

Integrating Character Education into Primary School Curriculum

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Abstrak

Character education has become a critical concern in primary education; however, its integration into school curricula remains fragmented across educational contexts. This study aims to systematically synthesize existing research on the integration of character education into primary school curricula. Guided by the PRISMA framework, a systematic literature review was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC, identifying 742 records. After duplicate removal and screening based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 54 articles were assessed for eligibility, resulting in 32 studies included in the final synthesis. Thematic analysis revealed three dominant themes: (1) curriculum integration models, (2) pedagogical strategies supporting character development, and (3) assessment approaches for character-related outcomes. The findings indicate that effective integration of character education requires coherent alignment between curriculum design, instructional practices, and school culture. This review provides a structured synthesis of current evidence and highlights key methodological and empirical gaps to inform future research and curriculum development in primary education.

Kata Kunci: *Character education, Primary education, Curriculum integration, Pedagogical strategies, Character assessment, Systematic literature review*

INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a central concern in primary education as schools increasingly face challenges related to students' moral reasoning, social responsibility, and ethical behavior. Primary schooling is widely recognized as a critical phase for shaping students' values and dispositions, as character development during early educational stages has long-term implications for individual and social outcomes (Pike et al., 2021; Scholz-Kuhn et al., 2025). Consequently, international educational discourse has emphasized the role of schools not only in academic achievement but also in fostering character and moral development.

Despite this growing emphasis, the implementation of character education in primary schools remains conceptually fragmented. In many contexts, character education is still delivered through stand-alone subjects, extracurricular programs, or short-term interventions, which often fail to influence students' everyday learning experiences in a sustained manner (Revell & Arthur, 2020; Arthur et al.,

2022). Recent studies suggest that such approaches limit the effectiveness of character education, as moral values are insufficiently connected to curriculum content, pedagogical practice, and school culture. In response, scholars increasingly advocate for integrating character education into the formal curriculum as a coherent and school-wide endeavor (Pike et al., 2021); Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2024).

Research conducted in the last decade has examined various dimensions of character education, including curriculum integration models, pedagogical strategies, and assessment approaches. However, much of the existing literature addresses these dimensions in isolation, resulting in a partial understanding of how character education functions as an interconnected system within primary education. Recent reviews highlight the need for comprehensive syntheses that bring together curriculum design, instructional practices, and assessment mechanisms to better understand how character education can be effectively embedded in schools (Moulin-Stožek et al., 2022; Muzakkir et al., 2024). Moreover, empirical findings published between 2020 and 2025 indicate a shift toward embedded, whole-school, and integrative models, yet these findings remain dispersed across diverse educational contexts and methodological approaches.

This lack of an integrated perspective highlights the need for a systematic synthesis of recent research that brings together curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment as interconnected components of character education. Therefore, this study conducts a systematic thematic literature review to synthesize recent studies on the integration of character education in primary education. The review focuses on three interrelated dimensions: curriculum integration, pedagogical strategies supporting character development, and assessment of character-related outcomes. By examining these dimensions collectively, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive and coherent understanding of effective character education practices in primary schools.

This study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, it offers a structured synthesis of recent research that clarifies dominant patterns and emerging trends in character education integration at the primary school level.

Second, it advances an integrated conceptual framework that highlights the interdependence of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment in supporting character development. Third, it provides theoretical and practical insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to design sustainable and context-sensitive character education initiatives. Through this systematic perspective, the study seeks to strengthen scholarly understanding and inform future research and practice in character education.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a systematic thematic literature review to synthesize recent studies on the integration of character education into primary school curricula. This approach was selected to identify, categorize, and interpret thematic patterns reported across previous empirical and conceptual studies, particularly those related to curriculum integration, pedagogical strategies, and assessment of character-related outcomes. A systematic thematic review allows for a structured yet flexible synthesis of literature, which is suitable for examining complex educational phenomena within diverse contexts.

