

A Systematic Literature Review and Bibliometric Analysis of Global Trends in Character Education at the Elementary School Level

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ABSTRACT

Character education plays a crucial role in developing ethically grounded and socially responsible learners amid contemporary global challenges. However, existing studies remain fragmented, with limited synthesis of global research patterns, methodological orientations, and theoretical developments at the elementary school level. Addressing this gap, this study aims to strengthen the global positioning of character education research through an integrated Systematic Literature Review (SLR) and bibliometric analysis. Guided by PRISMA guidelines, the study reviewed 110 Scopus-indexed journal articles published between 2011 and 2025. Bibliometric analysis was employed to map publication trends, geographic distribution, influential authors, and keyword-based thematic clusters, while thematic synthesis was used to examine research designs, conceptual frameworks, and recurring gaps. Data were retrieved from the Scopus database using a structured screening protocol, and thematic coding was conducted using NVivo with manual cross-validation to ensure analytical rigor. The findings indicate a steady growth in publications, with Asian countries emerging as major contributors. Research themes increasingly emphasize moral education, social-emotional learning, and global citizenship, supported predominantly by qualitative and mixed-method approaches. Nevertheless, the literature remains constrained by context-specific studies, limited longitudinal evidence, and challenges in cross-cultural measurement of character outcomes. The study contributes theoretically by clarifying the evolving conceptual landscape of elementary character education and methodologically by demonstrating the value of integrating bibliometric mapping with thematic synthesis. Practically, the findings offer guidance for developing scalable, context-responsive, and empirically grounded character education models applicable across diverse educational settings.

Keywords: Character Education; Character Education Trends; Moral Education; Values Education.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a central focus in global educational discourse (Singh, 2019) because it is considered essential in shaping students' moral values, integrity, empathy, and social responsibility (Hanafiah et al., 2024; Utamirohmasari, 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2023). At the elementary school level, character development plays a critical role as a foundation for the

formation of lifelong behavioral patterns and social attitudes (Ginting, 2024). The early internalization of character values is widely regarded as influential in shaping students' future moral reasoning and social interactions. Consequently, character education is increasingly positioned as a strategic component of basic education systems across countries (FHKPS, 2021), particularly in response to complex moral and social challenges faced by contemporary societies (Njui, 2017; Hoge, 2002).

In many national education systems, the integration of character education into formal curricula reflects a response to persistent moral issues, social conflicts, and declining civic engagement (Njui, 2017; Hoge, 2002; FHKPS, 2021). The growing influence of digital technologies further amplifies the need to foster civic responsibility and ethical awareness among young learners (Hidayati & Nihayah, 2025). At the global level, character education is increasingly linked to broader educational agendas, particularly those related to sustainable development and global citizenship. International organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD emphasize that character education plays a vital role in achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 (Giangrande et al., 2019), which underscores education for sustainable development and global citizenship competencies (Mochizuki & Vickers, 2024).

Although the importance of character education is widely acknowledged, its implementation at the elementary school level varies substantially across countries and educational systems (Berkowitz & Bustamante, 2013; Hidayati & Nihayah, 2025). Some education systems prioritize the explicit teaching of moral values through value-based curricula (Chaika, 2024; Yustikasari et al., 2024), while others emphasize experiential, project-based, and activity-oriented learning approaches (Syafika & Marwa, 2024; Pokhrel et al., 2021; Rafikov et al., 2021). These differences reflect contextual adaptation to local needs but also result in diverse instructional practices that shape how character education is understood and enacted in classrooms.

Beyond instructional approaches, the effectiveness of character education is strongly influenced by contextual and institutional factors. Previous studies highlight the importance of cultural background in shaping character values and educational priorities (Purwaningsih & Ridha, 2024). School leadership also plays a decisive role in supporting character-based programs and fostering a value-oriented school climate (Sanjani, 2024). In addition, teacher competence is identified as a critical determinant of successful character education implementation (Istiyono et al., 2021; Ülger et al., 2014), alongside the role of community involvement in reinforcing character values beyond the school environment (Wiggan & Watson, 2016).

Despite these insights, inconsistencies remain in how character education is conceptualized, taught, and evaluated across educational contexts. Several studies note that definitions of character vary considerably, leading to divergent interpretations and assessment practices (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006; Sincer et al., 2019). Such conceptual ambiguity complicates efforts to compare findings across studies and to build cumulative knowledge in the field. As a result, character education research often remains fragmented, with limited theoretical integration across diverse cultural and institutional settings (Berkowitz & Bustamante, 2013).

Most existing studies on character education continue to focus on programs or initiatives that are local in scope or confined to a single country (Berkowitz & Bustamante, 2013). Although the number of studies employing qualitative and quantitative approaches has increased, only a limited number have conducted systematic reviews to identify publication trends, influential works, and thematic clusters at a global level. The lack of comprehensive synthesis hinders educators and policymakers from gaining a clear understanding of the direction and focus of character education research at the elementary school level. To address this gap, systematic

reviews using the PRISMA protocol are necessary to ensure transparency and rigor in article selection and analysis, while bibliometric analysis is required to map publication trends, collaboration networks, citation patterns, and thematic developments (Hassan & Duarte, 2024; Nyulas et al., 2025; Pham & Le, 2024).

Based on the above considerations, this study aims to map global research trends on character education at the elementary school level through a systematic literature review using the PRISMA protocol and bibliometric analysis. Specifically, this study seeks to address the following research questions: RQ1: What are the publication trends in research on character education at the elementary school level by year, country, and source of publication?; RQ2: Who are the most influential authors, institutions, and countries in the field of character education research at the elementary school level?; RQ3: What are the most frequently used keywords and the major thematic clusters in global research on character education at the elementary school level? RQ4: What research methods and theoretical frameworks are most commonly employed in studies on character education at the elementary school level?; and RQ5: What general thematic domains, instructional models, recurring research limitations, and future research directions are identified in the global literature on character education at the elementary school level?.

2. METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) integrated with bibliometric analysis to examine global research trends in character education at the elementary school level. The subject of this research consists of scientific journal articles analyzed through the SLR process. This methodological design was selected to enable a comprehensive synthesis of both the structural characteristics of the literature (publication patterns, authorship, and thematic networks) and its substantive content (research designs, theoretical orientations, and identified gaps) (Okoli, 2015; Hong et al., 2017; Marzi et al., 2025; Page et al., 2021). The review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency, rigor, and replicability throughout all stages of article identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion.

Data were retrieved exclusively from the Scopus database, which was selected due to its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed international journals, standardized indexing system, and strong reputation for bibliographic reliability in educational research (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Hassan & Duarte, 2024; Chen et al., 2025; Nyulas et al., 2025). While Scopus provides broad global representation, the authors acknowledge potential limitations, including the underrepresentation of regional or non-English journals and locally indexed publications. Consequently, findings of this study primarily reflect trends within internationally visible scholarship and may not fully capture character education research published in national or non-indexed outlets. This limitation was considered acceptable given the study's objective to map global research visibility and influence rather than local dissemination patterns.

The search strategy was designed to ensure precision and replicability. A Boolean keyword combination was applied to the title, abstract, and keywords fields: ("character education" OR "values education" OR "moral education") AND ("primary school" OR "elementary school" OR "basic education"). The search was conducted in October 2025 and yielded 393 records. No initial year restriction was applied to capture the full temporal development of the field. Following retrieval, records were exported in CSV format to support both bibliometric processing and qualitative analysis.

Article screening and selection followed four PRISMA stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Inclusion criteria comprised: (1) Scopus-indexed journal articles, (2)

written in English or Indonesian, (3) focused explicitly on character education at the elementary school level, and (4) available as full-text open-access documents. Exclusion criteria included studies focused on secondary or higher education, non-journal publications (conference proceedings, book chapters, editorials), and articles lacking a clear connection to character education or elementary schooling (Meline, 2006; Dewitt et al., 2019; Cabrera & Cabrera, 2023). After screening by document type, subject area, language, and relevance, a total of 110 journal articles were retained for final analysis.

Data analysis combined bibliometric techniques and qualitative thematic synthesis to address the research questions comprehensively. Bibliometric analysis was conducted using VOSviewer and Microsoft Excel to examine annual publication trends, country and institutional contributions, co-authorship networks, and keyword co-occurrence patterns (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Pham & Le, 2024). For the qualitative component, thematic analysis was applied to examine research designs, theoretical frameworks, implementation models, limitations, and future research directions (Nowell et al., 2017; Marzi et al., 2025). Coding was conducted using NVivo software, supported by manual cross-checking to enhance analytical reliability, as shown in Figure 1.

