

Impact of Merdeka Curriculum Implementation on Student Character Development in Sekolah Penggerak Donggala Regency

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Abstract: The development of student character is an essential element in education that must be consistently nurtured to promote positive growth. A well-designed curriculum plays a pivotal role in achieving this objective. This study investigates the impact of the Merdeka Curriculum on students' character development. The research used a quantitative approach with a survey design focused on five driving schools in Donggala Regency, Central Sulawesi. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews and comprehensive documentation studies. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive techniques to provide a thorough understanding of trends and outcomes. The findings highlight that SDN 25 Banawa achieved the highest overall scores, while SDN 16 Banawa recorded the lowest average score among the schools studied. Despite this variation, a general upward trend in character development was observed across all schools over the past three years. The results indicate that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum has a measurable positive effect on student character development. Nevertheless, active involvement from parents is deemed crucial to enhance further and maximize this developmental process. Therefore, fostering strong collaboration between schools and families is strongly recommended to optimize the potential of the Merdeka Curriculum in shaping the character of students in a comprehensive and sustainable manner.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a key element in shaping the character and ethics of young generations. In Indonesia, it is a strategic tool for developing human resources that are ethical and capable of competing in the globalized era. One approach that is increasingly being adopted in the field of education is the implementation of positive discipline. Positive discipline refers to efforts to teach students how to manage their behavior and emotions through a supportive, character-development-centered approach rather than through harsh or authoritarian punishment. In the school context, positive discipline is expected to foster a conducive learning environment and support the growth of responsibility, respect, and social awareness (Saputra, 2023).

In line with this, the Sekolah Penggerak program initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia aims to improve the quality of education through transformation in selected schools, including those in Donggala Regency. This program emphasizes strengthening teacher and school capacity to facilitate learning focused on character development. Within this context, positive discipline is highly relevant, given the challenges educators face in creating a school environment that supports character and discipline development among students (Saavedra & Minango, 2023).

Donggala Regency is one of the regions striving to improve the quality of education through the Sekolah Penggerak program. However, challenges related to fostering students' ethics and character in schools in this area remain significant. Students often face challenging social environments, such as a lack of support from family or community, which hinders their character development despite the

significant influence of these environments on students' character (Avci, 2023). In such situations, positive discipline could serve as an effective solution for enhancing students' understanding and practice of moral values through a humanistic and self-awareness-based approach (Saputra, 2023).

Character development in students is indeed essential; research shows that good emotional and character development in students positively impacts academic performance, attendance, and discipline (Snyder et al., 2009). Furthermore, character education has a positive and significant impact on honesty, respect at home and school, self-control, and self-development (Rianawati et al., 2023). Recognizing the importance of character for students, it must become a primary focus for improvement. Research on enhancing students' character and ethics through positive discipline was conducted by (Shaharani & Februannisa, 2023), who found that positive discipline can be effective for character education for students at MI Al-Ishlah, Sorong City. Positive discipline helps students understand positive values like responsibility, cooperation, and honesty. Student character development should always be accompanied by good ethics and character in teachers, as teachers' ethics significantly influence students' character development (Rahayu et al., 2023).

This study fundamentally differs from previous research by emphasizing the impact of implementing the *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Merdeka Curriculum) on students' character development comprehensively, focusing on a larger scale by involving multiple *Sekolah Penggerak* in Donggala Regency. While prior studies centered on character development approaches such as positive discipline or the role of teacher ethics using smaller sample sizes, this research explores how the national education policy, *Kurikulum Merdeka*, is implemented in a local context to shape students' character. By integrating policy evaluation with the practices of *Sekolah Penggerak*, this study offers a novel contribution to understanding the influence of curriculum flexibility on fostering character values comprehensively in a specific region.

Through this study, it is expected that a more comprehensive understanding can be gained regarding the role of the Merdeka Curriculum, which includes the principles of positive discipline, in creating a productive learning environment that supports students' character development. Consequently, the findings of this research are anticipated to contribute to educational policy development, particularly in efforts to improve the quality of schools designated as *Sekolah Penggerak* and other schools. This research also serves as an evaluation of the policy launched by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology on implementing the Merdeka Curriculum in primary schools, with a specific focus on applying positive discipline principles in schools.

