



Character Education in the Shadow of Global Competition

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ABSTRACT

Character education in Indonesia faces an existential paradox, as the moral values that should liberate people are at risk of being reduced to tools of adaptation within a market logic that demands relentless efficiency, productivity and competitiveness. This study aims to develop a conceptual framework to explain the relationship between local character values and global competencies, and to explore how integrating the two can be implemented in educational practice. This study employs a sequential explanatory design, enabling both in-depth exploration and testing of conceptual relationships. The findings confirm that character education in Indonesia faces not merely implementation challenges, but is caught in a deeper epistemological crisis, wherein moral values are produced, negotiated, and even compromised within the framework of a non-neutral global competitive rationality, thus revealing that the education system implicitly has the potential to act as an agent reconstructing morality according to market logic, rather than merely transmitting noble values. The contribution of this study lies in dismantling the assumption that character education is inherently noble, by demonstrating that without structural transformation, it may instead function as symbolic legitimisation for contradictory educational practices, whilst simultaneously offering a new conceptual direction that positions character as a critical arena between resistance and adaptation.

A. Introduction

The phenomenon of moral decline among the younger generation is often cited as an urgent indicator of the need to strengthen character education. Various issues, such as rising levels of intolerance, violence in schools, corruption involving young people, and a lack of ethical standards in the use of digital technology, highlight a disconnect between academic achievement and character development (Aprilianto et al., 2025; Karimullah et al., 2022). On the other hand, the education system, which has traditionally been oriented towards exam results and cognitive indicators, has not yet fully provided adequate space for the deep internalisation of character values (Wahyudi et al., 2025). The pressures of globalisation, which bring new values, including individualism and fierce competition, are often not balanced by students' capacity to critically and morally filter these influences. This situation raises concerns that, without appropriate intervention, education in Indonesia risks producing individuals who are intellectually intelligent but lacking in character.

The Indonesian government's policies have demonstrated a commitment to strengthening character education through various programmes, such as the Character Education Enhancement (PPK) initiative, the integration of character values into the 2013 Curriculum, and efforts to revitalise education in line with Pancasila values. However, the implementation of these policies still faces various challenges, ranging from teachers' limited capacity to integrate character education into teaching, the lack of comprehensive evaluation models to measure character development, to inconsistencies between the values taught at school and the social practices students encounter in their daily lives. Furthermore, the massive wave of digitalisation presents new opportunities for character development that have not yet been fully understood or systematically addressed by educational institutions (Karimullah et al., 2025; Timotheou et al., 2023).

In a global context, character education is often linked to 21st-century education, which emphasises the importance of soft skills such as collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. International organisations such as UNESCO and the OECD regard character as an integral part of the global competencies that individuals must possess to participate effectively in the global community. However, the approaches adopted in a global context are often generic and fail to account for local cultural distinctiveness. This raises the question of how character education in Indonesia can be designed in such a way as to accommodate local values whilst meeting the demands of global competencies. This issue becomes increasingly complex when confronted with the reality that global values do not always align with those embedded in Indonesian society.

Several previous studies have examined various aspects of character education in Indonesia. These studies generally highlight the effectiveness of character education programmes in schools, the role of teachers in instilling moral values, and the integration of character education into the curriculum (Chung, 2023; Muzakkir et al., 2024). Some studies indicate that approaches based on role modelling and habit formation positively impact students' character development, particularly when supported by a conducive school environment (Jumatullailah et al., 2024; Sumar et al., 2025). Other studies emphasise the importance of family and community involvement in reinforcing the values taught at school, thereby creating continuity between formal and informal education (Kibtiyah et al., 2025; Maynard et al., 2024). Furthermore, studies have linked character education to improved academic performance, suggesting that students with good character tend to be more motivated to learn.

Other studies show that digital media can be an effective means of instilling character values, particularly through project-based learning and online collaboration (Almazroui, 2023; Nurhayati et al., 2025). However, findings also indicate that exposure to unregulated digital content can negatively impact students' character development, particularly in empathy, discipline, and responsibility. These studies suggest that technology plays an ambivalent role

in character education, necessitating a more holistic and contextual approach to its utilisation. Although various studies have made significant contributions to understanding the dynamics of character education in Indonesia, several knowledge gaps remain.

Firstly, the majority of studies still focus on local contexts without explicitly linking them to the dynamics of global competition, thus failing to provide a clear picture of how character education can function as a strategic asset in facing international competition (Sakinah et al., 2025). Secondly, the approaches used in these studies tend to be normative and descriptive, with limitations in developing a conceptual framework that can explain the relationship between local character values and global competencies in an integrated manner. Thirdly, there remains a scarcity of studies critically examining the tension between traditional values and the demands of globalisation, as well as its implications for the design and implementation of character education in Indonesia.

