




Exploring the Influence of the Merdeka Curriculum on Elementary Students' Moral Development

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the impact of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum on the moral development of elementary school students. The Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasizes flexibility, relevance, and student-centered learning, is expected to contribute positively to the development of students' character and moral values. This study employs a literature review method to examine the concept of the Merdeka Curriculum, theories of moral development in elementary school children, and the potential relationship between the curriculum and students' moral growth. The findings indicate that the flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum enables teachers to integrate moral values contextually and in accordance with students' needs. In addition, project-based learning and collaborative activities have the potential to foster empathy, responsibility, and social awareness among students. However, effective implementation requires teachers to possess a deep understanding of children's stages of moral development as well as appropriate instructional strategies. The implications of this study suggest that elementary school teachers and educational policymakers should strengthen the integration of character education and ethical digital literacy within the learning process. Furthermore, schools are encouraged to design learning activities that promote students' moral reasoning, collaboration, and social responsibility through meaningful real-life experiences. In conclusion, the Merdeka Curriculum has significant potential to support the moral development of elementary school students. Nevertheless, its success largely depends on well-planned and adaptive implementation practices.

Keywords: Merdeka Curriculum, Moral Development, Elementary School Students, Character Education, Implementation.



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INTRODUCTION

Moral education plays a fundamental role in shaping children's character and guiding them to become responsible members of society. At the elementary school level, moral development

becomes particularly important because this stage represents a critical period in children's cognitive, emotional, and social growth. During this phase, children begin to understand social norms, distinguish between right and wrong, and develop empathy, responsibility, honesty, and respect for others [1]. Moral values acquired during childhood significantly influence students' future behavior, decision-making, and interpersonal relationships [2]. Therefore, schools are expected not only to develop students' academic competencies but also to foster moral and ethical values that support holistic development.

In recent decades, the issue of moral education has become increasingly complex due to globalization, technological advancement, and digital transformation. The rapid growth of digital technology has created new challenges for children's moral development [3]. Elementary school students are now exposed to unlimited information through social media, online games, and digital platforms that may influence their attitudes and behavior positively or negatively. The digital era has changed children's social interaction patterns and created ethical dilemmas related to cyberbullying, misinformation, digital addiction, and declining social sensitivity [4]. Modern education systems often focus excessively on academic achievement while neglecting character formation, resulting in a decline in students' moral awareness and social responsibility [5].

The importance of integrating moral education into school curricula has been emphasized by many scholars. Moral development evolves through progressive stages of reasoning and requires meaningful social experiences to stimulate higher moral thinking [6]. Meanwhile, Bandura's social learning theory highlights the role of observation, modeling, and social interaction in shaping children's moral behavior [7]. This indicates that moral education cannot merely rely on theoretical instruction but should involve authentic experiences, collaborative learning, reflection, and real-life problem-solving activities. In elementary education, teachers become important role models who influence students' moral attitudes through both explicit instruction and implicit daily interactions.

In Indonesia, moral education is strongly connected to the philosophical values of Pancasila, which emphasize religious values, humanity, unity, democracy, and social justice. The Indonesian education system has long recognized the importance of character education as an integral component of national development [8]. However, the implementation of moral education in schools has often faced challenges, including teacher-centered learning approaches, excessive emphasis on cognitive achievement, limited contextual learning experiences, and insufficient integration of character values across subjects [9]. Consequently, there is a growing need for educational reform that supports more flexible, meaningful, and student-centered learning practices capable of strengthening students' moral development.

The implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum represents one of the Indonesian government's major educational reforms aimed at improving the quality and relevance of education in the twenty-first century. The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes flexibility, differentiated instruction, student-centered learning, and competency development [10], [11]. Unlike previous curricula that tended to focus heavily on content mastery, the Merdeka Curriculum encourages students to learn actively through exploration, collaboration, creativity, and project-based activities [12]. This curriculum also provides schools and teachers with greater autonomy to adapt learning to local contexts and students' characteristics.