METHOD

The research conducted is quantitative research, utilizing a survey research design (Little et al., 2024). The subjects of this study are *Sekolah Penggerak* in Donggala Regency, encompassing five schools: SDN 13 Banawa, SDN 25 Banawa, SDN 17 Banawa, SDN 16 Banawa, and SDN 4 Banawa, along with their teachers and principals. These schools were chosen as research subjects because they receive comprehensive support from both teachers and principals in implementing the Merdeka Curriculum and are required to enforce positive discipline among students. The study was conducted from September to October 2024. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews via Zoom and document review, examining character scores, school safety, and diversity climate in school education reports over the past three years (2022, 2023, and 2024), and teacher evaluations related to student character. The assessment indicators for the school report card are classified into five categories, which are as follows: Excellent (81-100%), High (61-80%), Moderate (41-60%), Low (21-40%), and Very Low (1-20%). Meanwhile, the character achievement indicators based on teachers' assessments of students' character are categorized as Cultured, Developing, Beginning to Develop, and Requiring Guidance.

The data collection process involved communication with and obtaining permission from the schools, followed by an explanation of the research procedures. In the discussion, there are indicators for Achievement Scores; it would be better to mention these in the methodology section as well. Interviews with principals and teachers were then scheduled in a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) format, lasting 60-90 minutes (Chowdhury et al., 2019). Additionally, education report data from the past three years were examined. Data analysis employed descriptive analysis techniques (Deckert & Wilson, 2023). To ensure the credibility and validity of the qualitative data, a systematic approach was followed, based on guidelines

provided by the Institute of Educational Development (BIED) at BRAC University (Chowdhury et al., 2019). Furthermore, data recording during collection was consistently documented in a reflective journal, ensuring structured and systematic data during the interviews (Chowdhury et al., 2019).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research findings show the scores for each observation indicator (character, school safety climate, and diversity climate) over the past three years. The highest average score for character development was achieved by SDN 25 Banawa, with a score of 62.28, while the lowest score was recorded by SDN 16 Banawa, with a score of 48.40. The highest score for the school safety climate was also achieved by SDN 25 Banawa, at 79.34, whereas the lowest score, 64.39, was observed at SDN 16 Banawa, with only a 0.14-point difference from SDN 17 Banawa. Additionally, the highest average score for the diversity climate was at SDN 25 Banawa, reaching 71.38, while the lowest average score was 62.32 at SDN 16 Banawa.

Table 1. Achievement Scores from the Last 3 Years of Education Report: Character Values, School Safety Climate, and Diversity Climate.

Subject	Years	Character Achievement Score (%)	School Safety Climate Score (%)	Diversity Climate Score (%)
SDN 4 Banawa	2022	51.98	61.93	52.32
	2023	56.58	72.64	71.13
	2024	61.51	73.66	75.05
	Mean	56.69	69.41	66.17
	ST Dev	3.8914	6.4979	12.1507
SDN 13 Banawa	2022	51.05	75.36	59.58
	2023	55.72	66.74	70.26
	2024	66.16	79.48	75.37
	Mean	57.64	73.86	68.40
	ST Dev	7.7364	6.5011	8.0571
SDN 16 Banawa	2022	49.65	57.64	62.31
	2023	44.69	62.86	55.21
	2024	50.85	72.67	69.43
	Mean	48.40	64.39	62.32
	ST Dev	3.2657	7.6309	7.1100
SDN 17 Banawa	2022	52.55	62.72	63.08
	2023	51.28	65.33	68.66
	2024	56.15	65.53	75.81
	Mean	53.33	64.53	69.18
	ST Dev	2.5262	1.5678	6.3811
SDN 25 Banawa	2022	52.02	68.91	61.18
	2023	67.75	85.96	75.21
	2024	67.08	83.16	77.76
	Mean	62.28	79.34	71.38
	ST Dev	8.8946	9.1433	8.9279

Source: School Education Report (Kemendikbud, 2024)

The trend of scores on observation indicators (character, school safety climate, and diversity climate) for students at the subject schools generally shows improvement, although the magnitude of this increase varies across schools. SDN 25 Banawa demonstrated a higher score increase for each indicator compared to other schools, whereas SDN 16 Banawa showed the smallest average score increase. This difference is evident in the trend line graph, where the improvement trajectory for SDN 25 Banawa and

SDN 16 Banawa reveals distinct rates of progress.

