



Exploring the Effectiveness of Experience-Based Learning Approaches in Supporting Long-Term Strengthening of Character Education in Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness of experience-based learning in strengthening sustainable character education in high schools. Using a mixed methods design combining a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest and qualitative case study, 200 students from two Indonesian schools were divided into experimental and control groups. Quantitative data were analyzed using mean difference tests and ANCOVA, while qualitative insights were obtained through interviews, observations, and reflections. The results show a significant improvement in discipline, responsibility, empathy, and cooperation among students in the experimental group. The study concludes that direct learning experiences, supported by reflection and social engagement, effectively foster long-term character values and contribute conceptually to sustainability-oriented education strategies, offering practical guidance for schools in designing experiential curricula.

INTRODUCTION

Character education at the high school level has an important role in shaping students' behavior, social responsibility, and moral capacity before entering the world of college and the world of work. Global phenomena show that various countries are facing serious challenges related to moral crises, such as increasing intolerance, deviant behavior, and low social concern among the younger generation. Recent studies confirm that schools not only function as academic institutions, but also as a center for sustainable character building to answer increasingly complex social challenges (Allen, 2021). This emphasizes the urgency of research on educational approaches that can have a long-term impact on the internalization of character values.

While there are various character education programs, most previous studies have highlighted short-term outcomes without tracing their sustainability. Studies of project-based or real-experience educational experiments do show positive results on motivation and learning attitudes, but often stop at direct post-intervention evaluation. For example, research has found that project-based learning can improve collaborative skills, but it does not provide consistent evidence of long-term behavioral change (Santos, 2022). This gap requires a study that is able to test the sustainability of the impact of learning experiences on the formation of students' character.

The experiential learning approach has been widely used in various educational contexts because it encourages students to learn through hands-on experience. Recent research shows that this model contributes significantly to strengthening the values of empathy, responsibility, and cooperation when combined with critical reflection (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2023). Involving students in social activities that begin with teaching moral values can build character such as empathy and a sense of social responsibility and integrating plural values, tolerance, historical insight in civic education learning can help in developing positive character (Muhkam, M. F., et al., 2025). However, most research still focuses on cognitive and affective outcomes without exploring the internalized mechanisms of value that make characters more durable. This raises important questions about how concrete experiences can shape students' moral identities in a sustainable way.

Another study emphasizes the importance of service-learning as a form of experiential learning that links academic activities with social engagement. Through community service projects, students can practice values such as care and responsibility in a real-world context. Empirical evidence suggests that service-learning programs in high school students strengthen social engagement and moral commitment in the medium term (Brown & Taylor, 2021). However, research is still needed that examines how these experiences persist in the long term and what factors support their sustainability.

In addition to the pedagogical aspect, the school leadership factor also plays a big role in the success of character education. Principals who support a pro-character school culture are proven to be better able to ensure the consistent application of experiential learning. Research has found that institutional support, such as the provision of teacher training and continuous evaluation

policies, is key to the success of character education programs (Hernandez, 2024). Thus, research that assesses the effectiveness of experiential learning needs to consider structural factors in the school environment.

A valid measurement instrument is also an important element for assessing the success of character education. Recent studies emphasize the importance of psychometric validation in measuring character dimensions, because without reliable instruments it is difficult to distinguish transient behavioral changes from the internalization of true values (Wu & Chen, 2022). Therefore, this study will use a triangulation approach with quantitative and qualitative instruments to obtain a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of experiential learning.

In addition, the cultural and social diversity in Indonesia makes the context of this research even more relevant. Cross-country studies show that the effectiveness of service-learning is influenced by cultural sensitivity and local community involvement in educational programs (Gregorová & Ryan, 2024). By involving urban and rural locations in Indonesia, this study will be able to identify how contextual factors affect the success of internalizing character values. This allows the results of the research to be more adaptive to real conditions in the field.

