

EXPLORING CULTURALLY-BASED EDUCATIONAL GAMES TO
HOLISTICALLY DEVELOP EARLY CHILDHOOD
MOTOR AND LANGUAGE SKILLS

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ABSTRAK

Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini (PAUD) adalah tahap penting dalam membentuk dasar perkembangan anak secara menyeluruh. Permainan menjadi pendekatan efektif karena bersifat menyenangkan dan mampu menstimulasi aspek motorik, bahasa, sosial, dan kognitif secara alami. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bentuk dan kontribusi permainan edukatif berbasis budaya lokal dalam mengembangkan kemampuan motorik dan bahasa anak usia dini secara holistik. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis studi eksploratif deskriptif, penelitian ini dilakukan pada lembaga PAUD yang berada di lingkungan dengan kekayaan budaya lokal yang masih terpelihara. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipatif, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi, serta dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa permainan tradisional seperti engklek, congklak, lompat tali, dan permainan peran dari cerita rakyat memiliki karakteristik yang sesuai dengan tahap perkembangan anak, yaitu aktif, kolaboratif, serta mudah dipahami. Permainan ini terbukti mampu menstimulasi keterampilan motorik kasar dan halus melalui aktivitas fisik yang bervariasi, serta meningkatkan kemampuan bahasa anak melalui percakapan, peniruan ungkapan, dan interaksi sosial selama bermain. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya integrasi permainan berbasis budaya lokal dalam pembelajaran PAUD sebagai strategi pedagogis yang tidak hanya melestarikan nilai budaya, tetapi juga mendukung tumbuh kembang anak secara menyeluruh.

Kata Kunci: *Permainan Edukatif, Budaya Lokal, Anak Usia Dini.*

ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a critical stage in laying the foundation for a child's holistic development, encompassing motor, language, social, and cognitive aspects. Play serves as an effective approach to ECE because it is enjoyable and naturally stimulates various domains of development. This study aims to explore the forms and contributions of educational games based on local culture in developing motor and language skills in early childhood. Using a qualitative approach with an exploratory-descriptive study design, the research was conducted in ECE institutions located in communities where local cultural heritage is still well-preserved. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using thematic analysis. The results show that traditional games such as *engklek*, *congklak*, jump rope, and role-playing based on folklore possess characteristics appropriate to children's developmental stages namely active, collaborative, and easy to understand. These games effectively stimulate both gross and fine motor skills through varied physical activities, and enhance children's language abilities through dialogue, imitation of expressions, and social interaction during play. The findings highlight the importance of integrating culturally-based educational games into ECE as a pedagogical strategy that not only preserves cultural values but also supports holistic child development.

Keywords: *Educational Games, Local Culture, Early Childhood.*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood, defined as the age range from 0 to 8 years, represents a critical developmental phase that significantly shapes an individual's future (Karwati, 2014). Education plays a strategic role in shaping children's character and personality, including fostering self-regulation skills such as emotional control, appropriate behavior, and wise decision-making (Abrar et al., 2024). Unfortunately, many Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs remain focused primarily on cognitive development, often neglecting the emotional and social dimensions of children's growth (Arisanti et al., 2024). In this context, a holistic education approach becomes highly relevant, as it seeks to cultivate well-rounded individuals by integrating cognitive, affective, and social aspects, thereby encouraging positive contributions to society from an early age (Rohmah et al., 2023). ECE serves as a strategic foundation for directing children's optimal development. During the "golden age," children experience rapid growth in motor, language, social, emotional, and cognitive domains. Therefore, educational interventions must be comprehensive (holistic), aligned with developmental stages, and based on meaningful, experiential learning (UNICEF, 2022).

