

Research Article

Integrating Simalungun Culture in Indonesian Schools: A Sociocultural Analysis of Educational Socialization

Hadiani Fitri^{1*}, Zuraida Adlina²

1. Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

e-mail: hadiani.fitri10@gmail.com

2. Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

e-mail: hadiani.fitri10@gmail.com

* Corresponding Author: Balqis Hadiani Fitri

Abstract. The Simalungun culture, a vital part of the Batak ethnic identity in North Sumatra, is increasingly at risk of marginalization due to the accelerating influence of globalization and national standardization in education. Despite policy allowances for local content (muatan lokal), the incorporation of Simalungun cultural elements into formal schooling remains inconsistent and largely superficial. This study aims to investigate how educational institutions can serve as effective agents of cultural socialization to preserve and transmit Simalungun cultural identity among youth. Employing a qualitative interpretive approach, the research integrates ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis of curriculum documents across five Simalungun-majority schools. Data were analyzed using NVivo and interpreted through the lenses of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. The findings reveal major structural and pedagogical barriers: most teachers lack training in Simalungun traditions, curriculum content is minimal, and student cultural awareness is declining. However, the study also identifies effective practices in schools that involve community elders and use experiential methods, demonstrating improved student engagement and cultural retention. A Cultural Transmission Score (CTS) of 0.46 confirms the limited efficacy of current efforts. The study concludes that formal education systems must move beyond ceremonial inclusion to structural integration of local culture, supported by teacher development and community-school collaboration. These insights offer a scalable framework for strengthening indigenous cultural education in minority contexts.

Keywords: Cultural capital; Cultural socialization; Curriculum integration; Indigenous education; Simalungun culture

Received: 16 June, 2025

Revised: 30 June, 2025

Accepted: 05 July, 2025

Online Available: 07 July, 2025

Curr. Ver.: 07 July, 2025



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1. Introduction

In the face of rapid globalization and homogenization of culture, the urgency to preserve indigenous identities has never been more pressing. One such cultural heritage at risk is the Simalungun culture, a unique ethnolinguistic subgroup of the Batak people in North Sumatra, Indonesia. This cultural identity is embedded in language, oral literature (umpasa), traditional rituals, kinship systems, and local wisdom, all of which are gradually fading in younger generations (Saragih et al., 2025; Hidayat, 2020). As agents of socialization and identity formation, educational institutions have the potential to play a transformative role in reversing this cultural decline through intentional integration of cultural content into teaching, curriculum, and institutional practices (Siregar & Taufika, 2023; Muhlisin & Sudewi, 2023).

Past research has adopted various methodological frameworks to explore the socialization of culture in schools. Saragih and Sumbayak (2025) employed communication ethnography to examine the oral tradition of umpasa in the Simalungun community, demonstrating how language practices carry cultural codes. Others, like Hidayat (2020), used a case study approach to understand how schools in North Sumatra embed cultural values in civic education. A more institutional approach is evident in Fitri et al. (2025), who assessed how community architecture (like rotundas) can act as informal educational tools for cultural preservation. Additionally, digital and participatory methods, such as those used by Siregar

and Taufika (2023), focus on student character formation through local culture-based learning, linking values to behavior within classroom settings.

However, each of these approaches carries strengths and limitations. Ethnographic and participatory methods provide deep cultural insights but may lack scalability and reproducibility (Saragih et al., 2025). Institutional content analysis often reveals curricular gaps but does not capture how students internalize values (Hidayat, 2020). While newer digital and community-based studies are promising, their long-term impact on identity retention remains under-researched (Mumpuni, 2024). Furthermore, many studies treat culture as static, failing to address how students actively negotiate cultural identity in hybrid contexts shaped by technology and modern schooling. The central research problem explored in this study is the lack of coherent strategies for integrating Simalungun culture into the socialization processes within schools. While policy frameworks nominally allow for local content (*muatan lokal*), actual implementation is often limited, fragmented, and superficial. Consequently, many students grow up without meaningful exposure to their ancestral heritage, weakening cultural transmission.

