

## Teachers' enactments of character education: A case study from Indonesia

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**Abstract:** The Indonesian national curriculum and educational policies mandate the integration of character education into every classroom learning activities in schools. This qualitative case study aims to investigate Indonesian subject teachers' agency to enact character education, including how they plan, assess, and execute it, in their teaching practices. In addition, it also explores the ways they select the character traits as well as the challenges they encountered in character education. The data include in-depth semi-structured interviews with three experienced Indonesian senior high school teachers. The results delineate that the teachers enacted character education that covered cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects. Nevertheless, these enactments were unplanned and unassessed. In the process of character selection, the teachers reflected on their contextual situations, past experiences, and future orientations. They encountered difficulties in character education due to the abundance of academic materials, and the lack of professional development programs and proactive involvement from other school members.

**Keywords:** character education; enactment; agency teacher; Indonesia

### Penerapan pendidikan karakter oleh guru: Sebuah studi kasus dari Indonesia

**Abstrak:** Kurikulum nasional dan kebijakan pendidikan Indonesia mengamanatkan integrasi pendidikan karakter ke dalam setiap kegiatan pembelajaran di kelas di sekolah. Penelitian kualitatif dalam bentuk studi kasus ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji peran guru mata pelajaran di Indonesia dalam penerapan pendidikan karakter, termasuk bagaimana mereka merencanakan, menilai, dan melaksanakannya, dalam praktik pengajaran mereka. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga mengeksplorasi cara mereka memilih karakter serta tantangan yang mereka hadapi dalam pendidikan karakter. Data penelitian meliputi wawancara semi-terstruktur mendalam dengan tiga guru Sekolah Menengah Atas di Indonesia yang berpengalaman. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru menerapkan pendidikan karakter yang meliputi aspek kognitif, afektif, dan perilaku. Namun demikian, penerapan pendidikan karakter ini tidak direncanakan dan tidak dinilai. Dalam proses pemilihan karakter, guru merefleksikan situasi kontekstual, pengalaman masa lalu, dan orientasi masa depan mereka. Mereka mengalami kesulitan dalam pendidikan karakter karena banyaknya materi akademik, dan kurangnya program pengembangan profesional dan keterlibatan proaktif dari warga sekolah lainnya.

**Kata kunci:** pendidikan karakter; penerapan; guru; Indonesia

#### INTRODUCTION

The notion of character education is not a brand-new enterprise in Indonesian formal education contexts. For decades, it has always been an inherent part of the Indonesian national curriculum and educational policies. Character education is the actual and explicit realization of the Indonesian national education goals that do not only cover cognitive aspects of the

students, but also affective aspects, the root of character education (Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2003). The previously implemented Indonesian *Kurikulum Berbasis Kompetensi* (Competence-Based Curriculum) in 2004 and *Kurikulum Tingkat Satuan Pendidikan* (School-Based Curriculum) in 2006, and the currently enacted *Kurikulum 2013* (Curriculum 2013) have explicitly instilled character education

as a part of its core and standard competence. In Indonesian context, the term 'character education' is formally used to refer to deliberate educational attempts conducted by schools to instil the interconnected core values of Pancasila, the basic philosophy of the nation, which are religiosity, nationalism, independence, communal work, and integrity (Kemendikbud, 2018). These core values are then expanded into 18 more specific values: religiosity, honesty, tolerance, discipline, hard work, creativity, independence, democracy, curiosity, national spirit, nationalism, respect for achievement, communication, love of peace, love of reading, environmental awareness, social awareness, and responsibility (Kemendikbud, 2018). Currently, under a framework program entitled *Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter* (Character Education Empowerment), it is mandated that the character education be applied through every classroom learning, the provision of a strong school culture, and the involvement of social environments outside the school (Kemendikbud, 2018; Presiden Republik Indonesia, 2017).

