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## **Character Education in Elementary Schools: An In-depth Analysis of Strategies, Challenges, and the Dichotomy Between Genuine and Superficial Character**

Muhammad Aswab Mahasin<sup>1</sup>  
Haryanto<sup>2</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, INDONESIA

Corresponding Email:

[muhammadaswab.2024@student.uny.ac.id](mailto:muhammadaswab.2024@student.uny.ac.id)

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### **Abstract**

Character education in elementary schools plays a vital role in shaping students' moral reasoning, ethical behavior, and civic identity from an early age. This study examines effective strategies for implementing character education, explores the challenges that hinder its depth and sustainability, and highlights the distinction between genuine moral internalization and superficial behavioral conformity. Using a qualitative literature review approach, the paper synthesizes insights from a range of interdisciplinary sources and international case studies—including Japan, Finland, Rwanda, Singapore, and Indonesia. The findings emphasize that successful character education must be holistic, culturally grounded, and systemically embedded in curriculum, school culture, and community life. Models that integrate values into academic instruction, create supportive school environments, and involve families and local communities are shown to foster long-term moral development. Furthermore, countries with cohesive character education frameworks often exhibit higher social cohesion, civic responsibility, and ethical public behavior. This paper underscores the urgency of aligning educational practices

with deeper moral objectives and offers a globally informed foundation for future character education reform.

**Keywords:** character education, moral development, educational strategies, implementation challenges, international case studies

## **INTRODUCTION**

The growing complexity of moral and ethical challenges in today's society has elevated the urgency of implementing effective character education in elementary schools. Beyond academic achievement, schools are now expected to nurture students' integrity, empathy, and civic responsibility from an early age. Elementary education offers a critical period for shaping values and behaviors that persist into adulthood.

Research indicates that early exposure to structured moral instruction and prosocial modeling can reduce antisocial behavior, strengthen relationships, and enhance school community (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Lickona, 1996; Narvaez, 2006). However, the implementation of character education often lacks consistency and depth, frequently appearing as a ceremonial or supplementary practice rather than an integral part of the learning process.

A key issue lies in differentiating authentic character development from surface-level behavioral compliance. Programs focused on rules and rewards may induce temporary conformity but often fail to instill enduring moral conviction (Kohn, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Teachers also encounter barriers such as limited training and insufficient institutional support, making meaningful implementation challenging (Jones et al., 2010). Additionally, the digital age introduces new ethical dilemmas that demand adaptive educational responses (Gentile et al., 2011).

Despite these challenges, several countries—including Japan, Finland, Rwanda, Singapore, and Indonesia—have developed successful models by

embedding values into the curriculum, routines, and community life. These cases demonstrate how character education can be contextually embedded and sustainably practiced.

This study employs a qualitative literature review to examine best practices, explore implementation challenges, and emphasize the importance of genuine moral internalization. Drawing from interdisciplinary insights and international case studies, it seeks to contribute to global efforts in cultivating ethical citizens prepared to navigate the moral complexities of the 21st century.

## **METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative literature review methodology to explore the implementation of character education across diverse socio-cultural contexts. The literature review was chosen due to its ability to integrate interdisciplinary perspectives and generate a comprehensive understanding of complex educational phenomena (Snyder, 2019). Given the multifaceted nature of character education—which intersects with moral philosophy, developmental psychology, comparative education, and cultural studies—this method offers a flexible yet systematic framework for analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The review followed a structured process involving literature search, selection, and thematic synthesis. Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and policy reports were sourced from major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Priority was given to recent publications to ensure relevance, while foundational works (e.g., Lickona, 1996; Kohlberg, 1984) were included for theoretical grounding.

Inclusion criteria for literature selection included:

- Studies addressing character education in primary or secondary school contexts;
- Research discussing implementation strategies, pedagogical models, challenges, and cultural adaptation;
- Articles differentiating between genuine and superficial character development;
- Case studies presenting integrative and holistic frameworks in character education.

The selected literature was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis model. This approach allowed for the identification of recurring patterns such as moral internalization, community involvement, curriculum integration, and ethical challenges in the digital age. The thematic coding was cross-referenced with theoretical frameworks, including Kohlberg's moral development theory (1984), Lickona's character education principles (1996), Narvaez's Integrative Ethical Education model (2006), and Berkowitz and Bier's (2005) whole-school moral culture.

