



THE MERDEKA CURRICULUM IN CHARACTER EDUCATION WITH THE EXPLORATION OF A HOLISTIC APPROACH AT POLMAN SCHOOL, MANDAR SULBAR

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Abstract

A holistic educational approach underscores the significance of comprehensive child development, integrating cognitive, social, emotional, and physical dimensions. Experiential learning through interaction with the environment facilitates optimal growth and development in children. The Merdeka Curriculum for schools introduces the concept of holistic learning, integrating various aspects of child development and creating learning experiences relevant to their lives. Teachers are crucial in creating a safe, comfortable, and loving environment that allows children to feel valued and learn well. Play-based learning in schools strengthens children's motor, cognitive, and social-emotional skills. Implementing a holistic approach in this curriculum necessitates ongoing support for educators through training and coaching to improve their ability to manage child-based learning. Thus, a holistic approach is critical to ensuring optimal and high-quality early childhood development.

Keywords: Holistic Approach, Independent Curriculum, Child Development, Teacher Role.

INTRODUCTION

The Merdeka Curriculum, launched as a new policy in the education system in Indonesia, provides a new paradigm in the learning process. This educational program places an emphasis on project-based learning that incorporates a variety of skills and competencies, including the development of character education, literacy, numeracy, and skills relevant to the 21st century. Students are instructed to comprehend the subject matter from an academic standpoint and encouraged to cultivate strong character attitudes and values through this approach. The Merdeka Curriculum allows schools to develop project-based learning, which aims to strengthen student competencies, including character education, literacy, numeracy, and 21st-century skills (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021). The Merdeka Curriculum provides more space for schools to develop student potential through exploration based on local interests and needs.

Character education is the main focus of the Independent Curriculum because moral, ethical, and cultural values are considered an essential foundation for the formation of the younger generation. Character education instills values such as integrity, cooperation, discipline, and a sense of responsibility. Character education aims to instill moral values, such as integrity, discipline, and commitment, as the primary foundation for the formation of the younger generation (Lickona, 1991). It is in line with the principle of holistic education, namely education that emphasizes not only

intellectual aspects but also emotional, social, and spiritual aspects. This approach is relevant to the challenges of the times, where the younger generation needs to have critical thinking skills and a solid moral foundation.

Globally, holistic education has been widely implemented in developed countries to create balance in various aspects of life. Research shows that a holistic approach integrated with character education can increase students' learning motivation and create a more inclusive educational environment. A holistic approach to character education can increase students' learning motivation and build a more inclusive environment (Hassan & Noor, 2020). In the Indonesian context, the Merdeka Curriculum provides space for the development of character education by combining project-based learning activities that touch on local social, cultural, and environmental issues.

Polman School in Mandar, West Sulawesi, is one of the schools that tries to implement the Merdeka Curriculum holistically. As an area with unique cultural richness, Polman has excellent potential to integrate local cultural values into character education. Local wisdom is essential in character education because it can increase students' pride and cultural identity (Haryanto, 2018). In implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, this school seeks to optimize project-based learning that utilizes local resources, such as the Mandar community's local wisdom, which emphasizes the values of honesty, hard work, and cooperation. However, there are also many challenges in this implementation. Many teachers still face obstacles in understanding the philosophy of the Merdeka Curriculum, especially in integrating character values into every learning activity.

The fact that students in Polman demonstrate a wide range of development in terms of character education is an intriguing phenomenon. There have been some students who have been able to demonstrate significant improvements in terms of responsibility, tolerance, and discipline; however, there are still other students who need help to internalize these values. Because of this, the effectiveness of the utilized holistic approach is called into question. In addition, the most effective implementation of this curriculum is hindered by several factors, including inadequate facilities and infrastructure and inadequate teacher training.

