

Integrating *Dulmuluk* Theater into Character Education: A Cultural Approach to Social Transformation in Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how *Dulmuluk* theater—a traditional performing art from Palembang, Indonesia—can be integrated into formal education as a medium for character development and social transformation. While recognized as cultural heritage, its pedagogical use in schools remains underexplored. A qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological approach was employed to understand the lived experiences of educators and students involved in *Dulmuluk*-based learning. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with 3 teachers and 6 students, documentation review, and audiovisual materials. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Findings revealed that *Dulmuluk* theater effectively conveys moral values such as honesty, discipline, environmental awareness, respect for parents, social solidarity, and responsibility. These values are internalized through a three-stage process: understanding (exploration of scripts and character analysis), application (performance-based learning and collaboration), and habituation (reflection and behavior reinforcement). Students demonstrated improved moral reasoning, social interaction, and empathy through their engagement with the theater. The integration of *Dulmuluk* into character education aligns with constructivist and socio-cultural learning theories by fostering experiential, affective, and culturally relevant learning. It serves as a powerful tool for reinforcing local values, enhancing emotional literacy, and supporting inclusive, democratic learning environments. The study recommends formal curriculum integration and teacher training to support this approach.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education in Islam emphasises the formation of individuals with noble character, including honesty, compassion, responsibility, respect, and justice. According to Fatmah (2018), character development in education should go beyond the mere memorization of values and be applied in

everyday life (Bangun, 2023). Character education is the process of fostering intellectual, emotional, and behavioral development aligned with moral and ethical values, aiming to create individuals who are devout, responsible, and morally upright (Nurmadiyah, 2018). Omeri (2021) adds that character education includes the integration of moral principles, ethics, positive attitudes, and essential social skills necessary for forming individuals with integrity.

In the Indonesian context, character education also incorporates the nation's cultural values, strengthening national identity (Suriaman et al., 2024). Education serves as a tool for social transformation by promoting values such as gender equality, tolerance, and sustainability (Nazmi & Pulungan, 2024). It also fosters freedom of learning, which can lead to social change (Rahmah et al., 2025). Selo Soemardjan emphasizes that social transformation involves shifts in societal values, attitudes, and behavior, which are deeply connected to various social groups (Rodhiyana, 2024).

Bangun (2023) outlines several key principles in character education: (1) internal and external influences, where individual development is shaped by both personal conscience and societal factors; (2) alignment between beliefs, words, and actions; (3) personal moral awareness; and (4) becoming an "Ulul Albab" individual—someone who is conscious, knowledgeable, and acts based on moral principles. Iwan (2020) supports this, noting that character education is not merely teaching right and wrong, but instilling habits that encourage learners to choose and embody goodness in their daily lives.

Traditional performing arts, such as Dulmuluk theatre, offer a unique moral and educational dimension beyond entertainment. Rooted in the poetic work Abdumuluk Jauhari, Dulmuluk performances convey rich moral teachings—such as loyalty, religious faith, and social responsibility—making them relevant to educational settings. Although Dulmuluk reflects informal community-based moral education, its integration into formal education remains underexplored.

Julianto (2019) emphasises that formal education should nurture moral values and cultural identity to shape an active and creative generation. Ki Hajar Dewantara also highlighted the role of family and informal environments as key sites of moral development (Umar & Sulo, 2008). Given the strong relationship between education and culture (Rahman et al., 2022), there is potential for Dulmuluk to serve as a pedagogical tool in schools. However, despite recognition of its value (Rolando & Walidah, 2021; Wijaya et al., 2021), research and practice on systematically incorporating Dulmuluk into school curricula, especially in a way that strengthens character education, are still limited.

While studies have analysed Dulmuluk's role in cultural preservation and moral messaging (Rokhman & Misbah, 2023), few have focused on how its educational potential can be operationalised in classroom or extracurricular settings. Additionally, despite UNESCO's recognition of Dulmuluk as an intangible cultural heritage (Rolando & Walidah, 2021), current implementations remain largely performative and lack structured pedagogical strategies.

