

## Cooperation, Mutual Respect, and Societal Commitment: Meanings of Gotong-Royong in Indonesian Social Studies School-textbooks

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### ABSTRACT

*The study aims to explore the meanings of gotong-royong, a core national and cultural value in Indonesia, as it is presented and disseminated in the Social Studies curriculum, particularly at the lower secondary level. Since introducing character education in 2017, the Ministry of Education and Culture has sought to promote the value of gotong-royong among students to foster and maintain a peaceful and harmonious society. This research involved a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 11 Social Studies textbooks published and used in Indonesian schools over the past decade. The analysis examined the forms and meanings of gotong-royong presented to students in various social and cultural contexts. The findings revealed three general meanings associated with gotong-royong: (i) cooperation and social support (56%), (ii) mutual respect for all members of society (33%); and (iii) societal commitment (8%). Although the meanings of gotong-royong are not equally represented, the study found that this value has been readily adopted and integrated into the local and national civic and social values presented in the Social Studies textbooks for lower secondary education.*

### Keywords:

Indonesian National Value; Gotong Royong; Social Studies Education; Textbooks.

### ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi makna gotong-royong, nilai inti nasional dan budaya di Indonesia, seperti yang disajikan dan disebarluaskan dalam kurikulum Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial (IPS), khususnya di tingkat sekolah menengah pertama. Sejak diperkenalkannya pendidikan*

*karakter pada tahun 2017, Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan telah berupaya untuk mempromosikan nilai gotong-royong di kalangan siswa untuk membina dan memelihara masyarakat yang damai dan harmonis. Penelitian ini melakukan analisis konten kuantitatif dan kualitatif dari 11 buku teks Ilmu IPS yang diterbitkan dan digunakan di sekolah-sekolah Indonesia selama dekade terakhir. Analisis ini meneliti bentuk dan makna gotong-royong seperti yang disajikan kepada siswa dalam berbagai konteks sosial dan budaya. Temuan tersebut mengungkapkan tiga makna umum yang terkait dengan gotong-royong; (i) kerja sama dan bantuan sosial (56%); (ii) saling menghormati untuk semua anggota masyarakat (33%); dan (iii) komitmen masyarakat (8%). Meskipun makna gotong royong tidak terdistribusi secara merata, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa nilai tersebut telah dengan mudah diadopsi dan dieksplorasi sebagai bagian dari nilai-nilai kewarganegaraan dan sosial lokal-nasional negara tersebut dalam buku teks sekolah studi sosial untuk tingkat sekolah menengah pertama.*

**Kata kunci:**

Nilai Kebangsaan Indonesia; Gotong Royong; Pendidikan IPS; Buku Pelajaran IPS.

## 1. Introduction

The well-known word of gotong royong – which means cooperation and assistance – has been recognized as the hereditary cultural value that grows and develops in the social life of the ethnically and religiously diverse Indonesian society (Bowen, 1986; Simarmata, Yuniarti, Riyono, & Patria, 2020). Gotong royong is an attitude and behavior that respects cooperation in solving common problems by establishing communication and friendship and providing help and assistance to people in need. It is believed that these socially oriented values have originated and spread across the different ethnic and geographical communities ever since the country was established. The value of gotong royong is born from the habits of society or culture and customs, thus recognized by the state to preserve the peaceful and harmonious society since years after the independence, particularly during the New Order Era (Bowen, 1986; Suwignyo, 2019).

Nevertheless, it has been understood that the wave of modernization, industrialization, and globalization affecting almost all members of the nation promotes not only economic prosperity but also individualistic values, thus threatening the perseverance of gotong royong within the Indonesian society (Effendi, 2016; Tomo, Wardana, Indrahadi, Zummi, & Sulistyosari, 2020). In other words, Indonesian society has been facing a decreased understanding and commitment to the cooperation character of gotong royong, which includes togetherness, social care, solidarity, and responsibility. Over the last 30 years, the country has experienced the presumed decline of social solidarity pointed out by various communal conflicts based on ethno-religious and economic disparities (Van Klinken, 2007; Tadjoeddin, 2013; (Wilson, 2015; Mudhoffir, 2022) up to the current socio-political polarization (Warburton, 2020; Raharjo Jati, 2022).

