



Character Education Strengthening Management at the Elementary School Level in Nature-Based Schools in Realizing SDGs4: Quality Education

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe and analyze the management of nature-based character education strengthening in realizing SDGs4 of quality education at the elementary school level at Sekolah Rimba Indonesia and SD Sekolah Alam Pelopor. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation studies. Research informants included school principals, teachers, foundation administrators, parents, and students. Data analysis was conducted using a management function framework consisting of planning, organizing, implementing, and supervising. The study shows that strengthening nature-based character education is designed systematically through the integration of intra-curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities, as well as school culture, by utilizing nature as a living learning laboratory. This program has had a positive impact on strengthening students' religious character, independence, cooperation, responsibility, and environmental awareness. However, further improvements are needed in strategic planning and the establishment of a dedicated organizational structure for character education management.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education in Indonesia is facing complex challenges, not only in terms of academic achievement but also in terms of character, personality, and student concern for the environment. Character education instills positive habits that students can apply in their daily lives (Mulyasa, 2016). Current facts show that cases of violence against children, bullying, drug abuse, risky sexual behavior, intolerance, and other deviant behavior involving students and adolescents are increasing, including in educational environments.

Based on data from the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) and the National Commission for Child Protection (*Komnas Perlindungan Anak*), hundreds to thousands of cases of violence and sexual crimes against children are reported annually. At the same time, the National Narcotics Agency (BNN) and health institutions indicate an increase in drug abuse and HIV cases among adolescents. This condition confirms the occurrence of a serious character crisis and the suboptimal role of educational institutions as a space for the formation of a complete personality and protection for students. This is based on KPAI data that: Family and parenting problems reached 1,097 cases, child victims of sexual crimes 265 cases, children in the context of fulfilling education, use of free time, culture, and religion recorded 241 cases, children victims of physical and psychological violence numbered 240 cases, and children victims of pornography crimes as many as cases (KPAI, 2024).

These various problems demonstrate the moral crisis our nation is experiencing, and it is already deeply concerning. Based on this, it is crucial to involve all parties, including schools, households (families), and the community (Marisyah, 2020). Normatively, the goal of national education in Article 3 of Law Number 20 of 2003 emphasizes that education aims to develop the potential of students to become faithful people, pious, have noble character, are healthy, knowledgeable, capable, creative, independent, and responsible (Law No. 20 of 2003, 2003). The Character Education Strengthening Policy (PPK) outlined in Presidential Regulation Number 87 of 2017 (*Presidential Decree No. 87 of 2017*, 2017), and follow-up policies at the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology place character and morals as the deepest dimensions of education that must be integrated into learning, school culture, and co-curricular/extracurricular activities. Within the framework of the Independent Curriculum, this vision is emphasized through the Pancasila Student Profile which contains six main dimensions, namely faith and noble character, independence, cooperation, global diversity, critical thinking, and creativity, which are operationalized, among others, through the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5) (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, 2022), the existence of character education under the Ministry of Religious Affairs through the Pancasila and *Rahmatan lil alamin* Student Profile Strengthening Project (P5RA) (Directorate General of Islamic Education, Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2022). Currently, the development of character education in the independent curriculum with a *deep learning* approach through graduate profiles, covering 8 (eight) dimensions of graduate profiles that must be mastered by the end of each level of education, namely: a. faith and piety towards God Almighty; b. citizenship; c. critical reasoning; d. creativity; e. collaboration; (Kemendikdasmen, 2025).

On the other hand, various studies criticize educational practices that are still dominated by cognitive orientation and test scores. At the same time, the cultivation of the heart, feelings, and sports has not been developed in a balanced manner. Character education in many schools tends to be ceremonial, partial, and not integrated into systematic school management, so its impact on changing student behavior is less significant and difficult to measure. In this context, the nature-based school model (nature school) has emerged as an

alternative that offers a contextual learning approach by utilizing nature as a living laboratory, allowing students to learn through direct experience in gardening, raising livestock, managing waste, observing ecosystems, and interacting with the surrounding community.