There is also a mismatch between national-level character education policies and their implementation in schools. Many studies indicate that teachers often face difficulties in translating character education concepts into concrete and measurable learning activities. This is exacerbated by inadequate training and limited resources. On the other hand, evaluations of the success of character education are still dominated by subjective qualitative approaches, lacking support from valid and reliable instruments. This situation highlights the need to develop a more systematic and evidence-based approach to measuring and enhancing the effectiveness of character education.

Within a broader framework, there have been few studies that integrate a multidisciplinary perspective in examining character education, particularly those combining aspects of education, sociology, psychology, and global studies. The complexity of character education issues in the era of globalisation demands a cross-disciplinary approach to understand the interactions between various factors influencing the formation of individual character. The absence of such an integrative approach leads to a fragmented understanding of character education, making it difficult to formulate comprehensive and sustainable strategies.

Given these gaps, a study is required that examines character education not merely as an educational phenomenon, but also as part of a national strategy for addressing global competition. Such a study must integrate local values rooted in Indonesian culture with the universal demands of global competencies, whilst also considering the role of technology as an increasingly dominant factor in society. This study aims to comprehensively analyse the dynamics of character education in Indonesia in the context of global competition, identifying challenges, opportunities, and strategies to enhance its effectiveness. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to enriching the body of knowledge in the field of character education, particularly within the context of developing nations facing the pressures of globalisation.

B. Method

This study employs a mixed-methods approach with a sequential explanatory design, chosen to enable both in-depth exploration and empirical testing of the conceptual relationship between character education based on local values and global competencies, wherein the quantitative phase identifies patterns of relationships among variables and the qualitative phase enriches their contextual interpretation. The main variables include character education (operationalised as the internalisation of the values of integrity, responsibility, and cooperation in learning practices), global competencies (critical thinking skills, cross-cultural collaboration, and global literacy), as well as mediating factors in the form of the learning environment and the use of digital technology.

The study population comprises students and teachers at the secondary education level in urban and semi-urban areas of Indonesia, with sampling techniques that employ

stratified random sampling for the quantitative stage and purposive sampling for the qualitative stage to ensure both representativeness and depth of data. The study instruments comprised a Likert-scale questionnaire developed from a synthesis of current theoretical frameworks and empirical indicators, alongside semi-structured interview guidelines; their validity was tested using expert judgement and confirmatory factor analysis, whilst reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Forero, 2024). The validity of qualitative data was maintained through triangulation of sources and techniques, as well as member checking. Data collection was conducted in stages, beginning with a survey, followed by in-depth interviews and contextual observations. Quantitative data analysis utilised structural equation modelling to test latent relationships between variables, whilst qualitative data was analysed using thematic techniques to uncover contextual meanings. The results were then integrated interpretatively to produce a comprehensive understanding aligned with the study's objectives.

C. Results and Discussion

1. The Commodification of Morality in Indonesian Character Education Amid the Pressures of Global Competition

Education policy in Indonesia shows a trend towards integrating character education into the national economic development agenda. Various policy documents emphasise the importance of producing high-calibre, competitive human resources who are ready to face global challenges, with character education positioned as one of the means to achieve these objectives. This rhetoric, whilst appearing progressive, implies that moral values are positioned as a tool to enhance the nation's competitiveness in the global market. In this context, character education becomes part of a national strategy to improve the quality of the workforce, which tends to be pragmatic and utilitarian (Ulum et al., 2025; Watts & Kristjánsson, 2022). This raises critical questions about the extent to which character education retains its ethical dimension or has, in fact, been co-opted by economic logic.

Educational practices at the school level also reflect a similar trend, in which the implementation of character education is often linked to quantitative, measurable performance indicators. Schools are encouraged to demonstrate achievements in student discipline, rule compliance, and a strong work ethic, all of which can be easily measured and reported (Plaku & Leka, 2025). However, deeper aspects of character development, such as moral reflection, empathy, and critical awareness, are often neglected because they are difficult to measure objectively (Karimullah, 2023). In this situation, character education risks becoming merely an administrative formality focused on meeting targets, rather than a substantive, transformative process. Teachers, as the key actors in the educational process, also face pressure to meet these demands, thereby limiting the scope for developing more reflective and dialogical approaches.

