

Character education as the foundation of vocational curriculum: a case study at SMK Mardhotullah Al-Islamy

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ABSTRACT

Character education has become a major focus in the education system in Indonesia, particularly in vocational schools. This study examines the integration of character education into the vocational curriculum at SMK Mardhotullah Al-Islamy, aiming to assess the impact of implementing the Panca Jiwa and Panca Karakter values on shaping students' character, balancing technical competence and moral integrity. This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method. Data were collected through interviews with teachers, field observations, and analysis of curriculum documents and program implementation. Data analysis was conducted descriptively to describe the implementation and impact of character education in the vocational school context. The results show that the integration of character education into the vocational curriculum at SMK Mardhotullah Al-Islamy has successfully shaped students who are not only technically competent but also possess high moral values. The role of teachers as Ruhul Mudarris and the supportive school environment contributed significantly to the success of the program. Challenges encountered in the implementation of the program include time constraints, varying levels of understanding among teachers, and the socio-economic backgrounds of students. This study recommends that this approach be adapted by other vocational schools in Indonesia, with adjustments to local contexts

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Introduction

In Indonesia, character education in Vocational High Schools (SMK) still faces various challenges that hinder its effective implementation (Hariati et al., 2023). One of the main issues is the lack of integration between character education and core subjects (Muzakkir et al., 2022). Character education is often seen as a supplement and separate from the technical skills that should be taught in SMK (Sudarmi & Yusuf, 2022). This leads to character education being overlooked or only partially implemented without significant emphasis in the curriculum (Dewi & Alam, 2020). Additionally, the lack of specialized training for teachers in teaching character values is a major obstacle, as many teachers focus more on teaching technical skills than on developing students' character (Lukman et al., 2021).

Moreover, there is significant pressure on mastering technical skills required in the workforce, which leads to neglecting the aspects of character development (van der Baan et al., 2022). SMK often emphasize achieving technical competencies, so character values such as

honesty, teamwork, and responsibility do not receive adequate attention (Jhon et al., 2021). A curriculum overly centered on technical aspects overlooks the importance of character education (Taufik, 2020) in shaping students into individuals who are not only technically skilled but also possess good ethics and integrity in professional interactions (Faith Ibukun Babalola et al., 2023). This situation is further exacerbated by the gap between the national curriculum and local needs, resulting in suboptimal implementation in certain regions (Aithal & Aithal, 2019).

On the other hand, the measurement and evaluation of character education remain weak (Darnell et al., 2019). Many SMK lack a clear and structured system for assessing students' character development (Sukarno & Riyadini, 2024), making it difficult to determine the extent to which character education has been successfully implemented (Rahmawati & Asmawan, 2023). Additionally, students' social and environmental factors, such as family background and socioeconomic conditions, also influence the acceptance and application of character education (Mónus, 2022). Students from environments that do not support character education may struggle to internalize the taught values, necessitating a more holistic and socially contextual approach (Septiwiharti & Mutawakkil, 2023).

Furthermore, there is immense pressure to master technical skills that can be directly applied in the workforce (Bongomin et al., 2020). This causes many SMK to overlook the importance of character education (Iksal et al., 2024). In some cases, the curriculum focuses more on achieving technical and academic competencies, while character education often becomes a neglected addition (Hanafiah et al., 2024). In fact, in the professional world, good character traits such as integrity, honesty, and teamwork are often valued more than technical skills alone (Mitana et al., 2019).

Amidst these challenges, SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy stands out for its excellence in integrating character education with vocational curricula. The school has successfully aligned character education with technical skill instruction, creating a learning environment that supports students' holistic character development. Character education at SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy is not only theoretical but also implemented through daily practices that shape students' attitudes and behavior outside the classroom. This makes the curriculum distinction applied at SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy particularly intriguing for further study.

The researcher is interested in exploring in depth how SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy has been able to overcome challenges faced by many other SMK, such as the lack of integration between character education and technical skills, as well as insufficient teacher training in teaching character values. With a more holistic approach, this school has successfully taught students to develop both technical competencies and strong character. This research aims to understand how the school effectively implements character education in its curriculum and to identify the key elements that set SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy apart from other schools in character education.

The findings of this study are expected to uncover an effective model for integrating character education with technical skills in SMK, which can be applied in other schools across Indonesia. This research is also expected to provide insights for education policymakers in designing a more balanced curriculum that not only focuses on technical competencies but also on shaping students' character to support their success in the professional world and daily life.

