

ISLAMIC CHARACTER EDUCATION IN INDONESIAN NATIONAL CURRICULA: A CRITICAL POLICY ANALYSIS OF THE 2013 AND MERDEKA FRAMEWORKS

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Abstract: *Character education has been a national agenda in Indonesia since the early 2010s. It was formally integrated into the 2013 Curriculum and further strengthened through the Merdeka Curriculum, which was launched in 2022. This study aims to examine how character education is conceptualized and implemented within these two curricula, particularly through the lens of Islamic religious education. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study analyzes key policy documents issued by the Ministry of Education, including competency standards, learning outcomes, and the Pancasila Student Profile. The analysis reveals that both curricula explicitly emphasize core values such as faith, discipline, nationalism, integrity, and critical thinking as integral components of students' character formation. These values are embedded within the formulation of core competencies and learning indicators across various subjects. However, pedagogical implementation guidelines remain limited and normative, often relying on broad and vague terms like "value internalization," without being supported by concrete and contextual teaching strategies. Furthermore, both curricula tend to adopt a top-down and moralistic tone, providing limited space for dialogic, reflective, or participatory approaches. In addition, teachers are burdened with numerous administrative tasks, which reduces their time and focus on developing students' character in an optimal way. The study concludes that in order to achieve effective character education within Indonesia's diverse context, clearer, more inclusive pedagogical strategies rooted in critical student engagement are needed. The findings also imply the necessity for teacher training and curriculum development that are more responsive to social realities and students' needs.*

Keywords: : Character Education, Curriculum Policy, Moral Values, Islamic Education

Introduction

Character education has emerged as a central pillar in global education reform, particularly in the wake of increasing concerns about moral degradation¹. Youth delinquency and school violence remain pressing issues in Indonesia. According to the PISA survey, 15% of children and adolescents report experiencing bullying, 19% are socially excluded, 22% are verbally insulted, 14% are threatened, 18% are physically pushed or hit by peers, and 20% report being victims of bullying, and the perceived erosion of social cohesion. International organizations such as UNESCO², OECD³, and UNICEF⁴ have consistently advocated for the integration of character and values education into national curricula to promote global citizenship, sustainable development, and 21st-century

¹ Alhamuddin Alhamuddin, "Abd Shamad Al-Palimbani's Islamic Education Concept: Analysis of Kitab Hidayah al-Sālikin Fi Suluk Māsālāk Lil Muttāqin," Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies 6, no. 1 (2018): 89–102, doi:10.21043/qijis.v6i1.3717.

² UNESCO, *Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All* (Fontenoy, 2004).

³ OECD, *Early Learning and Child Well-Being: A Study of Five-Year-Olds in England, Estonia, and the United States*, 2020.

⁴ UNICEF, *Global Framework on Transferable Skills* (New York, 2019).

skills. These calls have been echoed in many developing nations, including Indonesia, which has responded through successive curriculum reforms aimed at embedding character education within formal education systems. However, the translation of these global frameworks into local policy and practice remains fraught with challenges—especially in countries of the Global South, where social, political, and cultural complexities demand more nuanced and context-sensitive approaches⁵.

Indonesia, as a multicultural and multi-religious society, has prioritized character education as a key component of national education policy since the early 2010s. This commitment was formalized through the implementation of the 2013 Curriculum, which explicitly integrated character values into core and basic competencies across all subjects and educational levels. The initiative was further strengthened with the launch of the Independent Learning Curriculum in 2022, which institutionalized character education through the *Profile of Pancasila Students*⁶. This framework promotes six core values: religiosity, nationalism, integrity, independence, critical thinking, and collaboration. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology reported that by the end of 2023, more than 143,000 schools across Indonesia had adopted the Merdeka Curriculum, either fully or partially, primarily through the flagship *Sekolah Penggerak* (Driving School) program. Despite the widespread policy adoption, many teachers continue to face challenges in effectively implementing character education. The main obstacles include insufficient pedagogical training, limited classroom resources, and curriculum guidelines that remain too general and lack contextual clarity. Despite this policy emphasis, there is growing evidence that character education in Indonesia often remains at the level of rhetoric, struggling with practical implementation, teacher capacity, and relevance to students' lived experiences.