In response to the above societal challenge, in 2017, the Ministry of Education and Culture (now the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology) released a policy to guide the implementation of the character education named Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter (PPK) or the strengthening character education at the primary and secondary schools across the country (Kementrian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2016). PPK consists of 5 core values of characters, including religion, independence, gotong royong, nationalism, and integrity, built on the very spirit of Pancasila (the five principles of the nation) in efforts to establish a peaceful, prosperous, and harmonious Indonesian society. It is worth noting that gotong royong has been considered a very important value in the country's implementation and development of character education. As presented and elaborated in PPK, the values of gotong royong consist of helping each other, respecting cooperation, solidarity, commitment to joint decisions, consensus deliberation, empathy, anti-discrimination, anti-violence, and volunteerism (Kementrian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2016; Marini, Safitri, & Muda, 2018; Zurqoni, Retnawati, Arlinwibowo, & Apino, 2018).

The value of cooperation amongst members of the society for preserving social order, cohesion, and integration – as contained in gotong royong – has been shared with the very foundation of the social studies education established in the Indonesian school curriculum since the 1970s (White, 1997; Sukmajadi & Yahya, 2015; Budimansyah & Pangalilo, 2021). The teaching of social studies course in both primary and secondary schools aim to train and equip students to establish social and mutual relationships with others within their closed-community circles and/or the wider societal life through learning of social-cultural values, cooperative skills, social care, and an attitude of empathy towards others. Having learned and trained with those social values, students are expected to be able to socialize and contribute positively to the continuity and peace of the given society. The existing shared educational objectives between the character education as formalized in PPK, particularly the value of gotong royong and the social studies course on mutual coexistence and cooperation amongst members of the society both in the primary and secondary schools, state the very importance of the value within the Indonesian society (Subiyakto, Syaharuddin, & Rahman, 2017; Prasetyo Utomo, 2018).

Recently, there have been numerous researches conducted to explore and examine the relevance and relationship between character education, particularly on gotong royong and its implementation and development in social studies courses in Indonesia (Supriatna, 2015; Subiyakto et al., 2017; Prasetyo Utomo, 2018). While offering a very important insight into how gotong royong is introduced to students through thoroughly exploring and exemplifying events and activities in various social-cultural contexts within society, those studies need more depth in examining its core meanings and derivative understandings. Those previous studies tend to revolve around adapting and implementing the teaching of gotong royong in Social Studies education but have not examined critically how the national value is presented and exemplified in various socio-cultural contexts with various meanings, particularly in school textbooks.

Having said this, the study offers to take more deep and explorative research on the meanings of gotong royong as it has been widely understood and disseminated to students through the social studies course. To do that, we researched the meaning of gotong royong presented and exemplified in the social studies school textbooks, particularly for the lower secondary level, from Grades 7, 8,

and 9. School textbooks are a very important education media widely used in all education institutions around the world that not only present course-related materials about knowledge but also contain character values affecting and developing the intelligence and morality of students (Wade, 1993; Pingel, 2010; Chu, 2017; Gautschi, 2018). In other words, the school textbook study conducted in this research offers a rather comprehensive understanding of how gotong-royong is one of the country's national characteristics presented and learned by students in the lower secondary levels and its core derivative meaning altogether.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research Design

The study employed quantitative and qualitative content analysis addressing and examining the contents of the Indonesian national value of gotong royong as presented in the Social Studies school textbooks for the lower secondary schools, grades 7, 8, and 9. The quantitative and qualitative content analysis method offered systematic research to analyze written messages (texts) and how to describe their meaning in wider and relevant contexts (Pingel, 2010; Bock, 2018). The combined content analysis methods are used in tandem with different research objectives. The quantitative method was used to map out the mainstream and minority meanings of gotong-royong as presented in the social studies school textbooks for the lower secondary level. The qualitative one was intended to take a deeper understanding of the various social, cultural, political, and economic contexts of the meanings of gotong royong (Mayring, 2015; Krippendorff, 2018). The two are believed to give a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of how secondary-level students learn this national value of cooperation and assistance, named gotong-royong, in the country.