International case studies were selected to represent distinct yet complementary approaches to character education: Japan (collectivism and moral routines), Finland (trust-based pedagogy), Singapore (policy-driven integration), Rwanda (post-conflict civic education), and Indonesia (cultural-religious synthesis). These cases were examined not only for best practices but also for how character education is shaped by cultural, institutional, and historical factors.

Overall, this methodological approach enabled a nuanced exploration of how character education can be effectively contextualized and operationalized in various national settings.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Effective Strategies for Character Education**

One of the most effective strategies in character education is integrating values across the school curriculum. Rather than treating it as a separate subject, embedding ethics into academic content allows students to engage with moral reasoning through diverse learning contexts. Lickona (1996) emphasized that character formation thrives when values are woven into daily instruction, fostering ethical understanding through experience rather than abstraction.

Cross-disciplinary value integration helps students see that ethics permeate all aspects of life—be it in history, science, or literature. Peterson and Bentley (2017) noted this approach strengthens long-term moral retention, while Narvaez (2006) stressed the need for developmental environments where values are modeled and reinforced. In diverse classrooms, this method also promotes shared moral foundations without dismissing cultural differences (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

Beyond curriculum, the school climate plays a vital role. Schools function as moral communities where respect, responsibility, and fairness are not only taught but lived. When students feel emotionally safe and supported, they are more likely to embrace ethical learning (Nucci & Narvaez, 2014). Practices like peer mentoring, restorative discipline, and student participation enhance moral agency and belonging (Schaps et al., 2004).

Parental and community involvement further strengthens character formation. When home and school values align, students experience consistent expectations that reinforce moral development. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) found that collaborative family-school partnerships improve both academic and behavioral outcomes. Programs like service learning, family workshops, and school-community initiatives provide real-life applications

of values such as empathy, responsibility, and cooperation.

Character education is most effective when it becomes a shared responsibility among educators, parents, and communities. As Berkowitz and Bier (2005) emphasized, successful programs integrate values into everyday routines and interactions, transforming moral instruction from a set of rules into a holistic, lived experience.

### **Challenges in Implementing Character Education**

Despite the increasing recognition of its importance, the implementation of character education in schools often faces substantial challenges that compromise its effectiveness, sustainability, and depth. These obstacles stem not only from internal limitations within the school system but also from broader socio-cultural and technological dynamics that shape students' moral development.

One of the most critical barriers is resource limitation. Many schools operate under financial constraints that limit their ability to provide comprehensive character education programs. Jones et al. (2010) found that insufficient funding and lack of teacher training result in fragmented and superficial implementation. In such conditions, character education is often reduced to sporadic campaigns or moral slogans, lacking coherence with the overall educational mission.

Addressing resource-related constraints is fundamental to ensure the long-term success of character education initiatives. Investment in teacher professional development, curriculum design, and appropriate instructional tools is essential. Without such institutional support, there is a risk that character education becomes merely rhetorical—used more for image-building than for fostering genuine moral transformation.

Another significant challenge is the influence of digital media, which increasingly shapes how students understand and engage with moral issues. While digital platforms provide opportunities for learning, they also expose students to a multitude of messages—many of which may conflict with school-based ethical instruction. Gentile, Saleem, and Anderson (2011) warned that media content often promotes aggression, materialism, or distorted views of success and relationships, thereby undermining the values promoted in school environments.

In response, character education must evolve to include digital literacy and media ethics. Schools must help students develop the ability to critically evaluate online content, identify manipulative or unethical narratives, and engage responsibly in digital interactions. This approach empowers students not only to resist harmful influences but also to act ethically in both virtual and real-world settings.

In addition, cultural and societal diversity presents a complex challenge in the implementation of character education. Students come from varied ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, which influence their interpretation of values and moral norms. Nucci and Narvaez (2014) emphasized that universal character programs may fail to resonate with all learners if they overlook these cultural contexts.

However, embracing cultural diversity does not imply moral relativism. Instead, schools must adopt a principled pluralism—an approach that respects diverse traditions while promoting shared human values such as honesty, compassion, and justice. This requires teachers to exercise pedagogical flexibility, foster open dialogue, and design culturally responsive curricula that make moral learning inclusive and meaningful across backgrounds.

By acknowledging and addressing these multifaceted challenges—resource limitations, digital influence, and cultural complexity—educators and policymakers can

create more authentic and resilient character education systems. Failure to adapt may result in programs that are either ineffectual or misaligned with students' lived realities, ultimately weakening the intended moral impact.