More critically, scholars have questioned the ideological underpinnings of character education policies in the Global South. These critiques highlight how global education agendas, often shaped by neoliberal ideologies and donor influence, tend to be uncritically adopted by national governments, leading to curriculum reforms that may not align with local cultural values or structural realities. In Indonesia's case, education policy often reflects a hybrid model—borrowing frameworks from international bodies while attempting to anchor them in national ideology, particularly through Pancasila. This hybridity can produce tensions, contradictions, and superficial implementations, particularly when the curriculum serves more as a tool for political legitimacy or social control than as a means of fostering critical and democratic character development.

Prior studies on character education in Indonesia primarily focused on its philosophical underpinnings, pedagogical methods, and classroom-level practices. Underscored the significance of embedding Pancasila values as a foundation for building national character, reflecting the state's ideological commitment to moral education rooted in Indonesian identity. Advanced for student-centered and active learning approaches as effective pedagogical strategies for character formation, aligning with constructivist educational theory. Teachers lacked sufficient training, professional development, and

⁵ Alhamuddin et al., "Politics of Education in Curriculum Development Policy in Indonesia from 1947 to 2013: A Documentary Research," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 9, no. 1 (June 28, 2020): 29–56, doi:10.14421/jpi.2020.91.29-56.

⁶ Kemendikbud-Ristek, *Dimensi, Elemen, Dan Subelemen Profil Pelajar Pancasila Pada Kurikulum Merdeka 2* (Jakarta: Badan Standar Kurikulum dan Assesmen Pendidikan, 2022).

institutional support to deliver character education effectively, suggesting a persistent gap between policy ideals and instructional capacity. Revealed a more systemic disconnect between curriculum mandates and classroom realities, highlighting structural challenges such as rigid school cultures, exam-oriented assessment practices, and limited teacher autonomy, which often hindered authentic character education practices.

However, only a few studies to date critically examined the curriculum policy discourse itself—specifically, how character education was constructed ideologically, whose values were privileged, and how power relations influenced its formulation. This gap is significant, as curriculum documents are not neutral; they are embedded with political, cultural, and moral assumption. A critical policy analysis perspective is therefore necessary to uncover the implicit ideologies, normative frameworks, and sociopolitical interests that shape the discourse of character education in national curricula.

This article seeks to fill that gap by offering a critical policy review of character education in the Indonesian national curriculum, situated within the broader framework of Global South perspectives. Drawing on critical curriculum theory and postcolonial education discourse, this study interrogates how character education is framed, the socio-political interests it serves, and the extent to which it is responsive to local cultural and educational needs. In doing so, the article aims to contribute to a more reflective and contextually grounded understanding of character education policy in developing countries. It argues that without a critical examination of curriculum-making processes—beyond mere content and delivery—character education risks becoming an instrument of conformity rather than a vehicle for ethical, democratic, and transformative learning.

Method

This study used qualitative research design with a critical interpretive approach⁷. The research focused on analyzing the discourse of character education in Indonesia's national curriculum. The analysis centered on official curriculum documents, government education policies, and relevant academic literature. The data were collected through document analysis and literature review. Primary sources included government-issued curricula, such as the 2013 Curriculum, the Merdeka Curriculum, and the Profile of Pancasila Students framework. Other documents, such as teacher training guides and ministerial regulations, were also reviewed. Secondary sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, policy evaluation reports, and studies on curriculum development and character education in Indonesia. The documents were selected using purposive sampling. The criteria for selection were that the documents were official, related directly to character education, and widely used or cited in educational contexts.

After collecting the data, the documents were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis. The researchers identified key terms, values, and themes that reflected how character education was framed in the curriculum. The analysis also examined how values such as nationalism, morality, religion, and global citizenship were embedded in policy language. To strengthen the validity of the study, triangulation was applied by comparing policy texts with previous research findings and theoretical literature. The researchers also reflected on their own perspectives to reduce interpretation bias. This method allowed the researchers to understand how the Indonesian education system constructed character education within its national curriculum, and how policy discourse reflected broader cultural and political agendas.

⁷ James P Takona, "Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches / Sixth Edition," .." *Quality & Quantity* 50, no. 1 (2024): 1011–13.