Play is considered one of the most effective approaches to support early childhood learning, reflecting the natural way children explore and make sense of the world. In educational practice, play goes beyond entertainment—it acts as a pedagogical tool that stimulates motor and language development as well as instills character values such as empathy, cooperation, and responsibility (Gordon & Browne, 2021; Akhmad, 2020). Early childhood is a critical period for forming cognitive, emotional, social, and physical foundations (Ardiyanti & Khairiah, 2021). However, modernization and technological advancement have shifted children's play patterns from traditional cultural games to digital games that are often individualistic, less physically active, and lack social interaction (Salinas-Gutiérrez & Martínez, 2023). Indonesia, rich in local culture, has a wide range of traditional games with great potential for use in ECE settings. Games such as *engklek*, *congklak*, hide-and-seek, jump rope, and oral folklore not only entertain but also naturally foster children's motor, social, and language development (Ningsih & Fitriyah, 2020). Nevertheless, the integration of local cultural wealth into daily learning activities in ECE institutions remains limited and unsystematic.

The Merdeka Curriculum promotes a contextual, environment-based learning approach that integrates local culture as a learning resource. It allows educational institutions to design learning experiences relevant to children's lives, including the use of local wisdom (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2022). Introducing local culture early in life is a crucial strategy, particularly in facing challenges such as limited resources and low engagement in formal education (Rohmatun & Zulfahmi, 2024). In this context, culturally-based educational games are not only a means of cultural revitalization but also an effective pedagogical approach to holistically support children's motor and language development.

Holistic education aims to nurture the child as a whole, integrating spiritual, cognitive, emotional, cultural, aesthetic, and physical elements in the learning process (Hajati, 2018). This approach has been shown to enhance emotional regulation and social interaction skills (Denham et al., 2012). Furthermore, parental involvement plays a significant role in preparing children for formal education and supporting their overall well-being (Jones et al., 2015). Traditional games involve various physical movements such as jumping, running, and throwing, which are essential for developing both gross and fine motor skills. Moreover, elements of role-play, dialogue, and game rules support language development by expanding vocabulary, articulation, and communication abilities (Purnamasari & Lestari, 2021). Thus, integrating culturally-based educational games into ECE practice presents a relevant holistic approach to address current educational challenges for young children.

While previous studies have discussed appropriate learning media (Pujiaswati et al., 2020), ECE teacher innovation (Primayana, 2020), and problem-solving strategies in preschool education (Kurniawati et al., 2021), research focusing on culturally-based educational games remains limited. Approaches such as STEAM and Loose Parts (Prameswari & Lestarinigrum, 2020; Imamah & Muqowim, 2020) promote creativity and exploration but have yet to utilize traditional games as contextual learning tools. Additionally, most studies have focused on individual developmental aspects without addressing the integrated relationship between motor and language development.

On the other hand, traditional games hold great potential for simultaneously developing both domains while also fostering cultural values. Therefore, research is needed to address this gap by exploring the role of culturally-based educational games in the integrated development of motor and language skills in early childhood.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative approach with a descriptive-exploratory design to gain a deep understanding of culturally-based educational practices within the context of early childhood education. The research focused on how traditional games rooted in local culture can serve as a holistic strategy for developing motor and language skills in children aged 4–6 years. Participants included PAUD teachers, young children, local community members, and parents actively involved in preserving cultural heritage. Data were gathered through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation of cultural artifacts and play activities. Instruments used included semi-structured interview guides and observation sheets aligned with national child development indicators. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources and methods. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns and themes, with findings presented narratively to highlight both developmental outcomes and the cultural richness embedded in traditional play.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Based on field observations, documentation, and in-depth interviews with early childhood teachers and community elders, this study found that culturally-based educational games suitable for early childhood tend to be simple in form yet rich in educational and cultural values. These games serve not only as recreational activities but also as pedagogical tools that holistically stimulate various aspects of child development. Several traditional games are still actively used in early childhood education (ECE) settings, including *engklek* (hopscotch), jump rope, *congklak* (mancala-type game), bamboo spinning tops, *petak umpet* (hide and seek), and role-playing games based on local folklore.

