



Empowering Early Learners' Social Interaction: A Qualitative Inquiry into *Gotong Royong* Implementation

Nasywa Cahya Meisyah Ayu*, Suharti Suharti, Mallewi Agustin Ningrum, Dhian Gowinda Luh Safitri

Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia

Correspondence: E-mail: nasywacahya.23098@mhs.unesa.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the role of *gotong royong* (communal work) in strengthening cooperative character among early childhood students at KB/TK Cordova Islamic School. Using a qualitative case study with an ethnographic orientation, the research involved four children from Class A1 selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected via classroom observations, teacher interviews, and informal conversations, then analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. Findings reveal that *gotong royong* is deeply integrated through daily routines and collaborative projects, such as collective cleaning and peer-tutoring. These activities enable children to transition from egocentric play to autonomous collective action. Cooperative behavior has become an ingrained group identity, evidenced by spontaneous empathy and prosocial initiatives. Consistent environmental modeling and a "hidden curriculum" create a social ecosystem where mutual assistance is a lived value. Repeated cultural practices effectively shift the child's perspective from individualistic agency to communal belonging. The implementation of *gotong royong* transforms social interactions into collaborative dynamics. This shift reduces egocentric tendencies and fosters empathy and social responsibility, providing a sustainable foundation for character identity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social interaction in early childhood serves as the primary mechanism through which children navigate their environment, yet many young learners still struggle with egocentric tendencies that hinder collaborative engagement. In the context of early childhood education, the quality of these interactions is often challenged by a lack of spontaneous cooperation and mutual awareness among peers. This issue is critical because positive social dynamics are not merely a byproduct of classroom presence but require a structured cultural framework to flourish. Therefore, there is an urgent need to explore how local wisdom, specifically the culture of *gotong royong*, can be implemented to transform these social exchanges into meaningful collaborative behaviors. By centering this research on the implementation of *gotong royong*, this study seeks to provide a pedagogical solution to the stagnation of social interaction in early childhood settings. During this rapid developmental phase, the values and habits instilled serve as a robust foundation for later life. Education functions not merely as a vehicle for knowledge transfer but also as a process of internalizing values and morals that underpin social behavior (Nurhaswinda & Parisu, 2025). Given that cognitive, social, emotional, and moral dimensions evolve most rapidly during these formative years, character education must be implemented through planned approaches relevant to the child's world and social environment. This aligns with the perspective that education in Indonesia plays a pivotal role in shaping the character of the next generation through both formal and non-formal learning processes (Ardiyanti et al., 2021). Furthermore, early childhood is the most opportune period for embedding moral values and life skills due to its accelerated developmental pace compared to other stages. Character building, however, is not an instantaneous occurrence; rather, it is a continuous learning process derived from daily social experiences.

A critical character trait requiring development in early childhood is cooperation. Cooperative character pertains to a child's ability to interact with others to complete collective activities while respecting individual roles within a group. In the context of early childhood education, the capacity for cooperation is a vital component of social development, as children learn to communicate, distribute roles, and assist peers in group tasks. This ability flourishes through learning activities involving social interaction, providing children with direct experiential cooperation. Research indicates that cooperative attitudes can be observed through key indicators such as collaboration, empathy, and sharing within group settings (Akmaliani & Rohita, 2025). Collaboration is evidenced by the ability to work in teams to achieve common goals, while empathy is reflected in a child's attentiveness toward peers requiring assistance. Additionally, a willingness to share demonstrates a readiness to contribute time, ideas, and resources, thereby fostering positive social relationships.

