Online ISSN: 3082-5121
https://aijsseaf.com
Volume 2 Issue 10 (2026)

Aloysian Interdisciplinary Journal
of Social Sciences, Education, and Allied Fields

Constructing Collective Identity Through Decolonized and Digitized Literature: A Contextual Framework from Sultan Kudarat, Philippines

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Publication Date: October 27, 2026 DOI: **10.5281/zenodo.23683119**

Abstract

This qualitative constructivist grounded theory study examined how decolonized and digitized literature instruction contributes to collective identity formation and cultural consciousness among Senior High School learners in multicultural classrooms in Sultan Kudarat, Philippines. The study addressed the limited process-oriented understanding of how local and Indigenous narratives, classroom dialogue, critical reflection, and digital literary practices interact in learners' meaning-making. Ten learners from selected public secondary schools who had taken 21st Century Literature from the Philippines and the World participated. Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and analyzed iteratively using constant comparison and grounded theory coding procedures. The analysis produced four interrelated categories: meaning-making through culturally situated literary encounters; negotiating perspectives through dialogic classroom engagement; critical reflection and identity reconstruction; and expanding literary engagement through digital and multimodal learning spaces. These categories were synthesized into three interconnected processes: reclaiming cultural narratives, negotiating shared meanings, and strengthening cultural consciousness through digital practice. The findings suggest that collective identity is not a fixed outcome of exposure to texts but an evolving, context-dependent process shaped by cultural representation, interaction, reflection, and digital participation. Cultural diversity, access to localized materials, and technological resources enabled or constrained learners' participation. The resulting framework offers a context-specific explanation that may inform culturally responsive literature teaching and equitable digital learning in multicultural settings.

Keywords: *collective identity, decolonized literature, digitized literature, cultural consciousness, constructivist grounded theory, multicultural education*

Online ISSN: 3082-5121
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1. Introduction

Literature education offers learners ways to interpret social realities, encounter cultural perspectives, and reflect on identity and belonging. Literary narratives do more than convey aesthetic or linguistic knowledge, they represent histories, values, relationships, and competing understandings of community. Identity can therefore be understood as socially and culturally constructed through shared narratives and ongoing interpretation rather than as a fixed attribute (Anderson, 2006; Hall, 1996). In the classroom, reading and discussing literature can become a process through which learners relate texts to lived experience and negotiate meanings with others.

In the Philippine educational context, calls for contextualized and learner-centered education emphasize the importance of connecting instruction with learners' sociocultural realities. The Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (Republic Act No. 10533) provides a policy basis for a relevant and responsive curriculum, while the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997 (Republic Act No. 8371) recognizes the importance of Indigenous communities and their rights. Yet curriculum intentions do not automatically ensure that local narratives, Indigenous knowledge, and marginalized perspectives are consistently represented in everyday instruction. Decolonizing literature education consequently involves more than adding regional texts to a reading list; it also entails making space for learners to question dominant representations, interpret local knowledge, and consider whose experiences are recognized as legitimate sources of meaning (Battiste, 2013; Mignolo & Walsh, 2021).

At the same time, digital platforms and multimodal texts have expanded the ways learners encounter and create literary meaning. Videos, electronic texts, multimedia presentations, and digital storytelling can supplement print-based reading and enable learners to access narratives through visual, auditory, and interactive modes. Multiliteracies perspectives recognize that meaning-making increasingly occurs across modes and social contexts (New London Group, 1996; Jenkins, 2009). However, digital availability alone does not guarantee meaningful or equitable participation. Access to devices, connectivity, relevant content, and instructional support can shape which learners benefit from digitally mediated literature.

These issues are particularly salient in Sultan Kudarat, a province characterized by ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity, including Maguindanaon, Teduray, Ilonggo, Cebuano, and migrant communities. Multicultural classrooms provide opportunities for learners to encounter narratives beyond their own experience, but they also require respectful dialogue and pedagogical attention to differences in language, history, and cultural representation. Literature instruction can help learners identify shared meanings without erasing cultural distinctions.

Research has considered literature and identity, decolonial curriculum, digital learning, and multicultural education, but these areas are often examined separately. Less is understood about the processes through which culturally situated literary texts and digital modes interact with classroom dialogue and reflection to shape collective identity in a localized, multicultural setting.

