

Character Education Policy and Its Implications for Learning in Indonesia's Education System

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Introduction

Indonesia has undertaken various large-scale education reforms over the past two decades, including increasing spending by threefold in real terms (Beatty et al., 2018). The country's investments in education have achieved a gender-balanced, near-universal school enrolment, particularly at the elementary-school level. And yet significant challenges to improve learning outcomes still exist. The performance of Indonesian students in science, mathematics, and reading is one of the lowest among the participating countries of the 2015 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016). The 2016 Indonesia National Assessment Programme (INAP) also shows that 77 percent of elementary school students do not master basic mathematics; about 73 percent of students do not master science; and almost 50 percent have low reading skills (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2016).

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, when we asked education stakeholders from national to school levels about challenging issues in education, they seldom mentioned these worryingly low results on academic skills.¹ Instead, these stakeholders emphasised other issues affecting students: moral degradation, reflected by violence (including bullying), drug use, free sex, and teenage pregnancy. National policymakers are particularly concerned about systemic cheating on national exams. In their view, the need for education to address these

Key Points

- This Insight discusses the character education policy within the Indonesian education system, which still faces key challenges to improve learning outcomes.
- From our diagnostic of the Indonesian education system, we find that education policymakers and stakeholders in Indonesia perceive that character education can solve societal issues related to moral degradation.
- The philosophy underpinning character education policies includes the elements of character and learning. However, we observe that intellectual discussion and public discourse on character education are dominated by a focus on morality, religiosity, and nationalism. As a result, we find that the learning aspect of education has slowly become distinct, particularly in the implementation of the latest policy, Strengthening Character Education (PPK).
- We hypothesise that the one-sided implementation of the policy is due to the lack of clarity in the “delegation” aspect of the policy design, which results in a variety of conflicting interpretations by education stakeholders at national, local, and school levels.
- Policymakers at the national level could make use of open forums to involve local governments, schools, and communities to develop a shared vision of character education policy. Policymakers must also ensure that the design and technical guidelines of character education policies align, so that implementation does not come at the cost of activities that directly support other priority learning objectives.

¹We received similar responses from our informants of SMERU's study on education in West Nusa Tenggara Province (2016) and RISE Programme in Indonesia's studies—SABER-like exercise (2017), phone survey for listing potential study areas (2018), diagnostic study of Reform Area B (2018), and in-service teacher professional development (ongoing). The informants were, among others, officers of the education agency and other government agencies, school principals, teachers, parents, and community leaders.

societal issues overshadows the urgency to address low learning outcomes. The media's portrayal of societal ills may affect the perception of political figures, policymakers, and education stakeholders about the urgency of these problems (Damaledo, 2017; Permana, 2017).

For example, media have extensively covered bullying leading to death or physical and emotional injuries of students (Rahayu, 2017; Tanjung, 2017; Wasono, 2018). The 2015 Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) noted that in Indonesia 20.6 percent of students aged 13-17 years old were bullied on one or more days during the 30 days before the survey; of those surveyed, 24.1 percent of males and 17.4 percent of females reported being bullied (World Health Organisation, 2015). In 2015, the Child Protection Commission (KPA) announced that while the cases of child abuse decreased, cases of children being bullied increased; bullying has started to occur in primary schools (Aulia, 2016).

Meanwhile, in the cases of free sex and unwanted pregnancies, Indonesia now has more adolescents who are sexually active outside of marriage (Utomo and McDonald, 2009 cited in Utomo and Utomo, 2013, p.3). In 2010, the Child Protection Commission (KPA) conducted a survey of 4,500 teenagers across 12 cities in Indonesia: 63 percent had engaged in sex and 21 percent of the females had had an abortion (Kusumaningsih, 2010 cited in Utomo and Utomo, 2013, p.3).

Recently, many stakeholders attribute the societal problems in Indonesia to the lack of moral, religiosity, and nationalism in the character of students despite the fact that public schools provide instruction on related subjects. Schools may be expected to play a key role in addressing these continuously expressed concerns about moral degradation and other general societal problems. This is not a recent development nor unique to Indonesia as socialisation of values is a key component of education in many societies (Paglayan, 2017). For example, in the 1990s, Utomo and McDonald (2009 cited in Utomo and Utomo, 2013, p.3) stated that extended schooling might significantly reduce rates of early marriage among Indonesian women.

How policymakers see the urgency of education as a key to tackle this societal problem is manifested in the enactment of the Regulation of the President of the Republic of Indonesia No. 87/2017 on Strengthening Character Education (PPK). Its underlying philosophy is based on at least 18 character values developed in the concept of character education. In PPK, these values are grouped into five aspects: religiosity, integrity, nationalism, independence, and mutual cooperation. Theoretically, these five aspects of character education present a tailored solution that is intended to overcome societal issues of concern without ignoring the problem of low learning outcomes. However, we observe that, in practice, the PPK tends to be restricted because of the predominance of three aspects: morality, religiosity, and nationalism. Very little direction is oriented towards improving academic learning.