### **Genuine vs. Superficial Character Development**

A fundamental concern in character education is distinguishing between genuine moral development and superficial behavioral compliance. While many educational programs claim to cultivate character, not all succeed in fostering the deep internalization of ethical values. This distinction is essential for designing pedagogical strategies that promote enduring moral agency rather than temporary behavioral conformity.

Genuine character is marked by internalized values that guide consistent ethical behavior across different contexts, even in the absence of external rewards or surveillance. Damon (2004) described authentic character as emerging from personal conviction and an intrinsic commitment to moral ideals. Individuals with genuine character act ethically because they believe in doing what is right, not because they fear punishment or seek approval. Berkowitz and Bier (2005) echoed this, asserting that authentic moral development stems from autonomous ethical reasoning and reflection rather than obedience.

Supporting this perspective, Narvaez and Lapsley (2008) introduced the concept of “moral self-authorship,” where students actively construct meaning around moral issues through reflection and dialogue. Schools that foster this process—through techniques such as Socratic questioning, service learning, and moral dilemma discussions—empower students to engage with values in ways that align with their emerging identity. Over time, such environments nurture students' capacity for ethical judgment and self-regulation rooted in conscience rather than compliance.

In contrast, superficial character refers to outward moral behavior that is motivated by external incentives such as praise, rewards, or fear of punishment. Kohn (1997) criticized reward-based moral instruction, noting that it often leads to "doing the right thing for the wrong reasons." Similarly, Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000) found that excessive reliance on extrinsic motivators undermines intrinsic motivation, producing ethical behavior that is situational and fragile.

When students behave ethically only when observed or rewarded, they lack the resilience to maintain moral integrity in complex or high-pressure situations. Nucci and Narvaez (2014) emphasized that genuine character development requires education that goes beyond behavioral control to cultivate emotional engagement, empathy, and independent moral reasoning. Programs that prioritize conformity over critical reflection risk producing students who are compliant but ethically passive.

Bridging the gap between genuine and superficial character development involves reimagining the role of educators. Teachers must not only enforce behavioral norms but also serve as facilitators of moral inquiry. According to Lickona (1991), effective character education integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains—helping students to “know the good, desire the good, and do the good.” Such integration enables students to see moral values not as imposed rules but as principles worth adopting for their own intrinsic worth.

To achieve this, schools should promote practices that encourage intrinsic motivation, self-reflection, and moral discourse. Classroom strategies that engage students in perspective-taking, ethical decision-making, and community involvement help to embed values deeply into the students' personal frameworks. Only through such approaches can character education foster moral

resilience that extends beyond institutional boundaries and into real-life ethical behavior.

## **International Case Studies of Successful Character Education Implementation**

Character education cannot be universally applied in a one-size-fits-all approach; instead, it must be contextualized to fit cultural, historical, and institutional realities. This section presents five international case studies—Japan, Finland, Singapore, Rwanda, and Indonesia,—that exemplify distinctive yet effective models of character education. These cases illustrate how various nations have integrated moral values into their education systems, drawing from cultural traditions, national policies, and community practices to develop ethical citizens and promote social cohesion.

### **Japan**

Japan is widely regarded as a global model of character education, where moral development is not treated as an optional program but embedded at the core of the national education framework. Through a culturally embedded system known as tokkatsu (special activities), Japanese schools cultivate moral competencies alongside academic and physical education (OECD, 2012). Tokkatsu is designed to develop empathy, cooperation, discipline, and civic responsibility through structured daily routines and group engagement (Cave, 2007; Takahashi, 2014).

A central component of this framework is *dōtoku kyōiku*, the formal moral education curriculum made mandatory in 2018. It focuses on universal values such as honesty, justice, perseverance, and respect for life. What makes Japan's system effective, however, is not merely the content of the moral lessons but their integration into everyday school life. Students regularly reflect on their behavior, participate in ethical discussions, and engage in school-wide rituals that promote mindfulness and community values (Lickona, 1991; Sato, 2004).

One distinctive example is the practice of souji, in which students take responsibility for cleaning their classrooms and shared spaces. More than a cleanliness routine, souji instills values of humility, shared responsibility, and mutual respect (Fujita, 2019). The absence of janitorial staff in most schools symbolizes collective ownership and a sense of equality among students and teachers. This practice also reinforces Confucian values of moral development through action, deeply rooted in Japanese culture (Watanabe, 2013).

Moreover, disaster education has become a significant element of character formation in Japan. Given the country's frequent natural disasters, students participate in regular emergency drills and community simulations that cultivate resilience, empathy, and civic solidarity (Nakayama, 2021). These experiences highlight how moral education in Japan extends beyond school boundaries and prepares students to act ethically in broader societal contexts.

