# BUILDING CHARACTER EDUCATION BASED ON SCHOOL CULTURE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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**Abstract:** The importance of character education has become one of the main programs in school development. Character education aims to develop a person's character, making them better individuals. This form of education is crucial for everyone as it guides human behavior and expression in society. The development of character education based on school culture reflects the motivations and character values that grow within the school environment, involving the traditions of individuals in the educational setting. This research is a qualitative descriptive study with the aim of understanding the implementation of character education based on school culture. The research subjects included school principals and teachers from three schools in the Yogyakarta region, namely Elementary School A, Elementary School B, Elementary School C. Data collection techniques involved observation, interviews, and document analysis. The gathered data was then analyzed through thematic analysis, involving data grouping and interpretation stages. The research results indicate that the three schools adopt different approaches, adjusting to the specific conditions of their respective school environments. The character development goals of each school also exhibit slight differences. The implementation of character education based on school culture is influenced by several factors, such as school leadership, the resources of teachers and staff, the availability of facilities and infrastructure, parental support, and the community environment.

**Keywords:** Character Education, Character Implementation, School Culture, Elementary School

## INTRODUCTION

Schools, as one of the educational institutions, bear a responsibility towards students, particularly in nurturing their character. The character instilled by a school depends on the ultimate goals of the learning process within that institution. At times, the character objectives of each school are nearly the same, but they employ different approaches to achieve them. One of the efforts made by schools to promote character education is based on the character values already ingrained within school environment, involving the traditions of individuals in the school setting. This approach is often known as school culture-based education.

Character education can influence students' behavior (Thompson, 2002). Character education is an effort to nurture a child's soul, both in their outward and inner nature, from their basic traits towards becoming a better human being (Mulyasa,2018). Good character is about how to be and give as a human to others (Linda, Richard, 1995). Character education not only explains right from wrong but also deals with how a student

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develops and applies these character traits (Dalmeri, 2014). Essentially, character education is education about values (Soegeng, et.al, 2013). Likewise, character education is moral education that involves various aspects such as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions related to values and norms (Zubaedi, 2012: 14).

The implementation of character education based on culture, as outlined in PASKA (2018), can be carried out through eight activities, namely: (1) instilling core values, (2) setting an example among school community members, (3) involving all stakeholders, (4) establishing and adhering to school norms, regulations, and traditions, (5) developing the school's branding, (6) promoting literacy activities, (7) nurturing interests, talents, and potentials through extracurricular activities, and (8) providing individual and group mentoring by teachers in school activities. The primary goal of character-based education is to create an environment that fosters mutual support among individuals in discovering their true selves and experiencing directed freedom for healthy psychological, moral, and spiritual growth (Koesoema, 2018: 30). Additionally, it aims to develop students' ability to make moral decisions for the betterment of life (Solisso, et al., 2023).

Character education based on the school's culture can be implemented through various approaches. In its implementation, character education can be integrated into science education and extracurricular activities (Topik, 2023). The use of Stop Motion Animation in elementary schools has been found to be an effective means of character education (Rihatno, et al., 2020). Utilizing English Module as a teaching medium can enhance students' motivation in elementary school (Hidayati et al., 2022). Furthermore, character education can also be carried out through the process of learning and the implementation of learning modules (Muhammad, et all., 2021).

The development of culture-based character education in elementary schools can sometimes yield varying character achievements for each school. Darmawan (2018) explains that school culture encompasses ideas, concepts, norms in the form of a vision and mission that prioritize religious values, honesty, tolerance, discipline, hard work, creativity, independence, curiosity, love for one's homeland, and a passion for reading, manifested in the form of activities and behaviors. Muhammad, et all (2021) note that character development achievement can include religious character, honesty, tolerance, discipline, hard work, creativity, independence, democratic values, curiosity, national spirit, a love for peace, social responsibility, and accountability.

In the implementation of culture-based character education, several influencing factors can be identified, including school principal leadership, teacher human resources, parental involvement, character curriculum, from central authorities, and the social conditions of the school environment (Huda et, al., 2021, Susilo, et all, 2022, & Sumiati, 2023). The availability of suitable facilities also affects the implementation of culture-based character education in schools (Darmawan, 2018). Additionally, there are other factors that can hinder the implementation of culture-based character education in elementary schools, such as a lack of support from educational policymakers, curriculum development not aligning with the school's character, limited motivation for creativity and innovations, and insufficient awareness and participation from educational stakeholders (Tohri, et, al., 2022).

This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of character education implementation in elementary schools through a qualitative approach. It will explore how

character education is applied in elementary schools and the factors that influence the implementation of culture-based character education in schools.