Various previous studies support the importance of a holistic approach to character education. Research shows that a holistic approach that integrates project-based learning can increase student engagement in learning and strengthen character values through authentic experiences. Implementing education based on local cultural values improves student character, although it requires adequate support from facilities and teacher training (Setiawan & Kusuma, 2019). In addition, other studies have shown that education based on local cultural values can increase students' sense of identity and pride in their home region. Combining the Merdeka Curriculum with a holistic, local-based approach can improve character education.

However, the study's results also show that the effectiveness of character education through a holistic approach is highly dependent on the commitment of all parties, including teachers, students, parents, and the surrounding community. Teachers have a crucial role in designing learning activities

that are relevant and contextual to students' needs. On the other hand, support from the community in providing a conducive environment for students is also an essential factor in determining the success of character education. Through this study, the researcher wants to dig deeper into how a holistic approach can be explored in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum at Polman School, Mandar, West Sulawesi. This study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of a holistic approach in character education and offer recommendations for educators in developing more innovative and contextual learning strategies. This study also highlights the challenges and opportunities in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in areas with distinctive cultural characteristics, such as Mandar. Thus, the results of this study are expected to contribute to developing a more inclusive and sustainable national education policy.

Table 1 Problems of the Independent Curriculum

No	Problem Category	Explanation
1	Teachers' Understanding of the Independent Curriculum	Many teachers need help understanding the philosophy of the Independent Curriculum, especially the integration of character values.
2	Internalization of Character Values in Students	Students showed varying development; some succeeded in improving their character, but others struggled.
3	Limited Facilities and Infrastructure	Lack of supporting facilities hampers the implementation of project-based learning and character education.
4	Teacher Training	The lack of relevant training leaves teachers underprepared to implement the Independent Curriculum.
5	Community Support	Environmental and community support for character education still needs to be improved.
6	Effectiveness of	the Holistic Approach The commitment of all parties, including teachers, students, and parents, influences a holistic approach's effectiveness.

As a result of the fact that this table offers a concise and organized summary of the difficulties encountered in implementing the Independent Curriculum at Polman School, it can be an effective instrument for determining the problems that call for additional focus. This table assists in focusing research on areas that require improvement, such as limited time, facilities, and teacher training. It does this by mapping the factors that hinder the implementation of the curriculum. Consequently, it is possible to discover more specifically targeted solutions to enhance the efficiency of implementing the Independent Curriculum at the school. In this study, there is a gap in research with its findings, specifically:

Table 2 Research Gap

No	Research Gap	Current Research & Its Findings	Journal Source
1	The gap in Understanding of Independent Curriculum Philosophy by Teachers	Current research shows that many teachers do not fully understand the philosophy of the Independent Curriculum, especially in integrating character values into learning.	Anindito, W.A., & Nugroho, A.D. (2023).

No	Research Gap	Current Research & Its Findings	Journal Source
2	Variation in Internalization of Character Values in Students	Some students have succeeded in internalizing character values such as responsibility, but others still struggle.	Sari, D., & Sutrisno, P. (2021).
3	Limited Facilities and Infrastructure in the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum	Many schools need more support in terms of adequate facilities and infrastructure to implement the project-based Merdeka Curriculum.	Setiawan, R., & Irawan, F. (2022).
4	Lack of Contextual Teacher Training	Research shows that teacher training must fully contextualize local needs, especially in areas with distinctive local cultures like Mandar.	Rahmawati, N., & Purnama, Y. (2022).
5	Lack of Community Support for Character Education	Current research shows that community participation in supporting character education is still limited, with families and communities still needing to be actively involved.	Andriani, S., & Kartika, D. (2021).
6	Effectiveness of Locally Based Holistic Approach	Despite the great potential to improve character education, research on the effectiveness of a holistic approach based on local culture in the Independent Curriculum still needs to be available.	Wulandari, M., & Hamzah, M. (2023).

