

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO CHARACTER EDUCATION IN THE INDEPENDENT CURRICULUM ERA

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Abstract

Character education is an important pillar in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum to shape students with integrity, responsibility, and high empathy. One approach considered in line with this spirit is the humanistic approach, which positions students as active subjects in the learning process. This study aims to test the effectiveness of the humanistic approach in improving five indicators of student character: empathy, responsibility, independence, honesty, and cooperation. The research method used was quantitative with a quasi-experimental design of the non-equivalent control group design, involving 60 junior high school students from two different schools. Data analysis techniques used an independent t-test and effect size calculation. The results showed that the group learning with the humanistic approach experienced significant character improvement compared to the control group, with a significance value of $p = 0.000$ and an effect size of 1.52. The discussion shows that the humanistic approach is effective in creating a reflective, empathetic learning climate and encouraging the internalization of values. The conclusion of this study states that the humanistic approach is an appropriate strategy in strengthening character education, in line with the objectives of the Independent Curriculum.

Keywords: *humanistic approach, character education, independent curriculum*

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1. Introduction

Character education is an important foundation in shaping a generation with high integrity, ethics, and the ability to practice the values of Pancasila (Saliba, 2024; Suryadi & Mulyana, 2023). In Indonesia, the Independent Curriculum explicitly promotes character education by strengthening the Pancasila Student Profile, such as empathy, responsibility, independence, and global diversity (Kementerian Pendidikan Riset, dan Teknologi, 2025). A humanistic approach to education positions students as the primary subjects in the learning process.

The theories of (Maslow, 1970) and (Rogers, 1969) emphasize self-actualization, respect for individual dignity, and the creation of a supportive learning environment. (Kirschenbaum, 2000) also states that character education must be based on a reflective process of values clarification. Various studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of a humanistic approach in strengthening students' character. For example, the "Love Curriculum" project, which adopts a humanistic approach to Islamic education, has been reported to deepen the moral values of each individual (Qamariah & Anwar, 2025). Similar implementations of a humanistic approach in principal leadership have shown improvements in school climate and student character (Effendi, 2023). Furthermore, humanistic-based models in school management and Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning have also shown positive results in students' internalization of values (Siskin, 2024).

Systematic literature research from Scopus shows a shift in the focus of character—toward tolerance, sustainability values, and moral identity since the decade 2017–2021 (SLR Scopus, 2025). In Indonesia, publications related to humanism in education have shown a significant increase, including those explaining how humanism strengthens students' identities (History Islam, 2024). According to (Mariani & Widodo, 2024) in the Journal of Didaktika, humanist philosophical theory has been integrated into English language learning within the context of the Independent Curriculum.

Meanwhile, the P5 project in elementary schools was found to still be symbolic, due to teachers' low understanding of humanistic philosophy (Kementerian Pendidikan Riset, dan Teknologi, 2025). Practically, several initial quantitative studies have shown positive results. For example, research at MA NU Wahid Hasyim applied humanistic methods in the Explicit Instruction model for faith and morals; the results showed an improvement in students' moral character. However, the majority of these studies are qualitative or single-case studies. Systematic quantitative implementation within the context of the Independent Curriculum remains rare.

Several previous studies have demonstrated that a humanistic approach to education significantly contributes to student character development. For example, Effendi et al. (2023) in the journal SINTA 2 found that a principal's humanistic leadership style contributes to the creation of a school culture that supports character values. Another study by Qamariah and Anwar (2022) showed that implementing a humanistic approach in Islamic Religious Education (IS) learning can improve students' understanding of moral values and empathy. A study by Mariani et al. (2023) in the Journal of Didaktika also reviewed the integration of a humanistic approach into English learning in secondary schools, with positive results for student emotional engagement. Furthermore, research by Suryadi and Mulyana (2023) revealed that the use of humanistic-based learning methods can strengthen the affective dimensions of student character, such as caring and honesty. However, most of these studies focus on descriptive or qualitative aspects; few have tested the effectiveness of this approach quantitatively through experimental methods in the context of the Independent Curriculum.

