

Improving Character Education through a Holistic Approach in Supporting the Achievement of SDGs 4 in Secondary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Holistic-based character education is an approach that emphasizes synergy between schools, families, and communities in shaping students' moral values. This study explores the effectiveness of a holistic approach in character education to support the achievement of SDGs 4 in secondary schools. The research used a mixed method, involving quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with students, teachers, and parents in three high schools. The survey measures perceptions of the effectiveness of character education programs, while in-depth interviews explore implementation experiences and challenges. The data is analyzed with statistical and thematic approaches to provide comprehensive insights. The results show that the holistic-based character education program significantly improves students' moral values, such as honesty, responsibility, and the ability to work together. Parental involvement has been proven to strengthen family communication and support character education at home. Obstacles such as limited parental time indicate the need for flexibility in program implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Character education is the main foundation in creating a generation that is not only intellectually intelligent but also has high moral values (Husen et al., 2022; Ölmez & Izsák, 2020). However, in today's global context, the implementation of character education in schools still faces various challenges. The lack of integration of character values in the formal curriculum, the lack of teacher training related to character learning (Zhang et al., 2023), and the lack of parental participation are the main obstacles in efforts to produce a generation with integrity. This situation is a serious concern, especially in supporting the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 (Wulff, 2024), namely inclusive and quality education. With increasingly complex challenges, a holistic approach is considered an effective strategy to integrate character education thoroughly in the school environment.

Various recent studies pay great attention to the importance of character education in supporting the development of students as a whole. Studies conducted show that character education integrated into the curriculum can increase student empathy, responsibility, and discipline. Character education (Jordan, 2023; Mahanani et al., 2022) involving the school community, including teachers, students, and parents, is more effective than approaches that only focus on classroom learning. In Indonesia, this shows the need for collaboration between sectors to strengthen character education that supports the achievement of SDGs 4.

Several studies have put forward the relevance of a holistic approach in character education. The importance of a holistic approach that focuses not only on students, but also on the professional development of teachers to improve the effectiveness of character education (Sarkadi et al., 2022). A holistic approach that involves various parties, such as teachers, parents, and the community, can create a learning ecosystem that supports strengthening students' character (Curren et al., 2022). In addition, the positive impact of a holistic approach on the development of students' social skills, such as cooperation and leadership (Metcalf et al., 2024).

Other studies also reinforce the importance of character education as an integral part of the SDGs 4 goals (Avelar et al., 2019; Glavič, 2020; Wulff, 2024). The integration of character education (Ritonga & Desrani, 2023) with project-based learning can have a significant impact on increasing students' moral values. In addition, there is a need for a holistic approach that includes curriculum, teacher training, and parent participation to strengthen the successful implementation of character education in secondary schools (Hernández De La Fuente, 2023; Sartika et al., 2024). This research provides the basis that a holistic approach is not only relevant but also urgent to be applied to achieve sustainable quality education.

Although the holistic approach in character education has been widely discussed, there is still a significant gap in its implementation in the field. One of the main challenges is the lack of integration of character education in the formal curriculum that can cover the emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of students in a balanced manner. Many schools still focus on academic

achievement without paying enough attention to character building. In addition, the limited training of teachers and the low involvement of parents in character education programs further exacerbate this situation. Therefore, this research is a solution based on a holistic approach designed to strengthen the synergy between the curriculum, teachers, students, and parents to support the achievement of SDGs 4.

This study has a difference from previous studies, namely focusing on a holistic approach by considering local context and inclusivity. Previous studies have dealt more with theoretical or implementation aspects limited to a specific area, while this study explores how a holistic approach can be applied practically in secondary schools by involving all stakeholders. In addition, the study makes a new contribution by integrating a character-based learning model into the high school curriculum that reflects global and local needs simultaneously. Thus, this research will strengthen previous findings and provide innovations in the approach to the implementation of character education.

