



An Analysis of the Implementation of the Character Education Strengthening Policy in Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the implementation of Indonesia's Character Education Strengthening Policy in elementary schools, focusing on four interrelated dimensions: communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the research examined how schools in Kretek Subdistrict, Bantul Regency, operationalized the policy through daily practices and institutional mechanisms. The findings revealed that while the policy is normatively strong and conceptually comprehensive, its realization remains inconsistent due to fragmented communication, limited human and material resources, procedural educator dispositions, and weak bureaucratic structures. Despite these challenges, schools demonstrated growing awareness of character education as an integral aspect of moral and civic formation. The study contributes a cyclical operational model—*diagnose-act-reflect-recalibrate* that integrates pedagogical reform, participatory communication, and resource alignment as drivers of sustainable implementation. Theoretically, it advances understanding of policy coherence in moral education, while practically, it offers an adaptive framework for continuous improvement through measurable standards, localized innovation, and collective reflection.

Keywords:

character education;
policy implementation;
moral development;
school management;
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Introduction

Character education has been recognized as a central pillar in shaping the moral, ethical, and civic identity of Indonesian students. The Character Education Strengthening Program was designed to cultivate values rooted in *Pancasila*, religion, and Indonesian traditions, translating them into everyday practice within the nation, community, and family. These moral and ethical foundations are articulated through five interrelated core pillars: religiosity, nationalism, mutual cooperation, integrity, and independence. Religiosity embodies faith and devotion to God Almighty; nationalism prioritizes collective national interest; mutual cooperation promotes social solidarity; integrity nurtures personal trustworthiness; and independence fosters self-reliance and responsibility (Hendarman et al., 2017). The Character Education Strengthening Policy program further seeks to reconstruct perceptions, mindsets, and behaviors concerning religiosity, morality, and self-sufficiency (Dalmeri, 2014).

This policy framework aligns with Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017 on the Strengthening of Character Education, which envisions preparing Indonesian students as the "Golden Generation 2045," capable of upholding *Pancasila*-based values amidst the challenges of globalization. The regulation aims

to establish a national education platform where character education serves as the foundational dimension of learning, supported by public participation across formal, non-formal, and informal systems. It emphasizes Indonesia's cultural diversity while revitalizing the roles and competencies of teachers, education personnel, students, families, and communities in promoting holistic character development. In this sense, Character Education Strengthening Policy is not merely a pedagogical initiative but a comprehensive moral framework for nation-building.

Despite the normative strength of this policy, its implementation in elementary schools remains suboptimal. Persistent behavioral problems among students such as bullying (Borualogo et al., 2020), student brawls (Anggiono, 2017; Budiyanto, 2020), and sexual misconduct (Eviana, 2019) reflect gaps between policy ideals and school realities. The Ministry of Education and Culture acknowledges that character development outcomes have yet to meet expectations, as negative behaviors such as dishonesty, indiscipline, and lack of empathy remain prevalent (Directorate General of Early Childhood, Primary, and Secondary Education, 2020). Empirical data further reveal that the national character index among students averages only around 60 points, with nationalism scoring 74.26, religiosity 73.13, integrity 71.99, mutual cooperation 63.97, and independence 56.34 (Murtadlo et al., 2021). The 2021 Annual Report of the Indonesian Child Protection Commission recorded 5,953 cases of violence and violations against children, including physical and psychological abuse, sexual crimes, cyber exploitation, and neglect (Fitriana, 2022). These data affirm Megawangi's (2004) assertion that Indonesia continues to face a serious character crisis at both individual and institutional levels.

Scholarly evidence also reinforces the view that Indonesia is undergoing a character emergency. Studies report alarming declines in students' politeness, language use, and respect toward teachers and parents (Palungga & Marzuki, 2017), as well as behaviors inconsistent with the ethos of educated individuals (Soedarsono, 2013). Lickona's classic indicators of moral decline such as rising violence, vulgarity, peer pressure, sexual misconduct, substance abuse, dishonesty, selfishness, loss of patriotism, and moral apathy—remain visible in Indonesian schools (Winaryati, 2014). These behavioral shifts signify the erosion of civic virtues and moral intelligence, underscoring the urgent need to reposition character education as the soul of national education.