Within the Indonesian cultural landscape, the value of cooperation is inextricably linked to the tradition of *gotong royong*, which has been a focus of numerous studies. For instance, Akmaliani & Rohita (2025) explained how this cultural value is integrated through specific local themes like Betawi culture to foster collaboration. While their research is commendable in identifying the role of local wisdom in character building, it primarily focuses on the implementation of planned activities rather than spontaneous social dynamics. Similarly, Sholekhati et al, (2024) discussed the implementation of *gotong royong* elements through Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). However, their study is largely centered on the pedagogical framework of the teacher, leaving a gap in understanding how children themselves negotiate social interactions in a naturalistic setting. From these results, a significant problem emerges: existing research often treats *gotong royong* as a structured

program or an abstract value, overlooking its role as a practical framework that mediates real-time social exchanges. This study addresses these limitations by providing a qualitative inquiry into how *gotong royong* specifically transforms daily social interactions into collaborative and reciprocal dynamics among early learners, which has long served as a collective social identity. *Gotong royong* embodies the spirit of togetherness, concern, and shared responsibility. This value functions not only as a social mechanism but also as an effective educational medium for character formation (Ma'ali et al., 2026). In early childhood education, *gotong royong* facilitates the internalization of cooperative values through group activities that necessitate social interaction, allowing children to learn mutual assistance and role-sharing.

A review of existing research on social interaction in early childhood reveals significant limitations. Most studies tend to focus on quantitative measurements of social skills or the effectiveness of specific pedagogical tools, often overlooking the organic and culturally-rooted nature of these interactions. Furthermore, there is a lack of longitudinal or in-depth qualitative inquiry into how local cultural values, such as *gotong royong*, specifically transform the daily social dynamics of young learners in a naturalistic setting. Many researchers discuss cooperation as an abstract character trait rather than a lived social experience, leaving a gap in understanding how children navigate complex social negotiations through cultural frameworks. This research aims to address these shortcomings by providing a nuanced qualitative analysis of the social interaction patterns that emerge through the practical implementation of *gotong royong* (Akmaliani & Rohita, 2025). Moreover, it is closely associated with a child's ability to collaborate and demonstrate care in group activities (Sholekhati et al., 2024). Consequently, implementing learning activities based on local culture constitutes an effective strategy for nurturing cooperative character from an early age (Akmaliani & Rohita, 2025).

Various studies have examined cooperative and *gotong royong* behaviors in childhood, but most of these studies treat these concepts as separate entities. For example, the study by Kanza et al. (2025) describes teachers' strategies for fostering empathy and cooperation, but does not examine in depth the cultural framework of *gotong royong* as a primary driver. Similarly, Akmaliani & Rohita (2025) focused on the development of *gotong royong* attitudes through specific cultural themes like Betawi culture, yet their study was primarily tied to structured thematic activities. These previous studies often fail to bridge the gap between abstract cultural ideals and the actual dynamics of social interaction during spontaneous classroom moments. Specifically, research like that of Sholekhati et al. (2024) remains focused on the implementation of pedagogical frameworks without examining how children autonomously reshape their social interactions through local wisdom.

The research gap addressed in this study is the lack of a comprehensive analysis that positions *gotong royong* not just as a 'value' to be taught, but as a practical framework that actively mediates social exchanges. This research improves upon previous studies by moving beyond mere character outcomes; its novelty lies in its ethnographic focus on the 'process' of social negotiation and the shift from egocentric to communal behavior as it occurs in naturalistic daily routines. Unlike earlier works that focus on formal instruction or specific themes, this study highlights how *gotong royong* becomes a lived reality that transforms the nature of students' social interactions.

Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in its integrated approach, which specifically investigates the transformation of social interaction patterns into collaborative and reciprocal dynamics through the implementation of *gotong royong* in a naturalistic setting. Unlike previous works that focus on character outcomes, this study highlights the 'process' of social negotiation and the shift from egocentric to communal behavior as it happens in real-time. In

practice, however, the development of a child's cooperative character frequently occurs through the internalization of cultural values present in their social environment. Cultural values are instrumental in character formation as they represent a repository of social experiences passed down through generations, influencing behavioral patterns (Ardiyanti et al., 2021). Additionally, traditional educational practices within society have proven effective in instilling moral values and etiquette (Ardiyanti et al., 2021). Therefore, integrating cultural values into character education is a vital aspect of early childhood development.

