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The Implications of the 'Merdeka Belajar' (Freedom to Learn) Curriculum for Student Character Development in the Christian Religious Education Subject for Class VIII.10 at SMPN-2 Palangka Raya

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Abstract

The Merdeka Curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning, competency development, and character formation. This study examines its implications for student character development in Christian Religious Education (CRE) among Grade VIII.10 students at SMPN-2 Palangka Raya and identifies supporting and inhibiting factors. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed. Data were collected through observation, interviews with the CRE teacher, the vice principal for curriculum, and students, as well as school-document analysis. The data were analyzed through collection, reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that character development is reflected in three interconnected dimensions: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Students demonstrated understanding of Christian values, including love, honesty, discipline, responsibility, patience, humility, forgiveness, and care for others; affective internalization through conscience, empathy, self-control, and willingness to accept correction; and practical application through helping others, praying, respecting teachers and peers, maintaining cleanliness, completing tasks, and forgiving. Supporting factors include teacher competence and role modeling, school leadership, positive school culture, family support, facilities, student motivation, and learning resources. Inhibiting factors include uneven curriculum understanding and teacher readiness, differences in student characteristics, inconsistent family support, peer influence, distracting technology use, and facilities that still require improvement. The study concludes that curriculum flexibility contributes to character formation when learning is consistently reinforced by modeling, habituation, and student guidance.

Keywords Freedom to Learn, Character Development, Christian Religious Education

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INTRODUCTION

Education is expected to develop learners not only intellectually but also morally, spiritually, socially, and emotionally. In Indonesia, this broad purpose is reflected in the

national education orientation and in curriculum reforms that seek to make learning more relevant to students' needs. The Merdeka Curriculum gives schools and teachers flexibility to organize learning around essential competencies and student characteristics, while strengthening the values expressed in the Pancasila Student Profile (Mulyasa, 2023; Irawati et al., 2022; Putri & Maula, 2024).

Character formation is particularly important in Christian Religious Education (CRE), because learning is not limited to acquiring religious knowledge. It is also directed toward internalizing Christian values and expressing them in daily conduct. The values of love, honesty, discipline, responsibility, humility, forgiveness, and care for others should therefore be visible in students' decisions and interactions. Lickona (2021) explains character education through the connected dimensions of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. In CRE, these dimensions provide a useful way to examine whether students understand values, develop moral sensitivity, and act consistently with what they have learned (Bessie et al., 2023; Dei, 2023; Rendi et al., 2024).

The Merdeka Curriculum offers opportunities for student-centered and contextual learning, but flexibility alone does not guarantee the development of character. Students need guidance to interpret freedom as responsibility rather than as the absence of rules. Prior studies discuss the contribution of the curriculum to character education and the importance of teacher guidance, school culture, and the Pancasila Student Profile (Widaningsih et al., 2023; Taufiq et al., 2023; Aprianti et al., 2025). Research on moral development also emphasizes that knowledge, feeling, and action must be considered as an integrated process (Nur et al., 2023; Purwati et al., 2024).

Initial observations in Grade VIII.10 at SMPN-2 Palangka Raya indicated a gap between the intended learning autonomy and some students' classroom behavior. The observed issues included talking during lessons, using mobile phones for non-learning purposes, leaving the classroom while learning was in progress, and delaying or completing assignments without sufficient seriousness. These conditions raise questions about how curriculum implementation is related to character formation in CRE and what conditions strengthen or constrain that process.

Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions: (1) How does the Merdeka Curriculum have implications for student character formation in CRE for Grade VIII.10 at SMPN-2 Palangka Raya? and (2) What supporting and inhibiting factors influence the implementation of the curriculum in character formation? The study contributes a context-specific account of how moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action appear in students' learning experiences, while identifying the school, family, peer, and technological conditions that shape character development.

METHODS

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach to understand the implications of the Merdeka Curriculum for character formation in CRE in the natural setting of SMPN-

2 Palangka Raya. The research focused on Grade VIII.10 and explored students' experiences, classroom behavior, and the practices through which Christian values were introduced and reinforced. The primary sources consisted of the CRE teacher, the vice principal for curriculum, and students in the selected class. The thesis documents interviews with the CRE teacher Mersy Marianne Tioria S., S.PAK, the vice principal for curriculum Ida I Dewa Ayu Oka, S.Pd., and student informants. Interviews with students were conducted on 27 August 2026, while interviews with the teacher and vice principal were conducted on 28 August 2026.

Data were gathered through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to examine learning activities and students' conduct during CRE lessons. Interviews explored moral understanding, moral feelings, moral decision-making, the application of values, and the factors supporting or inhibiting curriculum implementation. Documentation included relevant school and learning documents. The data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 2021).

