

Research Manuscript



Moral Education in History Teaching under Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum: Challenges and Contradictions in Post-Colonial Pedagogical Reform

Fitrian Jingga Arimbi¹✉

¹ Bae Senior High School 2, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study critically examines the implementation of moral and character education within history teaching under Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum. Drawing on interviews, observations, and document analysis at two public high schools in Kudus, Central Java, the research reveals significant gaps between curriculum policy and classroom practice. While the curriculum provides a framework, integration of character values remains suboptimal due to overemphasis on the Pancasila Student Profile project, insufficient teacher training, non-strategic scheduling, and lack of validated teaching materials. Student perspectives indicate varied and often limited reception of character education. The findings contribute to global debates on post-colonial curriculum reform, teacher agency, and the challenges of embedding moral education in history teaching. The study underscores the need for balanced, intentional pedagogical approaches to translate policy into meaningful practice, advocating for sustained professional development and context-sensitive resource development.

KEYWORDS

Merdeka Curriculum; Character Education; History Teaching; Post-Colonial Pedagogy; Moral Education

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted:
20 August 2024
Revised:
15 July 2025
Accepted:
20 July 2025

ABSTRAK

Studi kualitatif ini secara kritis meneliti implementasi pendidikan moral dan karakter dalam pengajaran sejarah di bawah Kurikulum Merdeka Indonesia. Berdasarkan wawancara, observasi, dan analisis dokumen di dua sekolah menengah atas negeri di Kudus, Jawa Tengah, penelitian ini mengungkapkan kesenjangan yang signifikan antara kebijakan kurikulum dan praktik di kelas. Meskipun kurikulum menyediakan kerangka kerja, integrasi nilai-nilai karakter masih kurang optimal karena terlalu menekankan proyek Profil Siswa Pancasila dan kurangnya materi pengajaran yang tervalidasi. Temuan ini berkontribusi pada debat global tentang reformasi kurikulum pasca-kolonial, peran guru, dan tantangan dalam menanamkan pendidikan moral dalam pengajaran sejarah. Studi ini menggarisbawahi perlunya pendekatan pedagogis yang seimbang dan disengaja untuk menerjemahkan kebijakan ke dalam praktik yang bermakna, serta mengadvokasi pengembangan profesional yang berkelanjutan dan pengembangan sumber daya yang peka terhadap konteks.

KATA KUNCI

Kurikulum Merdeka; Pendidikan Karakter; Pengajaran Sejarah; Pedagogi Pascakolonial; Pendidikan Moral

SEJARAH ARTIKEL

Submit:
20 Agustus 2024
Revisi:
15 Juli 2025
Diterima:
20 Juli 2025

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed a global resurgence of interest in character and moral education as societies grapple with perceived declines in ethical standards and social cohesion (Hart, 2022; Hsu et al., 2022). Across diverse national contexts, policymakers have increasingly positioned schools as sites for cultivating not only cognitive competencies but also the values, dispositions, and virtues essential for responsible citizenship (Maire, 2024). In post-colonial societies, this imperative carries additional weight, as education systems must simultaneously address legacies of colonial domination, construct cohesive national identities, and prepare youth for participation in rapidly globalizing economies (Nesterova, 2024; Reid, 2024).

Indonesia's educational history reflects these complex dynamics. Since independence, the nation has undergone multiple curriculum reforms, each attempting to align schooling with evolving political, social, and cultural aspirations (Permana & Rohmah, 2024). The most recent transition to the Merdeka Curriculum (Independent Curriculum), initiated in 2022, represents a significant paradigm shift toward flexibility, student-centered learning, and enhanced teacher autonomy (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). Central to this reform is the Pancasila Student Profile, a framework articulating six core character dimensions: faith, global diversity, mutual cooperation, independence, critical reasoning, and creativity. The profile explicitly aims to integrate character education across all subjects, positioning teachers as key agents in moral formation.

History education occupies a strategically vital position within this framework. As (Pratama, 2022) argues, history teaching in Indonesia serves both cognitive and civic functions: it transmits knowledge of the national past while cultivating dispositions essential for democratic citizenship. The discipline's focus on human agency, ethical dilemmas, and collective memory provides rich opportunities for moral reflection (Alvén, 2024; Weintraub & Gibson, 2025). Through engagement with historical narratives, students can develop empathy, perspective-taking, and understanding of the consequences of human choices qualities central to character development.