The purpose of this study is to explore how the moral and character values embedded in Dulmuluk theatre can be integrated into formal school education, notably to support character education goals in Indonesia. The study aims to bridge the gap between cultural tradition and modern education by designing strategies to incorporate Dulmuluk into classroom and extracurricular activities. This research seeks to understand both the pedagogical potential and practical approaches to adapting traditional arts for contemporary character education.

Research Questions:

- 1) What moral and character values are conveyed through Dulmuluk theater?
- 2) How can Dulmuluk be integrated into formal school education to support character development?
- 3) What are the perceptions of educators and students regarding the use of Dulmuluk as a tool for character education?

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, focusing on the interpretation of lived experiences related to *Dulmuluk* theatre as a medium of social transformation and character education. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as described by Craswell (2015), is concerned with understanding and interpreting the meanings behind human experiences. This approach is suitable for exploring how educators perceive and integrate the moral values embedded in *Dulmuluk* into formal education.

2.2 Participants and Setting

The research was conducted in a public junior high school (SMP Negeri) in Palembang, South Sumatra, Indonesia. Participants included:

- a. 3 art and culture teachers who have experience integrating *Dulmuluk* into classroom instruction.
- b. 6 students from grade VIII who participated in *Dulmuluk*-related learning activities.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were directly involved in the teaching or learning of *Dulmuluk*, ensuring relevance to the study's focus.

2.3 Data Collection Methods

Multiple sources of qualitative data were collected to ensure depth and triangulation:

- a. Observation: Conducted during *Dulmuluk*-themed learning sessions and extracurricular activities, focusing on student-teacher interactions, behavior, and instructional methods.
- b. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were held with teachers and students to explore their understanding and experiences related to moral and character values in *Dulmuluk*.
- c. Documentation: Analysis of lesson plans, teaching materials, and curriculum-related documents that mention or incorporate *Dulmuluk*.
- d. Audiovisual materials: Photos and videos of performances and teaching activities were collected to support observational and interview data.

2.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. The process involved:

- a. Familiarization with transcripts, field notes, and visual materials.
- b. Initial coding to identify key themes related to moral education, cultural identity, and social transformation.
- c. Theme development, grouping codes into broader categories reflecting core aspects of *Dulmuluk*'s educational impact.
- d. Interpretation of findings in relation to the study's objectives.

Data were reduced and organised to focus on essential patterns (Miles & Huberman, 2007) and presented in narrative form to reflect the complexity of participants' lived experiences.

2.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings:

- a. Triangulation was applied by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents.
- b. Member checking was used, where participants reviewed summaries of their interviews.
- c. Thick description ensured transferability by providing detailed accounts of the research context.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the school administration. Informed consent was secured from all participants (including parental consent for students). Identities were anonymised, and all data were handled confidentially and stored securely.

2.7 Justification for Choosing Dulmuluk

Dulmuluk was selected as the focus of this research because it represents a unique local cultural heritage that embodies moral values such as loyalty, honesty, humility, and responsibility. Despite being recognised as a form of traditional moral education, its integration into formal schooling remains limited. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how *Dulmuluk* can serve as a culturally relevant medium for character education in schools.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

The education program implemented in schools aims to guide students in understanding the concepts of right and wrong and to encourage social improvement. In addition, education also plays a role in helping students behave in accordance with moral values (Susilawati, 2020). On the other hand, Sinnott-Armstrong (2023) argues that morality is related to the concern for how one treats fellow human beings and involves the processes of judgment, emotions, and actions that arise from that concern (Lungu & Munteanu, 2025).

Based on interviews with teachers and students involved in the implementation of *Dulmuluk* theatre within character education programs, several key themes emerged that highlight the transformative impact of this cultural performance. Students reported increased engagement and heightened awareness of moral values after participating in theatre-based activities. One student remarked that playing a role in the *Dulmuluk* performance encouraged deeper reflection on the importance of honesty and respect, particularly in interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. Teachers similarly noted significant improvements in students' attitudes throughout the rehearsal and performance phases, particularly in terms of discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and teamwork. Socrates' view on character education consists of four interrelated main aspects, namely, knowing the good, loving the good, desiring the good, and acting the good. All four elements must be practiced simultaneously and continuously to form a strong character (Akhtim, 2021).

