



The Implementation of Character Education in the Independent Curriculum in Elementary Schools

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Abstract

Character education plays an important role in shaping students' personalities, including moral, ethical, and social values. The Merdeka Curriculum, which has been implemented since 2022, provides opportunities for the integration of character education into learning in elementary schools. This study aims to evaluate the implementation of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum, as well as the challenges faced by teachers in implementing character values in daily learning. This study uses a qualitative approach with interviews and observations of teachers in several elementary schools. The results show that integrated character education can improve students' positive attitudes and behavior, but the biggest challenge is the lack of teacher skills in implementing character consistently. Therefore, this study recommends the need for more intensive teacher training to integrate character education into every aspect of learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Character education plays an important role in shaping students' personalities, which includes moral, ethical, and social values that can form positive attitudes in everyday life (Ambarwati et al., 2023; Fuadhah, 2024; Kamaruddin et al., 2023). In Indonesia, character education has become a major focus in the curriculum implemented in schools, especially in primary education (Armini, 2024; Rahayu et al., 2024). The Merdeka Curriculum, introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in 2022, provides greater opportunities for the implementation of character education, with the aim of providing a more relevant and meaningful learning experience for students (Mustoip, 2023). In this case, character education is not just an addition to learning, but an integral part of the process of forming the nation's identity and character (Hayati & Alfiansyah, 2025).

Along with the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, character education is expected to overcome the challenges faced by the younger generation in dealing with technological advances, cultural shifts, and the influence of globalization. The Merdeka Curriculum provides a more flexible approach, allowing teachers to tailor teaching materials to the needs and conditions of the students' environment, including instilling character values such as mutual cooperation, responsibility, honesty, and respect (Silvia & Tirtoni, 2023). This is important

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because character education plays a role in shaping students to become individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent, but also have moral and ethical depth (Ixfina & Rohma, 2025).

Research on the application of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum at the elementary school level is highly relevant for evaluating the extent to which this curriculum can have a positive impact on character building in students. Previous studies have shown that the character of elementary school students has a significant influence on their behavior in society, social interactions, and academic achievement (Khairunnisa & Rigianti, 2023). Therefore, it is important to understand how character education is implemented in the context of the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools to evaluate the effectiveness of this curriculum in producing a young generation with noble character.

However, even though character education has been implemented in various curricula in Indonesia, educators still face major challenges. One of these challenges is how to integrate character values into daily learning in elementary schools. Character education cannot be taught separately, but must be integrated into every aspect of learning, both in academic subjects and extracurricular activities. Therefore, a creative and innovative approach is needed so that character values can be accepted and applied well by students (Indahwati et al., 2023).

Based on this, research on the implementation of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools is very important. This study aims to explore teachers' experiences in planning and implementing character education in the classroom, as well as the challenges they face in implementing it. In addition, this study will also identify the methods or strategies used by teachers to integrate character values into daily learning, as well as their impact on the development of students' attitudes and behavior (Marcelino et al., 2023).

Previous studies have shown that the implementation of unstructured character education or character education that is not supported by clear policies can hinder the achievement of character education goals. Therefore, it is important to determine the extent to which the Merdeka Curriculum provides space for strengthening character education and how elementary schools can utilize this curriculum to create an environment that supports the formation of students' character. This study also aims to provide recommendations on best practices that teachers can apply to teach character more effectively (Engkizar et al., 2025; Yunazar et al., 2024).

Overall, this study is expected to make a positive contribution to the understanding of how character education is implemented in the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools. In addition, the results of this study are also expected to serve as a reference for the development of more applicable education policies, in order to improve the quality of character education in Indonesia and contribute to the formation of a young generation that is intelligent, has integrity, and is responsible in social life.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore in depth the implementation of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools (Berliani et al., 2024; Engkizar et al., 2022, 2023; Gunadi et al., 2024; Krisnawati et al., 2024; Kurniawan et al., 2024; Murniyetti et al., 2016; Mustoip, 2023; Oktavia et al., 2023; Rahawarin et al., 2023; Rahmiati et al., 2023). This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand the context of character education implementation in real school environments, as well as to explore the meaning behind the practices, policies, and interactions that occur between teachers, students, and school officials. The research subjects consisted of

school principals, classroom teachers, and students involved in the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile project as part of the Merdeka Curriculum. Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies (such as lesson plans, project journals, and student reflection reports) (Engkizar et al., 2024; 2025).

