

Integrating Local Wisdom Into Literacy Education: The Role Of Punakawan In Shaping Elementary Students' Character Within The Merdeka Curriculum

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Abstract— This study explores the potential of Punakawan storytelling, featuring the Javanese puppet figures Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong, as an innovative medium to promote Indonesian language literacy and character education in primary schools using the Merdeka Curriculum. The study is inspired by persistent problems of low literacy achievement, as demonstrated by the 2022 PISA results, as well as the growing issue of moral degradation among Indonesian youth in the digital age. Data from five elementary schools in Central Java and Yogyakarta were analyzed using thematic content analysis and source triangulation to map the alignment between Punakawan values and the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile. The findings indicate that Punakawan narratives include fundamental principles such as justice (Semar), honesty and responsibility (Gareng), creativity and critical thinking (Petruk), and openness and solidarity (Bagong). Their humorous but philosophical dialogues serve as a pedagogical bridge for integrating literacy skills, reading comprehension, writing, and storytelling with character development in engaging and accessible ways for young learners. Practical techniques include creating Punakawan-based learning modules, acting out narrative dramatizations, and producing literacy projects like story writing and comics. The study also identifies obstacles, including teachers' poor understanding of wayang, resource limitations, and low student engagement in local culture, and proposes remedies through teacher training, school-community partnership, and authentic measurement. This study advances both theory and practice by demonstrating how local wisdom can be systematically rejuvenated to solve current educational concerns. It advises establishing a Punakawan-based teaching module and performing additional empirical studies to test its effectiveness, ensuring that cultural heritage becomes a strategic bridge toward meaningful, inclusive, and future-ready education.

Keywords— Punakawan Narrative; Literacy Development; Character Education; Pancasila Student Profile; Merdeka Curriculum

I. INTRODUCTION

Character education and literacy are two essential foundations of Indonesia's educational system. In the context of globalization, the younger generation is expected not just to thrive academically but also to represent strong values and moral integrity. This vision is mirrored in national policies, such as Permendikbud No. 20 of 2018 on Strengthening Character Education, which prioritizes character formation in the curriculum[1]. More recently, the Merdeka Curriculum [2] deepens this commitment by emphasizing student-centered learning, curricular flexibility, and the establishment of the Pancasila Student Profile. Despite these initiatives, major issues keep arising. According to the 2022 PISA poll, Indonesia ranks 72nd out of 81

nations, with 62% of students unable to analyze textual information [3]. Concurrently, mounting worries about adolescent moral degeneration and the influence of bad digital information [3], [4] highlight the urgent need to rethink how literacy and character education are provided.

One possible approach is to revive Indonesia's cultural legacy as an educational resource. Wayang kulit (shadow puppetry), designated by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity [5], contains numerous philosophical and ethical precepts. The Punakawan Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong are cultural educators in this tradition, communicating principles of justice, solidarity, independence, and honesty through their humor, wisdom, and societal critique [6]. Their stories work not just as entertainment, but also as instructive narratives that align with both local wisdom and modern educational needs.

Existing research acknowledges the importance of local wisdom in promoting literacy and character development, but the handling of Punakawan storytelling is fragmented. For example, Ferando et al., [7] shows how folktales can increase participation without emphasizing on Punakawan. Yusuf et al. [8] and Anggraeni et al. [9] both study cultural integration, primarily through visual arts or motivational frameworks rather than narrative traditions. Recently published studies such as Pratiwi et al. [10] on writing development and Sulistiyan [11], Sari et al. [12], and Nurgiyantoro [13] on moral symbolism clarify the ethical components of Punakawan, but do not translate these insights into structured educational systems. Similarly, Hatima [14], Suswandari (2024), and Widayat and Dwiadmojo [15] emphasize their narrative and philosophical depth, but these studies remain topic or skill-specific, without incorporating Punakawan into a complete framework for literacy and character education.

