ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' CHARACTER CONDITIONS THROUGH SOCIAL STUDIES LEARNING IN PRIVATE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The condition of the character of students is an important aspect that needs to be considered and developed by teachers. The character development of students can be done through the learning process, especially social studies learning which is very relevant to the character education of the nation's children to become good citizens. The success of a learning is seen from how much the character of students can be developed to be good. In 2020 there was a Covid-19 pandemic which caused learning regulations implemented in schools to change to online or distance mode. This condition also has an impact on the character development of students who have decreased so that in this transition and post-pandemic period, teachers are trying to take various approaches to continue to improve the character of students in schools. This study was conducted with a qualitative approach by conducting observations, interviews, and literature studies in producing this paper which displays the character problems of students in social studies learning at SMP Lab school UPI and SMP Kartika XIX-2 Bandung. This study seeks to describe the current condition of student character, due to the impact of online learning on character education, solutions and problem solving in social studies learning in schools.

Keyword: *character education, social studies learning, junior high schools*

A. INTRODUCTION

Character constitutes a fundamental aspect of individual and social life. An individual's acceptance within society is largely determined by the character they possess and how they interact with others. Character formation is influenced by various factors, including internal factors originating from within the individual and external factors derived from the surrounding environment (Sari, 2021). Character is also dynamic in nature, allowing for both development and decline over time. The term character may refer to either positive or negative traits; however, in practice, an individual is considered to have character when they consistently apply moral values in their behavior.

Therefore, character development is of critical importance, particularly the cultivation of positive character traits that can be fostered through education and life experiences. Such development enables individuals to become responsible, ethical, and constructive members of society. Education is consistently expected to produce generations endowed with intellectual competence, life skills, and strong moral character (Melati, Ardianti, & Fardani, 2021). Nevertheless, character development is not merely concerned with distinguishing between good and bad behavior, but also represents an effort to transform individual personality traits in accordance with noble values, ethical principles, and prevailing social norms (Rohimah & Agustin, 2023). Indonesia has long been recognized for a national character marked by politeness, hospitality, and strong kinship values. However, these characteristics appear to be increasingly eroded, giving way to behaviors such as intolerance, social conflict, mutual suspicion, student violence, declining ethics and moral conduct, widespread corruption, human rights violations, and escalating violence against children and women. These phenomena indicate a deeply concerning moral decline (Marhayani, 2017; Guswantoro, Rindrayani, & Sunjoto, 2018). Such realities pose serious concerns for society, particularly for students as the future generation responsible for national development. Numerous social problems involving students have emerged, including moral degradation, diminishing empathy, reduced social concern, increasing cases of bullying and violence, sexual harassment, and other forms of misconduct. Observations conducted at SMP Labschool UPI and SMP Kartika XIX-2 further revealed a decline in students' character, reflected in reduced social sensitivity, increasing individualistic attitudes, lack of sympathy and empathy, and incidents of bullying within classrooms. These issues demand serious attention,

especially from educators tasked with shaping students' character within educational settings.

Empathy, in particular, has become an increasingly crucial character trait in the contemporary era. The ability to understand and respond to the feelings, perspectives, and needs of others plays a vital role in minimizing conflict, both in face-to-face interactions and within digital environments. Empathy contributes to improving the quality of social relationships, fostering inclusive cultures, and enhancing tolerance and mutual respect within society. It involves the capacity to understand and feel what others experience, to adopt their perspectives, and to express appropriate responses in accordance with social contexts (Rachmah, 2014; Hutasuhut & Yaswinda, 2020; Mashar, 2015; Rahmawati, 2015).

In Indonesia, character education is formally regulated under Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System. Article 3 stipulates that national education aims to develop students' potential so that they become individuals who are faithful and devoted to God Almighty, possess noble character, are healthy, knowledgeable, competent, creative, independent, democratic, and responsible citizens. Character development is also embedded within national development objectives, as stated in Law Number 17 of 2007, which emphasizes the formation of a resilient, competitive, morally upright, and ethical national character grounded in Pancasila. This character is reflected in diverse Indonesian society that is faithful, virtuous, tolerant, cooperative, patriotic, dynamically progressive, and oriented toward science and technology.