Thus, the implementation of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum illustrates a holistic, contextual, and transformative approach, in which moral and social values are not merely conveyed verbally, but internalized through concrete and reflective learning experiences. This process encourages students to deeply understand the meaning of each value and fosters awareness to apply them in their daily behavior, both in and outside of school. Ultimately, the Merdeka Curriculum not only serves as a tool for achieving academic goals, but also as a platform for character building that prepares students to become individuals with good character, independence, adaptability, and global competitiveness based on the values of Pancasila.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that the implementation of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools has undergone a fundamental paradigm shift. Character education is no longer viewed as an additional or complementary activity to the learning process, but has become an integrated part of the overall teaching and learning activities. In its implementation, character building is carried out through various systematically designed activities, including thematic learning, the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) project, and through habits that are part of the school culture. Character values such as responsibility, mutual cooperation, discipline, honesty, empathy, and social awareness are applied in a tangible way in the learning process, so that students not only understand the concepts of these values theoretically, but are also able to internalize and practice them in their daily lives (Ramadhani et al., 2024).

The integration of these character values is reflected in the implementation of contextual and student-centered learning. Teachers play an important role in creating learning experiences that enable students to collaborate, interact, and reflect on the positive behaviors they display during the learning process. For example, in a project themed “Sustainable Lifestyle,” students not only gain knowledge about environmental conservation, but also engage directly in real activities such as maintaining classroom cleanliness and sorting waste.

Case Study on the Implementation of Character Education in the Merdeka Curriculum in Elementary Schools

The results of the study show that the implementation of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools has been carried out in an integrated manner through the learning process and Pancasila Student Profile (P5) project activities. Teachers play a role not only as educators, but also as facilitators and mentors of values, who help students internalize characters such as responsibility, discipline, mutual cooperation, empathy, and integrity through contextual learning experiences. In the implementation of projects themed “Sustainable Lifestyle” and “Local Wisdom Around Me,” for example, students were actively involved in activities to maintain environmental cleanliness, manage waste, and learn about local cultural traditions. Through these activities, the values of responsibility, environmental awareness, and love for local culture grew naturally in students. These findings are in line with (Muhyi et al., 2023), which emphasizes that the Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes value-based learning and real-life experiences, where character is not taught verbally but practiced in the context of everyday life.

In addition, observations and interviews showed that teachers applied

reflective and participatory approaches in fostering character values. Teachers provided space for reflection through activities such as student daily journals, experience sharing sessions, and value discussions at the end of lessons. This reflection encouraged students to realize the meaning of their actions and assess behaviors that were in line with Pancasila values. The principal plays an important role in strengthening school culture through policies, such as the Character School Movement and Inspirational Morning programs, which include daily positive behavior habits. This practice supports the results of research (Adiyatma et al., 2023), which states that the effectiveness of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum is largely determined by collaboration between the principal, teachers, and a conducive learning environment.

From the results of in-depth interviews, it was found that the implementation of character education faces a number of challenges, particularly in terms of consistency in applying values across classes and teachers' limited understanding of the concept of integrating character values into all subjects. Some teachers still focus on the cognitive aspects of learning and have not fully instilled character values as an integral part of the learning process. However, teachers are trying to overcome this by participating in internal school training, forming teacher learning communities (PLCs), and sharing character learning strategies with their peers. These collaborative efforts are in line with the findings (Ruslan et al., 2022), which confirm that strengthening teacher professionalism and collective reflection through PLCs can strengthen the sustainability of character education in elementary schools.

Analysis of learning documents, such as lesson plans, project journals, and student reflection reports, shows that character values have been systematically designed and measured through behavioral indicators such as time discipline, responsibility for group tasks, ability to work together, and tolerance. Students showed improvement in terms of participation, initiative, and ability to work together in completing project-based tasks. This is in line with research (Masitha, 2017), which shows that project-based learning (PBL) in the Merdeka Curriculum is able to shape independent, creative, and collaborative character through the active involvement of students in meaningful learning activities.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that character education in the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools has been implemented holistically and contextually, with the support of all school components. The success of the implementation is greatly influenced by the leadership of the principal, the exemplary behavior of teachers, and the active participation of students in project activities that instill the values of Pancasila in a tangible way. However, improving teacher capacity through ongoing training is still necessary to ensure uniformity in understanding and implementing character values in accordance with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Thus, character education is not only part of the formal school program, but has developed into a living culture throughout the educational environment.

The Role of Teachers and Principals as Character Values Facilitators

Teachers play a crucial role as facilitators, mentors, and moral role models in the implementation of character education in elementary schools. In the context of the Merdeka Curriculum, teachers are not only tasked with delivering subject matter, but also play an active role in shaping students' personalities and instilling noble values through various reflective and participatory learning strategies. These strategies are realized through activities such as group discussions, practicing positive behavior in the school environment, and self-reflection recorded in students' daily journals (Grimalda et al., 2021). Through these activities, students are encouraged to understand the meaning of their actions, assess behaviors that reflect character values, and develop self-awareness to improve and develop better attitudes. Teachers also serve as role models for students by demonstrating discipline, responsibility, and

empathy that can be emulated in daily life. Thus, character education takes place not only through formal learning processes, but also through real-life examples and daily interactions between teachers and students (Respati et al., 2023).

