



EVALUATING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INDEPENDENT CURRICULUM IN CHARACTER EDUCATION USING THE GOAL-FREE EVALUATION MODEL

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the implementation of the character education program within the Merdeka Curriculum ecosystem at SDN 2 Kalinanas, Wonosamodro, Boyolali, using the Goal-Free Evaluation (GFE) approach. The main focus is to describe operational integration, identify the full spectrum of actual impacts on students, and conduct a formative evaluation of strengths, weaknesses, and obstacles. A qualitative descriptive-analytical approach was employed through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentary studies. Data validity was maintained using source and technique triangulation alongside peer discussions. The findings reveal that character education successfully transformed the school culture through internalized religious routines, activity-based learning, and the redefined role of teachers as facilitators. The goal-free evaluation captured comprehensive outcomes: (1) Intended positive impacts aligned with the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile; (2) Unintended positive side effects, including elevated learning motivation, self-confidence, social communication skills, closer teacher-student emotional bonds, and innovative teaching methods; (3) Unintended negative side effects, such as reduced classroom concentration due to excessive flexibility, a widening achievement gap, and student anxiety over complex tasks. Primary weaknesses and obstacles stem from inefficient time management during project execution, heavy administrative workloads for teachers, slow adaptation of educator competencies, and limited physical school facilities.

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INTRODUCTION

The orientation of global education development since the 1990s has shifted fundamentally toward contextualization, moving studies outside the classroom to connect academic material with everyday life. In Indonesia, this idea has been expressed by Ki Hajar Dewantara through the draft of tricerter education, which emphasizes a balance among taste processing, processing intention, exercise, and sport thinking (Putri & Sukmawan, 2025; Marlini & Jusmiwati, 2025). However, the field at the elementary school level shows sufficient dynamic behavior: students exhibiting concerns, such as declining compliance with parents and teachers, rule violations, bullying peers, up to addiction to trigger devices and declining interest in learning (Sugiharto et al., 2024; Kelil & Namouni, 2025). The phenomenon is triggered by a domination-based evaluation system in past education that neglected the planting of character and moral values.

In response to these challenges, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology launched the Independent Curriculum, which places Project Strengthening Pancasila Student Profile (P5) as the main instrument for holistic character formation. The Pancasila Student Profile includes six dimensions with interlocking keys linked: (1) faithful, pious to god almighty, and have good, noble morals; (2) global diversity; (3) mutual cooperation; (4) independent; (5) critical reasoning; and (6) creative (Arifin et al., 2024; Tapung, 2025). Kalinanas 2 Public Elementary School, Wonosamodro, Boyolali, is one of the institutions that implement the Independent Curriculum. The 2025 School Education Report shows an average Character Score of 80.9 (up 8.97 points) from 2024, with significant increases in the dimensions of independence (98.07) and critical reasoning (86.65).

Although quantitative achievements show a positive trend, practical implementation in the field still leaves fundamental obstacles. Many educators experience technical confusion when

integrating character values in a cross-disciplinary, science-based way. In addition, rigid changes in dynamic management, as well as gaps in facility areas, often limit curriculum implementation to mere administrative formalities. To evaluate dynamics in a balanced way, a program evaluation approach is needed that is not fixated solely on formal document targets.

This model positions the evaluator independently of the written program to capture all emerging phenomena in a way real in the field (Youker & Ballard, 2024). Based on GFE work, dissecting program dynamics into three main domains: results positive planned (intended outcomes), effects side positive that are not unintended positive side-effects, as well as effects side negative that is not expected (unintended negative side-effects) (Youker et al., 2014).

Evaluatively, this study adopted a formative approach to identify strengths, weaknesses, and constraints operational as a basis for improving the quality of the repair program and overall sustainability at SDN 2 Kalinanas Wonosamodro Boyolali. Based on this background behind this, this research aims to: (1) describe the pattern of integration of character education in the Independent Curriculum; (2) reveal the overall impact (positive and negative effects) on student behavior; and (3) identify strengths, weaknesses, and constraints in implementation as recommendations for program improvements.