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Volume 2 Issue 10 (2026)

This study addressed that gap by developing a contextual framework grounded in learners' accounts.

To address this gap, the present study aimed to generate a contextually grounded explanation of how learners construct collective identity and cultural consciousness through engagement with decolonized and digitized literature in multicultural Senior High School classrooms in Sultan Kudarat, Philippines. Specifically, it sought to understand how learners interpret local and Indigenous literary narratives, how they negotiate diverse cultural perspectives through social interaction, and how digital and multimodal forms shape their literary engagement and participation. It also examined the contextual conditions that influence these processes and the development of shared meanings. Guided by these inquiries, the study sought to explain the processes through which learners construct collective identity while engaging with culturally situated literary texts and digital learning experiences.

2. Methods

Research design

The study used a qualitative constructivist grounded theory design informed by Charmaz (2014). This approach was appropriate because the aim was to explain an evolving social process rather than test predetermined variables. From a constructivist perspective, meanings are developed through interaction and interpretation; the researcher and participants contribute to the production of the account. The analysis therefore focused on how learners described interpreting texts, exchanging perspectives, reflecting on identity, and participating in digital literary learning.

Setting and participants

The study was conducted with learners from selected public secondary schools in Sultan Kudarat, Philippines. Ten Senior High School learners participated. Eligibility criteria included having taken the subject 21st Century Literature from the Philippines and the World; having experienced instruction involving local, Indigenous, or culturally contextualized literary narratives; having engaged with digital or multimodal literary materials; being able to reflect on experiences related to literature, culture, and identity; and agreeing to participate voluntarily. The study used purposive selection initially and theoretical sampling to seek further detail on emerging categories and relationships. The sample was intended to provide depth and conceptual development within the study context, not statistical representation of all learners in the province.

Data generation

Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Interviews elicited learners' individual experiences and interpretations of culturally situated texts, digital literary materials, identity, and belonging. FGDs supported examination of the interactional dimension by allowing learners to discuss literary experiences, compare interpretations, and respond to differing viewpoints. The dissertation reports that interviews and FGDs were conducted online, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed for analysis. Interview and discussion prompts were adjusted as the analysis progressed so that emerging concepts could be explored in greater depth.

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Data analysis

Analysis proceeded iteratively alongside data generation. The researcher used constant comparison to examine similarities and differences within and across participants' accounts. Initial coding identified meaningful actions and ideas in the data; focused coding brought recurring and analytically useful codes together; axial analysis examined relationships among categories; and theoretical or selective coding integrated the categories into an explanatory account. Emerging interpretations were revisited against the interview and FGD material, and theoretical sampling was used to clarify, extend, or challenge developing categories. The final framework was synthesized from the relationships among four categories and the broader processes they represented.

Researcher reflexivity and trustworthiness

The researcher served as the primary instrument for data generation and interpretation and brought professional experience in language and literature education. This familiarity supported contextual understanding but also required reflexive attention to assumptions about culturally responsive teaching and digital learning. The dissertation describes reflexive practice and comparison across interviews and FGDs as strategies for strengthening the credibility and depth of interpretation. The findings should be read as a contextually grounded explanation co-constructed through participants' accounts and the researcher's analytic decisions.

Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained; parental or guardian consent was required where applicable. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw without penalty. The dissertation states that participant information was treated confidentially and used for research purposes. In preparing this article, no verbatim participant quotations have been added because the article version is based on the dissertation's synthesis of findings rather than a fresh review of the full transcript set.

3. Results

The analysis indicated that collective identity formation developed through connected practices of culturally situated literary engagement, dialogue, critical reflection, and digital participation. Four interrelated categories formed the empirical basis of the contextual framework.

3.1 Meaning-making through culturally situated literary encounters

Learners made sense of literary texts by relating narratives to personal experience, community life, cultural values, traditions, and histories. Texts became meaningful when learners could recognize the people, places, and realities represented in them. Local and Indigenous narratives offered opportunities to recognize cultural knowledge as relevant to literature learning and to consider experiences that may be underrepresented in more generalized or externally centered accounts. The findings suggest that culturally situated content provided the narrative foundation for learners' reflections on identity and belonging.