Scholars also underline the need of integrating literacy education into cultural and digital contexts. Abdullah et al. [16] advocate for merging literacy, culture, and technology, while Sulianta [17] and Luqmi et al. [18] offer local wisdom as a solution to Society 5.0's issues. However, none of these research address how Punakawan narratives might be systematically interwoven within the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly within project-based learning models.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by presenting Punakawan as a culturally grounded and pedagogically structured medium for improving literacy and character education in primary schools. It is unique in that it integrates narrative analysis with classroom observations, aligns cultural pedagogy with national priorities such as the Pancasila Student Profile, and responds to pressing issues of literacy deficits and moral challenges in the digital era [3], [4], [19].

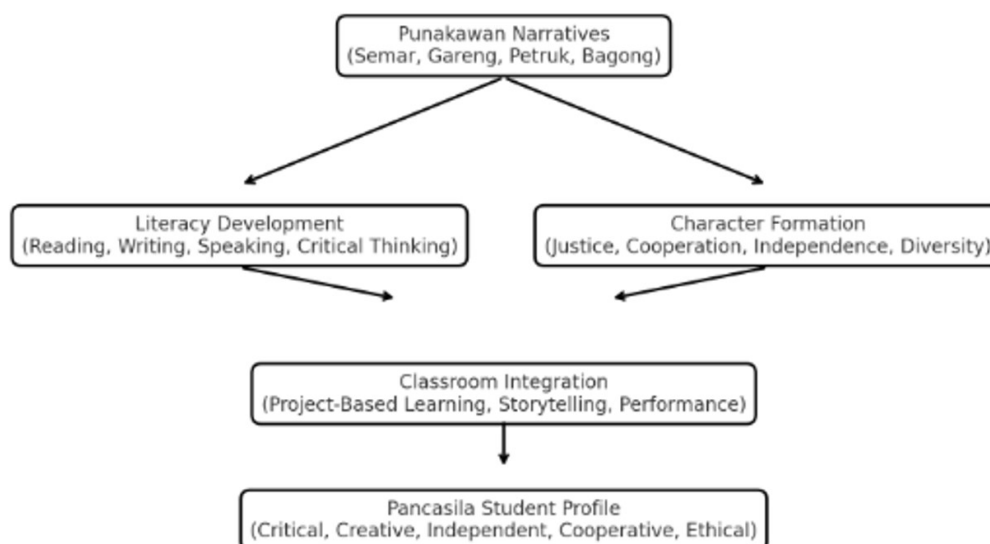
II. METHODS

This study used a qualitative method to explore the role of Punakawan narratives in improving literacy and character education in the Merdeka Curriculum. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for the interpretation of cultural symbols, moral values, and linguistic characteristics while setting them in modern classroom contexts, problems that cannot be effectively addressed using quantitative methods. Wayang kulit scripts, Punakawan dialogue transcriptions, and reference works on Javanese puppetry were used as data sources, in addition to secondary literature on literacy, character education, and cultural pedagogy, as well as policy documents such as the national language curriculum and government regulations. To put textual insights into practice, participant observation was conducted in five elementary schools in Central Java and Yogyakarta, focusing on project-based classroom activities that used Punakawan stories, such as "Staging Punakawan for the Environment" and "Writing Petruk's Solution Story".

The study was conducted in three stages: identifying Punakawan's core values (justice, cooperation, independence, and diversity), analyzing their linguistic features (humor, figurative language, satire, dialogue structures) for literacy development, and aligning these findings with project-based learning strategies and the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile. The data was examined through thematic content analysis, with triangulation across cultural texts, academic literature, policy documents, and classroom observations. Expert evaluation by language educators and Javanese cultural experts enhanced credibility, while documentation of interpretive decisions throughout the analysis preserved reflexivity. Ethical issues included informed consent from participating schools and teachers, data anonymization, and ensuring classroom activities continued without disruption.

