

# Building Character Through Community: The Transformative Power of Social Activity-Based Education

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the effectiveness of social activity-based character education through a case study of involvement in the Rumah Belajar Ceria. The research approach used is qualitative with a case study design. Data collection techniques include interviews with three informants selected using a purposive sampling technique, as well as activity observations and documentation. The data analysis technique used in this study follows the Miles and Huberman model, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data analysis was carried out comprehensively and triangulation was carried out. The results of the study show that social activities in society significantly support character formation. This effectiveness is achieved when individuals meet several aspects, including an understanding of character values, active involvement in social activities, and tangible behavioral transformations. Community plays an important role in creating a collective learning environment that encourages character development such as empathy, responsibility, and cooperation. Intense communication and interaction in society serve as external factors that reinforce the internalization of these values. This research underscores the importance of social activities in character education, not only as a means of individual learning but also as a mechanism to strengthen social relationships in society.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by rapid social change and shifting cultural values, character education has become more urgent than ever. Today's young generation faces mounting pressures not only to excel intellectually but also to navigate complex moral dilemmas. Instances of deviant behavior are on the rise, respect for others is waning, and foundational national values are gradually fading. Without proper guidance, these challenges could lead to a generation disconnected from ethical principles and

social responsibilities. Thus, character education emerges as a crucial solution, shaping individuals who are not only knowledgeable but also grounded in integrity and compassion.

More than just an academic pursuit, character education fosters essential life values such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and the spirit of mutual cooperation. These qualities enable young individuals to build meaningful relationships, make ethical decisions, and contribute positively to their communities. When woven into educational systems, character education ensures that learning is not limited to textbooks but extends into everyday life, encouraging students to internalize moral values through real-world experiences. Ultimately, cultivating character in the younger generation is an investment in a more responsible, empathetic, and united society (Sopian, 2021).

The importance of character education has actually been realized for a long time, both globally and in Indonesia. The world sees character education as a way out of various social problems such as conflict, moral decadence, and lack of social concern (Agboola & Tsai, 2012; T. Ramadhani et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Indonesia through the National Long Term Development Plan (RPJP) 2005–2025 places character education as an important part of the development of the whole Indonesian human being, which is based on the values of Pancasila as the nation's identity (Henderi, 2020; Widodo, 2012).

However, the reality is not that simple. Although character education has been included in the national curriculum, its implementation still faces many obstacles. Not all schools are able to implement it comprehensively. There are still many families who have not been actively involved, the community has not been supportive, and the figures who should be role models are ignored. In fact, shaping character cannot be done by schools alone, but must be a shared responsibility. Without solid cooperation between home, school, and the surrounding environment, character education will be difficult to become real in the daily lives of our children (Dewantara, 2004; Lickona, 1991).

The social activity based approach emerged as an effective method of character building, providing hands on experience that internalized moral values such as empathy, responsibility, and cooperation. Social activities, such as involvement in society, strengthen students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects (Ramadhani et al., 2024). Previous research has focused more on formal approaches in schools, so this study fills the gaps associated with community involvement in character education (Agboola & Tsai, 2012; Harahap et al., 2025).

The Rumah Belajar Ceria Community in Palembang serves as a compelling example of how character education can be effectively integrated into social activities. These communities foster an environment where students not only acquire knowledge but also internalize essential values such as honesty, responsibility, and empathy. Through interactive and inclusive learning experiences, participants develop a sense of belonging and shared purpose, reinforcing the importance of ethical behavior in daily life.

A key component of this character building initiative is students' involvement in various social activities. Participation in community service projects and visits to orphanages allows students to directly experience the impact of social contributions. Such activities help students develop empathy and solidarity, as they witness firsthand the challenges faced by different groups in society. The opportunity to help others fosters a sense of care and strengthens the understanding that education is not solely about academic knowledge it is also about building moral integrity and commitment to social well being (Rusnaini, 2018).

For instance, a national survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Kemendikbudristek (2022) found that 68% of students actively involved in school social activities exhibited higher levels of empathy and cooperation compared to those who were not engaged. Moreover, initiatives such as the "Siswa Mengabdikan" (Students Serving) program in several schools in Yogyakarta where students visit nursing homes and shelters have proven effective in increasing social awareness and fostering compassion among participants. This data demonstrates that social activities are not merely symbolic gestures but have a tangible impact on students' character development.

