

TEACHERS' MEANINGS OF CHARACTER EDUCATION IN INDONESIAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Character education has become an essential concern in schools, particularly in relation to teachers' roles in shaping students' values and attitudes. This study aims to explore teachers' meanings of character education in Indonesian elementary schools. Using a qualitative exploratory approach, the study involved three elementary school teachers in Purwokerto who were selected purposively based on their teaching experience and involvement in student development. Data were collected through semi structured interviews and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that teachers understand character education as a moral responsibility inherent in their professional roles. Character education is perceived not merely as a formal program but as a practice embedded in daily school life, manifested through teachers' conduct, interactions, and relationships with students. Teachers also emphasize the importance of role modelling and relational interactions as key spaces for character formation. At the same time, they recognize various limitations and challenges, particularly the influence of family background and external social environments, which shape students' character beyond the school context. Overall, the study highlights that character education, from teachers' perspectives, is a contextual and relational process grounded in everyday professional practice. Understanding teachers' meanings of character education provides valuable insights for developing more realistic and context sensitive approaches to character education in elementary schools.

Keywords: Character Education, Elementary Schools, Moral Responsibility, Teachers' Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

Character education is a crucial aspect of education, as it is closely related to the formation of students' values, attitudes, and behaviors within both school and societal contexts (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022). Across educational policies and practices, character education is often positioned as an integral component of holistic student development, addressing not only academic achievement but also moral and social dimensions (Fernández-Espinosa et al., 2025a; Megawati & Prahmana, 2025). Nevertheless, the implementation of character education in schools takes diverse forms and approaches, depending on institutional contexts and the actors involved in its enactment (Maulana, 2022).

Teachers are among the key actors in character education within schools. In their daily professional practice, teachers interact directly with students and engage in various situations that involve moral and ethical dimensions. A number of studies portray teachers not only as instructors but also as role models, guides, and mentors in the process of students' character formation (Lickona, 1991). These interactions create opportunities for teachers to interpret, enact, and reflect character values within everyday educational practices.

Teachers' understandings and interpretations of character education may vary, shaped by their professional experiences, pedagogical beliefs, and the social and cultural contexts in which they work (Flint et al., 2024). Studies on teaching beliefs indicate that teachers hold different orientations toward educational processes, ranging from teacher centered to student centered approaches, which in turn influence how they perceive educational goals and practices in schools (Pajares, 1992). These differing orientations suggest variations in how teachers understand their roles and responsibilities, including in the context of character education.

A number of previous studies on character education have primarily focused on implementation aspects, such as school programs, instructional strategies, and the use of specific models or media to instill character values in students (Alfikri & Fajar, 2023; Angga et al., 2022; Was et al., 2006). Other studies emphasize the role of teachers in character education, particularly in terms of role modelling, moral leadership, and the strengthening of school culture (Kapoh et al., 2023; Lickona, 1997). Nevertheless, these studies tend to position teachers mainly as implementers or agents of practice, while teachers' personal meanings and interpretations of character education have received relatively limited scholarly attention.

On the other hand, changes in social and educational contexts, including the dynamics of school life and technological developments, have also shaped teachers' experiences and perspectives in performing their professional roles (Akram et al., 2022; Fütterer et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2025). These conditions create the possibility of diverse meanings of character education to emerge, which have not yet been fully captured by studies that focus primarily on programs or policy driven approaches.

Based on these conditions, this study is directed at exploring teachers' meanings of character education in Indonesian schools. By examining teachers' perspectives and experiences in depth, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how character education is understood by teachers within the context of everyday educational practice.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Character Education in School Context

Character education has increasingly been positioned as a central component of holistic education, aiming to foster not only students' academic achievement but also their moral, social, and emotional development (Sriyanta et al., 2025). In many educational systems, character education is understood as a deliberate effort to cultivate values such as responsibility, respect, honesty, and empathy within school environments (Megawati & Prahmana, 2025). Rather than being limited to formal curricula, character education is often

embedded within broader educational practices and school cultures, reflecting the belief that values are developed through lived experiences and social interactions (Chadija et al., 2026). Previous studies emphasize that character education is shaped by contextual factors, including school culture, social norms, and daily interactions within educational settings (Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025). This perspective suggests that character education is not a uniform or standardized process, but one that is deeply influenced by the meanings and practices constructed by educators in their everyday professional lives.