However, international research consistently documents significant gaps between curriculum policy and classroom implementation (Smith et al., 2025). Teachers' interpretations of reform mandates, their professional knowledge and beliefs, and the structural constraints of schooling shape how policies are enacted. In post-colonial contexts, these challenges are amplified by resource limitations, large class sizes, and historical patterns of centralized control that may inhibit teacher agency (Oteng et al., 2023). Indonesian history teachers implementing the Merdeka Curriculum navigate these tensions daily, balancing new expectations with established practices.

Preliminary studies suggest that while the Merdeka Curriculum offers promising directions, implementation remains uneven. Hanif & Maruti (2025) highlighted challenges in traditional history teaching in Indonesia, where cognitive aspects such as knowledge transformation and analytical skills are addressed but creative and emotional engagement, key to deeper character integration, require innovative approaches like outdoor frameworks to strengthen identity and values. Kusumawati & Umam (2025) further noted that the curriculum emphasizes Pancasila-based character development alongside knowledge acquisition, yet teachers face difficulties in fully integrating these non-cognitive elements amid broader pedagogical shifts and resource demands. These studies,

however, primarily address general curriculum rollout, teacher competence, and historical thinking enhancement rather than specifically examining moral education or character integration in history classrooms at the high school level.

This research addresses that gap through a qualitative case study of two public high schools in Kudus, Central Java. It investigates three interrelated questions: (1) How is moral and character education implemented in history teaching under the Merdeka Curriculum? (2) What challenges do teachers encounter in this process? (3) How do students perceive and respond to these efforts? By examining teacher practices, institutional constraints, and student perspectives, the study aims to contribute both to Indonesian educational discourse and to international conversations on curriculum reform, teacher agency, and the role of history education in moral formation.

Theoretical Framework

Curriculum Reform and Teacher Agency in Post-Colonial Contexts

Curriculum reform in post-colonial societies operates within complex historical and political dynamics that shape both possibilities and constraints. (Santiago & Dozono, 2022) argues that curriculum is never neutral but embodies particular configurations of power, knowledge, and interest. In Indonesia, successive reforms have reflected ongoing negotiations between centralized control and local autonomy, between internationally circulating educational discourses and locally grounded pedagogical traditions (Kholiq et al., 2022). The Merdeka Curriculum's emphasis on flexibility and teacher autonomy represents a significant departure from earlier prescriptive approaches, yet its success depends fundamentally on teachers' capacity to operationalize this flexibility within resource-constrained environments.

Teacher agency the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively in shaping their work emerges as critical in understanding curriculum implementation (Pratama, 2022; Smith et al., 2025) . Rather than passive recipients of policy directives, teachers actively interpret, adapt, and sometimes resist curricular changes based on their professional knowledge, beliefs, and contextual constraints. This ecological perspective recognizes that agency is achieved through interplay between individual factors (experience, beliefs, skills) and contextual factors (resources, support, policy coherence). In post-colonial contexts, teacher agency operates within what Hariyono & Leksana (2025) term the "post-colonial condition," characterized by legacies of colonial educational structures, ongoing negotiations between global and local knowledge traditions, and persistent resource constraints.

Moral Education and History Teaching

The integration of moral education into history teaching has been theorized from multiple perspectives. Lickona (1991) conceptualizes character education as deliberate efforts to cultivate virtues such as respect, responsibility, honesty, and fairness. In history classrooms, these virtues can be developed through engagement with historical narratives

that illustrate moral dilemmas, ethical choices, and the consequences of human action (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Seixas and Morton (2013) emphasize that historical thinking involves ethical judgment: understanding the actions of historical actors requires considering the moral frameworks of their time while also recognizing enduring human values.

Barton and Levstik (2004) argue that history education serves both individual and collective purposes, including the development of empathy, perspective recognition, and critical reflection on societal values. These capacities align closely with character education goals. However, they caution against simplistic “moral lessons” that reduce complex historical events to didactic messages. Effective integration requires nuanced engagement with historical contexts, multiple perspectives, and the ambiguity inherent in human experience.

