The *Merdeka Curriculum* and Local Wisdom: An Innovative Synergy in Shaping Student Character in South Sumatra, Indonesia

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Abstract

Character education is a crucial aspect in shaping a generation with integrity amidst global challenges. The Merdeka Curriculum emerges as an educational innovation offering flexible learning approaches; however, the integration of local wisdom in strengthening student character remains underexplored systematically. This study aims to explore how local wisdom can be synergized in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum to enhance character education at the junior high school level. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through observations, interviews with teachers, and document analysis in three junior high schools in Indonesia. The findings reveal that the incorporation of local values such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), *musyawarah* (deliberation), and tolerance in both intraclass activities and the Pancasila Student Profile strengthening projects contributes to contextual character development among students. These results underscore the importance of culturally-based curriculum development as the foundation for character education. The implication is that schools need to design adaptive learning strategies aligned with local contexts to realize relevant and meaningful education.

Keywords

Merdeka Curriculum, Local Wisdom, Character Education, Junior High School, South Sumatra.

1. Introduction

The implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum*, launched by Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in 2022, has introduced a new paradigm in the national education system that emphasizes flexibility and adaptability in learning [1]. This policy grants autonomy to educational institutions to develop curricula tailored to students' characteristics and local environmental conditions. However, in practice, it faces significant challenges in systematically integrating local wisdom values as a foundation for strengthening character education [2]. The era of globalization and the digital revolution has created a dilemma in preserving local cultural identity, as younger generations are increasingly exposed to a degradation of traditional values due to the massive influence of foreign cultures [3]. This phenomenon becomes even more complex when character education must be implemented within a curriculum framework that promotes freedom while preserving the nation's cultural roots.

Previous research has confirmed the urgency of integrating local wisdom into character education as a strategic response to the challenges of globalization [4]. Global bibliometric studies show a significant increase in research on the integration of local wisdom in education during the 2020–2024 period, with a primary focus on strengthening character and cultural identity [5]. However, field implementation still faces structural and methodological challenges [6]. Studies on the *Merdeka Curriculum* suggest that while it provides flexibility for teachers in designing learning programs, the main obstacles lie in the lack of technological infrastructure and limited teacher competencies in systematically integrating local values.

Systematic literature reviews reveal that actualizing local wisdom in character education requires a collaborative model involving teachers, parents, and the community [7]. Character education rooted in local wisdom has proven effective in preventing the erosion of ethical and moral values among the younger generation, especially in the learning of science and humanities [8]. Research in the Indonesian context shows that character education plays a crucial role in shaping students who are not only intellectually capable but also morally upright [9]. However, such studies remain partial and have not comprehensively explored how the synergy between the *Merdeka Curriculum* and local wisdom can be operationalized within specific regional contexts.

Although various studies have explored the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* and the integration of local wisdom separately, there remains a significant research gap in analyzing the synergy between these two aspects in shaping junior high school students' character. Previous research has mostly focused on the technical aspects of curriculum implementation or the inventory of local wisdom values, but has yet to offer a theoretical and practical framework for effective and sustainable integration strategies. Specifically, in the South Sumatra region, which is rich in cultural diversity—such as *Simbur Cahaya* values, *Sekayu* philosophy, and the tradition of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation)—empirical studies on best practices for synergizing the *Merdeka Curriculum* and local wisdom in character education are still very limited.

Addressing this gap, the present study aims to explore and analyze how local wisdom can be systematically synergized within the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* to enhance character education among junior high school students in South Sumatra. Specifically, this research seeks to: first, identify local wisdom values in South Sumatra relevant to character education; second, analyze strategies for integrating local wisdom into intraclass activities and the Pancasila Student Profile Reinforcement Projects; and third, evaluate the impact of this synergy on student character development. The findings of this study are expected to offer a theoretical contribution in the form of an innovative synergy model and a practical contribution to the development of culturally relevant and meaningful curricula.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a multiple case study design that is both exploratory and descriptive in nature. This approach was chosen for its capacity to deeply uncover the complex dynamics of integrating local wisdom into the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* within distinctive socio-cultural contexts. The multiple case study design enabled cross-site comparisons and enhanced the transferability of findings across local educational contexts in South Sumatra [10]. The research was conducted in three junior high schools (*Sekolah Menengah Pertama*, SMP) in South Sumatra Province. Schools were selected purposively based on the following criteria: having implemented the *Merdeka Curriculum* for at least one year, actively integrating local wisdom into the curriculum, and representing distinctive local cultural characteristics [11].