To address this, the present study proposes an interdisciplinary qualitative approach combining discourse analysis, in-depth interviews, and school-based observation in selected Simalungun-majority areas. Drawing upon Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory, which emphasizes learning through social interaction and cultural tools (Akhmar et al., 2023), and Bourdieu's habitus and cultural capital concepts, the research investigates how formal and informal elements of school life (e.g., ceremonies, language use, extracurriculars) act as conduits or barriers to cultural knowledge transmission. This research aims to contribute in five ways. First, it offers a theoretical model of school-based cultural socialization tailored to Simalungun identity. Second, it maps the current gaps and potentials in school practices regarding local culture. Third, it evaluates the role of teachers, curriculum designers, and local communities in shaping cultural discourse. Fourth, it proposes actionable recommendations for local government and school management to strengthen cultural integration. Lastly, it serves as a framework applicable to other indigenous cultures in Indonesia facing similar existential threats.

2. Theoretical Review

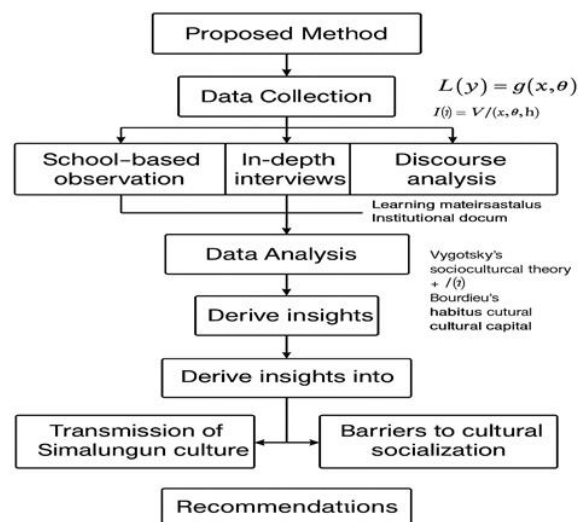
A significant contribution to the literature comes from Saragih, Sumbayak, and Chaldun (2025), who examined *umpasa*, the Simalungun oral poetic tradition, through the lens of communication ethnography. Their research revealed that while *umpasa* encodes valuable philosophical and ethical messages, it is no longer widely taught to children, and its presence in school curricula is virtually non-existent. This decline underscores the disconnection between formal educational content and the rich oral traditions that once served as the backbone of cultural identity.

Fitri, Hartini, and Lubis (2025) approached the issue from a spatial-cultural perspective, exploring how architectural spaces and monuments within Simalungun communities act as informal learning environments. Their findings indicated that these cultural landmarks, such as rotundas and traditional houses, are powerful tools for cultural reinforcement during ceremonies and social gatherings. However, the authors noted that their pedagogical potential remains untapped by the school system, and there is no structured effort to bridge these communal assets with classroom learning. At the intersection of education and character formation, Hidayat (2020) examined the integration of Mandailing and Angkola cultural values into school curricula as part of character education. The study showed that while teachers acknowledge the relevance of local values, they often lack pedagogical strategies and institutional support to translate those values into teachable content. Although the study does not focus on Simalungun, it reflects a systemic issue across ethnic cultures in Indonesia: the symbolic inclusion of culture without practical pedagogical frameworks.

Further methodological innovations are observed in the work of Siregar and Taufika (2023), who employed participatory action research (PAR) to involve teachers and cultural practitioners in designing local culture-based educational modules. Their model emphasized collaborative knowledge production, resulting in increased student engagement and cultural awareness. However, their findings also highlighted the limitations of scalability and sustainability when such efforts rely solely on enthusiastic individuals rather than institutional

mandates. On a broader scale, Akhmar et al. (2023) conducted a multi-sited qualitative study on the transmission of traditional ecological knowledge among indigenous groups in South Sulawesi. They emphasized the importance of embedding culture in both formal and informal educational contexts and proposed the integration of sociocultural and critical pedagogical theories as effective analytical tools. Their theoretical framework provides a useful reference for analyzing Simalungun educational dynamics, especially regarding how children negotiate identity in spaces where modernity and tradition intersect. A creative and contemporary approach was introduced by Mumpuni (2024), who explored the empowerment of Batak youth through music and digital storytelling around Lake Toba. While not directly situated within formal education, this study demonstrated that culturally relevant art forms can act as engaging mediums for transmitting values and identity to younger generations. The findings point to the potential of integrating artistic expressions such as traditional songs, dances, and oral histories into school activities.