In the Indonesian context, character education has been formally integrated into national curriculum since 2010, with particular emphasis on values derived from Pancasila, the state philosophy (Riani et al., 2025). The Merdeka Curriculum’s Pancasila Student Profile represents the latest iteration, articulating six dimensions intended to guide all instructional activities. History education is positioned as a key vehicle for developing these dimensions, particularly those related to national identity, diversity appreciation, and mutual cooperation.

Differentiated Instruction and Its Limits

The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes differentiated instruction as a core pedagogical principle, requiring teachers to adapt content, processes, and products to diverse student needs (Smets, 2024). This approach aligns with international trends recognizing that effective teaching responds to variations in student readiness, interest, and learning profiles. However, implementing differentiation in large, diverse classes requires sophisticated pedagogical content knowledge and significant planning time (Ardenlid, 2025). In resource-constrained contexts, teachers may struggle to operationalize differentiation, particularly when also expected to integrate character education.

The Hidden Curriculum and Teacher as Moral Agent

Beyond explicit instruction, schools transmit values through what Jackson (1968) termed the “hidden curriculum” the implicit norms, routines, and social relations that shape student experience. Teachers serve as moral agents not only through direct teaching but through their modeling of values, classroom management practices, and interactions with students (Feiss et al., 2025). In history classrooms, teacher attitudes toward historical content, their framing of controversial issues, and their responses to student perspectives convey implicit messages about ethical engagement with the past.

Functionalist Perspectives on Educational Change

Durkheim’s (1956) functionalist perspective, referenced in the original manuscript, views education as a mechanism for maintaining social cohesion and transmitting collective

values. From this viewpoint, character education serves to integrate individuals into the moral order of society. However, critics note that functionalism may overemphasize consensus and stability while underplaying conflict and power (Haugaard, 2022). In post-colonial contexts, the “moral order” itself may be contested, with different groups advancing competing visions of national identity and values. History education, as a site for negotiating these tensions, requires critical examination of whose values are transmitted and how.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design with a phenomenological orientation. Qualitative methodology was selected for its capacity to explore complex social phenomena within their natural contexts and to capture the meanings participants assign to their experiences (Creswell, 2015; Moleong, 2017). The phenomenological approach enabled deep exploration of how teachers and students experienced and interpreted character education within history classrooms (Kainulainen et al., 2025). The case study design, encompassing two schools, allowed for comparative analysis while maintaining contextual richness.

Data and Sources of Data

The research was conducted at two public high schools in Kudus, Central Java: SMA Negeri 2 Bae and SMA Negeri 1 Mejobo. These schools were purposively selected based on their implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum and accessibility. Both schools are located in semi-rural areas, providing insights into challenges faced by schools outside major urban centers.

Data sources comprised three categories essential for qualitative understanding. First, informants included four history teachers (two from each school) and twenty tenth-grade students (ten from each school, five per teacher). Teachers were selected based on their direct involvement in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. Students were purposively sampled to represent diversity in gender, academic performance, and engagement levels. Second, learning activities were observed directly in four classrooms, capturing teacher-student interactions, instructional methods, and classroom dynamics. Third, documents including teaching modules, learning outcomes (CP), learning objectives (TP), and assessment records were analyzed to understand planning and implementation.

Data Collection

Data collection employed three complementary techniques over four months (August to November 2024). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher (60-90 minutes) and each student (30-45 minutes), exploring perceptions of character education,

implementation practices, challenges encountered, and responses to teaching. Interview protocols were developed based on research questions and theoretical framework.

Classroom observations were conducted for each teacher across multiple sessions, focusing on how character values were explicitly or implicitly communicated, student engagement, and classroom management. Observations followed a structured protocol documenting teacher behaviors, student responses, and contextual factors.

Document analysis examined teaching modules, lesson plans, and assessment tools to assess alignment between planned and enacted curriculum. Documents were analyzed for explicit references to character values and evidence of differentiated instruction.

Trustworthiness of Data

Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of sources, techniques, and methods (Braun & Clarke, 2025). Source triangulation involved comparing data from teachers, students, and documents. Technique triangulation cross-verified interview findings with observational and documentary evidence. Method triangulation combined multiple data collection approaches to compensate for limitations of any single method. Member checking was conducted by summarizing key findings and presenting them to participants for verification. Thick description of contexts and participants supports transferability.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Saldaña (2018) interactive model, comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded using both deductive codes derived from the theoretical framework (e.g., "teacher agency," "character values," "challenges") and inductive codes emerging from the data (e.g., "Pancasila project overshadowing," "student passivity"). Coded segments were organized into themes through constant comparison. Themes were refined through iterative review and discussed with research supervisors to enhance credibility. The analysis integrated findings across data sources to construct coherent interpretations.