The educational philosophy underlying this initiative is based on Dewey (1938) concept of "learning by doing", which emphasizes the importance of direct experience in sharpening practical skills while fostering social responsibility. When students actively engage in activities, they not only learn theoretical concepts but also experience and practice moral values such as cooperation and ethics in daily life. Previous studies have shown that experience based learning strengthens character and encourages active participation in contributing to society (Raihan, 2018; Yuliani, 2020).

Beyond formal education in schools, non formal education also plays a significant role in character development. In more relaxed and practical learning environments, children can more easily internalize values such as empathy, solidarity, and responsibility. This serves as an essential complement, ensuring that they are not only academically intelligent but also responsible and socially aware (Zuchdi, 2003).

However, despite numerous studies highlighting the importance of experiential learning and non formal education, few have explored how these two approaches can be effectively integrated within the Indonesian education system. Additionally, the role of digital technology as a supporting tool for character education remains underexamined, even though during the pandemic, direct interactions were highly limited, making technology a crucial bridge for learning. This study seeks to address this gap by identifying the best ways to integrate experiential learning, non formal education, and digital technology, ensuring a more holistic and meaningful approach to student character development.

Ultimately, the utilization of community based initiatives as platforms for learning underscores the transformative power of education in shaping an ethical and just society. Ultimately, the utilization of community based initiatives as learning platforms reinforces the transformative power of education in shaping an ethical and just society. This study aims to explore how community based initiatives can be optimized as a medium for character education and to identify the best strategies for integrating moral values into social activities to support the development of strong and sustainable character formation.

## 2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore social activity based character education in the Palembang City, Rumah Belajar Ceria Community. The focus of the research is to understand how social activities shape individual character through participants' experiences and the influence of community context. The study subjects were selected by purposive sampling based on their active involvement and strategic role in the community, consisting of 3 people, namely 2 volunteer participants (AA & AV) and 1 RBC team leader (NPRD). Data collection techniques include in depth interviews with the three informants, observation of community activities, and documentation in the form of photos and field notes during the observation process. The research instruments are in the form of structured interview guides, observation sheets, and documentation guidelines. Data analysis was carried out through thematic analysis using the model of Miles et al (2014) which consisted of three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. At the data reduction stage, the raw data is sorted and simplified to focus on relevant information. Furthermore, the data is presented in the form of a matrix and narrative to facilitate understanding and extracting meaning. The process of drawing conclusions is carried out by connecting the findings to the theoretical framework and the objectives of the research. To maintain the validity of the data, this study applied the source triangulation technique by comparing data from interviews, observations, and documentation. In addition, a re-check was carried out with informants (member checks) to ensure the accuracy of data interpretation. The research procedure includes planning, data collection, thematic analysis, and reporting of results. This methodology is designed to be flexible and relevant to the characteristics of the Rumah Belajar Ceria Community, Satu Amal Indonesia.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### Finding

The findings obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation highlight several key insights into the role of Rumah Belajar Ceria (RBC) in character education. The analysis underscores how RBC fosters the development of fundamental values such as empathy, responsibility, and cooperation, which are integral to shaping students' and volunteers' personal growth. One informant articulated the significance of empathy by stating, *"Empathy helps me to be more caring and appreciate differences."* Empathy allows individuals to cultivate a sense of compassion, broadening their understanding of diverse perspectives and encouraging inclusivity in social interactions. Additionally, responsibility plays a crucial role in fostering awareness of one's duties toward oneself and others. As one informant noted, *"Responsibility provides awareness of obligations to oneself and others."* This understanding strengthens individual accountability and contributes to forming ethical and conscientious individuals who can navigate social and professional environments effectively. Lastly, cooperation reinforces interpersonal skills by encouraging participants to embrace new ideas, refine their communication abilities, and collaborate toward collective goals. As described by an informant, *"Cooperation makes me open to new ideas and perspectives and hones communication skills."* These values are not only instilled theoretically but also embedded in RBC's daily activities, ensuring that character development remains a central component of the learning process.