### 2.2 Research Data

For the study, we collected 11 Social Studies school textbooks for the Second Lower Secondary level for grades 7, 8, and 9. The textbooks were developed under the 2013 Curriculum and Merdeka one and published between 2014 and 2023. The data represented partial but exhausting social studies textbooks currently used nationally in Indonesian schools. Those data are considered in the public domain and available for academic research. No ethical issues and conflicts of interest were involved and/or violated for this study.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

The study was conducted in two stages: counting and exploring sentences and pictures containing the value of gotong-royong and its derivative meanings. The guide referred to the ten indicators of PPK (the national reference of character education) guideline on the value of gotong-royong, including (i) mutual respect, (ii) cooperation, (iii) commitment to a joint decision, (iv) helping each other, (v) have empathy and solidarity, (vi) deliberation, (vii) anti-discrimination, (viii) anti-violence, (ix) volunteerism, and (x) inclusivism. By utilizing the ten gotong royong-linked PPK

indicators, the study has a focused analyzing tool. It provides a more comprehensive understanding of the presentation of gotong-royong value in these school textbooks.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Mapping The Quantitative Presentation of Gotong Royong in Social Studies School Textbooks

Based on the quantitative content analysis, as shown in Table 1, the study found 146 words/sentences in 11 social studies school textbooks for the lower secondary level containing gotong royong and its derivative meanings linked to ten indicators of PPK. The value of *gotong-royong* is proportionally presented in all grades, either 7, 8, or 9. This states that value is a prominent topic in the social studies course to be learned by students at this educational level - the equal presentation of each PPK's indicator of *gotong-royong* in all grades. Take, for example, the presentation of *gotong-royong* as cooperation is mentioned with 11 cases in Grade 7, 16 cases in Grade 8, and 12 cases in Grade 9; or *gotong-royong* as deliberation is presented with 3 cases in Grade 7, 3 cases in Grade 8 and 5 cases in Grade 9.

**Table 1.** The Quantitative Meanings' Map of *Gotong-Royong* in Social Studies School Textbooks Based on PPK's Indicators

Meanings of gotong royong	Grade			total	(%)
	7	8	9		
Mutual Respect	11	3	6	20	14
Cooperation	14	16	12	42	29
Commitment to joint decisions	0	1	0	1	1
Helping each other	21	10	4	35	24
Having empathy and solidarity	2	5	0	7	5
Deliberation	3	3	5	11	7
Anti-discrimination	2	10	4	16	11
Anti-violence	0	2	4	6	4
Volunteerism	3	1	1	5	3
Inclusivism	1	0	2	3	2

As shown in the table of PPK's ten indicators, there are two mainstream meanings of the value of gotong royong inside the social studies school textbook under the study, namely, (i) cooperation and social help and (ii) mutual respect for all members of the society. Cooperation and social help represent 56% of understandings consisting of 3 indicators, including cooperation (29%), helping each other (24%), and volunteerism (3%). The understanding has spread quite equally across all grades. To note, cooperation and help are mostly elaborated in chapters explicating and discussing social interactions, societal life, social institutions, social transformations changes, and ancient communities in pre-colonial and pre-independence Indonesian society.

Another mainstream understanding of *gotong-royong* – mutual respect for all members of the society – represents 36%. It consists of 5 indicators, including mutual respect (14%), empathy and solidarity (5%), anti-discrimination (11%), anti-violence (4%) and inclusivism (2%). The understanding has also spread and elaborated in almost all grades in chapters, explicating and

discussing inter-societies-countries coexistences, everyday social interaction, patterns of social relationship, multicultural-multiethnic society, cultural diversity, and urban-rural geographical spaces.

Aside from the two mainstream meanings of 8 PPK indicators, *gotong-royong* has been linked to societal commitment. However, it is only represented in 8% of cases in the social studies school textbooks under the study. The understanding is built on two indicators, including (i) commitment to joint decision (1%) and (ii) deliberation (7%). The above topic is mostly mentioned in chapters that discuss social-cultural changes, societal development, globalization, decision-making, and democracy.