Subject teachers hold a significant role in the enactment of Indonesian character education. As character education is integrated within every classroom learning activity, teachers are given the authority and responsibility to enact character education within their teaching practices based on their distinctive contextual situations (Kemendikbud, 2018). Consequently, the character education is implemented as a situational praxis. Teachers are required to reflectively adapt and adjust the curriculum and policy expectations into appropriate teaching practices within their respective contexts (Aoki, 1983, 2005; Biesta, 2007; Biesta, 2015b; Lilja & Osbeck, 2020; Priestley et al., 2012). For this to occur, the role of teacher agency is very pivotal. This agency could either increase or decrease the impacts of character education in the settings where agents, or teachers in this context, play their roles (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Teacher agency is associated with teachers' individual capacities and their engagement with contextual situations (Cheng & Huang, 2018). Scholars have illustrated the significant impacts of teacher agency in several different educational contexts (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Biesta, 2015a; Biesta, 2015b; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Johnson, 2008; Lilja & Osbeck, 2020; Priestley et al., 2012). Further, Biesta (2015b) postulated that this subjective domain plays a pivotal role in enhancing teachers' professionalism and ensuring that students receive a quality education. However, very few studies have focused specifically on teachers' agency to enact the Indonesian character education program. Instead, greater attention has been given to school-wide strategies and the impacts of character education implementation (Abdi, 2018; Hayati et al., 2020; Suyatno et al., 2018; Zurqoni et al., 2018a; Zurqoni et al., 2018b). While these studies are indeed significant, it is worth noting that a singular focus on school-wide strategies obscures the impacts individual teachers have on their students' character development (Robertson-Kraft & Austin, 2015; Selivanova et al., 2019).

This small-scale qualitative case study aims to investigate and better understand the ways in which Indonesian senior high school teachers achieve and exert agency in response to the educational reform of character education. It analysed teachers' pedagogical efforts to enact character education, including how they plan, assess, and execute it, in their teaching practices. In addition, it also explored the ways teachers select the character traits as well as the challenges they encounter in character education. The results of this research are expected to contribute to the body of knowledge related to teacher agency in character education. In addition, the findings can also be reflected as a point of departure for designing targeted and appropriate pre-service and in-service professional development programs for teachers in the domain of character education.

## METHOD

### Qualitative Case Study Design

The current qualitative research employed an instrumental case study design which is used to deeply investigate a particular issue of interest by studying a particular case as a specific illustration (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). In this sense, the case, which is defined as a specific, complex, and functioning object, such as a person or program (Stake, 1995), was utilised as an instrument for understanding the issue of interest based on the underlying theoretical explanations (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). As a result, during the process of data generation and analysis, the case study is advantaged by the development of existing theories that ground the issue of interest (Merriam, 2001; Yin, 2014). The theories may be modified, developed, rejected, advanced, or corroborated (Yin, 2014). Thus, instead of being confirmatory – demonstrating relationships between variables or examining hypotheses, for example – case studies seek to identify the emerging themes or categories of social phenomena in sophisticated ways (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Stake, 1995). In this project, the teachers' enactments of character education were instrumentally investigated through a case study of three Indonesian senior high school subject teachers residing in one school.

### Participants

The participants in this study were three Indonesian subject teachers. They teach *Bahasa Indonesia*, Physics, and Geography subjects in one of Indonesian senior high schools located in Kudus, Central Java, Indonesia which has approximately 2.500 students (40-44 students in each classroom) coming from various socio-economic, cultural, and academic backgrounds. The teacher participants were purposefully invited and selected due to their immediate relevance to the academic puzzle, theoretical underpinnings, and analytical frameworks that grounded the research. It was considered that they could provide a specific illustration and 'relevant range'

(Seidman, 2006, p. 124) in forms of experiences, views, processes, categories, and other relevant variables related with the research questions. Teachers of religion or civics as well as guidance and counselling teachers were purposefully not invited, as their jobs intrinsically involve the teaching of character education. They were considered as professionally prepared to teach character education.

The teacher participants were identified in pseudonyms as Gatot, Broto, and Satrio. First, Gatot was a *Bahasa Indonesia* teacher. He has taught the subject for more than 12 years. In the school, he was responsible to teach *Bahasa Indonesia* to 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students. He had an undergraduate and graduate degree in *Bahasa Indonesia* education. Second, Broto was a Physics teacher with more than 7 years teaching experience. He finished his undergraduate degree in physics education in 2014 and directly taught in the school upon graduation. In the school, he taught physics to 10th and 11th grade students. Finally, Satrio was originally a geography teacher, but in the school, due the lack of teacher resources he was asked to teach three subjects including history, anthropology, and geography to 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students. He had an undergraduate degree in geography education and has taught in the school for more than 11 years. In addition, as he was involved in the Indonesian teacher certification program, Satrio was also regarded as a certified teacher. All of the teacher participants in this research have experienced applying two Indonesian national curricula including the school-based curriculum (2006) and the currently enacted curriculum 2013. These two curriculum documents formally mandated every subject teacher to integrate character education within their teaching practices.