It is expected that the research results could provide effective information regarding the implementation, influencing factors, and impacts of culture-based character education in elementary schools. With this effective information, future contributions can be more precisely tailored to the development of character education programs in elementary schools.

**METHOD**

This research employed a qualitative descriptive method with the aim of describing activities, phenomena, events, perceptions, thoughts of individuals or groups, followed by analysis (Sukmadinata, 2007). The research was conducted in three schools located in the Sleman Regency of the Special Region of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. All of these schools were private institutions (Schools A, B, and C). Data collection was carried out through interviews (both individual and group), observations, visual analysis, and literature review (Gill et al., 2008). In-depth interviews were performed at School A, utilizing both visual observations and the documentation of photographs. The literature review as based on books and research articles as sources. Subsequently, the data were analyzed by organizing them into several categories, describing them one by one, synthesizing the information, and drawing conclusions. The interview and observation data were then returned to the interviewees for validation and to confirm the accuracy of the information.

**FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

The research finding reveals several insights into the implementation of culture-based character education in the three schools. The implementation of character education was examined in terms of the school's vision and mission, as well as the ideas and concepts embedded in the school's sustainability process. Meanwhile, the factors influencing this implementation were assessed, encompassing both supportive and obstructive factors.

1. The Implementation of Culture-Based Character Education in Schools
    1.1 The Implementation of Character Education in School A

    The initiative to realize the school's vision and mission began in early 1983 by instilling discipline as a character trait. The character traits School A aimed to develop included patience, obedience, adaptability, compassion, empathy, and instinctual behavior. One of their significant initiatives was starting the school day at 06:40 AM, meaning that teachers and staff arrived at the school earlier. The significance of this implementation was rooted in the belief that children are a gift or trust from God, and thus the role of parents (in this case, teachers) is to welcome them in order to provide a safe education, protection, and nourishment, just as they would receive at home. The school's goal was to make students feel comfortable in their learning environment, much like at home. In addition to providing guidance to the children, parents' role is to ensure that they receive nutritious food (Nongyendi & others, 2013) and create a

comfortable environment for them (Kurniati, 2021: 244). This commitment was embraced by the teachers and staff, who considered it their responsibility to fulfill this trust as if they were parents at the school. The teachers had to be able to apply the principles of nurturing, caring, and educating in their teaching methods at the school.

There are at least five aspects of how Elementary School A built culture-based character education. First, character education through daily family activities. Strengthening character education is reinforced by making parents role models, which is why the school believed in involving parents in the educational process. Every Saturday, meetings with parents start at 06:00 AM. This school was open to criticism because they believe that the journey is not always straightforward, so there needed to be a collective commitment from all stakeholders, including school community members, parents, and the community.

Second, character education was instilled through classroom learning. Each teacher was required to emphasize at least two-character traits. There are various ways in which teachers interact with students to shape their character, and a simple gesture like patting a student's head is one of the approaches to make students feel comfortable and build a close, parent-child-like relationship.

Third, character education was integrated through extracurricular activities. There were approximately 36 types of extracurricular activities as a means to enhance character education. Character education doesn't have to be confined to the classroom; it needs to be reinforced outside of it. One concrete example is the involvement of mentors in activities outside of school, optimizing facilities designed for character development programs.

Fourth, character education was incorporated through classroom arrangement. The school believed that character development doesn't require luxurious facilities. What matters most was the proper arrangement of physical artifacts, so that students would feel comfortable while learning. A tangible sign of students' comfort was that many of them enjoy studying and playing at the school. Literacy promotion was realized through classroom designs like a literacy reading corner. The classrooms were designed by teachers and parents so that students feel like they are learning in a home-like environment.

The fifth aspect is digital-based character education. The steps taken by the school included: (a) making it mandatory for teachers to create Google Classrooms, which were used for character development activities, controlling children's activities, monitoring prayers, and more; (b) students' attendance was recorded through Google Classroom; (c) while students were encouraged to continue handwriting, the school also provides tablets for certain classes; and (d) some discussions were held through Zoom meetings.

1.2 The Implementation of Character Education in School B

Since its establishment, Elementary School B has always had a strong foundation in character education. Academic aspects were not prioritized; instead, the focus was on building character in alignment with the school's vision and mission. The character they aimed to cultivate includes being faithful, possessing good morals, being intelligent, skilled in mastering science and technology, and having a global perspective. These character traits were reinforced through five pillars and eight bases

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of learning. It is hoped that after students graduate from the school, they would have strong character in line with the five pillars emphasized by the school.