Based on existing literature, several gaps remain in the study of the humanistic approach to character education. First, most previous studies have not quantitatively and comparatively measured the effectiveness of the humanistic approach, particularly using quasi-experimental designs to compare classes with a humanistic approach and conventional classes. Second, the research subjects generally focus on the role of principals or religious education teachers, resulting in few studies specifically examining the role of general subject teachers in implementing this approach.

Third, although the Independent Curriculum emphasizes character formation through differentiated and contextualized learning, empirical studies directly evaluating the relationship between the humanistic approach and the achievement of the Pancasila Student Profile values are still very limited. Moreover, in the context of implementing the Independent Curriculum, the humanistic approach is often not fully understood and consistently integrated by teachers due to a lack of training and technical guidance (Kementerian Pendidikan Riset, dan Teknologi, 2025; Siskin, 2024).

This research offers novel contributions in three main respects. First, it uses a quantitative approach with a quasi-experimental design, allowing for objective and measurable measurement of the influence of a humanistic approach on character formation. Second, it specifically examines five key character dimensions (empathy, responsibility, independence, honesty, and cooperation) formulated from the Pancasila Student Profile indicators, using a valid and reliable instrument developed for the learning context of the Independent Curriculum era. Third, this research not only fills an existing methodological gap but also provides a model for humanistic learning practices that teachers can directly adopt in their daily teaching processes.

Thus, this research has innovative value, both theoretically in supporting the development of humanism-based character education literature, and practically in supporting the successful implementation of the Independent Curriculum, which is oriented towards the

holistic development of learners. Based on the foregoing, it can be seen that the purpose of this study is to empirically test the effectiveness of a humanistic approach in improving character education in junior high school students within the context of the Independent Curriculum implementation.

2. Method

This study used a quantitative approach with a quasi-experimental design of the non-equivalent control group design. This design was chosen because the researcher could not randomly assign subjects to the experimental and control groups, but could still compare the effects of certain treatments. The experimental group was given treatment in the form of the application of a humanistic approach to learning, while the control group was given learning with a conventional approach. The study was conducted for three months, namely from February to April 2025, in the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The research location was at two public junior high schools that had implemented the Merdeka Curriculum comprehensively, each located in Yogyakarta City and Sleman Regency, Yogyakarta Special Region Province. School selection was carried out using a purposive sampling technique based on the following criteria: (1) implementing the Merdeka Curriculum, (2) having a character strengthening program, and (3) being willing to participate in the research.

In this study, the variables used consist of two types, namely independent variables and dependent variables. The independent variable (X) is the humanistic learning approach, namely an approach that emphasizes recognition of individual potential, freedom of expression, and positive relationships between teachers and students in the learning process. Meanwhile, the dependent variable (Y) is student character education, which is measured through five main indicators adapted to the dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile, namely: empathy, responsibility, independence, honesty, and cooperation. Each of these indicators represents the success of character learning to be achieved through the application of the humanistic approach in the context of the Independent Curriculum.

Data collection was carried out using a Likert scale questionnaire instrument (scale 1–5), which was developed based on five indicators of student character according to the Pancasila Student Profile. This instrument consists of 25 statements (each indicator consists of 5 items). Content validity was tested through expert judgment by three education experts, while empirical validity and reliability tests were conducted through instrument trials outside the research subjects. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with a value of ≥ 0.70 as the minimum limit for internal consistency. In addition to the questionnaire, classroom observations and documentation were also used as supporting data to ensure that the humanistic approach was truly implemented in the experimental group. Observations focused on teacher behavior and student participation during the learning process.