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on specific inclusion criteria. The primary informants included nine subject teachers actively implementing the *Merdeka Curriculum* and the Pancasila Student Profile Reinforcement Project (P5), along with three school principals serving as decision-makers at the institutional level. Supporting informants consisted of 18 eighth-grade students chosen for their active involvement in local culture-based activities, and six community leaders or cultural figures with in-depth knowledge of local values in their respective regions [12].

Data collection was conducted using three main techniques. First, structured participant observation focused on teaching processes, P5 projects, and school activities rooted in local culture. Observations were carried out four times at each school between March and May 2024 [13]. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, principals, students (via focus group discussions), and community figures, using an interview guide aligned with the research focus [14]. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Third, document analysis was conducted on syllabi, lesson plans, teaching modules, P5 documentation, and student character assessment records to identify patterns of local wisdom integration in learning [15].

The research instruments included observation guidelines, interview protocols, and document analysis sheets. The observation guidelines were developed based on *Merdeka Curriculum* indicators and dimensions of local wisdom integration. The interview protocols comprised 25–30 questions focused on identifying local values, integration strategies, and their impact on student character. The document analysis sheets applied content analysis techniques with thematic categorization based on South Sumatran local values and dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile [16].

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis technique, which involves six phases: data familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and report writing [17]. The analysis was strengthened through data triangulation, source triangulation, and methodological triangulation to enhance the validity of the findings. Verification procedures included member checking, peer debriefing, and thematic mapping using NVivo 12 software [18]. The trustworthiness of the data was ensured through Lincoln and Guba's criteria, which include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These principles were implemented through thick description, audit trails, researcher reflexivity, and external audits [19].

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Contextualizing Character Education through Local Wisdom

The concept of local wisdom in the context of character education refers to value systems, norms, and cultural practices that have been internalized in community life across generations. In South Sumatra, the *Simbur Cahaya* philosophy—a traditional legal manuscript—embodies fundamental values such as justice, deliberation, and social harmony, all of which are relevant to the formation of students' character [20]. Nuraini's (2012) study demonstrates that character development based on local wisdom in school-based learning leads to a deeper internalization of values compared to conventional approaches [21]. This finding is supported by Wuryandani (2010), whose research indicates that the integration of local wisdom into educational practices not only fosters nationalism but also reinforces students' local cultural identity [22]. The implementation of these values within the *Merdeka Curriculum* framework facilitates a holistic learning experience, wherein students acquire academic knowledge while simultaneously developing character rooted in their local culture.

The *Merdeka Curriculum* provides substantial flexibility for integrating local wisdom into the learning process, particularly through project-based learning and contextualized approaches. The application of a multicultural education model contextualized by local wisdom highlights the importance of aligning learning content with local values to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of character education [23]. In the context of South Sumatra, community practices such as *gotong royong*—expressed through communal work, social contributions, and consensus-based

decision-making—can be incorporated into subjects such as Pancasila and Civic Education, Indonesian Language, and other disciplines using cooperative and collaborative learning methods [24]. This approach not only strengthens students' cognitive skills but also develops affective and psychomotor domains in line with the goals of shaping *Pancasila Student Profiles*. Recent studies show that schools implementing thematic learning based on local wisdom have reported significant improvements in students' character traits such as social care, tolerance, and leadership [25].

Simbur Cahaya, as a cultural heritage of South Sumatra, contains universal values that can be actualized in modern character education. Compiled in the 17th century, the manuscript promotes principles of justice, deliberation, and social harmony that correspond with the character dimensions outlined in the *Pancasila Student Profile* Pancasila [26,27]. An analysis of the values within *Simbur Cahaya* identifies four key aspects: religious values, moral/ethical values, social values, and political values—all of which are still practiced by communities in Ogan Ilir today [20]. These values can be implemented in classroom settings through strategies such as storytelling of wise historical figures from *Simbur Cahaya*, classroom simulations of deliberative decision-making, and community service projects that reflect social justice values. This pedagogical approach enables students to understand and internalize character values not as abstract concepts, but as concrete and meaningful practices embedded in their cultural context.