Furthermore, the weakening of perseverance, work ethic, empathy, and tolerance among students points to deeper sociocultural challenges. Evidence from elementary schools indicates reduced resilience and responsibility, as students tend to give up easily during assessments, engage in cheating, or neglect assigned tasks (Policy Research Center for Education and Culture, 2017). These issues illustrate that character empowerment efforts have not yet produced a measurable transformation in students' values and attitudes, despite various government and school-level initiatives (Budimansyah, 2010).

In line with these findings, the effectiveness of the Character Education Strengthening Policy as mandated by Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017 and Ministerial Regulation No. 20 of 2018 remains limited. Several studies report that elementary schools often lack a comprehensive design for character education, that the integration of life-skill-based values is incomplete, and that schools' vision and mission for character development are not optimally communicated among stakeholders (Akbar, 2018). Moreover, socialization activities related to Character Education Strengthening Policy are not fully understood by teachers, students, or parents (Listiwati et al., 2019), and many schools face managerial constraints in operationalizing Character Education Strengthening Policy systematically through clear planning, implementation, and evaluation mechanisms (Asrijanty & Hardiana, 2019). These challenges

underscore the importance of empirically assessing how elementary schools, as formal education institutions, implement the Character Education Strengthening policy within their organizational contexts. This study, therefore, aims to analyze the implementation of Character Education Strengthening Policy in elementary schools specifically focusing on the dimensions of communication, human and material resources, policy implementers' disposition, and bureaucratic structure. The findings are expected to provide a critical evaluation of policy realization in elementary schools within Kretek Subdistrict, Bantul Regency, and to contribute to the broader discourse on character education governance across Indonesia's educational system.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design aimed at portraying facts, characteristics, and relationships among phenomena in a factual, accurate, and systematic manner. The descriptive method seeks to depict and interpret research objects as they naturally occur, presenting data systematically based on facts to provide a comprehensive and objective understanding of the actual situation (Moleong, 2018). As noted by Sugiyono (2014), descriptive research emphasizes observation and natural settings to discover theories rather than to test them.

Within the context of implementing the Character Education Strengthening Policy in elementary schools, this study examined two analytical dimensions: an objective dimension, which focuses on policy and regulatory analysis, and a subjective dimension, which explores the accountability and responsiveness of policy implementers including principals, teachers, and school committee members in Kretek Subdistrict, Bantul Regency. The analysis concentrated on four key aspects of policy implementation: communication, human resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure.

A qualitative approach was adopted to provide a deeper interpretative understanding of policy implementation and its contextual dynamics. Qualitative research emphasizes meaning and interpretation rather than numerical measurement. It aims to comprehend participants' lived experiences holistically within their natural contexts (Moleong, 2018). As an exploratory form of inquiry, qualitative research commonly produces data in the form of narratives, cases, or descriptive accounts of specific phenomena. This approach was therefore appropriate for analyzing processes, evaluating implementation patterns, and interpreting emerging meanings from the data (Sugiyono, 2014).

The research was conducted across all elementary schools in Kretek Subdistrict, Bantul Regency, Special Region of Yogyakarta. The study's participants included school principals, teachers, and school committee members, selected based on their academic competence, technical capacity in educational management, and readiness to participate. This purposive inclusion ensured that participants possessed relevant experiential knowledge of character education implementation within their respective institutions. Data collection involved three complementary techniques: documentation, observation, and interviews. *Documentation* was used to gather data from official records, archives, and policy documents related to character education, *Observation* was conducted to corroborate data derived from direct school activities implementing Character Education Strengthening Policy, *Interviews*, both structured and unstructured, were carried out to obtain further insights and clarifications not captured during documentation or observation processes.

All collected data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis, which aimed to portray the examined phenomena in detail while identifying underlying patterns and meanings. Data analysis involved stages of data reduction, data display, interpretation, and conclusion drawing, allowing the researcher to construct a holistic understanding of character education policy implementation. To ensure validity and reliability, data triangulation was applied by cross-verifying findings from multiple sources and methods (Moleong, 2018; Sugiyono, 2014).

Overall, this methodological design provided sufficient rigor and transparency for evaluating the implementation process of the Character Education Strengthening Policy at the elementary level, while offering empirical and interpretive insights that can inform future educational policy evaluations in similar contexts.

