



Implementation of Character Education in the *Merdeka* Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Purpose-This study aims to examine the implementation of character education in the *Merdeka* Curriculum, focusing on planning, implementation, and evaluation in vocational school environments. This study is motivated by the decline in morals of the younger generation, which is marked by increasing juvenile delinquency, lack of discipline, and increasing social challenges in the digital era.

Methodology-This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with a purposive sampling design. The subjects of the study included the principal, vice principal, subject teachers, and grade XI students. Data collection techniques were done through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data analysis used the Miles and Huberman interactive model, consisting of data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion.

Findings-The study results indicate that character education is systematically integrated into school policies, vision, mission, and curriculum. Implementation is carried out through experiential learning, extracurricular activities such as the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IPM) and *Tapak Suci*, and routine practices such as *Al-Qur'an* recitation, congregational prayer, morning exercise, the "Clean Friday" program, and social activities. Evaluation is carried out through direct observation, character journals, and periodic review meetings. These findings confirm the active role of these practices in shaping students' character.

Significance-This study contributes to understanding how vocational schools contextualize character education in national curriculum reform. This study emphasizes increasing teacher involvement and parental participation to strengthen students' character development.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a developmental phase full of challenges and vulnerabilities, characterized by significant biological, cognitive, and emotional changes. Santrock (2018) explains that this period is a transition from childhood to adulthood, which is marked by significant changes in adolescents' perceptions of themselves and

their surroundings. Adolescence is also often marked by emotional instability, social pressure, and the exploration and formation of self-identity (Lailiyah et al., 2025). During this period, teenagers are vulnerable to mood swings, increased independence from family, and face various challenges in social interaction and education (Magfirah & Mustika Sari, 2024). Although full of challenges, this period is also a golden opportunity to instill and strengthen positive characters that are important for shaping the younger generation into responsible, resilient, and noble individuals, as Lickona (1991) stated about the importance of character education.

In the realm of character education, international studies confirm that the effective implementation of character education contributes to improving the quality of education while forming a young generation with strong personalities (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; UNESCO, 2023). In Indonesia, character education has become a priority through the independent curriculum that integrates moral and ethical values into learning (Putri et al., 2023). This curriculum is designed to produce students who are not only academically capable but also have strong character, critical thinking, creativity, and social responsibility. One of the main pillars of the Independent Curriculum is the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5), which instills six main characteristics, namely: faith and devotion to God Almighty, cooperation, independence, critical thinking, creativity, and noble character (Indonesia, 2020).

However, contemporary society is facing a decline in moral values among teenagers, which has increased social problems such as juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, and unethical behavior. Recent empirical data demonstrates this phenomenon. For example, in December 2022, 78 teenagers aged 15–20 years in Surabaya were arrested for involvement in brawls, illegal racing, and alcohol abuse (Manumoyoso, 2023). In addition, the 2023 report of the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) noted a significant increase in the number of children in conflict with the law and drug abuse cases (bankdata.kpai.go.id, 2023). These data emphasize the need for more comprehensive and proactive character education as a preventive effort in addressing the roots of these social problems. Effective character education emphasizes academic achievement and the development of moral and ethical values as the foundation for the formation of adolescent personality (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004).

Although character education through the Independent Curriculum has received much attention, studies that deeply and critically examine the implementation of character education, especially in vocational schools with Center of Excellence status, are still very minimal. Previous studies, such as those by Chamisijatin et al. (2022) and Wulandari et al. (2024), have discussed the policy framework and theory of character education in the Independent Curriculum without delving into the implementation practices, evaluations, and challenges in the field, especially in the context of vocational schools. In addition, the current literature has not explicitly outlined the planning, implementation, and evaluation processes of character education in vocational schools using the independent curriculum approach. Thus, there is a noticeable research gap, namely the lack of empirical studies that holistically examine how character education is implemented in practice in vocational schools and how it is adjusted to specific vocational needs and student profiles.

SMK Muhammadiyah 5 Jember, which has been recognized as a Center of Excellence since 2020, was chosen as the research location because it is considered representative and strategic. This school has character education practices integrated into students' daily activities, such as Al-Quran recitation, morning exercise, Clean Friday program, joint prayer, and short study after congregational prayer. These practices aim to foster positive habits and moral values in students, which is relevant to strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile. However, the effectiveness and challenges of implementing these activities in the context of the Independent Curriculum have not been critically and systematically studied. This study is here to fill this gap and provide a comprehensive evaluation based on the theory of character education and Pancasila values as the foundation of national education.