Research Framework

The analytical framework links the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in CRE with character formation through three dimensions: moral knowing (understanding and reasoning about values), moral feeling (internalizing values through conscience and empathy), and moral action (competence, will, and habits). The analysis also considers contextual factors that support or inhibit the process.

Merdeka Curriculum in CRE	Character Formation	Contextual Factors
Student-centered and flexible learning; teacher facilitation	Moral knowing → moral feeling → moral action	Supporting: teacher, leadership, school culture, family, facilities, motivation, resources Inhibiting: readiness, student diversity, family, peers, technology, facilities

Figure 1. Analytical framework of the study

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

1. Implications of the Merdeka Curriculum for student character formation

The findings show that the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in CRE is associated with character development across three interrelated dimensions. The findings do not indicate that all students have reached the same level of consistency; rather, they

show emerging understanding, internalization, and practice of Christian values that still require reinforcement.

Moral Knowing: Understanding and Reasoning about Moral Values

Students demonstrated an emerging ability to distinguish right from wrong by referring to biblical teachings, CRE lessons, school rules, parental advice, and the consequences of an action. Values mentioned by students and the teacher included love, honesty, discipline, responsibility, patience, humility, mutual respect, forgiveness, and helping others. Students also showed perspective-taking by listening to friends, imagining another person's situation, and offering assistance. In moral reasoning and decision-making, students described rejecting inappropriate peer invitations and considering whether an action harmed others or contradicted Christian teachings. At the same time, self-knowledge varied: some students could identify strengths such as honesty and helpfulness, while acknowledging weaknesses such as distraction, inappropriate language, or talking during lessons.

2. Moral Feeling: Internalizing Values

The affective dimension appeared in students' feelings of guilt and regret after acting against values they had learned. Students described responding to mistakes by praying, reflecting, apologizing, and trying not to repeat the behavior. Positive self-esteem was expressed through happiness, gratitude, and pride after completing responsibilities or doing something helpful. Empathy appeared in listening to friends, asking about their condition, helping with schoolwork, and offering support. Students were motivated to do good because of their faith, the wish to glorify God, and the happiness of seeing others helped. Self-control was visible in efforts to put mobile phones away, redirect attention, and manage emotions, although the teacher noted that some students still needed reminders. Students generally reported willingness to accept advice and correction, while some continued to need gradual guidance.

3. Moral Action: Applying Values in Daily Conduct

Students described applying CRE values by respecting teachers and peers, being honest, avoiding cheating, helping classmates, forgiving others, praying before and after lessons, maintaining cleanliness, and using polite language. The teacher also observed efforts to complete assignments, follow rules, and assist peers. Several students explained that they chose to do what was right even when teachers were not watching because they believed God knew their actions. However, the teacher noted that such willingness was not yet consistent among all students. Repeated positive practices suggest that character formation is beginning to move from knowledge and feeling toward habits, but consistency remains an ongoing task.

4. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

Supporting factors identified in the study were teacher competence and role modeling; principal support through guidance, supervision, and professional

development; a school culture of greetings, prayer, cleanliness, discipline, ceremonies, and worship; family attention and communication with school; available classrooms, library, laboratory, internet, and other facilities; student participation and motivation; and the use of technology and varied learning resources. The inhibiting factors were uneven understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum, differences in teacher competence and readiness (especially in technology use and learning-method development), diverse student abilities and motivation, inconsistent family support, peer influence, excessive or misdirected gadget and social-media use, and facilities that require further improvement. The findings indicate that school facilities are generally available, but some need to be upgraded or better aligned with learning needs.

Discussion

The curriculum's implications across moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action

The first research question concerns how the Merdeka Curriculum is implicated in character formation through CRE. The findings suggest that the curriculum creates learning conditions in which students can engage with values, reflect on their meaning, and practice them in social interactions. The three dimensions are mutually reinforcing rather than separate outcomes. Students' ability to explain why honesty, love, or respect matters represents moral knowing; feelings of regret, empathy, and gratitude indicate moral feeling; and helping peers, keeping promises, and completing tasks represent moral action. This pattern is consistent with Lickona's (2021) framework and with Purwati et al. (2024), who describe moral development among junior high school students through moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Nur et al. (2023) similarly emphasize the integration of moral knowledge, feeling, and behavior in school character education.

The moral knowing findings show that students do not rely on a single source when judging conduct. They refer to biblical teachings, classroom learning, school rules, family advice, and the effects of actions on other people. This combination is important because moral reasoning becomes more meaningful when students can connect religious principles with concrete situations. The students' accounts of refusing negative peer invitations also suggest that learning can support decision-making, although the reported weaknesses in concentration and classroom discipline show that understanding does not automatically produce consistent conduct. The curriculum therefore needs to provide repeated opportunities for discussion, reflection, and contextual problem-solving rather than relying only on the delivery of lesson content.