Sekolah Rimba Indonesia (SRI) and SD Sekolah Alam Pelopor (SAP) are two nature-based educational institutions that explicitly prioritize character, a love of nature, and environmental sustainability as key pillars of their graduate profiles, alongside meeting national academic standards. Both integrate PPK (Community Empowerment and Child Protection), the Pancasila Student Profile, and environmental education into their operational curriculum, daily learning, and school culture. However, the success of strengthening nature-based character education depends heavily on how school management plans, organizes, implements, and oversees character programs in a structured, sustainable, and data-driven manner.

Initial findings indicate that the implementation of character education in many schools, including nature schools, is often not fully managed as a complete managerial system. Planning is not supported by adequate context analysis, the organization of character programs lacks a specific structure, implementation varies among teachers, and character assessments do not use consistent standardized instruments. This creates a gap between the ideals of the national PPK policy and the Pancasila Student Profile and field practice, particularly regarding the ability to produce graduates who are both strong in character and academically competent. However, the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education is encouraging nature schools to become a model for quality alternative education. As the Minister of Primary and Secondary Education (Mendikdasmen), Abdul Mu'ti, in a press release Number: 566/ sipers/A6/IX/2025 during a visit to the Indonesian Nature School in Pekanbaru. Friday, September 19, 2025, stated that "Nature schools are unique, creative, and close to real life educational services. This model must remain high quality, relevant, and meet community expectations. Education is not just about buildings, but also the process of building children's character into a healthy, intelligent, and characterful generation" (Kemendikdasmen, 2025).

Published research on the management of strengthening character education in nature-based elementary schools to achieve quality education is still minimal, and no research is the same as this one. Researchers have studied Character Education in Tahfidz Nature Schools (Maulida, 2021), Character Building for Environmental Care through Islamic Religious Education in Nature Schools (Kholilah, 2021), Implementation of the Nature School Curriculum in Building Student Character Education in Nature Schools (Kristina et al., 2021), and Implementation of *Total Quality Education (TQI). Management (TQM)* in Education in Nature-Based Schools (Muslimah et al., 2025). However, research on the Management of Strengthening Student Character Education in Nature-Based Schools in realizing this quality education has not been conducted, especially in publications over the past 10 years, namely in the period 2015 to 2025.

Based on this background, this study focuses on "Management of Strengthening Nature-Based Student Character Education in Improving Graduate Quality" with a descriptive study at Sekolah Rimba Indonesia and SD Sekolah Alam Pelopor. The objectives of character education include developing wise thinking, internalizing attitudes, and applying them in good behavior (Alfian et al., 2025). This study carries the POAC management function of George F. Terry (Terry, George R. and Rue, 2021), which is directed to answer questions about management functions in planning, organizing, implementing, and monitoring, and can be

applied in strengthening nature-based character education and can realize quality education in supporting and achieving SDG 4. The objectives of this study include being able to contribute theoretically and practically to the development of a management model for strengthening character education in schools throughout Indonesia, due to the urgency of research on student character education, so that it is easier to implement in schools, so that the achievement of goals will be easier to realize, especially in realizing quality education in the current digitalization era. Hence, researchers need to create and continue this research in a more beneficial direction according to current developments.

2. METHODS

This study used a qualitative approach with descriptive methods. This design was chosen to examine in-depth the management process of strengthening character education in a real-life context at Sekolah Rimba Indonesia and SD Sekolah Alam Pelopor. The qualitative approach allows researchers to understand the meaning, experiences, and perceptions of education practitioners regarding the implementation of nature-based character programs in supporting SDGs4 for quality education. The scope or object of this research is related to the management of strengthening character education in nature-based elementary schools, through management using POAC management functions, which consist of *planning, organizing, actuating, and controlling* (Terry et al., 2021).

The main materials and tools in this research are qualitative research; the main instrument or tool is the researcher himself (*human instrument*), who is assisted by in-depth interview guidelines, observation sheets for learning activities and school culture, documentation study guides, and research support tools, which include writing tools, voice/video recorders, *mobile phones, and iPad* cameras for documentation.

