ISSN 3123-2205 (Electronic)

Jurnal Teknologi Pendidikan dan Desain Media Pembelajaran

Volume 1 Number 1 (2025)
pp.34-37

Article/Review/Book Review

Character Education as the Central Purpose of Schooling in the Twenty-First Century

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Keywords:
Character Education, Moral Development, Schooling, Ethics, Global Citizenship, Prosocial Behavior

ABSTRACT

In the era of rapid globalization and unprecedented socio-technological change, educational systems worldwide are increasingly challenged to prepare students not only for academic success but also for ethical and civic life. Traditional schooling paradigms that emphasize cognitive outcomes and standardized performance metrics risk marginalizing the moral and character development of learners, leading to concerns about ethical disengagement, social fragmentation, and declining civic participation. Character education — the intentional cultivation of virtues such as integrity, empathy, responsibility, and respect — has emerged in international scholarship as a foundational element of comprehensive schooling. This study synthesizes evidence from 35 peer-reviewed international journals to examine the theoretical, empirical, and practical dimensions of character education as a central purpose of schooling in the twenty-first century. The literature demonstrates that character education enhances moral reasoning, prosocial behavior, school climate, emotional well-being, academic engagement, and civic responsibility. Furthermore, effective character education is associated with whole-school approaches that integrate ethical reflection into curriculum, pedagogy, and school culture. This article also identifies persistent challenges, including definitional ambiguity, cultural diversity, and assessment complexities, and discusses implications for policy and practice. In conclusion, character education should be repositioned from a supplementary program to a core mission of schooling, pivotal for nurturing morally grounded and socially engaged individuals capable of contributing constructively to democratic societies. Recommendations are offered for future research, teacher preparation, and educational policy frameworks aimed at sustaining character development within contemporary educational ecosystems

Introduction

Education has historically been conceptualized as a moral as well as intellectual endeavor. Classical thinkers such as Aristotle argued that education ought to cultivate virtue, claiming that intellectual illumination without moral character could be both incomplete and potentially harmful to society (Kristjánsson, 2015). In modern times, educational philosophers like John Dewey reiterated this view, positing that schools serve as democratic spaces where ethical growth and social responsibility are cultivated alongside academic competence (Dewey, 1916). Despite such long-standing philosophical foundations, contemporary schooling has often privileged measurable cognitive outcomes, standardized testing, and economic productivity over moral cultivation (Biesta, 2010). The resulting imbalance has raised urgent questions about the broader aims of education in the twenty-first century, particularly as societies confront complex ethical challenges including digital misinformation, social polarization, environmental degradation, and inequities in access to opportunities.

Character education has emerged as a significant focus within this broader reframing of educational purpose. Defined as intentional efforts to cultivate moral values, ethical reasoning, and virtuous behavior, character education emphasizes dispositions such as honesty, respect, justice, empathy, responsibility, and civic mindedness (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Nucci, Narvaez, & Krettenauer, 2014). While related to constructs such as social-emotional learning (SEL) and citizenship education, character education is distinguished by its explicit emphasis on normative ethical commitments and moral agency (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006). Moral psychology underscores that character involves the interaction of cognition, emotion, and behavior, necessitating pedagogies that engage students holistically in ethical understanding and action (Haidt, 2001; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Character education, therefore, challenges the notion that schools are neutral

transmitters of knowledge; rather, they are active moral communities shaping students' dispositions toward self and others (Campbell, 2008; Zins et al., 2004).

Empirical research supports the centrality of character development as an outcome of schooling. Meta-analyses of SEL and character programs indicate that students exposed to such approaches demonstrate improvements in prosocial behavior, emotional regulation, academic engagement, and reductions in conduct problems (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). Longitudinal evidence further connects character education with enhanced civic engagement and reduced risk behaviors (Yates & Youniss, 1996; Berkowitz & Althof, 2011). Positive school climate research reveals that environments emphasizing mutual respect and shared values foster both ethical behavior and academic motivation (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). These findings suggest that character education aligns with broader educational goals, rather than standing apart as an auxiliary objective.

Despite growing consensus about the benefits of character education, challenges persist. Definitions vary across cultural contexts, and debates continue over whether character education should emphasize universal virtues or culturally specific ethical frameworks (Banks, 2017). Measurement and assessment of character outcomes present further difficulties, given the complexity of moral constructs and the limitations of standardized instruments (Nucci, 2017). Moreover, implementation research highlights that character education is most effective when embedded systematically in school culture, policies, and pedagogical practices rather than delivered through isolated curricula (Berkowitz, Battistich, & Bier, 2008). Teachers play a pivotal role in this integration; their modeling, expectations, and relational practices significantly influence students' moral development (Sockett, 2012).

International policy frameworks such as the OECD Education 2030 and UNESCO Global Citizenship Education frameworks reinforce the need for ethical competencies alongside cognitive skills. The OECD identifies ethical understanding and intercultural competence as key competencies for future learners, advocating for curricula that reflect holistic developmental aims. UNESCO promotes ethical engagement, respect for diversity, and social responsibility as integral to education in a globalized world (UNESCO, 2015; OECD, 2018). These international directives affirm that character education should be central, not peripheral, to educational missions.

In this article, we synthesize findings from 35 international peer-reviewed studies to articulate a comprehensive understanding of character education as a central purpose of schooling. We examine theoretical foundations, empirical outcomes, implementation strategies, and policy implications to demonstrate how character education contributes to holistic student development and societal well-being. The analysis underscores that character education enriches academic learning and equips students to become morally grounded, socially engaged, and civically responsible individuals prepared for the ethical complexities of the twenty-first century.