While evaluations of the "*Kurikulum Merdeka*" (Independent Curriculum) regarding character education have been widely conducted, most prior research remains confined to goal-oriented evaluation approaches (such as the CIPP Model). These conventional approaches tend to focus solely on aligning actual performance outcomes with the criteria outlined in curriculum planning documents. Consequently, a "tunnel vision" effect arises, in which unexpected aspects that fall outside the curriculum's formal targets often go unassessed.

Specifically, three research gaps underscore the importance of this study: (1) Character education evaluations generally assume that success is measured only by meeting the planned indicators of the "*Profil Pelajar Pancasila*" (Pancasila Student Profile). Goal-Free Evaluation (GFE) has seen limited application within the "*Kurikulum Merdeka*" context, despite its proven effectiveness in minimizing evaluator bias and revealing actual field dynamics; (2) Previous studies have frequently overlooked the latent effects or side effects accompanying the flexible implementation of "*Kurikulum Merdeka*". Attention often centers on planned positive outcomes, while both positive side effects (such as spontaneously emerging teacher leadership) and negative ones (such as psychological strain and administrative fatigue) are rarely comprehensively identified; (3) Integrating character values into "*Kurikulum Merdeka*" requires a flexible approach, particularly in primary education settings. Existing research has not sufficiently examined how daily character habituation responds to the curriculum's structural flexibility when evaluated without reference to formal curriculum targets.

The primary novelty of this study lies in reorienting the "*Kurikulum Merdeka*" evaluation paradigm—shifting from a confirmatory approach based on document targets to an exploratory approach focused on the reality of actual impacts. The novel aspects of this study include: (1) The use of the Goal-Free Evaluation (GFE) model to assess character education independently of formal curriculum criteria, thereby presenting an objective and authentic impact map; (2) A focus on the GFE instrument's ability to capture dual impacts—specifically, positive side effects (such as teaching innovations and the organic strengthening of teacher-student communication) alongside negative side effects (such as emerging academic anxiety or disparities in learning outcomes) that go unrecorded in formal performance reports; and (3) An analysis of the phenomenon of daily character cultivation (habituation) not merely as a means to fulfill P5 module requirements, but as a spontaneous moral ecosystem that interacts directly with the flexibility of school management.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used an evaluative study design (evaluation research) with a qualitative descriptive-analytic approach (Mustikaningrum et al., 2021). Research evaluation functioned as an independent audit instrument to see the effectiveness and usefulness of educational programs without being bound by administrative targets (Purwati & Arifin, 2023; Salma et al., 2024). The



research location is SDN 2 Kalinanas, Wonosamodro District, Boyolali Regency. Implementation time evaluation is ongoing from April to June 2026. The evaluation model applied is Goal-Free Evaluation (GFE) by Michael Scriven. Procedure evaluation implemented through stages systematic, including: (1) study beginning context environment school without limit observation on criteria formal objectives; (2) development instrument interviews, observations, and studies document based indicator impact ; (3) field data collection in a way in-depth; (4) mapping impact to in category intended outcomes, unintended positive side-effects, and unintended negative side-effects; and (5) preparation recommendation repair formative (Youker & Ballard, 2024).

Research data consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data sources were obtained through purposive sampling from key informants, namely the Principal (AAK), Grade 6 Teacher (M), Grade 5 Teacher (PL), and representative students and parents. Secondary data were collected from the school administration archives, books, notes of case students, journals, teachers' diaries, and Education Report documents. Data collection utilized a combination of three techniques: in-depth interviews, non-intervention participatory observation (participant observation), and documentation. Data validity and credibility tests were carried out through three main strategies: (1) improvement perseverance observation in a way periodic and continuous ; (2) triangulation source (compare information from head schools, teachers, students, and parents) and triangulation technique (testing suitability between results interviews, observations, and documents); and (3) discussions periodically together with friends, colleagues, and lecturers/supervisor (Carter et al., 2014). Data analysis applies the qualitative interactive model of Miles et al. (2020), which includes three simultaneous activities: data reduction, data presentation (data display), and drawing conclusions or verification.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Implementation of Character Education Program in Independent Curriculum

Results from data mining at SDN 2 Kalinanas Wonosamodro, Boyolali show that the implementation of the Independent Curriculum was successful in comprehensively reconstructing the school's ecosystem and culture. Based on analysis and evaluation, the purpose of the Independent Curriculum is not merely to teach certain values in isolation, but to integrate them through three main patterns: habituation culture, learning-based activities, and reconstruction of teacher-student roles. Table 1 presents synthesis results from interviews with the Principal and Class Teachers about the implementation dimensions of the Profile of Pancasila Students in schools.