This study aims to fill the gap in existing research by conducting an in-depth analysis of the planning, implementation, and evaluation process of character education based on the Independent Curriculum at SMK Muhammadiyah 5 Jember. Using an in-depth qualitative approach, this study seeks to uncover the practical

application of character education, the obstacles faced, and strategies to increase its effectiveness. The contribution of this study is expected to be twofold: theoretically enriching the literature on character education with field data from leading vocational schools, and practically providing applicable recommendations for managers and educators at vocational schools and similar institutions to optimize character education programs.

Thus, this study not only fills the existing empirical gap but also answers the urgent need to strengthen character education as a moral foundation and the main capital for the younger generation in facing global challenges in the era of the industrial revolution 4.0 and the ever-growing digital society.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach because this approach is considered the most appropriate for exploring and understanding in depth the process of implementing character education in the *Merdeka* Curriculum at SMK Muhammadiyah 5 Jember. This design allows researchers to explore the meanings, perceptions, and subjective experiences of education stakeholders, including principals, teachers, and students, which cannot be measured quantitatively. This approach is relevant considering that character education is a complex and contextual social phenomenon, so it requires an approach that can holistically capture the dynamics of values, attitudes, and actions. Moleong (2019) states that the qualitative approach aims to understand phenomena in a natural context and is appropriate for examining social values and practices in the school environment.

Subject of Study

The subjects in this study were selected using a purposive sampling technique, namely the selection of informants considered to have the most understanding and who are directly involved in implementing character education. The informants comprised the principal, vice principal for student affairs, two subject teachers with more than five years of teaching experience and involvement in character strengthening programs, and two grade XI students active in school activities that reflected character values. This technique obtained relevant, in-depth information from credible sources (Sugiyono, 2018). Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: (1) structured observation using an observation guide sheet compiled based on the value indicators in the Pancasila Student Profile to assess the planning, implementation, and evaluation process of character education; (2) in depth interviews with the principal, teachers, and students, using a semi-structured interview guide that lasted for 30–60 minutes and was recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes; and (3) documentation study of documents such as the school's vision and mission, student work programs, independent curriculum teaching module, and student portfolios related to character building.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using the interactive model from Miles and Huberman, which consists of four stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions (Sugiyono, 2018). The data reduction includes filtering, sorting, and arranging relevant data to produce main themes. In contrast, data presentation is done through narratives and thematic matrices to facilitate interpretation, which is then continued with drawing conclusions and continuous verification during the research process. To ensure data validity, this study applies source triangulation by comparing information from the principal, teachers, and students and technical triangulation by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation. This triangulation is intended to increase the credibility and validity of the findings, as Patton (2002) suggested that triangulation can strengthen the reliability of research results by confirming data from various perspectives. This study also pays attention to the ethical aspects of research by requesting informed consent from all participants before the data collection process and ensuring the confidentiality of the informant's

identity. The entire research series, from planning to data analysis, was carried out from May to November 2024 at SMK Muhammadiyah 5 Jember.

FINDING

Character Education Planning at Muhammadiyah 5 Jember Vocational School

Clarity of Character Education Objectives

The explicitly outlined objectives of character education emphasize the formation of students who excel academically and vocationally and have noble, disciplined characters based on Islamic values. Routine activities such as congregational prayer, religious studies, and socialization between parents and students are real implementations of spiritual values that are the pillars of character education in this school. A teacher said:

Character education is not only learning in the classroom, but also through religious activities and the active role of parents.

This statement strengthens the findings (Wahyudi et al., 2024), emphasizing the importance of involving all stakeholders in planning effective character education. Religious activities and parental involvement reflect a holistic approach to character education, as Lapsley et al. (2020) emphasized, namely by creating a moral school environment.



Figure 1. Vision, Mission, and Goals Documents, Congregational Prayers, and Parent-Teacher Meetings

Figure 1 shows the integration between the values formulated normatively in school documents and students' daily practices in spiritual activities. However, the interpretation of the images and observation results shows that although the planning is mature, challenges remain in maintaining the consistency of implementing character values in every school activity unit. This is reflected in the variation in the level of student and teacher participation, which indicates the need for more systematic monitoring of the involvement of all school elements.

Integration of Character Values in the Curriculum

Character values such as responsibility, collaboration, and leadership are explicitly embedded in learning modules, learning methods, and extracurricular activities. Field observations show that these values are not just theories, but are actualized in daily learning practices, primarily through group discussions and collaborative projects. One teacher explained:

Group projects teach students to work together and think critically.

This statement is in line with the results of the study (Hariyati & Rofiq, 2024), which emphasizes the effectiveness of project-based learning in character development, while supporting the goals of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in instilling *Pancasila* values through collaborative and reflective activities.



