

## **Integrating Cultural Values Into Buddhist Sunday School Learning System**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper draws upon the possibility of integrating cultural values into the Buddhist Sunday School (BSS) learning system in Indonesia. It employed George's (2008) library research methods consisting of motivation or assignment, imagination, research questions (brainstorming), research plan (strategy), reference works and databases (tools and tactics), sources, evaluation, insight, thesis, argument and outline, and drafting and revising. By reviewing 25 journal articles and books regarding with culture and education, this paper proposed three things to establish a cultural-based religious learning in BSS, which are strengthening cultural content and values in the learning process, building a community-based learning, and involving parents.



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### **Introduction**

Buddhist Sunday School (BSS) has been long standing as one of the trusted educational assets of Buddhist education system in Indonesia. According to the Government Regulation Number 55 Year 2007 on Religious and Religiosity Education, Article 44 Paragraph 2, BSS aims at improving students' *saddha/sraddha* (faith) and devotion as to continuously increase Buddhists' faith. It provides a nonformal Buddhist learning held in monasteries once a week. The materials range from the life of the Buddha, Buddhist simple rituals, prayers, tales, songs, to games. Most of the students are children that are students of kindergarten and primary school.

However, its practice is far from what is seen as ideal. Most of the BSS do not have lesson plans, the teachers are volunteers who, admittedly, come with no Buddhist education background, and the learning activities are more than just learning-for-fun-type. Those have been constituting BSS with low quality and lack of the learning goal aimed at realizing its original purpose.

As part of the efforts to strengthen its system, the Buddhist Society Guidance Board, through the Decree of the General Director of the Buddhist Society Guidance Number 63 year

2017 passed the Curriculum of BSS. It divides the learning system into four learner levels starting from *Adi Sheka* (early education and kindergarten), *Culla Sekha* (primary education), *Majjhima Sekha* (secondary education), and *Maha Sekha* (higher education). Besides, the materials focus on *Paritta/Mantram*, *Dharmagita* (Buddhist songs), *Dhammapada*, Meditation, *Jataka* (Buddhist tales), the Life History of Buddha Gotama, and the Basic Elements of Buddhism. They should be completed with culture and local wisdom and the characteristics of each of the Buddhist Councils. Those are meant to create a contextual and values-based learning so that it produces Buddhist generation that is developed physically (*kāya-bhāvanā*), socially or morally (*sīla-bhāvanā*), mentally (*citta-bhāvanā*), and has developed knowledge (*citta-bhāvanā*) based on the sociocultural condition, local wisdom of each region, diversity, and speciality in each of the Buddhist Councils (Buddhist Society Guidance Board, 2017).

It means that teachers of BSS must be able to teach Buddhism and integrate cultural values and local wisdom into their teaching. Moreover, the teaching and learning activity does not only focus on Buddhist materials. On the contrary, it should explore more the culture where the learning is taking place and connect to the students' background. Both Buddhism and culture should be the centre of the BSS learning system that brings religious values into the students' environment where they are living and growing up.

There have been many practices that attempted at bringing culture into learning. The most common ones have been happening in the foreign language teaching and learning. Culture is inseparable in language foreign language teaching since it is essential in building learners' communicative competence (Nguyen, 2017) and there is interconnection between them (Hossain, 2024). However, some challenges raised in implementing culture in learning. Two major challenges were lack of standards of what a culture teaching is and practical and effective strategies in culture teaching (Chen & Yang, 2016). It also happened in the Indonesian as Foreign Language Teaching where the program management, learning material, learning media, approaches, methods, and strategies, assessment, and program evaluation were not culture-based (Zuchdi & Nurhadi, 2019). A similar phenomenon happened in the area of primary education. In Mathematics, the Ministry of Education and Culture has been trying to accommodate culture into learning by applying Culturally Responsive Teaching (RCT) in their Mathematics textbook (Murti, 2023). However, although the textbook was dominant in its RCT contextual aspect, the teachers in primary education generally still had problems with understanding cultural concepts and implementing them in thematic learning (Wardani, Haryani, & Anggriani, 2021).

A recent interview showed that most of the BSS teachers have not applied the curriculum into their teaching. Most of them still focus on the Buddhism materials. Some of them have art

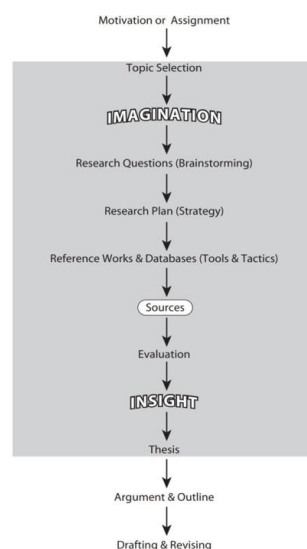
and craft activities, yet they are not integrated with the Buddhist materials. In short, the teachers have not translated the BSS curriculum by providing cultural-based religious lessons.