The moral feeling findings indicate that values have begun to acquire personal meaning. Feelings of guilt after wrongdoing, empathy toward friends, and willingness to accept correction suggest that students are developing an internal response to moral situations. This is particularly relevant to CRE because Christian values are expected to be lived, not merely recited. Bessie et al. (2023), Dei (2023), and Rendi et al. (2024) likewise place character and ethical formation at the center of Christian religious education. Rondo

and Mokalu (2022) also highlight the relevance of educational psychology in Christian character education. Nevertheless, students' varying ability to control emotions and mobile-phone use demonstrates that affective internalization remains a developmental process requiring modeling and guidance.

The moral action findings provide practical evidence that values are being translated into everyday behavior. Prayer, honesty, helping classmates, forgiveness, cleanliness, respect, and responsibility are concrete expressions of the values taught in CRE. The students' explanation that they should act rightly even without teacher supervision because God knows their actions suggests that faith can function as an internal moral reference. However, the teacher's observation that some students still require supervision is an important qualification: positive behavior has emerged, but it is not yet uniform or fully habitual. This supports the argument that character education requires consistency between knowledge, affective commitment, and repeated practice (Hikmah et al., 2021; Purwati et al., 2024).

These findings also align with research on the Merdeka Curriculum and character education. Irawati et al. (2022) explain the role of the Pancasila Student Profile in strengthening national character, while Mulyasa (2023) describe character education as integrated into learning and school activities. Irawati et al. (2022) and Aprianti et al. (2025) also discuss the relationship between curriculum implementation and student character development. The present study adds a focused account from Christian Religious Education at the junior high school level, showing how the moral dimensions can be traced through students' understanding, feelings, and daily practices.

Supporting and inhibiting conditions in character formation

The second research question concerns the conditions that support and inhibit implementation. Teacher competence and role modeling emerged as central supports. Teachers translate curriculum goals into learning experiences, demonstrate expected conduct, and reinforce positive habits. Professional learning through MGMP and training can strengthen this role. This is consistent with Ananda et al. (2022), who discuss the internalization of respect and responsibility through teacher example, and Ananda et al. (2022), who emphasize teacher role modeling in student character formation. School leadership also matters because supervision, coaching, and opportunities for professional development create an institutional environment in which character education can be sustained (Hasanah & Khotimah, 2024; Jani, 2023).

School culture and family involvement provide continuity beyond the CRE lesson. Daily greetings, prayer, cleanliness, discipline, ceremonies, and worship give students repeated opportunities to practice values. Parents reinforce these habits through attention, supervision, and communication with teachers. The findings are consistent with Ma'ruf and Ratnaningrum (2024), who highlight collaboration among parents, teachers, and peers, and Rohmah et al. (2023), who examine the relationship between parental and school support and students' peaceful character. Peer relationships can also

be constructive when students help and encourage one another, but can become an obstacle when students imitate disruptive behavior (Afidah et al., 2024; Densius, 2024).

Technology similarly has a dual role. Digital resources can broaden learning materials and support student engagement, but uncontrolled mobile-phone and social-media use can reduce concentration and influence behavior. Andriani et al. (2024) connect digital literacy with strengthening student character in the Merdeka Curriculum, while Andriani et al. (2024) discuss social media's role in character formation in the digital era. The implication is not to reject technology, but to establish clear learning purposes, classroom rules, and digital-literacy guidance. The need to improve some facilities also corresponds with Hamidah et al. (2025), who emphasize adequate infrastructure and effective management in supporting curriculum implementation.

The findings point to a systemic understanding of character formation. The curriculum provides flexibility and direction, but the realization of character depends on the interaction of teachers, school leadership, school culture, families, peers, students' own motivation, technology, and learning facilities. The practical response should therefore combine ongoing teacher development, consistent positive routines, differentiated student guidance, family-school communication, responsible technology use, and gradual improvement of facilities. Because the research is qualitative and focused on one class in one school, the findings should be interpreted as a contextual account rather than a statistical generalization to all schools.

CONCLUSION

The Merdeka Curriculum has implications for student character formation in Grade VIII.10 CRE at SMPN-2 Palangka Raya through the interconnected development of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Students showed understanding of Christian values and the ability to reason about right and wrong; affective responses such as conscience, empathy, gratitude, self-control, and humility; and practical behaviors including prayer, honesty, respect, helping others, forgiveness, cleanliness, and responsibility. These developments are emerging and differ among students, so continued habituation and guidance remain necessary.

Supporting conditions include teacher competence and example, principal support, positive school culture, family involvement, available facilities, student motivation, and learning resources. Inhibiting conditions include uneven curriculum understanding and teacher readiness, differences in student characteristics, inconsistent family support, peer influence, distracting technology use, and facilities that still need improvement. Schools should strengthen teacher professional development, maintain consistent character-building routines, deepen family-school collaboration, guide responsible technology use, and provide differentiated mentoring. Future research may involve multiple schools or compare qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the continuity of moral development over time.

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