Conceptual Framework.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Punakawan Narratives in Literacy and Character Education



The conceptual framework (Figure 1) depicts Punakawan narratives' systematic significance in promoting literacy and developing characters within the Merdeka Curriculum. Punakawan stories, including Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong, are the foundation's cultural entry point. Their humorous yet philosophical conversations provide fascinating content that seamlessly blends language richness with value transmission. This source produces two complimentary domains. The first is Literacy Development, emphasizing on reading comprehension, writing abilities, and critical thinking by exploring conversation structures, figurative language, and storytelling. The second is Character Values, which emphasize justice, humility, creativity, and solidarity, as shown in the qualities of the Punakawan figures. These domains intersect in classroom practice via project-based learning, storytelling, and discussion tactics, all of which are strongly emphasized by the Merdeka Curriculum. Teachers can develop literacy abilities while also cultivating students' moral consciousness by including Punakawan storytelling into their lessons. Finally, this integration helps to shape the Pancasila Student Profile, particularly by fostering learners who are critical, creative, cooperative, independent, and ethical. Punakawan narratives serve not just as a method of cultural preservation, but also as a pedagogical innovation that directly addresses Indonesia's critical concerns of low literacy accomplishment and moral decline.

III. FINDINGS

The Punakawan Narrative and Character Values

The analysis of cultural texts, paired with classroom observations in Central Java and Yogyakarta, indicates that the Punakawan tale is more than just theatrical entertainment; it is some instructional medium rich in character values and linguistic resources essential to literacy learning. The four characters, Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong, represent complimentary aspects of local wisdom that can be effectively integrated into the Merdeka Curriculum. Their amusing but philosophical dialogues make moral lessons easily accessible to primary school children, providing as an effective bridge between cultural traditions and modern education.

Semar emerges as the most prominent person representing knowledge, humility, and social justice. His nurturing position and persistent alignment with the marginalized reflect ideals such as sincerity, compassion, and justice. Teachers stated that Semar's words were easily perceived by students as advice toward empathy and solidarity, which corresponded directly to the Pancasila Student Profile quality of noble character and social duty. Gareng, on the other hand, embodies honesty, caution, and

integrity. His physical flaws serve as metaphorical reminders of moral rectitude, encouraging children to "walk straight" in both thought and behavior. Observations at schools showed that Gareng's stories prompted students to ponder on honesty and accountability in collaborative endeavors.

Petruk exemplifies innovation, openness, and the bravery to offer constructive criticism. His tall, amusing physique frequently used as a vehicle for mockery, representing the need of expressing aspirations and thinking independently. Within literacy activities, Petruk's narrative was especially beneficial in improving students' critical reading and writing skills, since they were encouraged to reinterpret Petruk's satirical observations in modern contexts such as environmental care or school discipline. Bagong, the youngest character, represents spontaneity, innocence, and humour. His simple yet profound statements promote openness, honesty, and acceptance of variety. In storytelling sessions, Bagong's character inspired students to speak more openly and appreciate differences, increasing the dimensions of collaboration and global variety in the Pancasila Student profile.

Therefore, the thematic analysis shows that Punakawan narratives feature five essential values: justice, honesty, creativity, solidarity, and wisdom, which correlate directly to the six characteristics of the Pancasila Student Profile. The Punakawan's value transmission approach is unique: rather than depending on abstract theology, their messages are conveyed through comedy, symbolism, and accessible folk language. This method of delivery is popular among elementary students, as seen by classroom observations, which show that interest and involvement were consistently higher when Punakawan stories were included in lessons. Thus, the findings support the concept that Punakawan narratives can serve as a culturally embedded teaching technique that not only enhances literacy abilities, reading comprehension, writing, and speaking, but also holistically internalizes character qualities.

Schools can address both low literacy performance and moral deterioration by incorporating Punakawan into project-based learning methods. Classroom projects such as Staging Punakawan for the Environment and Writing Petruk's Solution Story indicate that students become more engaged, sympathetic, and thoughtful while also practising narrative composition and critical thinking. This confirms that the Punakawan are not only a cultural heritage to be preserved, but a strategic teaching tool in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The Potential of Punakawan in the Development of Indonesian Language Literacy

The findings show that Punakawan narratives are not only culturally significant, but also pedagogically effective in promoting Indonesian language literacy. Theatrical dialogues between Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong, which were characterized by humor, satire, and simple folk language, were particularly successful in listening lessons. Compared to traditional materials, students were able to pay closer attention to talks and comprehend messages more accurately. Teachers stated that Semar's moral advice and Bagong's amusing comments sparked classroom discussions, making abstract values easier for students to understand. This suggests that Punakawan stories can be used as authentic, engaging listening resources to develop both understanding and moral thought.