The stage of character formation, in the view of (Bangun, 2023), is itself encompassed in three basic concepts, including.

First, the understanding stage is used in character education and is applied across all subjects taught to students. In this stage, the guiding teacher provides knowledge about the *dulmuluk* theatre, from its history, including the formation of the *dulmuluk* theatre, until it becomes a theatre in the form

of a performance or stage. To provide knowledge about dulmuluk theatre, it is not limited to recognising the script and its performance, but also to understanding the importance of its history, which ranges from literature to the performance stage. Then, students are invited to analyze what characters appear in the script and analyze the moral messages contained in the dulmuluk theater script.

Secondly, the implementation stage can be carried out in various situations and environments, especially in the classroom. For example, in an educational setting, one can instill and practice values such as discipline, honesty, religiosity, responsibility, tolerance, hard work, independence, democracy, curiosity, national spirit, love for the homeland, appreciation for achievements, friendship, peace, a passion for reading, care for the environment, and social concern. In this stage, the implementation or application is carried out through practice or acting demonstrations so that students can directly experience the application of the character values contained in the dulmuluk theatre. The practical activities are guided directly by the supervising teacher from the stage of script selection, determining players/actors, script reading, memorization of the script, acting demonstrations, deciding on makeup and costumes, selecting performance properties to be used, and setting up the performance stage. In this application, the character of students begins to be forged and shaped based on character rooted in good morals. Further discussion on will be addressed in the sub-discussion.

Third, the habituation stage involves emotional aspects and routines in the educational process. In this stage, elements such as moral understanding, moral knowledge obtained through emotional experiences, and moral behavior manifested in actions are necessary. Character development is not limited to cognitive aspects but also requires direct application and practice by students. This stage of habituation can be considered as the final stage or evaluation, because in terms of understanding or cognitive knowledge and psychomotor skills, it has been carried out in the stages of understanding and application. Students are invited to reflect on their experiences and how character values have been embodied in the learning process. In this stage, habituation that impacts the development of character values is also necessary, which occurs in social transformation shaped in character education applied in school learning. This application results in an evaluation that impacts the character development of students. It is integrated with the messages and teachings found in the play '*Dulmuluk Abidinsyah Berlayar ke Negeri Seberang*,' which include the importance of seeking knowledge, the courage to make decisions, respecting and listening to parental advice, preserving nature, unity and family ties, and avoiding negative influences.

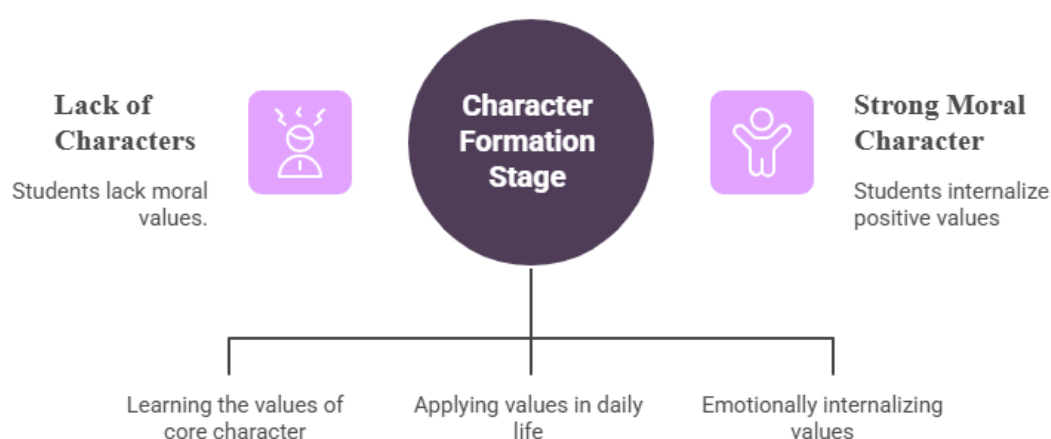


Figure 1. The concept of stages in character formation.

Figure 1 illustrates the character formation process through the stages of understanding, implementation, and habituation. However, rather than viewing them as linear, our findings suggest these stages are cyclical and reinforcing. For example, habituation often led students back to deeper understanding, especially when performances were repeated or reflected upon. Therefore, Figure 1

should be interpreted dynamically: not just as a progression but as a loop where each stage deepens the previous one.