### Procedures and Measures

This research followed the six pragmatic stages of thematic analysis proposed by Aronson (1995), including generating data, transcribing the data, identifying themes, managing (bounding and reducing) the themes, building valid

arguments, and applying the findings to practice. Before the data generation phase began, the researcher had applied and gained ethics approval from the researchers' institute of Human Research Ethics Committee to ensure that the participation in this research was safe, confidential, and voluntary. During the participant recruitment phase, the teacher participants were initially sent an invitation and explanatory statement through emails and asked to contact the researcher if they were interested to participate. When they voluntarily agreed to participate, they were asked to sign a consent form and return it to the researcher before the data generation process began. The teachers' identities and affiliations were always kept confidential to protect them from any potential harm.

This research employed in-depth semi-structured interviews as the mode of data generation to access the teacher participants' teaching practices regarding character education. This method of data generation was considered appropriate for the current research project because of the focus on perceptions and teaching practices, which are very difficult to probe through structured form of interview. Interviewing the participants in a semi-structured way allowed the researchers to adapt the interview questions based on the interviewees' responses and assertions (Bassegy, 1999). As a result, unpredictable or tentative responses could be addressed and probed more deeply.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted through the Zoom meetings (40-70 minutes), which were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. This was done to enable the researcher to focus on the direction of the interview during the process (Bassegy, 1999), to prevent any loss of data, and to allow closer scrutiny following the interview (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

The thematic data analysis was started by identifying and managing the emerging themes from the final transcript. To do this, the researcher utilised NVivo 12 Plus to make the data more manageable and easier to access and track when needed. During this phase, literal and interpretative

readings of the data based on the affective coding method proposed by Saldaña (2016) were employed. This method was utilised to investigate or explore subjective human experiences, including values, attitudes, evaluations, judgments, decision-making processes, reasoning, and emotions regarding the concept and the enactments of character education by labelling them with codes (Saldaña, 2016). Lastly, to build arguments, the researcher employed the practice of reflexive reading where the researcher critically examined and located his perspectives and theoretical underpinnings in the process of data analysis (Seidman, 2006). During this phase, the results of previous the literal and interpretative data analysis were juxtaposed with the theory of curriculum implementation as a situational praxis (Aoki, 1983, 2005), approaches to character education, dimensions of character, teacher agency in character selection, and teachers' professional development. This way, instead of remaining faithful to the rules outlined in the curriculum and policies, teachers' pedagogical decisions are based more on serving their contextual situations (Aoki, 1983, 2005). Although they are indeed structurally positioned as the enactors of the curriculum's goals, they possess their own views about which aspects should be emphasised at the instructional level (Lilja & Osbeck, 2020).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Teachers' Preparation in Character Education

Scholars in character education have emphasized the significance of proactiveness in the enactments of character education. Effective character education required deliberate and proactive pedagogical plans (Lickona, 1996; Marshall et al., 2011; Thornberg, 2008). However, while the participants stated that they always prepared specific plans for academic lessons, they openly admitted that they did not make detailed and organised plans when delivering character education. As a result, character education was frequently enacted in various unplanned ways. First, it

was administered incidentally. For example, Satrio stated, "When the students did something wrong, I just reminded them". Second, it was conducted subconsciously. For example, Satrio asserted, "There is no specific preparation; it just happened naturally. ... It was a form of character education, but I was just not aware [of] it". Finally, it was administered in spontaneous and unstructured ways. For example, Broto stated that there were no "details on how the process would go", including "the steps, the evaluation, and the assessment". As such, instead of proactively and purposefully designing detailed lesson plans, character education remained as a hidden curriculum which was relatively seen as less important compared to the academic contents.

#### **Assessment in Character Education**

Thomas (1991) postulated that character education should be assessed based on moral paradigms and underpinnings employed in certain contexts. Therefore, it is pivotal to conduct rich formative and summative assessments to track on what has and has not been gained through the implementation of character education (Thomas, 1991). However, the participants in this study stated that it was not their job to give scores to the students on their affective aspects or behaviours. They believed that their job, as subject teachers, was only to give scores on academic tests. Satrio, for example, said, "In my school, the one who gives scores on students' behaviour in the report card is the guidance and counselling teacher. My job is just to give their test scores". In alignment with John et al. (2021) findings, teachers seem to have difficulties administering assessments on students' characters.

#### **Teachers' Agency in the Selection of Characters**

In terms of the selection of character process, it is worth noting that the participants were not greatly influenced by the character education policies. They never referred to the policy documents when talking about how they selected the character traits. In fact, they did not know whether the characters they instilled were

part of the 18 desirable character traits mandated by the policies. Instead, they were enormously influenced by their own contextual situations and partly affected by their past experiences and future orientations. These three aspects, which Emirbayer and Mische (1998) called the practical-evaluative, iterative, and projective dimensions, determined the teacher participants' agency in the character selection process.