Results and Discussion

The findings reaffirm that Indonesia's Character Education Strengthening Policy is a normatively sound and conceptually strong framework, yet its realization across elementary schools remains highly variable and often inconsistent. Anchored in Presidential Regulation No. 87/2017 and elaborated through Ministerial Regulation No. 20/2018, the policy aspires to form learners who embody the five national character pillars religiosity, nationalism, independence, cooperation, and integrity. Substantively, it envisions character education as a holistic human formation process, harmonizing is spiritual cultivation, emotional sensitivity, intellectual reasoning, and physical discipline. This harmonization is expected to emerge through daily habituation, cultural practices, and the integration of learning experiences among schools, families, and communities (Muzayanah & Widyastono, 2021). Schools have attempted to operationalize this integration across three overlapping planes: the curricular, reflected in lesson designs and assessment rubrics; the co-curricular, manifested in projects, assemblies, and service learning; and the extra-curricular, expressed through scouting, arts, and sports. Collectively, these dimensions influence attitudes, knowledge, and competencies echoing Hendarman et al. (2017) and reaffirmed by recent scholarship emphasizing that character education must permeate all aspects of schooling, not exist as a discrete moral subject (Lickona & Davidson, 2021; Berkowitz et al., 2022). Yet, while conceptually coherent, its practical enactment is fragile, constrained by the absence of measurable readiness indicators, sustained monitoring mechanisms, and clear accountability frameworks (Rahmawati et al., 2023).

In reality, four interdependent dimensions communication, resources, disposition, and bureaucratic structure jointly explain the gap between policy intention and implementation. Communication emerged as a critical hinge, linking the abstract language of policy to the daily routines of schools. In contexts where information flow is dialogical and continuous—through district-level policy briefings, translation workshops, mentoring cycles, and stakeholder feedback the alignment between vision and practice becomes stronger (Wardani & Anwar, 2022). However, most communication remains top-down, sporadic, and ceremonial. Socialization activities tend to occur once rather than being institutionalized as ongoing sense-making processes (Sukandar et al., 2021). Policy messages from district offices rarely accommodate local socio-cultural contexts, and few schools receive contextualized modules that reflect community wisdom or regional values. At the school level, communication is often administrative limited to compliance reporting rather than instructional and collaborative. The absence of structured stakeholder participation mechanisms such as parent forums, school committees, and

community councils—further weakens ownership, leaving character education perceived as an obligation rather than a shared moral enterprise (Wibowo et al., 2020).

Resource constraints further compound these challenges. Human, informational, financial, and infrastructural limitations are consistently reported as barriers in recent studies (Supriyanto et al., 2021; Nisa & Rohmah, 2022). Teachers have limited access to professional development on character pedagogy such as designing value-embedded learning tasks, facilitating moral dialogue, or conducting formative assessment of attitudes (Wulandari et al., 2023). Principals face administrative overload, leaving minimal time for instructional supervision (Budiarti & Santoso, 2020). Facilities are often inadequate: libraries that function as storage rooms, limited arts and sports areas, and a lack of reflective or worship spaces undermine the moral ecology of learning (Hendriani et al., 2021). Financially, the BOS program (School Operational Assistance) funds remain insufficient to sustain comprehensive character programs that include training, materials, and community outreach. Information resources are fragmented, teachers rarely have access to practical examples or validated rubrics translating abstract virtues into measurable learning behaviors (Utami et al., 2022). Consequently, pedagogical improvisation prevails, resulting in uneven quality and minimal coherence across schools.

Educator disposition the attitudinal and moral stance of teachers and leaders shows a supportive yet procedural orientation. Most educators endorse the policy's aims and seek to model virtues, but enactment frequently stops at compliance behaviors, such as holding flag ceremonies or adding "character" annotations to lesson plans. In contrast, schools cultivating peer learning cultures through lesson study, co-observation, and reflective dialogue tend to produce more autonomous, value-driven educators (Yuliani et al., 2023). When teachers internalize moral reflection as part of their professional identity, character education transcends formality, becoming an expression of vocation rather than obligation. This transformation from procedural compliance to reflective agency aligns with international findings emphasizing teachers' moral self-awareness as the heart of sustainable character education (Arthur, 2021; Kim & Lim, 2023).