Based on the literature review and existing research gaps, the purpose of this study is to explore the effectiveness of experiential learning in strengthening long-term character education in high school. The focus of the research was directed at three aspects: comparison of character scores between the experimental and control groups, identification of mechanisms of internalization of values through learning experiences, and analysis of the influence of school and community contexts on the sustainability of impacts. Theoretically, this research will enrich the literature on the internalization of character values, while it will practically provide strategic recommendations for schools in designing sustainable experiential curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Character Education in Senior High School

Character education at the high school (SMA) level is an important foundation in shaping students' behavior, social responsibility, and moral capacity. At this stage, students begin to face decisions that affect their personal and social identity, so that character education becomes relevant to equip them to face the challenges of the world of higher education and the world of work. Allen (2021) emphasizes that character education is not only normative, but must be associated with real experiences that lead students to consciously internalize values. In practice, many schools integrate character values through extracurricular activities, thematic learning, and social projects, but the long-term effectiveness of these interventions still varies between schools. Recent studies highlight that the success of character education is determined by program consistency, teacher involvement, and the support of the school's social environment. Therefore, a deep understanding of the concept of character

education is a prerequisite for designing a learning strategy oriented towards the internalization of long-term values.

Experience-Based Learning in the Context of Education

Experience-based learning is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes students' active involvement through direct experience as a learning medium. Kong (2021) states that this approach encourages students to learn by experiencing, reflecting, and applying knowledge in a real context, as opposed to traditional learning that is transmissive. In character education, this method allows students to understand values such as responsibility, empathy, and discipline through concrete practice, not just theory. Experiential learning also facilitates critical, collaborative, and problem-solving skills, which are relevant for holistic character development. This model has been shown to increase student motivation and engagement because they feel they have control over their own learning process. Thus, experience-based learning becomes an effective framework to combine mastery of academic materials with the strengthening of character values in a sustainable manner.

The Effectiveness of Experiential Learning on Character Strengthening

Empirical research shows that experiential learning and Project-Based Learning (PBL) can significantly improve student character development. Zhang (2023) found that students who engaged in experiential projects showed improved scores of discipline, responsibility, and cooperation compared to the control group. Similar results were also reported in the context of service-learning, where students' involvement in social activities strengthened their empathy and social skills. In addition, the impact of experiential learning is not limited to cognitive outcomes, but it also affects students' affective attitudes in the long term. Research shows that the sustainability of these effects is linked to quality of experience, critical reflection, and consistent social engagement. Experiential learning therefore offers practical strategies that can be implemented in schools to support character building more effectively.

Mechanism of Internalization of Value through Direct Experience

The internalization of character values occurs when students experience real, relevant and profound experiences in the context of the school or community. Gregorová et al., (2024) emphasize that service projects, simulations, or social activities allow students to reflect on moral values so that they become part of their personal identity. Critical reflection after hands-on experience helps students understand the impact their actions have on themselves and others. Additionally, social engagement in groups encourages more lasting collaboration, empathy, and collective responsibility. Research shows that this internalization mechanism is more effective if supported by a trained mentor and a learning environment that is consistent with character values. Thus, real experience becomes a strategic means to shape students' character systematically and sustainably.

The Role of School Context and Leadership in the Sustainability of Character Education

The context of school and leadership has a significant influence on the success of experiential character education programs. Dabdoub (2024) shows that school principals who support a pro-character culture can ensure the consistent implementation of experiential learning methods. School policies, resource provision, and teacher training are important factors to support the sustainability of character interventions. Without this structural support, experiential learning tends to be episodic and lose its long-term impact. In addition, collaboration between teachers, students, and the school community strengthens the transfer of character values from the learning experience to real practice. Therefore, the role of leadership and institutional policies is a key element in ensuring the internalization of long-lasting character values.

Character Education Instruments and Measurements

Measuring student character development requires valid and reliable instruments so that research findings have high accuracy. Wu & Chen (2022) emphasizes that character measurement should include cognitive, affective, and social dimensions to provide a holistic picture. The use of scaled instruments that have been tested, combined with observations and interviews, allows triangulation of data so that the validity of the findings is stronger. This evaluation helps distinguish temporary change from the internalization of sustainable value. In addition, good instruments also support teachers and researchers in designing targeted interventions. Thus, the development of systematic measurement tools is an important component in experiential character education research.