This study uses a mixed method to obtain comprehensive data. A quantitative approach (Flemming & Noyes, 2021; St. Pierre, 2021) was conducted through a survey of students and teachers to measure the effectiveness of holistic-based character education programs. Meanwhile, a qualitative approach is carried out through in-depth interviews with teachers, principals, and parents to understand the experiences and challenges faced in the implementation of character education. Quantitative data is analyzed using statistical software, while qualitative data is analyzed with a thematic approach. The combination of these methods allows the study to produce richer and more in-depth findings.

Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on character education by introducing an innovative holistic approach. Practically, the results of this study can be a guide for policymakers, educators, and parents in designing and implementing effective character education programs in secondary schools. In addition, this study provides recommendations for curriculum development, teacher training, and collaboration strategies with parents to create an educational ecosystem that supports the formation of students' character as a whole.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Character education plays a crucial role in shaping students' moral and ethical values, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive and quality education for all. A holistic approach to character education involves integrating cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions to foster well-rounded individuals (Lickona, 1991).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a mixed method to provide a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of a holistic approach in character education in secondary schools. The quantitative approach (Goldsmith, 2021; Swain & King, 2022) is used to measure the effectiveness of the program, while the qualitative approach aims to explore the experiences and views of

stakeholders in depth. The research was conducted in three secondary schools that were selected through a purposive sampling method based on certain criteria, namely having a character education program that is integrated into the curriculum, involving collaboration between teachers, students, and parents, and representing the regional context.

The quantitative instrument used is a closed questionnaire with a Likert scale of 1–5 to measure students' and teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of character education, which includes moral, social, and emotional dimensions. This instrument is tested for validity and reliability through statistical analysis. For qualitative data, semi-structured interview guidelines and field observation notes are used (Lochmiller, 2021; St. Pierre, 2021). Triangulation techniques are applied to ensure the validity of qualitative data. Quantitative data was collected through a survey involving 200 students and 50 teachers, while qualitative data was obtained from in-depth interviews with 15 key informants consisting of principals, teachers, and parents, as well as from observation of character learning activities in the classroom.

The research process is carried out in three stages. The first stage is the collection of quantitative data to get an overview of the effectiveness of character education programs. The second stage involves interviews and observations to explore the experience of program implementation in more depth. The third stage is data analysis using a parallel approach, where quantitative data is analyzed with statistical software, while qualitative data is analyzed (Isoaho et al., 2021; St. Pierre, 2021) thematically to identify key patterns and themes.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Students' Perception of Character Education

The study found that most students (85%) stated that character education programs significantly helped them improve moral values, particularly honesty and responsibility. Students describe their experience as a positive transformation that is not only seen in learning activities but also in daily interactions with friends and teachers. These moral values become more internalized when students engage in activities that allow them to practice honesty, such as group discussions and cooperation-based projects. In addition, the holistic approach in the program provides opportunities for students to learn to respect differences, both in the context of culture, religion, and views.

Students' ability to work together has also improved through this program. They mentioned that collaborative activities such as educational games and social projects helped them understand the importance of teamwork. More than 70% of students report that the program influences their attitude towards diversity, where they value different perspectives more. Positive interaction during group activities is considered one of the main factors that build the ability to cooperate. This shows that character education not only shapes individuals but also encourages more inclusive social learning. The findings also show some unexpected results. A small percentage of students (15%) reported that they needed more time to adapt to this new approach. They find it difficult to understand the application of moral values at the beginning of the program,

especially in activities that involve personal reflection. This is likely due to a lack of prior experience in character-based learning. Researchers suspect that more intensive mentoring in the early stages of the program can help overcome these barriers.