Figure 2: Teaching Modules and Learning Activities

Figure 2 shows the real activities of students involved in the group discussion and presentation process. This visual strengthens empirical evidence that the values of collaboration and leadership are practiced, not just listed in the curriculum document. Analysis of images and field data shows that the interaction pattern between students in group projects provides space for the growth of communication skills, tolerance for differences of opinion, and initiative to lead. However, the interviews and observations also revealed that the evaluation of student character is still subjective and poorly documented. This indicates the need to develop a more valid and comprehensive character assessment instrument, so that changes in student behavior can be measured systematically.

Teacher Training Support in Character Education

Teacher training, as the leading supporter of the success of character education, is held twice a year. However, there is still a need for additional training, especially for new teachers, so that the vision and mission of character education can be understood and implemented optimally. The vice principal for student affairs stated:

We need more intensive training so that new teachers understand the vision and mission of the school's character education.

The challenges of limited time and resources are the main obstacles. Hassan (2024) underlines the importance of ongoing teacher training as the primary foundation for consistently implementing character education.



Figure 3: Teacher Training Activities

Figure 3 shows offline teacher training held periodically and documentation of the use of online learning technology as an alternative training medium. This visual indicates that even though training is already underway, a more systematic and sustainable approach is still needed. Online training is a relevant solution along with the development of educational technology. This is in line with what was stated by Breen (2018), which emphasizes the importance of flexible teacher upskilling in the digital ecosystem. However, field findings also noted the absence of evaluation instruments for training effectiveness on changes in teacher teaching practices. Therefore, schools need to build a training follow-up mechanism so that their impact can be monitored objectively and impact the character education process.

Integration of School Programs in Character Building

Various school programs, such as the Entrepreneurship Movement School (SPW) and extracurricular activities, such as *Paskibra*, IPM, and *Tapak Suci*, play a role in strengthening the values of responsibility, honesty, and hard work through authentic experiences. For example, the SPW Mulia Laundry program provides a space for entrepreneurial practice that also internalizes the values of hard work and independence.

Routine religious activities such as Duha prayers and religious studies also strengthen the values of discipline and cooperation.

Through this laundry program, students learn to run their own business, value time, and work honestly." (Students participating in the SPW program)

Field observations show that these programs align with the Pancasila Student Profile, which emphasizes independence and noble character, as stated (Yusgiantara et al., 2024).



Figure 4. IPM, SPW “Mulia Laundry” and Extracurricular Activities

Figure 4 shows the active involvement of students in extracurricular activities and SPW programs, which shows that internalization of character values occurs not only in the classroom, but also through contextual and social experiences. However, the results of interviews with supervising teachers reflect concerns about overlap between programs and a lack of precise coordination. This emphasizes the need to review the managerial structure of school activities so that the integration of character values can be facilitated holistically, program repetition can be avoided, and the whole-school approach can be supported as developed by Lickona (1991).

Implementation of Character Education at Muhammadiyah 5 Jember Vocational School

The implementation of character education refers to the principles of the Independent Curriculum with a student-centered learning approach. Moral, spiritual, and social values are internalized through project-based learning, a conducive school environment, and extracurricular activities.

Teaching Methods

SMK Muhammadiyah 5 Jember teachers use diverse and interactive pedagogical approaches, such as group discussions, projects, practicums, and problem-based learning. This approach is designed to transfer knowledge and instill character values such as responsibility, discipline, cooperation, and respect for opinions. A teacher said:

Group discussions enhance collaboration, and presentations build confidence and respect for others' opinions.

This statement strengthens the theory of Nurjanah & Mustofa (2024), which emphasizes that collaborative and hands-on experience-based learning has great potential in strengthening students' character.



Figure 5. The Various Teaching Methods Applied in Class

Figure 5 shows students actively discussing in small groups and presenting their work. This activity reflects active learning strategies and a classroom atmosphere that encourages participation, empathy, and responsibility. This visual confirms previous findings regarding the relationship between participatory teaching methods and character development, as Lickona (1991) emphasized, that character grows through

responsible habits and meaningful social engagement. However, field observations also revealed that the success of this method is highly dependent on the teacher's readiness to facilitate discussions and student activity. In some classes, it was found that discussions had not yet run optimally because some students were still passive or did not understand their roles in the group. This is an important note for increasing teacher capacity in implementing character-based pedagogical strategies consistently.