The literature search was conducted using reputable academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC, due to their strong coverage of educational and curriculum-related research. Relevant articles were identified using combinations of keywords such as *character education*, *primary education*, *curriculum integration*, *pedagogical strategies*, and *character assessment*. The search focused on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025 to ensure the relevance and currency of the reviewed studies.

The selection of studies was guided by predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were included if they focused on character education or values education in primary or elementary education, explicitly addressed curriculum integration, pedagogical strategies, or assessment approaches, and were published in peer-reviewed journals in English. Studies were excluded if they focused on non-primary education levels, addressed character education solely as extracurricular activities, lacked sufficient methodological clarity, or were non-peer-reviewed publications.

The literature selection process followed a systematic screening procedure. Initially, all identified records were screened based on their titles and abstracts to assess relevance to the research focus. Full-text screening was then conducted for potentially relevant articles to ensure alignment with the inclusion criteria. This process resulted in 32 studies that were deemed suitable for thematic synthesis. Although the review followed systematic principles, the primary emphasis was placed on thematic interpretation rather than numerical comparison across studies.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic synthesis, which involved organizing key information from each selected study, coding recurring concepts, and grouping them into broader thematic categories. The analysis focused on three main themes: curriculum integration models, pedagogical strategies supporting character development, and assessment approaches for character-related outcomes. This thematic process enabled the identification of convergent patterns and conceptual relationships across the reviewed literature.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the review applied transparent selection procedures and consistent thematic analysis. As this study analyzed previously published research, no direct involvement of human participants occurred. Ethical standards were maintained by accurately citing all sources and reporting the review process transparently.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Result

This systematic literature review synthesizes findings from 32 selected studies (2020–2025) and reveals a coherent pattern in how character education is effectively integrated into primary school education. The integrated findings demonstrate that curriculum integration models, pedagogical strategies, and assessment approaches are interdependent components, and their alignment determines the sustainability and effectiveness of character education implementation.

Table 1. Summary of Curriculum Integration Models in Character Education (2020–2025)

Author(s) & Year	Context	Method	Curriculum Integration Model	Key Findings
(Pike et al., 2021)	Primary schools (UK)	Conceptual & curriculum analysis	Embedded curriculum model	Character development is most effective when virtues are intentionally embedded within subject curricula and aligned with learning objectives and assessment.
(Septiwiharti et al., 2024)	Elementary schools (thematic learning in Indonesia)	Qualitative case study	Thematic-integrated curriculum strategy	Cross-subject character-based thematic learning significantly improved students' moral awareness and behavior; integrating honesty and responsibility into thematic lessons fostered stronger moral and responsible character traits
(Moulin-Stożek et al., 2022)	Primary education (global contexts)	Theoretical synthesis	Integrated virtue-based curriculum	Curriculum integration grounded in virtue ethics supports moral resilience, particularly during social and educational crises.
(Jordan, 2023a)	Primary education	Instrumental case study	Integrated curriculum model	Integrating character education across curriculum areas promotes value coherence and ethical reflection in classroom practice.
(Jordan, 2023b)	Primary education	Conceptual analysis	Cross-curricular integration model	Character education is strengthened when values education is systematically aligned with broader curriculum aims.
(Muzakkir et al., 2024)	Primary schools	Systematic literature review	Embedded and whole-school models	Teachers perceive embedded and whole-school curriculum models as more feasible and sustainable than stand-alone character programs.
(Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022)	Primary & elementary education	Framework development	Whole-school curriculum framework	Character education requires alignment between curriculum design, pedagogy, school ethos, and assessment practices.
(Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025)	Primary education (international)	Thematic review	Integrated curriculum approaches	Recent empirical studies show a shift from isolated moral instruction toward curriculum-integrated and school-wide character education models.
(Lestari et al., 2025)	Basic/elementary education curriculum transformation	Qualitative literature analysis	Curriculum Integration; Pedagogical Strategies; Assessment Approaches	Integrating local wisdom with global progress strengthens student character, cultural identity, and 21st-century competencies. A holistic, contextual, and futuristic curriculum model utilizing ICT is effective and relevant for improving basic education quality in Indonesia.