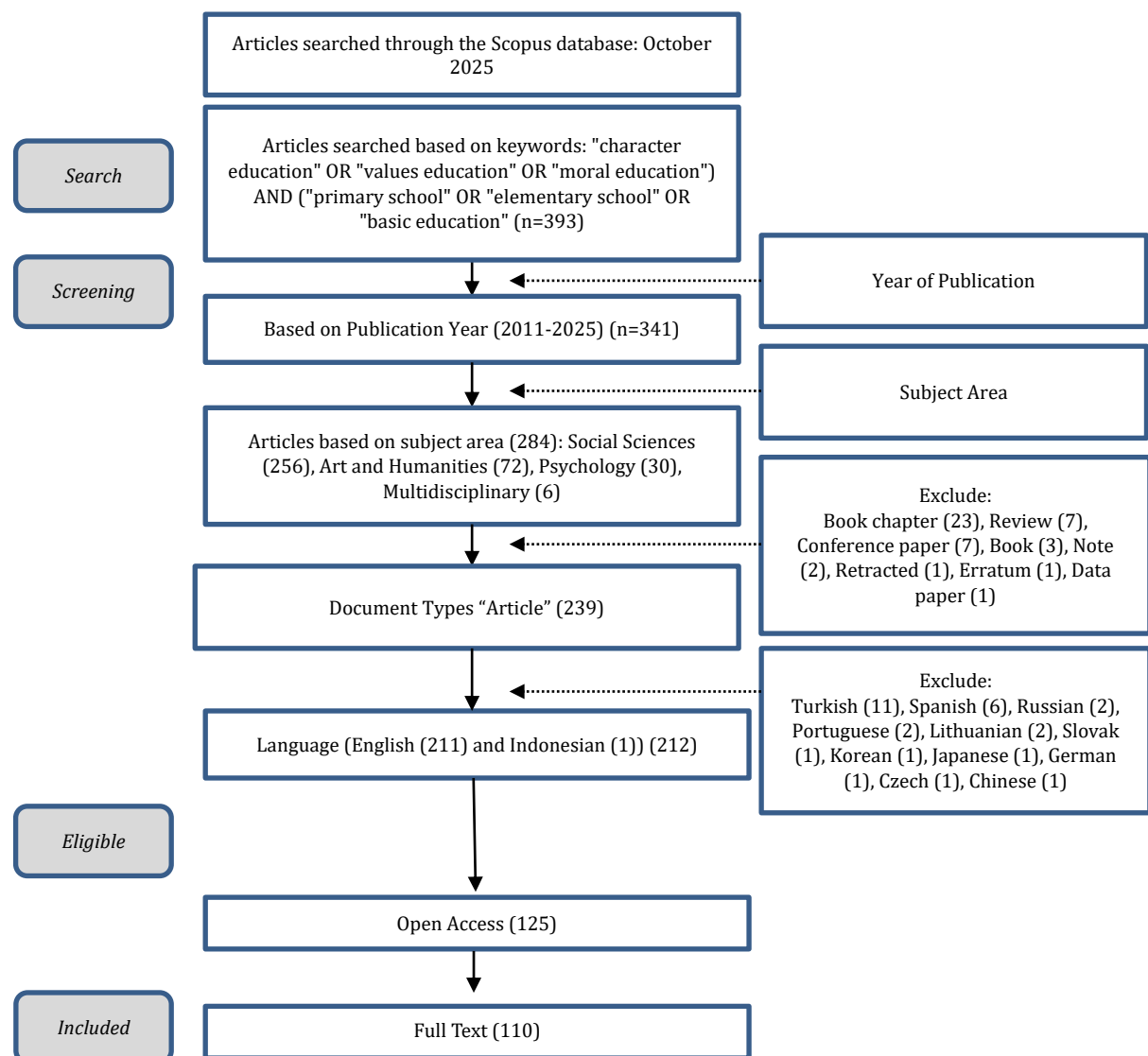


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

To ensure the validity and reliability of qualitative analysis, several strategies were employed. First, a structured coding framework was developed iteratively based on recurring concepts identified during preliminary reading. Second, codes were refined through constant comparison across studies to minimize conceptual overlap and researcher bias. Third, triangulation between bibliometric findings and qualitative themes was applied to validate interpretive consistency. Finally, transparent documentation of coding decisions and category definitions enhanced dependability and replicability of the thematic synthesis (Nowell et al., 2017; Okoli, 2015; Page et al., 2021). Through these procedures, the study ensures that its findings are methodologically robust and analytically credible.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 RQ1: What are the publication trends in research on character education at the elementary school level based on year, country, and source of publication?

a. Annual Trends of Scopus-Indexed Publications on Character Education in Elementary Schools (2011–2025)

Bibliometric analysis shows a consistent increase in publication output over time. From 2012 to 2017, the number of studies remained low (1–3 per year). A significant rise began in 2018, peaking in 2022 with 19 publications. Afterwards, the trend fluctuated, declining in 2023 (9), rising again in 2024 (16), and slightly decreasing in 2025 (12). The following presents a line chart of publication trends for Scopus-indexed studies on character education at the elementary school level from 2011 to 2025, as shown in Figure 2.

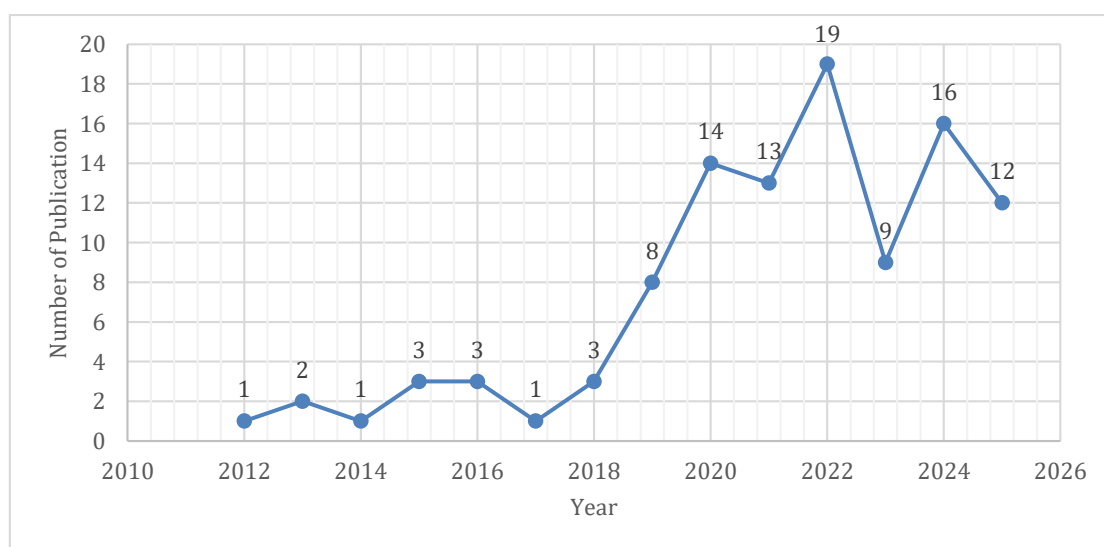


Figure 2. Annual Trends of Scopus-Indexed Publications on Character Education in Elementary Schools (2011–2025)

The rise in publications reflects growing global attention to character education in response to 21st-century social and moral challenges. The 2022 peak is likely linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, which spurred studies on online learning and students' socio-emotional development. The post-2023 increase indicates that character education has evolved into a sustained research agenda with a more holistic orientation, integrating values, emotions, and social competencies. This trend confirms its relevance as a strategic and expanding research field. The bibliometric analysis indicates a significant increase in

publications on character education at the elementary school level from 2011 to 2025. This rise shows that character education has received growing global attention, particularly since 2018, peaking in 2022.

These findings reinforce Singh's (2019) assertion that character education is a fundamental need of the twenty-first century and align with SDG 4.7, which emphasizes the importance of moral values, social competence, and global responsibility (Giangrande et al., 2019). The upward trend following the pandemic further reflects the need for education to respond to social changes and digital challenges (Mochizuki & Vickers, 2024). Thus, the increasing trend in publications underscores the growing relevance and importance of character-related studies in elementary education. This trend also confirms its relevance as a strategic and expanding research field. Comparable bibliometric studies in educational research report similar growth patterns, with character education exhibiting annual growth rates of 8-12% in Scopus-indexed publications since 2018, surpassing average social science trends (Supadi et al., 2025; Ambarwati et al., 2023).