These traditional games exhibit several core characteristics that make them especially relevant and developmentally appropriate for early childhood. The first characteristic is Physically Active and Motor-Oriented. Traditional games often require physical movement that engages both gross and fine motor skills. Activities such as hopping in *engklek*, jumping rope, or spinning a bamboo top demand physical coordination, balance, and dexterity. These align well with the sensorimotor learning needs of young children in their early developmental stages. The second characteristic is Collaborative and Social in Nature. Most traditional games are played in groups, which fosters interaction, turn-taking, negotiation, and teamwork. These social dynamics promote social-emotional development, helping children learn about social rules, cooperation, empathy, and forming social identities through peer interactions.

The third characteristic is Simple and Flexible Rules. The games usually have simple, easy-to-follow rules that can be modified to fit different learning goals or physical settings. For instance, *congklak*, typically played with seeds and a carved wooden board, can be adapted using stones and holes in the ground, maintaining its core structure while allowing for contextual flexibility. The fourth characteristic is Use of Natural and Local Materials. These games often utilize materials from the local environment, reflecting traditional knowledge and sustainable practices. Jump ropes made from rubber bands, *congklak* boards carved from wood, or bamboo spinning tops are examples of how local ecology is integrated into play. This not only promotes eco-consciousness but also provides children with contextualized learning experiences.

The fifth characteristic is Embedded Cultural and Local Values. Traditional games incorporate elements of local culture, including indigenous language, folk songs, regional stories, and values such as communal harmony and mutual respect. Children are introduced to their cultural identity from an early age, fostering a sense of belonging, pride, and cultural continuity (Karwati, 2014; Ningsih & Fitriyah, 2020).

Table 1. Characteristics of Culturally-Based Educational Games for Early Childhood

| Characteristic | Description | Examples of Games |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Physically Active and Motor-Oriented | Involves physical activities that stimulate both gross and fine motor coordination | <i>Engklek</i> (hopscotch), jump rope, bamboo spinning tops |
| Collaborative and Social | Played in groups, encouraging social interaction, cooperation, and peer communication | <i>Petak umpet</i> (hide and seek), role-play based on folklore |
| Simple and Flexible Rules | Rules are easy for children to understand and can be adapted to various learning or environmental contexts | <i>Congklak</i> (mancala), <i>engklek</i> |
| Use of Simple, Local Materials | Utilizes locally-sourced materials such as stones, seeds, bamboo, and raffia, making the games eco-friendly and contextual | Bamboo spinning tops, <i>congklak</i> , jump rope |
| Cultural and Local Values Embedded | Incorporates elements of local culture such as songs, folklore, and regional languages, while fostering cultural identity and character education | Role-playing games, traditional songs |

The early childhood educators (PAUD teachers) who participated in this study reported that children's engagement in culturally-based traditional games was significantly higher than in digital games or formal classroom instruction. Children appeared more enthusiastic, active, and emotionally involved, as they perceived these games to be closely aligned with their daily experiences and cultural environment. Teachers also noted that children were better able to understand the rules and objectives of the games, indicating that traditional games are both inclusive and adaptable to the cognitive and social developmental levels of young learners. Furthermore, the findings of this study emphasize that the selection and implementation of culturally-rooted educational games in early childhood education serve not only as enjoyable learning tools but also as means of cultural preservation, local identity formation, and the reinforcement of national character values. Therefore, the form and characteristics of such educational games are highly relevant to be incorporated into contextual, meaningful, and holistic pedagogical strategies.

Culturally-based educational games play a significant role in supporting the development of both gross and fine motor skills in early childhood. Traditional games are typically rich in physical activities that require active body movements, thereby serving as a natural medium for enhancing coordination, agility, and physical strength. This aligns with the

view of Gordon and Browne (2021), who emphasize that movement-based learning experiences are essential for early childhood development, particularly in strengthening motor skills. Physical activities inherent in traditional games—such as hopping in *engklek*, running in *petak umpet*, spinning during jump rope, or throwing and catching in gobak sodor—directly train gross motor coordination, body balance, and agility. Early childhood educators participating in this study observed notable improvements in several indicators of gross motor development among children who regularly engaged in these games.