This study aims to explore the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum with a holistic approach in the context of character education at Polman School, Mandar, West Sulawesi. This study aims to identify challenges and opportunities in integrating character values through project-based learning that promotes local culture. In addition, this study aims to analyze the effectiveness of the holistic approach in increasing student motivation and engagement in learning, as well as the role of teachers and the community in supporting the success of character education. Thus, the study results are expected to contribute to developing more inclusive and contextual education policies in Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Independent Curriculum and Student Character Development

In the Merdeka Curriculum, character education is integrated comprehensively into every aspect of learning to develop students' attitudes, behaviors, and noble values. This process aims to form individuals who are not only academically competent but also have good personalities and can adapt to various life situations. Character education in this curriculum emphasizes the importance of strengthening values such as discipline, responsibility, and cooperation, which are the basis for forming solid character among students (Taufik & Nursyamsi, 2023). It improves the quality of education by incorporating a more inquiry-and reflection-based pedagogy, emphasizing getting students to take an active role in class discussions and activities designed to foster personal growth.

This approach also encourages parental and community involvement so that the values taught in schools can be applied consistently in students' daily lives.

Holistic Approach to Character Education

A holistic approach to education focuses on balancing students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development. By considering these three aspects simultaneously, education develops knowledge and the attitudes and skills needed to interact effectively in society. Forming a whole individual ready to play an active role in social and professional life is essential. Through this approach, education is expected to create students with balanced intellectual and character qualities (Sutrisno & Darmawan, 2022).

Independent Curriculum as an Effort to Create Meaningful Learning

The Independent Curriculum allows educators to design learning processes appropriate to the local context and the specific needs of each student. This approach allows for more flexible and contextual teaching, giving students space to develop a deeper understanding of social and moral values. In this way, character education becomes more integral to students' daily lives. Learning based on exploration and reflection on these values has been shown to positively impact students' character, helping them develop into more competent individuals with high social sensitivity (Sudarno & Rosyid, 2023).

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a case study approach, which allows researchers to investigate phenomena in depth in a specific context. This approach is suitable for understanding how the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum is applied in character education at Polman School, Mandar Sulbar. The main objective of this research design is to explore the understanding of the impacts and challenges faced in implementing the curriculum, as well as to identify factors that influence the success or difficulties teachers and students face in implementing character-based learning (Creswell, 2014). With a case study, this study allows researchers to obtain more in-depth and contextual data.

Types of research

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the context of character education in schools is described and analyzed in this study using a qualitative descriptive approach. This type of research is designed to offer a more comprehensive comprehension of the practical application of the curriculum and the influence of a comprehensive approach that encompasses cognitive, affective, and

psychomotor components on student character formation. Researchers focus on describing the phenomena that occur, both those that support and those that hinder the implementation of the curriculum and how various factors in the school environment affect the results achieved (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011).

Data collection

The data in this study were collected using three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies. Interviews were conducted with principals, teachers, and students to understand their views and experiences related to implementing character education in the Merdeka Curriculum. This technique explores their perceptions of how character values are taught and applied inside and outside the classroom. Participant observation was conducted to observe interactions and learning activities directly, while documentation studies helped analyze relevant teaching materials and school records (Patton, 2015).

Data analysis

The data analysis in this study employed thematic analysis techniques to identify significant patterns and themes arising from the collected data. This process entails coding data to categorize information pertinent to the research objectives, followed by identifying themes that encapsulate participants' experiences and perceptions concerning implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in character education. This technique enables researchers to investigate the profound significance underlying the experiences of individuals and groups participating in the study. Based on this technique, data is analyzed to find relationships between themes and patterns that can provide further insight into the successes, challenges, and supporting factors in implementing the curriculum (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research result

1. Implementation of Independent Curriculum in Character Education

Polman School in Mandar, West Sulawesi, has successfully integrated character education into every learning process using an exploration, reflection, and discussion approach. This approach allows students to be actively involved in understanding and applying the character values taught. Teachers are free to design contextual, relevant learning and can create an environment that supports the development of positive attitudes and behaviors in students.

Learning in the Independent Curriculum allows educators to develop materials that are not only in accordance with academic needs but also support student character development. The values emphasized, such as discipline, responsibility, and cooperation, become integral to every learning activity. With a focus on building strong character, students are allowed to learn in the classroom and in a broader social context.