Educational curricula that integrate character education are often designed with labour market needs in mind, so that the values taught tend to align with the competencies required by industry. This is evident in the emphasis on soft skills relevant to the workplace, such as teamwork, effective communication, and adaptability. Whilst these competencies are important, an excessive focus can shift the emphasis of character education from the formation of moral individuals to the production of a productive workforce. In this context, moral values are no longer understood as an end in themselves, but rather as a means to achieve economic success.

An analysis of government rhetoric reveals a discourse construction that closely links character education with economic development. Narratives about the golden generation and high-calibre human resources are often accompanied by an emphasis on the importance of character as a determining factor for success in global competition. However, the character referred to in these narratives tends to be defined within the framework of productivity and

efficiency rather than ethics and humanity. This indicates a paradigm shift in the understanding of character education, from a normative to an instrumental approach. This discourse is subsequently reproduced in various educational policies and programmes, thereby shaping the dominant framework of thinking in educational practice.

From a sociological perspective on education, this phenomenon can be seen as a form of reproduction of the social structures that underpin the global capitalist system (Ruuska, 2023). Character education, which ought to serve as a space for fostering critical awareness of these structures, risks instead becoming a tool of legitimisation that reinforces them. By instilling values such as discipline and hard work within a framework of productivity, education contributes to the formation of compliant subjects ready to participate in the existing economic system. In this sense, character education no longer functions as a tool for emancipation, but rather as a mechanism of social reproduction that maintains the status quo. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the commodification of morality in character education is neither total nor homogeneous. There are spaces of resistance where moral values are still taught and practised within a more authentic and reflective framework.

Some schools and educators strive to develop character education approaches that emphasise critical awareness, empathy, and social responsibility, rather than merely linking them to market demands (Waghid, 2024). This approach demonstrates that character education still holds the potential to serve as a meaningful space for transformation, despite being under the pressure of a powerful global logic. The tension between the ethical and instrumental dimensions in character education reflects a broader dilemma within the education system in the era of globalisation. On the one hand, there is a need to prepare individuals to compete in the global market, which demands mastery of specific competencies. On the other hand, there is a responsibility to shape individuals with moral integrity and social awareness. This tension is not easily resolved, as the two dimensions often conflict. Nevertheless, efforts to balance them are crucial to ensure education does not lose its humanistic orientation.

In the Indonesian context, integrating local values with global demands is a major challenge in character education. Values such as cooperation, solidarity and togetherness, which form part of Indonesian culture, have the potential to serve as a foundation for the development of a more contextual and humanistic character education. However, these values are often sidelined in a curriculum that places greater emphasis on individualistic global competencies. This indicates an imbalance in the orientation of education that needs to be critically examined and rectified.

2. The Tension between National Moral Identity and Global Ethical Standards in Character Education

The globalisation of education has led to the emergence of ethical standards that emphasise individual competition, meritocratic mobility, freedom of expression, and critical rationality as key indicators of individual success in a global society (Day et al., 2025). These values are promoted through various mechanisms, such as global competency-based curricula, international assessments, and educational discourse that emphasises the importance of readiness for the global labour market. Within this framework, individuals are positioned as autonomous and rational agents, responsible for their own success or failure (Pertamawati et al., 2025). Whilst this paradigm offers opportunities to enhance individual capacity, it also carries normative implications that may shift moral orientation from collectivism towards individualism. When these values are internalised within the national education system, questions arise regarding how they interact with local values that have long formed the basis of character development.

The tension between these two value systems is often not explicitly apparent due to the dominant assumption that local and global values can be harmoniously integrated.

However, in practice, such integration does not always proceed smoothly. Rather, it often involves a complex and ambiguous process of negotiation. For instance, the value of gotong royong, which emphasises cooperation and solidarity, may clash with the logic of individual competition that demands individuals excel on their own. Similarly, the value of politeness, which prioritises social harmony, may conflict with freedom of expression, which encourages individuals to voice their opinions openly, even if this risks causing conflict. In such situations, learners face a normative dilemma that influences how they understand and practise morality in their daily lives.

From a social constructivist perspective, morality cannot be understood as a static entity but rather as a social construction that evolves in response to historical and cultural contexts (Segovia-Cuellar, 2022). In the context of globalisation, moral construction becomes increasingly complex as it involves the interaction of various distinct value systems. Character education, as the institution tasked with transmitting these values, occupies a position that is both strategic and problematic. On the one hand, education is expected to preserve national moral identity as part of cultural heritage. On the other hand, education is also required to prepare individuals to adapt to increasingly dominant global standards. This tension creates a space of ambivalence where values are taught simultaneously, yet without a clear conceptual framework to bridge the differences between them.