One of the most significant aspects of the Merdeka Curriculum is its emphasis on strengthening the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (Pancasila Student Profile). The Pancasila Student Profile consists of six key dimensions: faith and noble character, global diversity, collaboration, independence, critical reasoning, and creativity [13], [14]. These dimensions demonstrate that moral and character development are positioned as central goals of education rather than supplementary outcomes. The implementation of the Pancasila Student Profile is intended to

develop students who are not only academically competent but also possess strong moral character and social awareness.

Several studies have shown that the Merdeka Curriculum has the potential to support students' moral and character development. Project-based and student-centered learning approaches provide students with opportunities to develop empathy, cooperation, and moral reasoning through direct experiences. Through collaborative projects and contextual problem-solving activities, students learn to respect others' perspectives, communicate effectively, and take responsibility for group decisions. The moral development in children is influenced by social interaction and environmental experiences, meaning that learning environments that encourage active participation and collaboration can positively affect students' moral growth [15].

Furthermore, project-based learning, which is one of the core characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum, has been recognized as an effective approach to fostering social and moral competencies. Project-based learning encourages students to engage in meaningful inquiry, teamwork, and reflective thinking, which can strengthen ethical awareness and social responsibility [16]. Project-based learning supports the development of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity while enabling students to connect classroom learning with real-life issues [17], [18]. In the context of elementary education, projects related to environmental awareness, social care, and community engagement can become powerful tools for cultivating moral values and responsible behavior.

The flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum also enables teachers to integrate moral values contextually into various subjects and learning activities. Instead of teaching moral education separately, teachers are encouraged to incorporate ethical discussions, reflective activities, and social issues into everyday learning experiences. Effective moral education should be integrated across the curriculum and embedded within students' social experiences rather than delivered solely through direct moral instruction [19]. This integrated approach aligns with the philosophy of the Merdeka Curriculum, which prioritizes meaningful and contextual learning.

Despite its potential benefits, the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum also faces several challenges in supporting moral development. One major challenge is teachers' readiness to design and facilitate meaningful character-based learning experiences. Effective implementation requires teachers to possess not only pedagogical competence but also a deep understanding of child development, moral education, and reflective teaching practices. Some teachers still experience difficulties in implementing differentiated instruction and integrating character education into project-based learning activities. Limited training, insufficient resources, and varying levels of teacher digital literacy may hinder the effectiveness of curriculum implementation.

Another important challenge relates to the integration of ethical digital literacy in elementary education. In the digital era, students require guidance not only in using technology effectively but also in interacting responsibly in digital spaces. Digital citizenship education is essential for helping students understand ethical online behavior, digital safety, respect for others, and critical evaluation of information [20]. Without proper digital moral guidance, students may become vulnerable to cyberbullying, misinformation, intolerance, and irresponsible online behavior. Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum must support the integration of ethical digital literacy as part of students' moral and character education.

Family and community environments also play important roles in children's moral development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory explains that children's development is influenced by interactions among family, school, peers, and broader social environments [21]. This means that schools alone cannot fully shape students' morality without support from parents and communities. Collaboration among teachers, families, and society is

essential to create consistent moral values and positive role models for children. The Merdeka Curriculum provides opportunities for schools to involve parents and communities in project-based learning and character education activities that strengthen students' social and moral competencies.

Based on these considerations, the Merdeka Curriculum appears to have significant potential to support the moral development of elementary school students through flexible, student-centered, and project-based learning approaches. However, the effectiveness of its implementation depends on various factors, including teacher competence, ethical digital literacy integration, supportive learning environments, and collaboration between schools and families. Therefore, further analysis is needed to understand how the Merdeka Curriculum influences the moral development of elementary school students and how its implementation can be optimized in the Indonesian educational context.