Student Engagement

Students are actively involved in various extracurricular activities such as the Muhammadiyah Student Association (IPM), Paskibra, Tapak Suci, and anti-bullying campaigns and religious activities. These activities become authentic character learning spaces, where the values of responsibility, leadership, religiosity, and cooperation are honed through real experiences outside the classroom. One of the students said:

Group activities and presentations made me more confident and learned to work together.

This statement reinforces the experiential learning approach, as explained (Nasution et al., 2024), that direct experience through social and organizational activities encourages deeper internalization of character values. This is also in line with the policy of the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (2020), which emphasizes the importance of student agency in character formation.



Figure 6. Morning Study and Flag Raising Practice

Figure 6 shows integrating spiritual values and discipline in students' daily lives. The morning congregational Duha prayer, followed by physical activities such as marching exercises by Paskibra, demonstrates social cohesion and collective discipline that are part of the school culture. This visual supports the findings that active student involvement is key to fostering a vibrant and organically developing character culture in the school environment. However, there are differences in the level of involvement between students that need to be considered. Some students show high enthusiasm, while others only participate passively. This shows the importance of a more inclusive and personal approach in encouraging the participation of all students so that character values do not only develop in certain groups.

School environment

The school environment, based on Islamic values and positive culture, such as cooperation in cleaning the school environment, also strengthens the sense of responsibility and cooperation among school residents. The principal emphasized:

We implement Islamic culture through greetings, politeness, and congregational prayer.

The statement reflects the holistic application of character values involving spiritual, social, and daily behavioral aspects. This approach aligns with the Positive Education framework proposed by Seligman & Adler (2019), which emphasizes the importance of building an environment that supports the growth of emotional and social well-being. In addition, the concept of holistic education, as explained by Hidayatullah (2024), also strengthens the idea that students' emotional and social intelligence can grow through experiences and interactions in a conducive environment.



Figure 7. Schools Environmental Activities

Figure 7 shows two main activities that strengthen the character education ecosystem in this school. First, congregational prayer is a collective practice of spiritual values. Second, cleaning activities that reflect responsibility and cooperation between students and teachers. This visual illustrates how character values are internalized through real practices in the physical and social environment of the school. However, the observation results also indicate the need to increase awareness to maintain the consistency of this positive culture among all school members, because some students are still less active in cooperation activities. This opens up space for developing strategies to strengthen school culture so that the desired character can be internalized more evenly.

Role of Teachers and Staff

Around 70% of teachers implement character education consistently, demonstrating a strong commitment to internalizing character values in daily learning and interactions. However, around 30% of teachers still need additional training and mentoring to implement character education optimally. The principal emphasized the importance of routine supervision and monthly evaluation as a strategy to ensure the consistency of the program's implementation:

Supervision and evaluation are constructive so that we can continue to implement character education well," said one of the teachers.

This finding strengthens the results of the study by Putri et al. (2024) and Muslihati (2019), which emphasize that the success of character education is highly dependent on the consistency of implementation and structured and continuous supervision. Figure 8 shows the supervision and teacher training activities that are an integral part of strengthening educators' capacity to implement character education in schools.



Figure 8. Teacher Support Students' Religious Activities

Figure 8 illustrates the process of monitoring and improving teacher competency through training and supervision that is carried out periodically. This visual shows how schools strive to ensure that character education is not just a slogan, but is consistently realized in the field. However, significant challenges still exist to reach all teachers at an equal level of implementation, requiring more intensive attention and resources.

Evaluation of Character Education at Muhammadiyah 5 Jember Vocational School

Student Assessment

The student character assessment in this school still relies on conventional methods such as attendance records, violation records, and character journals. The principal stated that direct observation and teacher reports are also part of the assessment process, although the implementation is not yet fully data-based and systematic. Monthly evaluation meetings are held to assess the effectiveness of the character education program, with informal indicators used, including students' daily behavior, such as discipline and cleanliness.

Although the existing assessment methods are relatively simple and not yet comprehensive, the approach provides a general picture of student character development in the school environment. However, based on the findings of Hidayati et al. (2024), practical character assessment must involve in-depth observation, reflection, and active participation from various stakeholders, not just relying on written documentation alone. Rahma & Perawironegoro (2024) also emphasize the importance of a holistic approach that integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects into students' real-life experiences. This indicates the need to develop more diverse and data-based assessment instruments to capture changes in character behavior more validly and comprehensively. For example, the use of attitude assessment rubrics, student self-assessment, and parental feedback can be alternatives that enrich the evaluation process.