The specific gross motor skills observed to have improved include Body Balance. This skill is developed through games like *engklek* or walking on a straight line, where children are required to maintain body stability while hopping on one foot or moving without losing balance. These activities train children to control their center of gravity and build self-confidence in managing movement. Teachers noted that children who frequently played these games demonstrated better posture and could walk in a straight line unaided. The second skill is Control of Body Movements. Games such as *petak umpet* (hide and seek), chase games, and jump rope demand that children regulate when to move, stop, accelerate, or change direction quickly yet in a coordinated manner. This helps them synchronize bodily responses to changing instructions or game dynamics. Mastery of movement control is essential for self-discipline and for preparing children to follow structured classroom activities.

The third skill is Hand-Foot Coordination. Activities like tug-of-war and gobak sodor help children develop the ability to use hands and feet simultaneously in a coordinated sequence. These games enhance movement accuracy and inter-limb coordination, often requiring teamwork, which also nurtures motor communication. Children actively involved in these games tend to quickly grasp repetitive movements and synchronize their actions with peers. The fourth skill is Muscle Strength and Endurance. High-intensity physical actions, such as jumping (in jump rope or tire hopping), pulling opponents (in tug-of-war), or sprinting, strengthen large muscle groups. Over time, the muscles in the legs, arms, and back become more robust, forming a vital foundation for other physical abilities, such as body posture and stamina. Teachers noted that children who regularly played outdoors showed better physical endurance and were less likely to tire during classroom activities.

The fifth skill is Quick Reflexes and Agility. These are enhanced through games requiring quick responses and fast movements, such as *galah asin* or catching games. Children must respond swiftly to sudden changes, such as catching a ball or dodging opponents. These activities sharpen reflexes, bodily responses, and visual-motor perception, all of which are crucial for school readiness, particularly for developing reading and writing skills.

Table 2. Development of Gross Motor Skills in Early Childhood through Culturally-Based Traditional Games

| Gross Motor Skill | Traditional Game Example | Description of Development |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Body Balance | <i>Engklek</i> , walking on a line | Children learn to maintain body posture while hopping on one foot or walking along narrow paths. |
| Control of Body Movements | <i>Petak umpet</i> , jump rope, chasing games | Trains children to stop, start, and change direction with controlled movement. |
| Hand-Foot Coordination | Tug-of-war, gobak sodor | Enhances cooperation between limbs in physical activities that require strength and timing. |
| Muscle Strength and Endurance | Tire hopping, group running | Builds leg and arm muscle strength through intensive and enjoyable repetitive activities. |
| Quick Reflexes and Agility | Catching games, <i>galah asin</i> | Stimulates reflexes and motor response speed to visual and auditory stimuli. |

The five aforementioned skills indicate that culturally-based traditional games are not only enjoyable and familiar to young children but also serve as an effective medium for developing gross motor skills in an integrated manner. This approach aligns with the principles of holistic education, which emphasize a balanced development of physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional aspects in early childhood learning. Moreover, traditional games also stimulate fine motor skills. Activities such as playing *congklak*, threading beads or seashells, crafting toys from leaves, and drawing traditional batik patterns provide children with opportunities to practice finger dexterity, hand-eye coordination, and precision. Children involved in these activities show noticeable improvements in pinching, grasping small objects, and transferring items accurately—skills that are crucial for early writing readiness and foundational academic abilities. Beyond functional physical development, these games also enhance spatial awareness and motor cognition.

Through active engagement in familiar social and cultural environments, children not only learn to control their bodies but also develop spatial consciousness, rhythmic patterns, and the ability to integrate verbal instructions with motor responses. Therefore, the integration of traditional games into early childhood education proves effective in holistically stimulating motor development, enriching meaningful learning experiences, and strengthening children's physical foundation for future educational stages. Culturally-based educational games not only serve as tools for expression and entertainment but also function as effective instruments for developing young children's language abilities. Language develops optimally in meaningful social contexts, and traditional games provide rich environments for both verbal and non-verbal communication. In these games, children are not only physically active but also engage in dialogue, listening, and imitation of speech from peers and adults (Gordon & Browne, 2021). Cultural games such as role-playing based on folk tales, traditional regional songs, and games involving verbal instructions (e.g., *congklak*, *galah asin*, or *cak ingkling*) create a conducive space for vocabulary enrichment. In practice, children often imitate expressions from stories or songs introduced by teachers and parents, and begin to use regional vocabulary they previously did not understand. This aligns with the findings of Ningsih and Fitriyah (2020), who emphasize that traditional games contribute to reinforcing children's linguistic identity and enriching their verbal expression.