Contextualizing character education through local wisdom within the implementation of the *Merdeka Curriculum* has proven to generate a significant positive impact on the character formation of students in South Sumatra. The integration of values such as *gotong royong*, deliberation, and the *Simbur Cahaya* philosophy not only strengthens students' local cultural identity but also fosters character competencies aligned with the *Pancasila Student Profile*. The pedagogical implications of these findings suggest the need for: 1) the development of systematically integrated learning modules based on local wisdom, 2) teacher training on culturally responsive instructional design, 3) the creation of character assessment instruments sensitive to cultural contexts, and 4) collaboration between schools, community leaders, and local cultural experts. Further research is recommended to evaluate the effectiveness of local wisdom-based learning models in achieving more comprehensive learning outcomes and to develop a framework for integrating local wisdom adaptable across regions with diverse cultural characteristics. Thus, character education rooted in local wisdom can serve as an innovative model for cultivating a generation that is morally grounded, culturally rooted, and globally competent

3.2 Operational Strategies and Pedagogical Innovation

The implementation of local wisdom in the *Merdeka Curriculum* is operationalized through two synergistic approaches: intraclass integration and the *Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project* (P5). The intraclass approach enables teachers to embed local wisdom values into regular subject instruction, while the P5 offers a broader scope for in-depth exploration of local cultural practices. Recent studies have shown that this dual-track strategy is effective in creating meaningful learning experiences that accommodate local cultural contexts without compromising national standards [28]. In several schools, learning activities are designed thematically by incorporating traditional practices such as folklore, local performing arts, and indigenous agricultural systems. Teachers utilize these cultural elements as entry points to reflect on moral values, ethics, and social responsibility—dimensions that align with the *Pancasila Student Profile* [29].

Pedagogical innovation in the implementation of local wisdom involves diversifying teaching methods that are responsive to the characteristics of local cultures. Project-based learning approaches that integrate local wisdom have been proven to enhance student engagement and promote deeper understanding of character values [30]. Innovative strategies such as storytelling using local folklore, classroom simulations of deliberative decision-making, and community service projects reflecting social justice values have emerged as effective pedagogical models. Additionally, the use of digital technology to document and preserve local wisdom through interactive multimedia learning adds a new dimension to the learning process, particularly appealing to digital native generations [31]. Collaborative approaches involving community leaders, cultural practitioners, and local wisdom experts as learning resource persons further enrich students' educational experiences and strengthen connections between schools and local communities.

However, integrating local wisdom into the *Merdeka Curriculum* is not without its complex challenges, which require serious attention. One of the primary barriers is the limited competency among teachers to systematically connect curriculum content with local values [32]. Studies indicate that the majority of teachers struggle to identify and operationalize local wisdom values into coherent lesson plans aligned with the national curriculum learning objectives [33]. Furthermore, the absence of a well-established and standardized pedagogical framework for local wisdom integration has led to inconsistent and sporadic implementation. Practical constraints, such as the lack of locally-based teaching resources—including modules, media, and valid assessment instruments—also hinder teachers' ability to deliver effective culturally grounded instruction. These challenges underscore the urgent need for systematic and continuous teacher capacity-building programs.

Addressing the complexities of local wisdom implementation in the *Merdeka Curriculum* requires comprehensive and multidimensional policy interventions. Strengthening cultural relevance within curriculum design must be prioritized as a central agenda in education reform [34]. Key strategies include the development of support systems encompassing continuous teacher training, provision of local wisdom-based teaching resources, and the establishment of collaborative networks between schools and local communities to ensure effective implementation. In addition, a systematic

monitoring and evaluation mechanism is necessary to assess the effectiveness of local wisdom integration in achieving character education goals [35]. Local-level policy support, including adequate budget allocation for the development of culturally-based curricula and incentives for teachers who successfully implement innovative culturally grounded teaching, is also crucial to the success of this initiative.

The prospects for developing a local wisdom integration model within the *Merdeka Curriculum* are highly promising and can be adapted to diverse regional contexts across Indonesia. Developing an adaptive and scalable local wisdom-based learning model requires a systematic approach that includes standardizing the integration process, diversifying content according to regional characteristics, and developing valid and reliable evaluation instruments [35]. Collaboration among universities, research institutions, and education practitioners is essential to establish both theoretical and practical frameworks for broad implementation. Moreover, leveraging digital technology and online learning platforms can accelerate the dissemination of best practices and expand the reach of this model nationwide. With consistent policy support and strong commitment from all educational stakeholders, the synergy model of the *Merdeka Curriculum* and local wisdom has the potential to serve as a global reference for culturally responsive and sustainable education development.