Teachers' Role and Moral Responsibility in Character Education

Teachers are widely recognized as key agents in character education due to their close and continuous interaction with students. Beyond their instructional responsibilities, teachers are often viewed as moral agents who implicitly and explicitly influence students' value development. Several scholars argue that teaching is inherently a moral practice, as teachers' decisions, attitudes, and behaviors convey ethical messages to students on a daily basis (Cronqvist, 2025).

Research on teachers' beliefs indicates that educators' interpretations of their professional roles significantly shape how character education is enacted in schools (Hadi et al., 2025). When teachers perceive character education as a moral responsibility rather than an external mandate, they tend to integrate values into everyday teaching practices more authentically. This aligns with studies suggesting that character education becomes more meaningful when it is grounded in teachers' professional identity and ethical commitment, rather than treated as an additional program or policy requirement (Groenewald & Arnold, 2025; Pires, 2023).

Character Education as Everyday Practice and the Hidden Curriculum

A growing body of literature highlights that character education often takes place through everyday school practices rather than through explicitly labeled character education programs. Daily routines, classroom management strategies, teacher-student interactions, and informal school norms contribute to what is commonly referred to as the hidden curriculum. Through this hidden curriculum, students internalize values by observing how teachers respond to situations, resolve conflicts, and interact with others (Gunio, 2021).

Role Modelling and Teacher-Student Relationships

Role modelling has been consistently identified as a central mechanism in character education. Teachers' behaviors, attitudes, and ways of interacting with others serve as concrete examples for students, making values visible and observable. Research indicates that students are more likely to internalize character values when they are demonstrated consistently by significant adults in their lives, particularly teachers (Feliza, 2025).

In addition to role modelling, the quality of teacher-student relationships has been shown to influence character formation. Positive relationships characterized by trust, care, and mutual respect provide a supportive environment for moral and social development. Within such relational contexts, character education becomes a dialogical process, allowing teachers to guide students' values in ways that are responsive to individual needs and experiences (Gusriana & Elisa, 2024).

Challenges and Contextual Influences on Character Education

Despite the central role of schools and teachers, the literature acknowledges that character education is shaped by factors beyond the school environment. Family background, peer groups, media exposure, and broader social contexts significantly influence students' value development. Studies emphasize that inconsistencies between values promoted at school and those reinforced at home or in society can pose challenges for teachers in implementing character education effectively (Hadi et al., 2025).

These findings highlight that character education is a shared responsibility involving multiple stakeholders. Consequently, scholars argue for more context-sensitive and collaborative

approaches that recognize the interconnected roles of schools, families, and communities in shaping students' character (Akram et al., 2023; Arthur, 2019; Handoko et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach with an exploratory design to understand teachers' perspectives and meanings of character education in schools (Creswell, 2014). The study was conducted in elementary schools in the Purwokerto area and involved three teachers selected through purposive sampling based on their teaching experience and involvement in student development. The number of participants was determined by considerations of data depth and richness, which are central characteristics of qualitative research, rather than by statistical representativeness (Creswell, 2014).

Data were collected through semi structured interviews. The interview guide was developed with reference to key concepts in the literature on character education and teachers' moral roles discussed in the introduction, and was designed flexibly to enable an in-depth exploration of teachers' meanings. Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2014). All stages of the research were carried out in accordance with ethical research principles, including informed consent and the protection of participants' confidentiality.

RESEARCH RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data with elementary school teachers regarding their meanings of character education. The findings are organized into several themes that emerged consistently across participants' accounts. These themes represent patterns of meaning grounded in teachers' professional experiences and everyday practices in school contexts. Rather than describing formal implementations or prescribed programs, the findings illuminate how teachers interpret character education as part of their lived professional reality.

Character Education as Teachers' Moral Responsibility

The findings indicate that teachers consistently perceive character education as a moral responsibility inherent in the teaching profession. Participants emphasized that character education is not understood as an additional task imposed by school policies or curricular demands, but as an ethical obligation that naturally accompanies their role as educators. Teachers described this responsibility as inseparable from their professional identity, reflecting an internalized sense of duty toward students' moral and value development.