This article aims to analyze the potential influence of the Merdeka Curriculum on the moral development of elementary school students by reviewing curriculum concepts, theories of moral development, and recent research findings related to character education and student-centered learning. In addition, this article discusses the opportunities and challenges in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum to strengthen moral education in Indonesian elementary schools.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative literature review method to analyze the potential influence of the Merdeka Curriculum on the moral development of elementary school students. This study adopted a narrative literature review approach. A literature review was considered appropriate because the study aimed to examine theoretical perspectives, previous empirical findings, and educational policies related to moral education and curriculum implementation in Indonesia. Through this approach, the researchers were able to synthesize various concepts and findings from different scholarly sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the Merdeka Curriculum and students' moral development.

The data used in this study were obtained from various credible and relevant sources, including official government documents related to the Merdeka Curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, books on moral development theories, peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and expert opinions in the fields of education, psychology, and character education. The literature selection process prioritized sources that discussed curriculum implementation, moral development in children, character education, project-based learning, and student-centered learning approaches. Both national and international publications published within the last ten years were reviewed to ensure the relevance and recency of the discussion, although several classical theories, such as those proposed by Piaget and Kohlberg, were also included as foundational references.

The data analysis process was conducted qualitatively through several stages, namely data collection, data reduction, data categorization, interpretation, and synthesis. First, the researchers identified and collected literature relevant to the topic of study. Second, the selected literature was reviewed critically to identify key themes, concepts, and findings related to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and moral development in elementary education. Third, the information obtained from various sources was categorized into several discussion themes, including character education, project-based learning, ethical digital literacy, and child moral development theories. Finally, the researchers interpreted and synthesized the findings

to formulate conclusions regarding the opportunities and challenges of implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in supporting the moral development of elementary school students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Merdeka Curriculum

a. Definition and Characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum is an educational framework designed to provide flexible, student-centered, and competency-based learning experiences. The curriculum emphasizes differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and the development of students' competencies through meaningful learning activities. Unlike conventional curricula that mainly focus on content mastery, the Merdeka Curriculum prioritizes conceptual understanding, creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and character development.

One of the major characteristics of the Merdeka Curriculum is its flexibility in implementation [11], [12]. Teachers are given autonomy to adapt instructional strategies, learning materials, and assessment methods according to students' needs, learning readiness, interests, and local contexts. This flexibility enables educators to create more inclusive and contextual learning environments that support students' holistic development. Curriculum flexibility allows schools to design innovative learning activities that are relevant to students' social and cultural realities [22].

Another important characteristic of the Merdeka Curriculum is the implementation of project-based learning. Through project-based activities, students are encouraged to solve real-world problems, collaborate with peers, and apply knowledge in authentic situations. Project-based learning enhances communication, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration skills while increasing students' engagement in learning [23]. Project-based learning supports deeper conceptual understanding because students actively construct knowledge through inquiry, reflection, and investigation [24].

The Merdeka Curriculum also strongly emphasizes the development of the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (Pancasila Student Profile), which serves as the foundation for character education in Indonesia. The six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile include: (1) faith and noble character, (2) global diversity, (3) collaboration, (4) independence, (5) critical reasoning, and (6) creativity [25]. These dimensions indicate that the curriculum aims not only to improve students' academic competence but also to foster moral values, social responsibility, and civic awareness.

The implementation of Pancasila Student Profile projects can improve students' empathy, responsibility, collaboration, and problem-solving abilities [26]. Project-based activities in the Merdeka Curriculum encourage students to become more socially aware and responsible toward their environment [27]. Effective character education should integrate moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action in everyday learning experiences.

Furthermore, technology integration is another important component of the Merdeka Curriculum. The curriculum encourages the use of digital technology to improve accessibility and effectiveness in learning. However, digital learning must also be accompanied by ethical digital literacy education. Digital citizenship education is necessary to help students develop responsible online behavior, critical awareness, and ethical communication skills. Therefore, the Merdeka Curriculum has considerable potential to support both students' academic achievement and moral development when implemented effectively.

b. Core Principles of the Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum is built upon several fundamental principles that support students' comprehensive development. The first principle is "Freedom to Learn," which

emphasizes students' autonomy in exploring knowledge and developing their interests and talents. This principle encourages active participation, independent learning, and self-regulation. Autonomy in learning increases intrinsic motivation, engagement, and students' sense of responsibility toward their learning process [28].

