



Fostering Critical Thinking in Indonesian Youth through Character Education

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Abstract

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Character education plays a crucial role in shaping the personality of Indonesian youth to be responsible, integrity-driven, and critically minded. In the context of globalization and technological advancement, young generations face challenges such as moral degradation, instant thinking, and the widespread dissemination of unverified information. This study aims to analyze the role of character education in fostering critical thinking skills among Indonesian youth. The research employs a literature review method, examining various scholarly sources to provide a comprehensive understanding. The findings indicate that character education can enhance critical thinking through the reinforcement of moral values, active learning approaches, and a collaborative educational environment. By integrating character values into the curriculum and instructional methods, students are able to develop analytical, reflective, and rational abilities necessary to navigate the challenges of the digital era. Effective implementation of character education requires the support of teachers, families, and communities to create a sustainable educational ecosystem that promotes moral development and critical reasoning among the younger generation.

1. Introduction

Education holds a strategic position in shaping the nation's character and determining the direction of civilizational development. Through the educational process, fundamental values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and patriotism are instilled to produce individuals with integrity and real contributions to the nation's progress (Pradana et al., 2020). Education does not only function as a means of developing intellectual ability but also plays a role in shaping the character, personality, and moral awareness of citizens. In the context of national education, this principle aligns with Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, which affirms that education aims to develop capabilities while also forming a dignified national character. Therefore, character education is the main foundation for improving the quality of Indonesia's younger generation.

However, the dynamics of social change and digital technological advancements present serious challenges to the character development of the younger generation. The phenomenon of declining social ethics, the tendency for instant gratification, and the widespread dissemination of hoaxes indicate a weakness in critical thinking skills and a minimal internalization of moral values among students (Saripudin et al., 2021). Unlimited access to information is often not accompanied by adequate analytical capability, making the younger generation easily influenced by the stream of unverified information. The lack of proficiency in distinguishing facts from opinions leads to increased disinformation, which potentially disrupts social integration and the nation's moral order (Fatmawati,

2019). In this context, character education serves as a systematic instrument to instill ethical values and foster a reflective and critical mindset towards the constantly evolving social reality.

One of the fundamental problems in the Indonesian education system is the dominance of the cognitive approach, which emphasizes academic achievements and test results, while affective dimensions such as moral values and social attitudes receive disproportionate attention (Widodo, 2018). The excessive focus of education on the cognitive aspect results in students having underdeveloped critical thinking skills, empathy, and sensitivity in moral decision-making. According to Suhartini et al. (2019), an education system that only emphasizes the knowledge aspect without considering character formation will produce a generation that is intellectually clever but morally poor. Therefore, the comprehensive integration of character education into the curriculum is a necessity so that students can foster moral awareness and critical thinking skills in a balanced manner (Dewi & Alam, 2020).

The implementation of character education in schools still faces various obstacles. Many educators do not deeply understand the concept of character education or how to integrate it into active and contextual learning (Retnawati et al., 2018). Besides these limitations, lack of policy support, limited human resources and facilities, and the inconsistency of values between home and school environments also impede the effectiveness of its application (Marsh et al., 2017). External factors, such as the influence of the digital environment, which is saturated with instant and consumptive culture, further worsen the moral condition of students. Thus, synergy between educational institutions, families, and communities is needed to consistently

instill character values and build an educational ecosystem that supports a reflective and value-oriented learning process (Ergen, 2019).

Character education is an essential basis for developing the critical thinking skills of the younger generation. Through active learning approaches such as discussion, debate, and case studies, students are encouraged to analyze social issues, evaluate information, and make decisions based on moral principles and logical reasoning (Komara et al., 2021). Values such as responsibility, honesty, and respect for differences help students develop open, objective, and rational attitudes. Thus, character education does not only function as a means of moral formation but also as a main strategy in building critical thinking skills essential for facing the complexity of global challenges (Taufik, 2020).

2. Methods

This research method uses a literature review approach as the foundation for the main analysis. This approach was chosen because the research is oriented towards a theoretical and conceptual study of the correlation between character education and critical thinking skills in Indonesia's younger generation. Through this method, the researcher gains the opportunity to trace, compare, and interpret various academic views, empirical findings, and educational policies directly related to the issue under study. The literature review is considered relevant in the context of this research because it is capable of presenting an in-depth understanding of the theoretical construction and implementation of character education in forming higher-order thinking skills in the educational environment.