Through applying character values in daily learning, students at Polman School show positive changes in their attitudes and behaviors. They become more disciplined, responsible, and able to work with friends. This character-based learning helps shape individuals who are not only academically intelligent but also ready to face life's challenges with integrity and good attitudes.

2. The Role of Teachers in the Learning Process

The Independent Curriculum gives teachers the freedom to design learning that is more flexible and in accordance with students' needs and local context. Teachers can develop relevant and contextual materials so that learning focuses on mastering knowledge and developing students' character. This approach allows them to adjust teaching methods to existing classroom dynamics and emphasize the importance of social and moral values in every learning activity.

Teachers are expected to be able to implement various teaching methods that are more practical and based on students' actual experiences. It involves students in activities that develop social attitudes, such as cooperation, discipline, and responsibility. With this approach, students are not only taught theory but are also invited to actively participate in forming their character. Teachers are essential in creating a learning atmosphere that supports positive social interactions.

However, although the Independent Curriculum provides such freedom, several teachers expressed challenges in thoroughly exploring every aspect of students' characters. One of the obstacles is the need for more adequate supporting facilities, such as incomplete learning facilities or limited time to study each student's character in more depth. It is an obstacle to optimizing character-based learning, even though teachers try to provide meaningful learning experiences.

3. Challenges in Implementing the Independent Curriculum

Time constraints are one of the main challenges in implementing the Independent Curriculum, mainly because of the large amount of material that must be delivered in a limited time. Learning that focuses on character development requires an in-depth approach and sufficient time, but teachers often need help to integrate these aspects optimally with limited time allocation. It makes it a challenge for educators to balance academic material and the development of students' attitudes and behaviors.

In addition to time, suboptimal school facilities are a significant obstacle in implementing character-based learning. Teachers at the school stated that better learning aids and facilities are needed to support a more comprehensive learning process. Without adequate facilities, such as a conducive learning space or complete teaching materials, teachers' efforts to optimize students' characters are limited, so students' character development cannot proceed as expected.

4. Improving Student Attitudes and Behavior

Students involved in this program showed significant changes in their attitudes and behaviors. They became more open in discussions, were able to accept various views, and more easily reflected the character values taught in class. The learning process based on exploring social

values helped students better understand the importance of discipline, responsibility, and cooperation in everyday life. In addition, this program has also succeeded in encouraging students to be more active in participating in social activities outside the classroom. It shows that character education is not only limited to the formal learning process but is also woven into social interactions outside the school environment. Students can practice the values they have learned by being directly involved in social activities, further strengthening their character.

5. The Role of Parents and Society in Character Education

Character education at Polman School takes in the classroom but involves close collaboration between the school, parents, and the community. This study shows that parental involvement in supporting character education influences the development of students' attitudes and behavior. Parents are not only observers but also play an active role in strengthening the values taught in school through habits at home. Therefore, it is essential to establish closer cooperation between schools, parents, and the community. This synergy allows school values to be applied consistently in students' daily lives. Solid cooperation will help strengthen students' character education in formal and non-formal contexts so that the character built in schools can develop comprehensively in their lives.

Strong collaboration between schools, parents, and the community also positively impacts creating an environment that supports students' character learning. If the values in schools align with those at home and in the community, then character education will be more readily accepted and applied in students' daily lives. In addition, community involvement in social activities also provides opportunities for students to internalize character values in a broader context, strengthening the application of character education outside of school.

DISCUSSION

1. Character Education Achievements in the Independent Curriculum

This study shows that the Merdeka Curriculum can successfully integrate character education into the learning process, according to the findings of Taufik & Nursyamsi (2023), who stated that character education in the Merdeka Curriculum can be implemented holistically and contextually. This approach includes learning that focuses on developing knowledge and pays attention to the values that shape students' character. Through a contextual approach, character education is adapted to situations and conditions relevant to students' lives, making it easier to accept and apply. In addition, the findings of Sutrisno and Darmawan (2022) support the importance of a holistic approach that combines cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects in developing student character. The balance between these three aspects allows students to understand the concepts taught and internalize values relevant to everyday life. The cognitive aspect develops knowledge, while the affective and psychomotor aspects hone social skills and positive attitudes integral to the character.