Regarding the context, the participants selected the characters they emphasised by considering the characteristics they observed in students in their classes and the students' perceptions of the subject they teach. Broto and Satrio stated:

I chose confidence because], in general, the students in my school... are not confident with their own abilities [in science]. (Broto)

The one which I emphasised is the character of respect, because, indeed, in my school, there are so many students who sleep during the lesson. They do not pay enough attention; they talk with their peers. (Satrio)

Their decisions were mainly to help the students improve the characters that the teachers considered lacking. This finding confirmed that character education enactments were highly influenced by the contingent characteristics of formal education institutions (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2005). It is "the product of people making assumptions, drawing inferences, and living lives in particular contexts" (Sanger & Osguthorpe, 2005, p. 67). In this sense, teachers, as education agents, developed agency to interpret and enact the character education policies by critically reflecting on their own assumptions about the contexts in which they work (Aoki, 1983, 2005). They achieved agency through negotiations with the available resources and contextual factors within their 'ecology' (Biesta and Tedder, 2007). Therefore, character education is enacted as a situational praxis and not as an instrumental action. Its enactments are based on appropriateness to the contextual

situations rather than faithfulness to the written policy documents (Aoki, 1983, 2005).

In terms of past experiences, participants reflected on their experiences in university and the traits they needed or were taught in school. Satrio, for example, stated, "When I was a university student, ... I had difficulties [adapting to] university demands which required me to be disciplined". In addition, Broto also said, "My campus life was very disciplined. ... As such, I instilled the character of discipline". The participants wanted to prepare students based on these past experiences. This showed that individuals selectively retrieved previous patterns of thought and action to respond to complex contextual situations (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Consequently, the values, attributes, and beliefs that they already possess as a part of their identities influenced their reactions to emerging social dilemmas and ambiguities (Priestley et al., 2012).

Moreover, to choose the desirable character traits, the teachers also oriented toward their expectations on future outcomes (projective dimension). They wanted the students to possess characters that will enable them to adapt to their future university environments more easily. Satrio stated, "discipline needs to be instilled since they [are] senior high school students, so that they will not be shocked [by] campus life in the future". As such, the teachers' decisions were also driven by the future outcomes they wanted to achieve through the enactments (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). They wanted their students to have the abilities to adapt to the challenging future environments they would encounter. The dynamic interplay between the teachers' judgments on their context for action, reflections on past experiences, and orientations towards future outcomes formed the agency that was employed to select the characters they wanted to instil within their teaching practices. In this sense, the teachers' personal or professional beliefs influence the ways they enact character education in their contexts (Rissanena et al., 2018). Indeed, even though they are

structurally positioned as the enactors of the mandated curriculum and policies, they possess their own views about which aspects to emphasise at the instructional level (Lilja & Osbeck, 2020).

### **Teachers' Approaches in Character Education**

The participants employed both explicit and implicit approaches to deliver character education in their teaching practices. The explicit approach was administered through direct explanations of desirable character traits and telling stories about their personal past experiences. This was exemplified by Broto and Gatot:

I explained it explicitly, directly, that the character of discipline is like this, this, and this; you can do it by doing this, this, and this. Then, for example, responsibility, or honesty, or confidence, you must do this, this, and this. (Broto)

I gave [the students] examples. One of them is that when I was a senior high school student, in one year I had never been absent for more than three times. (Gatot)

In terms of the implicit approaches, the participants identified role modelling as the main key for effectively delivering character education. They stated that character education would not work effectively if teachers did not display the desirable characters themselves. As such, they required themselves to be the moral exemplars and expected the students to follow their actions. For example, Gatot stated, "I use polite language [with] the students. I display an example so that they [can] imitate it". Broto further added, "If the stakeholders ... are not responsible or display a bad example, then the students will have those characters". Role modelling functions to effectively inspire and motivate students to enact desirable characters.

In addition, the participants also implicitly integrated character education into their teaching methodologies. This was exemplified by Broto and Gatot. In order to instil the character of confidence, Broto asked the students to present the findings from their physics experiments. In a similar

vein, Gatot used cooperative learning to develop communication skills. He specifically said, "Of course, to look for [a] solution ... I asked the students to ask their classmates". He also asked his students to correct their own work to instil the character trait of honesty and used punishment to instil respect. He said, "When there is a student who [is] sleepy, I absolutely ask him questions. ... If he cannot [answer, I ask him to] please stand. Later, if he can answer, he can sit down".