Punakawan's dialogic style served as a paradigm for expressive and engaging communication on the speaking dimension. When students used Punakawan as a reference, they were more inclined to role-play, invent dialogues, and express their thoughts. This contrasts with their uncertainty in traditional recitation activities, implying that the narrative's comedy and satire provide a low-pressure setting that fosters speaking confidence. When Punakawan stories were adapted into graded texts, students showed increased interest and retention at the reading level. The use of proverbs, metaphors, and symbolic references exposed students to genuine literary characteristics, allowing them to practice decoding meaning beyond surface-level comprehension.

Punakawan-inspired writing activities were especially important. Students who were invited to reinterpret Petruk's sarcastic comments in modern contexts, such as environmental responsibility or honesty in group work, produced more creative and critical responses than control groups using generic prompts. This shows that Punakawan provides a narrative framework that not only inspires imagination but also invites moral reflection on modern challenges. Punakawan's literary depth, with its idioms, proverbs, and stylistic playfulness, reinforces its role as a holistic literacy aid that links language learning to cultural heritage.

At the same time, the findings reveal significant limitations. Punakawan's effectiveness in literacy development was significantly mediated by teacher familiarity and instructional scaffolding. In schools with teachers who lacked cultural expertise or confidence, the stories were underutilized or presented superficially, limiting their potential impact. Furthermore, while students responded strongly to vocal and performative parts, some found the symbolic and philosophical layers difficult without clear coaching. These limits show that Punakawan stories, while highly promising, require teacher preparation, properly developed materials, and contextual adaptation to assure consistent literacy improvements.

Thus, Punakawan narratives show immense potential as catalysts for literacy development in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Their comedy, symbolism, and moral significance captivate students more than conventional literature, while also encouraging critical and creative expression. These findings strongly support the study's premise that Punakawan can be used as culturally embedded pedagogical resources to integrate literacy instruction with Merdeka Curriculum character education aims.

Punakawan Integration Strategy in Indonesian Language Learning in Elementary School

Several strategies for integrating these cultural figures into Indonesian language study at the basic level can be developed based on theme analysis of Punakawan narratives and observations made in participating schools. These initiatives are not restricted to classroom techniques, but include curriculum design, cultural collaboration, and assessment processes that align with the Merdeka Curriculum.

First, Punakawan-based learning modules can provide structured materials that blend literacy skills with character development. Such modules should be differentiated by grade level to ensure that textual complexity and moral reflection progress over time. Second, media such as shadow puppets or student-created "human puppets" can be used to provide interactive learning opportunities. This not only enhances involvement with local culture, but also strengthens Indonesian speaking, listening, and storytelling skills. Third, Punakawan narratives can be integrated into literacy activities such as writing inspirational stories, performing puppet shows in Indonesian, or creating student-created comics. These exercises promote creativity, narrative construction, and critical reading while also instilling values such as justice, solidarity, and honesty.

Fourth, collaboration with local puppeteers is suggested as a way to integrate school curriculum with community cultural practices. Workshops and performances organized by practitioners can provide genuine cultural exposure, pique students' interest, and develop local identification. Finally, realistic evaluation instruments should be created to test both literacy competencies and character development through Punakawan-based activities. Assessments can include performance rubrics for storytelling and theater, reflective journaling on character values, and peer assessments to measure cooperation and responsibility.

Therefore, these initiatives show that incorporating Punakawan narratives into Indonesian language learning is not only possible, but also pedagogically effective. They provide students with significant opportunities to engage with language in contextualized, culturally based ways while internalizing the values of the Pancasila Student Profile.