Bureaucratic structures, however, remain the least developed yet most decisive in sustaining reform. High-level regulations exist, but operational frameworks such as Norms, Standards, Procedures, and Criteria and Minimum Service Standards are either incomplete or weakly institutionalized (Priyono & Rahman, 2021). The lack of delineated roles, defined timelines, and quality assurance cycles causes implementation to rely on individual initiative. Without clear standard operating procedures tied to measurable character outcomes, accountability diffuses and sustainability diminishes. Many schools duplicate efforts or neglect essential follow-ups due to the absence of integrated systems for monitoring, evaluation, and recognition (Nasir & Rohim, 2020).

These empirical findings align with the broader policy implementation literature, which posits that systemic dependency determines success: communication creates shared understanding, resources enable execution, disposition sustains commitment, and structure ensures continuity (Edwards III, 1980; Hill & Hupe, 2022). When any of these elements weaken, fidelity declines. Character education then becomes ritualistic performed rather than lived and its moral depth erodes. The challenge, therefore, is not a lack of moral intent but a deficit in system coherence that translates aspiration into everyday practice (Suharto, 2023).

Visualize the transformation from policy to practice, Figure 1 below outlines how educational inputs evolve through pedagogical processes and cultural shifts into long-term moral outcomes.

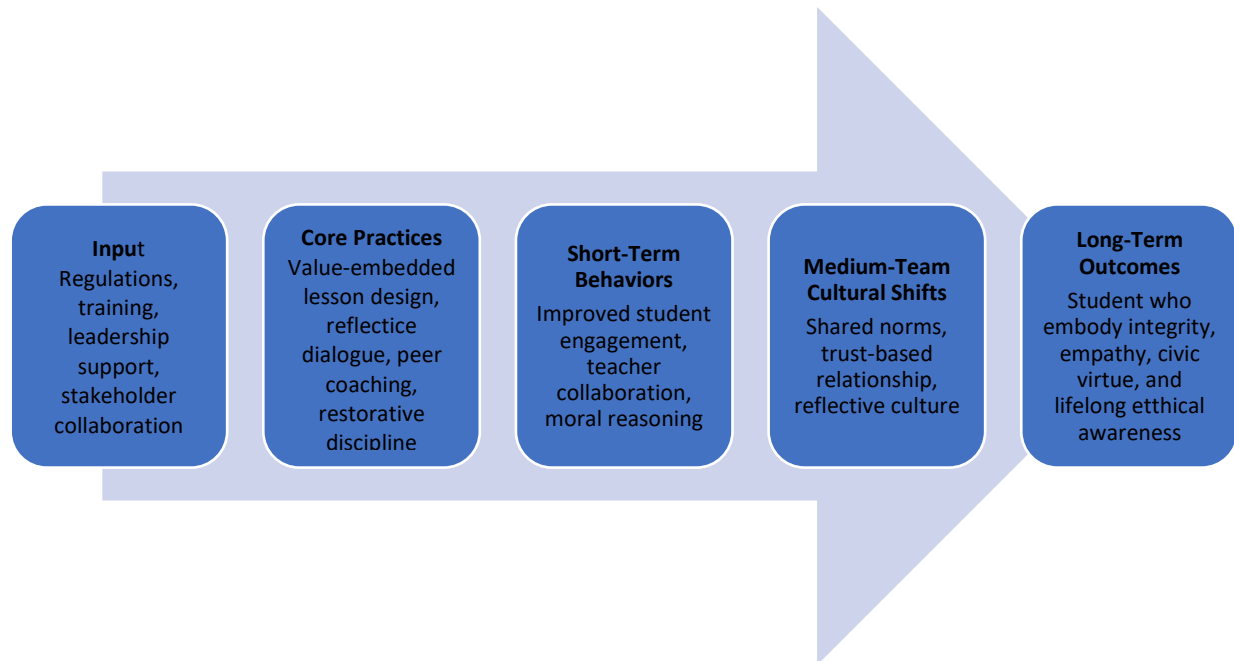


Figure 1. Policy-to-Practice Logic Model for Character Education
(Adapted from Hendarman et al., 2017; Muzayanah & Widyastono, 2021; Suharto, 2023.)