Results

Implementation of Character Education in History Classrooms

Teachers at both schools demonstrated awareness of the Merdeka Curriculum's character education mandate and incorporated references to character values in their planning documents. Learning objectives in teaching modules frequently included values such as tolerance, mutual cooperation, national pride, and appreciation of historical heritage. However, classroom observations revealed considerable variation in how these values were enacted.

At SMA Negeri 2 Bae, Indah Ayu Ainina, S.Pd., integrated character education systematically, using local historical sites as pedagogical resources. She explained: "In every meeting, I emphasize that learning history isn't just about facts but about understanding the meaning behind events and applying those lessons in daily life." Her lessons included discussions of tolerance through study of Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic cultural heritage, and she assigned group projects requiring students to visit local heritage sites such as Menara Kudus. Students responded positively, with several noting that these activities made historical content more meaningful and helped them internalize values like cooperation and respect for diversity.

In contrast, Angga Handika, S.Pd., also at SMA Negeri 2 Bae, focused more heavily on content coverage and structured presentations. While his teaching modules listed character objectives, classroom practice emphasized cognitive outcomes. Students primarily engaged in group presentations and question-answer sessions, with limited explicit discussion of moral implications. One student commented: "The character values are mentioned at the beginning, but during the lesson, it's mostly about presenting material. I don't really feel the moral education part."

At SMA Negeri 1 Mejobo, similar contrasts emerged. Siti Nurbiah, S.Pd., newly appointed to the school, emphasized character education through inclusive practices. She began each lesson with prayer, explicitly noting the presence of non-Muslim students to model tolerance. Her use of historical films followed by critical discussion created opportunities for moral reflection. Students appreciated her approach: "Ibu Nur always reminds us about values like honesty and tolerance. Even though I'm a minority here, I feel respected."

M. Galih Sulisty, S.Pd., employed varied methods including quizzes, infographics, and crossword puzzles, but students reported limited character integration. One student observed: "Pak Galih's lessons are creative, but the character education part isn't really visible. It's more about finishing the material." Observations confirmed that while instructional methods were varied, explicit attention to moral values was minimal.

Across all teachers, the values most frequently addressed were tolerance, cooperation, national pride, and appreciation of historical heritage. These aligned with Pancasila Student Profile dimensions. However, integration depth varied significantly, with some teachers weaving values throughout lessons while others treated them as peripheral.

Challenges in Implementing Character Education

Teachers identified multiple challenges spanning internal and external domains. Internal challenges included student motivation and classroom management. History was often perceived as boring or irrelevant, a perception reinforced by family and community attitudes. Siti Nurbiah noted: "The biggest challenge is student motivation. Many think history is just memorizing old events that don't matter now." Scheduling compounded this problem; history lessons frequently fell during afternoon hours when student energy and attention waned.

Classroom diversity posed additional challenges. Students brought varied backgrounds, learning styles, and personality traits, making differentiated instruction difficult. During discussions, disagreements could escalate, disrupting learning. M. Galih Sulisty

explained: "When students have different opinions, sometimes the class gets noisy. Managing that while also trying to teach values is tough."

External challenges included limited professional development. All teachers reported insufficient training on character education integration specifically, as opposed to general curriculum orientation. Indah Ayu Ainina commented: "From the beginning, we haven't had enough training on how to teach character in history. Most workshops focus on administrative aspects of the Merdeka Curriculum." This gap left teachers to develop strategies independently, resulting in uneven practice.

Resource constraints further complicated implementation. The absence of official textbooks aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum forced teachers to rely on internet sources and supplementary materials of variable quality. Angga Handika noted: "Finding valid and relevant historical sources is hard. There's so much information online, but verifying accuracy takes time." This challenge was particularly acute for character education, which requires nuanced, contextually appropriate examples.