Table 2. Summary of Pedagogical Strategies Supporting Character Development (2020–2025)

Author(s) & Year	Context	Method	Pedagogical Strategy	Key Findings
(Pike et al., 2021)	Primary schools (UK)	Conceptual & curriculum-based analysis	Dialogic teaching and reflective practice	Character development is strengthened when pedagogical practices encourage moral reasoning, reflection, and dialogue rather than direct moral instruction.
(Scholz-Kuhn et al., 2025)	Primary education	Theoretical review	Role modelling and moral exemplarity	Teachers' moral exemplarity and consistent modelling of values are central pedagogical mechanisms for character formation.
Thornberg (2022)	Primary schools	Qualitative classroom studies	Democratic and relational pedagogy	Democratic classroom practices foster empathy, responsibility, and social moral competence among primary students.
(Muzakkir et al., 2024)	Primary schools	Systematic literature review	Student-centered pedagogical strategies	Inquiry-based, collaborative, and reflective pedagogies are perceived by teachers as more effective for character development than teacher-centered approaches.
(Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022)	Primary education	Pedagogical framework	Teaching for virtue (practice–reflection–habituation)	Effective character pedagogy requires structured opportunities for practice, reflection, and moral habituation within daily instruction.
(Musthofa et al., 2025)	Elementary mathematics education	Conceptual systematic literature review (PRISMA-guided)	Curriculum Integration; Pedagogical Strategies; Assessment Approaches	Mathematics can function as a moral learning domain when character values are intentionally embedded through narrative, cultural, and contextual pedagogies. The MCIM framework explains character formation through four stages: value representation, engagement, reflection, and internalization, resulting in improved moral awareness, responsibility, and discipline among students.
(Himmah, 2025)	Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (Islamic primary school)	Qualitative phenomenological study	Independent Curriculum implementation practices and teacher perceptions	Teachers implement Independent Curriculum with student-centered learning and character emphasis; implementation challenges include limited understanding of new curriculum concepts, workload, and adapting instructional and assessment methods.

Table 2. Summary of Assessment Approaches for Character-Related Outcomes (2020–2025)

Author(s) & Year	Context	Method	Assessment Approach	Key Findings
(Pike et al., 2021)	Primary schools (UK)	Conceptual & curriculum-based analysis	Formative and curriculum-embedded assessment	Character outcomes are best assessed through ongoing formative practices aligned with curriculum goals rather than summative testing.
(Thornberg et al., 2022)	Primary schools	Qualitative classroom studies	Observational and relational assessment	Teacher observations within relational contexts reveal students' social-moral competencies more effectively than isolated instruments.
(Moulin-Stožek et al., 2022)	Primary education (global contexts)	Theoretical synthesis	Context-sensitive assessment frameworks	Character outcomes should be evaluated longitudinally and contextually, especially during social and educational crises.
(Muzakkir et al., 2024)	Primary schools	Systematic literature review	Portfolio-based and narrative assessment	Teachers perceive portfolios and narrative reports as practical tools for assessing character development over time.
(Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022)	Primary education	Framework development	Virtue-oriented assessment (practice-reflection-habitation)	Effective assessment integrates behavioral observation, reflective dialogue, and evidence of moral habituation.
(Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025)	Primary education (international)	Thematic review	Multi-method assessment approach	Recent studies emphasize combining observation, self-assessment, and reflective tools to capture complex character outcomes.

Integrated Curriculum–Pedagogy–Assessment Framework

Across the reviewed studies, character education is most effective when implemented through embedded and whole-school curriculum integration models (Table 1). Rather than treating character education as a stand-alone subject, recent research consistently emphasizes the importance of integrating moral and character values within core academic subjects and aligning them with school culture and institutional practices. This curricular coherence enables character education to

function as an integral part of daily learning experiences rather than as isolated moral instruction.