The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent sample t-tests with the help of SPSS version 25 software. The t-test was used to test whether there was a significant difference between the character scores of students in the experimental and control groups. Before the t-test was conducted, a normality and homogeneity assumption test was first conducted. The significance level used in this study was $\alpha = 0.05$. The following is the research design carried out in this study;

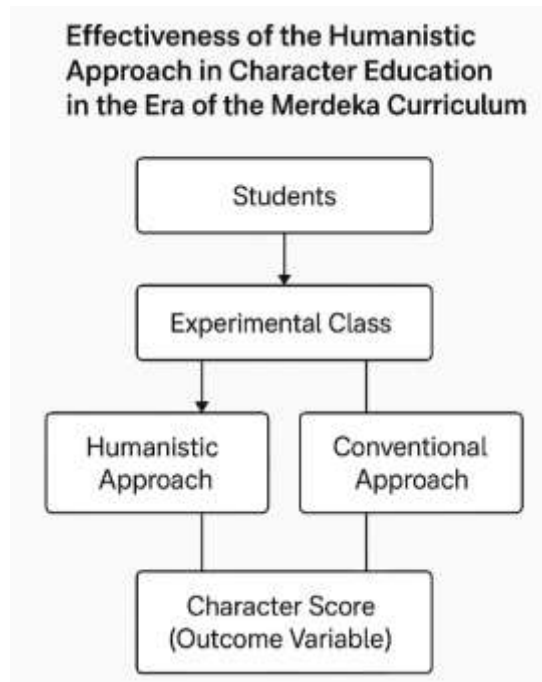


Figure 1. Research Method Design

3. Results and Discussion

The improvement of students' character education was analyzed based on the results of the pre-test and post-test, this was done through a normality test on the gain score data. This normality test is the initial stage before testing the main hypothesis, which aims to ensure that the normal distribution assumption is met as a prerequisite for using parametric analysis. The test was conducted using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov method using the IBM SPSS Statistics application version 20. The decision-making criteria were based on the significance value (Sig.), where the data is categorized as normally distributed if the value exceeds the threshold of 0.05. If this requirement is met, the data is declared suitable for further analysis using the Independent Sample T-Test. The results of the normality test are presented in the following table:

Table 1. Normality Test Results

Variables		Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Sig.	Conclusion
Improving Character Education	Pretest	0.844	0.475	Normally Distributed
	Posttest	1,035	0.234	Normally Distributed

As a result of the test, the normality test table presented shows that the null hypothesis (Ho) cannot be rejected. The significance value for the experimental group was 0.475, while the control group recorded a value of 0.234. Both values exceed the 0.05 threshold, indicating that the data from both groups follow a normal distribution. Thus, the basic assumptions for using parametric analysis have been met.

Homogeneity Test Results

The homogeneity test was conducted to identify the similarity of variance between the two groups involved in the study. This analysis aims to ensure that both groups have comparable data dispersion characteristics, thus allowing for valid parametric tests. The homogeneity test was conducted through the Levene's Test procedure using IBM SPSS

Statistics software version 20. The decision-making criteria were based on the significance value, where the variance between groups can be homogeneous if the value exceeds 0.05. The results of the homogeneity test are presented in the following section:

Table 2. Results of Homogeneity Test

Variables	Class		Levene statistic	Sig.	Conclusion
Improving Character Education	Control and Experiment	Pretest	0.152	0.698	Homogeneous
		Posttest	2,070	0.157	

The homogeneity test results table indicates that both the experimental and control groups produced significance values above 0.05. This finding reflects the homogeneity of the variance between the two groups, thus meeting the assumption of equality of variance in the parametric analysis.

Independent Sample T-Test Results and Effect Size

Once the prerequisite analysis testing is complete, the hypothesis is then tested using parametric statistics (Dul et al., 2020). This is done because the experimental and control class data are normally distributed and homogeneous.

The formulation of the hypothesis in this study is as follows:

H_0 (Null hypothesis): There is no significant difference between the character education of students who take part in learning with a humanistic approach and students who take part in learning with a conventional approach.

H_a (Alternative hypothesis): There is a significant difference between the character education of students who follow learning with a humanistic approach and students who follow learning with a conventional approach.