In this continuum, communication functions as both catalyst and regulator. When the flow between policymakers, school leaders, teachers, and communities forms a closed feedback system, implementation becomes adaptive and self-correcting (Rahmawati et al., 2023). This iterative process is captured in Figure 2.

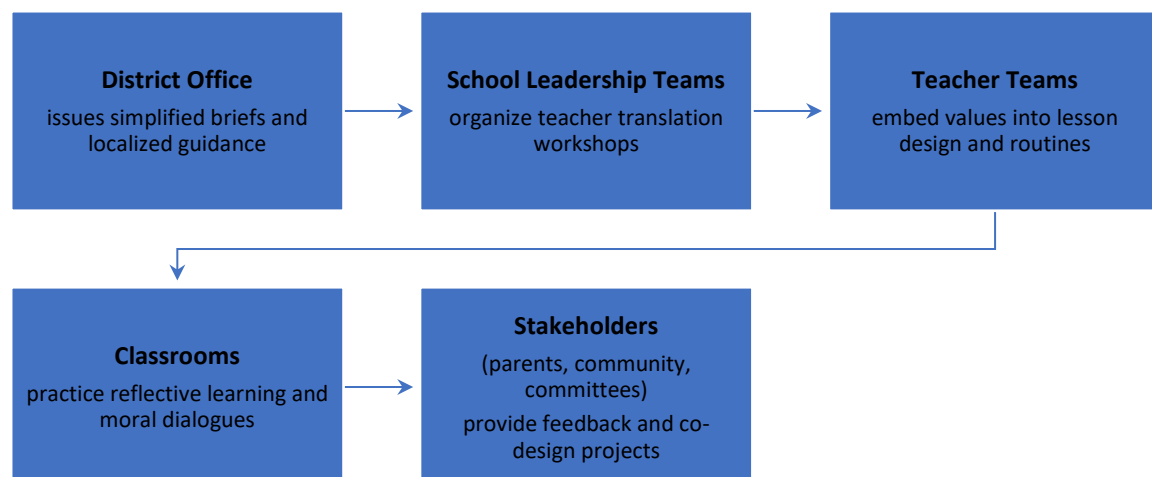


Figure 2. Communication Flow and Feedback Loops

Figure 2 illustrates how communication functions as an iterative feedback system ensuring that learning, leadership, and policy evolve through reflection and participation.

Operationalizing these flows requires a sustainable resource ecosystem. A practical blueprint is the Minimum Viable Package (MVP) for school-level implementation, ensuring that essential supports training, materials, micro-grants, environment, and time are embedded into the school's planning and budgeting.

Table 1. Minimum Viable Package (MVP) and Budget Map

Component	Description	Indicative Cost Range (IDR)	Funding Source
Professional Development	Three modules per term: embedding values, formative assessment, restorative practice	5–10 million	BOS program (School Operational Assistance), district grants
Materials Bank	Contextualized teaching scenarios, rubrics, and discussion protocols	2–4 million	BOS program (School Operational Assistance), donations
Micro-Grants	Service learning, arts, sports, and student leadership projects	3–5 million	Community sponsorships
Environmental Supports	Reflection boards, reading corners, quiet/prayer rooms	2–6 million	BOS program (School Operational Assistance), CSR programs
Time Protection	One hour weekly for collaborative learning	-	Administrative allocation

(Modified from Utami et al., 2022; Yuliani et al., 2023.)

To ensure accountability, Table 2 outlines indicator rubrics that map each of the five character pillars across classroom, school culture, and community loci, allowing continuous monitoring and formative evaluation.

Table 2. Pillar-by-Locus Indicator Rubrics

Pillar	Classroom Indicators	School Culture Indicators	Family–Community Indicators
Religiosity	Daily reflection and gratitude routines	Inclusive observance calendar	Family prayer and interfaith collaboration
Nationalism	Civic projects and heritage studies	Reflective flag assemblies	Community history programs
Independence	Goal-setting journals, inquiry-based learning	Student committees	Home responsibility tracking
Cooperation	Peer mentoring and group problem solving	Collaborative service initiatives	Parent–teacher volunteer groups`
Integrity	Honor codes, transparent grading	Ethical review panels	Family integrity pledges

(Synthesized from Nisa & Rohmah, 2022; Wulandari et al., 2023.)