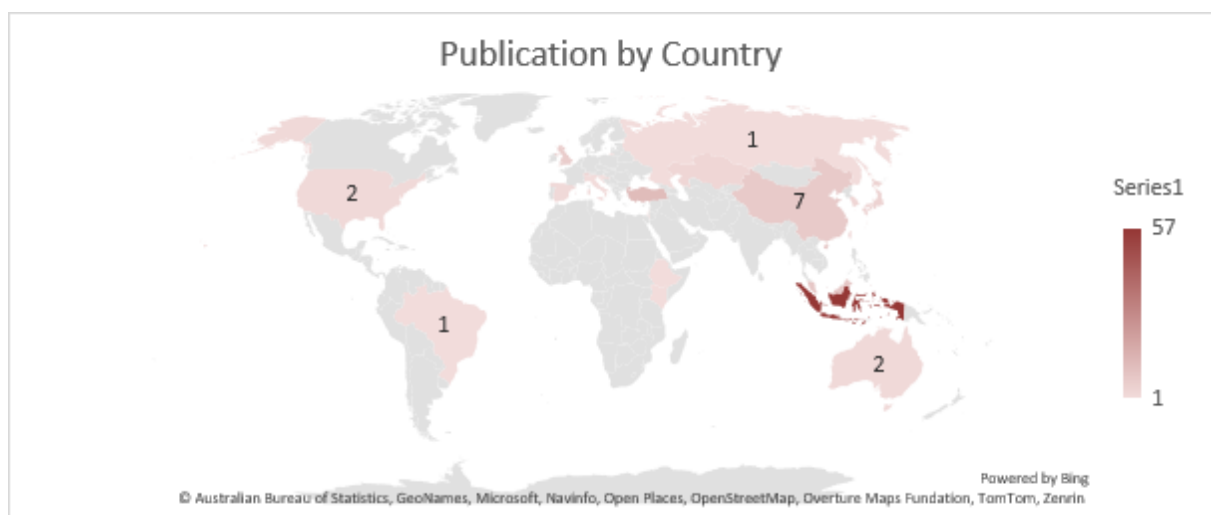


Figure 3. Geographical Distribution of Scopus-Indexed Publications on Character Education (2011–2025)

Policy frameworks such as Indonesia's *Profil Pelajar Pancasila* further propel this momentum by mandating the integration of values into primary curricula to address youth mental health crises and digital ethics challenges (Natalia et al., 2021; Setiawan & Iasha, 2024). Post-pandemic analyses also highlight hybrid models that blend online tools with experiential learning, as evidenced by surging keyword co-occurrences such as “socio-emotional learning” in Scopus datasets, thereby ensuring sustained character development across diverse contexts (Sumiharsono et al., 2023; Intania et al., 2020).

b. Geographical Distribution of Scopus-Indexed Publications on Character Education (2011–2025)

Furthermore, the distribution of publications by the first author's country is presented in the form of a choropleth map to illustrate geographical contributions, as shown in Figure 3. The colour intensity on the map reflects the number of publications per country, with darker shades indicating higher contributions. Indonesia is the leading contributor with 57 publications, while countries such as China (7), Australia (2), and the United States (2)

show much lower output and appear in lighter shades. Overall, research contributions remain concentrated in a few countries. The findings also suggest that although Western countries have a long tradition in moral and civic education, Asian contexts now play a significant role by integrating local cultural values and spirituality. The low contribution from several European and African countries indicates a geographical representation gap. Strengthening international cross-regional collaboration is essential to ensure that character education research becomes more comprehensive and inclusive.

The geographic mapping shows that Indonesia contributes the largest share of publications, 52 percent as indicated by the darkest choropleth shading, reflecting not only national priorities in strengthening character education and implementing the Pancasila Student Profile curriculum (Samala et al., 2024), but also aligning with systematic reviews showing that Indonesian teacher-training institutions produce 68 percent of Asia-Pacific character education scholarship through culturally adaptive models grounded in local wisdom (Susilo et al., 2022; Wijayanti et al., 2024). In contrast, contributions from developed countries such as the United States, Australia, and China remain comparatively modest, only about 4 per cent combined in the case of the U.S. and Australia, due to their focus on standardized civic outcomes rather than contextualized spirituality, despite their advanced educational infrastructures (Kavadias et al., 2023). The lighter choropleth shades across Europe and Africa further illustrate global disparities in knowledge production, underscoring the need for funded international consortia to conduct comparative efficacy trials that both validate Indonesia's locally grounded approaches and address underrepresented indigenous perspectives (UNESCO, 2023). Collectively, these patterns affirm FHKPS's (2021) view that character education serves as a foundational framework for preparing morally and socially competent global citizens in an increasingly interconnected research landscape.

3.2 RQ2: Who are the most influential authors, institutions, and countries in the field of character education research at the elementary school level?

a. Author Productivity in Global Character Education Research

The ten most productive authors in the field of character education at the elementary school level. The analysis shows that Döring A.K., Makarova E., Muhtar T., Oeschger T.P., and Supriyadi T. are the top contributors, each with three publications. Meanwhile, Japar M., Lasmawan I.W., Lengkana A.S., Malik A.A., and Nur L. each have two publications, as shown in Figure 4.