Complementing curriculum integration, the findings indicate that student-centered and virtue-oriented pedagogical strategies play a crucial role in translating curricular intentions into meaningful character development (Table 2). Dialogic teaching, experiential learning, role modelling, and reflective practices are repeatedly identified as effective strategies for fostering moral reasoning, empathy, responsibility, and social competence among primary school students. These pedagogical approaches emphasize active student engagement and moral habituation, suggesting that character formation occurs through sustained interaction, reflection, and practice rather than direct moral transmission.

In terms of evaluation, the reviewed studies consistently highlight the limitations of standardized or summative assessments in capturing character-related outcomes (Table 3). Instead, scholars advocate for formative, qualitative, and context-sensitive assessment approaches, such as teacher observation, reflective journals, portfolios, and narrative reports. These assessment methods are considered more appropriate for capturing the developmental, situational, and longitudinal nature of character formation. Importantly, effective assessment practices are shown to be closely aligned with both curriculum design and pedagogical strategies, reinforcing the need for coherence across instructional and evaluative dimensions.

Synthesis of Key Patterns

Taken together, the integrated findings reveal three overarching patterns. First, structural integration at the curriculum level provides the foundation for consistent character education practices. Second, pedagogical strategies function as the mediating mechanism through which character values are internalized by students. Third, assessment approaches serve as reflective and developmental tools, rather than measurement instruments, supporting continuous character growth. The convergence of these patterns suggests that character education in primary schools is most effective when curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are designed as a unified and mutually reinforcing system.

1. Discussion

a. Curriculum Integration as the Structural Foundation of Character Education

The findings of this review confirm that curriculum integration models constitute the structural foundation of effective character education in primary schools. Consistent with recent studies, embedded and whole-school curriculum models are identified as more sustainable and impactful than stand-alone character education programs (Lestari et al., 2025; Muzakkir et al., 2024; Pike et al., 2021). These models enable character values to be internalized through regular academic learning rather than treated as supplementary moral content. This supports the argument that character education should be conceptualized as an integral dimension of curriculum design rather than an additional subject area (Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022). From a curriculum theory perspective, such integration enhances coherence between educational aims, content, and school culture, which is essential for long-term character formation.

b. Pedagogical Strategies as the Mediating Mechanism

While curriculum integration provides the structural basis, the findings demonstrate that pedagogical strategies function as the mediating mechanism through which character education is enacted in classroom practice. Student-centered, dialogic, and experiential pedagogies are consistently associated with positive character-related outcomes (Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022, 2022; Musthofa et al., 2025; Thornberg et al., 2022). These approaches align with virtue-based educational theories that emphasize moral habituation through repeated practice, reflection, and social interaction (Sanderse & Cooke, 2020). The convergence between empirical studies and conceptual frameworks suggests that character development is less likely to occur through direct moral instruction and more likely to emerge from pedagogical environments that encourage ethical reasoning, collaboration, and teacher role (Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022; Himmah, 2025; Pike et al., 2021).

c. Assessment as a Developmental and Reflective Process

The review also highlights that assessment of character-related outcomes remains one of the most complex dimensions of character education. The predominance of qualitative, formative, and context-sensitive assessment approaches reflects widespread concern over the limitations of standardized measurement tools in capturing moral and character development (Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022; Muzakkir et al., 2024). Recent literature emphasizes assessment as a developmental and reflective process rather than a summative judgment, advocating for methods such as portfolios, narrative reports, and observational assessments (Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025; Pike et al., 2021). This perspective aligns with contemporary views that character formation is longitudinal and situational, requiring assessment practices that are embedded within daily learning and aligned with pedagogical and curricular intentions (Moulin-Stožek et al., 2022).

d. Toward an Integrated Character Education System

Synthesizing these dimensions, the discussion reveals that effective character education in primary schools emerges from the alignment of curriculum integration, pedagogical enactment, and assessment practices. Fragmentation across these components weakens implementation, whereas coherence strengthens value internalization and behavioral consistency (Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022). This integrated perspective reinforces recent calls in international scholarship to move beyond isolated interventions toward system-oriented models of character education that recognize the interdependence of curriculum, teaching, and evaluation (Jordan, 2023b; Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025). Consequently, future research should focus on examining how such alignment operates across diverse cultural and institutional contexts and how it can be supported through teacher professional development and curriculum policy.