Furthermore, Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia Number 23 of 2015 concerning Learning in Primary and Secondary Education mandates the integration of character education into the school curriculum. This commitment is reinforced through Government Regulation Number 4 of 2022, which amends Government Regulation Number 57 of 2021 on National Education Standards. Article 6 paragraph (2) emphasizes that graduate competency standards at the secondary education level focus on preparing students to become morally upright individuals and instilling character values aligned with Pancasila. These policy frameworks underscore Indonesia's commitment to character education as a core component of national education.

Curriculum reforms further strengthen this commitment. In 2019, the Indonesian government introduced the revised 2013 Curriculum (2018 Revision), which explicitly integrates character education across all subjects and school activities. Character education within this framework aims to develop students who are faithful, morally upright, independent, and responsible. Subsequently, in 2021, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology launched the "Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka" program to enhance educational quality, including students' character development. This initiative involves collaboration among government institutions, educators, parents, and communities, and includes character surveys as part of student assessment to support holistic development (Agustin & Pratama, 2022). Character education can thus be understood as a deliberate effort to shape individuals' dispositions, morals, and personalities by internalizing noble values that are manifested in thought, speech, and action (Rianto & Yuliananingsih, 2021). Its primary objective is to cultivate individuals' capacity to discern right from wrong, preserve moral goodness, and actualize ethical behavior in everyday life (Komalasari & Saripudin, 2022). Through character education, individuals are expected to develop autonomy in decision-making, creativity, dynamism, innovation, and a strong sense of responsibility toward themselves, others, society, and ultimately, toward God (Rohimah & Agustin, 2023).

If issues related to low levels of empathy among students remain unresolved, such problems will continue to persist. Consequently, collective attention, particularly from educators is required to address and mitigate these challenges. One effective avenue for strengthening students' empathetic character is through Social Studies learning in schools. The 2013 Curriculum, specifically Core Competency 2 (KI-2), emphasizes the development of students' social attitudes, including honesty, discipline, responsibility, care, politeness, cooperation, peace-loving behavior, responsiveness, and proactivity. These competencies position students as part of the solution to national challenges through effective interaction with social and natural environments. Similarly, the current Merdeka Curriculum prioritizes character development through student-centered learning approaches tailored to students' needs and potentials, implemented collaboratively between teachers and learners. Through a holistic and comprehensive implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, character education is expected to address moral decline and unethical behavior, enabling students to develop strong character

traits and competitive capacities necessary for navigating the challenges of the 21st century and the future.

B. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at providing an in-depth depiction of the investigated phenomena based on empirical data obtained from the field. A qualitative approach was selected because it is appropriate for examining processes, meanings, and social experiences occurring in the practice of character education in schools (Creswell, 2018). The descriptive method was used to systematically describe real conditions related to the planning and implications of character education within Social Studies learning. Data were collected through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, which were further strengthened by a literature review of relevant scholarly articles on character education and Social Studies learning (Moleong, 2017; Sugiyono, 2021). Observations were conducted to obtain factual insights into classroom learning practices, while interviews with teachers and students were carried out to explore their experiences, perceptions, and strategies in internalizing character values at school. Documentation, including school records, instructional materials, and relevant archives, was also utilized as complementary data sources.

The study was conducted at SMP Labschool UPI and SMP Kartika XIX-2 Bandung, representing private secondary schools in Bandung City with differing characteristics in the implementation of character education. The research sites were selected purposively based on the consideration that both schools actively developed character education programs, particularly during the post–COVID-19 transition period (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The research participants consisted of Social Studies teachers and students from both schools. Data collection was carried out in May 2023. Data analysis followed an interactive analysis model, encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data credibility was ensured through technique and source triangulation to enhance the validity and trustworthiness of the findings (Patton, 2015).