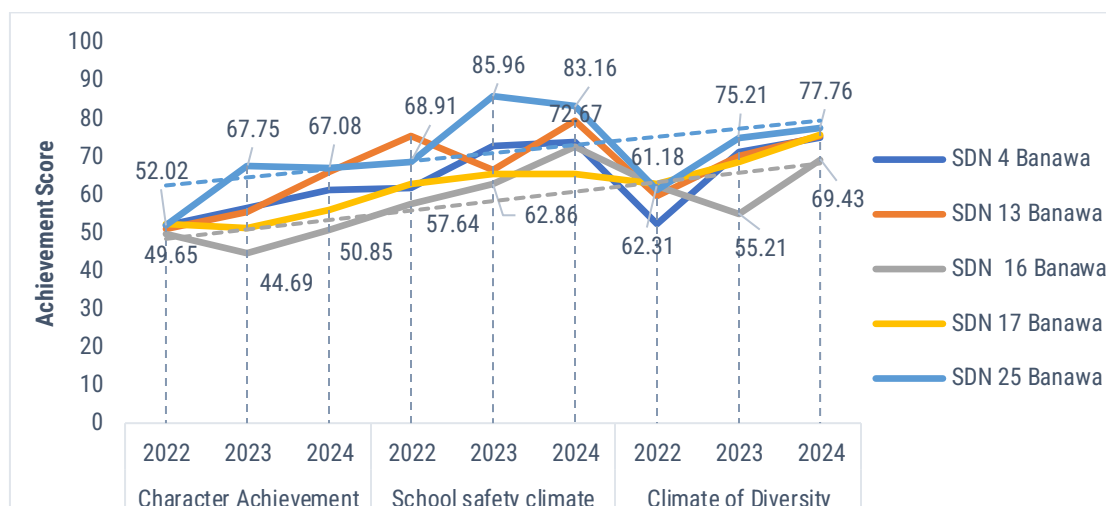


Figure 1. Trend Graph of Improvement in Each Observation Indicator
Source: School Education Report (Kemendikbud, 2024)

In addition to data on character, school safety climate, and diversity climate, which are key areas of observation, additional data collected include parental participation in character-building activities and other school programs over the past three years.

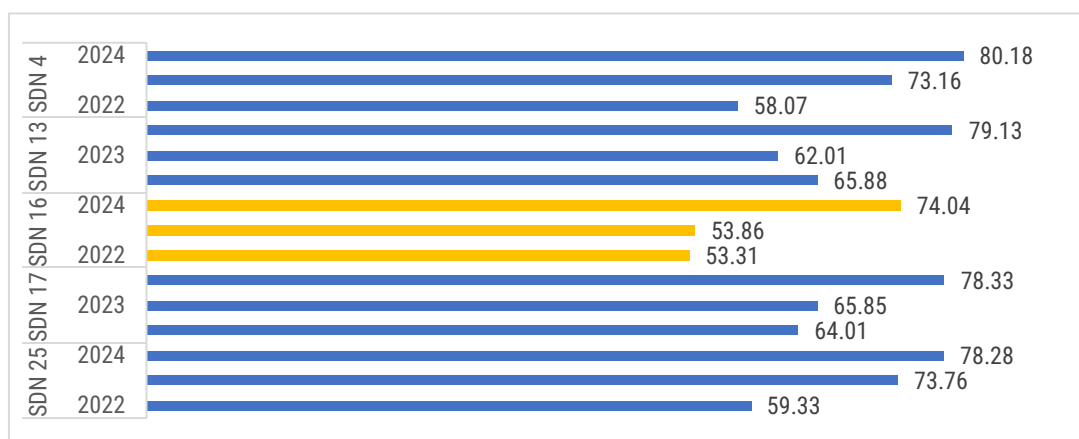


Figure 2. Parental Participation Data in Character Development and Other School Activities
Source: School Education Report (Kemendikbud, 2024)

The research findings derived from school education reports over the last three years focus on three key indicators: character values, school safety climate, and diversity climate. These indicators were selected due to their interrelation, as students' character is closely linked to school safety, which can impact both school security and national resilience (Handayani et al., 2023). The character indicator includes aspects such as independence, global diversity, critical thinking, and student creativity. Additionally, character or personality significantly influences socio-psychological adaptation, with traits like self-acceptance and emotional comfort enhancing adaptability in diverse educational settings (Terletska & Chistyakova, 2020). The diversity climate indicator consists of religious and cultural tolerance, student equality, and national commitment.