Challenges and Solutions in Implementation

The integration of Punakawan narratives into Indonesian language study at the elementary level has great potential, but it is not without difficulties. One significant barrier is teachers' inadequate comprehension of wayang, particularly the intellectual profundity of the Punakawan characters. Many teachers are more comfortable with traditional reading materials and may feel unprepared to incorporate cultural texts into classroom instruction. To address this, professional development through focused training and workshops is crucial, empowering teachers with both cultural awareness and innovative pedagogical practices.

A second challenge is the scarcity of structured learning tools that link Punakawan narratives to literacy competencies. Teachers may struggle to construct effective classes if materials are not easily available and ready for use. This requires the creation of textbooks, digital modules, and multimedia teaching aids that expressly include Punakawan stories into language learning objectives. A third barrier is a decline in student interest in local culture, as many students become increasingly involved with international digital media. To address this, Punakawan narratives must be presented in engaging, contextualized formats,

such as comics, animated movies, or gamified storytelling, that connect with the reality of children while keeping the moral essence of the stories.

The demands of an already complex curriculum constitute an additional challenge, as teachers frequently feel confined by time and learning objectives. The approach is to infuse Punakawan narratives within current competencies rather than as a separate subject, such as reading comprehension, writing exercises, or speaking activities. Finally, time and resource restrictions limit schools' ability to continue culturally relevant learning projects on their own. Collaboration between schools and local wayang communities may reduce this by allowing for resource sharing, cultural performances, and co-creation of learning media. By systematically addressing these issues, Punakawan tales can progress from conceptual innovation to long-term classroom practice. Such efforts ensure that Punakawan serve not simply as cultural treasure, but as living teaching resources that strengthen literacy and the values of the Pancasila Student Profile.

Hierarchy-Based Policy Recommendations

To transition from pilot innovation to sustainable practice, the incorporation of Punakawan narratives into Indonesian language learning necessitates coordinated activity at three levels: teachers, schools, and government. The recommendations listed below are ordered hierarchically and are meant to be mutually reinforcing: Capacity at the teacher level facilitates school implementation, which is supported by enabling policy and government funding.

For teachers, any culturally responsive instructional reform must prioritize teacher capacity. A tiered training program is recommended, with basic workshops introducing instructors to the historical, philosophical, and linguistic qualities of Punakawan storytelling (characters, key values, common motifs, and age-appropriate narrative elements). Intermediate modules should cover classroom pedagogy, scaffolded task design, the use of storytelling for reading comprehension, and the integration of drama and scripted dialogue to improve speaking skills. Advanced training should focus on learning design (project-based learning cycles, character and literacy assessment rubrics, and action research methodologies). Training should be offered in blended formats (face-to-face community workshops with follow-up micro-modules online), culminating in easy certification or micro-credentials, and incorporating mentoring and peer observation. To maintain professional communication, teachers form "Pokjawayang" (Wayang Teacher Working Groups) modeled after MGMPs, which include regular peer meetings, shared repositories of lesson plans and media, lesson study cycles, and small-scale classroom experiments whose results are distributed throughout regional networks. Expected teacher results include enhanced pedagogical confidence, a reservoir of adaptable teaching sequences, and measurable increases in classroom use of Punakawan materials.

For schools, institutional framework serves as vital to operationalize teacher practice and establish a strong foundation for cultural learning. Schools should put aside money to buy or make wayang media (shadow puppets, student-made "human puppets," printed modules, digital narrative animations) and to reward local artists who organize workshops. Instead of treating Punakawan as an add-on, schools should incorporate it into the operational curriculum by piloting it as a local content program or thematic unit for one semester, mapping its learning objectives to Indonesian language competencies (reading, writing, and speaking) and Pancasila Student Profile dimensions, and then scaling to whole-grade implementation. Cross-curricular links should be encouraged. For instance, "Staging Punakawan for the Environment" combines language arts, environmental science, and civic education. Schools could create cultural hubs or extracurricular clubs to organize performances, arrange community collaborations with puppet troupes, and function as student production centers (comics, screenplays, short films). Student engagement rates in Punakawan activities, formative gains in literacy tasks, and instructor implementation fidelity are all examples of school monitoring measures.