This research was conducted at two nature-based elementary school locations in the Bandung area of West Java Province, Indonesia, namely at the Indonesian Forest School (SRI) and the Pioneer Nature School Elementary School (SAP). Data collection techniques include three techniques, namely through observation, interviews and document studies: (1) observation of the implementation of nature-based learning activities, project activities, daily habits, and school culture; (2) in-depth interviews with school principals, foundation heads, teachers, education staff, and related *stakeholders* to explore planning, organizing, implementation, supervision, constraints, and solutions to character programs; (3) documentation studies of curriculum documents, annual programs, semester programs, lesson plans/teaching modules, PPK and P5 programs, activity reports, character assessment instruments, as well as student work portfolios and project documentation.

Informants (data sources) at the two elementary schools in this study included school principals, foundation leaders, teachers, education staff, parents, students, committee members, and stakeholders. Data sources were selected based on the informants' involvement and knowledge of nature-based character education management. Operational Definition: The variables that are the focus of this qualitative research include management functions according to George R. Terry, namely: first, planning, *by* determining priority character values and integrating them into the curriculum and nature-based school programs. Second, organizing, *by* structuring tasks and cooperative relationships between personnel in managing character programs. Third, implementation (*Actuating*), namely the realization of programs through an *experiential learning* approach and the use of nature as a living laboratory. Fourth, supervision (*Controlling*),

namely by assessing and evaluating student character development through attitude journals, portfolios, and daily observations to support SDG 4 of quality education.

Data analysis used the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (Miles et al., 2020), which includes data reduction, data presentation, and repeated drawing and verification of conclusions until a consistent pattern of findings was obtained. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources (principals, teachers, foundations, parents) and triangulation of methods (interviews, observation, documentation), as well as peer review and confirmation of findings with key informants (*member checks*).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Planning for Strengthening Character Education in Nature-Based Elementary Schools

Management planning for strengthening nature-based character education at the Elementary School level is based on nature schools. Schools carry out this nature-based character education strengthening planning by integrating character values into curriculum documents, school programs, and learning activities. In nature-based schools, planning begins with determining priority character values such as responsibility, environmental awareness, cooperation, and independence, which are then translated into programs such as Rimba Class, gardening, water conservation, waste banks, thematic camping, and social projects in surrounding villages. These programs are integrated into prota, promes, RPP, and teaching modules, so that nature is present as part of the learning plan, not just an additional activity.

The planning of a nature-based character education program in schools refers to the Independent Curriculum and Learning Objectives, combined with nature projects (agriculture, animal husbandry, entrepreneurship) and the instilling of Islamic values, such as a food security program that encourages students to plant, care for, and manage crops as a means of learning across subjects and character. However, the analysis shows that a systematic SWOT analysis does not fully support the planning; planning focuses more on setting programs and objectives without comprehensive mapping of obstacles and long-term anticipation strategies.

The planning for strengthening nature-based character education in nature-based elementary schools, conducted at this school, demonstrates the integration of character values into the school curriculum and programs. This finding aligns with recent research, which confirms that in implementing the Independent Curriculum, character strengthening must be systematically designed through needs identification, integration into the curriculum, and the involvement of all school stakeholders. Curriculum development in elementary schools is crucial for enhancing character education (Aluf, 2024).

The first step implemented by the nature-based school is Terry's management function, which begins with planning, which is the initial function in management, because if the planning is good, then other management functions will be optimal. This matter regarding planning is in line with Hasibuan, who said, "Planning is a basic (fundamental) function of management, because organizing, staffing, directing, and controlling must also be planned (Hasibuan et al., 2018). This matter regarding planning is also in accordance with the Word of Allah SWT in the Al- Quran surah Al-Hasyr Verse 18 (Al-Quran, 2025).

Legally, this planning is also in accordance with the direction of national policy as stated in the Minister of Elementary and Secondary Education Regulation No. 10 of 2025 concerning Graduate Competency Standards (Kemendikdasmen, 2025), which emphasizes the importance of character dimensions such as faith, collaboration, creativity, and critical reasoning as the main educational achievements. This reinforces that character education planning is not only programmatic, but also a national policy mandate that must be integrated

into the curriculum. These Islamic values contribute to the formation of students' spiritual, social, and ecological character, which is in line with the principles of Islamic character education, SDG 4, good habits, and inclusive and sustainable education promoted by SDG 4 (Muhajang et al, 2026).

Based on the explanation above, it can be said that both schools have carefully planned their nature-based character education programs. This careful planning for integrating environmental education is a manifestation of SDG target 4.7, which emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2021).