Research Method

This study employs a systematic literature review to consolidate international research evidence on character education in schooling. A systematic review approach enables the integration of diverse research designs, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies, to identify consistent patterns in theoretical framing, outcomes, and practical strategies. Literature searches were conducted across major academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. Keywords used in the search included combinations of "character education," "moral education," "ethical development," "schooling," "school climate," "social-emotional learning," "prosocial behavior," and "civic engagement." Boolean operators (AND, OR) refined search results to capture comprehensive scholarly coverage.

The inclusion criteria required that studies be (a) published in peer-reviewed international journals between 1990 and 2024, (b) written in English, and (c) explicitly address aspects of character education theory, implementation, or outcomes in formal educational settings. Studies focusing exclusively on adult education, workplace ethics outside formal schooling, or unrelated constructs without clear links to character outcomes were excluded. The initial search yielded over 450 publications. After removing duplicates and screening abstracts for relevance, 98 full-text articles were assessed. Of these, 35 articles met all inclusion criteria and were selected for detailed analysis, ensuring representation of multiple research traditions and geographic contexts.

Data extraction involved cataloging each article's authors, publication year, journal, research design, sample characteristics, theoretical framework, key findings, and educational implications. The synthesis process employed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to character conceptualization, documented outcomes, implementation strategies, and challenges. Particular emphasis was placed on studies with rigorous methodological designs, including randomized controlled trials, longitudinal studies, and systematic reviews/meta-analyses. Quality appraisal criteria included transparency of reporting, validity of measures, and coherence between evidence and conclusions. The review acknowledges limitations due to reliance on English-language publications and potential publication bias favoring positive findings.

Results and Conclusion

The 35 included studies converge on several key findings regarding the role of character education in schooling. First, character education is consistently associated with enhanced prosocial behavior and interpersonal competence. Research shows that students engaging in character-focused programs display increased empathy, cooperation, and conflict-resolution skills. For example, meta-analytic evidence indicates significant improvements in students' social relationships and behavior

across diverse settings (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). These prosocial outcomes are critical not only for individual well-being but also for fostering inclusive school communities.

Second, character education contributes positively to academic engagement and overall school climate. Studies reveal that schools emphasizing ethical values and caring relationships cultivate environments where students feel respected, supported, and motivated to learn. Positive school climate, characterized by trust and mutual respect, mediates connections between character development and academic engagement (Thapa et al., 2013). Such findings challenge the notion that academic and ethical aims are separate, instead highlighting their interdependence.

Third, character education supports emotional well-being and resilience. Research demonstrates that students exposed to moral and character education show reductions in conduct problems, enhanced emotional regulation, and greater psychological resilience. This aligns with theoretical models positing that moral competencies underpin adaptive functioning across life domains (Elias et al., 1997; Zins et al., 2004). Emotional competencies like self-awareness, empathy, and self-regulation are not only moral in orientation but also facilitate academic persistence and positive peer relations.

Fourth, character education enhances civic knowledge and responsible civic engagement. Programs integrating service-learning and community involvement provide students with meaningful opportunities to apply moral reflection in real-world contexts. Such experiences strengthen civic identity and commitment to the common good, which is particularly important in democratic societies facing declining youth participation (Yates & Youniss, 1996; Niemi & Junn, 1998). These outcomes affirm that character education extends beyond individual virtues to communal and societal responsibilities.

Fifth, studies highlight that whole-school approaches outperform isolated classrooms or curricular add-ons. Sustainable character development emerges when ethical values are embedded in school missions, policies, classroom interactions, leadership practices, and relationships with families and communities. Teachers play a central role as moral models, and professional development that equips educators with ethical awareness and reflective pedagogical strategies enhances program effectiveness (Sockett, 2012; Berkowitz et al., 2008). Whole-school models integrate character goals with academic standards, daily school life, and student voice, ensuring coherence between values and practice.

Despite these positive findings, challenges remain. Conceptual ambiguity about definitions and measurement of character outcomes complicates research and practice. While some frameworks emphasize universal virtues, others stress culturally contextual values, raising questions about cross-cultural generalizability (Banks, 2017). Moreover, assessment of character presents methodological difficulties due to the complex, multidimensional nature of moral constructs. Future research should prioritize development of culturally responsive, reliable assessment tools that capture moral reasoning, dispositions, and behavior across contexts.

Policy implications from this synthesis are clear: character education should be repositioned as a core mission of schooling rather than an optional supplement. International frameworks such as UNESCO Global Citizenship Education and OECD Education 2030 underscore the value of ethical understanding and intercultural competence as essential competencies for future learners (UNESCO, 2015; OECD, 2018). Aligning educational standards and assessment systems with these broader developmental aims can support coherent and sustained implementation of character education across diverse educational systems.

In conclusion, the literature demonstrates that character education enriches both moral and academic dimensions of student development. By integrating ethical reflection, relational practices, and community engagement into schooling, education systems can nurture well-rounded individuals equipped with the moral compass, social awareness, and civic commitment necessary for flourishing in an ethical, pluralistic world. Character education, therefore, is not an optional accessory to schooling but a foundational purpose that sustains ethical citizenship and societal well-being. Realizing this purpose requires intentional design, systemic support, and ongoing research to ensure that character education remains responsive to the evolving challenges of the twenty-first century.

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