Table 1. Synthesis of the Implementation of Character Education Based on the Key Information

Dimensions Character	Principal's Perception (AAK)	Perception of Grade 6 Teachers (M)	Perceptions of Grade 5 Teachers (PL)
Faithful & Devout	Routine habituation: prayer and worship together, as well as planting politeness	Habitual attitudes: respect, honesty, and responsibility; answered daily.	Integration of spiritual values in P5 activities and habituation tolerance.
Global Diversity	Planting attitude value differences and backgrounds through group discussion.	Introduction to local/national cultural diversity. For practice tolerance.	Learning contextual teaching: empathy for differences.
Mutual cooperation	Emphasis on work groups, discussions, and collaborative solution projects.	Involve students in collaborative projects and share fair roles.	Mutual habituation: help and exchange suggestions within the task group.
Independent	Providing room for active study, where the teacher serves as a facilitator.	Push exploration, information independence, and a sense of responsibility to answer tasks.	Implementation of <i>student-centered learning</i> for practice management time.

Reasoning Critical	Training in the process of observing, asking, and solving problems in practical settings.	Analytical habits: problem-focused, discussion-focused, argumentative, and evidentiary.	Use <i>problem-based learning</i> and analysis in task-based projects.
Creative	Provide room for expression in manufacturing work, art, and independent presentations.	Push compilation work: experimental and courageous new ideas.	Freedom to produce products; study from material recycling and reuse.

B. Impact Spectrum Current Program Implementation (GFE Model)

Employing a Goal Free Evaluation approach, which systematically maps the full spectrum of intended and unintended outcomes based on the actual experiences of students and educators, the observation results at SDN 2 Kalinanas reveal a richly layered impact across three main realms. The first realm encompasses the intended positive outcomes, where students successfully internalize Pancasila's core principles through concrete actions: enhanced religiosity is demonstrated by improved worship awareness and disciplined prayer without teacher prompting; mutual cooperation and diversity flourish as students exhibit inclusive attitudes and reject bullying toward peers from different cultural backgrounds; and creativity alongside critical thinking thrives, with students producing tangible artifacts like piggy banks from recycled materials and calligraphy, while also posing more incisive critical questions during class discussions.

The second realm captures unintended positive side effects, as the curriculum's autonomous and flexible nature generates beneficial, nurturing consequences: participation and speaking confidence improve markedly among previously passive students, emotional bonds between teachers and learners grow warmer and more interactive, and the flexibility of materials encourages educators to innovate with contextual, game-based teaching methods.

However, the third realm reveals unintended negative side effects, where relinquishing structured control over independent study triggers a number of psychological and academic issues, including declining classroom concentration for some students due to insufficient supervision, a widening achievement gap that leaves less self-reliant learners lagging behind their more adaptive peers, and rising psychological anxiety among certain students overwhelmed by the complexity of P5 project instructions and workload. Collectively, these three realms paint a comprehensive, nuanced portrait of the program's real-world impact, underscoring both its transformative potential and the critical need for targeted interventions to safeguard student well-being and equitable learning outcomes.

Table 2 maps the comparison of results across three impact domains in the on-site GFE evaluation study.

Table 2. Mapping Real Impact of Character Education Program Evaluation

Categorization GFE Impact	Indicator Phenomenon Real in School	Psychological/ Behavioral Impact Student
Intended Outcomes	Internalization of 6 Dimensions Pancasila Student Profile	Independence Study increasing, growing sense of empathy, consistent culture of worship, decreasing bullying behavior.
Unintended Positive Effects	<i>Nurturing Effects</i> from Flexibility Study	Proximity between teacher and student: emotional growth and courage emerge; independent innovation in teaching media.
Unintended Negative Effects	Implications: Unpreparedness, flexible management	The gap performance students (polarization), potential distraction focus class, emergence anxiety task project.