3.2 Organizing the Strengthening of Character Education in Elementary Schools Based on Nature Schools

The organization of nature-based character education reinforcement in both schools is implemented through existing formal structures, although they do not yet have a dedicated, explicit character program unit. In nature-based schools, the roles of the principal, vice principal for curriculum, vice principal for student affairs, infrastructure coordinator, and teachers are complemented by a small nature-based character strengthening team, such as a garden coordinator and environmental project coordinator. In these nature-based schools, the organization is carried out through the Kober–TK–SD–TPA ecosystem under one foundation, so that character education takes place continuously from an early age, with the KPK formula (exemplary, habituation, agreement) involving the entire school community. The results of this study indicate that the organization of the character program is still attached to the general school structure and does not yet have a dedicated. This is in line with recent research which states that effective character education management requires a holistic and integrated approach that covers cognitive, affective, social, and spiritual aspects as a whole (Aziz et al., 2025).

Theoretically, effective organization requires a clear task structure, efficient working relationships, and role satisfaction. The results of this study indicate that even though the organization of the character program is already underway, some character tasks are still blended with other tasks, resulting in a lack of focus and identity for the character unit, potentially leading to role fatigue. This condition indicates the need to establish a specific organizational structure for nature-based character education programs to strengthen program accountability and sustainability.

In terms of management function, the organization is implemented by involving the collaboration of human resources in both elementary schools, in accordance with Mulyono, that "this organization is by establishing cooperative relationships between personnel in carrying out tasks, in achieving goals" (Mulyono, 2017). Strengthened by Hanafiah et al., schools guarantee continuous quality development with professional management through integrated planning, organizing, implementing, and supervising, utilizing human resources and other sources (Hanafiah et al., 2019).

Similarly, regarding the importance of the role of school leaders, following other research, in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum policy, the principal's role as a manager is crucial in organizing character programs through coordination, task distribution, and strengthening school culture (Sofiana et al., 2025). This demonstrates the importance of creating a clear organizational structure for character education to optimize the effectiveness of character education programs. Thus, the findings of this study can reinforce the importance of establishing an organization within a character education strengthening team in schools specifically, to streamline performance according to the main duties and functions of each

individual, in facilitating the achievement of goals. This is part of modern, quality-based school governance to realize quality education.

3.3 Implementation of Strengthening Character Education in Nature-Based Elementary Schools

The implementation of character education strengthening programs in nature-based elementary schools relies heavily on experiential learning and nature-based learning approaches. In nature-based schools, activities such as Rimba Class, gardening, simple conservation, and social projects provide students with opportunities to learn directly from nature by planting, caring for, and observing plants, as well as engaging in social activities in their surroundings. Character values such as patience, discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and environmental awareness are cultivated through practice, not just through lectures. These practices and other practices are crucial for continued implementation in the current digital era. Handayani, in line with Handayani, stated that "moral education and practice in Salafi Islamic boarding schools remain unwavering amidst technological advances and developments" (Handayani et al., 2020). These nature-themed activities result in projects that are enjoyable and meaningful for students in addressing various life challenges.

In line with research by Ismi et al, "the implementation of quality projects or work programs with the concept of nature, as the main media and periodic evaluation to address the problems faced" (Muslimah et al., 2025). Likewise, other research has shown that implementing nature-based character education through experiential learning and project-based learning has proven effective in instilling character values.

This aligns with research showing that the Independent Curriculum provides real-world implementation through project activities (P5) oriented toward strengthening student character contextually (Ratu et al., 2023). Therefore, it can be said that the nature-based learning practices in this study are not only contextually relevant but also align with the modern learning paradigm that emphasizes learning by doing as an effort to achieve quality education.

Based on research findings, it can also be said that in nature-based schools, almost 90% of lower-class activities are carried out outdoors (saung, gazebo, garden, barn), while agricultural, livestock, and entrepreneurship projects become a means of learning across subjects and character, including the dimension of religiosity through prayer and exemplary stories of Muslim figures. The implementation of contextual learning through collaboration and real-life experiences fosters students' character in responsibility, independence, and social concern (Handayani Fitri, 2026). This experiential learning approach is also reinforced by 21st-century educational research trends that show that project-based learning and direct experience can significantly improve students' social, collaboration, and problem-solving skills (Yunis & Ginting, 2025).