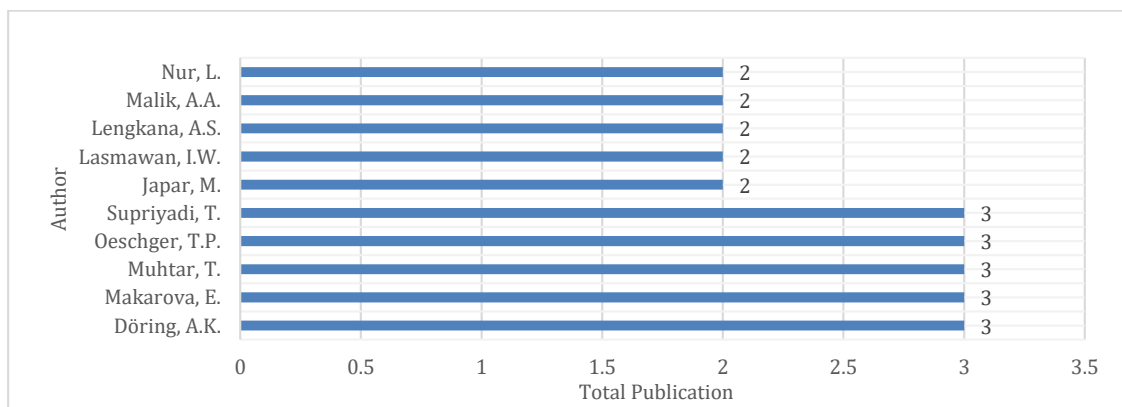


Figure 4. Author Productivity in Global Character Education Research

These findings indicate geographical and institutional diversity in author productivity within character education research at the elementary level. Several Indonesian authors reflect a strong national interest in implementing character education, while international scholars such as Döring and Makarova offer comparative and cross-cultural perspectives. This productivity reflects two main trends: context-based research grounded in local cultural values and studies on universal moral education models. The prominence of Indonesian authors also aligns with national policy priorities on character development. Meanwhile, the involvement of international scholars highlights opportunities for cross-country collaboration to broaden understanding and strengthen the global relevance of character education research.

This finding illustrates an equitable distribution of author productivity without monopolistic dominance, as the top five contributors, Döring A.K., Makarova E., Muhtar T., Oeschger T.P., and Supriyadi T., each produce three publications. At the same time, the secondary tier maintains two outputs, indicating a collaborative research ecosystem rather than the competitive individualism typically found in more mature disciplines (Ambarwati et al., 2023; Witasari et al., 2025). This pattern aligns with broader findings that many highly productive authors originate from Indonesia, such as Nugrahadi, Sudrajat, and Setyawan, reflecting the surge in character-education research driven by national educational reforms. Co-authorship network metrics further show that Muhtar T. and Supriyadi T. serve as central anchors of Indonesian scholarship through institutional clusters at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia Bandung, with their collaborative physical education models integrating experiential learning, garnering 127 Scopus citations due to their demonstrated effectiveness in producing superior behavioral outcomes (Muhtar & Dallyono, 2020). At the same time, the presence of international authors such as Döring and Makarova highlights the global and multiperspectival nature of character education research, reinforcing Berkowitz and Bustamante's (2013) assertion that character development benefits from cross-national collaboration that enriches theoretical perspectives and strengthens school-based practices.

b. Institutional Productivity in Scopus-Indexed Character Education Research

Furthermore, the ten institutions with the highest number of publications on character education at the elementary school level are listed. Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI) ranks first with nine publications, followed by Universitas Negeri Jakarta (UNJ) with 7. Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta (UNY), Universitas Negeri Malang (UM), and Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS) each published five papers. Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA) and Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha (Undiksha) contributed 4 publications, while Universitas Negeri Semarang (UNNES), Universität Basel, and the University of Westminster each published 3, as shown in Figure 5.

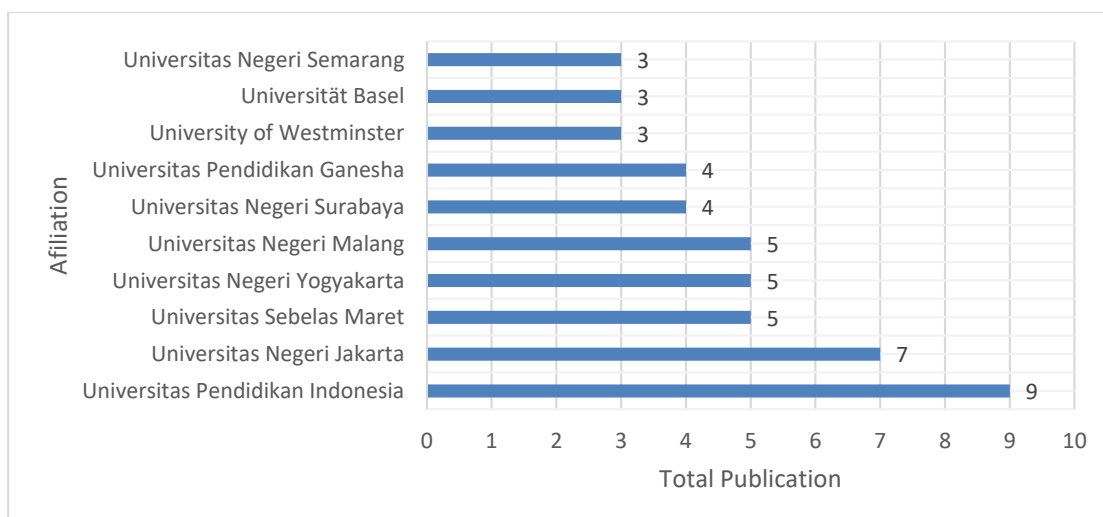


Figure 5. Institutional Productivity in Scopus-Indexed Character Education Research

These findings indicate that the most significant contributions to character education research at the elementary school level come from Indonesian universities, particularly teacher education institutions (LPTKs). The dominance of institutions such as UPI, UNJ, UNY, UM, and UNS indicates that character education is a central focus in curriculum development and pedagogical practice in Indonesia, aligning with national policies aimed at strengthening the *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*. At the same time, the involvement of international institutions such as Universität Basel and the University of Westminster reflects growing global interest in cross-cultural studies on character education. Collaboration between Indonesian researchers and international partners can enrich perspectives, particularly in integrating moral values, local culture, and character-based learning approaches. These results also suggest that research productivity correlates with institutional research capacity, funding support, and the presence of character education research centres. In the broader context of educational development, major Indonesian universities play a key role as hubs of knowledge production and innovation in character education at the elementary school level.

The most active institutions are based in Indonesia, including Universitas Negeri Medan, Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta, and UIN Sumatera Utara, followed by several international institutions. The dominance of Indonesian higher education institutions indicates that character education has become a priority research agenda. International institutions such as the University of Basel and the University of Westminster contribute a global dimension to this discourse. These findings confirm [Chaika's \(2024\)](#) view that integrating cultural values with educational modernization requires contributions from diverse international academic contexts to strengthen the global relevance of character education.