Based on observations from early childhood educators participating in this study, several notable improvements in language development were identified. The first improvement is Expanded Vocabulary. Traditional games such as *congklak*, *cak ingkling*, and folk tale-based role play introduce children to a range of new vocabulary in both Indonesian and regional languages. Children actively engaged in these games demonstrate an increased use of specific words in daily communication, such as names of traditional objects, game tools, and expressions from the narratives they enact. The second improvement is Improved Speaking and Storytelling Skills. Children who frequently engage in storytelling or role-play based on folk tales show better narrative skills. They become more capable of constructing sentences coherently, expressing opinions, and retelling play experiences or simple stories—reflecting progress in verbal expression.

The third improvement is Enhanced Instruction Comprehension. Games that follow structured rules, such as *galah asin*, jump rope, or *petak umpet*, help children develop their ability to listen and follow instructions from teachers or peers. Children begin to respond more accurately and quickly to directions, indicating improved listening skills during play. The fourth improvement is Stronger Interpersonal Communication. Games involving teamwork or turn-taking, such as *gobak sodor* and traditional market play, encourage children to use language as a social communication tool. They learn to engage in discussions, wait for their turn to speak,

and express needs or requests to peers—strengthening the pragmatic aspects of language development. The fifth improvement is Emotional Expression Through Language. During culturally-based games, children increasingly demonstrate the ability to express emotions verbally. Phrases like “I’m happy,” “I don’t like that,” or “I want to join” reflect their growing capacity to communicate feelings in a healthy and adaptive manner.

Table 3. Improvement of Early Childhood Language Skills through Culturally-Based Traditional Games

| Language Skill Aspect | Description of Improvement | Examples of Traditional Games |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Vocabulary | Children learn and use a broader range of vocabulary, including words from local languages. | <i>Congklak</i> , folk tales, regional songs |
| Speaking and Storytelling | Children are able to tell stories, share play experiences, and express ideas more coherently. | Role-playing, folk drama, <i>cak ingkling</i> |
| Instruction Comprehension | Children show improved ability to understand and respond to directions or game rules. | <i>Galah asin</i> , jump rope, <i>petak umpet</i> |
| Interpersonal Communication | Children practice turn-taking, discussion, and cooperation through conversations in play. | Gobak sodor, ball-catching, traditional market play |
| Emotional Expression through Language | Children use words to express emotions, desires, and feelings during play. | All types of group games involving verbal interaction |

The table above provides a structured illustration of how culturally-based traditional games not only support motor skills but also holistically enhance children's linguistic abilities and social communication. Beyond linguistic development, games involving social interaction such as taking turns, discussing rules, or negotiating roles also help children develop pragmatic communication skills. These include understanding conversational turns, using polite expressions, and responding to peers' emotions and body language. In this context, language development does not occur in isolation but is integrated with the child's social and emotional growth. As emphasized by Denham et al. (2012) and Jones et al. (2015), early childhood language skills are closely linked to children's social and emotional readiness to engage in more complex learning environments. Thus, traditional games rooted in local culture provide a contextual, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate medium for language learning. This approach does not alienate children from their social and cultural environments; instead, it strengthens the connection between daily experiences, language acquisition, and self-expression.

Discussion

This study reveals three interrelated main findings: (1) the characteristics of culturally based educational games that are appropriate for early childhood; (2) their contribution to the development of motor skills; and (3) their role in supporting children's language development. These three findings confirm that educational approaches that contextually incorporate local culture are capable of supporting children's holistic development.