The following are the results of the analysis that has been carried out;

Table 4. Results of the Independent Sample T-Test Data on Improving Critical Thinking Skills

		<i>Independent Samples Test</i>						
		<i>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</i>		<i>t-test for Equality of Means</i>				
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Standard Error Difference
Character building	<i>Equal variances assumed</i>	1,266	0.266	-5,027	46	0,000	-,19458	0.03871
	<i>Equal variances not assumed</i>			-5,027	43,988	0,000	-,19458	0.03871

Based on the analysis results using the Independent Sample T-Test, the significance result of p (sig. 2-tailed) was 0.000, which is below the significance limit of 0.05. From these

results, the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_a) is accepted. This shows that there is a significant difference between the character education of students who follow learning with a humanistic approach and students who follow learning with a conventional approach.

The next step is to calculate the effect size after conducting an independent sample t-test. The effect size calculation is used to determine the quantitative value of an influence or effect that occurs after a treatment is administered. Table 19 shows the results of the calculation of the impact size on students' critical thinking skills.

Table 5. Effect Size Test Results for Character Education Improvement Data

Xt	Xc	Spooeted	d (Effect Size)
0.48	0.28	0.131255	1.523755

Based on the calculation results using the effect size test, the d value was obtained as 1.523755. According to the Cohen's d interpretation criteria, this value is included in the high criteria.

The Effectiveness of the Humanistic Approach to Character Education in the Independent Curriculum Era

The results of this study indicate that the humanistic approach significantly influences the improvement of students' character education in the Merdeka Curriculum era. This finding is demonstrated through the results of the Independent Sample T-Test statistic, where a significance value (p) of 0.000 (<0.05) indicates a significant difference between the experimental group receiving learning with a humanistic approach and the control group receiving conventional learning. Furthermore, the effect size value of 1.523 also indicates a very strong influence.

This finding aligns with the theories of Maslow (1970) and Rogers (1969), which state that learning that humanizes humans will facilitate the optimal development of affective aspects, including the values of empathy, responsibility, and honesty. Character education through a humanistic approach emphasizes the importance of warm teacher-student relationships, unconditional acceptance, and student self-empowerment to understand and internalize values reflectively. In the context of the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum which upholds the principles of differentiation and meaningful learning, this approach has proven relevant and effective. According to Kirschenbaum (2000), humanistic education not only transfers knowledge but also facilitates the development of personal potential and moral values. The results of this study corroborate the findings of Suryadi and Mulyana (2023), who showed that a humanistic-based pedagogical approach can increase students' empathy and emotional engagement in the learning process.

During field observations, teachers in the experimental group demonstrated facilitative behaviors, such as providing space for students to engage in open discussions, responding with empathy, and encouraging reflection on personal experiences. This aligns with the Rogersian approach, which suggests that teachers should be present as "authentic and non-judgmental guides" (Rogers, 1969). This conducive learning environment allows students to be more open in expressing their opinions, listening to their peers, and taking responsibility for their own behavior, ultimately strengthening aspects of character. In line with these results, Qamariah and Anwar (2022) in their research in Islamic education environments showed that the application of humanistic values in Islamic Religious Education learning had a positive impact on students' understanding of moral values and empathy. A similar finding was expressed by Mariani et al. (2023) in their study of humanistic integration in English learning at the junior high school level, which increased students' moral awareness and active engagement in learning. Although the subject contexts differ, humanistic principles remain consistent in supporting students' character development.

In this study, the five character indicators measured empathy, responsibility, independence, honesty, and cooperation showed significant increases in scores in the experimental group. This finding aligns with a study by (Salsabila & Hartono, 2023) which

stated that learning that places students at the center of activities encourages active engagement and internalization of values. Furthermore, research by (Wibowo, 2022) found that implementing authentic, values-based projects naturally fosters students' sense of responsibility within learning groups, a key element of a humanistic approach. More deeply, increased empathy among students in the experimental group was a significant achievement. Empathy is the foundation of prosocial behavior and tolerance. In the context of character education in the Merdeka Curriculum era, which demands dimensions of diversity and collaboration, the ability to empathize is vital (Gunawan, 2021). A learning environment that encourages students to understand others' feelings and refrain from hasty judgment is a key characteristic of a successful humanistic approach.