Result and Discussion

Character Education as a Central Curriculum Goal

All official curriculum frameworks analyzed — including the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum — placed strong emphasis on character education as a national educational priority. character values were systematically integrated into the core competencies and basic competencies, which guided both content and pedagogical objectives in all subjects. This structural embedding demonstrated the government's commitment to institutionalizing character education at the formal policy level. Furthermore, the concept of character education was operationalized through the Profile of Pancasila Students a national framework developed to articulate the ideal attributes expected of Indonesian learners in the 21st century. This profile included six core attributes: faith and piety, independence, critical reasoning, creativity, collaboration, and global awareness. These attributes were designed not only to reflect the nation's cultural and religious values but also to align with global educational trends emphasizing 21st-century skills and competencies.

The integration of character education into national curricula reflects a deliberate state strategy to shape citizens who embody both local cultural identities and global competencies. This dual orientation can be understood through the lens of glocalization — the blending of global and local values — which has become a prominent feature in education reform worldwide. In the Indonesian context, this approach attempts to balance the preservation of foundational values, such as religious faith and national pride, with the cultivation of skills deemed necessary for global competitiveness, such as creativity and critical thinking.

However, this hybridization raises important questions about potential tensions and contradictions. For instance, while “faith and piety” emphasize adherence to religious norms and traditions, attributes like “critical reasoning” and “creativity” encourage questioning and innovation, which may sometimes challenge established beliefs and social norms. Such tensions are not unique to Indonesia but are common in many postcolonial societies navigating rapid modernization alongside strong cultural-religious identities. Moreover, the state's emphasis on “Profile of Pancasila Students” aligns character education closely with the national ideology of Pancasila, reinforcing a moral and civic framework rooted in the country's founding principle. This alignment serves to legitimize the curriculum politically but may also risk constrain the diversity of moral perspectives and critical dialogue in education.

Empirically, studies on curriculum implementation have found that although these character attributes are well articulated at the policy level, their translation into classroom practice is often inconsistent and superficial. Teachers frequently report a lack of clear guidelines, adequate training, and supportive resources to effectively foster these six attributes. The broad and abstract nature of concepts like “global awareness” and “critical reasoning” leaves much room for interpretation, potentially leading to varied or diluted educational outcomes across different regions and school contexts.

In sum, the integration of character education within Indonesia's national curriculum frameworks represented a significant attempt to construct a holistic learner identity that was simultaneously rooted in local cultural and religious values while aspiring toward global competencies. This dual orientation reflected the state's progressive educational vision to produce learners who were morally grounded, nationally committed, and globally competitive. However, this ambition also introduced several challenges, particularly concerning ideological coherence, pedagogical feasibility, and the tension between conservative moral ideals and liberal-democratic educational aims.

The curricula exhibited a hybrid ideological composition—merging faith-based values, nationalist sentiments, and global skill demands—without offering a coherent pedagogical or philosophical synthesis. This lack of clarity often resulted in conflicting messages for educators, who were expected to transmit values authoritatively while also promoting critical thinking and global citizenship. Moreover, the absence of detailed instructional strategies and professional development pathways for teachers limited the effective realization of these goals at the classroom level. As Biest argued, education that seeks to shape subjectivity must avoid indoctrination and instead cultivate agency, dialogue, and moral reasoning. To address these challenges, character education must be reconceptualized not merely as value transmission but as a dialogic and participatory process. Policymakers should provide clearer pedagogical frameworks that support reflective and inclusive teaching practices. This includes enhancing teacher training programs, promoting whole-school approaches to values education, and aligning assessment systems with character development objectives. Most importantly, curriculum development should involve broader stakeholder engagement to ensure that character education reflects Indonesia's pluralistic society while preparing students for ethical participation in a globalized world.

Normative and Moralistic Language Dominated Policy Texts

The curriculum documents frequently used terms such as “obedience,” “discipline,” “morality,” and “national loyalty.” These terms were framed in a strongly normative way, emphasizing the internalization of predetermined values as the primary goal of character formation. This approach presented character education largely as a process of conforming to established social and cultural norms, where students were expected to absorb and replicate desired behaviors and attitudes without question. Such a moralistic tone aligns closely with what Arthur termed authoritarian moral education, in which moral values are imposed from the top down, and critical reflection or dialogue about these values is limited or discouraged.