Therefore, the push for Indonesian education to emphasise character education raises concerns, chief among them: how character is defined and the extent to which morality, religion, and nationalism are part of this; and whether the focus on character complements or detracts from a focus on improving student learning.

We discuss these issues in this article, drawing insights from our SABER-like² exercise—one component of the RISE System Diagnostic Study—ongoing research activities of the RISE Programme in Indonesia, and a SMERU study.³

Character Education Policy in Indonesia

Key goals of Indonesia's education since the country's independence in 1945 are twofold: to develop the character, as well as to enhance the knowledge and skills of students. Various policy documents, including the 1945 Constitution and the most recent 2003 Law on National Education System are similar in stating these goals of education. These are the basis of character education policies in Indonesia. The current motto of the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC)—“smart and with character” underlines the importance of both goals.⁴ The philosophy builds upon the philosophy of Ki

²SABER-like refers to a diagnostic exercise of the current condition of an education system. It is an adaptation of the World Bank's Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) diagnostic tool that covers the six RISE-relevant SABER domains (i.e., EMIS, Engaging the Private Sector, School Accountability and Autonomy, School Finance, Student Assessment, Teachers). The RISE Programme in Indonesia further extends the SABER-like exercise to ensure that other contextually applicable dimensions of Indonesia's education system are covered.

³A study on education in West Nusa Tenggara Province conducted in 2016.

⁴The Ministry of Education and Culture (MoE) dedicates a website for Strengthening Character Education (Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter or PPK). The website's name (<http://cerdasberkarakter.kemdikbud.go.id/>) means “smart and with character”.

Hadjar Dewantara, Indonesia's Father of Education, who emphasised four integrated concepts (ethical, intellectual, aesthetic, and kinaesthetic goals) and three centres of education (school, family, and community). The philosophy underpinning character education is therefore "holistic", and incorporates both improvements in character and intellect, and the responsibilities of all stakeholders in achieving these aims.

Despite this shared foundation, the ways in which these key concepts are applied differ throughout different political contexts.⁵ During the New Order era (1966–1998), there was no specific policy on character education. The implementation of character education heavily emphasised nation-building and religious and moral values (see for example Kelabora, 1979). Schools at that time addressed character education by teaching Pancasila, which was the official philosophy of the Indonesian New Order government.⁶ Moral Education, a subject that emphasised that morality, religiosity, and nationalism are part of the national philosophy. In the wake of Indonesia's political reform in 1998, the emphasis has shifted. Following a trend toward democratisation of that time, Pancasila Moral Education changed into Pancasila and Citizenship Education. During this transition period, The National Long-Term Development Plan and Law on National Education System, incorporated the key values that then become the basis for implementing cultural and character education.

In 2010, policymakers in the MoEC adopted Ki Hadjar Dewantara's concepts as the basis for the policy on Character Education (PK). The key concept of the 2010 policy places the aspects of moral, religiosity, and nationalism at the forefront of education, without diminishing learning aspect. The Character Education Action Plan 2010 stipulates 18 character values that students need to achieve in schools in Indonesia. Hambali (2015) groups them into four sets of characters: religiosity, nationalism, productivity, and creativity. The last two characters, in our view, relate to the development of students' intellectuality, which is linked to learning outcomes.

The latest policy on character education, PPK, is an extension of the earlier policy, and is still based upon Ki Hadjar Dewantara's principles. The 18 character values are adopted and grouped into five aspects: religiosity, integrity, nationalism, independence, and mutual cooperation. Although we do indeed see that fewer than half of the values relate to learning of skills or capabilities (like reading, mathematics, science, history) we take the view that the PPK as designed does not in and of itself diminish learning aspects.

But, interestingly, we found that many stakeholders overemphasise the religiosity and nationalism elements of character education. There are also indications that key education stakeholders in the districts have emphasised the development of character more than learning achievement. Some stakeholders even place character development as an opposite of academic achievement.

These views about character education could undermine efforts, and government investments, to improve learning. Therefore, it is important to find the root of this problem of misinterpretation about character education.

Delegation Issues in Character Education Policy

In its philosophy and design, the policy of character education includes learning. However, the implementation seems to be shifting away since elements of morality, religiosity, and nationalism now predominate, potentially at the expense of learning.

The findings of our SABER-like exercise lead to our arguments that this problem of the implementation of character education policy lies on the incoherent "delegation" (Pritchett, 2015) of character education policy.⁷ We argue that the incoherent delegation is reflected in the misalignment at the level of idea and in the implementation.

⁵See the work of Agustina S. Paglayan on schools as an instrument of nation building, and the work of Ivor Prichard on debates on character education and the aim of moral education in the United States.