Social and Cultural Context in Strengthening Character Education

The success of experiential learning is influenced by social and cultural contexts, including the differences between urban and rural schools. Gregorová & Ryan (2024) suggests that program design that is sensitive to local conditions, cultural values, and local social practices can reinforce the internalization of character values. Local community participation and parental involvement also provide social support that strengthens learning. This context factor allows learning experiences to be relevant and meaningful for students, thereby increasing the sustainability of their impact. In addition, adapting methods with cultural diversity into account helps students relate character values to real life. Therefore, strengthening character education must always pay attention to contextual variables so that experiential learning strategies are effective in various school settings.

METHODOLOGY

Types and Approaches to Research

This study uses a mixed methods approach, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of experience-based learning in strengthening character education

in high school. The quantitative research design uses a quasi-experimental pretest with a control group, while the qualitative approach applies case studies to explore the mechanisms of internalizing character values through students' real experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The mixed methods approach was chosen because it allows data triangulation so that the research results are more valid and in-depth, both in terms of measuring character score changes and understanding the process of internalizing values through reflection and social interaction.

Research Population

The research population consists of all high school students in two different locations in Indonesia, covering urban and rural schools, with a total population of about 1,200 students. The sampling technique used purposive sampling to select students who participated in the experience-based learning program, taking into account school readiness, curriculum variations, and the diversity of students' socio-cultural backgrounds. The final sample consisted of 200 students who were divided into experimental (100 students) and control (100 students) groups, thus allowing for statistically significant comparative analysis. The selection of the number of participants was based on the consideration of the strength of statistical tests and the ability to manage qualitative data in depth (Teddlie & Yu, 2020).

Data Collection Techniques

Quantitative data collection was carried out through a Likert scale-based questionnaire that assessed character dimensions such as discipline, responsibility, empathy, and cooperation. The instrument was developed by adapting a valid scale from previous research and tested for validity and reliability using Cronbach's Alpha test and item-total correlation, with a reliability value of at least 0.80 (Wu & Chen, 2022). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, and analysis of students, teachers, and parents' reflection documents to understand the internalization mechanisms of character values. Interviews were designed to explore students' real-life experiences, teachers' perceptions of the sustainability of character education, and school context support, while observations were conducted during the implementation of experiential learning projects in the classroom and community.

Research Procedure

The research procedure begins with teacher planning and training related to the implementation of experiential learning, followed by a pretest to assess the initial condition of students' character. Furthermore, an intervention in the form of an experience-based learning program was implemented for 12 weeks, which included community service projects, simulations, and reflective activities. After the intervention, a posttest and qualitative data collection were carried out through interviews and observations. To assess the sustainability of the effect, follow-up measurements were carried out six weeks after the posttest, so as to identify whether the character values remained internalized in the medium term.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data analysis was conducted using the mean difference test (t-test) and the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to compare character scores between the experimental and control groups, while controlling for different initial variables between students. The analysis was performed with SPSS software version 28. Meanwhile, qualitative data was analyzed thematically using an approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which included transcription, encoding, categorization, and identification of patterns of internalization of character values. This combination of analysis allows for the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings so that research can lead to a thorough understanding of the effectiveness of real-life experiences in strengthening character education.

RESERACH RESULT

Improving Character Scores through Experience-Based Learning

The results of the quantitative research show that the implementation of the experience-based learning program has a positive and significant impact on strengthening the character of students at the high school level. The average overall character score in the pretest experimental group was recorded at 65.4 with a standard deviation of 6.2, while the control group had an initial score of 64.9 (SD = 6.0), indicating a relatively balanced initial condition. After the implementation of the 12-week experiential learning program, the experimental group experienced a marked increase, with a posttest score of 81.7 (SD = 5.8). In contrast, the control group experienced only a moderate increase to 70.3 (SD = 6.1), suggesting that experiential interventions significantly encouraged character development compared to conventional learning. The t-test on the posttest confirmed that the difference in score between the two groups was significant ($t = 10.24$; $p < 0.001$), and ANCOVA's analysis controlling for the pretest's initial score confirmed that this character improvement was actually associated with the experience-based learning intervention ($F(1.197) = 92.35$; $p < 0.001$).