To achieve equity, scale, and long-term viability, the government need national leadership. A ministerial rule (Permendikbud) titled "Strengthening Local Culture in the Merdeka Curriculum" might give normative assistance by specifying how local cultural content (including Punakawan) will be included, supported, and monitored. The government should consider implementing a National Wayang Literacy Program based on the following pillars: (1) development of grade-appropriate modules and open educational resources; (2) regional training hubs and accredited teacher development pathways; (3) seed funding for school pilots and collaborations with cultural practitioners; and (4) a national repository (digital and physical) of texts, scripts, and

media. Inter-ministerial collaboration (Education; Culture; Research and Technology) and partnerships with universities, cultural organizations, and UNESCO programs can give technical competence, quality assurance, and worldwide visibility. Government action should include materials standards, teacher certification processes, and a monitoring mechanism linked to measurable literacy and Pancasila profile measures [5].

Implementation plan, monitoring, and evaluation. A stepwise approach is recommended. Phase 1 (Pilot: 6-12 months): create modules, provide graded teacher trainings, and implement in 5-10 pilot schools, including embedded participant observation and formative assessments. Phase 2 (Scale and refine: 1-3 years) entails expanding regional centers, incorporating input, creating digital repositories, and integrating Punakawan modules into local material in more schools. Phase 3 (Policy mainstreaming: 3-5 years): publish national advice, allocate long-term funding, and integrate the concept into teacher pre-service courses. Monitoring should include quantitative literacy indicators (reading comprehension and writing proficiency), qualitative indicators (student reflective journals, teacher lesson studies), and character rubrics based on the six Pancasila Student Profile qualities. Periodic external evaluation and action-research cycles should guide iterative improvement.

Sustainability and scaling considerations. Long-term success is dependent on community involvement, teacher networks, and institutionalization. Including Punakawan content in teacher pre-service training, developing open and shared learning tools, and establishing Pokjawayang networks will all assist to keep momentum going. Schools and districts should prepare modest recurrent resources for media upkeep and artist partnerships, and governments could explore incentives for schools that demonstrate clearly enhance literacy and Pancasila indicators through cultural integration.

An inspiring rationale. As Prof. Dr. Suripan Sadi Hutomo (Wayang Expert, University of Indonesia) remarked in 2023, "The best solution for preserving wayang is to make it alive in students' daily lives, not just as an object in a museum." This expresses the policy imperative: Preservation thrives through meaningful lived practice, and meaningful practice requires explicit training, school support, and an enabling policy.

IV. DISCUSSION

The integration of Punakawan narratives into Indonesian language study indicates that cultural heritage may be used not only for preservation but also as a strategic teaching resource. The study's findings confirm that the four Punakawan figures, Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong, represent a constellation of moral, social, and linguistic ideals that are still very relevant in education today. When consistently entrenched in classroom practice, these tales address both the reading gap and the erosion of students' character values. The moral lessons of Semar's justice, Gareng's honesty, Petruk's creativity, and Bagong's solidarity can be explicitly linked to the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile, which is in line with Sulistiyan's (2019) finding that Punakawan is a medium for value internalization in character education. Similarly, Sari et al. [12] emphasize the adaptability of wayang narratives in transmitting values across cultural and religious frameworks, while Nurgiyantoro [13] shows that wayang figures can foster meaningful character learning when delivered dialogically rather than didactically. These results correspond to previous cultural education research by Ferando et al. [7], Yusuf et al. [8], and Anggraeni [9], who emphasize the importance of local wisdom in increasing student engagement and motivation, though their works do not link these traditions to structured literacy and character formation. This study expands previous work by portraying Punakawan characters as accessible mediators of complex moral notions for elementary students, demonstrating how cultural narratives can develop authentic value internalization in humorous and engaging ways.