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The establishment of the Laboratory School was initiated concurrently with the founding of PTPG on October 20, 1954, which later evolved into FKIP, subsequently becoming IKIP, and ultimately the Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI). In 1960, a kindergarten was established, followed by the founding of a junior high school in 1964, and later a senior high school, all of which functioned as Laboratory Schools. In 1964, the UPI Laboratory Senior High School was designated as a Pilot Project for the School Development Program (Proyek Perintis Sekolah Pembangunan/PPSP). Between 1984 and 1986, the elementary school was designated as the State Experimental Elementary School of Setia Budhi and temporarily located on the UPI campus, while the junior high school became SMPN 38 and the senior high school became SMAN 20. The establishment of Model Laboratory Schools represents an essential institutional need for UPI to examine, develop, and test various innovations and findings in the field of educational science, encompassing both theoretical frameworks and practical educational models. The UPI Model Laboratory Schools comprising kindergarten, elementary, junior high, and senior high levels were officially inaugurated by the Minister of National Education of the Republic of Indonesia on October 20, 2003, coinciding with UPI's anniversary. Meanwhile, SMP Kartika XIX-2 was established in 1973 and has undergone several name changes. Initially known as SMP Persit 2 (1973), it was renamed SMP Kartika Chandra 2 in 1981, later changed to SMP Kartika III-2 in 1986 for approximately 17 years, renamed again as SMP Kartika Siliwangi 2 in 2003 until 2010, and finally adopted its current name, SMP Kartika XIX-2, in 2011. SMP Kartika XIX-2 Bandung is located at Pak Gatot Raya Street No. 73s, KPAD, Gegerkalong, Sukasari District, Bandung City. As private educational institutions, both schools demonstrate a strong commitment to supporting the development of high-quality and competitive Indonesian human resources through education. Education constitutes a universal and indispensable aspect of human life; without education, human development and cultural advancement would not be possible (Pernantah et al., 2022). Moreover, school education is not solely expected to promote academic achievement but also to foster positive attitudes and ethical behavior among students (Siska, Yufiarti, & Japar, 2021).

The school environment plays a decisive role in shaping students' learning outcomes across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. In line with Mandriesa

(2020), the school environment is expected to support students in developing responsible character traits encompassing both behavior and knowledge. A positive school environment significantly contributes to the success of character education, whereas a negative environment may undermine its effectiveness (Rosyad & Zuchdi, 2018). Character development should reflect comprehensive achievement across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions, enabling students to compete effectively based on their competencies (Guswantoro, Rindrayani, & Sunjoto, 2018; Suriadi, Firman, & Ahmad, 2021). As highlighted by Mujiburrahman (2016), the grand design of character formation is closely linked to environmental contributions, as illustrated in the following framework:

Figure 1. Character Formation Design of the Ministry of Education (2010)

Source: Jaedun et al. (2014)

Character formation can be effectively implemented through classroom learning processes, particularly through Social Studies instruction. Social Studies plays a strategic role in cultivating citizens who contribute to nation-building by fostering national character and producing civilized and culturally grounded human resources (Guswantoro, Rindrayani, & Sunjoto, 2018; Rosyad & Zuchdi, 2018; Widodo et al., 2020). Through Social Studies learning, students are guided to become responsible Indonesian citizens who value peace, demonstrate commitment to social and humanitarian values, and develop national consciousness, thereby supporting a successful transition toward mature civic life in alignment with national principles and spirit (Wijayanti, 2013;

Oktaviyanti & Novitasari, 2019). In relation to the implementation of character education within Social Studies, teachers recognize the importance of integrating character values into instructional practices to equip students with the social competencies necessary for effective participation in society (Arisma, 2023).

Field observations and research conducted at SMP Labschool UPI and SMP Kartika XIX-2 Bandung revealed that both private schools consistently strive to support and implement various character development programs for students. These efforts are reflected in each school's vision and mission, which emphasize the formation of graduates who are competent, resilient, responsive, morally upright, disciplined, confident, creative, innovative, and capable of problem-solving. In addition, the reinforcement of religious values constitutes a key focus, achieved through cultivating faith and piety alongside appreciation for local arts and cultural heritage. Character education is integrally embedded within Social Studies learning, wherein teachers not only deliver factual knowledge but also instill social, ethical, and moral values. Through this integrated approach, students are expected to avoid deviant behaviors and develop into individuals who are faithful, pious, and possess strong moral character. These findings further indicate that the primary factor influencing character formation in both schools is teachers' consistency in continuously and systematically internalizing character values across all school activities (Lickona, 2013; Zuchdi, 2015).