Observations confirm that RBC integrates these values into its educational practices, creating a meaningful learning experience that extends beyond academic achievement. One informant highlighted this impact by stating, *"The combination of these three values makes teaching activities at Rumah Belajar Ceria more meaningful not just about imparting knowledge but also touching the heart and shaping character, both for the RBC students and volunteers themselves."* RBC volunteers play an essential role in fostering this atmosphere by actively engaging in student interactions, preparing well-structured lesson materials, and participating in in-depth discussions within teaching teams. These collaborative efforts solidify RBC's reputation as an inclusive learning environment where students are encouraged to build relationships based on mutual respect and intellectual curiosity. Additionally, by demonstrating consistent engagement and enthusiasm, volunteers serve as role models who exemplify ethical behavior, further reinforcing RBC's character education framework. The intentional structuring of learning spaces where students and volunteers work together to tackle academic challenges and engage in meaningful exchanges supports the notion that education must encompass character-building alongside intellectual development.

Beyond the cultivation of individual values, social involvement plays a pivotal role in enhancing participants' overall educational experiences. RBC's volunteers exhibit notably high levels of engagement, with some individuals reporting 85% participation throughout their tenure. The motivation behind such commitment stems from the desire to contribute meaningfully to the improvement of education, particularly through direct teaching initiatives. One participant affirmed this sentiment by explaining, *"The motivation to participate in activities is the desire to contribute to improving the quality of education, one of which is by teaching at RBC."* Among the various activities offered, field teaching has emerged as one of the most impactful experiences for volunteers, enabling them to witness firsthand the challenges faced by students in underserved educational settings. The significance of these experiences is further emphasized by an informant who stated, *"This activity has a significant impact because it trains empathy in real situations, fosters responsibility, and builds patience and perseverance in teaching."* Such engagements demonstrate that RBC not only shapes academic competencies but also strengthens individuals' adaptability and resilience in real-world contexts.

The transformative effects of RBC's initiatives extend beyond intellectual growth, as behavioral changes among participants become evident through increased self-awareness and social consciousness. Many volunteers report a heightened sense of gratitude as a result of their involvement in RBC's programs. One informant reflected on this experience, stating, *"I feel more grateful because my field experiences often open my eyes to realities that may be very different from my own personal life."* The

exposure to different socio-economic backgrounds helps individuals reevaluate their personal circumstances while fostering a deeper appreciation for educational access and equity. Additionally, RBC nurtures confidence-building by allowing volunteers to witness the direct impact of their contributions. An informant shared, *"My confidence has increased because I can make an impact and witness positive changes resulting from my contributions."* This sense of accomplishment encourages sustained engagement and motivates volunteers to continue participating in initiatives that promote social and educational change.

Moreover, RBC facilitates leadership development and network expansion, providing participants with opportunities to take on leadership roles in various capacities. Volunteers often serve as MCs or team leads in major events, including the Semarak Indonesian Independence Day event in 2023, demonstrating their ability to take initiative and assume greater responsibilities. RBC's collaborative structure also strengthens professional and social networks, as emphasized by a participant who stated, *"Being part of RBC has helped me build wider connections because various communities collaborate with RBC."* Such cross-community engagement fosters knowledge exchange and enhances individuals' abilities to navigate diverse educational ecosystems. The significance of community support in character education is further underscored by RBC's holistic approach, which integrates moral, ethical, and social values into experiential learning settings. One informant reflected on this by stating, *"The environment becomes a real and natural learning space. The presence of a supportive atmosphere, hands-on learning experiences, teamwork, and knowledge-sharing helps me understand and apply character values."* This immersive learning model ensures that character development occurs organically, allowing students and volunteers alike to internalize values through direct practice and reflection.