If analyzed based on the dimensions of the character, it can be seen that all aspects have experienced significant improvements, but with different variations. Detailed data on character score improvements is shown in the following table:

Table 1. Comparison of Student Character Scores Before and After the Implementation of Experience-Based Learning

Character Dimensions	Pretest Experiments	Posttest Experiment	Pretest Control	Posttest Control	Experiment Increase (%)
Discipline	64.8	79.2	64.5	69.8	14
Responsibility	65.1	81.5	65.0	69.5	18
Empathy	66.0	82.0	65.2	70.1	16
Cooperation	65.8	81.4	64.8	70.1	15

From the table above, it can be seen that the dimension of responsibility has increased the most, up 18%, which confirms that students' involvement in community service projects and simulation activities spurs them to understand the consequences of actions, take initiative in groups, as well as take responsibility for individual and collective tasks. The cooperation dimension also experienced a significant increase of 15%, showing that collaborative activities are effective in building students' ability to work together, share roles, and appreciate the contributions of other team members. Meanwhile, the empathy dimension rose by 16%, indicating that students who actively engage in real social interaction and deep reflection are better able to understand the feelings of others and adapt their behavior to social needs. The discipline dimension increased by 14%, showing behavioral consistency, self-regulatory ability, and compliance with rules in learning activities and community service.

Overall, these findings confirm that real-life experiences in learning not only affect cognitive aspects, but also have a significant impact on affective and social aspects. Character values such as responsibility, cooperation, empathy, and discipline can be internalized in a more durable way. An in-depth analysis showed that the increase in the character score of the experimental group was not temporary; Active engagement, critical reflection, and social interaction during the program form consistent habits and attitudes.

Mechanism of Internalization of Character Values

Qualitative data analysis from semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, and reflection documents showed that the internalization of character values in students occurred through several interrelated mechanisms. First, critical reflection is a key component. During the implementation of community service projects and simulations, students are encouraged to evaluate their decisions and actions in depth, understand the consequences of their behavior, as well as assess how those actions impact others. One of the students (S-12, June 10, 2025 interview) revealed, *"After the environmental clean-up activity, I realized that my small actions could help a lot of people and make me more responsible."* This experience fosters higher self-awareness and the ability to objectively assess personal behavior.

Second, social collaboration plays an important role in strengthening character. Participation in groups and interactions with communities make students learn to work together, respect each other, and develop empathy. Teachers who observe the learning process state, *"Students who are active in group discussions begin to show initiative to help friends who are struggling, they care more about each other"* (G-04, Interview June 12, 2025). This is reinforced by the parents' acknowledgement, *"My child is now more willing to share responsibilities at home, especially after participating in social projects at school"* (O-03, Interview June 15, 2025). Observations also show that students who are more active in projects tend to be more proactive in taking responsibility and exhibiting collaborative behavior than students who are less engaged.

Third, the integration between academia and real practice strengthens the internalization of values. Experiential learning activities that combine theory in the classroom with hands-on application in the field allow students to relate the

concept of character values to real-life situations. One of the students said, *"Learning about cooperation in the classroom is different when we have to prepare for a social service event, I really feel the importance of coordination"* (S-07, Interview June 11, 2025). The teacher also added, *"This experience helps students connect moral lessons with everyday life, so that those values are more embedded in their behavior"* (G-08, Interview June 13, 2025). Parents observed similar behavioral changes at home, *"Now she is more patient and willing to cooperate with her sister when we do family activities"* (O-06, June 16, 2025 Interview).

The data show that these internalization mechanisms reinforce each other. Critical reflection encourages deep understanding, social collaboration strengthens the application of values in real interactions, and academic-practice integration makes experiences more meaningful. Students who are active in all three mechanisms show increased responsibility, empathy, discipline, and more enduring cooperation. For example, one student said, *"I feel more responsible for not only learning theory, but also practicing what I learn with friends"* (S-21, June 14, 2025 Interview).

Overall, these findings confirm that real-life experiences in experiential learning not only increase cognitively awareness of character values, but also foster real, sustainable moral behaviors. Experience combined with critical reflection, social engagement, and application of theory to practice allows the internalization of value to occur systematically and deeply.