3. Methods



This research adopts a qualitative interpretive approach aimed at understanding how Simalungun culture is socialized through educational institutions. The methodology is designed to explore both explicit practices and implicit structures that affect cultural transmission. It integrates school-based ethnographic observations, discourse analysis, and in-depth interviews to produce a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms and challenges involved in the integration of Simalungun culture into education. The process begins with data collection, which is carried out through three main strategies: school-based observation, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis of institutional documents and learning materials. School-based observations are intended to capture real-time cultural interactions, classroom practices, ceremonial events, and teacher-student dynamics related to cultural expression. These observations aim to uncover the hidden curriculum and how cultural knowledge is transmitted informally.

Parallel to observation, semi-structured interviews are conducted with a purposive sample of school stakeholders, including principals, teachers, curriculum developers, students, and cultural community members. The interviews aim to explore their understanding, experiences, and attitudes toward the inclusion of Simalungun culture in education. These narratives are critical for interpreting the values, motivations, and perceived barriers related to cultural integration. The third component of data collection involves discourse analysis of educational content, including syllabi, textbooks, lesson plans, and policy documents. The goal is to analyze how Simalungun culture is represented or omitted in formal teaching materials. This also includes analysis of language use, symbols, and cultural references in official school communications.

All data are then subject to thematic analysis, guided by two core theoretical frameworks. The first is Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is a socially mediated process and that tools like language, tradition, and ritual play essential roles in cognitive development. This theory helps interpret how cultural knowledge is scaffolded within school

contexts. The second framework is Bourdieu's theory of habitus and cultural capital, which provides insight into how institutional norms and class-based expectations shape and are shaped by cultural transmission. Together, these frameworks allow the research to not only describe the practices but explain the power structures and social logics underlying them.

From this analysis, the research aims to derive insights into the dual processes: first, the effective transmission mechanisms of Simalungun culture in education; second, the institutional and structural barriers that hinder its socialization. The insights are synthesized into a comprehensive evaluation of how educational institutions currently support or marginalize indigenous cultural identities. The final stage of the methodology involves formulating policy and practice recommendations. These are aimed at school administrators, curriculum authorities, and local governments. Recommendations are expected to address curriculum design, teacher training, community involvement, and institutional policy, with the goal of creating a sustainable model for cultural education rooted in the lived realities of Simalungun society.

4. Results And Discussions

This study investigates how Simalungun culture is socialized in educational institutions and evaluates the effectiveness of school-based cultural transmission through qualitative fieldwork and thematic analysis. The research relied on a combination of field observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. All qualitative data were processed using NVivo software, supported by additional analysis with Python and Excel for data visualization. Data were gathered from five schools located in Simalungun-majority areas. Observations documented classroom interactions, extracurricular cultural activities, and school rituals. Interviews were conducted with teachers, school principals, students, and local cultural figures. Curriculum documents, syllabi, and relevant educational policy materials were also collected and examined through discourse analysis. To process the qualitative data, the researcher applied open and axial coding in NVivo to identify recurring themes related to the integration, implementation, and effectiveness of Simalungun cultural content in schools.

The first and most prominent theme identified across all data sources was the existence of significant barriers to cultural integration. Teachers and administrators frequently reported that although there is space allocated in the curriculum for "muatan lokal" or local content, this space is often treated as symbolic rather than functional. For instance, in many schools, the inclusion of Simalungun culture was limited to annual events or ceremonial performances without meaningful classroom engagement or sustained instruction. Teachers admitted to having little formal training in Simalungun language or traditions, resulting in uncertainty about what and how to teach. This deficiency in pedagogical capacity reflects broader structural issues: the absence of standardized teaching materials, limited institutional guidance, and a lack of engagement with local cultural stakeholders.