One participant stated, *"As a teacher, I see character education as my responsibility, not because of a particular program, but because it is already part of a teacher's moral duty"* (Teacher 1). This statement suggests that teachers' meanings of character education are grounded in personal moral awareness rather than external directives. Similarly, another participant noted, *"When it comes to character education, I see it as the teacher's responsibility. We cannot simply leave it to rules or school activities"* (Teacher 2), indicating that teachers view moral guidance as an essential dimension of their professional role.

These accounts reveal that teachers position themselves as morally accountable actors within the educational process. Character education, from their perspective, is understood as a continuous obligation that shapes how they interact with students, make decisions, and exercise professional judgment in everyday situations.

Character Education as Everyday Practice in Schools

Another prominent theme highlights teachers' understanding of character education as a practice that occurs through everyday school activities and interactions. Teachers described character education as something that unfolds organically through routine classroom management,

communication styles, and responses to students' behavior, rather than through explicitly labeled character education programs.

One participant explained, *"Character education often comes from small things, such as how teachers correct students, how they communicate, or how they respond to problems"* (Teacher 1). This statement reflects teachers' awareness that character formation takes place in ordinary moments of school life. Another participant similarly noted, *"Sometimes, without realizing it, character education is already happening through daily routines at school"* (Teacher 3), suggesting that character education is often implicit rather than deliberately planned.

These findings indicate that teachers perceive the school environment as a social space where values are shaped through lived experience. Character education is not separated from instructional activities, but is embedded within teachers' daily interactions and habitual practices. Teachers thus understand character development as an ongoing process that evolves alongside routine school life.

Teacher Role Modelling as Character Education

Role modelling emerged as a central element in teachers' meanings of character education. Participants emphasized that students learn character values primarily through observing teachers' behavior, attitudes, and consistency in action. Rather than relying on verbal instruction alone, teachers believe that their conduct serves as a concrete reference for students' moral learning.

As one participant stated, *"Children tend to imitate what they see more easily than what is merely said"* (Teacher 1). Another teacher added, *"Every action is observed by students and can influence how they behave"* (Teacher 3). These statements indicate that teachers are highly aware of their visibility and influence in students' daily lives.

The findings suggest that teachers understand role modelling as an integral part of their professional practice. Teachers view their behavior not as incidental, but as continuously shaping students' perceptions of acceptable values and conduct. Role modelling is therefore perceived as a practical mechanism through which character education is enacted in everyday school contexts.

Teacher-Student Relationships as a Space for Character Formation

The analysis further reveals that teachers perceive **teacher-student relationships** as a crucial space for character formation. Participants described meaningful relationships characterized by closeness, trust, and personal understanding as essential for guiding students' character development. Teachers emphasized that values are more effectively cultivated when students feel respected, understood, and emotionally supported.

One participant noted, *"When teachers are close to students, it becomes easier to instill positive values"* (Teacher 2). Another highlighted the importance of understanding individual differences, stating, *"Every child is different, so teachers need to know their students in order to guide their character appropriately"* (Teacher 3).

These findings indicate that teachers understand character education as a relational process. Teacher-student interactions are viewed not merely as instructional exchanges, but as opportunities for dialogue, empathy, and moral guidance. Through these relationships, teachers perceive themselves as able to respond to students' individual needs and support value internalization in a more personal and meaningful way.

Constraints and Challenges in Character Education

Finally, the findings reveal that teachers are aware of various constraints and challenges in implementing character education. Although teachers perceive character education as a moral responsibility and an essential part of everyday school practice, they recognize that their efforts are influenced by factors beyond the school context.

Participants identified family background as a significant factor shaping students' character. One teacher explained, *"Sometimes the values taught at school are not aligned with what*

children receive at home” (Teacher 1), suggesting that inconsistencies between home and school environments can limit teachers’ influence. In addition, teachers pointed to broader social and media influences, with one participant stating, *“The influence of the outside environment and media is very strong”* (Teacher 3).

These findings indicate that teachers view character education as a complex and contextual process. While they acknowledge their professional responsibility, they also recognize that character formation is shaped by multiple social environments. Teachers therefore understand character education not as an isolated school-based effort, but as a process that requires broader support and consistency beyond the classroom.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Teachers’ meanings of character education indicate that teachers do not view character education as an additional task or merely as the implementation of school programs. Instead, teachers understand it as an ethical obligation inherent in their professional roles as educators. This meaning emerges from teachers’ awareness of their position and responsibility in guiding students’ value and character development, which they perceive as an inseparable part of the professional mandate of teaching. From this perspective, teachers position themselves as ethical subjects within education, whose professional responsibilities extend beyond instructional duties to include moral guidance.