Based on the aforementioned context, *gotong royong* possesses significant potential as a means to strengthen cooperative character in early childhood. Nevertheless, scholarly work specifically highlighting the role of *gotong royong* within early childhood educational settings remains relatively limited. Existing research tends to emphasize the implementation of character programs without deeply analyzing how local cultural values indirectly shape social character development. Yet, in various play and learning activities, children frequently engage in behaviors that implicitly carry the essence of *gotong royong*, such as collaborating in group games, sharing roles, and helping peers in distress. These activities suggest that *gotong royong* is already an integral part of a child's social experience that can reinforce their cooperative character. Consequently, researching the role of *gotong royong* as an effort to strengthen cooperative character in early childhood is essential to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between local cultural values and social character development.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a case study design oriented toward ethnographic principles. The qualitative method was specifically chosen because it allows the researcher to capture the complexity and nuance of social interactions that cannot be quantified, providing a deep understanding of how children naturally internalize cultural values in their daily environment (Hunleth et al., 2022). This approach enables an in-depth investigation of the phenomenon within its naturalistic school setting, where the researcher can observe behaviors in their original context without manipulation.

The data collection process was conducted through three integrated techniques to ensure data triangulation. First, participatory observation was carried out over five days to document spontaneous social behaviors, such as peer assistance and collaborative play. Second, in-depth interviews with teachers were conducted to gain insights into pedagogical strategies and the 'hidden curriculum'. Third, informal conversations with children were used to understand their personal motivations behind prosocial actions.

2.1. Research Participants

The participants in this study involved four students enrolled at KB TK Cordova Islamic School. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique to obtain in-depth data. This is consistent with the perspective that in a case study, researchers may conduct investigations at the level of an individual, a group of people, an organization, or a community to gain detailed knowledge about a specific activity, event, process, or one or more individuals (Septiana et al., 2024).

2.2 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through various techniques to achieve data triangulation:

- a. **Teacher Interviews:** Conducted to elicit in-depth information regarding classroom teaching practices and caregiving patterns. In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with two teachers, identified by the initials Teacher IA and Teacher PTI. These

interviews provided context on how the "hidden curriculum" and direct modeling are used to instill *gotong royong* values.

- b. **Child Observation and Informal Interviews:** The researcher engaged in direct observation of children's behavior while conducting informal inquiries. In this study, four students from Class A1 were observed and interviewed, identified by the initials RKY, HZL, QEN, and AKA. These specific initials are used consistently throughout the findings and discussion sections to ensure clarity and traceability of the observed social interactions. Data collection techniques may include interviews, observations, and documentation (Ilhami et al., 2021).

2.3 Research Procedure

The research procedure follows a systematic sequence, commencing from problem identification and primary data collection in the field, to data processing conducted through scientifically recognized steps. This structured approach is essential, as findings can be considered scientific if they meet objective and systematic standards, and adhere to rigorous scientific procedures (Ilhami et al., 2021).

2.4. Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman. This process was carried out continuously, encompassing "data collection, condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification" (Ash-Shiddiqi et al., 2025). The researcher processed the field data through a condensation phase, followed by a narrative display, and finally, a verification process to ensure the validity of the findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Research Findings

Based on the data collected through participatory observation, documentation, and in-depth interviews at the KB TK Cordova Islamic School, the researcher identified various manifestations of cooperative character reinforced through the culture of *gotong royong*. These findings are presented based on the categorization of raw data that has undergone a condensation process.

a. Matrix of Findings: Cooperative Character in Children:

To provide a systematic overview of the manifestation of cooperative behavior among the participants, the following **Table 1** categorizes the observed indicators, the cultural integration of *gotong royong*, and the corresponding behaviors:

Table 1. Categorizes the observed indicators

No	Cooperation Indicators	Participants	Data Sources
1.	Collaboration Autonomously tidying up Lego pieces and wooden blocks after play sessions	All Class A1	FN-5, DN-1
2.	Negotiating and assigning roles in group projects (e.g., coloring farm- themed posters and assembling giant puzzles).	Group A1	IN-Izza, IN-Putri
3.	Demonstrating prosocial initiative by providing	RKY	FN-2, FN-5, DN-2

	chairs for teachers/researchers.		
4.	Offering physical assistance to peers (e.g., zipping bags and helping carry heavy belongings).	HZL, QEN	FN-4, DN-2, DN-4, IN-Kids
5.	Engaging in peer-tutoring during academic tasks, such as identifying <i>hijaiyah</i> letters. or departure.	QEN, AKA	FN-4, DN-2, IN-Kids
6.	Voluntarily lending personal toys and proposing communal games (e.g., "Tepuk Mi-Mi-Mi") when physical toys are limited	HZL, QEN	FN-3, DN-3, DN-4, IN-Kids

Definition of Observation and Data Source Indicators

To ensure the validity and traceability of the findings, the data sources in the matrix above are categorized using the following coding system. The numerical suffixes (1–5) specifically represent the chronological sequence of the five-day research period:

- **FN (Field Notes):** Refers to qualitative records written during direct classroom observations. The numbers FN-1 to FN-5 correspond directly to Day 1 through Day 5 of the field study.
- **DN (Documentation Notes):** Refers to evidence gathered from photographs, video recordings, and anecdotal records that provide visual and contextual proof of the children's spontaneous social interactions.
- **IN (Interview Notes):** Refers to transcripts and summaries of qualitative interviews. **IN-Izza** and **IN-Putri** represent formal interviews with teachers, while **IN-Kids** refers to informal dialogues with the students.

Table 1 illustrates that the cooperative character of children at KB/TK Cordova is manifested through three primary dimensions: collaboration, care, and sharing. The data indicates a significant shift from egocentric play to organized collective action, where children proactively distribute roles and assist one another without constant teacher intervention. Furthermore, these findings highlight that social interaction is not limited to play but extends into academic support (peer-tutoring) and spontaneous empathy, suggesting a deep internalization of the *gotong royong* culture within their daily school routines.

b. Description of Field Research Findings

1) The Culture of *Gotong Royong* in Transition Activities and Projects

Data obtained from interviews with Ma'am PTI and Ma'am IA confirm that the culture of *gotong royong* is consistently implemented through daily routines. A prominent finding emerged during the "cleaning up" activities. On Day 5, the researcher observed that students in Class A1 demonstrated a high level of collective awareness. As free-play sessions concluded, the children autonomously assisted one another in tidying up blocks and toys without requiring explicit, repetitive instructions. This behavior indicates that *gotong royong* has transitioned from an external expectation into an ingrained group behavioral identity.

Furthermore, collaboration was evident during group art projects. Ma'am IA explained that during a farm-themed coloring activity, the children naturally distributed roles among themselves; some focused on coloring the mountains, while others concentrated on the livestock or the gate. This spontaneous coordination reflects the children's emerging ability to balance individual agency with collective effort, effectively setting aside personal interests to prioritize the completion of a shared project.

2) Manifestations of Empathy: Care in Action

The character of care, manifested through empathy in action, was consistently observed among the participants through specific prosocial initiatives. A significant finding was identified in the behavior of RKY, who demonstrated a high level of social awareness. For instance, based on observation data from Day 2 to Day 5 (FN-2, FN-5), RKY consistently and autonomously offered a chair to the researcher every morning upon arrival. When descriptively analyzed, this behavior is not merely a polite gesture but reflects an emerging understanding of social reciprocity. This was confirmed during an informal conversation (IN-Kids) when RKY stated: "*So that if I encounter difficulties, there will be someone to help me as well.*" This statement indicates that the child has begun to internalize the concept of mutual aid, which is central to the values of *gotong royong*.