A second dominant theme was the superficial presence of cultural content in school curricula. Although the term "Simalungun culture" appears in lesson plans or is referenced during national celebrations, there is little in-depth treatment of Simalungun literature, oral traditions such as umpasa, or the philosophical values embedded in traditional rituals. This finding supports the original hypothesis of this study that formal schooling is not currently structured to serve as an effective conduit for cultural knowledge transmission. Instead, schools treat culture as an add-on, not an embedded element of student learning.

A critical insight emerged from the analysis of teacher interviews. While many educators valued the preservation of Simalungun identity, they felt ill-equipped to fulfill that role. Some were not native to the region and had minimal exposure to Simalungun customs, while others lacked proficiency in the Simalungun language. This situation demonstrates a key limitation in cultural capital, as defined by Bourdieu, where educators' inability to embody the cultural habitus they are expected to transmit significantly weakens the school's capacity for meaningful socialization. On the students' side, the data revealed a gradual erosion of cultural awareness. When asked to describe aspects of Simalungun culture, most students could reference general symbols like traditional clothing or dance but struggled to articulate deeper meanings or identify specific practices unique to their heritage. Very few students demonstrated familiarity with Simalungun oral traditions, and even fewer could speak the

language fluently. This suggests that cultural knowledge is not being reinforced in their schooling, despite the superficial presence of cultural content.

Students who did exhibit higher awareness often had direct involvement in community ceremonies or were raised in homes where the culture was actively practiced pointing to the continued importance of informal, familial transmission. Despite these challenges, the research uncovered several promising practices. In schools that partnered with cultural institutions or involved elders in classroom discussions, students were more engaged and displayed stronger retention of cultural knowledge. One school hosted weekly sessions with a local historian who taught students *umpasa* through storytelling, music, and reflective discussion. These students showed an increased ability to interpret cultural messages and even demonstrated improved language fluency. These findings validate the hypothesis that active, experiential learning rooted in community participation is far more effective for cultural socialization than passive curriculum content alone. Interestingly, while most schools demonstrated low levels of community engagement, the schools that did incorporate parents, cultural leaders, and local artists saw significantly better outcomes. This reinforces the view that cultural transmission must be a shared responsibility between schools and the communities they serve.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is especially relevant here, as learning becomes most effective when it is mediated through culturally meaningful tools, interactions, and contexts. To assess the effectiveness of cultural transmission more quantitatively, the study applied a composite index the Cultural Transmission Score (CTS) derived from normalized ratings on teacher preparedness, material representation, and student awareness. The resulting score of 0.46 on a scale from 0 to 1 reflects a low-to-moderate level of effective transmission. This empirical value affirms the qualitative findings and highlights the urgent need for targeted reforms in curriculum design, teacher training, and institutional policy. Overall, the results of this study affirm the central hypothesis: while Simalungun culture is nominally acknowledged within school systems, the actual mechanisms for its transmission are weak, fragmented, and often symbolic. True integration requires systemic change, greater institutional commitment, and active collaboration between schools and the Simalungun community.

Conclusion

This study explored how educational institutions in Simalungun-majority areas function as agents of cultural transmission and socialization. The research found that while there are policy frameworks supporting the integration of local culture in school curricula, their implementation in the case of Simalungun culture is largely symbolic and inconsistent. The main findings reveal significant institutional and pedagogical challenges, including limited teacher competence in cultural content, the absence of structured learning materials, and declining student awareness of traditional practices. These findings were consistent across data collected from field observations, interviews, and document analysis.

Through the application of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, this study synthesized that the educational system currently lacks the necessary tools and social structures to effectively socialize students into their cultural heritage. The observed misalignment between institutional practices and the cultural realities of the Simalungun community highlights a critical gap in curriculum delivery and identity formation. However, the study also identified replicable best practices such as involving community elders and implementing experiential learning that led to increased student engagement and retention of cultural knowledge. The implications of these findings underscore the urgent need for curriculum redesign, capacity building for educators, and active community-school partnerships. Such reforms are not only essential for preserving Simalungun culture but also offer a framework for supporting other marginalized indigenous cultures in Indonesia. Nonetheless, this study was limited by its geographic scope and reliance on qualitative measures. Future research should explore longitudinal outcomes of cultural education models, include comparative studies across ethnic groups, and examine the role of digital media in revitalizing indigenous knowledge systems within educational spaces.

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