The five pillars that are continually developed at Elementary School B are as follows: (1) Believing in and having faith in the greatness of God. The school's curriculum is based on Islamic principles, with the expectation of shaping students with character and personalities in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith, (2) Respecting others. Respecting and valuing others is a fundamental character trait that students and teachers at the school are expected to possess. By respecting and valuing others, we also show respect for ourselves, (3) Maintaining cleanliness. Cleanliness is considered an integral part of the faith of every individual in the Islamic religion. The school's hope is that in a clean, tidy, and beautiful environment, the learning process will be more effective and smoother, (4) Being honest. Honesty is a character trait that should be instilled in students from a young age. One way to do this is through the implementation of the school's curriculum, (5) Taking responsibility. Through the character trait of responsibility, students become aware of their behaviour, are willing to express their ideas, and are ready to take risks based on their own decisions and those of the group.

In addition to the five pillars serving as the foundation for character development, the strengthening of character education also involves eight bases of learning at School B: (1) positive discipline, instilled through daily habits within the school environment and families, (2) respect and tolerance for individual differences, (3) emphasis on flexibility in thinking and acting, (4) acknowledgment of achievements, (5) reinforcement of the idea that religion, art, and sports contribute to character development, (6) promotion of an open learning process that prioritizes student participation, (7) education based on living values, (8) acknowledgment that each individual is unique, and every student has their own way and ability to develop into themselves.

The development of culture-based character education at School B was also grounded in Eastern culture or "unggah ungguh," a norm that every individual should possess when interacting with others and the community. One simple activity closely monitored by the school was that every student, upon arrival at the school, was required to greet the teachers and staff. The school initially noticed that students tended not to greet, but over time, they began to adopt this habit. Another example is the development of positive discipline. Students completed their tasks at the school not because there were written instructions but rather because they are motivated by their own awareness and willingness to do so. Thus, there were no command signs displayed in the school environment. The school believed that with the habit of applying positive discipline, the need for instructional signs is no longer necessary. Additionally, teachers always provided direct examples of how to incorporate positive discipline in daily school life.

Extracurricular activities were designed to support character development. For example, the school implements an extracurricular schedule from 02:15 PM to 03:15 PM to emphasize that this time was sufficient and suitable for students to develop their interests and talents. Afterward, students were expected to understand that at 03:15 PM, it was time to draw closer to their faith. During this process, they were also accompanied by extracurricular teachers. As a result, the character strengthening

process did not end with extracurricular content but continues in the subsequent character education activities. The idea of designing a sustainable character program within extracurricular activities emerged after the pandemic. The school realized that there was ample time during the pandemic to strengthen students' character and their faith, which had continued in other activities at School B to this day.

Furthermore, the character education program was designed to align with the preparation time for performing the Dhuha prayer. The school allocated 30 minutes before the main prayer begins and 15 minutes for the actual prayer. The goal was for students to develop the habit of performing Sunnah prayers (additional prayers) before the obligatory prayers. For instance, students were monitored during their ablution (wudhu) activities, after which they were guided to recite the names of Allah (Asmaul Husna). This was followed by the Dhuha prayer and Quranic recitation. In this program, the school employed a form of assessment, but the focus was not on numerical grades. Instead, teachers, particularly mentors, praise students for their participation and emphasize the significance of these activities. The entire sequence of these activities is reported by the class teachers during parent meetings.

Character education is also based on literacy and digital technology. As students are still children, the school prioritized learning with books. Both the school and teachers were required to conduct prior monitoring to identify books suitable for students' development. This did not mean digital literacy was neglected. The school was committed to controlling the amount of time children spend on digital learning (primarily computer lessons). The school positioned the library as the centre of literacy. Teachers played a significant role in curating the books in the library and the school supported teachers in adding more books. The school also advised parents on using internet-based resources and provided information on websites suitable for children. Additionally, the school monitored the use of gadgets by teachers, particularly in front of the students. The school focused on the use of gadgets by teachers when communicating with parents upon students' return home.

The experience of building culture-based character education was further enhanced by feedback from parents and other schools that admitted students from School B. Graduates of Elementary School B were known for their self-confidence, straightforwardness, and high levels of empathy from the very beginning. This was partly because School B was an inclusive school, and students were accustomed to interacting with individuals with diverse backgrounds.

1.3 The Implementation of Character Education in School C

School C placed a strong emphasis on religious foundations in character education. Students were instilled with the belief that humans are creations of God and should always remember their Creator wherever they are. Belief, piety, and good moral conduct are the achievements aimed at by the school in terms of religious-based character. Other characteristics developed include discipline, self-reliance, critical thinking, and courage.