Furthermore, peer-directed empathy occurred spontaneously without teacher intervention. On Day 4 (FN-4), observation data recorded HZL visually identifying a peer, KMA, who was struggling with a stuck bag zipper. HZL immediately approached and provided physical assistance until the task was completed. Similarly, QEN was observed taking the initiative to help KMA carry a heavy bag during the arrival session (DN-4). These findings descriptively show that the students at KB TK Cordova possess a highly developed sense of socio-emotional sensitivity, where they are capable of identifying the needs of others and responding with relevant, helpful actions. These spontaneous acts of care demonstrate that empathy has moved beyond an abstract concept and has become an ingrained social habit within the group.

3) Implementation of Peer Tutoring as a Manifestation of Collaborative Learning

One of the most significant findings regarding the learning process is the emergence of "peer tutoring" behaviors, where children take on the role of facilitators for their peers. To provide a clearer understanding of these interactions, the following **Table 2** presents the concrete observational data recorded during the study:

Table 2. Observational data of peer tutoring interaction

Date/Code	Participant	Observed Behavior	Context/Activity
1. Day 4 (FN-4)	AKA & RKY	AKA provided a direct demonstration and manually guided RKY's hand to fix the orientation of the letter 'a'.	Academic task: Writing hijaiyah and alphabet letters
2. Day 4 (IN-Kids)	AKA	AKA stated: "I wanted to help because RKY likes to help me too, and helping is enjoyable."	Informal interview following the task.

Definition of Observation and Data Source Indicators

To maintain consistency with the research coding system, the data sources for this interaction are defined as follows:

- **FN (Field Notes):** Refers to the qualitative records documented during direct classroom observations. The code FN-4 specifically denotes the observations recorded on Day 4 of the research period.
- **IN (Interview Notes):** Refers to the transcripts and summaries of qualitative interviews. The code IN-Kids represents informal, child-friendly dialogues conducted with the participants to validate their social motivations and internal feelings regarding the observed actions.

The data in **Table 2** illustrates that cooperative character has transcended simple social play and entered the cognitive domain. In this instance, AKA visually identified that RKY was experiencing difficulties with the correct orientation of the character 'a'. Instead of waiting for the teacher, AKA initiated a scaffolding process by offering a direct model of the correct writing technique. This observation indicates that children are capable of collaborating not only for social harmony but also for the pursuit of collective academic competency. The reciprocal nature of this help, as expressed by AKA, suggests that the culture of *gotong royong* has created an egalitarian learning environment where students feel both responsible for and capable of supporting their peers' progress.

c. Sharing Behavior as a Mitigation of Egocentrism

While early childhood is developmentally characterized by a dominant egocentric stage where children prioritize personal interests, the field data from Day 3 revealed a significant deviation through the sharing behavior exhibited by HZL. HZL demonstrated a high level of social maturity by voluntarily sharing a personal toy brought from home with his peers. This act transcends simple play; it signifies the successful internalization of *gotong royong* values, where the child begins to shift their perspective from 'individual ownership' to 'communal enjoyment,' effectively mitigating natural egocentric tendencies through culturally-rooted social interaction.

d. Factors Shaping Character: Insights from Educator Interviews

Based on the analysis of interview data with educators, several key factors were identified as consistently contributing to the robust cooperative character observed in Class A1 students:

- 1) **Direct Modeling:** Educators do not merely provide verbal instructions; they actively participate in *gotong royong* for instance, by joining the children in tidying up toys. Ma'am IA emphasized that children are "expert imitators," making tangible modeling the most effective pedagogical strategy.
- 2) **Internalization from Family Environment:** The data suggests that home environments play a critical role. RKY, for example, is accustomed to assisting siblings at home, a practice he replicates in the school setting by assisting his teachers. This demonstrates a seamless synchronization between home-based upbringing and school-based character education.
- 3) **Spontaneous Learning Methodology:** Teachers capitalize on every moment of interaction such as when an object falls or a peer faces a difficulty as an opportunity to instill the value of *gotong royong* in real-time, rather than relying solely on abstract theory found in formal lesson plans (RPPH), as illustrated in **Figure 1**, **Figure 2**, and **Figure 3**.



