

# Integration of Character Education in the Independent Curriculum: A Case Study of Elementary Schools in Plered District

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## ABSTRACT

The integration of character education in elementary schools remains inconsistent despite the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, particularly in semi-rural areas such as the Plered District. This study aims to analyze the effect of project-based Merdeka Curriculum implementation on the integration of character education among elementary school students. A quantitative research design with a survey approach was employed, involving 100 teachers selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed using simple linear regression to examine the relationship between curriculum implementation and the integration of character education. The results reveal a positive and significant effect of project-based Merdeka Curriculum implementation on character education integration ( $\beta = 0.625$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), with  $R^2 = 0.422$ , indicating that 42.2% of the variance in character education integration is explained by curriculum implementation. These findings suggest that effective project-based learning enhances students' internalization of responsibility, discipline, cooperation, and tolerance. The study highlights the strategic role of the Merdeka Curriculum in strengthening character education at the elementary level and provides empirical evidence from a semi-rural educational context.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education in the era of globalization faces increasingly complex challenges, not only in knowledge transfer but also in shaping students' character [1], [2]. The world today is facing a multidimensional crisis, ranging from moral degradation and social conflict to

environmental crises [3], [4], [5]. A UNESCO report emphasizes that one of the main functions of 21st-century education is to prepare students with holistic competencies: basic literacy, 21st-century skills (critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration), and strong character development [6]. Phenomena such as increasing violence in schools, cyberbullying, intolerance, and uncontrolled consumerism are indicators that global education has not been entirely successful in shaping people of character. On the other hand, the 4.0 industrial revolution, combined with society 5.0, requires humans to integrate technology with human values so that digital development does not erode morality [7], [8], [9]. Thus, character education has become an urgent global issue, not only in developing countries but also in developed countries.

In Indonesia, a survey by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology states that more than 60% of elementary schools face difficulties in consistently integrating character education into daily learning [10]. This shows a gap between the policy's idealism and its implementation in the field. In the Plered District, for example, a number of elementary schools still face major challenges in internalizing character values such as discipline, responsibility, tolerance, and cooperation in learning activities. Teachers' limitations influence this condition by limiting the design of contextual learning, minimal collaboration with parents, and the suboptimal utilization of the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes project-based learning to instill life values. Therefore, further research is needed on the extent to which character education integration has been implemented in elementary schools, particularly in Plered Subdistrict, which has a heterogeneous community in terms of both social and cultural characteristics.

Previous studies have examined character education from various perspectives. Komara et al. argue that character education must become the core of learning to prepare responsible citizens in the 21st century [11]. Pratiwi found that integrating character values into subject learning is more effective than treating them as separate programs [12]. Meanwhile, Novitasary reported that project-based learning in the Merdeka Curriculum improves communication and collaboration skills [13]. However, most prior research focuses on urban contexts or conceptual discussions and rarely provides quantitative empirical evidence at the elementary level in semi-rural districts. Furthermore, limited studies have statistically measured the direct effect of project-based curriculum implementation on the integration of character education. This gap highlights the need for contextual and empirical investigation.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in constructivist learning theory, which posits that knowledge and values are constructed through active engagement and social interaction [14], [15], [16]. Project-based learning encourages experiential learning, collaboration, and reflection, enabling students to internalize values such as responsibility, discipline, tolerance, and cooperation. In addition, character education theory emphasizes that moral development is most effective when values are embedded in authentic learning experiences rather than delivered in a normative manner. Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on project-based learning provides a strategic framework for systematically integrating character education.

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Based on these considerations, the research problem can be formulated as follows: Does the implementation of the project-based Merdeka Curriculum significantly influence the integration of character education in elementary schools in Plered District? To address this problem, this study employs a quantitative survey and regression analysis to empirically test the relationship between curriculum implementation and the integration of character education. Through this approach, the study aims to provide measurable evidence regarding the effectiveness of project-based learning in strengthening character values.

The main objective of this study is to analyze in depth how character education is integrated into the Merdeka Curriculum in elementary schools in the Plered District. More specifically, this study aims to identify the actual forms of character education application in Merdeka Curriculum-based learning, describe the various obstacles faced by teachers in the process of integrating character values into teaching and learning activities, and analyze the extent to which project-based learning strategies are effective in instilling the values of discipline, responsibility, tolerance, and mutual cooperation in students. Furthermore, this study aims to produce practical recommendations for elementary schools to improve and optimize the implementation of character education amid the dynamics of curriculum changes that demand adaptation and innovation.

The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the literature on curriculum reform and the integration of character education, particularly within the Indonesian elementary education context. In practice, the results may guide teachers in designing contextual, project-based learning strategies, assist schools in evaluating curriculum implementation, and inform policymakers in improving teacher training and character education policies. Ultimately, this study aspires to support the development of a generation that embodies strong character, adaptability, and competitiveness in the global era.