Table 1. Presenting the main dimensions evaluated in the study, namely honesty, cooperation, respect for differences, and initial barriers to students' digital literacy

| Dimension | Key Results | Percentage |
|----------------------------|--|------------|
| Honesty and Responsibility | Most students feel that character education helps them improve their moral values | 85% |
| Cooperative Ability | Students report that collaborative activities improve their ability to work together in groups | 70% |
| Respect for Difference | Character education programs encourage students to appreciate perspectives and diversity | 75% |
| Initial Obstacles | A small percentage of students find it difficult in the early stages of character education programs | 15% |

The results of the study show that holistic-based character education programs have a significant impact on the formation of students' moral values in high school. Most students report that the program helps them strengthen honesty and responsibility, both in daily life and learning activities at school. In addition, students also revealed that character education improves their ability to cooperate and respect differences, especially through collaborative activities such as group projects and discussions. These findings indicate that a holistic approach to character education can create a learning environment that is not only academic but also builds positive social values. However, the initial obstacles faced by a small percentage of students highlight the need for more intensive mentoring to ensure the overall success of the program.

Thus, these results confirm the importance of character education that is thoroughly integrated into the school curriculum, by involving various parties such as teachers, students, and parents. Holistic-based character education is not only effective in shaping moral individuals but also encourages inclusive and harmonious social interactions. These findings provide a basis for further development of the character education model, as well as provide recommendations to address challenges that may arise at the implementation stage. This research underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach to support the achievement of quality education goals by SDGs 4.

The results of this study show that a holistic approach to character education has a significant impact on the formation of students' moral values, especially in the aspects of honesty, responsibility, cooperation, and respect for

differences. These findings confirm the theory that character education integrated into the curriculum has the potential to form individuals who are not only intellectually intelligent but also have integrity. The various collaborative activities in the program allow students to practice these values in a real way, which is in line with the concept of experiential learning. These results provide a strong foundation to support the importance of a holistic approach as a solution to challenges in the implementation of character education.

The findings of this study are also relevant to previous studies, that character education integrated into the curriculum increases student empathy and responsibility (Ingall, 2022; Kristjánsson, 2023). Other research states that the involvement of the entire school community in character education has a greater impact than the partial approach (Curren et al., 2022; Zulfikar et al., 2023). However, this study broadens the perspective by identifying that in addition to the moral aspect, character education also promotes respect for diversity, an aspect that has rarely been discussed in previous studies. Thus, this study adds to the existing literature by offering new insights into the impact of holistic-based character education on the social context of students.

The results of this study are also in line with the findings that emphasize the importance of inter-sector collaboration in supporting character education (Ritonga & Desrani, 2023; Sartika et al., 2024). However, this study makes an additional contribution by showing that a holistic approach can overcome implementation barriers often found in character education programs, such as a lack of parental involvement and support from school principals. In addition, the findings on the initial obstacles experienced by a small percentage of students provide a new dimension that highlights the importance of intensive mentoring during the early stages of program implementation. This has practical implications for designing a more inclusive and effective character education policy.

These findings confirm that a holistic approach is not only effective in shaping students' moral values, but is also able to create a learning environment that encourages respect for diversity and cooperation. By providing relevant empirical data, this study reinforces the argument that a holistic approach is a reliable strategy for improving character education as a whole (Andriani et al., 2023; Munadi & Nurulhaq, 2023). In addition, the results of this study provide practical recommendations to overcome obstacles that are often faced in the implementation of character education programs, so as to be able to support the goal of inclusive and sustainable quality education in accordance with SDGs 4.

Parent Involvement

This study found that parental involvement in character education programs has a significant impact on communication between parents and children, especially related to moral values. Parents report that their involvement in the program encourages more intensive discussions with their children regarding topics such as honesty, responsibility, and discipline. Activities designed to engage parents, such as workshops and group discussions, allow them to understand the importance of character education as well as how to

apply it in their daily lives at home. Most respondents stated that the program provides practical tools and strategies to build more open communication with their children. This shows that character education not only has an impact on students in school but also brings positive changes in the family environment.

Teachers with strong pedagogic competence can effectively utilize digital technology to support student character learning. The integration of technology in the learning process allows values such as responsibility, cooperation, and digital ethics to be taught through interactive media. Teachers who master technology have succeeded in creating project-based learning and online discussions that encourage students to understand and practice these values. Observations show that students who engage in technology-based learning have a better understanding of moral values than students who only learn through conventional methods. These findings confirm that the proper use of technology by teachers can increase the effectiveness of character learning in the digital era.