In educational practice, this ambivalence is often reflected in curricula and pedagogies that eclectically blend local and global values. For instance, a curriculum may emphasise the importance of teamwork as a form of implementing gotong royong, yet simultaneously assess pupils based on individual achievement in standardised tests. This creates a situation in which students are encouraged to cooperate yet must also compete with one another to achieve high academic performance. This inconsistency can lead to normative confusion, where students lack clear guidance on which values to prioritise in specific situations. In the long term, this situation has the potential to produce a pragmatic, situational morality, where values are chosen based on the benefits to be gained rather than on a deep ethical commitment.

This tension can also be analysed through the lens of cultural hybridity theory, which views the interaction between local and global values as a process that produces new forms that do not fully represent either. In the context of character education in Indonesia, this hybridisation can be seen in the emergence of new interpretations of traditional values adapted to global demands (Karimullah et al., 2023; Mahrus & Karimullah, 2022). For example, gotong royong can be redefined as the ability to work in multicultural teams, whilst politeness can be interpreted as the ability to communicate effectively in a global professional context. This process demonstrates that local values are not entirely abandoned but undergo a transformation in meaning, keeping them relevant in a global context. However, this hybridisation also carries the risk of blurring moral identity, where local values lose their depth of meaning as they are adapted to more dominant global standards.

Character education can also serve as a form of resistance against the homogenisation of global values that tends to disregard cultural diversity (Gare, 2023). In this context, the emphasis on local values can be seen as an effort to preserve national identity amidst the powerful tide of globalisation. However, this resistance is not always progressive, as it may also lead to an exclusivist attitude that rejects global values entirely. The challenge lies in developing character education that critically integrates local and global values without becoming trapped in a rigid dichotomy between them. This requires a reflective and dialogical approach, in which learners are encouraged to understand the context and implications of various value systems, and to develop the ability to make responsible moral decisions.

The incompatibility between certain national values and the global competitive ecosystem is also an issue that warrants attention. The value of collectivism, for example, may be seen as less compatible with a meritocratic system that emphasises individual achievement. In such situations, there is pressure to redefine national character to better align with global

demands. This process of redefinition does not always occur consciously, but often takes place implicitly through changes in educational and social practices. Consequently, the younger generation may experience a shift in their understanding of moral identity, moving from a collective-solidarity-based orientation to a more individualistic one.

The implications of this tension are not limited to the realm of education but also impact broader social structures. The way the younger generation understands and practises morality will influence patterns of social interaction, workplace relationships, and participation in public life. If character education fails to manage the tension between local and global values effectively, individuals may adopt values only partially and inconsistently, ultimately weakening social cohesion. Conversely, if this tension can be managed constructively, character education has the potential to produce individuals capable of integrating various value systems reflectively and contextually.

3. The Paradox of Character Education in a Culture of Academic Competition

From the perspective of social reproduction theory, as articulated by Bourdieu, the education system functions as a mechanism that reproduces social structures by legitimising certain forms of capital, particularly cultural and symbolic capital, embodied in academic achievement. Within this framework, academic competition is not merely a means of selection, but also a tool of legitimisation that determines who is deserving of access to social and economic opportunities. When this logic becomes dominant, character values such as honesty and solidarity tend to be positioned as secondary values that can be negotiated in order to achieve the primary goal, namely, academic success. Students within this system learn that moral values are not absolute principles, but variables that can be adjusted to suit situational demands (Jia & Wu, 2025). This demonstrates that character education is influenced not only by the formal curriculum but also by the hidden curriculum, which shapes behaviour through existing incentive structures.

This phenomenon is not unique to Indonesia, but can also be found in various countries with highly competitive education systems. In South Korea, for example, the pressure to achieve high academic performance on university entrance exams has created an extreme study culture, in which students spend most of their time studying outside school hours (Joung & Morgan, 2025). This situation not only impacts students' mental health but also encourages the emergence of unethical practices, such as the use of illegal tutoring services or the manipulation of academic data. In China, the highly competitive Gaokao system also generates similar pressures, where success in these exams is regarded as the primary determinant of an individual's future (Sargent et al., 2025). Meanwhile, in the United States, although the education system is more flexible, practices such as plagiarism and academic dishonesty remain significant issues, particularly in the context of competition for entry into prestigious universities (Glendinning, 2025). This comparison demonstrates that the paradox between character education and academic competition is a global phenomenon closely linked to the structure of modern education systems.