⁶For a brief overview of the five principles of Pancasila see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pancasila_\(politics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pancasila_(politics)).

⁷According to the RISE Framework, delegation spreads across the four relationships of accountability namely politics, compact, management, and voice/client power. Coherent delegation occurs when the principal-agent relationships of all elements of accountability have the same objectives. That is, what the citizens want the state to do (politics) must be well-translated into the state's delegation to organisations (compact) and the organisations' delegation to front-line providers (management). The service recipients, furthermore, must have a place to voice their concerns to the organisations, should the citizens' wants fail to occur (voice/client power). While Indonesia's education system is decentralised, national government has a core position in this system. Therefore, research into this system needs to clearly signify how the education is defined in the laws, regulations, and policies by the national government. What is similarly important is how stakeholders at national and local levels interpret and translate the defined goals into practice.

Misalignment of Ideas

Conceptually, character education policy incorporates the development of character and knowledge, reflecting the stated objectives of education in the 1945 Constitution. The MoEC's Character Education Policy and the statement on character education as an integrated part of Curriculum 2013 (Muhtar, 2014) also show that character education is not separated from the activities set in the curriculum to build students' knowledge.

However, the goals of character education policy quickly shifted. Further steps to implement the policy shows that too much emphasis is oriented toward activities that promote the morality, religiosity, and nationalism of students.

We observe that a key to this problem, first of all, is the use of the term "character" as in the name of the policy itself: Strengthening Character Education. "Character education" is a buzz word which has long been used by education institutions and religious schools alike.⁸ Therefore, the name of the policy itself, which specifically use the term "character"—despite the fact that, by design, the policy's aim also includes learning—could be easily misunderstood. Particularly, education stakeholders holding strong values on morality, religiosity, and nationalism would easily see the policy as an encouragement for schools to strengthen these three elements perhaps even at the expense of other learnings.

A second issue is that only few education scholars give attention to the linkage of learning to character education. Indonesian scholars writing on character education pay considerable attention to the elements of morality, religiosity, and nationalism. Consequently, those elements dominate the general discourse associated with character education policy. Although learning as a goal is still mentioned, it is secondary compared to the elements of morality, religiosity, and nationalism. The construct of the three elements as the main—and even as the dominant—element of character education policy seems to be fully accepted, with scholars seldom discussing the subject critically (few exceptions include Lie, 2014; Hambali, 2015; Hadi, 2016). Only a few make an attempt to link character education with teaching and students' academic learning activities (see for example Haryawan, 2014; Djiwandono, 2016).

We are concerned not at all by the presence of, but by the domination of moral and religious elements of character education in the room of intellectual discussion and in public discourse. The domination creates other consequences, as the goal to achieve positive learning outcomes then slowly becomes viewed as distinct from character education, whereas character education in principle emphasises student learning achievement as a key element.

Misalignment at the Practice Level

At the practice level, we observe that stakeholders tend to interpret implementation of character education policy activities as distinct from academic learning-oriented activities. This interpretation is visible in education institutions from national to school levels.

At the national level, this interpretation surfaces in MoEC communication to local governments and schools about how to implement character education-oriented tasks. As an example, the guidelines on implementing character education mention that students should read The Holy Quran or Doa Bapa Kami (the Lord's prayer) before classroom activities start; students' parents may only take their children up to, not through, the school gate; and all school members should carry out the flag ceremony every Monday morning (Kementerian Pendidikan Nasional, 2011; Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2017). These examples show that the implementation of character education policy falls short of its original concept. Furthermore, the emphasis on religious activities overlaps with the subject of religion, which already has its own place in the curriculum.

The implementation of the Strengthening Character Education Policy requires the involvement of different education stakeholders, from district government, schools, teachers, and community to families and students. The misalignment in the delegated tasks from national government to local stakeholders and schools creates domino effects, which further

⁸Faith-based schools in Indonesia usually apply the national curriculum combined with their own curriculum, which highlights special values promoted by the schools.

⁹An officer of a local education office in West Java stated that, in terms of new student admission, he would not want to have smart children only. He said that he would also like to have students of good moral character. He would like for the local government to establish a quota whereby 50 percent of accepted students would be "smart ones", and 50 percent of the rest would be hafiz/hafiza (Quran) (people who have memorised the Quran). Source: field notes of RISE phone survey (2018).