Based on field observations, the cultivation of character values at SMP Labschool UPI and SMP Kartika XIX-2 is clearly reflected in their respective visions and missions. SMP Labschool UPI emphasizes the implementation of active learning approaches across all subjects, grounded in national character education. The school also promotes a culture of reading, memorization, curiosity, tolerance, cooperation, mutual respect, honesty, hard work, creativity, and independence. Meanwhile, SMP Kartika XIX-2 employs specific indicators as benchmarks for character formation and student development, including: (1) utilizing cognitive abilities to strive, inquire, and think critically; (2) learning and developing new ideas and concepts; (3) applying discipline through effective time management; (4) engaging in continuous learning activities; (5) implementing learning through action; (6) fostering and practicing social interaction; and (7) learning to appreciate arts and culture thoughtfully. These targets and indicators are continuously

pursued through various school activities, particularly classroom instruction, including Social Studies learning.

These findings demonstrate that character education is not merely a school slogan but is realized through daily instructional practices integrated across subjects, including Social Studies. This aligns with Lickona's (2013) assertion that effective character education must involve the habituation of values within students' real-life experiences. Accordingly, the strategies implemented by both SMP Labschool UPI and SMP Kartika XIX-2 exemplify character-based education practices that emphasize cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions of student development (Samani & Hariyanto, 2017). Furthermore, the strengthening of character education in these schools supports national policy initiatives on Strengthening Character Education promoted by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud, 2017), positioning schools as primary environments for fostering moral, social, and cultural values integral to national identity.

Figure 2. School environment observation activities

School culture and the school environment constitute key factors in the success of students' character formation, as students spend most of their daily lives within the

school setting. Schools function as institutions with a crucial responsibility not only to enhance students' mastery of information and technology, but also to develop their capacity for responsibility and wise decision-making in everyday life (Rasyid, 2016). Various efforts have been implemented to support character education, including the cultivation of the 5S school culture (Smiling, Greeting, Saluting, Politeness, and Courtesy), praying before lessons, greeting teachers during encounters, strengthening religious values, providing counseling services, and other character-oriented practices. Nevertheless, the formation of individuals with strong moral character requires a long-term and continuous process. In practice, observable student behaviors in schools indicate that character development outcomes remain less than optimal.

One contributing factor to this condition is the limited interaction between teachers and students during the period of fully online learning implemented amid the Covid-19 pandemic. In the current transitional phase from pandemic to endemic conditions, as learning shifts from online to face-to-face modes, teachers in both schools continue to face significant challenges in restoring students' character development, which experienced noticeable decline during prolonged online learning. Several indicators of this decline include reduced social sensitivity, increased individualistic attitudes, diminished sympathy and empathy, and the emergence of bullying incidents within classrooms. These issues require immediate and systematic responses from teachers, including within Social Studies instruction, which is particularly relevant to character education in schools. To address these challenges, Social Studies teachers have implemented various strategies, such as issuing corrective warnings, establishing learning contracts with students to regulate behavior, integrating character values into Social Studies learning materials, and applying persuasive and personalized approaches, among other efforts.

These conditions can be interpreted through the lens of critical education theory (Habermas, 1984; Giroux, 2011), which emphasizes that schools should not merely function as spaces for the reproduction of knowledge, but also as arenas for critical praxis and social transformation. The limited teacher–student interaction during online learning in the Covid-19 pandemic weakened the internalization of character values. During the transition back to face-to-face learning, teachers in the two schools encountered serious challenges in addressing character degradation among students,

manifested in declining social awareness, rising individualistic tendencies, reduced sympathy and empathy, and incidents of classroom bullying.

**Figure 3. Environmental observation activities
for social studies learning classes**

Various findings from classroom observations were further corroborated by Social Studies teachers through in-depth interviews conducted in the field. According to one Social Studies teacher, Ms. Lia, there has been a noticeable decline in students' character development caused by multiple factors, one of which is the implementation of online learning that significantly limited direct interaction between teachers and students in the process of character reinforcement. A similar view was expressed by Mr. Rifki, who emphasized that the degradation of students' character was a direct consequence of the shift in learning modalities during the pandemic, during which face-to-face interaction was almost entirely suspended. During this period, educational practices largely prioritized cognitive achievement through knowledge transmission, while affective and psychomotor dimensions, which serve as the foundational elements of character formation were relatively neglected (Rohmat, 2021). This phenomenon aligns with

Lickona's (2012) perspective, which emphasizes that character education requires a balanced engagement of cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. The lack of direct interaction in online learning environments deprived students of meaningful spaces for the actualization of values such as empathy, cooperation, and discipline, which are typically cultivated through social experiences in classroom settings (Putra & Irwansyah, 2021). This condition indicates that pandemic-era online education tended to be reductionist in nature, as it focused predominantly on academic content mastery, while character development which depends on role modeling, habituation, and intensive social interaction was largely overlooked (Zuchdi, 2019; Sari et al., 2022).