Sustainability of Experiential Learning Impact

Follow-up measurements were conducted six weeks after posttest to assess the extent to which character values obtained through the experience-based learning program remained in the medium term. Follow-up results showed that the experimental group maintained a significantly high score, with an overall average of 79.8 (SD = 5.9), while the control group achieved only 71.0 (SD = 6.2). This difference confirms that the impact of experiential learning is more long-lasting than conventional learning methods, which tend to result in a temporary increase in character scores.

Analysis based on the character dimension showed that responsibility and cooperation maintained higher scores, indicating that real experience in community service projects and simulations had a stable medium-term effect. The dimensions of discipline and empathy also showed sustained improvements, although slightly lower than those of responsibility and cooperation. This shows that direct involvement in social and collaborative experiences reinforces the internalization of character values, so that behavioral changes do not only occur temporarily, but persist after the program is completed. The following table summarizes the follow-up data six weeks after the posttest:

Table 2. Six-Week Posttest Follow-up Scores in the Experimental and Control Groups Based on Character Dimensions

Character Dimensions	Posttest Experiment	Follow-up Experiment	Posttest Control	Follow-up Control
Discipline	79.2	77.5	69.8	70.0
Responsibility	81.5	80.2	69.5	70.5
Empathy	82.0	79.8	70.1	71.0
Cooperation	81.4	80.0	70.1	71.0
Average	81.0	79.8	69.9	71.0

From the table above it can be seen that the experimental group maintained most of the character score increase, with an average decrease of only about 1.2 points, while the control group showed minimal or stagnant increases. This confirms that experiential learning programs are not only effective in significantly improving character in the posttest, but are also able to maintain their positive effects in the medium term.

The factors that most support this sustainability are the combination of real-life experiences, social interactions, and critical reflection that are integrated into each learning activity. Students who are actively involved in community service projects, simulations, and collaborative activities are able to apply the values of responsibility and cooperation on a recurring basis, so that these behaviors become part of their routines and identities. Overall, these findings provide empirical evidence that experiential learning results in more stable character changes than traditional learning approaches, while also meeting the research objective of assessing long-term character strengthening through real-life experiences in high school.

School Leadership Roles and Contextual Support

The results of the qualitative analysis show that the success of the implementation of experiential learning is greatly influenced by the role of school leadership, institutional policies, and the support of the learning environment as a whole. Principals who actively provide direction, facilitate coordination between teachers, and create a pro-character culture are able to significantly increase student engagement. Teachers who receive professional training and support show better ability to design experiential activities, monitor student character development, and tailor interventions to classroom and community contexts.

Interview data supports these findings. Students reported positive experiences when the school fully supported the experiential learning program: *"We felt more motivated because the principal and teachers always encouraged us to be active in every community service project."* (S-12, June 10, 2025 interview). Another student also said: *"When the teacher gives clear directions and accompanies each step, we better understand the value of cooperation and responsibility."* (S-27, June 12, 2025 interview)

Parental support and local community involvement also emerged as important factors. Engaged parents help students relate learning to everyday life, while communities provide tangible context to internalize character values. For example, one parent stated: *"Seeing children directly involved in environmental projects makes them more caring and responsible."* (O-03, June 11, 2025 interview). Another parent also said: *"School activities in collaboration with local communities make children learn empathy and not just theory."* (O-07, June 13, 2025 interview)

In addition, teachers also emphasized that structural support from schools facilitates the implementation of experiential learning. Teachers who have access to resources, planning time, and training feel more confident in managing experiential learning projects: *"With the support of the principal and access to materials, we can develop activities that are challenging but still safe for students."* (G-05, interview June 10, 2025). Another teacher also added: *"Collaboration with other teachers and clear direction from school leaders makes the process of internalizing character values more consistent."* (G-08, June 12, 2025 interview)

In contrast, schools with minimal structural support showed lower results in character internalization, even though students continued to participate in experiential learning programs. This emphasizes that the school context not only facilitates activities, but also determines the sustainability of the impact of learning experiences on character strengthening. This analysis emphasizes the need for a combination of visionary leadership, supportive policies, teacher training, and community engagement to achieve a lasting internalization of character values.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that the experience-based learning approach has proven to be effective in strengthening students' character education at the high school level. The most significant improvement was seen in the aspect of responsibility, followed by empathy, cooperation, and discipline. Overall, students who took the experiential-based program showed consistently higher character scores than the control group, both on the posttest and the follow-up measurement six weeks later. These findings are in line with the experiential learning framework put forward by Kolb, in which the cycle of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application is proven to support the process of internalizing character values (Wijnen-Meijer et al., 2022). In other words, moral values are not only learned cognitively, but are also experienced and infused through direct involvement in real situations.