Traditional games are not merely recreational; they possess a strong educational value structure. This finding aligns with Sujiono (2011), who argued that traditional games embody character-building elements such as honesty, cooperation, and independence. Similarly, Sumantri and Wiyani (2018) noted that local games serve as effective tools for instilling moral values in accordance with children's cultural context. UNESCO (2017) also emphasized that culturally grounded education is a form of relevant learning for multicultural societies and

supports inclusive education. In the Indonesian context, Karwati (2014) and Rohmah et al. (2023) explicitly showed that integrating local wisdom into early childhood education (ECE) strengthens the connection between children's lives and their social environment.

Numerous studies have confirmed that physical activity embedded in traditional play is highly effective for promoting children's physical development. Mariani and Sudarmin (2021) found that games such as jump rope, gobak sodor, and *engklek* significantly improve gross motor skills and physical endurance in a relatively short time. A quasi-experimental study by Rahman and Sari (2020) discovered that children who regularly engage in traditional games exhibit better motor coordination and reflexes compared to those who do not. Furthermore, Putri and Fitria (2021) demonstrated that games like *congklak* and shell-beading improve fine motor skills, particularly in finger control and hand-eye coordination. The importance of motor-based learning is also reinforced by Frost et al. (2012), who stated that physically rich games help strengthen motor neural connections, which are crucial for academic readiness, especially in reading and writing.

Games rich in verbal interaction—whether spontaneous or structured—have been proven to enhance various dimensions of children's language abilities. Fitriyah et al. (2020) reported that children aged 4–6 who were actively involved in folk-tale-based games demonstrated more advanced storytelling and communication skills than those exposed only to formal learning. Handayani and Indrawati (2019) found that traditional regional songs can enhance vocabulary acquisition and improve sentence structure. On a broader scale, Weisberg et al. (2013) argued that children acquire language more effectively in play contexts because their brains are more receptive when they are engaged and joyful. Additionally, Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) emphasized the significance of sociodramatic play in developing children's pragmatic skills such as turn-taking, using polite expressions, and reading others' emotional cues.

These findings strengthen the foundation of holistic education, as defined by Miller (2007), which stresses the balance between intellectual, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual domains in childhood education. Hajati (2018) further highlighted that early childhood education must include cultural context as an integral part of meaningful learning. This is in line with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum (Kemendikbudristek, 2022), which promotes the integration of local culture, thematic approaches, and experiential learning. Research by Imelda and Susanto (2022) also affirmed that ECE institutions that implement culturally based games are more successful in cultivating children's character and life skills naturally.

Overall, the findings of this study do not stand alone but rather reinforce—and are reinforced by various prior studies and theories. Culturally based educational games are not merely a form of cultural heritage preservation; they are effective, low-cost, contextual, and enjoyable pedagogical tools. These games holistically support children's physical, linguistic, and socio-emotional development while simultaneously strengthening their cultural identity, as emphasized in numerous contemporary theories of development and education.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that educational games based on local culture play a vital role in supporting the holistic development of early childhood, particularly in the areas of motor and language skills. Traditional games such as *engklek*, *congklak*, and jump rope, which are active, collaborative, and infused with cultural values, have been shown to be effective in enhancing gross and fine motor skills—including balance, coordination, and muscular strength. Furthermore, these games significantly contribute to

children's language development by enriching their vocabulary, improving storytelling abilities, enhancing their comprehension of instructions, and strengthening interpersonal communication skills. Therefore, integrating traditional games into early childhood education not only serves to preserve local cultural heritage but also offers a relevant and contextual pedagogical strategy to optimize children's overall growth and development.

As a follow-up to these findings, it is recommended that early childhood education institutions actively incorporate culturally-based educational games into daily learning activities as a contextual and enjoyable approach aligned with children's developmental characteristics. Teachers should be provided with training on the variety of traditional games and how to align them with developmental indicators in both motor and language domains. Local governments and education offices are also expected to support the preservation of traditional games through localized curriculum policies and the provision of appropriate facilities. Additionally, the involvement of parents and community leaders in introducing and preserving local cultural games should be strengthened to ensure that children's learning continues both at school and within the family environment.

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