Apart from values, Punakawan narratives offer fertile ground for developing literacy skills in context and enjoyment. Writing alternative endings for Petruk's difficulties or dramatizing Bagong's humor allow students to practice reading, writing, and speaking in culturally relevant ways. This study agrees with Hatima [14], who shows that incorporating local wisdom increases both literacy and character, as well as Suswandari (2024) and Pratiwi et al. [10], who highlight the potential of Punakawan stories to strengthen writing competence among young learners. Widayat and Dwiadmojo [15] show that the ethnolinguistic richness of Punakawan speech, with its humor, figurative language, and philosophical undertones, enriches language acquisition, whereas Abdullah et al. [16] propose that literacy pedagogy must combine culture and technology. Thus, our findings reinforce previous research by demonstrating that Punakawan storytelling contextualize literacy while also making it

pleasant and culturally relevant, combating the disengagement that is frequently noticed with traditional textbooks. At the same time, this cultural literacy integration provides a constructive response to the issues of digitalization and moral decline revealed in both international and national studies [3], [4]. Punakawan narratives serve as a cultural "filter" through which students can evaluate texts, develop ethical reasoning, and build resilience against harmful digital content, as emphasized by Sulianta [17], Luqmi et al. [18], and Khodijah and Surawan [20]. This aligns with larger perspectives on sustainable digital societies [21] and youth moral development [22], identifying Punakawan as a culturally grounded response to present educational challenges.

Punakawan's effective integration into classrooms, however, requires empowered instructors and supporting policies. This study demonstrates that teacher readiness is critical, necessitating graded training programs and the formation of professional learning communities such as "Pokjawayang." Scott et al. [23] emphasize the relevance of modular training in scaffolding learning, which applies equally to teacher professional development. Ramdhayani et al. [24] show that digital training can be used for local wisdom-based modules, whereas Wildani et al. [25] emphasize the importance of teacher perceptions when implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. According to Mertler [26], who sees action research as a form of empowering educators, Punakawan-based modules function as both instructional materials and reflecting instruments for continual professional development. At the policy level, this aligns with Siringo-ringo et al. [27], who consider wayang traditions as durable forms of cultural heritage, and with Mok [28] and Nadzar [29], who highlight the government's responsibility in supporting cultural institutions and incorporating them into schooling. Our findings indicate that institutionalizing Punakawan through specific curricular space, resource allocation, and efforts such as the National Wayang Literacy Program is crucial to maintaining its long-term viability. Other recent research supports this point: Lazuardi and Mawardi [30] emphasize the interconnectivity of cultural values in wayang, whilst Ariyanto and Ibrahim [31], Muthoifin et al. [32], and Susilo et al. [33] demonstrate the various ethical and social dimensions entrenched in Punakawan traditions. Taken together, these insights highlight that Punakawan should be viewed not only as cultural treasure, but as a live pedagogical framework that enriches literacy, fosters character, and strengthens Indonesia's educational and cultural identity in the era of the Merdeka Curriculum.

V. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Punakawan narratives (Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong) are highly relevant for improving Indonesian language literacy and character education in primary schools. Their principles of honesty, discipline, hard effort, innovation, and solidarity correspond not only to the goals of the 2013 Curriculum, but also with the Pancasila Student Profile stressed in the Merdeka curriculum. At the same time, the humor, metaphorical language, and approachable dialogue patterns in Punakawan stories give abundant material for pupils to improve their reading comprehension, writing skills, and critical thinking. By putting these stories at the heart of project-based learning, schools may transform traditional folklore into a living pedagogy that addresses Indonesia's pressing concerns of low literacy achievement and moral degradation while maintaining cultural heritage. These findings have both practical and policy ramifications. Teachers urgently require structured training and the creation of Punakawan-based modules that effectively integrate literacy and character education. For schools and policymakers, institutional support in the form of resources, curriculum adaption, and partnership with cultural practitioners will ensure the sustainability of implementation. However, this study is confined to qualitative analysis and has not yet tested the concept in large-scale classroom settings. Future study should build and execute Punakawan-based modules in a variety of school contexts, assess their measurable influence on literacy and character outcomes, and investigate their potential for transdisciplinary learning and online adaption. In this approach, the Punakawan can transform from cultural icons to strategic tools for inclusive, relevant, and future-ready education.

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