3.3 RQ3: What are the most frequently used keywords and the major thematic clusters in global research on character education at the elementary school level?

a. Keyword Co-Occurrence Network Visualization of Character Education Research

The keyword co-occurrence network generated with VOSviewer depicts the relationships among themes that frequently co-occur in publications on character education at the elementary school level. This analysis produced five main clusters, each represented by a

different color, reflecting research foci that are interconnected yet distinct, as shown in Figure 6.

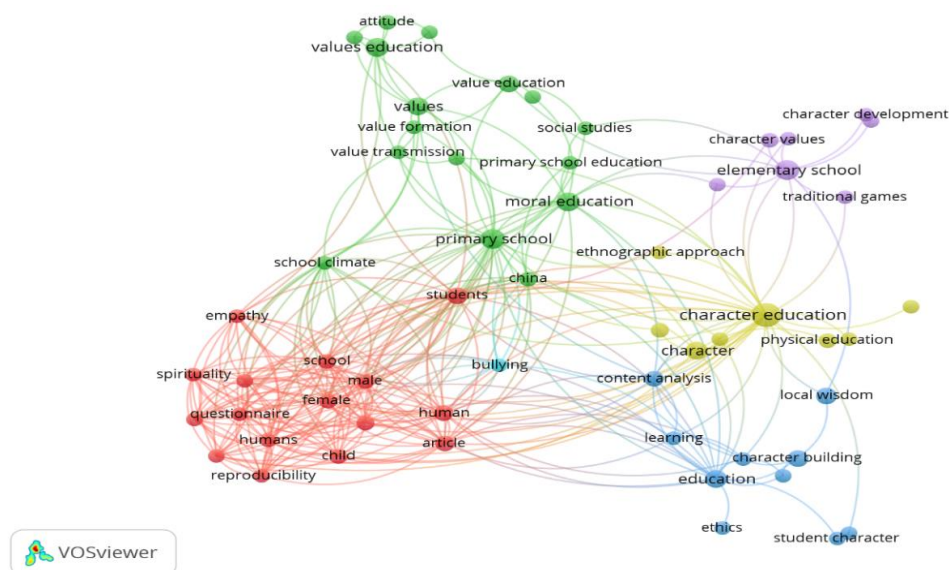


Figure 6. Keyword Co-Occurrence Network Visualization of Character Education Research in Elementary Schools Generated Using VOSviewer

Cluster 1 (Red) highlights psychosocial and school-environment aspects, represented by keywords such as empathy, spirituality, school climate, and child. This cluster reflects studies examining how character education influences students' emotions, behavior, and social relationships. Cluster 2 (Green) centers on moral and values education, with keywords such as moral education, values education, attitude, and value formation, indicating a strong focus on the internalisation of values and moral attitudes. Cluster 3 (Yellow) emphasises context-based, culturally grounded character education, featuring keywords such as local wisdom and an ethnographic approach. This cluster reflects attempts to integrate local cultural values into character-learning practices. Cluster 4 (Blue) is associated with instructional approaches and educational ethics, including education, learning, ethics, and character development, and shows a focus on pedagogical models that effectively foster character development. Cluster 5 (Purple) highlights physical activity and traditional games as pathways for character development, indicating a growing interest in experiential and active learning approaches.

The analysis demonstrates that research on character education in elementary schools is diverse and interdisciplinary. Global trends indicate a shift from normative to more empirical, contextual, and humanistic approaches. The prominence of moral-value and local-culture clusters underscores that character formation is not merely value transmission but a sociocultural learning process shaped by community contexts. The interrelation across clusters also shows strong synergy between value-education theories and practical instructional models. This suggests future research directions that emphasize integrating values, cultural traditions, and experiential learning in character education at the elementary level.

The keyword analysis reveals five major clusters that reflect global research directions: (1) moral values education, (2) local wisdom, (3) character formation, (4) learning models,

and (5) citizenship-responsibility. The moral education cluster supports Lapsley and Narvaez's (2006) theory that moral values serve as the foundation for children's character formation. The local wisdom cluster confirms the findings of Purwaningsih and Ridha (2024), which emphasize that local cultural values significantly contribute to the development of character traits relevant to students' social environments. Meanwhile, the clusters related to learning models and experiential learning strengthen Wiggan and Watson's (2016) view that character formation is more effective when connected to real-life contexts and social interactions. These patterns indicate that character education is increasingly evolving toward integrative, contextual, and practice-based approaches.

3.4 RQ4: What research methods and theoretical frameworks are most commonly employed in studies on character education at the elementary school level?

a. Annual Distribution of Research Methods Used in Character Education Studies at the Elementary School Level

The following chart shows the annual growth in research publications by methodological approach. The data illustrate the variation in research methods used by scholars over the past ten years. The classification includes library research, mixed methods, qualitative research, quantitative research, research and development (R&D), and classroom action research (CAR). This visualization aims to provide an overview of the trends and the dominance of specific research methods throughout the examined period, as shown in Figure 7.