In addition to teachers, principals play a strategic role in building and strengthening a character-based school culture. Principals serve as moral leaders who are tasked with formulating the school's vision, policies, and programs that are oriented towards shaping the character of students (Sunarno et al., 2023). This role is realized through various character-building activities, such as the Character-Based School Movement, Inspirational Mornings, and moral literacy programs that emphasize positive behavior in the school environment. These programs are not merely administrative routines, but serve as a means to create a school atmosphere based on the values of cooperation, discipline, responsibility, and a strong spirit of nationalism (Antara, 2019).

Visionary, inclusive, and collaborative school leadership is key to the successful implementation of character education in elementary schools. Principals play an important role in motivating teachers, developing professional learning communities, and collaborating with parents and the community to strengthen the process of character building in students. This is in line with the findings (Lisnawati, 2021) which emphasize that the success of character education is not only determined by classroom learning strategies, but also by strong synergy between the leadership of the principal, the exemplary behavior of teachers, and the participation of the entire school community in creating a conducive and positive learning environment. Thus, collaboration between teachers and principals is the main foundation for the formation of an effective character education ecosystem, where all school components play an active role in realizing the values of the Pancasila Student Profile in real life.

Challenges in Implementing Character Education in Elementary Schools

Although the implementation of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools has shown significant progress, this study also found a number of obstacles that need serious attention from schools and education policymakers (Badriyah et al., 2023). One of the main obstacles faced is the limited time available for learning activities, which makes it difficult for teachers to optimally integrate character values into each subject. In practice, most teachers still focus on achieving academic aspects, such as mastery of material and cognitive goals, so that character building has not received balanced attention. This condition illustrates that the paradigm shift in learning from an academic results orientation to values-based learning still requires a continuous process of adaptation and reinforcement.

In addition to time constraints, another challenge that arises is related to teachers' lack of understanding of effective pedagogical concepts and strategies for instilling character values. Not all teachers have the adequate skills to design contextual learning that is relevant to the principles of the Pancasila Student Profile. As a result, the process of internalizing character values is often only declarative or normative, without being directly linked to the students' real experiences. Therefore, teachers need practical guidance and ongoing training so that they can integrate moral and social values into the learning process in a creative and meaningful way without reducing the focus on academic aspects (Supriadi & Halpiani, 2020).

Another obstacle that is also commonly found is the limited availability of contextual learning resources that are oriented towards everyday values. Many teachers state that media and teaching materials specifically designed to support character education are still very limited. In fact, learning resources that are authentic and relevant to the reality of students' lives play an important role in fostering empathy, responsibility, and reflective attitudes. Therefore, innovative development of character-based media and learning resources is an urgent need in the

implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum so that learning is more contextual and has an impact on student behavior (Arifandi, 2017).

These various challenges show that implementing character education requires systemic and collaborative support from various parties. Efforts to strengthen students' character cannot only rely on teachers' initiatives, but also need to be supported by school policies that favor value learning, improving teacher competence through professional training, and providing facilities and infrastructure that support learning activities (Badriyah et al., 2023). With synergistic cooperation between teachers, principals, parents, and the community, character education is expected to become more than just a discourse in curriculum documents, but to be truly realized in continuous, relevant, and meaningful learning practices for students.

Project-Based Learning as a Medium for Character Building

Project-based learning (PBL) implemented in Pancasila Student Profile activities has proven to be an effective approach in strengthening character education at the elementary school level. Through the implementation of projects related to real-life situations, students not only gain academic knowledge but also develop various 21st-century competencies, such as critical thinking, collaboration, innovation, and a sense of responsibility towards themselves and their surroundings (Maulidyah & Listyaningsih, 2022). This approach provides opportunities for students to experience a more meaningful learning process, as they are actively involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of project results. Thus, project activities do not only focus on the final results but also emphasize the learning process that fosters moral, social, and spiritual values.

In practice, PBL serves as a means for students to understand and internalize character values concretely through direct experience. For example, in a project themed "Local Wisdom Around Me," students are invited to learn about and explore the traditions, arts, and customs that exist in their environment. This activity not only introduces regional cultural diversity, but also instills values of love for the country, appreciation for differences, tolerance, and curiosity about the nation's cultural wealth. Through these activities, students learn to appreciate plurality, understand cultural identity, and foster a sense of pride as part of Indonesia's diverse society. Thus, project-based learning becomes a tangible and effective medium for shaping students' character rooted in the values of Pancasila and national culture (Badriyah et al., 2023).