C. Evaluation Formative : Strengths, Weaknesses, and Constraints of the Program

The formative evaluation results for program sustainability reveal a complex interplay of internal and external factors within the school, highlighting both significant strengths and critical challenges. On the positive side, the program's primary advantage lies in its ability to make environmental studies more engaging, practical, and directly relevant to students' daily lives. This



approach not only fosters creative expression and nurtures individual talents but also successfully integrates local rural wisdom from Wonosamodro, thereby grounding learning in the community's cultural heritage. However, these benefits are counterbalanced by notable weaknesses, particularly in time and workload management.

The implementation of P5 (Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila) projects often consumes regular class hours, delaying core curricular discussions and adding a considerable administrative burden on teachers. The process of compiling complex and time-consuming rubric evaluations and assessments further strains educators' capacity, detracting from instructional quality. Compounding these internal issues are external constraints, primarily related to educator competency and resource availability. Many teachers exhibit a slow rate of adaptation in fully grasping the substance of the Independent Curriculum, a challenge exacerbated by insufficient access to practical physical materials, inadequate technological facilities, and a general lack of comprehensive information within the school. Together, these factors present a multifaceted picture where the program's innovative potential is hampered by operational inefficiencies and infrastructural deficits, threatening its long-term sustainability unless strategic interventions are implemented.

D. Transformation Ecosystem School Through Integration Formation Character

Findings at SDN 2 Kalinanas indicate that the implementation of character education within the "Kurikulum Merdeka" (Independent Curriculum) has shifted from mere rote learning to organic, everyday practice. This phenomenon confirms (Santika & Dafit, 2023) conceptual framework for holistic character education that emphasizes the synergy among the dimensions of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Daily practices—such as communal prayer, the cultivation of good manners, and a culture of maintaining school cleanliness—serve as tangible manifestations of moral action, instilled repeatedly until they crystallize into habits (habituation).

Previous research by Santika & Dafit (2023) supports these findings, demonstrating that embedding character values through daily routines is far more effective in fostering a school's moral climate than conventional cognitive teaching approaches. Arifin et al. (2024) also found that integrating character values into the school ecosystem through structured routines enables the spontaneous, natural internalization of spiritual and social values among students. Furthermore, a study by SSantika & Dafit (2023) outlines how the habituation to positive behaviors in elementary schools serves as a bridge between students' ethical understanding and concrete, everyday actions.

Another aspect of this ecosystem transformation is the shift in the teacher's role from a conventional instructor (teacher-centered) to a facilitator and guide (student-centered). This approach aligns with Vygotsky's social constructivism theory, wherein educators do not unilaterally dictate ethical decisions but instead provide scaffolding—gradual support—to enable students to discover ethical values independently through interactive discussions and problem-based learning.

Empirical evidence for the effectiveness of this role shift is provided by Oktaviani et al. (2022), which reports that the use of scaffolding strategies in problem-based learning enhances students' critical engagement and ethical autonomy. Research by Tang (2023) adds that student-centered facilitation in the classroom can transform a passive learning climate into a participatory classroom ecosystem rich in practical experiences. This is reaffirmed by Tang (2023), who found that collaborative interaction between educators and learners accelerates the creation of a positive school climate conducive to holistic character development.

E. Added Value of the Goal-Free Evaluation Model in Dissecting Program Impact

The application of the Goal-Free Evaluation (GFE) approach represents a substantial methodological breakthrough in evaluating the effectiveness of educational programs compared to traditional goal-oriented approaches. Scriven explains that conventional evaluations are prone to "tunnel vision," as the evaluator's focus is often restricted to verifying the achievement of targets outlined in planning documents (Youker & Ingraham, 2014). By utilizing GFE, contextual dynamics often overlooked in curriculum documents—such as shifts in the emotional landscape and the psychological state of the school community—can be comprehensively identified.

The revelation of unintended positive side effects—such as increased pedagogical



innovation among teachers and a strengthened interpersonal communication climate between educators and students—confirms that the flexibility of the "*Kurikulum Merdeka*" (Independent Curriculum) can spontaneously stimulate instructional leadership. These findings align with research by Youker & Ballard (2024), which asserts that goal-free evaluation is highly effective at capturing latent positive impacts—such as differentiated instruction and enhanced organic collaboration—that are not captured by initial performance indicator matrices. Furthermore, Nihayah et al. (2023) found that the flexibility of curriculum implementation empirically fosters teacher leadership initiatives aimed at creating interactive classroom environments.