Figure 4. Interview with social studies teacher of SMP Labschool UPI

Figure 5. Interview with social studies teacher of Kartika XIX-2 Junior High School

Given these conditions and circumstances, it is necessary for teachers to further optimize character education within Social Studies learning in schools. Character education must be systematically implemented and integrated into school life, both within classroom instruction and through extracurricular and school-wide activities (Dalimunthe, 2015). Various efforts have been undertaken to strengthen students' character development, including: (1) classroom-based learning processes that develop and internalize values relevant to the subject matter being taught; (2) the cultivation of school culture aimed at fostering habituation among students, such as the implementation of the 5S culture (smiling, greeting, saluting, politeness, and courtesy), praying before lessons, congregational prayers at the school mosque, maintaining cleanliness, donating to social causes, and practicing orderly behavior in public spaces such as school canteens; and (3) extracurricular activities designed to develop students' talents, interests, attitudes, potential, and personal character throughout their schooling. However, beyond these structured programs, the most crucial element in character education is the provision of authentic role modeling by teachers. Professional teachers

are expected to possess strong moral character and to serve as exemplary figures within the school environment, particularly for students. Such exemplarity constitutes a fundamental aspect of value education, as students learn ethical behavior not only through instruction but also through direct observation of their teachers' attitudes and conduct (Harahap, 2017).

This perspective is highly relevant to Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1987), which posits that students' character is shaped through processes of observation, modeling, and interaction with significant others, including teachers, peers, and community figures. Furthermore, from the standpoint of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (1970), character education in Social Studies should not merely function as indoctrination or one-way value transmission. Instead, it must engage students in dialogical and reflective processes. Freire emphasizes the importance of critical consciousness (conscientização), enabling learners to understand social realities, critically examine injustice, and take action toward social transformation. Through this approach, character education moves beyond obedience and compliance, fostering critical awareness and social responsibility among students. From a learning theory perspective, Vygotsky's constructivist framework (1978) also provides a strong foundation, suggesting that character formation develops optimally through social interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Teachers and peers function as more knowledgeable others (MKO), providing scaffolding that allows character values to be not merely taught, but socially constructed through shared learning experiences. This approach further supports reflective Social Studies learning, in which students are encouraged to reflect on their social experiences, connect Social Studies content to everyday life, and critically evaluate both personal behavior and social environments. Through Social Studies instruction, teachers are therefore encouraged not only to transmit factual knowledge but also to create reflective spaces that facilitate students' understanding of social meaning, nurture empathy, and support the internalization of character values within the school context.

D. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and discussion, several conclusions can be drawn. *First*, in terms of planning, schools have made systematic efforts to foster students' character development through clearly articulated school visions and missions, as well

as through the development of instructional plans and learning tools oriented toward character education. These planning initiatives demonstrate that character formation has been positioned as a fundamental objective within the institutional framework of the schools. *Second*, with regard to implementation and implications, the actualization of character education among students has generally proceeded effectively. However, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a noticeable decline in certain aspects of students' character development. During the transitional period from online to face-to-face learning, schools have continued to strengthen character education through integrated classroom instruction, the cultivation of positive school culture, and the provision of extracurricular activities. These efforts reflect the schools' commitment to restoring and reinforcing students' character formation in the post-pandemic context. *Third*, character education must be realized through consistent role modeling within the school environment. Teachers, in particular, play a pivotal role in exemplifying positive character traits, as daily practices and interactions serve as concrete references for students in internalizing values. Through sustained exemplarity in everyday school activities, a coherent value system can develop and be maintained within the school community. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The scope of the research was limited to a small number of schools, and the use of a descriptive qualitative approach restricts the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a broader range of schools and to employ mixed-methods approaches, including quantitative measurements, to more comprehensively assess the impact of character education. Furthermore, stronger collaboration among schools, teachers, parents, and the wider community is essential to reinforce the internalization of character values and to ensure the sustainability of character education initiatives.

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