The five pillars that are continually developed at Elementary School C are as follows: (1) Believing in and having faith in the greatness of God. The school's curriculum is based on Islamic principles, with the expectation of shaping students with character and personalities in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'an and

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Hadith, (2) Respecting others. Respecting and valuing others is a fundamental character trait that students and teachers at the school are expected to possess. By respecting and valuing others, we also show respect for ourselves, (3) Maintaining cleanliness. Cleanliness is considered an integral part of the faith of every individual in the Islamic religion. The school's hope is that in a clean, tidy, and beautiful environment, the learning process will be more effective and smoother, (4) Being honest. Honesty is a character trait that should be instilled in students from a young age. One way to do this is through the implementation of the school's curriculum, (5) Taking responsibility. Through the character trait of responsibility, students become aware of their behaviour, are willing to express their ideas, and are ready to take risks based on their own decisions and those of the group.

In addition to the five pillars serving as the foundation for character development, the strengthening of character education also involves eight bases of learning at School C: (1) positive discipline, instilled through daily habits within the school environment and families, (2) respect and tolerance for individual differences, (3) emphasis on flexibility in thinking and acting, (4) acknowledgment of achievements, (5) reinforcement of the idea that religion, art, and sports contribute to character development, (6) promotion of an open learning process that prioritizes student participation, (7) education based on living values, (8) acknowledgment that each individual is unique, and every student has their own way and ability to develop into themselves.

The implementation of character education based on religion involved several activities, such as Dhuha prayer (prayers in the morning before the start of learning) followed by tahfidz movement (Quranic recitation). Learning processes always started with prayer activities, followed by reciting the names of God's attributes (Asmaul Husna), reciting relevant daily prayers, and reading Hadiths (sayings of Prophet Muhammad conveyed to his companions and later documented) suitable for children. During break times at school, Quranic recitations (known as Murottal) are played.

Starting from grade 4, students were encouraged to participate in Adzan (call to prayer) activities and receive religious knowledge (Kultum, a term used for religious instruction, especially on Fridays). They also lead congregational "Dzikir" (remembrance) and prayers for their parents' health and well-being in this world and the hereafter.

To inculcate these characteristics, teachers integrated the subjects being taught with character education. Students were taught to greet their teachers and school staff when they met them. The school had designated Quran-reading classes (Iqro levels 1-6) for all grade levels, with each level having specific reading objectives. The final assessment included: (a) all graduates being able to read the Quran correctly, (b) memorizing the entire 30th Juz of the Quran, (c) memorizing Hadiths along with their meanings.

The school designed flexible classroom spaces to provide students with the freedom to learn, especially since primary school students tend to be more active learners. These classrooms aimed to train students to be independent learners who choose their learning methods and take responsibility for their choices. Furthermore, through school facilities such as lockers, dining areas, and shoe storage, students were encouraged to be independent in managing their personal belongings. Regarding

classroom cleanliness, students were scheduled to develop a sense of ownership, and they played an active role in keeping their environment clean and well-maintained.

The character of positive discipline was instilled directly in the learning process. Besides being disciplined regarding time, students and teachers established class agreements to ensure the continuity of effective learning. These agreements helped students understand that the rules they create are for the common good. If a student did not adhere to the agreements, the consequences focused on positive activities, such as reading the Quran.

Critical thinking was encouraged by teachers who provided time and space for students to express themselves. These expressions could range from simple activities like talking about what they did at home, sharing concerns, to contributing ideas and thoughts. The development of critical thinking was strengthened by the "Genius Hour" program, a research class where each student must make a meaningful contribution under the guidance of their class teacher. At the end of the "Genius Hour" program, students presented their ideas in front of the class. The ultimate goal of this program was for students to have 12 ideas/contributions (simple research projects) by the end of their schooling. For younger students, the "Genius Hour" program involved not only the guidance of the teacher but also parental involvement.

Character development based on school culture was also fostered through digital literacy, starting from grade 3. While digital literacy focused on learning and used the library as a centre of literacy, general literacy activities were conducted in the library once a week, with direct guidance from teachers. The activities were adapted according to the grade levels, with grades 1 and 2 focusing on drawing, while grades 3 to 6 concentrate on writing activities such as composing poetry and stories. The students' work was then showcased.

In general, character development at Schools A, B, and C was achieved through religious activities, classroom learning processes, and school extracurricular activities. While these schools also utilized digital literacy as a supporting tool for character education, the specific approach taken in character education was adapted to each school's unique cultural characteristics and the desired characteristics for their students.