When analyzed holistically, these findings imply that effective character education requires a cyclical operational model diagnose, act, reflect, recalibrate each quarter establishing measurable thresholds (e.g., ≥80% teachers conducting two value-embedded lessons per month; ≥1 student civic project per term). Such thresholds transform policy aspirations into actionable routines, transforming compliance into reflection, and reflection into institutional culture (Kim & Lim, 2023).

Ultimately, the strength of Indonesia’s character education policy lies not in its moral prescription but in its humanizing praxis. Schools must evolve into moral ecosystems where communication fosters meaning, resources sustain practice, dispositions enable agency, and structures guarantee coherence. When these converge, education ceases to be bureaucratic instruction and becomes the ethical architecture of civic life (Arthur, 2021; Berkowitz et al., 2022; Suharto, 2023). Character education, in this sense, is not a policy to be implemented but a moral journey to be lived—continuously cultivated through dialogue, reflection, and shared humanity.

The current implementation environment faces several limitations, including the immaturity of measurement instruments (the absence of validated rubrics and progress indicators), ecological variation (differences in school size, teacher stability, and community support), and policy overlap (multiple mandates operating simultaneously and competing for time and attention). Therefore, future research should prioritize the development of reliable evaluation instruments such as descriptive rubrics and inter-rater assessment protocols for the five character pillars design based studies to examine the most effective configurations of training and mentoring, and cost-efficiency analyses of MVP components to inform sustainable budget planning.

Overall, the evidence indicates that character education occupies a central conceptual position within the education system but remains peripheral in actual school practice. To position it at the heart of educational implementation, meaningful communication, adequate resources, proactive professional dispositions, and structured SOP/NSPK frameworks with measurable SPM thresholds are required. When these four prerequisites are systematically engineered and monitored through quarterly improvement cycles, schools will be better equipped to translate policy aspirations into sustainable daily practices genuinely shaping students' character, values, and national identity.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the implementation of Indonesia's Character Education Strengthening Policy, while conceptually comprehensive and normatively robust, continues to face systemic and contextual challenges at the school level. The policy's intent to cultivate religiosity, nationalism, independence, cooperation, and integrity has yet to be fully realized due to fragmented communication, limited resources, procedural educator dispositions, and underdeveloped bureaucratic structures. The findings confirm that character education's effectiveness depends not merely on moral exhortation but on coherent systems that translate values into practice. When communication becomes dialogical, resources are equitably distributed, professional dispositions evolve toward reflective agency, and structures institutionalize accountability, character education can transform from ceremonial compliance into a sustainable moral culture within schools.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to the literature on policy implementation and moral pedagogy by reaffirming that systemic alignment rather than isolated initiatives drives long-term educational change. The study advances the discourse by proposing a cyclical operational framework (*diagnose–act–reflect–recalibrate*) that integrates pedagogical transformation, participatory communication, and resource sustainability into a single continuum of practice. This conceptual contribution positions character education not as an adjunct to the curriculum but as the moral architecture of learning itself an integrative process that redefines the purpose of schooling in nurturing ethical citizenship and social cohesion. The model further reinforces recent perspectives (Arthur, 2021; Kim & Lim, 2023; Berkowitz et al., 2022) that effective character formation requires collective reflection, institutional learning, and culturally responsive adaptation rather than prescriptive mandates.

Practically, the study implies that the sustainability of character education depends on the establishment of reliable evaluation instruments, context-sensitive training designs, and efficient resource mapping. Schools and policymakers should institutionalize quarterly improvement cycles that incorporate descriptive rubrics, inter-rater assessments, and clear *SPM/NSPK* thresholds to ensure continuous monitoring and adaptive feedback. The Minimum Viable Package (MVP) offers a feasible blueprint to align financial, human, and environmental supports with moral objectives, while the Pillar-by-Locus Indicator Rubrics provide a measurable framework for tracking student development. In sum, the long-term impact of character education will be realized only when it becomes the living practice of the school where values are not taught as abstract doctrines but embodied through daily interactions, reflective teaching, and shared commitment to human dignity and civic virtue.

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