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design (Baxter & Jack, 2015; Edwards Anne, 2011; Gammelgaard, 2017). The study aims to explore in-depth how SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy integrates character education into its vocational curriculum. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews with the school principal, teachers, students, and parents; participatory observation during learning activities; and analysis of documents related to the curriculum and lesson plans (RPP) (Crowther & Lauesen, 2017; Sugiyono, 2018). The collected data will be analyzed using thematic analysis techniques to identify patterns relevant to the implementation of character education (Guest et al., 2014). Additionally, data

triangulation will be utilized to ensure the validity of the findings (Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Moon, 2019; Natow, 2020).

Result and Discussion

1. Integration of Character Education into Vocational Curricula

The implementation of character education in the vocational curriculum at SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy is achieved through the harmonious integration of the curriculum, *Panca Jiwa*, and *Panca Karakter* as core values that serve as the foundation for shaping students' character. The vocational curriculum is designed not only to enhance students' technical competencies but also to internalize the noble values contained in *Panca Jiwa*—such as sincerity, patience, and independence—and *Panca Karakter*—such as honesty, responsibility, and responsiveness.

This approach ensures that learning focuses not only on job skills but also on shaping students with strong character and an excellent work ethic. The values of *Panca Jiwa* and *Panca Karakter* are integrated into various aspects of learning, from lesson planning and teaching methods to evaluations. Thus, character education at SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy becomes an inseparable and integral part of the vocational curriculum, producing graduates who are technically skilled and morally upright.

Table 1. Five Principles of Mardhatullah Al-Islamy Students

No.	Panca Jiwa	Explanation
1	Sincerity (Ikhlas)	That we will do or not do something, love or hate, in all actions and words, outwardly or inwardly, solely for the sake of seeking Allah's pleasure.
2	Positive Thinking (Husnudzan)	That we are aware that everything happening in the universe is by Allah's will, based on His knowledge and wisdom, and there is no evil in His decrees.
3	Reliance on Allah (Tawakkal)	That we will entrust all matters of our lives to Allah alone, as He is the one we depend on, hope for, and seek help from.
4	Patience (Sabar)	That we fully realize life is a test from Allah, and Allah does not burden His servants beyond their ability. Thus, we accept everything wholeheartedly, without complaining or blaming Allah.
5	Independence and Hard Work	That we prioritize independence, stand on our own feet, work hard, be diligent, persistent, unyielding, creative, and innovative.

Field observations and interviews reveal that the integration of *Panca Jiwa* in the vocational curriculum at SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy is implemented through holistic approaches. The value of sincerity (*ikhlas*) is instilled in every learning activity by teaching students to begin with sincere intentions and prayers, recognizing that all efforts are part of worship. The value of positive thinking (*husnudzan*) is cultivated through reflective practices, where students are encouraged to see challenges in the learning process as part of Allah's wisdom. In practice, students are taught to remain positive and seek solutions without assigning blame.

The value of trust in Allah (*tawakkal*) is applied by encouraging students to rely on Allah after putting in their best effort, particularly during practical exams or vocational projects. Patience (*sabar*) serves as a critical foundation in overcoming technical and academic obstacles, such as completing projects that require time and perseverance. Independence and hard work are fostered through individual and group assignments designed to train students to rely on their abilities and complete tasks diligently. These projects also incorporate habits

of working creatively and innovatively, reflecting the strengthening of independence in daily life.

Table 2. Five Characteristics of Mardhatullah Al-Islamy Students

No.	Panca Karakter	Description
1	Honesty	In speech and actions, not contradicting conscience and divine truth.
2	Responsibility	Performing tasks optimally, working professionally to achieve the best results.
3	Responsiveness	Being sensitive and responsive to situations and conditions, and promptly taking the appropriate actions.
4	Skillful and Agile	Possessing work skills and carrying out tasks quickly, efficiently, and decisively—no sluggishness allowed.
5	Generosity	Caring for others, willing to help and ease the burdens of others, without being stingy.

Field observations and interviews also reveal that the values of *Panca Karakter* are integrated into various aspects of vocational learning at SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy. Honesty (*jujur*) is emphasized through business simulations and technical work reports, where students are required to provide accurate and truthful information without *manipulation*. Responsibility (*tanggung jawab*) is applied by assigning tasks with specific targets and success indicators, training students to complete work professionally and punctually. Teachers consistently reinforce responsibility through attitude assessments in every learning activity.

Responsiveness (*responsif*) is instilled through activities that require students to respond to problems, such as industrial work simulations that train them to address technical issues quickly and effectively. Efficiency and agility (*trampil dan tangginas*) are emphasized in practical learning, where students are trained to work swiftly and efficiently, reflecting a proactive and disciplined work ethic. Lastly, generosity (*dermawan*) is developed through social programs such as community service, where students are encouraged to care for others, share with those in need, and cultivate a non-selfish attitude in their daily lives.