¹⁰Regulation of the Regent of Purwakarta No. 69/2015 on Character Education.

isolate learning in favour of morality, religiosity, and nationalism. The guidelines previously noted in this paper indeed narrow the construct of character education policy merely as morality, religiosity, and nationalism. Consequently, key education stakeholders in the regions have also emphasised the three elements more than learning. More concerning, as elaborated below, some stakeholders further place character education as an opposite of student learning achievement showing the reduction of the actual integrated policy in design into morality, religiosity, and nationalism in practice.⁹

At the regional level, some examples are the following: in 2015, a local government of Purwakarta in West Java issued a regulation on character education to develop generations of children who are smart, skilful, independent, and broad-minded; who have noble character, love their homeland, and can adapt to their environment.¹⁰ The first four elements stated in the goal are still directly connected to learning. However, at the practice level, we found that the emphasis is more on the aspects of religiosity and morality.

The local education office has produced a student's control book for teachers and parents to assess student character.¹¹ Those actions assessed include waking up at 4.30 a.m. to say a morning prayer, reciting The Holy Quran, eating breakfast, bringing a healthy lunch and snack, and reading school books. To pass assessments, male students must acquire additional points for growing productive plants, raising livestock or poultry, demonstrating good skills in electronics, business, or farming. For female students, the additional points required include demonstrating skill in cooking, weaving or crocheting, and farming.¹²

We also observe similar tendencies in Bali, where the predominant religion is Hinduism. In Bali, character education is strengthened by intensification of religious learning through both formal and informal education known as *pasraman*, which includes moral education, ethics, and manners (Subagiasta, 2018).

At the school level, the obscurity and stakeholders' (mis)interpretation of the elements of policy pose potential obstacles to improving student learning. As character education is merged in the core curriculum, some changes are expected in the school or classroom activities. These include, for example, how teachers assess students' morality, religiosity, nationalism, as well as academic competencies. Teachers may teach or conduct assessments that focus on aspects of character. Instead of integrating character education into the learning activities set in the curriculum—as expected from the policy—teachers choose to focus on either character education in the form of its reduced meaning (e.g., mainly as religious activities) or on knowledge and skills in teaching and assessing students. Unfortunately, we see this tendency to interpret character education as limited, with teachers' tasks seen to be on building student character, and taking away from another essential goal: developing student knowledge.

How to move forward

We realise that policymakers face pressure to solve societal issues through the education system while the system faces its own challenges to improve student learning. National policymakers may attempt to solve societal problems by strengthening character education policy without deliberately undermining the improvement of learning. However, in our view, this intention is unlikely to solve both societal and learning problems unless two key issues related to delegation are resolved at the level of ideas and practice.

First, the delegated tasks associated with the policy need to be clarified. National policymakers need to realise that education stakeholders are lost in the translation of the normative policy statements of character education policy into practice.

The lack of clarity in delegation could lead education stakeholders to misinterpret the policy's objective. Even at the national level, character education policy is being reduced through the technical guidelines emphasising the elements of morality, religiosity, and nationalism. This situation shows that delegation from the state to the technical stakeholders is an issue. Furthermore, the fact that the guidelines from the national government are being followed “too literally” by

¹¹In another part of West Java, the local education office also produces a student control book. The control book is an essential component that supports the local government's programme on *gerakan maghrib mengaji* (reciting Qur'an during Maghrib). Source: field notes of RISE phone survey (2018).

¹²In the writers' opinion, these different additional points required for male students and female students offer another interesting discussion on gendered character education.

the local governments shows the importance of clarity of delegation.¹³

Stakeholders also need to carefully watch the potential or indirect effects of a misalignment that emphasises the elements of morality, religiosity, and nationalism. This may convince or justify the allocation of substantial resources by education stakeholders at all levels for activities to support these elements, at the expense of activities that directly support students learning. We recommend that national policymakers clearly and explicitly signal that the intended goal of character education policy is to include developing students' skills and knowledge (i.e., learning outcomes) as stated in the policy's original philosophy.

At the practice level, in order to ensure that all elements in the policy are being implemented as they should be, we recommend the following:

1. Stakeholders from the national to school levels need to develop similar visions about "character education". Indonesia has several existing mechanisms such as *rembuk nasional* (national gathering), an annual stakeholder meeting organised by the MoEC, which could be an example of channel to develop a shared vision about character education. The key is to ensure that the channels are open and widely promoted so that broad audiences from national government, local government, schools, and communities can participate.
2. Instruments (e.g., technical or implementation guidelines) to implement the policy need to be in line with—not contradictory to—existing instruments, such as those used to assess students and teachers. The instruments need to be clear and unambiguous, and, more importantly, they should not overemphasise one element at the expense of all others.

Having recommended these steps, we emphasise that we are not in any way attempting to endorse or oppose the policy to strengthen character education in Indonesia. As scholars, our main concern is to ensure that the problem of low learning achievement is not ignored (or denigrated) as education stakeholders focus on addressing perceived moral degradation.

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¹³Albertus (2015) asserts that in terms of implementing character education at the school level, a school and its community must have a solid understanding of human beings, a good understanding of the concept of character education, and clear objectives of such education. This also means that implementing character education is more than just promoting ritualism of any religions, among other things.

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