Japan's success in character education is also supported by strong family and community involvement. Parents participate actively through Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), and social expectations align with school values, creating a unified moral culture. The result is a society known for low crime rates, high civic engagement, and deeply ingrained social discipline (Transparency International, 2023; OECD, 2021).

Japan's approach exemplifies a culturally coherent and structurally integrated model of character education. Through rituals, routines, and community participation, values are internalized as part of students' everyday lives. This embedded model highlights the importance of aligning educational content with cultural context and daily practice, making character education both sustainable and impactful.

Finland. Finland is internationally recognized for its holistic, student-centered education system that

emphasizes not only academic excellence but also character formation, well-being, and social responsibility. In contrast to test-driven models, Finland's approach to character education is deeply embedded in curriculum design, school culture, and national policy frameworks (Sahlberg, 2015; Niemi, 2018). Moral and civic education is not treated as a separate subject but interwoven into all aspects of schooling.

A cornerstone of Finland's model is the high trust and professional autonomy granted to teachers. Educators undergo rigorous training and are empowered to integrate moral learning into daily lessons. This trust-based governance enables teachers to address students' developmental needs contextually, promoting ethical reasoning, reflective learning, and democratic values (OECD, 2020; Sahlberg, 2011).

In addition to moral integration, Finland invests significantly in social-emotional learning (SEL). Schools prioritize emotional intelligence, empathy, and mindfulness through initiatives such as conflict resolution programs, mental health education, and peer mediation (Niemi, 2018; Pulkkinen, 2017). These efforts foster resilience, compassion, and ethical awareness, which are regarded as essential to character development.

Equity and inclusivity are fundamental principles in Finnish education. All students attend public, non-selective schools, and access to both academic and character education is considered a basic right (OECD, 2021). This egalitarian approach reduces social stratification and encourages collective responsibility. Research suggests that environments emphasizing equity and belonging are more conducive to moral growth and civic engagement (Schleicher, 2018; Kiilakoski, 2015).

Another strength of Finland's character education lies in its commitment to environmental ethics. Sustainability is taught through experiential projects, outdoor education, and school-wide ecological initiatives.

Students participate in recycling, forest conservation, and climate campaigns, fostering long-term environmental stewardship (Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2019).

Furthermore, Finnish schools promote student voice and democratic participation. Through student councils and participatory pedagogy, learners are encouraged to take responsibility for shaping their school environment. This democratic ethos strengthens students' sense of agency and civic identity (Kiilakoski, 2015).

Finland's model of character education is holistic, inclusive, and future-oriented, emphasizing autonomy, trust, emotional development, and social equity. Its success lies not in isolated interventions but in the seamless integration of moral learning into every layer of education—curriculum, relationships, and community engagement—producing ethically aware and socially responsible citizens.

## **Singapore**

Singapore's education system is internationally acclaimed not only for its academic rigor but also for its structured and pragmatic approach to character education. Rooted in the principles of national values and civic responsibility, Singapore has developed a policy-aligned framework that integrates moral development into curriculum, co-curricular activities, national service, and digital citizenship (Tan et al., 2017). This comprehensive integration aims to foster a resilient and cohesive society grounded in shared ethical norms.

Central to Singapore's model is the implementation of National Education (NE) and Civics and Moral Education (CME), which have been part of the national curriculum since the 1990s. These programs seek to instill core values such as integrity, responsibility, perseverance, and national identity—particularly within a multi-ethnic and rapidly globalizing society (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2020; Liew, 2020). Through moral dilemmas,

reflective discussion, and contextual ethical scenarios, students are encouraged to internalize civic values in a way that resonates with real-life challenges.

One of the flagship programs is Values in Action (VIA), which mandates student involvement in service-learning activities across all levels of schooling. VIA projects include environmental clean-ups, intergenerational care, and social entrepreneurship, and they are not treated as optional extracurricular tasks but are integrated into curricular planning and assessment. This experiential learning model enables students to translate abstract moral values into concrete civic action (Tan, 2019; Chua, 2021).

Singapore also strengthens character formation through Compulsory National Service (NS) for male citizens, a program that emphasizes discipline, teamwork, and patriotism. As Chan (2021) notes, NS serves not only as a defense mechanism but also as a civic institution for ethical and emotional development. The structured exposure to responsibility, diversity, and hardship fosters civic maturity and social cohesion.