Time pressure emerged as a pervasive constraint. With reduced instructional hours for history under the Merdeka Curriculum (two hours weekly compared to previous allocations), teachers prioritized content coverage over character integration. M. Galih Sulistyono admitted: "Sometimes I focus on finishing the module because time is limited. Character education becomes secondary."

The Pancasila Student Profile project, while intended to strengthen character education, paradoxically diverted attention from classroom-based efforts. Teachers noted that the project absorbed significant time and resources, leading to assumptions that character goals were being met through project activities alone. Indah Ayu Ainina argued: "There should be balance. Character education shouldn't just happen in the project; it must be part of everyday classroom teaching."

Student Perspectives on Character Education

Student responses to character education efforts varied considerably, reflecting differences in teacher practice. Of twenty students interviewed, eleven reported experiencing meaningful character education in history classes, while nine perceived minimal or no integration.

Students who felt positively influenced described teachers who explicitly connected historical content to contemporary moral issues, created inclusive classroom environments, and modeled values through their behavior. At SMA Negeri 2 Bae, students in Indah Ayu Ainina's class appreciated her emphasis on tolerance and cooperation. One student stated: "Ibu Indah always reminds us that learning history means learning to be better people. She connects the past to our lives now." At SMA Negeri 1 Mejobo, students in Siti Nurbiah's class highlighted her respectful treatment of religious diversity and her use of film discussions to explore ethical questions.

Conversely, students who perceived limited character education described lessons focused narrowly on historical facts, with minimal discussion of values. A student in Angga Handika's class commented: "We present and discuss, but it's mostly about the material itself. I don't see how this connects to character." Students in M. Galih Sulistyono's class, while appreciating varied methods, noted that character values were rarely emphasized.

One observed: “Pak Galih mentions values at the start, but during the lesson, it’s just about answering questions and playing games.”

These contrasting perspectives underscore the critical role of teacher practice in translating curriculum policy into meaningful student experience. Where teachers actively integrated character education, students recognized and valued these efforts; where integration remained superficial, students perceived history as disconnected from moral development.

Discussion

The Policy-Practice Gap in Character Education

The findings reveal a significant gap between the Merdeka Curriculum’s ambitious character education goals and classroom realities. While the curriculum framework articulates clear expectations and teachers express commitment to character development, implementation remains uneven and often superficial. This pattern echoes international research documenting the challenges of translating policy into practice, particularly in contexts of rapid reform (Valdman & Cohen, 2025). Teachers’ capacity to enact character education depends not only on policy clarity but on professional knowledge, institutional support, and available resources.

The variation observed between teachers at the same schools highlights the centrality of teacher agency. Despite sharing institutional contexts, teachers differed markedly in their approaches to character integration. Indah Ayu Ainina and Siti Nurbiah actively wove values into instruction, using local history and inclusive practices to create morally engaged classrooms. Angga Handika and M. Galih Sulisty, while competent in content delivery, devoted less attention to character dimensions. This variation supports Smith et al. (2025) ecological model of teacher agency, which emphasizes the interplay of individual beliefs, skills, and contextual factors. Both teachers who successfully integrated character education demonstrated strong commitment to the moral purposes of teaching and willingness to experiment with innovative methods.

The Pancasila Project as Structural Distraction

An unexpected finding concerns the unintended consequences of the Pancasila Student Profile project. Designed to strengthen character education, the project appears to have diverted attention from classroom-based efforts. Teachers reported that project activities consumed substantial time and energy, leading to assumptions that character goals were being addressed through this separate mechanism. This pattern illustrates what might be termed “structural distraction,” where well-intentioned policy initiatives create new demands without adequately supporting core instructional practices.

International research on educational reform documents similar dynamics. In South Africa, post-apartheid curriculum reforms introduced multiple new requirements that overwhelmed teachers, leading to superficial implementation (Smets & Savenije, 2025). In Chile, student-centered reforms competed with examination pressures, resulting in hybrid practices that satisfied neither goal fully (Smith et al., 2025). The Indonesian

experience suggests that character education cannot be successfully outsourced to discrete projects; it must be embedded in everyday teaching across subjects.