This top-down transmission of values risks producing passive learners who accept norms uncritically, which can undermine the development of deeper moral reasoning, personal autonomy, and ethical judgment. It also potentially neglects the complexities of moral development in diverse, pluralistic societies like Indonesia, where students may come from varied cultural, religious, and social backgrounds. From a critical educational perspective, character education should move beyond mere obedience and discipline toward a more dialogic and reflective model. This model encourages students to engage actively with moral dilemmas, question assumptions, and develop their own ethical understandings through discussion and critical thinking. In this way, character education fosters not only compliance but also moral agency, empowering students to make principled decisions in real-life contexts.

Pedagogically, this shift required integrating values clarification techniques, ethical case studies, moral dilemma discussions, and project-based learning that situated moral issues within students lived experiences. Such methods allowed students to connect abstract values with concrete social realities, thereby deepening their moral understanding and commitment⁸. Teachers were expected to move beyond didactic delivery of norms and instead facilitate open, dialogic conversations about values and ethics, creating safe and inclusive classroom environments that respected diverse viewpoints while guiding students toward shared

⁸ Thomas Licona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (Bantam, 1992).

principles such as respect, justice, and empathy ⁹.

This dialogic and participatory approach aligned with contemporary global education frameworks that emphasized 21st-century competencies—critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and intercultural understanding—as outlined by the OECD¹⁰ and UNESCO¹¹. Furthermore, it supported the development of democratic citizenship, whereby students were not merely passive recipients of moral codes but active participants in shaping social values, ethical norms, and civic responsibilities ¹². Such an approach was particularly essential in pluralistic societies like Indonesia, where students brought diverse religious, cultural, and moral perspectives into the classroom. While obedience and discipline remained important social virtues, especially within cultures that valued hierarchy and communal harmony, character education policies needed to balance these with opportunities for critical engagement and moral reflection ¹³. Without this balance, there was a risk that character education would serve primarily as a tool for social conformity or state-driven moralization rather than a transformative educational process. A critically reflective model of character education aimed to develop autonomous, responsible, and ethically grounded individuals capable of navigating complex moral landscapes and contributing meaningfully to democratic and plural societies.

Lack of Clear Pedagogical Frameworks

Although the policy texts consistently promoted character education as a key objective, they provided limited practical guidance on how to effectively implement it within classrooms. Frequently used terms such as “internalization of values” appeared throughout the documents, yet these concepts remained abstract and were not accompanied by concrete instructional strategies or clear pedagogical models. Even the Merdeka Curriculum, which advocated for innovative approaches like project-based learning and inquiry-based learning to foster active student engagement, fell short of offering detailed frameworks or systematic guidelines on how teachers should translate these methodologies into character education outcomes. This gap between policy rhetoric and practical application led to significant challenges in implementation, often resulting in varied interpretations and inconsistent practices across different schools and regions ¹⁴.

The absence of clear, actionable strategies in policy documents aligns with findings from implementation theory, which highlights that effective policy outcomes require not only visionary goals but also detailed operational guidance and teacher support ¹⁵. Without such guidance, teachers may struggle to move beyond traditional, didactic teaching styles and fail to integrate character education meaningfully into daily lessons. This is especially critical for character education, which demands pedagogical approaches that promote reflection,

⁹ Larry Nucci, *Domain-Based Moral Education Promoting Moral Wellness and the Capacity for Social Justice* (Routledge, 2024).

¹⁰ OECD, *Early Learning and Child Well-Being: A Study of Five-Year-Olds in England, Estonia, and the United States*.

¹¹ UNESCO, *Learning to Be* (Paris, 1972).

¹² James A., ed Banks, *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives* (John Wiley & Sons, 2006).

¹³ Gert JJ Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (Routledge, 2015).

¹⁴ Putri Mahanani et al., “Educational Analysis to Develop Character in Malaysia and Indonesia,” *International Journal of Instruction* 15, no. 3 (July 1, 2022): 377–92, doi:10.29333/iji.2022.15321a; Rahmat Yasin, “Implementation of Wasathiyatul Islam in the Curriculum of Modern Islamic Boarding School Darussalam Gontor (Study of K.H. Imam Zarkasyi’s Thought),” *At-Ta’dib* 14, no. 2 (December 18, 2019): 75, doi:10.21111/at-tadib.v14i2.3656.

¹⁵ James P Spillane, Brian J Reiser, and Todd Reimer, “Policy Implementation and Cognition: Reframing and Refocusing Implementation Research,” *Review of Educational Research* 72, no. 3 (2002): 387–431, <http://rer.aera.net>.

discussion, and the modeling of values in authentic contexts¹⁶.