In adapting to modern ethical landscapes, Singapore incorporates digital citizenship and media literacy into character education. Students are taught to navigate online risks, discern misinformation, and practice respectful digital behavior—essential competencies in an era dominated by virtual interactions (Goh & Chia, 2022). Such measures extend the reach of moral education beyond the classroom into the digital sphere.

Parental and community engagement further enhances the consistency and effectiveness of Singapore's character education. The Ministry of Education regularly collaborates with families through seminars, outreach programs, and national campaigns that align home values with school efforts (Liew, 2020). This tripartite synergy between school, family, and government ensures that character formation is holistic and sustainable.

Moreover, Singapore employs a Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) Learning Outcomes framework that provides a structured means of evaluating students' progress in areas such as empathy, civic engagement, and personal responsibility (MOE, 2020). By combining formative assessment with values-based learning objectives, the system fosters deeper moral reasoning and accountability.

Singapore's character education model represents a methodically orchestrated framework that aligns national values with educational practice. By integrating moral education through structured policies, service-based learning, digital ethics, and institutional rites of passage like National Service, Singapore fosters disciplined, socially responsible citizens. The system's coherence across school, family, and state provides a compelling case for how character education can be embedded into the moral fabric of national identity and societal resilience.

## **Rwanda**

Rwanda offers a powerful example of how character education can play a transformative role in national healing and post-conflict reconstruction. Following the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, which devastated the nation's social fabric, the Rwandan government prioritized character and citizenship education as a central component of its long-term vision for unity, reconciliation, and development (UNESCO, 2021; Republic of Rwanda, 2015). In this context, moral education was not merely rehabilitative but foundational to rebuilding the moral conscience of a fractured society.

A defining element of Rwanda's approach is the revitalization of *Itorero ry'Igihugu*, a traditional civic training institution repurposed to promote patriotism, social responsibility, and collective ethics. Historically used to cultivate moral virtues and communal identity, *Itorero* was institutionalized into schools and youth

programs, emphasizing participatory learning, storytelling, and values-based dialogue (Karangwa et al., 2020; Rutayisire, 2021). Students are engaged not only in theoretical discussions but in reflective group activities that aim to instill integrity, discipline, and civic duty as living principles.

Another pillar of Rwanda’s character education model is Umuganda, a monthly nationwide day of community service in which citizens—including students—participate in public works such as infrastructure repair, environmental conservation, and sanitation efforts. Umuganda reinforces the values of solidarity, humility, and participatory governance. It represents a cultural philosophy of dignity through labor and collective responsibility, transforming public service into a moral act (World Bank, 2019).

Rwanda’s educational system also supports the national program “Ndi Umunyarwanda” (“I am Rwandan”), which encourages young people to embrace a shared civic identity beyond ethnic divisions. This initiative is embedded within classroom instruction—particularly in subjects like history, civics, and religious education—through peacebuilding activities, restorative dialogue, and ethical reflection (Ndahayo & Bizimana, 2022). By facilitating honest conversations about justice, forgiveness, and unity, schools serve as critical spaces for healing and identity reconstruction.

Moreover, Rwanda’s character education initiatives are integrated with broader social development goals. Educational reforms focus on promoting gender equality, ethical leadership, youth empowerment, and civic engagement. Programs supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2021) have elevated youth participation in governance and social entrepreneurship, linking moral development with national progress.

Importantly, Rwanda does not isolate character education as a separate subject; rather, it is infused across pedagogical practices and institutional frameworks. Teachers are trained not only to deliver content but to model ethical behavior, guide moral reasoning, and facilitate community-oriented learning. This approach ensures that moral formation is not episodic but continuous, contributing to the development of a generation committed to ethical citizenship.

Rwanda's model of character education exemplifies the transformative potential of culturally rooted, policy-supported moral instruction in contexts of societal trauma. By integrating traditional values through *Itorero* and *Umuganda*, and aligning educational goals with national healing through programs like "Ndi Umunyarwanda," Rwanda has demonstrated how schools can become engines of moral renewal. The synergy between cultural heritage, civic identity, and education policy offers a compelling framework for how character education can not only prevent future conflict but also forge a more just, unified, and morally resilient society.

## **Indonesia**

Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy and one of the most culturally diverse nations, presents a unique model of character education that draws strength from the intersection of religious, civic, and indigenous values. Since the introduction of the 2013 Curriculum (*Kurikulum 2013*), character education (*Pendidikan Karakter*) has been elevated as a national educational priority and integrated across all subjects, co-curricular activities, and school rituals (Kemendikbud, 2017). The program promotes five core values: religiosity, nationalism, independence, cooperation, and integrity—each intended to shape morally grounded and socially responsible citizens.