These meanings further reflect teachers’ self-understanding as moral agents in education, for whom attention to values and ethics forms the foundation of everyday professional practice. Teachers perceive character education as an ongoing process that is continuously integrated into their roles, rather than as a separate or episodic activity. This interpretation aligns with perspectives that conceptualize teachers as bearing ethical responsibility for students’ character formation (Campbell, 2003; Lickona, 1997) and is consistent with previous findings showing that teachers interpret character education as part of their professional responsibility requiring sustained moral commitment in teaching practice (Fernández-Espinosa et al., 2025b)

Teachers’ meanings also emphasize that character education is enacted through everyday school practices. Teachers understand character formation as occurring through routine interactions, responses to students’ behavior, and the ways they manage daily situations both inside and outside the classroom. Within this meaning, character is not always taught explicitly through formal instruction, but is gradually shaped through ongoing processes embedded in daily school life. Teachers thus view the school as a social space where values are constructed through lived experiences rather than isolated lessons.

This understanding reflects teachers’ perceptions of character education as inseparable from learning processes and school life more broadly. Teachers interpret their interactions, decisions, and shared routines with students as integral to value formation, situating character education within the hidden curriculum that shapes students’ attitudes and behaviors through everyday experiences. Such meanings are consistent with previous research emphasizing that character education often occurs implicitly through teachers’ daily practices and school culture, rather than solely through formal programs or written curricula (Yulia et al., 2025), and that routine interactions and habitual practices play a crucial role in students’ internalization of values (Kärner & Schneider, 2024; Litaay et al., 2025; Maudia et al., 2025).

In addition, teachers’ meanings highlight role modelling as a central element of character education. Teachers perceive their own attitudes and behaviors as primary references through which students learn character values. From this perspective, character education is not conveyed merely through advice or rules, but is enacted through the consistency of teachers’ behavior in everyday school life. Teachers thus understand themselves as influential figures whose observable conduct provides concrete examples for students’ moral learning.

Understanding role modelling in this way suggests that teachers view it as an integral and continuous aspect of professional practice rather than as an incidental action. Role modelling functions, in teachers' meanings, as a bridge between the values promoted in education and the behaviors expected to emerge among students. This interpretation aligns with literature positioning teacher role modelling at the core of character education, emphasizing that character develops through moral exemplarity demonstrated by significant adults (Lickona, 1997), and is supported by studies showing the strong influence of teachers' behavior on students' attitudes and values (Muzakkir et al., 2024).

Teachers' meanings also extend to teacher-student relationships, which are perceived not merely as formal instructional interactions but as relational spaces that enable meaningful value development. Teachers view closeness, trust, and communication with students as essential conditions for guiding character formation. Within these relationships, teachers perceive opportunities to cultivate values such as empathy, responsibility, and mutual respect through dialogue and personal engagement.

This interpretation reflects teachers' understanding of interpersonal interaction as a crucial medium for value internalization. Character education, from teachers' perspectives, does not occur solely through rules or role modelling, but is also fostered through caring relationships that support students' moral and social development. This meaning aligns with pedagogical perspectives emphasizing care and relationality in education, which highlight the contribution of supportive teacher-student relationships to students' moral and prosocial development (Longobardi et al., 2021; San-Martín et al., 2021; Wu & Zhang, 2022).

At the same time, teachers' meanings acknowledge various constraints and challenges in carrying out their roles in character education. Although teachers perceive character education as a moral responsibility embedded in everyday practice, they recognize that its enactment is influenced by factors beyond their direct control. Teachers identify family background, social environments, and media exposure as significant influences shaping students' character outside the school context.

Understanding these constraints highlights that teachers view character education as a complex and contextual process rather than an individual responsibility borne solely by teachers or schools. Teachers recognize that the effectiveness of character education depends on the consistency of values across schools, families, and broader social environments. In this sense, teachers' meanings position character education as a collaborative endeavor requiring the involvement of multiple stakeholders. This view aligns with previous research emphasizing challenges arising when school values are not supported by family and community contexts (Hendrowibowo & Kristanto, 2023; OECD, 2021), as well as studies highlighting the influence of media and social change on students' value orientations (Avci et al., 2025; Nugraheni, 2018).

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