2. Model for Integrating Core Values into the Curriculum at SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy

SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy implements a systematic model for integrating *Panca Jiwa* and *Panca Karakter* into the vocational curriculum to ensure that learning focuses not only on technical competence but also on character development. In curriculum planning, these core values are embedded in documents such as lesson plans (*Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran*, RPP) and syllabi. Each subject, particularly vocational subjects, is designed to reflect values such as sincerity, patience, and independence (*Panca Jiwa*), as well as honesty, responsibility, and responsiveness (*Panca Karakter*).

Teachers play a vital role as role models (Porter & Serra, 2020; Szymkowiak et al., 2021; Tondeur et al., 2019), demonstrating positive attitudes that reflect these values while applying project-based learning and real-world simulations that allow students to understand character values in the context of the working world (Fajra & Novalinda, 2020; Rosário & Raimundo, 2024; Singha & Singha, 2024).

Assessments at SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy include measuring attitudes and character through direct observations, student reflection reports, and feedback from the school environment and industry partners during internships (*Praktik Kerja Lapangan*, PKL). During PKL, students are trained to apply values such as honesty, hard work, and responsibility in real-world professional settings. The school environment also supports these values through

consistent practices, such as communal prayers, Quran recitation, and community service programs. Additionally, extracurricular activities such as technical competitions, social service, and entrepreneurship are designed to strengthen students' character (Buckley & Lee, 2021; Hameed & Irfan, 2019).

3. Strengthening *Ruhul Mudarris* in Implementing Character Education at SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy

One key to the successful implementation of character education at SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy is the strengthening of *Ruhul Mudarris* in every teacher. *Ruhul Mudarris* refers to the spirit and dedication of an educator who not only imparts knowledge but also guides, inspires, and serves as a role model for students (Rosyidah, 2024). Teachers at SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy fulfill this role wholeheartedly, recognizing that the success of character education depends on their example and consistency in internalizing and conveying the values of *Panca Jiwa* and *Panca Karakter*.

Teachers begin every interaction with students with the sincere intention of educating as an act of worship to Allah. This attitude is reflected in their words, actions, and teaching approaches that instill noble values in students. Teachers also exhibit positive thinking (*husnudzan*) in various situations, including when students make mistakes, by providing constructive guidance rather than mere punishment. Through patience, teachers guide students in overcoming academic and technical challenges, motivating them to remain diligent and not give up.

The strengthening of *Ruhul Mudarris* at SMK Mardhotullah Al Islamy demonstrates that teachers are not merely instructors but also spiritual and moral mentors who play a significant role in the success of character education. Through the spirit and example set by teachers, the values of *Panca Jiwa* and *Panca Karakter* are deeply internalized by students, creating a generation with strong character and competence.

4. Challenges and Solutions in Implementing Character Education at SMK Mardhotullah Al-Islamy

One of the primary challenges in integrating character education in vocational schools is the lack of initial awareness among students about its importance. Many students view character education as supplementary and less relevant compared to technical skills, leading to low motivation to internalize values like honesty, responsibility, and hard work in their daily lives. Additionally, the vocational curriculum's heavy emphasis on technical skills leaves limited time for explicitly addressing character development. Teachers also face difficulties due to varying levels of understanding and inconsistent approaches to embedding *Panca Jiwa* and *Panca Karakter* values into their teaching practices. Moreover, students' socio-economic backgrounds often contribute to challenges, as family environments may not always instill essential values, influencing students' attitudes and behavior at school. Lastly, the evaluation system for character education remains underdeveloped, lacking structure and relying heavily on subjective assessments, which makes it difficult to measure its effectiveness consistently.

To address these challenges, several solutions can be implemented. First, schools should focus on strengthening students' awareness and motivation by organizing regular orientation programs and discussions, using inspirational stories or alumni testimonials to highlight the importance of character education. Second, character education can be naturally integrated into learning activities such as technical assignments, work simulations, and problem-based projects, enabling students to develop their character alongside technical competencies. Providing regular training and mentoring for teachers is also essential to enhance their understanding and ensure a consistent application of character education across teaching practices. For students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, schools can adopt a holistic approach by involving families and communities through initiatives like home visits, parenting workshops, and collaborative school activities.