Parental Involvement

Schools actively involve parents through various activities such as parenting seminars, regular meetings, and home visits. Home visits effectively strengthen communication and collaboration between schools and families in supporting students' character education. This approach is in line with the Ecological Systems Theory proposed by Yang & Sanborn (2021), which confirms that the family environment is one of the central systems that influences the development of a child's character. In addition, the findings of Massucco (2020) emphasize the importance of the central role of the family in character education, primarily through direct parental involvement in the learning process and monitoring children's behavior at home.



Figure 10. Home Visit

Figure 10 below illustrates the home visit activity, which is one of the genuine efforts of the school in establishing harmonious relationships with students' families. However, evaluation of the impact of home visits on students' character development still needs to be carried out systematically to measure the effectiveness of this approach more objectively.

Collaboration with Communities and External Organizations

The school actively collaborates with various external communities and organizations, involving students in social activities such as social service, environmental campaigns, and community service. This collaboration aims to foster empathy, social responsibility, and concern for the surrounding environment to strengthen students' character. However, although various activities have been carried out, the evaluation of the impact of this collaboration is still informal and has not been carried out systematically or measurably. Proper

assessment of the contribution of external partners is important to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of character education programs in schools.

This approach is based on the Experiential Learning theory explained by Depiyanti (2014), where direct experience in a social context becomes an effective character learning medium. In addition, the Service Learning model proposed by Wulandari et al. (2024) emphasizes that integrating social services in formal learning can strengthen student character development through real action. To support this, the development of measurable and data-based evaluation indicators is needed to assess the real impact of this collaboration on the formation of student character and improve the program based on the evaluation results.



Figure 11. The Beach and River Cleaning with Mass Organizations

Figure 11 illustrates student involvement in social activities that serve as a vehicle for direct character learning through collaboration with external organizations.

DISCUSSION

The research findings show that the school's vision and mission, written in public, clearly emphasize the formation of students' characters who excel academically and vocationally and are based on Islamic values. These values are reflected in students' routine activities, such as congregational prayers and religious studies, that take place consistently. However, field observations revealed variations in the level of teacher and student participation in these activities, indicating the need for more systematic supervision and evaluation so that character values are truly integrated into the school culture. This is in line with Wahyudi & Rosyidah (2024), which emphasizes the importance of the role of the school moral ecosystem in character formation, as also supported by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory that highlights the importance of mesosystem interactions, namely active involvement between schools and families.

In the context of learning, teaching methods that emphasize group discussions, collaborative projects, and problem-based learning have proven effective in fostering values of collaboration, responsibility, and leadership. This method strengthens the findings of Hariyati & Rofiq (2024), which emphasize the effectiveness of project-based learning in developing student character. However, student character evaluations that still rely on attendance records and behavior journals indicate an urgent need to develop more valid and holistic assessment instruments, including authentic assessments that combine cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects (Hidayati et al., 2024).

Student involvement in various extracurricular activities and entrepreneurship programs reinforces the values of hard work, honesty, and independence by the Pancasila Student Profile (Kemdikbud RI, 2020). However, limited participation and coordination between programs indicate the need for a stronger participatory approach in the planning and implementation of character education. The concept of transformational leadership can be a practical framework for increasing all stakeholders' involvement and ensuring the program's sustainability (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Regular teacher training is a pillar of strengthening the capacity of educators to implement character education. However, limited resources and time are challenging, especially for new teachers. Innovative solutions such as online training can be an alternative in line with current developments in educational technology (Hasan, 2024).

In addition, collaboration with external organizations and social communities plays an important role in fostering students' empathy and social responsibility, which aligns with the Service-Learning model (Wulandari et al., 2024). However, the evaluation of the impact of the collaboration still needs to be developed so that it can be carried out systematically and measurably. Overall, although schools have made various strategic efforts in character education, these practices still face challenges in terms of consistency of implementation, comprehensive evaluation, and participatory approaches. This study underlines the importance of synergy between theory and practice and the need to develop a more holistic evaluation system to achieve character education goals optimally.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of character education in the Independent Curriculum at SMK Muhammadiyah 5 Jember shows a systematic effort through integrating character values in learning, strengthening school culture, teacher training, and student and parent involvement. However, the effectiveness of implementation still faces several challenges, such as the lack of adequate teacher training, the uneven distribution of teacher competencies in implementing character education, limitations in data-based evaluation, and the need to strengthen partnerships with external communities. Several recommendations can be made to improve the effectiveness of character education: developing more specific and sustainable teacher training, designing a locally-based character curriculum, developing a school community partnership model, more comprehensive data-based evaluation, and developing a spiritually and socially conducive school environment. Thus, character education in this school can develop comprehensively and sustainably, and produce students who have strong characters and are relevant to the needs of society.

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