Table 1. Moral Message in the Dulmuluk Theatre Performance 'Abidinsyah Sails to the Other Side' by: Randi Putra Ramadhan

Message Character	Description of the Message and Mandate
The Importance of Pursuing Knowledge	Prince Abidinsyah is determined to sail to foreign lands to deepen his knowledge. teaches that education and broad insights are the main provisions in life and should be pursued without limits.
The Courage to Make Decisions	Despite the concerns from the queen, the prince remained steadfast in his intention to study in another country. This attitude shows that in life, one must be brave enough to make decisions for a better future.
Respect and Listen to Parents' Advice	The prince always respects the decisions of his father and mother, as well as accepts their advice to take care of himself and stay away from negative things. teaches that parental guidance is an important part of shaping good character.
Preserving the Environment	During the journey, Prince Abidinsyah and his escorts realized that hunting wildlife could lead to extinction. From this, we learn the importance of maintaining ecosystem balance and taking care of the surrounding environment.
Unity and Brotherhood	All figures in the kingdom demonstrate a spirit of togetherness, mutual assistance, and cooperation in maintaining the nation. emphasizes that the success of a community depends on strong solidarity and cooperation.
Avoiding Bad Influences	The queen advised the prince not to be influenced by negative things like drugs. This message teaches that maintaining integrity and avoiding influences are part of forming a character.

This manuscript teaches the importance of education, courage, respect for parents, care for nature, unity, and avoiding negative influences in life. These are integrated into learning at school through dulmuluk theater.

3.2 Discussion

Dulmuluk Theatre, as a traditional performing art rooted in the culture of South Sumatra, serves not only as a means of entertainment but also as an educational tool that can effectively promote affective and social learning. Through its narrative structure, moral messages, and collaborative performance processes, this theatre fosters character development by embedding ethical, spiritual, and social values in learners.

From a constructivist perspective, learning occurs when students actively construct meaning from their experiences. Dulmuluk Theater, through its role-playing and dramatization, allows students to engage directly with moral dilemmas, cultural norms, and social cooperation, thus enabling experiential learning. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory further supports the use of such cultural tools, emphasizing that learning is mediated through social interaction and cultural artifacts. Theatre becomes a "mediating artifact" (Wertsch, 1991) that supports learners in internalizing shared values through participation, dialogue, and reflection.

This aligns with affective learning as described by Krathwohl et al. (1964), wherein students move from receiving and responding to values, toward internalizing them. Theatre-based education like Dulmuluk encourages emotional engagement, empathy, and value clarification through lived experiences—qualities essential for effective character education.

The religious values embedded in Dulmuluk—such as the doa selamat before performances—offer spiritual grounding that resonates with students' affective domains. This supports the findings of

Imam (2021), who argues that religious character education involves personal relationships with God, others, and the environment. By enacting these practices, students not only learn religious rituals but also develop spiritual sensitivity.

Social values are also central. As seen in rehearsal dynamics, students must cooperate, support peers in memorization, and function as a cohesive group—skills tied to social-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks. These practices mirror Johnson & Johnson's (1999) cooperative learning theory, which posits that collaborative tasks enhance social interaction, reduce egocentrism, and build mutual respect—key outcomes observed in Dulmuluk practices.

In comparison with studies on theatre in education (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), Dulmuluk functions similarly as a "drama-in-education" tool, fostering both emotional literacy and social understanding. However, unlike Western theatrical models often used in drama pedagogy, Dulmuluk carries indigenous, local values that make it contextually relevant to Indonesian learners—thus supporting the call for culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012).

The representation of gender values, where women now participate fully in roles once monopolized by men, demonstrates a shift toward gender equity in traditional arts. This reflects broader educational policies promoting inclusive learning environments (UNESCO, 2015). It also contrasts with earlier studies (e.g., Sudirman et al., 2020) that found traditional theatre often reinforced gender stereotypes; Dulmuluk shows potential to reverse this trend by embodying more egalitarian participation.