Data collection was carried out through a literature search process from various scientific sources published within the last five years. The main data source came from the Google Scholar database, which is widely known as a credible and current scientific repository. The selection of literature was done selectively by considering several main criteria. First, the articles used must be in Indonesian or English to maintain contextual relevance and ease of interpretation. Second, the selected literature must discuss issues related to character education, the development of critical thinking, and the education of the younger generation in various levels of formal education. Third, the sources used must have a strong relevance to efforts to strengthen character values and higher-order thinking skills as a basis for forming a reflective, rational, and critical mindset in students.

The analysis stage was carried out using a descriptive qualitative method, which aims to interpret and integrate findings from various previous studies to obtain a comprehensive conceptual picture. The analysis was conducted through four main steps. First, identification of the main theme, which is the process of determining the key issues that emerge in the literature, such as the relationship between character education and critical thinking skills. Second, grouping of key concepts, which involves the categorization process based on similarities in theme, context, and research results. Third, comparison of results between studies to see the compatibility and differences in approaches, findings, and educational implications produced. Fourth, drawing theoretical conclusions that formulate a synthesis of ideas about the contribution of character education to the development of critical thinking skills in Indonesia's younger generation.

This literature review approach serves as an analytical instrument to systematically explain how character education plays a role in developing critical thinking skills through value-based learning, moral reflection, and contextual pedagogical models. Through in-depth literature analysis, this research is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the strengthening of the national education paradigm, especially in developing character education implementation strategies that are adaptive to the challenges of the digital era and relevant to 21st-century needs

3. Results

Character education has a strategic role in shaping the critical thinking skills of Indonesia's younger generation amidst the challenges of the digital era and globalization. Education does not only function as a means of transferring knowledge but also shapes personality, morality, and a rational and responsible mindset. In this context, character education not only instills moral values such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and hard work but also serves as a medium for developing reflective and analytical reasoning power. Through the process of value internalization, students are directed to judge, consider, and make decisions based on moral principles and mature logic (Sari & Kurniawan, 2019).

The younger generation in the information technology era faces a very rapid flow of information that is often unverified. This condition demands critical thinking skills so that they are not easily influenced by false news, one-sided opinions, or provocative narratives. However, various studies indicate that students critical

thinking skills in Indonesia are still relatively low because the learning system emphasizes the cognitive aspect more than the affective (Saripudin et al., 2021). This causes students to focus more on achieving academic grades than on developing moral values and reflective thinking skills. Character education is present to bridge this gap by integrating moral values into the learning process that encourages reasoning and social sensitivity.

Character education, implemented systematically, encourages students to think rationally and ethically. Values such as integrity, responsibility, and justice foster moral awareness that goes hand-in-hand with the development of critical thinking skills. According to Marsh et al. (2017), character education is effective if it combines the dimensions of moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action. Through the combination of these three aspects, students not only understand what is right but also have the motivation and ability to carry it out. This process requires the active involvement of students in analysis, reflection, and decision-making based on moral considerations. Critical thinking does not only refer to logical ability but also the ability to question the truth, evaluate arguments, and see problems from various perspectives.

When character values are internalized within students, they become more selective in accepting information, able to distinguish facts from opinions, and behave more wisely in facing differences in views (Komara et al., 2021). Strong character education allows students to think openly, reflectively, and based on humanitarian values. The moral values embedded in school function as an ethical guide in thinking and acting, while critical thinking skills become a tool to interpret

and apply these values in daily life. The correlation between character education and critical thinking becomes more evident when linked to 21st-century competencies, namely critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration. According to Widodo (2018), the modern curriculum needs to balance intellectual and moral intelligence to produce individuals who are intelligent and civilized. The younger generation is not only required to solve problems but also to understand the moral implications of every decision made.

Through character education, students are trained to think critically by considering ethical, social, and humanitarian aspects. The importance of character formation and reasoning power is consistent with the findings of Wulandari and Prasetyo (2019), which show that the integration of character education in project-based learning can enhance critical thinking skills while strengthening social empathy. Students involved in collaborative projects learn to cooperate, solve real problems, and internalize the values of responsibility and solidarity. This kind of contextual learning makes the learning process not only cognitive but also reflective, social, and moral. Teachers play a central role in the development of character education and critical thinking. Teachers are not just conveyers of knowledge but also moral role models and facilitators of thought.