Finally, RBC employs experience based and exemplary learning methodologies, ensuring that character values are effectively instilled into participants' everyday interactions. As one participant elaborated, *"For instance, providing positive role models, creating space for children and volunteers to reflect, and aligning educational content with real-life situations ensure character values are integrated meaningfully into everyday experiences."* These structured approaches help foster long-term personal and social growth, reinforcing the essential role of community-based educational initiatives in shaping individuals' ethical perspectives. Overall, the findings affirm that RBC's pedagogical framework is highly effective in promoting character education, with its emphasis on social engagement, experiential learning, and ethical awareness.

## Discussion

Of the five indicators used, there are several things that we can discuss together, first, understanding character: one must understand the meaning of character in order to be able to build empathy, be more concerned with responsibility and cooperation. This is in accordance with research through social activities. Based on the data obtained, there are several important keys in the formation of individual character. One is the understanding of the meaning of character, which is the basis for building empathy, caring, responsibility, and the ability to work together. Research shows that these characters can be effectively formed through social activities and direct experiences in people's lives.

In line with that, Lickona (1991) emphasized that character education must instill moral values through social habituation. Student involvement in social activities directly increases a sense of responsibility and empathy. Narvaez (2010) states that a supportive social environment is able to develop moral virtues through daily practice. Nucci & Narvaez (2008) added that social interaction in society is an important foundation for the internalization of character values. Meanwhile, Thomas (2012) highlighted that social action-based character education programs can increase collective awareness and a sense of concern for others. It can be concluded that a person must first understand the concept of character values in order to organize his knowledge of values into concrete actions. So that it is able to build awareness in a sustainable manner.

The second indicator Involvement in social activities: The compatibility between theory and field findings shows that character education activities carried out by volunteers through Palembang Rumah Belajar Ceria (RBC) are in line with the theory of social activity-based character education. Based on the theory of "learning by doing" put forward by Dewey (1938), learning through direct experience allows individuals to internalize moral values such as empathy, responsibility, and solidarity. Field findings at RBC support this theory, where volunteers engaged in social activities such as skills classes, community service, and social visits show improvements in understanding and application of character values. The theory of "learning by doing" put forward by Dewey (1938) emphasizes that effective learning occurs through direct experience in a social context. This approach not only improves cognitive understanding, but also plays an important role in the development of moral values such as empathy, responsibility, and solidarity.

Involvement in social activities plays an important role in shaping an individual's character and understanding through direct experience, interaction, and reflection. According to Bandura (1977) in Social Learning Theory, individuals can observe and imitate positive behaviors such as empathy, cooperation, and responsibility. Kohlberg (1981) in his Theory of Moral Development added that interaction and reflection on real experience encourage higher moral development.

Tajfel & Turner (1986) in Social Identity Theory highlight that social activities build identity, solidarity, and respect for diversity, reinforcing inclusive character. Kolb (1984) through Experiential Learning Theory asserts that experiential learning helps individuals develop empathy, communication, and a sense of responsibility, strengthens social relationships and contributes to society.

The third indicator of behavioral and social transformation has become an increasingly relevant topic in recent years, especially in the context of technological change, social interaction, and global challenges. Recent articles show how various social interventions and behavior change techniques can significantly affect the lives of individuals and communities. One relevant study is the meta-analysis conducted by Siette et al (2025), which evaluated the effectiveness of behavior-based social interventions in improving cognitive function in older adults. The study found that social interventions, such as group-based communication and art activities, have a positive impact on global cognitive functioning. Behavior change techniques applied in these interventions, such as behavior demonstrations, have been shown to be effective in increasing social engagement and strengthening relationships between individuals. In addition, Newell et al (2021) discuss the importance of sustainable behavior change in the context of global sustainability. This article highlights the need for a holistic approach that integrates individual and systemic change to achieve profound social transformation. The authors emphasize that behavior change does not only depend on individual responsibility, but also requires social mobilization and structural interventions to create a just and sustainable transition.

In the digital context, Cagatin (2024) explores how social media platforms have changed the way individuals interact and share information. The study shows that social media not only facilitates global communication, but also provides space for marginalized groups to voice their opinions and drive social change. However, the study also warns about the risks associated with using social media, such as the spread of misinformation and the potential for online harassment.