Figure 1. A student demonstrating prosocial initiative by offering a chair to the researcher, reflecting an emerging understanding of social reciprocity.



Figure 2. Peer assistance in self-care tasks, demonstrating the manifestation of prosocial behavior among students.



Figure 3. Peer-tutoring in action: A student providing guidance to a peer who is experiencing difficulty with a worksheet.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to uncover how the culture of *gotong royong* (mutual assistance) is implemented as a means of strengthening cooperative character in early childhood at KB TK Cordova Islamic School. Based on the observations, documentation, and interviews, it is evident that the development of cooperative character does not occur solely through verbal instruction, but rather through an educational ecosystem that integrates local values into the children's daily activities.

This finding aligns with the perspective that the internalization of cultural values in Early Childhood Education (ECE) constitutes the primary foundation for social identity development. Effective character education must be conducted through deliberate planning and relevant approaches. However, this research goes further than the studies by Akmaliani & Rohita (2025) and Sholekhati et al., (2024). While previous research often treats *gotong royong* as a structured program or an abstract value, this study demonstrates its role as a practical framework mediating real-time social exchanges. The integration of *gotong royong* serves as a critical pedagogical scaffolding mechanism. By transforming abstract values into tangible daily practices such as collaborative cleaning, peer tutoring, and communal sharing the school successfully fosters an environment where cooperation is both learned and lived.

Table 3. Consequently, these practices suggest that when cultural ethos is embedded within school routines, it significantly enhances the children's prosocial behaviors, thereby mitigating egocentrism and fostering a robust sense of communal responsibility.

Table 3. Matrix analysis of research findings

No	Observed Field Phenomena	Pedagogical and Psychological Analysis	Children's Character Development
1	Collective clean-up of play materials (Lego & blocks)	Internalization of collective responsibility and self-management (Putriwan, 2025)	Transition from individualism to a sense of communal belonging
2	RKY's initiative to provide a chair daily	Prosocial behavior driven by <i>Observational Learning</i> (Yanuardianto, 2019)	Emergence of moral autonomy and respect for others
3	Peer assistance (zipper aid/bag carrying)	Manifestation of spontaneous altruism rooted in <i>secure attachment</i>	Strengthening of emotional bonds and peer-directed empathy
4	AKA acting as a peer tutor in writing	Implementation of <i>Scaffolding</i> via egalitarian social interaction (Nasution et al., 2025)	Enhanced <i>self-efficacy</i> and verbal communication skills
5	HZL Voluntary sharing of personal toys being	Mitigation of egocentrism toward sociocentrism via the concept of sharing	Development of generosity and commitment to collective well-being

Table 3 provides a theoretical bridge between the observed social phenomena in the classroom and established psychological frameworks. The analysis demonstrates that the daily implementation of gotong royong does not merely change surface-level behavior but facilitates a fundamental psychological transition from egocentrism to sociocentrism. By applying concepts such as observational learning and scaffolding, the matrix reveals that children's spontaneous actions ranging from peer-tutoring to collective cleaning are indicators of emerging moral autonomy and enhanced self-efficacy.

This study offers a distinct advantage over previous research by addressing a specific comparative gap. While Hamid (2024) emphasizes that a supportive school environment is a core component for developing empathy, this research provides a more granular explanation by showing that environment alone is insufficient. The findings at KB TK Cordova demonstrate that it is the active mediation of local wisdom (gotong royong) within that environment that transforms passive empathy into consistent prosocial actions, such as HZL's initiative with the zipper. Unlike Hamid's broader framework, this study proves that character internalization is significantly more effective when cultural values act as the primary operational tool for daily social problem-solving. This evidence confirms that a culturally-integrated environment effectively supports the holistic development of social-emotional character in early learners more robustly than traditional methods that lack specific cultural-pedagogical anchors.