As many as 75% of parents feel that this program helps strengthen their children's character education at home. One of the activities most appreciated by parents is project-based assignments that involve collaboration between students and families, such as moral discussions or the practice of cooperation at home. The program also motivates parents to be more active in monitoring and supporting their children's moral development. However, there were also unexpected findings, where a small percentage of parents revealed time constraints as an obstacle to fully participating in the program. Researchers suspect that this obstacle can be overcome by providing schedule flexibility or providing online materials for parents who cannot attend in person.

Table 2. Summarizes the key aspects of parental involvement in character education programs, including their impact on communication, home support, and barriers experienced by a small percentage of respondents.

| Aspects | Key Results | Percentage |
|--------------------------------|--|------------|
| Parent and Child Communication | Parental involvement increases discussions about moral values, such as honesty and responsibility | 75% |
| Home Education Support | Parents feel better able to strengthen their children's character education through activities at home | 75% |
| Barriers to Engagement | A small number of parents experience time constraints in participating in the program | 25% |

The results of the study show that parental involvement in character education programs makes a significant contribution to the formation of children's moral values in the family environment. Parents who were actively involved reported improved communication with their children, particularly in discussing moral topics such as honesty, responsibility, and discipline. This program has also succeeded in encouraging parents to take a greater role in

supporting children's character learning at home. Collaborative activities involving families, such as joint discussions or the practice of moral values at home, are one of the effective aspects in strengthening character education. Although some parents experience obstacles in implementation, the program generally creates a positive synergy between the school and the family, which supports the success of the overall character education of students.

The results of this study show that parental involvement in character education programs makes a significant contribution to the formation of students' moral values. These findings support the holistic education theory which states that family involvement is one of the key elements in supporting the success of character learning (Fajarianto et al., 2024; Miller, 2024). This program provides a space for parents to understand and apply moral values that are in line with those taught in school. In addition, the results of this study also show that the communication established between parents and children becomes more effective when they are actively involved in character education activities. This emphasizes the importance of a collaborative approach in building students' character values as a whole.

This research is relevant to its findings which show that character education is more effective when involving families in the learning process (Bahri et al., 2024; Nizarudin Wajdi et al., 2024). In the local context, these results are also in line with Susanto's research, which emphasizes the importance of synergy between schools and families to support character education. However, this study provides a new dimension by showing that collaborative activities at home can be an important means to strengthen the formation of students' character. Researchers have found that parental involvement not only serves as a support but also as a key driver in internalizing moral values into children's daily lives. Comparisons with others show that character education programs involving parents produce a more significant impact than programs that are only carried out in school settings (de Soria & Durán, 2023; Guttesen & Kristjánsson, 2024; Suhra, 2023). However, the study provides a unique additional finding, which is that family-based activities such as moral values discussions or home-cooperation practices can create a more immersive learning experience for students. The obstacles found in this study, such as the limited time for parents to participate, indicate the need for more flexible and adaptive program design. This is an important input to improve the implementation of character education programs in various contexts.

This research also provides new insights that parental involvement in character education is not only an additional element but an integral component in creating a comprehensive learning environment. Researchers note that the success of this program lies in the close collaboration between schools and families. These findings reinforce the argument that character education must be designed by involving various stakeholders to ensure its success. Thus, this program is able to have a wider positive impact, not only in the school environment but also in families and communities.

These findings confirm that parental involvement not only helps strengthen character learning at home but also creates a stronger synergy

between school and family. By providing in-depth empirical data, this study strengthens the argument that holistic-based character education requires active support from the family to achieve optimal results. In addition, these findings provide a basis for recommending more intensive family-involved education policies and practices as part of a strategy to achieve SDG 4 goals.

Deepening the findings, the results of in-depth interviews showed that parental involvement in character education programs significantly improved the quality of their communication with children. Parents feel that this program provides a better understanding of the importance of moral values and how to apply them in daily life at home. Discussions about honesty, responsibility, and discipline are becoming more frequent, which not only helps children understand these values but also strengthens the emotional connection between parents and children. In addition, some parents mentioned that they feel more confident in guiding their children to practice moral values consistently.