The result of the quantitative content analysis above provides an intriguing finding contextualized with various public and general meanings of *gotong-royong* developed over the years. The two dominant elaborations of the value of cooperation and social help echo the long-term state-sponsored policies to utilize it as a national value and identity for social-political purposes like preserving integration and maintaining social order and cohesion in this ethnically, religiously, and geographically diverse Indonesian society (Bowen, 1986; Suwignyo, 2019; Simarmata et al., 2020). The understanding also aligns with the common and public understanding of Indonesian society's values and characteristics, which are synonymous with togetherness, collectiveness, helping neighbors, and working together (Effendi, 2016; Latif, 2016). The fact that *gotong-royong* is limitedly associated with societal commitment could be shown by the current challenges linked to the decline of social trust experienced by society (Tomo et al., 2020; Nizeyumukiza, Cilik Pierewan, Ndayambaje, & Ayryza, 2020; Baharuddin et al., 2021). It states that as the agreed national-cultural value, *gotong-royong* has been considered one of the important social norms introduced and formally taught in the social studies course for students in primary and secondary schools. Nevertheless, the agreement is not without limitation, as it is merely focused on cooperation and mutual respect, not on social commitment from the populace to participate actively and contribute to the betterment of society.

### 3.2 Descriptive Elaboration of Meanings of Gotong Royong in Social Studies School Textbooks

The qualitative finding of the content analysis of the presentation of *gotong-royong* in social studies school textbooks for lower secondary schools offers a more thorough understanding exemplified with various examples in different social, cultural, and political contexts, as presented in Table 2 below. There are three groups of presentation of gotong royong developed from the previous quantitative mapping: (1) cooperation and social help, (2) mutual respect for all members of the society, and (3) societal commitment. The result of the qualitative analysis indicates either similarities, repetitions, or development of the presentation of the *gotong-royong* values with various and different social-political contexts in social studies school textbooks from Grade 7 to Grade 9.

**Table 2.** Descriptive elaboration of the presentation of Gotong Royong in social studies school textbooks for the Lower Secondary School

No	Meanings of Gotong- Royong	Grade		
		7	8	9

1	Cooperation and social help	Focusing on (i) the importance and role of mutual help and assistance amongst members of the inner society during hard times and people in need and (ii) other forms of cooperation like building public facilities, which booth are intended to preserve integration, maintain cohesion and harmony of the society.	Focusing on (i) fostering economic help and cooperation between people/communities in this country, which is vulnerable to human-made/natural disasters; and (ii) the need to maintain unity and togetherness, putting aside differences while spreading social welfare and economic prosperity for the whole society.	Focusing on (i) the practice of mutual help and cooperation in the wider social-cultural-geographical-political contexts, i.e., ASEAN and other neighboring countries; and (ii) the social-civic skills – to share and work together with others – as required by students and graduates in the 21st century.
2	Mutual respect for all members of the society	Focusing on (i) building personal-social attitudes to respect others from different socio-cultural backgrounds and social classes and (ii) promoting tolerance and anti-discrimination based on religion, culture gender to maintain social integration, cohesion, and inclusive values of the society.	Focusing on (i) creating an open and peaceful social environment for all members, (ii) fostering social solidarity and shared responsibility for the betterment of the society, and (iii) promoting equality, particularly gender equality and hindering any forms of discrimination for members of the society.	Focusing on (i) respecting others with different beliefs, lifestyles, and (political) opinions in the democratic society, (ii) preventing and hindering forms of discrimination, particularly racial ones, and (iii) promoting social justice for all members of the society.
3	Societal commitment	Elaborating deliberation for consensus or <i>musyawarah</i> to solve societal problems.	Elaborating deliberation for consensus or <i>musyawarah</i> in solving societal problems while stating the commitment to obey the agreement.	Elaborating deliberation for consensus in solving societal problems and challenges is required in a democratic society.

As mentioned in the previous section, cooperation and social help are the most dominant understanding of *gotong-royong* in the social studies school textbooks under study, which also echoes the mainstream opinion, particularly the pro-longed state-sponsored policies to forge it as the national value of the country (Bowen, 1986; Suwignyo, 2019). However, it has rather different elaborations with more nuanced and complex socio-cultural and political contexts in Grades 7, 8, or 9, though not forging a contradictory understanding.