Furthermore, the reliance on vague and abstract concepts such as “internalization” without concrete pedagogical articulation often reinforced a passive model of character education, wherein students were expected to absorb moral values through exposure and repetition rather than through deliberate, critical engagement¹⁷. This approach limited opportunities for students to develop ethical reasoning, make moral judgments, and apply values to complex real-life situations. As a result, character education risked becoming a rhetorical aim rather than a transformative process¹⁸.

To address this pedagogical gap, scholars have emphasized the need for curriculum policies to adopt evidence-based instructional strategies that actively involve students in value formation. Techniques such as moral dilemma discussions, cooperative learning, service learning, and community-based projects have been shown to significantly enhance students' moral reasoning, empathy, and civic responsibility¹⁹. These methods grounded character development in experience and reflection, aligning with constructivist principles and socio-cultural theories of moral development.

However, despite the rhetorical emphasis on character education in Indonesia's curriculum frameworks, including the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum, the absence of detailed pedagogical guidelines posed a significant implementation barrier. Teachers were often left without sufficient training, support materials, or time to translate broad policy ideals into meaningful classroom practices²⁰. Consequently, character education tended to rely on conventional moral instruction and behavioral control, rather than fostering deep ethical understanding. To overcome these challenges, educational reform efforts must include systematic teacher professional development programs focused on character pedagogy, access to quality instructional resources, and institutional support for reflective practice and innovation²¹. Moreover, curriculum documents should articulate not only what values to promote but how they can be cultivated through developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and contextually relevant methods. Such an approach would ensure that character education evolves from a normative ideal to an embedded, dynamic part of educational practice.

Tension Between Global Competence and Local Values

The Merdeka Curriculum introduced progressive elements such as global citizenship, digital literacy, and critical thinking, reflecting an effort to prepare students for the complexities of the 21st century and a rapidly globalizing world²². These components aimed

¹⁶ Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*.

¹⁷ Nucci, *Domain-Based Moral Education Promoting Moral Wellness and the Capacity for Social Justice*.

¹⁸ Nguyen Van Bao et al., “Sensemaking in Crisis: Unpacking How Teachers Interpret and Respond to Online Education as Street-Level Bureaucrats,” *Cogent Education* 11, no. 1 (2024), doi:10.1080/2331186X.2023.2290214.

¹⁹ Abidin Nurdin et al., “Government Policy Regarding Education in Indonesia: Analysis of Competence-Based Curriculum, Educational Unit Level Curriculum, and Curriculum 2013,” *Journal of Governance and Social Policy* 4, no. 1 (July 5, 2023): 139–55, doi:10.24815/gaspol. v4i1.31812; Wayne Miller, J.P & Seller, *Curriculum; Perspectives and Practices* (New York: Longman, 1985).

²⁰ Syahria Anggita Sakti, Suwardi Endraswara, and Arif Rohman, “Revitalizing Local Wisdom within Character Education through Ethnopedagogy Approach: A Case Study on a Preschool in Yogyakarta,” *Heliyon* 10, no. 10 (May 30, 2024), doi: 10.1016/j.heliyon. 2024.e31370.

²¹ Bao et al., “Sensemaking in Crisis: Unpacking How Teachers Interpret and Respond to Online Education as Street-Level Bureaucrats.”

²² Kemendikbud-Ristek, *Dimensi, Elemen, Dan Subelemen Profil Pelajar Pancasila Pada Kurikulum Merdeka 2*.

to cultivate skills and values that enable learners to navigate diverse cultural contexts, engage responsibly with digital technologies, and think independently and reflectively. However, these forward-looking aspirations sometimes clashed with the curriculum's entrenched moral conservatism, which was strongly grounded in religious teachings and nationalist values. This tension revealed a hybrid ideological framework within the curriculum, where global and local discourses coexisted but were not always fully integrated or coherent. Such contradictions illustrate the challenges of curriculum design in pluralistic societies like Indonesia, where education must balance modernization with respect for traditional and religious values²³. While global citizenship promotes openness, inclusivity, and critical engagement with diverse perspectives, moral conservatism often emphasizes adherence to established norms and authority, potentially limiting students' critical autonomy²⁴. This ideological hybridity can create confusion among educators and learners, who may struggle to reconcile competing values in classroom practice.