The second principle is character education. Character education is integrated into learning activities and is not treated as a separate subject. Effective moral education should be embedded within the curriculum and school culture rather than delivered solely through theoretical instruction [19]. In the Merdeka Curriculum, character education is implemented through collaborative learning, reflective discussion, community-based projects, and co-curricular activities that encourage students to practice ethical behavior in real-life situations.

The third principle is the development of 21st-century skills. The curriculum emphasizes communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and digital literacy as essential competencies for modern society. These competencies are necessary to prepare students for the rapidly changing global environment [29]. In elementary schools, these skills can be developed through inquiry-based learning, collaborative activities, and project-based instruction that encourage students to solve problems creatively and critically.

Another essential principle is holistic assessment. Assessment in the Merdeka Curriculum is not limited to measuring cognitive achievement but also evaluates students' attitudes, participation, collaboration, creativity, and moral behavior. Formative assessment provides continuous feedback that helps students improve both academic and personal development [30]. Consequently, holistic assessment supports students' intellectual, emotional, and moral growth simultaneously.

In addition, differentiated learning is an important aspect of the Merdeka Curriculum. Differentiated instruction allows teachers to adapt learning activities according to students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles [31]. This approach creates more inclusive classrooms and provides opportunities for all students to participate meaningfully in learning. In moral education, differentiated learning enables teachers to provide contextual moral experiences suitable for students' developmental stages and social backgrounds.

c. Structure and Implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum

The structure of the Merdeka Curriculum at the elementary school level is divided into three phases: Phase A (Grades I–II), Phase B (Grades III–IV), and Phase C (Grades V–VI). Each phase is designed according to students' developmental characteristics and learning needs. In the early grades, the curriculum prioritizes literacy and numeracy development as foundational competencies for lifelong learning.

The curriculum includes core subjects such as Indonesian Language, Mathematics, Natural and Social Sciences, Religious Education, and Pancasila Education. In addition, schools are encouraged to provide co-curricular and elective activities that support students' interests, creativity, and character development. One of the distinctive programs in the Merdeka Curriculum is the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5)*, which focuses on strengthening students' moral, social, and civic competencies through interdisciplinary projects.

The implementation of P5 activities improves students' collaboration skills, social responsibility, and environmental awareness. Through project-based learning, students are exposed to authentic social problems that require teamwork, empathy, and reflective thinking. This finding aligns with [32], social learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of observation, social interaction, and modeling in shaping behavior.

The implementation of project-based learning also contributes significantly to students' moral development because students actively engage in collaborative activities and

reflective experiences. Learning occurs through social interaction and communication. Consequently, classroom environments that encourage cooperation, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving can facilitate the development of empathy, moral reasoning, and social awareness among students.

Moreover, the flexibility of the Merdeka Curriculum enables teachers to integrate moral values across subjects and learning activities. Moral education is therefore not restricted to Religious Education or Civics Education but can also be incorporated into science, arts, social studies, and extracurricular programs. This integrated approach supports the internalization of moral values through continuous practice and social interaction.

2. Moral Development in Elementary School Children

a. Definition of Morality and Moral Development

Moral development refers to the process through which individuals learn values, ethical principles, norms, and socially acceptable behavior. Children's moral understanding develops gradually alongside cognitive growth and social interaction [33]. Children initially perceive rules as fixed and absolute, but over time they begin to understand that rules are socially constructed and can be negotiated based on fairness and mutual agreement.

Morality is closely associated with social and cultural values. The morality reflects socially accepted standards regarding appropriate and inappropriate behavior. In elementary school children, moral development is influenced by interactions with parents, teachers, peers, and the surrounding social environment. Therefore, schools play a strategic role in facilitating students' moral growth through both formal instruction and daily social interaction.