3.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study makes a significant contribution to the discourse on culturally responsive education by proposing the *Innovative Synergy Model*, which positions cultural identity as a foundational element in character development through the national curriculum. This model integrates Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism with Banks' principles of multicultural education to construct a holistic and contextual framework [36]. The model offers three key dimensions: 1) identification and codification of local values through educational ethnography, 2) cross-domain curricular integration employing transformative learning principles, and 3) reinforcement of community-based learning ecosystems involving teachers, parents, and traditional leaders in collaborative learning processes. This theoretical framework contributes to the development of an integrative curriculum theory that not only addresses cognitive domains but also incorporates affective and socio-cultural dimensions in the character formation of students [28].

The *Innovative Synergy Model* proposed in this study introduces a new conceptual approach to harmonizing the demands of national curriculum standardization with the diversity of local cultures. Unlike previous models of local wisdom integration that were often ad hoc and sporadic, this model provides a systematic framework that can be consistently operationalized [37]. Its key conceptual innovation lies in its dialectical approach, which allows universal values embedded in the national curriculum to be enriched and contextualized through local wisdom without compromising academic rigor. The model also adopts principles of culturally based learning, which have been proven effective in increasing educational relevance and student engagement in multicultural contexts [38]. Additionally, the integration of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offers a systemic perspective that facilitates a deeper understanding of the complex interactions among individuals, families, schools, and communities in the character education process rooted in local wisdom.

Practically, the findings of this study yield strategic recommendations applicable at multiple levels of the education system. At the policy level, the study recommends that local governments and educational institutions institutionalize local wisdom within curriculum planning by developing policies that support the diversification of learning content in alignment with local cultural contexts. Practical implementations include the development of learning modules that systematically integrate local wisdom, continuous teacher training in culturally responsive pedagogy, and the formation of collaborative networks between schools and local communities. At the operational level, the study advocates for the adoption of interdisciplinary project-based learning that enables in-depth exploration of local wisdom while achieving national learning objectives. The development of culturally relevant teaching materials is also prioritized to ensure the availability of contextual and meaningful learning resources.

The *Innovative Synergy Model* developed in this study demonstrates high scalability and can be replicated across various regions in Indonesia with diverse cultural characteristics. The flexible framework allows the adaptation of local wisdom content to regional uniqueness without altering the model's core structure [39]. In a broader context, the model holds potential as a reference for other multicultural nations undertaking national curriculum reform while considering cultural diversity. Indonesia's experience in harmonizing the national curriculum with local wisdom may serve as an inspiration for developing countries facing similar challenges in preserving cultural identity amidst educational globalization [40]. Replication of this model requires contextual adjustments that take into account each country's political systems, social structures, and cultural specificities, but the foundational principles of integrating local wisdom into national curricula can be adapted universally.

In the long term, the implementation of the *Innovative Synergy Model* is projected to have transformative impacts on the quality of character education and the preservation of local cultures. From a sustainability perspective, this model offers a structured cultural regeneration mechanism through the formal education system, ensuring the continued transmission of local wisdom values to future generations. The anticipated social impacts include strengthened social cohesion, enhanced intercultural tolerance, and the formation of a strong national identity that respects local diversity. Economically, local wisdom-based education can stimulate the growth of creative economies and sustainable cultural

tourism. To ensure the sustainability of this initiative, long-term commitment from all stakeholders—including government bodies, educational institutions, communities, and the private sector—is essential for supporting the ongoing implementation and development of the model. Periodic evaluation and monitoring are also crucial to ensure the model's effectiveness and relevance amid dynamic social changes and future educational demands.

3.4 Towards Sustainable Character Formation

Ultimately, the synergy between the *Merdeka Curriculum* and local wisdom leads to a holistic form of education—one that nurtures not only cognitive intelligence but also emotional, moral, and social integrity in students. A holistic approach to education that integrates intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions has been recognized by UNESCO as an essential strategy for addressing global development challenges [41]. Recent studies suggest that holistic education, which integrates local wisdom with national curricula, can result in more meaningful and sustainable transformative learning experiences [42]. The learning model developed within the Indonesian context reflects an effort to strike a balance between the demands of global educational standardization and the local need to preserve cultural identity. This multidimensional integration enables comprehensive character formation, where students not only achieve academic competence but also develop a strong foundation of moral and ethical values rooted in local culture while remaining globally relevant.

