and worldviews across generations.

In this sense, the ethno-curriculum advances curriculum studies by bringing ethnopedagogy, decolonial theory, and sustainability education into a single integrated model. It demonstrates that curriculum can simultaneously respond to global standards and remain anchored in the specificities of place, history, and culture.

Practical and Policy Implications

Practically, the ethno-curriculum model proposes clear roles for teachers, schools, cultural leaders, and local governments. Teachers are encouraged to move beyond textbooks and involve students in experiential learning: visiting longhouses and surau, observing rituals, interviewing elders, engaging in craft production, and participating in environmental stewardship activities. Assessment can include portfolios, performances, and community projects that reflect students' engagement with local wisdom.

Schools are positioned as cultural hubs that connect formal education with community life. Collaboration with adat councils, religious leaders, and cultural organizations ensures that curricular content remains accurate, respectful, and up to date. These partnerships also help prevent tokenistic or superficial inclusion of culture; instead, they build shared ownership of education.

For policymakers, the study suggests that decentralization of education must be accompanied by strong support for localized curriculum development. National standards need not be abandoned but can be reinterpreted through regional cultural lenses. Central authorities can provide frameworks, funding, and capacity-building, while regions like Sintang develop detailed ethno-curriculum blueprints guided by their own knowledge systems.

At the national level, such an approach has the potential to strengthen unity in diversity. When each region sees its culture reflected in schooling, national identity becomes a mosaic of local identities rather than a competing force. Education thus becomes a form of cultural diplomacy, presenting Indonesia's pluralism as an asset in global forums and contributing to international conversations on indigenous rights, decolonization, and sustainable futures.

Overall, the results and discussion affirm that ethno-curriculum is not a nostalgic return to the past but a forward-looking educational strategy. By integrating twelve domains of indigenous knowledge, five structural components, and the Tri-Value Philosophy within a multiethnic context, the Sintang model shows how education can preserve cultural identity while cultivating the competencies needed in a complex, globalized world. It reconciles the local and the global, the traditional and the modern, the cultural and the ecological—positioning education as a continuous dialogue between heritage and change.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that ethno-curriculum is a transformative paradigm that links indigenous knowledge with 21st-century skills and global agendas. Grounded in the wisdom of Dayak, Malay, and Chinese communities, it shows that local epistemologies can guide learning that is culturally rooted, ecologically conscious, and future oriented. Ethno-curriculum strengthens students' identities, nurtures values of harmony, morality, and balance, and cultivates competencies such as collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and innovation.

Beyond enriching classroom content, ethno-curriculum reshapes relationships among schools, families, communities, and policymakers, positioning education as a shared project of cultural sustainability and social justice. It affirms that decolonizing curriculum is not about rejecting national or global standards, but reinterpreting them through local wisdom and participation. In doing so, ethno-curriculum supports more just, inclusive, and sustainable education systems that honour Indigenous knowledge while preparing learners to face complex contemporary challenges. This model can guide other regions in revitalizing education through local wisdom.

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