## **2. METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative case study approach to explore in depth the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in the context of character education in elementary schools in Plered District [17]. The qualitative method was chosen because it provides a comprehensive understanding of the processes, experiences, and meanings constructed by teachers, students, and schools as they integrate character values into learning. The case study approach was used to trace the phenomenon of curriculum implementation in real-world settings, thereby providing a detailed picture of the practices, challenges, and strategies employed. Research data were obtained through in-depth interviews with teachers and principals, observations of learning activities, and analyses of related documents, such as lesson plans (RPPs) and school reports. Through data triangulation, this research is expected to demonstrate strong validity and to make empirical contributions to the development of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum.

The main instrument in qualitative research is the researcher himself (human instrument), who plays a role in planning, implementing, collecting data, analyzing, and interpreting the research results. To strengthen the data collection process, the researcher also used auxiliary instruments, including interview and observation guidelines and document analysis formats. The interview guidelines included a list of open-ended questions

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to be used flexibly to explore teachers' and principals' experiences, while the observation guidelines were used to record student behavior, activities, and interactions during the learning process. Document analysis was conducted by reviewing learning tools, including lesson plans, teaching modules, and school activity reports, related to character education.

The data in this study were obtained through three main methods: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted with classroom teachers, school principals, and students to obtain information about their perceptions, experiences, and practices in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Participatory observation involved directly observing the learning process in the classroom and during project-based activities to see the actual application of character values. Documentary studies were used to collect data from official school documents, including the operational curriculum, teaching modules, evaluation records, and character education program reports. These three techniques were combined to complement one another, yielding rich, valid data.

Data analysis was conducted interactively following Miles and Huberman's qualitative analysis model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion/verification. Data reduction involved sorting, summarizing, and focusing on data relevant to the study, particularly regarding the form of character education integration and the challenges of its implementation. Data presentation was carried out through descriptive narratives, matrices, and direct quotes from interviews to provide a clear, systematic overview. Conclusions were drawn in stages by linking field findings with previous theories and research, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the integration of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum. To maintain data validity, source, method, and document triangulation techniques were used, ensuring the research results were accountable for validity and reliability.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Results

This study involved 100 elementary school teachers in Plered Subdistrict who were selected using purposive sampling. Respondents were lower- and upper-grade teachers with varying genders, ages, and educational backgrounds. An overview of the respondents can be seen in the following table:

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	40	40%
	Female	60	60%
Age	<30 years old	20	20%
	30–40 years old	45	45%
Educational Background	>40 years old	35	35%
Characteristics	Bachelor's degree in education	85	85%
Gender	Master's degree in education	15	15%

The majority of respondents were female teachers (60%), aged 30-40 (45%), and most had a bachelor’s degree in education (85%). This indicates that the research respondents were predominantly teachers with relatively extensive teaching experience and formal education in the field.

### Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesis in this study is:

- **H1:** There is no significant effect between the implementation of the project-based Merdeka Curriculum and the integration of character education in students.
- **H0:** There is no significant effect between the implementation of the project-based Merdeka Curriculum and the integration of character education in students.

The analysis was conducted using simple linear regression with the independent variable (X) = *implementation of the project-based Merdeka Curriculum* and the dependent variable (Y) = *level of character education integration*.

Table 2. Simple Linear Regression Test Results

Variable	Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	t-count	Sig. (p)	Description
Curriculum Implementation	0.625	6.432	0.000	Significant
Constant	12.351	2.911	0.004	Significant
$R^2 = 0.422$				

The regression coefficient value ( $\beta = 0.625$ ) indicates that a one-unit increase in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum will result in a 0.625-unit increase in character education integration. The p-value = 0.000 < 0.05 indicates a significant result, so H0 is rejected, and H1 is accepted. With  $R^2 = 0.422$ , it means that 42.2% of the variation in character education integration can be explained by the implementation of the project-based Merdeka Curriculum.