However, some teachers still inconsistently integrate character values explicitly into lesson plans and learning steps; in some classes, character programs are still viewed as supplementary learning outside of class, rather than the core of the curriculum. This indicates that implementation is aligned with the concept of experience-based character education, but the degree of consistency among teachers varies. Qomar stated that "implementation is the realization of a plan to achieve goals, effectively and efficiently" (Qomar, 2018).

3.4 Supervision of Strengthening Character Education in Nature-Based Elementary Schools

Based on the research findings, monitoring and assessment of nature-based character education reinforcement in both schools were carried out through attitude journals, anecdotal notes, portfolios, and project documentation, as well as observations of students' daily behavior. In nature-based schools, character assessment is linked to the harmonization of heart, feeling, thinking, and physical development. Assessments emphasize the narrative of character development within the context of the Independent Curriculum Learning Objectives and the P5 project. However, the lack of a systematic standardized character assessment instrument and the limited involvement of the school committee and community in supervision mean that information on character development is not yet fully comprehensive or based on strong data. It can be said that the supervision and character assessment aspects in this study have not fully used standardized and participatory instruments. This finding is consistent with a recent study that showed that one of the main challenges in character education is the evaluation aspect, which is still subjective and not standardized nationally (Pujiono et al., 2025). Strengthening character education, the Independent Curriculum demands authentic assessment based on the process and student development, not just the result. Therefore, the development of a more comprehensive character assessment system is necessary, involving teachers, parents, and the community as part of the education ecosystem.

The results showed that both schools demonstrated a positive influence of character programs on graduate quality. SRI graduates were described as more independent, courageous, accustomed to working in teams, and environmentally conscious. In contrast, nature-based school graduates had a basic understanding of food security, concern for animals and the environment, a habit of working hard in nature, and the seeds of an entrepreneurial spirit. However, there were still variations in the consistency of academic discipline and independent learning, as well as the need to strengthen documentation of academic achievement to strengthen the image of nature schools in the public eye.

Supervision in these two elementary schools was carried out as Mujamil Qomar stated that "There are three things in supervision, namely planning, implementation, and objectives" (Qomar, 2018). Based on the explanation above, it can be said that the importance of managing character education through the application of management functions is to improve the quality of graduates, as the results of Fauzi Ali & Nuryani's research show that "schools realize the importance of implementing educational management to produce quality students" (Fauzi Ali & Nuryani, 2023). Proper management is crucial for achieving desired goals. Badrudin states that: "The lack of efforts to improve quality is caused by management not functioning properly." (Badrudin, 2016).

Overall, the findings of this study reinforce that the management of character education strengthening in nature-based elementary schools has high relevance to national education policy. Integration between management functions (POAC), experiential learning approaches, and regulatory support indicates that character education must be managed systematically, holistically, and sustainably. This emphasizes that the success of character education is not only determined by the program alone, but also by its management using management functions according to the steps. As a manifestation of the quality of educational management itself, as emphasized in various studies, the quality of education is influenced by the effectiveness of school management in managing the curriculum, learning, and evaluation in an integrated manner (Ratu et al., 2023).

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that multicultural learning based on surah Al-Hujurat, integrated into Pancasila Education through a deep learning approach, is capable of significantly increasing the tolerant attitudes of elementary school students. The integration of religious and ethical values through meaningful, reflective, and joyful learning experiences fosters an appreciation for diversity, awareness of justice, and inclusive behavior in social interactions. These results have implications for Indonesian education, particularly in the implementation of the Kurikulum Merdeka (Independent Curriculum) and religious moderation programs, while providing a foundation for developing instructional strategies that practically instill the values of tolerance in inclusive classrooms. The limitations of this research include the one-group pretest-posttest design and a sample size of 30. emphasize the necessity for further studies involving larger samples, longitudinal designs, and the exploration of other integrative pedagogical approaches. As a follow-up, educators may adopt value-based multicultural learning, policymakers can develop systematic curriculum guidelines, and researchers are encouraged to investigate the mechanisms of attitudinal change as well as the long-term impact of this approach.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirm that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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