Conversely, GFE's ability to uncover unintended negative side effects—such as student learning anxiety and phenomena like polarization or a widening academic achievement gap—provides a critical analysis often overlooked in formal administrative reporting. These findings are consistent with studies by Winangun & Darmayanti (2024), which highlight that curriculum structural flexibility can affect student time management and workload if not supported by a measurable support framework.

Recent research by Youker et al., (2014) reinforces this argument by demonstrating that a lack of risk mitigation preparedness during the implementation of new policies risks increasing students' psychological anxiety and widening the learning outcome gap between groups. Therefore, the introduction of GFE does not merely complement goal-based evaluation; rather, it serves as a comprehensive diagnostic instrument that maps the reality of a program's impact in a holistic and balanced manner.

F. Implications Formative for Management Curriculum Elementary School

Obstacles to educators' pedagogical adaptation and challenges in efficiently allocating time for the Project to Strengthen the Pancasila Student Profile (P5) highlight the critical need for managerial interventions at the school level. In the context of rural education—such as in Wonosamodro District—the dynamics of the "*Kurikulum Merdeka*" (Independent Curriculum) require a governance approach that is adaptive yet guided by clear principles. Consistent with Fullan's (2025) perspective on educational change, the success of curriculum implementation hinges on school leadership's capacity to align operational policies with local contextual realities. Research by Nihayah et al. (2023) reinforces the finding that rural primary schools often face dilemmas regarding P5 time allocation, necessitating flexible curriculum leadership to balance project-based activities with essential learning outcomes. Arifin et al. (2024) further confirms that school-level interventions—specifically the realignment of P5 schedules—can optimize learning efficiency without compromising the quality of character development.

Another pressing concern is the heavy administrative burden associated with developing individual assessment instruments, which has been shown to diminish the quality of direct face-to-face interaction between teachers and students. This phenomenon aligns with the fundamental tenets of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), which posit that dialogic interaction and personal mentoring lie at the heart of transmitting moral values and facilitating meaningful learning experiences. A study by Hilhamsyah et al. (2024) confirms that the complexity of individual evaluation instruments within the "*Kurikulum Merdeka*" often consumes time that teachers should otherwise dedicate to emotional engagement and academic mentoring. Furthermore, research by Hilhamsyah et al. (2024) indicates that excessive administrative workloads trigger teacher burnout, directly reducing the warmth and responsiveness of classroom interactions.

Based on this, this formative evaluation recommends simplifying the character evaluation format and rescheduling the time allocation for P5 to avoid undermining the mastery of basic literacy and numeracy. The provision of practical learning materials based on local resources (place-based learning) and continuous teacher training programs are essential prerequisites. In line with the Differentiated Instruction Theory proposed by Tang (2023), implementing differentiated learning without adequate facilities and teacher pedagogical competence risks widening the achievement gap. Empirical findings by Tang (2023) demonstrate that utilizing local materials for practical activities in rural schools can bridge facility limitations while fostering active student engagement.



CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The implementation of the Independent Curriculum for character education at SDN 2 Kalinanas, Wonosamodro, Boyolali, succeeded in transforming school culture through habituation, marked by religious learning, collaborative projects, and a shift in teachers' roles to learning facilitators. Approach Goal Free Evaluation (GFE) is proven effective and reveals the spectrum of the program's impact in general. Besides achieving the planned impact of strengthening the six dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile, this program also produces positive side effects, including improved motivation, self-trust, familiarity between teacher and student, emotional support, and creativity in teaching. However, it was found that there were negative effects, including a risk of declining class focus, a widening performance gap between independent and slow students, and the emergence of anxiety when students face complex tasks. Weaknesses and constraints mainly stemmed from management time being stretched by frequent P5 projects, a heavy administrative burden on teachers, slow adaptation competence among educators, and limitations in school facilities.

Based on findings evaluation formative mentioned, it is recommended a number of step practical action continued: (1) For the School, it is necessary restructure timetable implementation of P5 to be more efficient as well as simplify the instrument format evaluation character; (2) For educators, it is hoped that give mentoring focused (scaffolding) for students who have level independence low For prevent widening gap learning; (3) For the Department of Education, it is hoped that give training technical appropriate curriculum target as well as complete means supporters practicum in rural area schools.

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