This dynamic reflected what Rizvi and Lingard²⁵ described as the “glocalization” of education — a process in which global and local forces simultaneously influenced the shaping of educational policies, curricula, and practices. In the Indonesian context, this was evident in the Merdeka Curriculum's integration of global competencies such as digital literacy, critical thinking, and global citizenship with deeply rooted religious and nationalist values. While this convergence aimed to prepare learners for global participation without compromising national identity, it also produced ideological tensions and inconsistencies. For instance, global education frameworks emphasize open-mindedness, cultural pluralism, and democratic participation²⁶, while the curriculum's moral and religious components often promoted obedience, national loyalty, and conformity²⁷. These competing priorities posed challenges for curriculum coherence and pedagogical clarity. Without intentional integration, students risked receiving mixed messages—being encouraged to think critically and independently in some areas while being expected to follow prescriptive norms in others.

Successfully navigating these tensions required more than simply juxtaposing global and local content; it demanded deliberate curriculum design and pedagogical strategies that enabled students to critically engage with both global ideals and local values. As Bengtson²⁸ argued, education should cultivate reflective citizenship, empowering learners to question, negotiate, and reconcile multiple value systems rather than promoting uncritical conformity or cultural alienation. In this regard, the Merdeka Curriculum presented both opportunities and challenges. Its emphasis on Profile of Pancasila Students offered a potential framework for balancing global competencies with Indonesian values. However, realizing this vision depended heavily on teacher capacity, institutional support, and alignment across policy, practice, and assessment. Educators needed to be equipped not only with the knowledge of global and local frameworks but also with pedagogical tools to foster ethical reasoning, intercultural understanding, and socio-political awareness.

Therefore, policymakers and curriculum developers needed to move beyond rhetorical

²³ Syahrir Syahrir et al., “The Implementation of Merdeka Curriculum to Realize Indonesia Golden Generation: A Systematic Literature Review,” *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan* 16, no. 2 (March 30, 2024), doi:10.35445/alishlah.v16i2.4872.

²⁴ Banks, *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives*.

²⁵ Fazal Rizvi and Bob Lingard, *Globalizing Education Policy* (Routledge, 2009).

²⁶ UNESCO, *Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All*.

²⁷ Kemendikbud-Ristek, *Dimensi, Elemen, Dan Subelemen Profil Pelajar Pancasila Pada Kurikulum Merdeka 2*.

²⁸ Stephanie, and Sarah Dryden-Peterson, eds Bengtsson, *Education, Conflict, and Globalisation* (Routledge, 2018).

alignment and engage in the deliberate development of structural and professional mechanisms²⁹ to operationalize the hybrid vision of character education embedded within Indonesia's national curriculum³⁰. While curriculum policy documents such as the Profile of Pancasila Students articulated an aspirational portrait of the ideal learner—faithful, collaborative, independent, critical, creative, and globally literate—the realization of this vision required coherent pedagogical strategies, teacher empowerment, and systemic policy support³¹.

The complexity of aligning moral, religious, national, and global imperatives demanded more than symbolic policy gestures. It necessitated curriculum mapping that intentionally integrated local wisdom with global competencies, alongside professional development programs that prepared teachers to navigate ideological tensions and facilitate value-based discussions with nuance and reflexivity³²). Furthermore, curriculum implementation needed to be supported by monitoring and evaluation systems that went beyond academic metrics, assessing ethical reasoning, empathy, and civic participation as learning outcomes³³. By fostering a coherent, inclusive, and critically grounded model of character education, Indonesia was better positioned to cultivate a new generation of ethically conscious, socially responsible, and globally minded citizens. These individuals would not only possess the moral foundations essential for national cohesion but also the critical capacities needed to engage constructively in the global community. This transformative goal underscored the importance of treating character education not merely as a cultural imperative, but as a dynamic and dialogic process embedded in all aspects of educational practice and policy.

Curriculum as a Political-Cultural Tool

The discourse of character education in the analyzed curriculum documents appeared to serve broader political and cultural purposes that extend beyond educational objectives alone. The curriculum constructed and promoted an image of the ideal citizen—someone who is religious, obedient to authority, patriotic, and at the same time globally competitive. This ideal citizen profile closely aligns with the state's strategic interest in shaping and reinforcing a cohesive national identity through education³⁴. Rather than fostering open moral inquiry or encouraging critical engagement with ethical dilemmas, the curriculum tended to emphasize conformity to prescribed values and norms that uphold social stability and national unity.