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3.2 Negotiating perspectives through dialogic classroom engagement

Classroom dialogue emerged as a central process through which learners compared interpretations and encountered perspectives shaped by different cultural backgrounds and experiences. Differences in interpretation did not necessarily prevent shared understanding; instead, discussion could prompt learners to explain their views, listen to classmates, and reconsider assumptions. Shared meanings were therefore negotiated rather than simply delivered as a single authoritative interpretation. Dialogue helped connect individual responses to broader understandings of culture and community while leaving room for difference.

3.3 Critical reflection and identity reconstruction

Literary engagement also prompted reflection on personal beliefs, cultural assumptions, social realities, and the experiences of others. Learners' accounts, as synthesized in the dissertation, indicated that encountering diverse narratives could support greater openness, empathy, and awareness of cultural differences. Reflection linked the act of interpreting a text with the reconsideration of one's own position in relation to other people and communities. In this way, identity formation appeared as an ongoing process of interpretation and reconstruction rather than a settled result.

3.4 Expanding literary engagement through digital and multimodal learning spaces

Digital resources—including videos, presentations, online materials, electronic texts, and digital storytelling—expanded the modes through which learners accessed and interpreted literature. Multimodal resources could make texts more accessible, interactive, and visually meaningful, supporting varied forms of engagement. However, learners' experiences were not uniform. Access to technology, the availability of localized materials, and the cultural relevance of digital content influenced the usefulness of digital learning. Technology functioned as an enabling condition when resources and relevant materials were available, but it could constrain participation when access or culturally meaningful content was limited.

3.5 Synthesis: three interconnected processes

The four categories were integrated into three interrelated processes that explain the development of collective identity in the study context:

- Reclaiming cultural narratives. Learners encountered local, Indigenous, and culturally situated narratives and connected them with community histories, traditions, and lived experience.
- Negotiating shared meanings. Through classroom dialogue and critical reflection, learners compared perspectives, examined assumptions, and developed broader understandings of culture and belonging.
- Strengthening cultural consciousness through digital practice. Digital and multimodal environments expanded opportunities to access, interpret, create, and share culturally meaningful narratives, subject to the availability of technology and localized content.

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These processes were recursive rather than strictly linear. Culturally situated narratives supplied material for discussion; dialogue and reflection deepened interpretation; and digital participation widened the ways narratives and understandings could be represented and shared. Cultural diversity, school and learning environments, access to technology, and the availability of relevant materials shaped how the processes unfolded.

4. Discussion

The findings position collective identity as a social and context-dependent process emerging through interaction among learners, literary narratives, and learning environments. This interpretation is consistent with accounts of identity as constructed through shared cultural representations and social meaning-making (Anderson, 2006; Hall, 1996). The contribution of the present study is to show how these processes may be traced within literature learning: learners connected texts to their cultural worlds, negotiated meanings with peers, and reflected on identity while engaging with print and digital forms.

Decolonized literature as recognition and critical engagement

The category of reclaiming cultural narratives suggests that local and Indigenous texts can make literature instruction more culturally legible to learners and can recognize community knowledge as a source of interpretation. This finding aligns with decolonial perspectives that question the dominance of particular knowledge traditions and advocate for the inclusion of marginalized voices (Battiste, 2013; Mignolo & Walsh, 2021). Yet the findings also caution against treating decolonization as a matter of representation alone. Including a local text is a starting point; learners need opportunities to interpret it critically, discuss its meanings, and consider the historical and social conditions it represents.

Dialogue and reflection as mechanisms of collective meaning-making

The importance of classroom dialogue supports a social constructivist understanding of learning in which meanings develop through interaction rather than through isolated individual reception. In this study, dialogue also had a cultural dimension: learners encountered interpretations shaped by different backgrounds and had opportunities to listen, explain, and revise their views. Critical reflection connected this social exchange with identity reconstruction. These processes suggest that collective identity should not be equated with uniformity. Shared understanding can develop while cultural distinctions and multiple interpretations remain visible.