Local History as a Site for Moral Education

The successful use of local historical sites by teachers at SMA Negeri 2 Bae points to the pedagogical potential of place-based approaches. By connecting historical content to familiar landscapes and heritage, these teachers made abstract values tangible and personally relevant. Students' positive responses to fieldwork and local history projects align with international research on place-based education, which emphasizes that learning situated in meaningful contexts enhances engagement and deepens understanding (Strand, 2025). In history education specifically, engagement with local heritage sites can foster historical empathy, perspective-taking, and sense of responsibility for preserving collective memory (Strand, 2025).

The contrast with SMA Negeri 1 Mejobo, where out-of-school learning was not permitted, underscores the importance of institutional support. Teachers' capacity to innovate depends not only on personal initiative but on school policies that enable or constrain particular practices. Where schools restrict off-campus activities, teachers must rely on digital and textual resources, which may be less effective for moral engagement.

Teacher Professional Development Gaps

Teachers' reports of insufficient training on character education integration resonate with international findings. Kropfreiter et al. (2024) emphasize that effective professional development must be content-focused, sustained, and practice-based. The brief, generic workshops teachers received failed to provide the subject-specific guidance needed to integrate character education into history teaching. This gap left teachers to develop strategies through trial and error, resulting in uneven quality.

The need for subject-specific professional learning is particularly acute in history, where character education requires careful navigation of historical complexity, multiple perspectives, and ethical ambiguity (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Generic character education frameworks cannot address the distinctive challenges of teaching moral values through historical content. Teachers need opportunities to examine how specific historical topics can be framed to support moral reflection, to share effective practices, and to receive feedback on their approaches.

Student Reception and the Limits of Implicit Teaching

The variation in student perceptions of character education raises questions about the effectiveness of implicit versus explicit approaches. Students who reported meaningful character education described teachers who explicitly discussed values, connected historical content to contemporary issues, and modeled moral behavior. Students who perceived limited character education attended classes where values were mentioned in planning documents but not emphasized in practice. This pattern suggests that implicit approaches may be insufficient; students need explicit framing to recognize and internalize moral lessons from history.

Research on moral education supports this conclusion. Alvéen (2024) found that effective character education programs include explicit instruction in values, opportunities for practice, and modeling by adults. While history classrooms cannot become direct moral instruction sessions, deliberate framing of historical content in ethical terms can enhance students' moral awareness. Teachers who successfully integrated character education did not simply assume students would infer values; they made those values visible through discussion, questioning, and personal example.

Comparative Perspectives: Indonesia in Global Context

The challenges documented at SMA Negeri 2 Bae and SMA Negeri 1 Mejobo echo patterns observed across post-colonial educational systems. In India, Balagopalan (2022) documented how colonial and neocolonial ideas about childhood persist within school infrastructures, pedagogical routines, and curricula. These enduring elements make it difficult for national reforms, such as those under the Right to Education Act, to fully displace inherited exclusionary frameworks and achieve meaningful inclusion of children from marginalized groups, including Adivasi and lower-class communities. In Mexico (and broader Latin American indigenous contexts such as Amazonia), Veintie et al. (2022) described teachers' and indigenous communities' efforts to connect official curriculum to local indigenous knowledge and languages through intercultural bilingual education. These initiatives navigate persistent tensions between centralized national standardization, multiple concurrent crises (including the pandemic), and policies that challenge local autonomy and contextual responsiveness. In South Africa, Bertram and Mxenge (2023) analyzed how post-apartheid curriculum reforms, intended to democratize education and address inequalities, have often foundered due to performativity discourses, managerial professionalism, an emphasis on measurable outcomes and curriculum coverage monitoring, limited teacher autonomy, persistent legacies of apartheid-era inequalities, and insufficient deep professional support for teachers.

Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum, with its emphasis on flexibility and teacher autonomy, represents a distinctive approach to post-colonial educational reform. Unlike highly prescriptive curricula, it creates space for local adaptation and teacher creativity. However, as this study shows, flexibility alone cannot ensure quality implementation. Teachers need sustained support, appropriate resources, and professional learning opportunities to realize the curriculum's potential. The Indonesian experience offers lessons for other post-colonial societies seeking to balance central direction with local responsiveness.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Several implications emerge from this study. First, character education integration requires explicit attention in teacher preparation and professional development. Programs should address not only general principles but subject-specific strategies for connecting historical content to moral values. Second, schools should review scheduling practices to ensure history is taught at times conducive to student engagement. Third, the development of locally contextualized teaching materials, including those drawing on local

heritage, should be supported through school grants, teacher networks, and partnerships with universities. Fourth, the relationship between the Pancasila project and classroom-based character education needs recalibration to ensure balanced attention to both. Finally, further research should examine how different approaches to character integration affect student outcomes over time.