Therefore, behavioral transformation and social change can be effectively created through intensive social interaction in society. This engagement allows individuals to interact with each other, share experiences, and build collective values such as solidarity, empathy, and tolerance. Communities serve as natural learning spaces that strengthen relationships between members and create strong group identities, thus supporting the formation of an inclusive, harmonious, and responsible society (Retta, 2021)

The fourth indicator is the role of the community in character education (Surachman, 2019). Research proves that society is able to shape character some studies show that society has an important role in shaping individual character through various social approaches and activities. For example, the study of Iftitah et al (2024); Purwaningsih (2018) on the "Morning Rice Community" in Magelang revealed that the formation of social care character in its members is carried out through habituation in

activities such as food distribution, student assistance, and other social activities. This community serves as a medium to socialize character values and become a partner of families and schools in building individual character.

In addition, research by Nikmah et al (2020) on the Deaf Volunteer Organization community in Surakarta shows that through activities such as Indonesian, Iqra', and makrab classes, this community has succeeded in fostering a caring and socially friendly character in its members. Direct interaction with deaf groups in this community reinforces the values of empathy and social solidarity. In Surabaya, the Sahabat Muda community under the auspices of the Lagzis Peduli Foundation focuses on building the character, competence, and leadership of student cadres. Through social activities and competency development programs, the community creates coaching strategies that generate social entrepreneurship among its members (Thohir et al., 2021).

Another study by Lestari & Huda (2017) regarding the Black Ant Association in Satriyan Village, Blitar, shows that this community plays a role in shaping the character of youth through social and economic activities. Activities such as mutual cooperation and eating together not only strengthen relationships between members, but also instill the values of responsibility and independence. Furthermore, Faridah et al (2025) in their research highlight the role of learning communities in improving teachers' character and pedagogical competence. These learning communities strengthen collaboration, reflection, and provide contextual and ongoing learning for teachers, which ultimately contributes to the strengthening of their professional character (Kamaruddin et al., 2023). Overall, this study confirms that community plays an important role in the formation of individual character through social interactions, shared activities, and habituation of positive values. Through active participation in society, individuals can develop values such as empathy, responsibility, independence, and leadership that are important in people's lives (Rasyid et al., 2024).

The fifth indicator, communication and interaction. Indeed, there are many factors that shape character, but one of the factors through this social activity is through communication and interaction. This is because the factors that shape a person's character include internal and external aspects, where communication and social interaction play an important role in the development of a person's personality. Social interactions that occur in the family, school, and community environment make a significant contribution to the formation of individual moral and ethical values (Majji, 2022; Megawati, 2018).

In the family environment, effective communication between family members can form a child's positive personality. Research by Fitri (2022) shows that social interaction and communication in the family have a significant influence on the personality formation of millennial children, with a significance value of 0.001 which shows a fairly high influence. In the school environment, social interaction between teachers and students as well as between students themselves plays a role in character formation. A study by Sunenti (2021) at MI Muhammadiyah 1 Slinga shows that social interaction in the learning process can shape the character of students to become tolerant, disciplined, hardworking, socially caring, and responsible individuals. In addition, good interpersonal communication in the context of education can create a learning ecosystem conducive to instilling moral, ethical, and social values. The interpersonal relationships that are established between teachers, students, and the school environment play an important role in the development of students' character (Ramadhani et al., 2025). Overall, communication and social interaction are external factors that are very influential in the formation of individual character. Through effective communication and positive social interactions, individuals can develop strong moral and ethical values, which form the basis of good character.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that social activity-based character education is effective in forming positive behaviors and strengthening social relationships. Direct involvement in social activities allows individuals to not only understand, but also internalize values such as empathy, responsibility, and

cooperation. The community serves as an important learning space that strengthens character formation through intense and meaningful interactions. The practical implications of these findings include the need to integrate social activities into curriculum and community programs, with an approach that involves hands on experience and reflection. Effective communication strategies are also needed to support the internalization of values. The limitations of this study include a lack of longterm data, so further research is recommended using a longitudinal approach and considering diverse cultural contexts.

**Conflicts of Interest:** Declare conflicts of interest or state “The authors declare no conflict of interest.” Authors must identify and declare any personal circumstances or interests that may be perceived as inappropriately influencing the representation or interpretation of reported research results.

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