In the context of educational globalization that encourages localization and equity, the concept of *glocalization* offers a relevant framework to understand the synergy between the *Merdeka Curriculum* and local wisdom. Glocalization in education refers to a "think globally, act locally" approach that allows educational systems to adopt global standards and trends while preserving local values and characteristics. Indonesia's experience in harmonizing the national curriculum with cultural diversity demonstrates that educational glocalization can effectively address the dilemma between global homogenization and local heterogeneity. This strategy empowers students to develop the global competencies necessary to thrive in the digital era while maintaining cultural roots and local identity. Research has shown that multicultural education informed by glocalization principles can enhance intercultural understanding, tolerance, and students' adaptability in navigating an increasingly diverse global society [43].

The implementation of the synergy between the *Merdeka Curriculum* and local wisdom has produced significant transformative impacts on sustainable character development in students. *Sustainable character education* not only focuses on cultivating individual moral values but also emphasizes social awareness, environmental responsibility, and a commitment to social justice [44]. The integration of local wisdom into the national curriculum facilitates deep internalization of values due to its contextual relevance to students' lived experiences, resulting in authentic and meaningful learning. Longitudinal studies indicate that students who engage in character education grounded in local wisdom demonstrate significant improvements in empathy, tolerance, leadership, and conflict resolution skills compared to those who only experience conventional character education [45]. Furthermore, this approach has proven effective in preventing the erosion of traditional values and strengthening cultural identity among younger generations in the digital age.

Indonesia's experience in aligning the national curriculum with cultural diversity offers valuable lessons for contemporary educational practices, particularly for multicultural nations facing similar challenges. The model of local wisdom integration within the *Merdeka Curriculum* can serve as a best practice adaptable to other developing countries with high levels of cultural diversity [46]. Indonesia's example highlights that effective multicultural education requires a systematic approach involving all stakeholders—policy makers, educators, communities, and students—in the implementation process. The country's theoretical contribution to global educational discourse lies in its development of a learning model that bridges the dichotomy between global standardization and local diversity without compromising educational quality. This model also presents an alternative to internationalization approaches that tend to be homogenizing and overlook the richness of local cultures. In the long term, Indonesia's experience may inspire the development of more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable global education frameworks.

The long-term vision of implementing the synergy between the *Merdeka Curriculum* and local wisdom is the creation of a generation with *glocal character*—individuals who are competent to actively engage in global communities while preserving and promoting local cultural values [47]. This generation is expected to become change agents capable of addressing global challenges such as climate change, social injustice, and intercultural conflict with holistic perspectives and sustainable solutions. Sustainable character education rooted in local wisdom also contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Realizing this vision requires long-term commitment from all educational stakeholders to continuously develop, evaluate, and refine the model of local wisdom integration within the national education system. Investments in research and development, ongoing teacher training, and the creation of educational infrastructure that supports culturally based learning are key to ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of this program. In this way, character education grounded in local wisdom can serve as a strong foundation for building a nation that is progressive, morally grounded, and sustainable.

4. Conclusion

This study affirms that the synergy between the *Merdeka Curriculum* and local wisdom represents an innovative and strategic approach to strengthening students' character education, particularly in South Sumatra. The integration of local

values—such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), *musyawarah* (deliberation), and principles from *Simbur Cahaya*—into intradisciplinary learning and the *Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Projects* has proven effective in shaping students' character in a contextual, relevant, and meaningful manner.

The proposed *Innovative Synergy Model* combines multicultural education theory, social constructivism, and principles of community-based learning. This model not only addresses the challenges of globalization that threaten local cultural identities but also offers a systematic framework that can be adapted across diverse cultural regions.

Practically, the successful implementation of this model requires policy support, enhanced teacher capacity, the development of culturally grounded learning resources, and cross-sectoral collaboration. The synergy between the *Merdeka Curriculum* and local wisdom is not only relevant within the Indonesian context but also holds the potential to serve as a global reference for building inclusive, culturally rooted, and sustainable education systems.

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