Furthermore, the development of a structured evaluation system is crucial. Schools can create specific rubrics to assess indicators such as honesty, responsibility, and hard work, complemented by feedback from teachers, homeroom advisors, and industry partners during internships (Praktik Kerja Lapangan, PKL). Establishing a strong school culture aligned with *Panca Jiwa* and *Panca Karakter* values through daily activities like group prayers, community service, and social programs also helps reinforce character development. Lastly, collaboration with industry partners can play a pivotal role by providing real-world contexts for students to practice values such as hard work, honesty, and responsibility during internships, further bridging the gap between education and the professional world.

5. Model for Implementing Core-Value-Based Character Education in Vocational Schools in Indonesia

Other vocational schools in Indonesia can adopt the character education integration model implemented at SMK Mardhotullah Al-Islamy as a holistic approach to developing students who are technically competent and possess strong character. This model begins with establishing the school's vision and mission, emphasizing the importance of character development as an integral part of vocational education.

The curriculum is designed to incorporate core values such as honesty, responsibility, hard work, and spiritual principles into every subject, particularly vocational subjects. These values are documented in official guides such as lesson plans (*Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran*, RPP) and syllabi, serving as the main framework for teaching and learning. Schools can also develop localized curricula tailored to the needs of the community and local industries, incorporating project-based activities and work simulations that emphasize character values.

Teachers serve as *Ruhul Mudarris*, the primary role models who internalize and apply character values in their daily interactions. To support this role, schools should provide regular training for teachers to integrate character values into teaching and to inspire students. Project-based learning and real-world simulations train students to understand and practice values such as responsiveness, hard work, and independence in real-life scenarios.

Character assessments are conducted systematically using specific rubrics that include character indicators such as honesty, responsibility, and hard work. These assessments involve teacher observations, feedback from the school environment, and evaluations from industry partners during internships (*PKL*).

The school environment also plays a critical role in the success of this model. A consistent school culture, including daily prayers, community service programs, and disciplined routines, creates a conducive atmosphere for strengthening students' character. Extracurricular activities designed to shape character, such as social service, entrepreneurship, and technical competitions, provide students with opportunities to apply character values in real-life activities.

Collaboration with the workforce through *PKL* and community service programs extends the application of character values to professional and social contexts (Badrianto & Ekhsan, 2020; Hidayat et al., 2024; Richards et al., 2024). With this model, vocational schools can produce a generation that is technically competent, possesses exceptional character, and is ready to contribute positively to the workforce and society. This flexible model can be tailored to local needs, making it relevant for implementation in various regions across Indonesia.

Conclusion

This research successfully reveals that the integration of character education into the vocational curriculum at SMK Mardhotullah Al-Islamy serves as an effective model for shaping students who are not only technically competent but also possess exemplary character. By incorporating *Panca Jiwa* and *Panca Karakter* as core values into the planning, implementation, and evaluation of learning, the school has established a holistic and profound educational system. Teachers, through the strengthening of *Ruhul Mudarris*, play a pivotal role as role

models and mentors in this process, while the school environment and its culture of character education significantly support the success of the program. Collaboration with the workforce through internships (*Praktik Kerja Lapangan*, PKL) further extends the application of character values within professional contexts.

This study addresses the need for a novel approach in vocational education that not only emphasizes technical skills but also fosters character development to enable students to compete in the workforce and become individuals with integrity. However, the research also highlights challenges in its implementation, such as time constraints, variations in teachers' understanding, and students' socio-economic backgrounds, which require a holistic and collaborative approach to overcome. These findings affirm that the integrated character education model in the vocational curriculum is not only relevant for SMK Mardhotullah Al-Islamy but also has the potential to be applied in other vocational schools across Indonesia, with adjustments to local contexts.

Recommendations

This study recommends that other vocational schools in Indonesia adopt the core-value-based character education approach implemented at SMK Mardhotullah Al-Islamy, while adapting it to their local context and community needs. Routine training for teachers should be prioritized to enhance their understanding and skills in integrating character values into teaching. Moreover, local curricula should be developed to not only focus on technical skills but also provide space for character building through problem-based projects, work simulations, and community service programs.

The government and education policymakers are encouraged to support this model by formulating policies that promote the integration of character education into both national and local curricula. Collaboration with the industrial sector should also be strengthened to enhance the application of character values in real-world professional practices. Further research is necessary to develop a structured character evaluation system that can comprehensively measure the effectiveness of this program. Future studies could also explore the influence of socio-economic factors on character formation among students, enabling the development of a more inclusive and adaptive approach.

By taking these steps, vocational education in Indonesia can produce a generation that is not only technically proficient but also possesses high integrity to face global challenges.

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