### Data Visualization

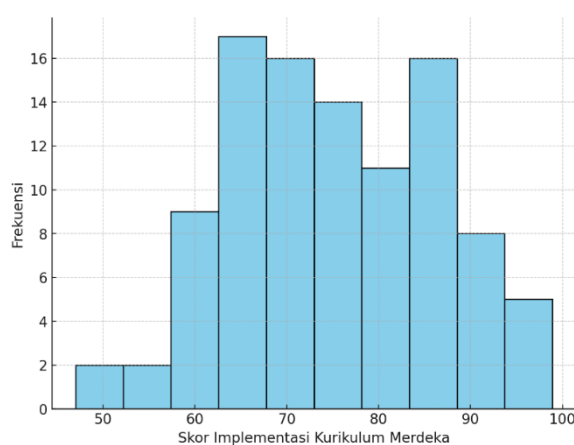


Figure 1. Histogram of Distribution of Independent Curriculum Implementation

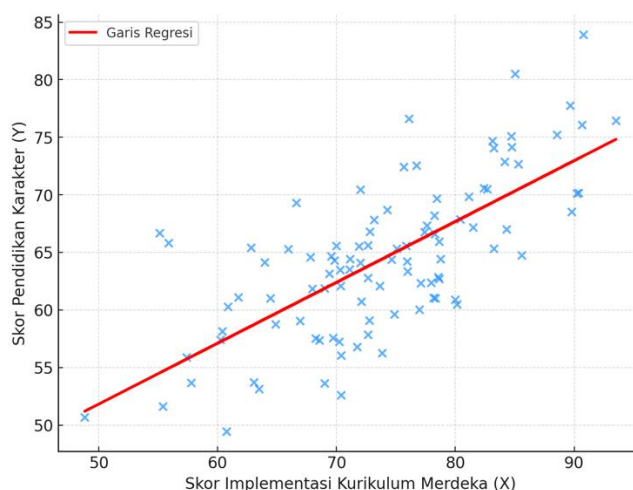


Figure 2. Scatter Plot of the Relationship between the Implementation of the Independent Curriculum and Character Education

### Interpretation of Test Results

Statistical analysis shows that implementing the project-based Merdeka Curriculum has a positive and significant effect on the integration of character education for elementary school students in Plered District. These findings support the research hypothesis that the better the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, the higher the internalization of character values formed in students. Thus, these results reinforce the theory that project-based learning can foster values of responsibility, cooperation, and independence in students.

### 3.2. Discussion

The study's results indicate that implementing the project-based Merdeka Curriculum has a positive and significant effect on the integration of character education for elementary school students in Plered District. The regression coefficient ( $\beta = 0.625$ ) indicates that the better the implementation of project-based learning, the higher the level of integration of character values experienced by students. The significance value ( $p < 0.05$ ) reinforces that this effect is not coincidental but has empirical strength. This supports the idea that the Merdeka Curriculum provides students with opportunities to learn through direct experience, collaboration, and real-world problem-solving [18]. Thus, these findings reinforce the view that project-based learning is a strategic means of instilling in students the values of responsibility, cooperation, and discipline [19].

The findings of this study are in line with Komara *et al.* study, which found that the project-based learning approach in the Merdeka Curriculum improves students' collaboration skills and tolerance [11]. The results of this study also support the findings of Belinda and Halimah, who confirm that integrating character education is more effective when done in subject lessons rather than through separate additional programs [20]. However, the results of this study differ slightly from those of Novitasary, who found that character education implementation remains weak due to teachers' limited understanding [13]. This difference indicates regional differences, with Plered Subdistrict beginning to show better adaptation to the Merdeka Curriculum. Thus, this study enriches the literature

by showing that local context plays an important role in the success of character education [21].

Practically, the results of this study have several important implications. First, for schools, implementing the Merdeka Curriculum can serve as a key strategy for strengthening character education through project-based learning contextualized to the surrounding environment [22]. Second, for teachers, this study emphasizes the need for pedagogical competence in integrating character values into learning in a meaningful way. Third, for policymakers, the results of this study can serve as a basis for expanding teacher training and for providing more applicable character-learning modules.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of constructivist theory, which emphasizes that knowledge and values are formed through active interaction between students and their environment [23]. Through project-based learning, students not only acquire cognitive knowledge but also internalize character values through real experiences [24]. This broadens the understanding that character education is not only a normative aspect but must also be integrated into learning activities that emphasize critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills.

This study has limitations, including the fact that the research was conducted in the Plered District, so the results cannot be generalized to all elementary schools in Indonesia. In addition, the number of respondents was relatively limited, and the questionnaire used for data collection had the potential to introduce subjective bias. The simple regression analysis method also only captures the relationship between two variables, whereas the integration of character education may also be influenced by family, school culture, and community environment factors [25].

Future research should include a broader sample from diverse regions to better represent the population. Mixed methods can also be considered to enrich quantitative data with in-depth qualitative findings. In addition, multivariate analyses such as multiple regression or SEM can be used to test more complex relationships among variables. Subsequent research should also include external factors, such as parental roles and school culture, to more comprehensively analyze the integration of character education.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study confirms that implementing the project-based Merdeka Curriculum plays an important role in strengthening the integration of character education in elementary schools in Plered District. Structured, contextual, and collaborative learning experiences encourage the internalization of values such as responsibility, discipline, cooperation, and tolerance. These findings indicate that curriculum reform, when supported by active and experience-oriented pedagogical strategies, can serve as a strategic instrument for student character development. Theoretically, this study reinforces the constructivist perspective that positions experiential learning as an effective medium for moral and value formation.

Practically, this research provides implications for teachers, schools, and policymakers to optimize project-based learning design and to strengthen support for training and curriculum implementation. However, the study is limited to one specific region and uses a quantitative approach, which may not fully capture broader sociocultural factors.

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Future research is recommended to involve a wider geographical area, employ mixed or longitudinal methods, and consider additional variables, such as parental involvement and school culture. Overall, this study contributes to the literature on integrating character education and offers benefits to the public by fostering a generation with strong character and adaptability to global challenges.

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