From a theoretical perspective, this study confirms that character education cannot be separated from the context of meaningful experiences. Critical reflection, social interaction, and integration between theory and practice are the main mechanisms for the formation of value internalization. This is in line with the findings of Narrative Education Combined With Experiential Teaching which in the context of nursing students shows that the combination of real experiences with systematic reflection results in more lasting changes in attitudes and behaviors, especially in the dimension of empathy (Zhou et al., 2023). In particular, a significant increase in the aspects of responsibility and cooperation

indicates that collective experiences in community service projects and collaborative activities are able to strengthen students' moral identities, while a slight decrease in the dimensions of discipline and empathy in follow-up indicates the need for repeated reinforcement in order for these values to be maintained.

The consequences of the results of this study are important for educational practice in schools. The implementation of experience-based learning is not enough to be done incidentally, but needs to be an integral part of the curriculum. School leadership support, teacher training, and parent and community involvement are key factors that determine success. Systematic studies show that character education strategies are more successful when the experiential learning approach receives structural support and consistent institutional policies (Hadi et al., 2024). In addition, programs that emphasize empathy, responsibility, and direct social interaction tend to show more stable outcomes in the medium term.

Factors that support the success of this research include active involvement of students in real activities, the existence of structured critical reflection, and integration with academic materials. These factors reinforce the initial hypothesis that hands-on experience can strengthen long-term character education. However, the results of the study also show limitations. First, the duration of follow-up was relatively short (six weeks), so it could not fully describe the long-term sustainability of character values. Second, the research sample is still limited to two locations, so generalization of results to a broader cultural context needs to be done carefully. In addition, the use of scale-based instruments and self-reports is still potentially biased, even though it has been supported by observational and interview data.

Based on these limitations, follow-up research needs to be conducted with a longer follow-up period, involving a more diverse variety of school contexts, and using more objective measurement instruments. Comparative studies between types of experiential activities such as social projects, simulations, or art-based activities are also important to identify the types of experiences that are most effective in shaping certain character dimensions. In addition, evaluating the cost and effectiveness of the implementation of experience-based learning on a broader scale of the education system can provide more concrete policy recommendations. Thus, this research contributes to the development of character education literature by emphasizing the importance of an experience-based approach as a long-term strategy that is able to strengthen students' moral identities while answering global challenges related to the character crisis of the younger generation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that the experience-based learning approach has proven to be effective in strengthening the character education of high school students in a sustainable manner. Quantitative results showed significant improvements in the dimensions of responsibility, empathy, cooperation, and discipline compared to the control group, while qualitative data confirmed that critical reflection, social collaboration, and integration between theory and

practice were the main mechanisms for the formation of value internalization. The increase in character scores that lasted up to six weeks after the program was completed showed that the moral values obtained were not temporary, but were internalized in the students' behavior. These findings reinforce experiential learning theories that emphasize the importance of concrete experiences as an effective means of cultivating a lasting moral identity.

In practical terms, this study confirms that experiential character education cannot be seen as an incidental intervention, but must be systematically integrated into the school curriculum. School leadership support, teacher training, and parent and local community involvement are important factors that ensure the sustainability of the program's positive impact. The contribution of this research lies in strengthening the literature on long-term character education by presenting empirical and conceptual evidence on the role of real experience in the formation of moral values. Thus, the results of this study not only provide theoretical implications, but also offer practical recommendations for schools in designing sustainability-oriented character education strategies.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Future research could explore the long-term impact of experience-based learning on students' moral development and behavioral consistency across different educational levels and cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in assessing how deeply internalized character values persist over time and influence students' social and academic lives. Further studies might also investigate the role of teacher competence, school climate, and community engagement in optimizing experiential character education.

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