Through the combination of these explicit and implicit practices, the teacher participants generated an enactment of character education that considered the cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects (Lickona, 1997). The explicit approach helped students cognitively by giving them theoretical knowledge about the meanings and aspects of certain characters (Lickona, 1997). Meanwhile, the modelling of desirable character traits by the participants could effectively motivate the students to adopt the exemplified characters (Szutta, 2019; Zagzebski, 2017). Finally, the integration of character education within other teaching methodologies gives students opportunities to act upon the instilled characters (Lickona, 1997). The consideration to these cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects within the explicit and implicit character education enactments enables students to understand what the character means, feel inspired to demonstrate this character, and ultimately integrate this character into their behaviour (Lickona, 1997).

### **The Challenges of Enacting Character Education**

The participants encountered some major challenges to the effective enactment of character education. First, the participants felt that they had too much material to teach in a limited teaching period. Broto stated, "Actually, the teaching periods to deliver academic material are very insufficient. ... [At] certain times, I have no time to instil character education". Because of this difficulty, the teachers pragmatically decided to focus on completing the academic material. It

indicated that even though the teachers could actually enact character education which considered cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects, they still felt difficulties to efficiently integrate it within their teaching practices.

Furthermore, the participants also shared that they were relatively unfamiliar with character education. They had never been invited to or been involved in any in-service professional development related to character education. Gatot, for example, stated, "There might be training about it, but I have never been involved". They further stated that character education had not been taught in a separate course during their time at university. It was merely discussed on a few occasions during micro teaching practices or briefly explained when the national curriculum was analysed. Broto described how his former university lecturers delivered character education:

The ways character education is delivered were completely handed over [to] the [university] students. We were asked to look for the approaches by ourselves, and then the lecturers made comments about it. ... University students' ability is still lacking. ... We ... do not understand more complete theories. So, [at] one point, we need[ed] explanation from the lecturers, but they did not explain it at all. (Broto)

This finding confirms that both pre-service and in-service teacher professional developments are still mostly dominated by academic teaching methodologies emphasizing knowledge transfer to prepare students for high-stakes testing (Orchard, 2021). Teachers are insufficiently supported to develop their competence in character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). They are not adequately equipped with the necessary professional knowledge and competencies to enact character education (Orchard, 2021). Thus, greater attention needs to be given to the delivery of basic ethical and moral knowledge in all stages of teacher education (Carr & Landon, 1999). As every subject teacher is required to integrate character education into their teaching

practices, they should be supported and provided with the professional competence to integrate and enact it effectively and appropriately (Orchard, 2021).

Lastly, the participants found it impossible to significantly form the students' characters only by themselves. They argued that not all the school members proactively inculcated character education into their jobs. While they acknowledged that teachers play a significant role in character education, it was clear that the participants believed that other school faculty, the students' families, and the society should be actively involved as well. As suggested by Berkowitz (2011), character education works when it is enacted broadly and faithfully. It will have a strong impact when all relevant actors are committed to carrying it out. Therefore, cooperation between those relevant actors is necessary if character education is intended to achieve maximum desirable outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study aims to delineate Indonesian teachers' agency to enact character education within their teaching practices. It analyzed the ways they planned, assessed, and executed character education in their teaching practices. In addition, it also investigated how the teachers chose the desirable character traits and the challenges they encountered in character education. It was found that the teachers enacted character education which considers cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of their students. Nevertheless, these enactments were unplanned and unassessed. In the process of character selection, they were not particularly influenced by the available character education policies. Instead, they selected the character traits mainly through identification of their contextual situations and reflection on their past experiences and expected future outcomes. In the enactments of character education, the obstacles that the teachers encountered were the difficulties to efficiently integrate character education within the abundance of academic teaching materials, the lack of

pre-service and in-service professional development programs in character education, and the lack of proactive involvements from other school members.

The findings of this study have informed and extended the knowledge on how teachers achieved and exerted agency in character education. It mainly highlighted the need for professional development programs for pre-service and in-service subject teachers focused specifically on the concept of character education, the policies that govern it, and the approaches to integrate it effectively and efficiently within teaching practices. Teachers should be supported in gaining sufficient professional knowledge of this domain of education and the competence to organize, implement, and assess it comprehensively and contextually in their teaching practices. This will allow teachers to develop strong agency in integrating character education within their teaching practices. As such, teacher agency will act as an invaluable asset to increase impacts of the delivery of character education in teaching practices.

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