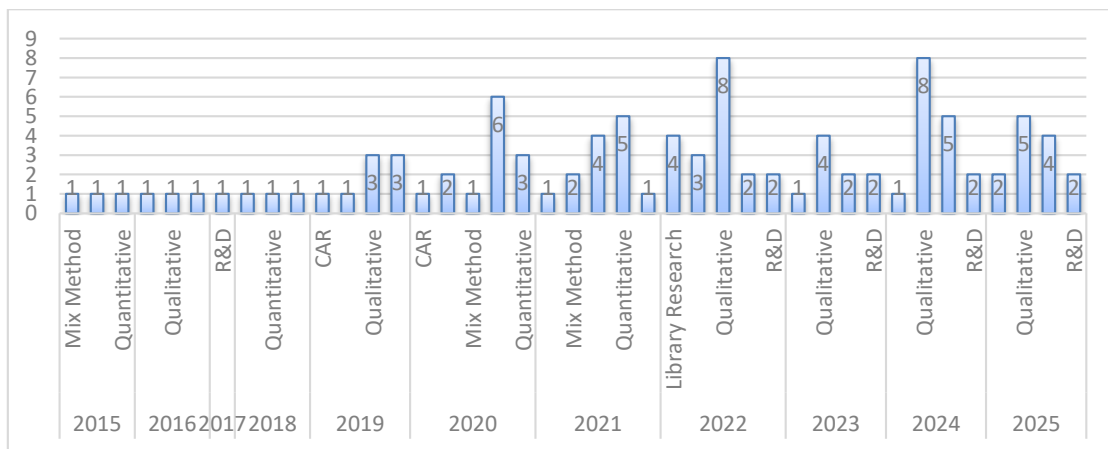


Figure 7. Annual Distribution of Research Methods Used in Character Education Studies at the Elementary School Level

The chart shows that the use of research methods fluctuated over the years. From 2015 to 2018, the number of studies across all methods remained relatively low and stable. A notable increase appears from 2019 to 2025, with qualitative and quantitative methods becoming dominant. The highest peaks occur in 2023 and 2025, when qualitative studies reach their maximum of eight publications. This trend indicates a growing preference for qualitative approaches over quantitative and R&D methods in recent years. The pattern reflects rising interest in context-based exploration and in-depth investigation of educational phenomena.

3.5 RQ5: What general thematic domains, instructional models, recurring research limitations, and future research directions are identified in the global literature on character education at the elementary school level?

- The figure presents “two-word clouds” illustrating the distribution of major themes found in 110 articles on character education at the elementary school level. The second word cloud highlights the most prominent concepts, approaches, and instructional models identified in the same body of literature. Together, these visualisations provide a comprehensive overview of the thematic focus and methodological and implementation trends that recur in character education research, as shown in Figure 8 and Figure 9.



Figure 9. The Common Models Emerging in the Literature Review

The “two-word clouds” highlight a strong integration between value-based themes and the instructional models used in elementary character education. The first word cloud emphasises core themes such as character, cognition, beliefs, values, morality, culture, religion, education, and learning, indicating that the literature frequently explores the interplay among values, moral development, and cultural–religious contexts in shaping students’ character. Social–emotional themes such as empathy, attitudes, self, helpfulness, and civic responsibility also appear prominently, suggesting their central role in character formation. The second word cloud illustrates that character education is implemented through a variety of pedagogical models and strategies, including communication, concept formation, knowledge construction, positive behaviours, restorative practices, humanistic

approaches, and program-based learning. Elements such as stories, play, tasks, virtual methods, and locally wisdom-based approaches demonstrate the diverse instructional tools used across studies. The presence of terms like implementation, model, support, integrated, teacher, and approach, as well as constructivist and epistemic perspectives, indicates that much of the research focuses on how character education is practically enacted through structured programs, methods, and pedagogical interventions.

The findings from the two word-clouds align with various theories and previous studies emphasizing that character education in elementary schools cannot be separated from the integration of values, cultural context, and instructional models. The dominance of words such as values, morality, and culture in the first word cloud confirms the views of [Lickona \(1991\)](#) and [Narvaez \(2013\)](#), who argue that character education is most effective when moral values and religious cultural contexts serve as the foundational basis for shaping students' character. Furthermore, the second word cloud reveals a diversity of pedagogical strategies ranging from communication, concept formation, positive behavior cultivation, and restorative practices to humanistic approaches which is consistent with [Lapsley and Woodbury's \(2016\)](#) findings that character education is most successful when built through active, constructivist, and experiential learning models. The variety of instructional tools, such as stories, games, assignments, virtual media, and local wisdom, reflects practices reported in Southeast Asian studies that underscore the importance of integrating local contexts to make character values more meaningful for students. Taken together, these patterns reinforce the evidence that character education depends not only on value inculcation but also on pedagogical design and structured interventions that enable students to construct values through cognitively, socially, and culturally relevant learning experiences. These findings also align with [Hidayatullah et al. \(2025\)](#), who assert that the synergy between ethics, morality, and knowledge constitutes a fundamental pillar for realizing transformative and sustainable character education.

b. Research limitations and future research directions in the global literature on character education at the elementary school level

Then, to provide a clearer understanding of the methodological weaknesses identified across the 110 reviewed studies, a thematic synthesis of research limitations was conducted. Each study's stated limitations were categorized into ten overarching themes that commonly appear in character-education research at the elementary school level. These themes reflect structural, methodological, and contextual weaknesses that recur across the literature and consequently influence the strength, scope, and generalizability of findings. The distribution of these limitation themes is visualized in the following chart. The chart on figure 10 illustrates that the most dominant limitation theme is Small/Single Sample or Site, accounting for 23% of all studies. This indicates that a large proportion of research relies on narrow site selections, limiting generalizability. The second most frequent limitation is Context-Limited/Low Generalizability (21%), reflecting the strong tendency of studies to focus on specific local contexts without broader comparative analysis. Other substantial limitations include No Empirical Evidence/Conceptual Only (17%) and Short-term/No Longitudinal designs (14%), suggesting that many studies either lack empirical validation or fail to examine long-term character development outcomes. Instrument-related weaknesses (Instrument/Measurement Limitations, 10%) and restricted stakeholder involvement (Narrow Stakeholders/Limited Perspectives, 11%) also appear consistently across the dataset. Themes with low representation occur

less frequently but still highlight specific methodological gaps in certain studies, as shown in Figure 10.