As presented in Table 2, the elaboration and social help in social studies school textbooks for Grade 7 is more concerned with urging students to learn the traditional role of *gotong-royong*, particularly in the inner societal circles of the society or, in other words, to make the social life works. This idealizes the very fabric of Indonesian society, where its members stay together in proximity, sharing duties and responsibilities while fulfilling their personal/familial needs, with or without help from others. Those social features are required to preserve and maintain social cohesion and

integration and create a harmonious society as traditionally imagined (Bowen, 1986; Bagas & Radjab, 2019).

In the social studies school textbooks for Grade 8, the elaboration follows a similar understanding of Grade 7 on the importance of cooperation and social help in maintaining social order and cohesion. However, at this grade, the elaboration is addressed during the hard times faced by some members and the whole society, such as accidents, bereavement, and whenever hit by human-made and natural disasters. The elaboration also states the importance of forging unity by putting aside societal differences, maintaining social cooperation, and helping to share equal prosperity. It is no coincidence that the value of *gotong-royong* has been widely and well-practiced within Indonesian society, particularly during disaster times (Koopman, 2021) as well as the recent pandemic Covid-19 (Muqsith, Pratomo, Kuswanti, & Muzykant, 2021).

In Grade 9, the elaboration is to put the important role of *gotong-royong* as a common cultural value in the wider social-political context by mentioning the ASEAN community of Southeast Asian countries and other (developing) countries in which Indonesia shares similar fates and destinies in today world. On the one hand, the value is not considered important in solely maintaining social order, cohesion, and harmony of the Indonesian society per se but also as a strategy to solve the numerous global problems from poverty, natural disasters, and wars to climate changes (Butler, 2017; Slikkerveer, 2019). On the other hand, it also stresses that gotong royong is part of the value of building social skills of cooperation and teamwork that are required in the current era of the 21st century (Kennedy & Sundberg, 2020; Aslamiah, Abbas, & Mutiani, 2021).

The second dominant meaning of *gotong-royong*, mutual respect for all members of society, has been further qualitatively explored in Table 2. Though there are similarities and repetitions in its presentations in social studies school textbooks for the lower secondary level, either Grade 7, 8, or 9, the meanings of mutual respect for all members of society have different focuses and exemplification. Grade 7 provides an understanding that the practice of gotong royong should be addressed to all members of society regardless of their differences, especially based on cultures, religions, and gender. Mutual respect and coexistence should be based on equality, tolerance, and anti-discrimination toward all members of society. Any practice of social-mutual help containing form discrimination would eventually create problems and/or cement conflicts and antagonistic relations between members of the society. The statement regarding mutual respect, tolerance, and anti-discrimination has been further elaborated on its relevance to maintaining order, cohesion, and harmony in society (Bowen, 1986; Effendi, 2016; Bagas & Radjab, 2019; Simarmata et al., 2020). It shares a similar argument in elaborating cooperation and social help that gotong royong is required to make all societal roles work, thus maintaining social equilibrium while mitigating internal problems and external challenges.

In Grade 8, the elaboration of mutual help for all members of the society largely contained shared features in Grade 7, such as recognizing differences and anti-discrimination for preserving the social cohesion of the society. However, it is presented by introducing some words linked to theoretical concepts used in social studies, such as open society, solidarity, shared responsibilities, and gender equality. It gives a general understanding that *gotong-royong*, as the Indonesian national value of anti-discrimination-inspired mutual respect, easily fits with the core learning outcomes and



subject matters of social studies courses, particularly for lower secondary school (Supriatna, 2015; Budimansyah & Pangalilo, 2021).

While in Grade 9, the elaboration of mutual respect for all members of the society takes another level by linking to the current socio-political contexts in the country. It largely addresses the current experimentation of democracy in Indonesia since Reformasi 1998. The elaboration could be seen as a step further in teaching social studies courses in Indonesian schools to introduce democratic education as widely conducted in other democratic countries. Here, mutual respect in the practice of *gotong-royong* should be supported by respecting different political opinions as well as equal rights and duties among members of the society, which is very relevant in democratic education (Gutmann, 1999; Feu, Serra, Canimas, Làzaro, & Simó-Gil, 2017; Sant, 2019; Zembylas, 2023).