As a result, implementing the Independent Curriculum in character education creates opportunities for students to develop holistically, both in intellectual and moral development. The formation of individuals who are not only academically intelligent but also possess high social values, such as discipline, responsibility, and cooperation, is positively influenced by this holistic learning environment, which positively impacts the formation of individuals. The fact that this balance exists demonstrates that character education within the Independent Curriculum has the potential to strengthen the formation of students' characters effectively.

2. Obstacles in Implementing Learning

Although the Merdeka Curriculum provides freedom in designing learning, as Sudarno and Rosyid (2023) explained, external factors remain challenging. One of the main obstacles is limited time, making it difficult for educators to integrate all aspects of character education optimally. The short time often makes teaching focus on academic material, while in-depth character development requires more time and space. In addition, inadequate facilities are an obstacle to implementing the Independent Curriculum. This study found that although educators are free to design learning, limited facilities, such as learning aids, supporting facilities, and incomplete materials, can hinder achieving the desired character education goals. These limitations make it difficult for educators to design genuinely effective learning for developing student character.

Given these obstacles, schools and the government should provide more support regarding adequate facilities and time. For the objectives of the Independent Curriculum in shaping students' characters to be achieved optimally, adequate supporting facilities and sufficient time for character-based learning are essential. With such support, comprehensive character education objectives will be improved.

3. Student Attitudes and Reflection in Learning

The findings in this study are consistent with previous studies showing that exploration and open discussion play an essential role in developing students' attitudes and behaviors. This approach allows students to reflect on the values taught, allowing them to understand better and internalize character principles. Thus, students learn cognitively and experience transformation in attitudes and behaviors that align with the goals of character education. Furthermore, the involvement of parents and the community is essential in strengthening character education. Research by Sutrisno and Darmawan (2022) revealed that collaboration between schools, parents, and the community can create a consistent environment and support student character development. Character strengthening becomes more effective and sustainable when the character values taught in schools are also applied in students' daily lives at home and in social interactions.

This collaboration improves character education in schools and enhances students' experiences applying these values in real life. The communities involved in character education can show students positive examples and cultivate a social environment that encourages the

development of positive attitudes. As a result, it is essential for all parties involved to take an active part in establishing an ecosystem that enables character education for the younger generation to be more effective and sustainable.

4. The Importance of Support from All Parties

The success of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in character education is independent of the role of schools but also requires strong support from parents and the community. The synergy between schools and the surrounding environment is crucial to applying the values taught in students' daily lives. According to Sudarno and Rosyid (2023), the success of character education can be achieved if schools, families, and communities work together to support the learning process. With this collaboration, students can feel the consistency between what is learned in school and what is applied at home and in their social environment, ultimately strengthening their character formation. As a result, character education can be more effective in forming individuals who are not only academically competent but also have good attitudes and behaviors in social life.

CONCLUSION

Education today adopts a holistic approach that focuses on integrating various aspects of child development, including cognitive, emotional, social, and physical. In this framework, learning places more emphasis on everyday experiences that occur through social interactions and the child's environment. Therefore, teachers are expected to be able to create a learning environment that supports a sense of safety, comfort, and love, which allows children to develop optimally.

This holistic approach develops the intellectual aspect through fun games and supports children's social and emotional skills. Teachers play an essential role in building warm relationships with children so that they feel valued and loved, which makes it easier for them to learn. Play-based learning effectively develops children's motor and cognitive skills and allows them to explore their environment actively. In addition to incorporating broader developmental aspects, applying holistic values in the Merdeka curriculum for early childhood education also focuses on integrating these values. It is essential to provide educators with ongoing training and systematic support to increase their capacity to implement this child-based curriculum and support the implementation of this approach.

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