This instrumental use of character education reflects what Apple³⁵ describes as the “politics of curriculum,” where education functions as a mechanism to inculcate dominant ideologies and sustain existing power structures. In the Indonesian context, the character education agenda promotes values of nationalism and religious devotion, which are perceived as essential pillars of societal cohesion and state legitimacy. However, such an approach risks curtailing students' development of critical thinking, moral autonomy, and democratic participation, as it privileges obedience over inquiry and loyalty over pluralistic

²⁹ Alhamuddin Alhamuddin, Eko Surbiantoro, and Revan Dwi Erlangga, “Character Education in Islamic Perspective,” in *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, (London: Atlantis Press, 2022).

³⁰ * Alhamuddin and Andi Murniati, “Promoting the Character of Respect for Each Other through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5): Educational Transformation in the Merdeka Curriculum Era,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Karakter* 1, no. 2 (2024): 3047–6453, doi:10.29313/masagi.v1i2.

³¹ Kemendikbud-Ristek, *Dimensi, Elemen, Dan Subelemen Profil Pelajar Pancasila Pada Kurikulum Merdeka 2*.

³² Banks, *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives*.

³³ Nel. Noddings, *Education and Democracy in the 21st Century* (Teachers College Press, 2013).

³⁴ Gary McCulloch, *The Struggle for the History of Education* (Routledge, 2011).

³⁵ Michael W Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*. 3rd Ed (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2004).

dialogue.

Moreover, the emphasis on religious obedience and patriotism as core virtues inadvertently marginalized minority groups and alternative worldviews within Indonesia's diverse society. This narrow framing constrained the development of truly inclusive citizenship, which requires embracing pluralism and fostering respectful dialogue across different cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds³⁶. The curriculum's discourse on character education predominantly reflected a top-down and normative approach, prioritizing nation-building and cultural preservation over the cultivation of reflective, autonomous, and socially engaged learners³⁷.

This approach risked reinforcing social conformity and marginalizing voices that diverged from the majority narrative, thereby limiting opportunities for critical moral engagement and democratic participation³⁸. To overcome these challenges, character education policies and practices needed to balance state-driven cultural objectives with pedagogical frameworks that encouraged critical moral inquiry, inclusivity, and active citizenship. Such a shift would have prepared students more effectively to navigate the complexities of a pluralistic society³⁹, enabling them to become thoughtful, empathetic citizens capable of contributing constructively to democratic and tolerant communities⁴⁰.

Conclusion

The analysis of the 2013 Curriculum and the Merdeka Curriculum reveals that character education is a central component, embedded in core competencies and embodied through the Pancasila Student Profile. The key values promoted include faith, independence, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and global awareness. However, both curricula lack clear pedagogical guidance, making classroom implementation difficult. Teachers are expected to internalize these values through abstract directives, without adequate support or practical models—highlighting a significant pedagogical gap. A major concern is the ideological tension between globally oriented values (such as digital literacy and pluralism) and conservative moral ideals rooted in religion and nationalism. This results in a hybrid yet often incoherent framework that restricts critical engagement and fails to reflect Indonesia's sociocultural diversity. To address these challenges, character education policy must be grounded in inclusive, dialogic, and evidence-based pedagogical models. Enhancing teacher capacity, clarifying instructional strategies, and aligning values with the realities of diverse classrooms are essential for successful implementation.

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³⁶ Raqib Moslimany, Anzar Otaibi, and Frugo Shaikh, "Designing a Holistic Curriculum: Challenges and Opportunities in Islamic Education," *Journal on Islamic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2024): 52–73.

³⁷ Alhamuddin Alhamuddin, "Transdisciplinary : Model Pengembangan Kurikulum Berorientasi Kebutuhan Alhamuddin" 2 (2017): 55–64.

³⁸ Banks, *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives*.

³⁹ Muhammad Alifuddin, Alhamuddin Alhamuddin, and Nurjannah Nurjannah, "School of Anak Laut (Sea Children): Educational Philanthropy Movement in Bajo Community of Three-Coral World Center," *Jurnal Iqra' : Kajian Ilmu Pendidikan* 6, no. 1 (June 2, 2021): 164–79, doi:10.25217/ji.v6i1.1057.

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