2. Implementation of the "Hidden Curriculum" in Character Reinforcement

A pivotal finding of this study is that the reinforcement of cooperative character at KB TK Cordova is not explicitly articulated as a primary theme within the formal curriculum (RPPH). Instead, it is cultivated through the "hidden curriculum" a mechanism encompassing values, norms, and beliefs that are effectively transmitted through daily social interactions rather than formal codification.

This finding strengthens the theory of "spontaneous habituation" proposed by Amanda & Wahyuningsih (2025), highlighting that character education is most efficacious when it is integrated into the children's lived experience. Throughout the observation, Educators (Teacher IA and Teacher PTI) consistently leveraged transitional moments and minor

classroom conflicts as spontaneous pedagogical opportunities. For instance, during block play, educators provided immediate guidance on sharing and collaboration.

This approach represents a significant advancement beyond the findings of Sholehhati et al., (2024), which still largely focus on structured, teacher-led interventions. In this framework, children do not perceive themselves as subjects of explicit moral instruction; rather, they experience cooperative conduct as a normative and natural aspect of their environment. As asserted by Mundzir (2024), a school's cultural ethos is far more effective when it permeates real actions, proving superior to abstract theoretical explanations in fostering lasting character traits.

3. Educator Modeling as a Behavioral Benchmark (The Power of Modeling)

Based on interview findings, both educators emphasized that the most effective pedagogical method is providing direct examples. This aligns with the foundational theory by Yaqin et al., (2025), which posits that early childhood learners are prolific imitators who adopt the behaviors of adults in their social sphere. However, while earlier studies such as those by Sholehhati et al., (2024) primarily focus on imitation within structured, teacher-led tasks, this research reveals a more advanced phenomenon.

When a teacher tidies up toys alongside the children, they are transferring the values of *gotong royong* through non-verbal communication that resonates beyond the classroom. A critical point of departure from previous literature is RKY's initiative in providing a chair for the researcher. This act is a direct reflection of how he observes his teachers treating guests, representing what this study identifies as "meaningful imitation". Unlike the structured interventions analyzed by Kanza et al., (2025), which often measure character through simulated scenarios, the naturalistic evidence found in Class A1 proves that character internalization is more robust when it occurs spontaneously. This finding suggests that the modeling method used at KB TK Cordova is superior in fostering authentic moral autonomy compared to traditional, instruction-heavy approaches.

4. Synergy Across the Three Pillars: Family, School, and Peer Environments

The synergy between the home and school environments is identified as a critical determinant in ensuring the consistency of a child's cooperative character. This study reinforces the perspective of Ardiyanti et al., (2021), which positions the school as a "laboratory" where children can practice and refine social values initially introduced by parents. A clear illustration is found in the case of RKY, whose habitual practice of assisting siblings at home seamlessly transitions into prosocial initiatives within the classroom. This underscores that parental involvement is not merely a support system but a primary foundation for the continuity of character internalization.

Furthermore, this research extends the theory of Kurniawan & Sudrajat (2020) regarding the role of parents by integrating the dimension of peer influence as an autonomous catalyst for cooperative behavior. In Class A1, the friendships among QEN, HZL, and KMA trigger a "social contagion effect". Unlike the findings of Kanza et al., (2025), which predominantly focus on teacher-led strategies, this study highlights how altruistic behavior can spread organically. When one child initiates a helping action, others are naturally inclined to follow, creating a supportive ecosystem that validates and encourages prosocial conduct independently of direct adult intervention.