Most of the reasons laid on the foundation of too many Buddhism materials taught for students so that the teachers concerned the students were not attracted to come to the BSS since they had to learn the similar materials they had learnt in schools. Others argued the difficulties in integrating cultural and local wisdom content to the Buddhism class. They spent a lot of energy and time to map the learning that is situated in students' cultural setting. And, still it requires a certain expertise and skill to be able to apply the curriculum in each of the BSS situations.

This paper is going to elaborate and present the possibility of bringing cultural values into the BSS learning system. First, it elaborates the context of culture-based education. Second, it weighs on the definition of cultural values and religious values. And, finally, it exemplifies the ways to integrate cultural values into Buddhism lessons in BSS.

## Methods

The study employed library research, a method that includes synthesizing information from different sources regarding research question (George, 2008). The main purpose of the study was to give input on how to establish a cultural-based Buddhist learning in the Buddhist Sunday School community. It reviewed 25 articles exploring education and culture. To achieve the purpose, the study began with defining culture-based education as the basic premise to establish a cultural-based learning system. Then, it went analyzing how to integrate cultural and religious values. Finally, based on the previous two elaborations, the study proposed some ways to create a cultural-based Buddhist learning in the Buddhist Sunday School community. The research was conducted by following these steps:



**Figure 1.** Diagram of the Library Research Process (George, 2008)

## Results And Discussion

### 1. Understanding Culture-Based Education

Culture has been regarded to be one of the central issues in learning. It is where people are coming from. It is related with values, knowledge, faith, and the things believed by certain societies and shared within the society and passed through the next generation (Lebrón, 2013; Gill, 2013; Matsumoto, 2009, as cited by Young, 2014). Therefore, to make learning meaningful, it is important to focus on where and how students live. Caballero (2015: 20) highlighted the importance of culture in learning as it is to “enrich lessons and help students learn better”. When students are able to connect what they learn with their environment, they do not only learn better, but also comprehend what they are learning better.

Therefore, it is important for teachers to understand students’ primary languages, background culture, interests, and hobbies before they design a lesson or curriculum (Caballero, 2015). Bruner (1996), as cited by Ubani & Keränen-Pantsu (2018), further, stated that culture is what shapes minds so that it becomes an essential base of how we construct our worlds as well as our conception of ourselves and our powers. That is why education should run in a cultural context.

The importance of culture in learning has emerged as a type of education that is based on culture. Originally, culture-based education (CBE) is a pedagogy associated with teaching in a culturally-based education setting for Native American students including American Indians, Native Alaskans, and Native Hawaiians (Demmert, 2009). It aims at providing a learning system that suits the indigenous students’ background culture and environment since the U.S. society commonly runs schools with the Western systems and views (Kana’iaupuni, 2007). Moreover, it is an alternative approach to Western and colonial education approach (Singh & Espinoza-Herold, 2003). Hence, the term culture here refers to the ways of life of indigenous and diverse-cultural students.

The main principle of this education is on “the constructivist learning theory that situates learning in a cultural-based model” (Singh & Espinoza-Herold, 2003: 11). As constructivist learning enables students to build knowledge through actively integrating experiences (Amineh & Asl, 2015), thus the CBE demands active students’ exploration and participation as well as their comprehension from attending lessons that are situated in their own ways of life. Singh & Espinoza-Herold (2003: 11) quoted what Gay (2010); Yamauchi (2005) described in CBE: “culturally responsive, culturally respectful, culture-sensitive, culturally-rooted, culturally relevant, and culturally congruent”. Therefore, it emphasizes on the learning system that brings diverse-cultural knowledge and skills and involves socio-cultural diversity.

Demmert (2009) has mentioned five important issues in CBE; namely culture, language, cognition, community, and socialization. Specifically, Kana'iaupuni (2007: 2) indicated five basic elements included in CBE. First, every cultural-based model should use native or heritage language. Second, it should actively include family and community in developing lessons and curricula. Third, it should structure the school and classroom in culturally-appropriate ways. Fourth, it should make learning meaningful and relevant through culturally grounded content and assessment. Fifth, it should gather and maintain data using various methods to insure students' progress in culturally responsible ways. Those are summarized in five components: language, family and community, context, content, and data and accountability.