Digital participation and the conditions of access

The findings also extend discussion of multiliteracies by showing how digital and multimodal formats may widen participation in literary meaning-making (Jenkins, 2009; New London Group, 1996). Digital materials can support access and offer additional modes for interpreting and sharing narratives, but the value of these resources depends on the cultural relevance of content and the conditions under which learners can use them. The digital divide is therefore not a peripheral technical issue; it is a contextual condition that can influence who participates and which cultural narratives are available. Digital integration should be planned alongside access, content curation, and culturally responsive teaching.

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A contextual framework for collective identity formation

The framework developed from this study brings together three processes—reclaiming cultural narratives, negotiating shared meanings, and strengthening cultural consciousness through digital practice—within a set of contextual conditions. It proposes that collective identity is more likely to be meaningfully negotiated when learners have access to culturally situated narratives, structured opportunities for dialogue and reflection, and equitable ways to engage with digital and multimodal texts. The framework is substantive and context-specific: it offers an explanatory account grounded in learners' experiences in Sultan Kudarat rather than a universal model applicable without adaptation.

Implications for practice

For literature teachers, the findings support selecting texts that represent local, Indigenous, and marginalized perspectives alongside other literary traditions; designing discussion prompts that invite comparison without requiring cultural consensus; and incorporating reflective tasks that connect textual interpretation with identity and community. Digital activities should have a clear literary and cultural purpose, such as documenting community narratives, producing multimodal responses, or sharing interpretations of local texts. Schools and curriculum leaders can support this work by strengthening access to devices and connectivity, developing or curating culturally relevant resources, and supporting teachers in the ethical and respectful use of community narratives.

Limitations

The study involved ten learners from selected public secondary schools in one province and prioritized depth over statistical generalization. The findings reflect learners' accounts gathered through interviews and FGDs; they do not directly establish causal effects of a particular teaching intervention or measure changes in identity over time. Teachers', administrators', curriculum developers', and policymakers' perspectives were not primary data sources, and the study was not a systematic policy analysis. The framework should therefore be considered contextually grounded and open to further examination in other educational and cultural settings.

5. Conclusion

This study generated a contextual framework explaining collective identity formation through decolonized and digitized literature instruction among Senior High School learners in Sultan Kudarat. The analysis identified four interrelated categories—culturally situated literary meaning-making, dialogic negotiation of perspectives, critical reflection and identity reconstruction, and digital and multimodal literary engagement—which were synthesized into three processes: reclaiming cultural narratives, negotiating shared meanings, and strengthening cultural consciousness through digital practice.

The findings indicate that collective identity does not emerge from exposure to literary texts alone. It develops through ongoing interactions among culturally meaningful narratives, peer dialogue, reflection, and opportunities to access and share literature through multiple modes. Digital resources may widen engagement, but their contribution depends on equitable access and

Online ISSN: 3082-5121
https://aijsseaf.com
Volume 2 Issue 10 (2026)

the availability of culturally relevant content. The framework offers a context-specific contribution to literature education by linking decolonial content, social meaning-making, and digital participation in a single explanatory account.

Future research may examine the framework in other cultural and educational settings, follow learners' identity development over time, compare different approaches to literature instruction, and investigate teachers' practices and institutional conditions. Further study should also evaluate the proposed instructional guide and examine how unequal access to technology and localized resources affects participation. Such work can refine the framework and inform more inclusive, culturally responsive literature education.

Declarations

Ethics and consent

The dissertation reports voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. Journal submission should include the approving institution or ethics review body and approval/reference number, if applicable, in accordance with the target journal's requirements.

Funding

No funding statement was specified in the source manuscript. The author should insert the accurate funding declaration required by the target journal.

Conflict of interest

No conflict-of-interest statement was specified in the source manuscript. The author should confirm and insert the appropriate declaration before submission.

Data availability

The source manuscript does not specify a public data repository. Because the data involve learners' personal accounts and cultural experiences, any data-sharing statement should be consistent with consent, confidentiality, and institutional requirements.

Use of artificial intelligence

The dissertation's AI disclosure states that ChatGPT was used for language refinement and formatting assistance and Grammarly for grammar and style checking. The author remains responsible for verifying the accuracy of the manuscript, citations, and all interpretations. The journal's AI disclosure policy should be followed.

Online ISSN: 3082-5121
https://aijsseaf.com
Volume 2 Issue 10 (2026)

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