Conclusion and Limitation

This study examined the implementation of moral and character education in history teaching under Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum at two public high schools in Kudus, Central Java. Findings reveal significant gaps between policy aspirations and classroom practice. While teachers acknowledge the importance of character education and incorporate values into planning documents, implementation varies widely and often remains superficial. Key challenges include insufficient professional development, time constraints, resource limitations, and the unintended diversion of attention to the Pancasila project. Student perspectives reflect this variation, with some experiencing meaningful character education while others perceive minimal integration.

The study contributes to international discourse on curriculum reform, teacher agency, and moral education in post-colonial contexts. It highlights the centrality of teacher practice in translating policy into meaningful student experience, the need for subject-specific professional learning, and the potential of local heritage as a resource for character education. It also reveals tensions between project-based and classroom-based approaches, suggesting the need for more balanced integration.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focused on two schools in a single region, limiting generalizability. Data collection relied primarily on self-report through interviews, supplemented by limited observations; more extensive observation across multiple lessons would provide fuller understanding. Student perspectives, while valuable, were obtained through single interviews; longitudinal research would illuminate how perceptions evolve over time. The study did not systematically measure student character outcomes; future research should examine whether different teaching approaches produce measurable differences in student values and behavior.

Despite these limitations, the research offers insights for educators, policymakers, and teacher educators. It underscores that curriculum reform is not accomplished through policy alone but requires sustained investment in teacher learning, resource development, and institutional support. The Merdeka Curriculum's vision of flexible, student-centered, character-rich education remains compelling, but realizing this vision demands continued effort to bridge the gap between intention and practice. In Indonesia and beyond, history education's potential to contribute to moral formation depends on teachers' capacity to transform policy into pedagogy.

References

- Alvén, F. (2024). Controversial issues in history teaching. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 56(5), 537-553. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2024.2322502>

- Ardenlid, F. (2025). Differentiated instruction for gifted students and their peers in Swedish mixed-ability classrooms: teachers' principles and practices. *Cogent Education*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2520560>
- Balagopalan, S. (2022). Introduction: Modernity, Schooling and Childhood in India: Trajectories of Exclusion. *Children's Geographies*, 20(6), 747–759. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2022.2073196>
- Barton, K. C., & Levstik, L. S. (2004). *Teaching History for the Common Good*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bertram, C., & Mxenge, N. (2023). Performativity, managerial professionalism and the purpose of professional development: a South African case study. *Journal of Education Policy*, 38(4), 607–624. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2022.2110946>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2025). Reporting guidelines for qualitative research: a values-based approach. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 22(2), 399–438. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2024.2382244>
- Creswell, J. W. (2015). *Penelitian Kualitatif dan Desain Riset*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- Durkheim, E. (1956). *Education and Sociology*. New York: Free Press.
- Feiss, C., Hagenauer, G., & Moroni, S. (2025). What are teachers' reasons for using differentiated homework, and what prevents them from doing so? A qualitative interview study. *Teacher Development*, 29(5), 985–1004. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2025.2452637>
- Hanif, M., & Maruti, E. S. (2025). History Work camp (HWC): a fun history learning framework to enhance creative thinking skills. *Cogent Education*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2549615>
- Hariyono, H., & Leksana, G. (2025). When Memory Becomes Critical Historiography: A Conversation with the Filmmakers of Eling-Eling Peniwen, a Documentary on Dutch Violence in Indonesia. *Anthropological Forum*, 35(2), 80–103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2025.2538012>
- Hart, P. (2022). Reinventing character education: the potential for participatory character education using MacIntyre's ethics. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 54(4), 486–500. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2021.1998640>
- Haugaard, M. (2022). Foucault and Power: A Critique and Retheorization. *Critical Review*, 34(3–4), 341–371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913811.2022.2133803>
- Hsu, C. L., Teets, J. C., Hasmath, R., Hsu, J. Y. J., & Hildebrandt, T. (2022). The Construction and Performance of Citizenship in Contemporary China. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 31(138), 827–843. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2022.2030993>
- Jackson, P. W. (1968). *Life in Classrooms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Kainulainen, M., Puurtinen, M., & Chinn, C. A. (2025). Regrounding Inquiry-Based Learning in History: A Study of Historians' Epistemic Processes. *Cognition and Instruction*, 43(4), 291–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2025.2503193>
- Kemendikbudristek. (2022). *Kurikulum Merdeka: Keleluasaan Pendidikan dan Pembelajaran Berkualitas*. Jakarta: Kemendikbudristek.
- Kholiq, A., Mutohar, A., & Sumintono, B. (2022). The tribal education in Indonesia: Detribalization challenges of Samin tribe. *Cogent Education*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2022.2136861>