It, then, must be realized that there are 'more-than-meet-the-eye-tasks' that teachers have to do. They are not just teaching materials and making students comprehend what they are learning. As the CBE highlights the constructivist learning theory, teachers should be able to encourage students to become self-directed learners who are able to connect what they learn with the issues they deal in their community. Students are also encouraged to find knowledge and build skills situated in their own cultural background. Consequently, it is important for teachers to study their own students' cultural background carefully. Singh & Espinoza-Herold (2003) suggested that teachers may establish working partnership with families to ensure that there is no misunderstanding and misplacing of students' cultural values incorporated in the learning.

Demmert (2009) exemplified one of the CBE practices in Greenland that established a set of effective CBE teaching principles. The school, *Atuarfitsialak*, a cool school in Greenlandic (Demmert, 2009) has seven principles of assessment that include (1) Teachers and Students Working Jointly, (2) Development Language and Literacy Across the Curriculum, (3) Connecting Lessons to Students' Lives, (4) Engaging Students with Challenging Lessons, (5) Emphasizing Dialogue over Lectures, (6) Learning through Observation, and (7) Encouraging Student Decision Making. Demmert (2009) also pointed out how teachers become one of the important aspects of the school by motivating students to achieve academically as well as socially, culturally, psychologically, and spiritually. Therefore, the teachers work to create such a learning atmosphere that supports students' academic, cultural, psychological, and spiritual development.

There have been reports on the positive impacts of the CBE made to students. One of them was reported by Kana'iaupuni, Ledward, & Jensen (2010) that described several advantages of the CBE practice in Hawaii. First, it impacted students' socioemotional well-being such as identity, self-efficacy, and social relationships. Second, it enhanced socioemotional well-being that it affected math and reading test scores. Third, it affected students' math and reading scores, particularly for those with low socioemotional development. Fourth, it encouraged

students to be involved in Hawaiian cultural and civic engagement and motivated students more to school. The impacts made to the Hawaiian students displayed similar principles set by the Greenlandic school, that students did not only achieve academically, but also socially, culturally, psychologically, and spiritually.

## 2. Religious Values vs Cultural Values

The very basic questions, then, will be ‘How are religious values related to cultural values?’ or ‘Can religious values be related to cultural values?’ A study conducted by Murtadlo (2017) may answer these questions. Murtadlo (2017) conducted a participatory action research for two years by developing local wisdom-based religious education in Tanah Ulayat Baduy, West Java, Indonesia. The research was conducted in order to give easier access for the Baduy people so that they get better education by providing *madrasah*, a Muslim religious school.

The *madrasah* was set based on what the Baduy people asked for. It was also designed based on the belief of *Slam Sunda Wiwitan* or the Baduy’s Islam version (Murtadlo, 2017). The *madrasah* was run with the local wisdom-based curriculum by incorporating typical Baduy music instrument, *angklung*, providing life skill lesson in making typical Baduy craft, and developing story books telling about Baduy typical values. Physically, the *madrasah* building was built similar to typical Baduy house, *saung-saung* and teachers’ and students’ uniforms were typical Baduy *batik*.

Even though not all of the plans were executed, the design of local wisdom-based religious school aimed at fulfilling the design of a school that is close to students’ daily life and is based on the values that they uphold every day. One of the basic things that we can see from the study is that both religious and cultural values share the good and valuable things. Put simply, it is about exploring the religious values situated in a cultural context.

Ubani & Keränen-Pantsu (2018: 127) highlighted the similar characteristics of culture and religious classrooms. A culture classroom includes “the things that are considered valuable and good, what kind of knowledge, language, concepts and practices...” (Ubani & Keränen-Pantsu, 2018: 127). Those elements are also the characteristics of religious learning and instruction (Ubani & Keränen-Pantsu, 2018). Hence, both culture and religious education involve good things to teach and the consideration of knowledge, language, concept, and practices to apply. As Abdulla (2018) further stated, culture and religion could be in close ties, both being part of each other. Cultural-based religious education becomes an important part of the increase of understanding and application of religious values by applying cultural values and local wisdom that are rooted in people’s daily life.

The interconnection between religious and cultural values has been proved as an effective tool to strengthen students’ character. A study conducted by Fakhurrozi, Minabari, Saguni, & Nadirah (2023) revealed a private Islamic vocational high school that integrated the *Tarbiyah*

*Islamiyah* into Islamic religious education subjects and extracurricular activities held every weekend, limited boarding school system, and in social values and characters teaching. The daily social characters teaching applied verbally and nonverbally reinforces how students behave and think that helps achieve the national education curriculum's aims (Fakhrurrozi, Minabari, Saguni, & Nadirah, 2023).