Character education in Indonesia is principally delivered through Religious Education (*Pendidikan Agama*) and Pancasila and Civic Education (*PPKn*). While the former emphasizes personal piety, discipline, and ethical behavior rooted in students' faith traditions, the latter draws from the philosophical foundation of Pancasila to cultivate democratic values, pluralism, and social justice (Susanto, 2020). These subjects go beyond rote learning by incorporating discussions on moral dilemmas, simulations of civic duties, and collective observances of national events, thereby linking abstract principles to lived civic experiences.

A distinguishing strength of Indonesia's approach lies in its communal ethos. Traditional practices such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) function as lived moral education, reinforcing values of altruism, solidarity, and collective responsibility. Practiced through neighborhood clean-ups, community gatherings, and local disaster responses, *gotong royong* serves as a moral infrastructure embedded in daily life (Setiawan, 2019). These communal experiences—often intergenerational and participatory—offer students a sense of belonging and civic obligation that is difficult to replicate through classroom instruction alone.

Indonesia has also advanced environmental character education through the *Adiwiyata* program, a nationwide initiative that promotes ecological awareness and sustainability in schools. Participating schools implement eco-friendly habits such as waste segregation, gardening, and energy conservation. These actions not only foster environmental responsibility but also instill ethical values such as stewardship, discipline, and foresight (Ministry of Environment and Forestry, 2021). The integration of environmental ethics further broadens the moral dimensions of character education in Indonesia.

Despite these strengths, challenges remain. Educational disparities across regions, limited resources

in rural areas, and a persistently high national corruption index (Transparency International, 2023) complicate the systemic realization of character education ideals. However, the effectiveness of Indonesia's model lies less in its bureaucratic precision and more in its cultural and social embeddedness. As noted by Geertz (1960), Indonesian society places a high moral value on hospitality, harmony, and relational ethics—traits nurtured not by formal institutions alone, but by deep-rooted communal and religious traditions.

Importantly, Indonesia's character education efforts reflect a bottom-up resilience that counterbalances top-down policy limitations. Moral development often occurs organically at the grassroots level, where family, faith communities, and local customs exert a powerful influence on students' values and behavior. These informal but potent agents of moral formation underscore the importance of cultural congruence in any national character education initiative.

Indonesia's character education model is marked by its cultural richness, spiritual grounding, and communal strength. Rather than relying solely on formal curricula or centralized enforcement, it leverages indigenous wisdom, religious teachings, and collective experiences to cultivate moral integrity. Initiatives like *Pendidikan Karakter*, *PPKn*, *Adiwiyata*, and the practice of *gotong royong* reflect a holistic vision of character formation that is embedded in both policy and everyday life. In a nation marked by institutional complexity, Indonesia demonstrates that enduring moral development is most effective when it is woven into the cultural and social fabric of the people.

## CONCLUSION

Character education is essential in shaping ethical individuals and fostering cohesive societies. As this study illustrates, it must be a central pillar of holistic education—intentionally designed, authentically

practiced, and consistently reinforced across curriculum, school culture, and community life.

International case studies show that character education is most effective when embedded in daily practices, culturally relevant, and supported by coherent policies. Mere slogans or occasional programs are insufficient; students need consistent exposure to meaningful moral experiences through both instruction and example. Authenticity is key—students quickly perceive discrepancies between stated values and lived behaviors.

Adults in educational environments—teachers, school leaders, and caregivers—must embody the virtues they teach. Without modeling empathy, fairness, and integrity, character education loses credibility. Older students and peer leaders also play a vital role in setting moral standards, creating a ripple effect across the school community.

Equity and consistency are equally critical. Values must be upheld for all students, regardless of background or academic ability. Selective enforcement undermines trust and moral learning. A fair, inclusive environment fosters the emotional safety needed for ethical growth (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

Moreover, character education must evolve with contemporary challenges—such as digital citizenship, cultural pluralism, and global interconnectedness. Programs should develop students' critical thinking, empathy, and civic engagement to navigate modern moral dilemmas with discernment and responsibility.

In conclusion, successful character education rests not just on formal curricula but on morally coherent environments where values are lived, not merely taught. Collaboration among schools, families, and communities is crucial to cultivating ethical, empathetic, and socially responsible citizens. Future policies and research should focus on how character education can remain contextually

grounded, morally earnest, and scalable across diverse educational landscapes.

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