- Kropfreiter, E., Bernhard, R., & McDermott, T. (2024). Austrian secondary school teachers' views on character education: Quantitative insights from a mixed-methods study. *Journal of Moral Education*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2024.2373167>
- Kusumawati, E., & Umam, K. (2025). Strengthening teacher competence for leading and sustaining the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. *Cogent Education*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2025.2501458>
- Lickona, T. (1991). *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Maire, Q. (2024). Towards an historical sociology of global citizenship education policy in Australia. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 54(8), 1328–1346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2023.2212108>
- Moleong, L. J. (2017). *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*. Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Nesterova, Y. (2024). Colonial legacies and the barriers to educational justice for Indigenous peoples in Taiwan. *Comparative Education*, 60(2), 315–333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2023.2185355>
- Oteng, B., Mensah, R. O., Adiza Babah, P., & Swanzy-Impraim, E. (2023). Social studies and history curriculum assessment in colleges of education in Ghana: Reflective practices of teacher educators. *Cogent Education*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2175515>
- Permana, P. G. A. M., & Rohmah, Z. (2024). Contemporary translingual English language policy and practice in Indonesia. *Cogent Education*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2404059>
- Pratama, S. (2022). Teachers' narratives about the possibility to teach controversial history of the 1965 affair in Indonesia. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 43(6), 898–915. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2022.2070127>
- Reid, J.-A. (2024). Truth-telling about (Teacher) education as settler-colonial project: 'The past is always with us.' *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(5), 519–533. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2024.2414817>
- Riani, R., Setiyanto, E., Rahim, H. F., Musayyedah, M., Indra, J., Ratnawati, R., Sumadi, S., Rahayu, R., & Purnami, W. H. (2025). Exploring the relationship between the eighteen character values in Indonesian National identity and East Borneo folklore. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2025.2559517>
- Saldaña, Johnny. (2018). *Writing qualitatively: the selected works of Johnny Saldaña*. Routledge.
- Santiago, M., & Dozono, T. (2022). History is critical: Addressing the false dichotomy between historical inquiry and criticality. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 50(2), 173–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2022.2048426>
- Seixas, P., & Morton, T. (2013). *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts*. Toronto: Nelson Education.
- Smets, W. (2024). Differentiated Instruction in History Education – A Subject-specific Analysis of Why and How. *Panta Rei*, 18, 293–316. <https://doi.org/10.6018/pantarei.605211>
- Smets, W., & Savenije, G. (2025). A structural and functional differentiation of knowledge for the history curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 57(4), 495–506. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2025.2455687>

- Smith, J., Harris, R., & Burn, K. (2025). History teachers as curriculum-makers in policy and practice: quantitative insights from England and Scotland. *Journal of Education Policy, 40*(2), 288–312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2024.2357614>
- Strand, H. (2025). Educational encounters with a local past-historical empathy in the archives. *Education Inquiry, 1*–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2025.2508554>
- Valdman, A., & Cohen, O. (2025). Trauma, memory, and dialogic historical education: the case of Israel in 2024. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 57*(6), 762–779. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2025.2506433>
- Veintie, T., Hohenthal, J., Betancourt Machoa, K., & Sirén, A. (2022). The (im)possibilities of education in Amazonia: assessing the resilience of intercultural bilingual education in the midst of multiple crises. *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education, 16*(4), 259–272. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2021.2015317>
- Weintraub, R., & Gibson, L. (2025). The Nakba in Israeli history education: Ethical judgments in an ongoing conflict. *Theory & Research in Social Education, 53*(1), 90–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2024.2396319>