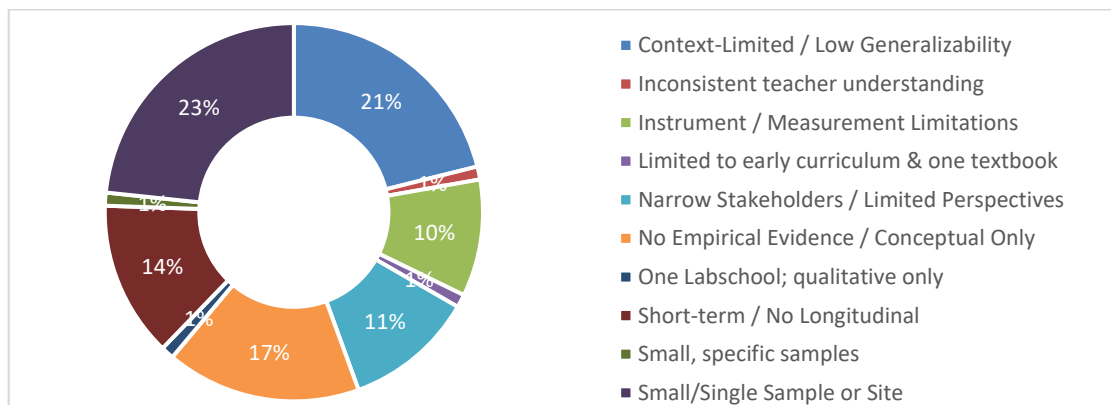


Figure 10. Distribution of Research Limitation Categories

The synthesis of future research directions provides valuable insights into the gaps and opportunities within character education studies. By analyzing 110 research articles, the researchers identified recurring themes and potential areas for further exploration. Understanding these trends not only highlights the field's current focus but also informs strategic recommendations for advancing educational practice and research. The chart illustrates the distribution of future research themes derived from 110 analyzed studies in character education. Among the identified themes, Expansion of Contexts and Research Samples accounts for the most significant proportion (22%), indicating a strong emphasis on testing programs across diverse schools, regions, and cultural settings. Curriculum and Cross-Subject Integration accounts for 18%, indicating researchers' interest in embedding character education across multiple subjects. Other notable areas include Measurement, Evaluation, and Impact (16%) and Focus on Values and Social Aspects (15%), reflecting concerns about assessment and the social relevance of character development. Smaller portions of the chart highlight Long-Term and Sustained Effects (12%), Teaching Methods, Approaches, and Strategies (12%), and Stakeholder Involvement (5%), suggesting that while these areas are recognized, they receive relatively less attention, as shown in Figure 11.

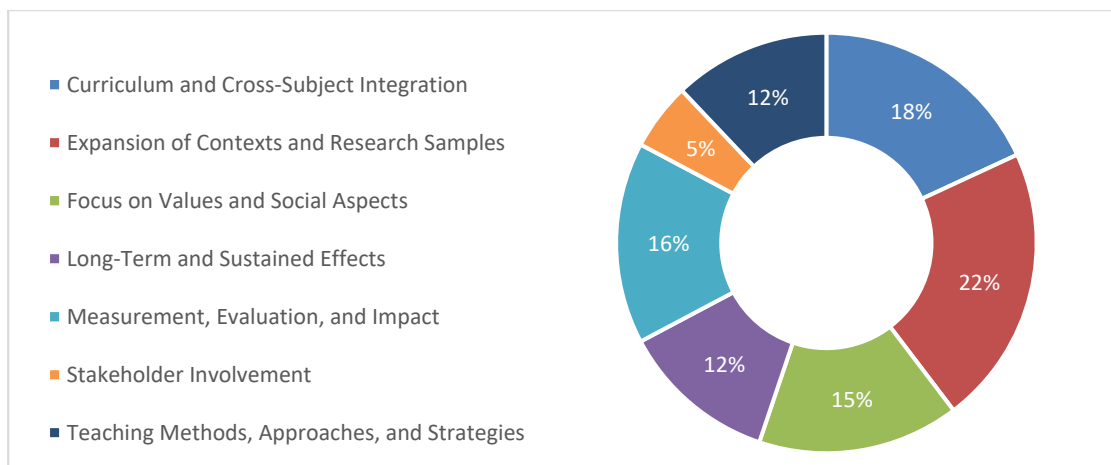


Figure 11. Distribution of Categories for Further Research Recommendations

Common limitations in the analyzed studies include small sample sizes, limited scope, and a lack of longitudinal research. These findings support the critique of Hanafiah et al. (2024), who argue that implementing character education requires long-term evaluation to assess its actual impact. The limited availability of valid and reliable evaluation instruments also aligns with the findings of Istiyono et al. (2021), who highlight that character assessment requires specialized tools sensitive to moral and value-based dimensions. The idea of developing integrative models across subject areas and conducting long-term studies aligns with the recommendations of Marzi et al. (2025) and Mayasari et al. (2024). These results reinforce that although character education is increasingly advancing globally, there is still a need for strengthened methodologies, evaluation systems, and sustainable model development.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate a growing volume of publications over time, with research output concentrated in particular regions, institutions, and countries. The results further show that global character education research is characterized by distributed scholarly contributions, dominant thematic domains related to moral values, social-emotional development, culturally grounded practices, and experiential learning, as well as a strong reliance on qualitative and mixed-method research designs. Collectively, these findings provide a coherent overview of how character education research at the elementary school level has evolved, what conceptual and methodological orientations prevail, and where gaps in theoretical integration remain.

From a theoretical, practical, and policy perspective, this study contributes by consolidating fragmented literature into an integrated research map that can inform future character education scholarship and practice. Theoretically, the synthesis highlights the need for more integrative conceptual frameworks that connect thematic domains across contexts. Practically, the identification of commonly used instructional models and contextual factors offers guidance for educators and school leaders in designing context-sensitive character education programs. At the policy level, the findings support evidence-based decision-making aligned with broader educational agendas, including sustainability and global citizenship. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its reliance on a single database, the descriptive nature of bibliometric analysis, and variations in conceptual definitions across studies. Future research is therefore encouraged to expand database coverage, employ longitudinal and comparative designs, and strengthen theoretical integration to advance a more comprehensive and globally applicable understanding of character education at the elementary school level.

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