Retnawati et al. (2018) emphasize that the success of character education highly depends on the teacher's ability to integrate moral values into active learning. Methods such as discussion, problem-based learning, and guided reflection have been proven to foster critical awareness while building students character. Through teacher guidance, students learn to logically evaluate information, question

assumptions, and express opinions politely and ethically. Besides the teacher's role, the school environment also influences the success of character education. Schools that cultivate a positive culture such as honesty, discipline, and collaboration will create a learning climate conducive to the development of critical thinking skills (Pradana et al., 2020). Conversely, schools that only focus on academic achievement tend to neglect the formation of attitudes and values. Suhartini et al. (2019) found that students from schools that implement a culture of character have better analytical thinking and social empathy skills compared to students who study in environments that emphasize academic competition alone.

However, character education will not be effective without the support of family and community. The family environment is the first place children learn moral values, while society is the space for practicing those values. Tyas et al. (2020) confirms that inconsistency between values at home and school can cause moral confusion. Therefore, synergy between school, family, and community is needed so that the instilled character values are consistent and form continuous critical thinking awareness. Taufik (2020) show that the collaboration of the educational tripusat (three centers of education) strengthens the internalization of moral values and trains students to make decisions based on ethical considerations and social responsibility.

The transformation of character education in the digital era is also an urgent necessity. Information technology can be utilized as a positive means in character education if used wisely and directed. Saripudin et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of character-based digital literacy, which is the ability to use technology to assess the truth of information and behave ethically in cyberspace. Digital

character education is not just about controlling the use of technology but also about forming moral awareness in the virtual space. Social media can become a reflective learning space for students to discuss, think critically, and develop empathy. The application of technology in character education has been proven to increase student participation and sharpen critical thinking skills. Sari and Kurniawan (2019) show that the use of interactive digital media encourages students to actively argue, analyze problems, and find solutions based on moral values. Technology-based learning also helps teachers broaden the context of learning to be more relevant to real life, so that character and critical thinking skills develop simultaneously (Arabloo et al., 2021).

Various studies prove that character education contributes positively to the improvement of students' critical thinking skills. Komara et al. (2021) found that value-based learning programs significantly increased students analysis and evaluation abilities. Meanwhile, Wulandari and Prasetyo (2019) confirmed that students who were active in character-based project learning activities showed an increase in problem-solving ability and self-reflection. From the perspective of educational psychology, values such as responsibility, honesty, and social concern function as internal motivators that encourage students to think more deeply about the actions and decisions they take. Fatmawati (2019) adds that critical thinking in the context of moral education cannot be separated from ethical awareness.

The rational thinking process must always be balanced with moral awareness so that decisions are not only logical but also fair and humane. In Indonesia, the integration of Pancasila values is an important foundation for character education

that trains the younger generation to think critically within the framework of national morality. Values such as social justice, humanity, and national unity become references in assessing truth and making rational decisions. Therefore, character education implemented consistently at all levels of education is capable of creating a younger generation that is not only intellectually smart but also possesses moral maturity and high critical thinking ability. It is this kind of generation that is expected to be an agent of change in society, building a civilization that is ethical, rational, and inclusive amidst rapid social dynamics and technological advancements.

4. Conclusion

Character education has a fundamental role in forming the critical thinking skills of Indonesia's younger generation. Through the process of internalizing moral values such as responsibility, integrity, and honesty, students are not only directed to become moral individuals but also to think reflectively, analytically, and rationally. The results of various studies indicate that the integration of character education in active, project-based, and digital technology learning can significantly improve students' critical thinking skills. Teachers, families, and the community environment play a synergistic role in ensuring character values are consistently instilled in daily life.

Strong character education will produce a younger generation that is intellectually smart and morally mature. In the complex era of digital transformation and globalization, the ability to think critically, underpinned by ethical and humanitarian values, is key for the younger generation to face changes with wisdom

and responsibility. Thus, character education is not just a complement to the national education system but the core of the development of the Indonesian people who are civilized, have integrity, and think critically for the nation's progress.

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