### **3. Establishing a Cultural-Based Religious Learning at Buddhist Sunday School**

What the BSS teachers concerned about the possible overlapping Buddhism materials and activities as what students experienced in formal schools is an important thing that needs to be addressed. What the 2017 BSS curriculum mentioned about the learning situated in each cultural and local wisdom context should also become another thing to consider. The following section provides suggestions on what can be done to establish a cultural-based religious learning at BSS.

#### **Strengthening Cultural Content and Values in the Learning Activities**

As Bruner (1996), cited by Ubani & Keränen-Pantsu (2018), stated that learning should be cultural context, the BSS curriculum must be strengthened in its cultural context and content. We found that the Buddhism handbooks published by the Buddhist Society Guidance Board still focused on Buddhism materials. Therefore, it is a good opportunity to rethink and reconsider the cultural content and values to be integrated in the BSS learning.

To produce a cultural-based learning, Faith (2003) argued that we should engage local people in designing a cultural-based curriculum so that it can meet the local people's needs. Hence, the curriculum should be broken down into different cultural-based materials based on each of cultural settings in each region. If the curriculum is still designed by top people who only focuses on general Buddhist materials, the BSS learning will still be similar to the materials produced in the formal school. In this case, there should be a lot of local people involved to contribute their ideas and opinion on the basis of the curriculum. A situational analysis might be done to diagnose cultural contents needed in the curriculum (Offorma, 2016). However, the Buddhist officials may still be central of control and evaluation of the process, especially in determining what cultural values and local wisdom that can be integrated into Buddhist values.

Another point to reconsider is the levels of learners that have been determined in the 2017 BSS Curriculum. The higher levels of learners the more exposure to cultural values is. And, it is important to note that students who are in secondary schools might be feeling reluctant to have Buddhism lessons that are similar to what they experience in formal schools. Therefore, the learning activities should be enriched with cultural values that challenge their comprehension. However, it is important to note that there should be balance between culture

and learning. Culture and education, still, should be complementary, both being supporting each other (Kia & Sitepu, 2022).

### **Building a Community-based Learning**

The involvement of local people will expand the education range of BSS. As culture is owned by the people who uphold and practice it, consequently, the learning should involve community as well. As Flecky (2011: 2), cited by Bedri, Fréin, & Dowling (2017: 2), mentioned, Community-based Learning (CBL) is “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs as part of structured opportunities, intentionally designed to promote student learning and development”. It means that students are to study in the field and contribute directly to their community needs and problems.

A study conducted by Triyanto & Handayani (2020) might help design learning that involves indigenous knowledge. Triyanto & Handayani (2020) proposed eight steps to integrate indigenous knowledge into a Teacher Learning Community (TLC) at the secondary school that were (1) collecting and identifying what constitutes indigenous science, (2) selecting natives' science issues of interest, (3) analysing and connecting the topics to school science, (4) implementing the lessons, (5) reflecting on the consequences of each knowledge, (6) evaluating the lesson process, (7) expanding possibilities for further discovery, and (8) sharing outcomes. It means that involving local people also brought their local knowledge into the learning environment. It also needs constant effort and communication regarding what necessary local people and knowledge contributed to the learning.

Community service that is manifested in projects will be challenging and interesting activities for students in non-formal education. As the learning should be situated culturally, the projects can be in social and art projects. Hence, the community will be the source of learning for students, as well as of developing social skills. The community itself will get benefit from the projects by receiving the usefulness of the projects. They can also develop sources and skills when engaging in art projects.

### **Involving Parents to Learning Activities**

Parents become one of the stakeholders that should be given more access to the BSS learning system. Cultural values include the respect of parents and elders in community; therefore, parents' involvement will contribute positively in the learning process. They should give their opinion on the initial program, comment on the materials, and contribute on the content of cultural values. They should also join the community and cultural activities held in the BSS program.



Another task that is essential is monitoring and evaluating the program. Parents should not be eliminated in voicing their evaluation on the program since they are witnessing their children's development and impact from the BSS learning activities. Teachers may also involve parents in monitoring students' progress. They can make active collaboration in monitoring both the program and students' activities. The involvement of parents may benefit the BSS as the medium of the BSS and community as well.

## Conclusion

This paper has discussed the essence of culture-based education (CBE) that focuses on the use of cultural values and culture in classrooms, as well as the application of the learning system that is based on cultural values upheld. As CBE highlights the good and valuable things in the learning process, it is in line with religious education that does not only teach the good and valuable things, but also considers what kind knowledge, language, concepts and practices to apply. To build a cultural-based religious learning system in Buddhist Sunday School, it is essential to strengthen cultural content and values in the learning activities, establish a community-based learning, and involve parents.

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