Societal commitment – linked to two PPK's indicators of commitment to joint decision and deliberation – is the least elaborated in all social studies school textbooks at all grades in the study, with only 8% of the quantitative result of Table 1. Similarly, as presented in Table 2, it is also limitedly elaborated as a consensus based on musyawarah or a public deliberation attended and agreed upon by all members of the society to solve routine and incidental social problems. The elaboration has been presented in similar forms and contents in grades 7, 8, or 9. However, in Grade 9, the elaboration of societal commitment is contextualized with the urgent need to disseminate and internalize the value of deliberation of going royong in the current democratic experimentation in Indonesia.

The fact that the value of societal commitment of *gotong-royong* has a limited elaboration indicates an interesting question. Note that *gotong-royong*, as a primary value to preserve social order, unity, cohesion, and integration, needs both agreement, participation and active engagement from all members of the society (Slikkerveer, 2019; Simarmata et al., 2020; Koopman, 2021). In other words, the little attention to societal commitment found in this study – on social studies school textbooks for the lower secondary level – might represent the real problem of how *gotong-royong* has been understood in general, which unequally focused on social cooperation and help and mutual respect only.

The result might also echo the current critical studies on the decline of *gotong-royong* in Indonesian society amidst the wave of modernization, industrialization, and globalization (Effendi, 2016; Wulandari et al., 2018; Rusyiana & Heriyana, 2020; Widyanti & Tetep, 2021; Latifa & Mahida, 2024). Additionally, to repeat the argument in the previous section, this might also be linked to the current decline of social trust within Indonesian society (Tomo et al., 2020; Nizeyumukiza et al., 2020; Baharuddin et al., 2021). Given that the indicator of societal commitment is deliberately overlooked in the presentation of *gotong-royong* in social studies school textbooks for secondary school states, the current dissemination of this national-cultural value is very limited. Additionally, the limitation states that one of the current yet traditional challenges in the teaching of social studies education in Indonesia is not only facilitating students to learn social-cultural and civic values of the society but also to eagerly engage and actively participate in preserving order, peace and harmony of the society (Supriatna, 2015; Budimansyah & Pangalilo, 2021; Argadinata, 2022).

The study's findings emphasize how the teaching and learning materials for social studies in Indonesian lower secondary schools align with current trends in the international context. The

curriculum promotes cooperation, respect for others, and a commitment to improving society. Specifically, incorporating *gotong-royong* exemplifies innovative approaches to exploring and integrating local cultural values into the social studies course (Tan, Naidu, & Osman, 2018; Uge, Neolaka, & Yasin, 2019). Furthermore, these national values reflect key components of global civic cultures embedded in the social studies curriculum, which aims to foster collaboration and shared societal responsibilities among individuals (Nelson & Durham, 2022; Jalbani & Khan, 2022; Farris, 2024). The curriculum also emphasizes the importance of social solidarity (Gaztambide-Fernández, Brant, & Desai, 2022; Magill, Scholten, Blevins, & Smith, 2024), which is essential for sustaining democratic values in contemporary society. Despite some limitations, integrating *gotong-royong* in Indonesian social studies textbooks is empirical evidence of current efforts to enhance the curriculum. This development aims to equip students with the civic competencies necessary to participate actively in Indonesian and global society.

#### 4. Conclusion

Throughout the article, we argued that the Indonesian national value of *gotong royong* has been seamlessly mentioned, explored, and elaborated in the Social Studies school textbooks published in the last ten years. *Gotong royong* has been explained and exemplified in various social-cultural, economic, and political contexts, from the micro level of daily social interaction in the neighborhood to the macro level linked to the current democratization in the country. Nevertheless, the elaboration of *gotong royong* is not equally distributed. It presents several meanings, with the majority understanding cooperation and help and mutual respect for all members of the society, while only a few elaborated on societal commitment and deliberation. On the one hand, this finding echoes the pro-longed government policies by associating *gotong royong* with cooperation and assistance within the various societal levels of Indonesian society, particularly in teaching social studies courses in secondary schools. On the other hand, it poses a classic challenge in teaching social studies, namely to encourage the young generation not only to learn the social-civic values of society but also to encourage them to participate and contribute to society's betterment. The result emphasized the urgent need to elaborate and expand the presentation of this national value in more diverse socio-cultural contexts and various fields of social life where the current generations socialize and grow their identities fitting with the national goals and spirits.

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