5. Dimensional Analysis of Character: Collaboration, Care, and Sharing

a. The Dimension of Collaboration: Transcending Individual Ego

Activities such as coloring farm-themed posters or assembling large-scale puzzles compel children to engage in essential social negotiation. Observations of these group activities support the theory by Kanza et al., (2025) that collaboration serves as a critical medium for children to align individual visions with shared objectives and transcend their individual egos for collective goals. This serves as an early pedagogical encounter with democratic principles and the division of labor, as children must compromise on task distribution.

b. The Dimension of Care: Empathy in Practice

The care demonstrated by HZL when assisting KMA with a zipper indicates that the children's empathy has reached the stage of "action". The child does not merely experience sympathy for a peer's difficulty but exercises the physical initiative to assist. This confirms Hamid (2024) assertion that empathy at the "action" stage represents the highest level of cooperative character. Such actions enable children to adopt the perspectives of others, which is a core component of character development in a non-competitive school culture.

c. The Dimension of Sharing: Collective Well-being

HZL's willingness to share personal belongings and QEN's initiative in group play—such as the "Tepuk Mi Mi Mi" game demonstrate that these children have identified intrinsic joy in social interaction. While egocentrism is developmentally dominant at this age, HZL's success in sharing illustrates the positive impact of the *gotong royong* culture on social acceptance. This aligns with studies by Liani (2024) and Sutrisno et al., (2025), which suggest that acts of sharing effectively mitigate natural individualistic tendencies and foster collective well-being within the classroom.

6. Challenges and Maintenance of Character

Although research findings demonstrate that the children at KB TK Cordova have achieved the "Developing as Expected" (*Berkembang Sesuai Harapan* - BSH) level in cooperative character, the primary challenge remains the management of children's emotional fluctuations or mood swings. Maintenance efforts are strictly executed through consistent positive reinforcement whenever a child exhibits cooperative conduct. This approach is consistent with Suris (2025), who emphasizes that steady positive reinforcement is a prerequisite for transforming desirable behaviors into ingrained, permanent habituation.

In this context, the use of simple praise acts as an effective external motivator that gradually evolves into internal motivation. As suggested by Ulfa et al., (2025), such motivational strategies prove effective in maintaining character sustainability, prompting children to contribute autonomously to group dynamics within the school environment. This research concludes that by prioritizing collective responsibility over individual achievement, school environments can foster permanent character traits rooted in the values of *gotong royong* that are projected to persist into adulthood.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the culture of *gotong royong* serves as an essential pedagogical framework for nurturing cooperative character in early childhood education at the KB TK Cordova Islamic School. The findings indicate that character development is not

achieved through isolated, explicit instruction, but rather through an integrated *hidden curriculum* that embeds local values into the students' daily social interactions.

The synergy across three primary environmental pillars family, school, and peer groups acts as a critical catalyst for the internalization of prosocial behaviors. Educators serve a strategic role as behavioral models who utilize meaningful imitation to facilitate a child's transition from individualistic tendencies toward communal awareness. Furthermore, the dimensions of collaboration, care, and sharing observed in Class A1 signify that spontaneous habituation, supported by consistent positive reinforcement, is highly effective in mitigating egocentrism and fostering robust social-emotional development.

Despite these findings, this study has limitations, as it was conducted within a specific Islamic school setting with a limited number of participants, which may affect the generalizability of the results to diverse cultural or secular educational contexts. Future research is recommended to involve a broader range of school types and larger sample sizes to validate the scalability of the *gotong royong* framework. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term retention of these cooperative characters as children progress to higher levels of education. The contribution of this study lies in providing a practical, culturally-rooted pedagogical model for educators to enhance early childhood social interaction through the 'hidden curriculum,' offering a localized alternative to conventional character education programs.

Fundamentally, when school environments prioritize collective responsibility over individual achievement, children are better equipped to develop autonomous moral standards, which form a sustainable foundation for their character identity into adulthood.

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7. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

8. REFERENCES

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