Justice and democratic values, such as fair role distribution and collaborative decision-making in casting, embody democratic citizenship education principles. As Ramdani et al. (2021) highlight, democratic classrooms promote active participation and respect for diversity, values clearly mirrored in the Dulmuluk learning context. This also confirms the findings of Mukhlis & Hafid (2020) that advocate for fair and equitable educational practices.

Honesty, independence, and resilience are further instilled through the demanding processes of training, memorization, and performance. The need for perseverance in perfecting one's role echoes Stoltz's (2007) concept of resilience, which emphasizes adaptive coping. Dulmuluk actors learn not only theatrical skills but also the value of effort, dedication, and self-reliance—skills transferable to broader academic and life settings.

Moreover, the value of responsibility, especially highlighted through the female protagonist's courage to reclaim her kingdom, introduces students to ethical reasoning and moral courage. This confirms the assertion by Sobon (2018) that true responsibility involves commitment to principles beyond personal interest, encouraging students to make ethical decisions grounded in collective well-being.

The value of environmental awareness, introduced through ecopedagogical ideas (Handayani et al., 2021), aligns with contemporary approaches to sustainability education. Dulmuluk performances encourage students to appreciate clean, safe, and orderly spaces, reflecting how theatre can support affective dimensions of environmental stewardship.

In conclusion, this study confirms and extends prior literature that emphasizes the transformative role of theatre in education. While earlier works have recognized the cognitive and expressive benefits of drama, this study highlights its potent role in character education rooted in local cultural wisdom. It shows that Dulmuluk Theatre aligns with both constructivist and socio-cultural learning theories and supports affective, social, and moral development.

The implications of this study offer several important directions for educational practice, policy, and future research. In terms of educational practice, teachers are encouraged to integrate local performing arts such as Dulmuluk into character education curricula. This integration is not only a means to preserve cultural heritage but also provides a culturally relevant context for students to internalize moral values, thus enhancing affective and social learning. By using theater as a medium, educators can engage students in experiential and reflective learning that aligns with their cultural identity and moral development.

From a policy perspective, education policymakers should support the incorporation of arts-based character education into formal curricula. This approach enriches learning by emphasizing affective and social domains, moving beyond traditional models that often focus primarily on cognitive development. Promoting cultural arts in education can help achieve a more holistic learning process that nurtures empathy, cooperation, ethical awareness, and cultural appreciation among students.

Regarding further research, future studies are needed to explore comparative analyses between Dulmuluk and other regional traditional arts in fostering character development. Such research could examine similarities and differences in the moral messages, pedagogical strategies, and cultural values embedded in various traditional performances. Additionally, longitudinal studies can be conducted to assess the long-term impact of theater-based character education on students' moral growth and social behavior, thereby providing deeper insights into the sustainability and effectiveness of culturally embedded educational practices.

4. CONCLUSION

This research highlights the significant role of Dulmuluk theatre in promoting social transformation and character education grounded in moral values. As a traditional performing art, Dulmuluk serves not only as a medium of cultural entertainment but also as an effective educational tool for instilling moral values in students. The findings reveal that Dulmuluk encompasses a range of character-building values, including religiosity, social awareness, justice, democracy, honesty, independence, perseverance, responsibility, and environmental appreciation. These values are transmitted through a structured process involving three key stages: understanding, application, and habituation. This staged approach enables students not only to comprehend moral concepts theoretically but also to implement them in their daily lives. To maximize the educational potential of Dulmuluk theater, specific recommendations are proposed. First, integration into school curricula should be pursued, particularly in subjects related to character education, language, or arts and culture. Second, teacher training programs should be developed to equip educators with the pedagogical skills necessary to utilize performing arts effectively in the classroom. Additionally, schools should consider incorporating Dulmuluk into extracurricular programs, allowing students to engage more actively in experiential learning environments. Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The research was conducted within a limited geographic and cultural setting, using a qualitative approach, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. The absence of longitudinal data also limits understanding of the long-term impacts of theater-based character education. Future studies are recommended to expand the research across diverse educational contexts and to employ longitudinal or quantitative methods to assess the sustained influence of Dulmuluk and other traditional arts on students' character development. Comparative studies involving different regional performing arts could also offer broader insights into culturally responsive character education strategies.

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