In the Indonesian context, the intensification of academic competition can be observed through various policies and practices, such as increasingly stringent university admissions selection, an emphasis on exam scores as the primary indicator of success, and the emergence of various forms of academic competitions used as benchmarks for school performance (Welch & Aziz, 2023). Although these policies aim to improve the quality of education and global competitiveness, their implementation often results in significant pressure on students. In this situation, students face a dilemma between maintaining moral integrity and meeting the demands of the system. Under high-pressure conditions, individuals are more likely to commit ethical violations, particularly if they feel that their success depends on achieving results within a limited timeframe. This explains why practices such as cheating, plagiarism,

and grade manipulation still occur frequently, even though character education has become an integral part of the curriculum.

Competitive pressure affects not only behaviour but also students' psychological well-being. An extreme culture of competition often leads to high levels of stress, anxiety, and even depression, which can ultimately impact overall character development. In such conditions, empathy and solidarity, which should be central to character education, are sidelined as students prioritise individual achievement. Social interaction becomes instrumental, with peer relationships viewed as a means to achieve academic goals rather than a space for building meaningful connections. This demonstrates that competitive structures not only influence individual behaviour but also reshape social dynamics within educational settings.

This paradox is further reinforced by educational rhetoric that is often not accompanied by significant structural changes. Character education is frequently promoted through slogans, programmes, and ceremonial activities, but without the underlying reforms to the evaluation and selection systems (Karimullah, 2022; Narayanan & McCluskey, 2025). Consequently, character education risks becoming a normative symbol that has no substantive impact on educational practice. Students can easily discern the gap between the values taught and the reality they face, leading to a cynical attitude towards character education. In such circumstances, moral values are no longer viewed as essential, but rather as a formality to be fulfilled to meet institutional expectations.

From an educational ethics perspective, this situation raises fundamental questions regarding the education system's responsibility in shaping individual character (Fathoni et al., 2024). If the educational structure systematically creates incentives that encourage unethical behaviour, then responsibility cannot be placed entirely on the individual. Instead, a critical evaluation of the education system's design is required, including the evaluation, selection, and reward mechanisms employed. This demands a paradigm shift from an outcome-focused approach to a more holistic one that balances the learning process with character development.

Pupils are not passive agents within this system, but rather active participants capable of negotiating the values they encounter (O'Reilly & O'Grady, 2024). In situations where academic success is the primary priority, pupils often develop adaptive strategies to balance the demands of the system with the moral values they uphold. Some students may choose to uphold their integrity, even though this may potentially reduce their chances of achieving high academic performance (Ossai et al., 2023). Meanwhile, other students may be more pragmatic, adjusting their behaviour in line with situational demands. This process of negotiation demonstrates that morality is not static but dynamic and contextual, shaped by the interaction between individuals and social structures.

Comparisons with other countries also show that some education systems have attempted to mitigate this paradox through more comprehensive policy reforms. Finland, for example, is known for its education system that emphasises a balance between academic achievement and student well-being, by reducing competitive pressure and emphasising collaboration and meaningful learning (Salmela-Aro, 2022). This approach demonstrates that it is possible to design an education system that not only produces academically competent individuals but also fosters strong character. However, implementing such a model requires significant structural changes, including in educational culture, assessment policies, and teachers' roles.

D. Conclusion

Character education in Indonesia, in the shadow of global competition, finds itself in a paradoxical situation characterised by the commodification of moral values, tensions between national ethical identity and global standards, and contradictions between normative rhetoric and the structural practices of a competitive education system, thus revealing that character is no longer produced solely as an intrinsic goal of holistic human development, but is

increasingly intertwined with the logic of productivity, social mobility, and the legitimacy of the global economic system. Theoretically, this finding expands the study of character education by shifting the perspective from a normative approach towards a critical-structural analysis that integrates the political-economic dimensions of education, whilst refining previous studies that tended to view character education as a neutral entity, whilst, in practical and policy terms, they underscore the urgency of reorienting the education system towards a balance between moral integrity and the demands of global competencies through the restructuring of assessment, curriculum, and a more reflective and humanistic school culture. However, the limitations of this study lie in its conceptual nature and the lack of empirical exploration across diverse local contexts, thereby opening the way for further research to empirically test the dynamics of students' moral negotiations and the effectiveness of more integrative character education models. Thus, character education needs to be repositioned not merely as a normative symbol, but as a critical praxis capable of navigating global complexities without losing its national moral roots, whilst simultaneously fostering continuous reflection on the direction and meaning of education in shaping human beings amidst the intensifying pressures of global competition.

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