From an analytical perspective, the increase in communication reported by parents reflects the effectiveness of holistic-based character education programs. This approach involving parents shows that character education is not only the responsibility of the school but also a collaborative process involving the family. These results support the theory that moral values are more easily internalized by children when the family environment serves as an extension of education in school. However, obstacles such as time constraints experienced by some parents highlight the need for a more flexible approach to program implementation.

The results of this study are in accordance with the findings that show that family involvement in character education increases children's ability to understand and apply values (Kistoro et al., 2024; Maisyaroh et al., 2023). Programs designed to engage parents not only improve the effectiveness of learning in schools but also strengthen the learning environment at home. In addition, (Hussin & Razak, 2024; Prayitno et al., 2024; Ramlan et al., 2023) found that character education programs involving parents have a long-term impact on the formation of moral values in children. These results are also relevant to research (Ekowati et al., 2022; Herawati et al., 2023), which emphasized the importance of consistent communication between parents and children in supporting local-based character education.

Table 3. Summary of Interview Result

| Theme | Sub Theme | Informant Expressions | Number of Informants |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| Parental Involvement in Character Education | Improved Communication with Children | Parents feel closer to their children after participating in this program | 8 |
| | | Discussions with children become more frequent, especially regarding moral values | 8 |

| | | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|---|----|
| | Improved Communication with Children | My son became more open about his activities after we discussed character education | 8 |
| | | I began to apply the values of responsibility in daily activities at home | 10 |
| | Strengthening Moral Values at Home | This program encourages me to be a good example for my child | 10 |
| | | We often remind children of the importance of honesty in their every action | 10 |

These results also enrich the literature by highlighting a unique aspect of family-based character education, namely how intensive discussions between parents and children can enhance a deeper understanding of moral values. Compared to previous studies, this study provides an additional focus on the influence of collaborative activities such as moral discussions and values practices at home on the formation of children's character. The obstacles found, such as parental time constraints, also provide a new dimension for further exploration, especially in the context of program flexibility.

These findings emphasize the importance of collaboration between schools and families in creating an environment that sustainably supports character education. However, obstacles such as time constraints indicate the need for more adaptive and inclusive strategies to ensure program sustainability. The results of this study make an important contribution to the development of family-based education policies, as well as opening up opportunities for further studies that can explore new approaches in character education.

This research has several limitations that need to be considered. First, the scope of the study was limited to three secondary schools, so the results may not be fully representative of the variation in educational contexts in other regions. Second, the parental involvement studied is based on perception reports, which can be influenced by subjective bias. In addition, the time constraints experienced by some parents indicate the need for a more flexible approach in the implementation of family-based character education programs. These limitations open up opportunities for further research with a wider area coverage, the use of more diverse data triangulation methods, and the testing of technology-based programs to increase the flexibility of parental involvement.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Holistic-based character education is an effective approach to shaping students' moral, social, and emotional values as a whole. This study confirms that the success of character education programs does not only depend on the curriculum designed by the school but also on the active involvement of parents in supporting the learning process at home. These findings provide an overview that integrated character education can create synergy between schools, families,

and communities, thereby supporting the achievement of SDG 4 which emphasizes inclusive and quality education.

Based on the results of this study, several actions can be taken to increase the effectiveness of character education programs. Schools need to develop a character education model that is not only school-based but also involves families through a collaborative approach. Training and mentoring for teachers and parents is also an important step to ensure that moral values can be taught and applied consistently. In addition, the development of technology-based programs can be an alternative to increase the flexibility of parental involvement when facing time or accessibility constraints.

FURTHER STUDY

This research inspires further studies that can expand the scope of geographical contexts or adapt approaches to different age groups. In addition, a more in-depth study of the mechanism of integrating character education into the curriculum and family life can provide a more complete understanding of the effectiveness of this holistic approach. Thus, this research not only contributes to the development of character education theory, but also provides a basis for more inclusive and sustainable educational policies and practices.

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