Trends in Scores for Observation Indicators (Character, School Safety Climate, and Diversity Climate)

The trend in scores for observation indicators (character, school safety climate, diversity climate) shows a general increase among students, with variations in improvement across schools. SDN 25 Banawa experienced higher score increases in each indicator compared to other schools, while SDN 16 Banawa had the smallest average increase. This difference is evident in the trend lines showing the growth

trajectory of SDN 25 Banawa versus SDN 16 Banawa.

The achievement of character values, school safety, and diversity climate in the school report card is influenced by several indicators, namely: 1) learning quality, 2) teacher reflection and improvement, and 3) instructional leadership (Kemendikbud, 2024). An analysis of the average scores over the past three years reveals significant differences between the two schools. The comparison shows SDN 25 Banawa/SDN 16 Banawa, with indicator scores of 1) learning quality (71.11/58.07), 2) reflection and improvement (60.63/56.66), and 3) instructional leadership (58.00/52.95)

Interviews with several teachers from each school revealed that character assessment tools used by teachers are based on Pancasila Student Profile character assessments (Suharti et al., 2023). The character assessment integrated with Pancasila student projects and learning processes is evaluated under four categories: Cultured, Developing, Beginning to Develop, and Requiring Guidance. In summary, the findings indicate that student character in each school is generally at the Developing level, except at SDN 25 Banawa, which has reached the Cultured level.

School Programs Supporting Character Development

Interviews with the principal of SDN 25 Banawa attribute the students' strong character to supportive school programs. These programs incorporate local wisdom, such as the "tabe" culture (a gesture of respect) and practices of mutual forgiveness among students, teachers, and peers. Additionally, religious character building is emphasized through group Dhuha prayers at school (Nirmawati, 2024). Local wisdom, particularly through Bugis oral traditions, enriches students' character by instilling cultural values, enhancing social and moral skills, and fostering a strong cultural identity (Ilham & Rahman, 2024).

At SDN 16 Banawa, the character of students is generally categorized as Developing. Various intervention programs have been implemented to foster character development, such as a food-sharing program designed to increase empathy and encourage sharing among students. Although the growth in character is not yet visible in all categories, there has been significant progress. One likely reason for the slower progress is the relatively low parental involvement compared to other model schools (Novita, 2024). The level of parental involvement in supporting character development programs is notably low, with SDN 16 Banawa scoring just 74.04 in 2024 (Kemendikbud, 2024). Collaboration between teachers and parents is crucial for fostering honesty and reinforcing positive character values, both in school and at home, to cultivate students' sense of responsibility (Febriani et al., 2023; Purwati et al., 2023). Parents serve as role models, instilling moral and ethical values which significantly influence children's character development and behavior within the school environment (Salma, 2024).

Implications for Policy Formulation

These findings have implications for policy formulation by regional and national stakeholders to ensure targeted interventions. Maximizing parental involvement can significantly impact character development. Furthermore, active parental participation in school activities helps them understand their roles at home and aligns school programs with what students experience at school.

Overall, the research findings suggest that the Merdeka curriculum has significantly impacted character development, as reflected in education report results on character, school safety climate, diversity climate, and character assessment through the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile. Future research could benefit from further in-depth analysis, such as comparing the outcomes of model schools with other schools not included in the program. Additionally, a more comprehensive approach could involve examining students' ethics and behavior in their broader community, not just in school, by including community members as respondents who can provide insights into students' character development.

CONCLUSION

The research findings indicate that implementing the Merdeka curriculum with a positive discipline approach has impacted student character across three aspects: character, school safety climate, and diversity climate. However, the extent of score improvements varies across schools. These findings could be further elaborated by comparing character development in schools that do not participate in the model

school program. Additionally, further research involving the broader community to assess student character could provide schools with a more comprehensive understanding of student behavior outside the school environment.

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