In line with the findings of the study (Mustaghfirin et al., 2024), the PBL approach in the Merdeka Curriculum is able to foster independent, creative, and collaborative character through contextual, challenging, and meaningful learning activities. Through active involvement in each stage of the project, students not only hone their thinking and creative skills, but also learn to appreciate the process, work together harmoniously, and resolve differences of opinion in a constructive manner. Therefore, project-based learning not only functions as a modern pedagogical innovation but also as a means of value transformation, where students are shaped into individuals with strong character, high social awareness, and the ability to contribute positively to society.

Implications of Research for Educational Practice

The results of this study indicate that the successful implementation of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum requires ongoing collaboration between various parties, including teachers, principals, students, parents, and the surrounding community. The process of character building cannot be achieved solely through formal activities in the classroom, but must be part of a living educational ecosystem that is embedded in the daily routines of the school community. Schools need to create a conducive environment where values such as discipline, responsibility, empathy, and mutual cooperation become part of habits that are

consistently practiced in every activity (Gunarni Suprihhatin & Rohmadi, 2024). In this way, character education can grow and develop naturally as a school culture that shapes the behavior, attitudes, and mindsets of the entire school community.

Teachers have a very strategic position in integrating character values into every learning process. Therefore, continuous professional training and mentoring are needed so that teachers are able to design character-based learning in a creative, contextual, and appropriate manner for the needs of students. Teachers not only act as conveyors of knowledge, but also as facilitators who foster reflective abilities, critical thinking, and empathy in students. On the other hand, principals act as moral leaders who ensure that every school policy supports character building, whether through the development of annual programs, supervision of learning implementation, or evaluation of student behavior development (Cahyaningrum et al., 2017).

School policy support is an important factor in maintaining the sustainability of character education. Various programs such as the Character School Movement, Inspirational Mornings, moral literacy activities, and the Pancasila Student Profile project need to be implemented consistently and accompanied by systematic behavior evaluation mechanisms. This evaluation serves to objectively monitor student character development, while also providing a basis for determining appropriate guidance strategies (Saputri et al., 2025). In addition, cooperation between schools, parents, and the community also plays an important role in strengthening character values so that they are aligned between the learning environment at school and life at home and in the community.

Thus, the implementation of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum is not only understood as the implementation of a policy program, but also as a manifestation of a paradigm shift in education towards a system that is oriented towards the formation of the whole person. The Merdeka Curriculum aims to realize the Pancasila Student Profile, which is faithful, noble, independent, cooperative, critical, and creative, as mandated in the national education policy direction. The application of these values is expected to not only create academically excellent students, but also students with strong character, a high sense of social awareness, and the ability to make a positive contribution to society and the nation in the future (Risdiyani & Dewi, 2021).

The results of the study show that the implementation of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools has undergone a fundamental paradigm shift. Character education is no longer viewed as an additional or complementary activity to the learning process, but has become an integrated part of the overall teaching and learning activities. In its implementation, character building is carried out through various systematically designed activities, including thematic learning, the implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) project, and through habits that are part of the school culture. Character values such as responsibility, mutual cooperation, discipline, honesty, empathy, and social awareness are applied in a tangible way in the learning process, so that students not only understand the concepts of these values theoretically, but are also able to internalize and practice them in their daily lives (Baginda, 2018).

The integration of these character values is reflected in the implementation of contextual and student-centered learning. Teachers play an important role in creating learning experiences that enable students to collaborate, interact, and reflect on the positive behaviors they display during the learning process. For example, in a project themed "Sustainable Lifestyle," students not only gain knowledge about environmental conservation but also engage directly in real activities such as keeping the classroom clean, sorting trash, and planting plants in the school area. Through these activities, students learn to cultivate a sense of care for the environment and

develop social responsibility in accordance with the core values of the Pancasila Student Profile (Asih & El-Yunusi, 2024).

Thus, the implementation of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum illustrates a holistic, contextual, and transformative approach, in which moral and social values are not merely conveyed verbally, but internalized through concrete and reflective learning experiences. This process encourages students to deeply understand the meaning of each value and fosters awareness to apply them in their daily behavior, both in and outside of school. Ultimately, the Merdeka Curriculum not only serves as a tool for achieving academic goals, but also as a vehicle for character building that prepares students to become individuals with good character, independence, adaptability, and global competitiveness based on the values of Pancasila (Putri et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Character education in the Merdeka Curriculum plays a very important role in shaping a young generation that is not only intellectually intelligent, but also has strong morals and ethics. The implementation of character education in elementary schools through the Merdeka Curriculum is expected to have a positive impact on the development of students' attitudes and behavior. Although there are challenges in integrating character values into every aspect of learning, with the right and innovative approach, these values can be instilled well in students. This study shows that the application of character education in elementary schools can support the formation of better attitudes in students, both in their daily lives and in social interactions. Therefore, it is important for schools to continue to develop policies and strategies that support the effective implementation of character education.

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