An Integrated Framework for Character Education in Primary School Curriculum

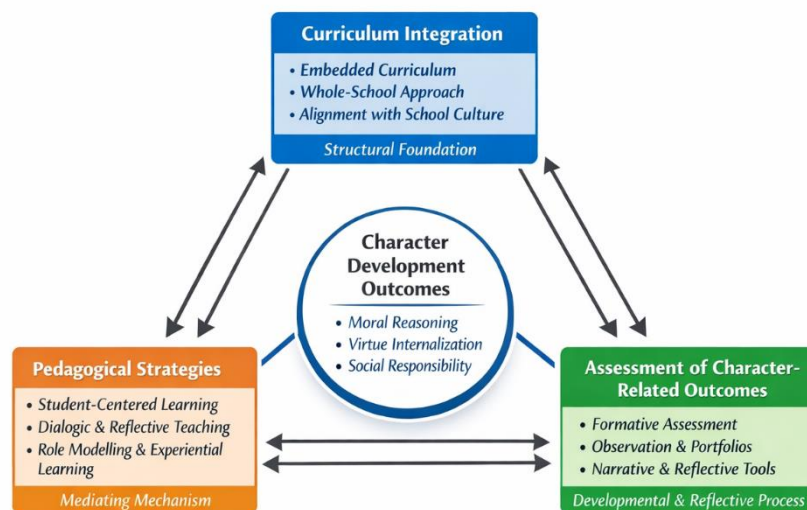


Figure X. Conceptual framework illustrating the integration of curriculum design, pedagogical strategies, and assessment approaches as interdependent components supporting character education in primary schools.

The figure illustrates an integrated framework for character education in primary school curricula, emphasizing the interdependence of curriculum integration, pedagogical strategies, and assessment of character-related outcomes. Curriculum integration functions as the structural foundation by embedding character values within subject content and school culture. Pedagogical strategies operate as the mediating mechanism through student-centered, dialogic, and experiential learning that translates curricular intentions into classroom practice. Assessment serves as a developmental and reflective process, employing formative and qualitative approaches to capture students' character growth over time. At the center of the framework, character development outcomes such as moral reasoning, virtue internalization, and social responsibility emerge from the dynamic interaction among these three components, highlighting that effective character education requires systemic alignment rather than isolated interventions.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review synthesizes recent studies published between 2020 and 2025 on the integration of character education into primary school curricula and demonstrates that effective character education is inherently

systemic rather than fragmented. The findings indicate that character education is most sustainable when it is embedded within the formal curriculum, enacted through student-centered and virtue-oriented pedagogical strategies, and evaluated using formative and context-sensitive assessment approaches. These three dimensions curriculum integration, pedagogy, and assessment operate as interdependent components that collectively support the development of students' character. Approaches that position character education as an isolated subject or rely primarily on standardized assessment are insufficient to foster long-term moral and behavioral development in primary education.

From both theoretical and practical perspectives, this review contributes an integrative understanding of character education that moves beyond program-based or instructional interventions. The synthesis underscores the importance of curricular coherence, pedagogical enactment, and reflective assessment in supporting moral habituation and ethical reasoning among young learners. For educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers, the findings highlight the need to design character education as a school-wide curricular endeavor supported by aligned teaching practices and developmentally appropriate assessment. Future research should focus on empirically examining integrated character education models across diverse cultural contexts and on developing longitudinal approaches to assessing character-related outcomes in primary education.

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