On the other hand, improvements in honesty and responsibility were also quite significant. According to (Fatimah, 2023), honesty as a moral value will only emerge if students feel valued, not pressured, and given the opportunity to reflect on their actions personally. Teachers who act as companions rather than sole authorities will be more effective in fostering internal awareness of values. This is evident in the documentation and observations in the experimental class, where students tended to openly express their opinions and mistakes without fear. The value of independence that emerges from learning with a humanistic approach is also an important aspect that aligns with the dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile. In the experimental group, students demonstrated initiative in completing assignments without over-reliance on the teacher. Research by (Rahmawati, 2024) states that a personal values-based learning model enables students to build a stronger learning identity and not simply become objects of instruction.

Meanwhile, the increased value of cooperation is evident in changes in classroom dynamics. In a humanistic approach, collaborative activities are carried out not merely to complete assignments, but also as a means of building trust, understanding differences, and learning from diverse characters. (Arifin, 2022) stated that collaborative learning based on humanistic values can reduce conflict between students and increase social cohesion in the classroom. However, the effectiveness of the humanistic approach is not without implementation challenges. Several teachers outside the experimental group admitted to having difficulty adopting this approach due to limited training, limited time, and high administrative burdens. Nur Siskin (2024) in his study also found that teachers' poor conceptual understanding of humanist philosophy resulted in implementation being merely ceremonial and not addressing aspects of character formation in depth. This suggests that systemic support such as professional training, reflective supervision, and integration into the curriculum is essential to ensure the sustainability of humanistic practices in learning.

Furthermore, the findings of this study support the findings of Effendi et al. (2023) regarding the crucial role of school leadership in creating a climate conducive to the development of a humanistic approach. In the school where this study was conducted, the principal's support for teacher experimentation was a key factor in its success, reinforcing previous findings that changing approaches requires not only teacher readiness but also institutional commitment. Theoretically, this study reinforces the position of the humanistic approach as an effective strategy in supporting the character dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile. Globally, this approach also aligns with 21st-century educational values, which demand non-cognitive skills such as collaboration, empathy, and social responsibility. Internationally, research by (Ryan & Deci, 2020) shows that a learning approach based on self-determination and human agency results in increased intrinsic motivation and more meaningful learning, which impacts sustainable character development.

In relation to the Independent Curriculum, the humanistic approach addresses the main challenge faced by teachers: how to shift the orientation of learning from content-centered to student-centered. Therefore, this study not only answers academic questions but also provides an alternative model of character learning that can be replicated and developed in other schools. Mariani et al. (2024) emphasized that one of the weaknesses in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum lies in teachers' unpreparedness to effectively facilitate students' personal dimensions, which can be addressed through this humanistic approach. When linked to contemporary learning theory, this approach

synergizes with the constructivist approach, where students are seen as builders of meaning, not passive recipients of information. Humanism and constructivism both position teachers as facilitators and learning as a social and personal process. In this context, the humanistic approach can be seen as a bridge between constructivist theory and the practice of character education in the field (Prasetyo, 2023; Yamin, 2023). Thus, this discussion confirms that the humanistic approach is empirically capable of significantly improving students' character education. In addition to demonstrating effectiveness in improving five key indicators of student character, this approach is also contextualized within the policy direction of the Independent Curriculum and has a strong theoretical foundation in progressive educational philosophy. However, its successful implementation requires adequate teacher training, institutional support, and systemic integration into education policy development at the educational unit level.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

Based on the results of data analysis and discussion, it can be concluded that the humanistic approach has proven effective in improving student character education at the junior high school level in the context of implementing the Independent Curriculum. This finding is evidenced by the results of the Independent Sample T-Test which showed a significant difference between the experimental and control groups, with a significance value (p) of 0.000 and an effect size of 1.52, which is included in the category of a large influence. The application of the humanistic approach that places students as active subjects, provides space for self-expression, value reflection, and empathetic interaction has been proven to be able to improve the five main indicators of character education, namely empathy, responsibility, independence, honesty, and cooperation. Thus, this approach is in line with and supports the success of the Independent Curriculum's objectives in shaping the Pancasila Student Profile in a more contextual and meaningful way. This research also reinforces the importance of transforming the learning paradigm from teacher-centered to learning that humanizes students.

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