Moral education involves three important dimensions: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action [5]. Students should not only understand moral concepts cognitively but also develop empathy, conscience, and the willingness to apply ethical principles in real-life situations. Consequently, effective moral education requires meaningful learning experiences that connect theoretical understanding with practical application.

Moral education also contributes significantly to students' social competence and emotional well-being. Effective character education programs can improve students' prosocial behavior, responsibility, and interpersonal relationships [34]. This suggests that moral education is not merely related to ethics but also to the development of positive social behavior that supports students' overall development.

b. Theories of Moral Development

Kohlberg's theory of moral development remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding children's moral reasoning. Kohlberg and Hersh classify moral development into three levels: pre-conventional morality, conventional morality, and post-conventional morality [35]. At the elementary school level, children generally operate within the pre-conventional and conventional stages, where moral decisions are influenced by rewards, punishment, social approval, and rule compliance.

Piaget's cognitive developmental theory also explains that children's moral understanding develops through interaction and cognitive maturation. During the heteronomous morality stage, children perceive rules as fixed and imposed by authority figures. However, during the autonomous morality stage, children begin to consider intentions, fairness, and reciprocity when evaluating actions.

In addition to cognitive theories, Bandura's social learning theory [7] highlights the importance of observational learning and role models in moral development. Children tend to imitate behaviors observed from parents, teachers, peers, and media figures. Therefore,

teachers' attitudes, classroom culture, and school environments significantly influence students' moral behavior.

Kohlberg also emphasizes that moral development requires opportunities for discussion, reflection, and social interaction. Democratic classroom environments and cooperative learning activities can stimulate students' moral reasoning and ethical awareness [36]. This perspective strongly supports the implementation of collaborative and reflective learning approaches within the Merdeka Curriculum.

c. Factors Affecting Moral Development

Moral development is influenced by multiple interconnected factors, including cognitive development, family environment, social interaction, culture, religion, education, and digital experiences. Children's development occurs within interconnected ecological systems involving family, school, peers, and society [37].

Family plays a fundamental role in introducing moral values and behavioral norms. Parenting styles significantly influence children's empathy, discipline, responsibility, and social behavior [37]. Positive parenting practices contribute to the development of moral sensitivity and emotional regulation in children.

Schools also contribute substantially to moral development through classroom interaction, teacher modeling, and character education programs. [38] explain that supportive school environments can strengthen students' moral reasoning, empathy, and prosocial behavior. Consequently, teachers function not only as instructors but also as moral role models for students.

In the digital era, social media and online interaction have become additional factors influencing children's morality. [39] explain that children's online experiences can shape attitudes, behavior, and ethical awareness. Without proper guidance, students may become vulnerable to cyberbullying, misinformation, intolerance, and unethical online behavior. Therefore, schools need to integrate ethical digital literacy into learning activities to help students navigate digital environments responsibly.

Overall, the findings indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum has substantial potential to support students' moral development through student-centered learning, project-based activities, collaboration, reflective learning, and character education integration. However, effective implementation requires teacher readiness, supportive learning environments, parental involvement, and ethical digital literacy education to ensure that students develop not only academic competence but also strong moral character and social responsibility.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the Merdeka Curriculum has substantial potential to support the moral development of elementary school students through its flexible, student-centered, and competency-based learning approach. The curriculum encourages the integration of character education, collaboration, reflective learning, and project-based activities that foster empathy, responsibility, critical thinking, and social awareness among students. The implementation of the Profil Pelajar Pancasila further strengthens the role of schools in developing students' moral character alongside academic competence. In addition, the integration of project-based learning and contextual learning experiences enables students to apply moral values in real-life situations and social interactions. However, the effectiveness of the Merdeka Curriculum in promoting moral development depends on several important factors, including teachers' pedagogical competence, the integration of ethical digital literacy, supportive school environments, and collaboration between schools, families, and

communities. Therefore, successful implementation requires continuous teacher training, adaptive instructional strategies, and meaningful learning experiences that encourage students to become morally responsible, socially aware, and ethically competent individuals in the digital era.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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