According to Khan (2010), character development is generally based on four foundations in the education process: (1) religious, based on divine revelations from God; (2) cultural values, such as moral virtues, the values of Pancasila (the Indonesian state philosophy), and the role models of significant figures; (3) environmental, based on environmental conservation; and (4) self-potential, focused on enhancing individual potential to improve the quality of education. According to the Ministry of National Education (2010), character education has four foundations: (1) religion; (2) the state's foundation, Pancasila; (3) the culture of society; and (4) alignment with the national educational objectives.

The objectives of character education according to Ibid (2010) include: (1) students developing their inner conscience and values that align with the nation's cultural and national character as individuals and citizens; (2) students embodying universal values and religious-based national cultural traditions; (3) students possessing leadership qualities and a sense of responsibility; (4) students becoming independent, creative, and having a national perspective; and (5) creating a safe,

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honest, creative, and friendly environment with a strong sense of nationality. Through character education, students are expected to be able to address various societal issues with sound decisions in accordance with established norms (Zuriah, 2007). The application of character education is not limited to the school but extends into the community, aiming to create a culture that produces generations of individuals with spiritual intelligence (Rohana, 2019).

In summary, Schools A, B, and C emphasized character education through religious activities, classroom learning, and school extracurricular activities. While these schools also utilized digital literacy, the approach to character education was tailored to each school's unique cultural context to nurture desired character traits in their students.

2. Factors Affecting Culture-Based Character Education in Schools

One of the significant challenges faced by Elementary School A is the "Comfort Zone" that still exists among the teachers. Efforts were being made to change this mindset and promote innovation continually. The school has a mission to transform through the application of character education based on (a) Continuity, (b) Convergence, and © Concentricity. Continuity means that a teacher should continue with what is good and make improvements by adding elements that can enhance the learning objectives. Convergence means that teachers should engage in continuous learning and not be complacent. They should improve their literacy to enhance their competence. Concentricity: it is about how teachers educate with the values of "asah, asih, asuh" by connecting cultural elements. During the learning process, teachers had to incorporate good cultural aspects that are already ingrained in the community. The role of School Principal is vital in implementing the programs. Some school programs consistently involved parents and the community. Neighborhood leaders (RT RW officials) were engaged bi-monthly for dialogues and program socialization.

In the implementation of character education at Elementary School B, challenges are also encountered, including the commitment of the school community, parental roles, and the availability of facilities. Initially, not everyone was committed to character education. However, through personal approaches and by assigning tasks to the school principal regarding the importance of collaborative character education, this commitment can be minimized. Regarding facilities, the school principal continually monitors and provides necessary facilities. In Elementary School B, they acknowledge that students' character development during elementary school years is significantly influenced by the role of parents. The school realizes that elementary school students are at an age where adult influence plays a vital role in their maturity. Based on experience and reports, some students were late because their parent faced difficulties when accompanying their children, even though the children were ready at the beginning.

Similar to Elementary Schools A and B, Elementary School C also faced obstacles in implementing culture-based character education. Changing teachers' mindsets regarding character education is not easy. A small number of teachers believe that character education was beyond their responsibilities, and they viewed this program as additional work. Most parents were already actively involved in the school's character education program. Many parents provided input and suggestions

for character education development. Another influential factor was the lack of teacher training programs for character development.

The role of parents and the community in supporting character education could not be ignored, considering that parents play a significant role in character education implementation at school. One of their roles is participating in the determination of values to be instilled in students (Hayes, 2003). Community involvement in character education at school provides space and strengthens character formation in students (Kevin & Karen, 199). Proximity to the social, cultural, and religious context of the students also has a significant impact on character education implementation because these character values are directly internalized within the cultural context that students know and understand every day (Tohri, A., et al., 2022 & Makmur, Dastina, 2018). Furthermore, there are factors that hinder character education development, such as suboptimal learning processes (Davis, 2003) and the diversity of students' characters, which makes character assessment challenging (Ronald S, 1991).

The implementation of character education at the elementary school level is crucial for laying the foundation of students' character, which is an essential pillar of national development and the Indonesian people as a whole (Suhartini, et al., 2019). Therefore, schools need to evaluate their character education programs. There are at least two aspects to evaluate: program evaluation and program outcomes (Stoll, Jennifer, 1998). Schools and teachers involved in character education programs should evaluate the development of the characters they have been working on, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the planned programs. Meanwhile, the evaluation of outcomes can be conducted by subject teachers through the subjects taught to students during the learning process.

## CONCLUSION

The research results indicate that all three schools have programs for the development of culture-based character education. Elementary Schools A, B, and C implement character education through religious activities, classroom learning processes, and school extracurricular activities.

The implementation of culture-based character education in elementary schools is influenced by several factors, including the school principal's leadership, the resources of teachers and school staff, the availability of facilities and infrastructure, parental support, and the community environment.

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