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Internalization of character education in formal school: Systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to map developments in character education research within formal schooling and to systematically examine how character values are internalized, which values are targeted, and which pedagogical mechanisms are documented in the scholarly literature. It employs a systematic literature review (SLR) combining bibliometric analysis and content analysis. Bibliometric analysis of 385 Scopus-indexed documents was conducted to identify publication trends, influential sources and authors, and patterns of collaboration in character education research. A further 30 selected articles were examined in depth through content analysis to address RQ2–RQ4, focusing on modes of internalization, targeted character values, and mechanisms of value internalization. The findings reveal a significant increase in publications in 2025, signaling growing scholarly attention to character education in response to twenty-first-century educational challenges. At the level of educational practice, curriculum integration and experiential learning were the most frequently reported modes of internalization, while social–emotional and moral–ethical values were the most commonly targeted domains. Regarding pedagogical mechanisms, the findings suggest a shift in emphasis from behaviorist approaches toward constructivist orientations, with reflection and social practice emerging as the most prominent mechanisms. The study's contribution lies in integrating bibliometric analysis and content analysis within a single systematic framework that connects the macro-level research landscape with micro-level practices of character value internalization. Theoretically, it advances an understanding of character education as a multidimensional, context-sensitive field; practically, it offers evidence-informed guidance for educators and policymakers designing more holistic and sustainable character education strategies.

KEYWORDS: character education, systematic literature review, bibliometric analysis, value internalization, social–emotional learning, formal schools

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1. INTRODUCTION

Formal schools shape students' ethical orientations through both planned instruction and everyday institutional life. Classroom relationships, disciplinary practices, peer interactions, and opportunities to assume responsibility communicate what a school values and whose interests matter. Character education therefore concerns more than teaching desirable behavior: it involves cultivating the understanding, dispositions, and judgment through which students respond to moral demands (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). Research on school climate further situates students' development within the quality of their relationships and learning environments (Thapa et al., 2013). The central educational challenge is consequently to explain how values encountered at school become meaningful guides for students' conduct. Evidence from character education and related fields supports attention to this challenge, while requiring care about what different outcomes demonstrate. Brown et al. (2023) reported a small positive average effect across 214 studies of character education programs, while identifying heterogeneity and evidence of publication bias. In the adjacent field of social and emotional learning (SEL), Durlak et al. (2011) reported improvements in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance across 213 school-based programs involving 270,034 students. Subsequent meta-analyses examined a larger contemporary evidence base and longer-term outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2017). These findings establish the educational relevance of social, emotional, and character-related development. Nevertheless, improved adjustment or academic performance does not, by itself, establish that students have internalized an ethical commitment.

This distinction matters because knowing a value, following a rule, and adopting a value as a reason for action are different educational outcomes. Abdullah et al. (2019), examining three Indonesian schools, questioned approaches that emphasize standardized character concepts without sufficiently connecting them to students' social experiences. Participatory research similarly directs attention to students' involvement in defining, practicing, and evaluating character expectations (Muassomah et al., 2025). These studies raise a fundamental question about internalization: how can educational practices foster learners' ability to interpret values and assume personal responsibility while moving beyond the mere reproduction of socially approved responses under supervision? The question also requires sensitivity to cultural and institutional context. Character education is articulated through locally meaningful moral, civic, religious, and social priorities. Research on Sasak local wisdom illustrates the importance of culturally grounded resources alongside curriculum support and coordination with families and communities (Tohri et al., 2022). Hanis et al. (2025) approached value-based pedagogy through model development in a multiracial educational context, while Jagers et al. (2019) situated SEL within concerns about equity, identity, and participation. These perspectives suggest that common educational aims cannot be assumed to have identical meanings or implementation requirements across schools. A useful synthesis must examine both recurring pedagogical processes and the contexts in which particular values are selected and enacted.

Existing reviews have clarified several aspects of this diverse field. Witasari et al. (2025) mapped the research landscape of character education in elementary schools, and Hidayatullah et al. (2026) combined systematic review and bibliometric analysis at the same educational level. Feraco and Casali (2025) examined the broader development of character strengths research. Beyond publication mapping, Oldham and McLoughlin (2026) provided a thematic review and comparative content analysis of empirical character education research. Hadi et al. (2025) synthesized strategies in primary and secondary schools, whereas Muzakkir et al. (2024) focused specifically on teachers' beliefs about the primary school character education curriculum. These reviews document research patterns, implementation strategies, and the professional perspectives shaping character education. A more specific analytical need concerns the relationship between the educational setting in which values are cultivated, the values being pursued, and the processes through which students are expected to appropriate them. Recent reviews of curriculum-making in the humanities and routine school practices further demonstrate the importance of implementation-focused synthesis (Pujiastuti et al., 2026; Sargeant & Trask-Kerr, 2026). However, describing an approach as curriculum integration or experiential learning does not necessarily identify its operative pedagogical mechanism. A project may provide opportunities for cooperation without incorporating reflection; a school routine may produce repeated behavior without evidence of independent endorsement. Keeping these distinctions visible enables more precise comparison across studies that employ overlapping terminology.

The present study addresses this need through a systematic literature review combining bibliometric mapping of 385 Scopus-indexed documents with directed content analysis of 30 selected articles. Its contribution lies in relating the macro-level research landscape to a three-part analytical framework: modes of internalization, targeted character values, and pedagogical mechanisms. Here, modes denote the educational arrangements through which character education is organized; values denote its intended substantive orientations; and mechanisms denote the reported learning processes through which those orientations are cultivated. The framework supports structured comparison across primary and secondary schooling without presuming that the presence of an activity demonstrates successful internalization or that a frequently reported practice is necessarily effective. Hence, the present study is guided by four research questions:

RQ1. What are the publication trends, influential sources, authors, countries, and thematic evolution of research on character education?

RQ2. What modes of internalization are employed in character education across educational contexts?

RQ3. What character values are targeted through character education initiatives reported in the literature?

RQ4. What internalization mechanisms are used to cultivate character values in educational settings?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Character Education and the Internalization of Values in Formal Schooling

Character education has long been recognized as an essential part of schooling, with its aims extending beyond academic achievement to the development of students' moral judgment, personal dispositions, and social responsibility. Schools contribute to this development through formal instruction, everyday interactions, institutional practices, and the relationships students establish with teachers and peers. Lickona (1991) describes character as comprising three interrelated dimensions: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. These dimensions explain how individuals come to understand ethical principles, develop a personal commitment to those principles, and express them through their conduct. Althof and Berkowitz (2006) similarly emphasize the close relationship between character education, moral development, and citizenship education, particularly in preparing young people to participate responsibly in social and democratic life. A central issue in character education concerns how values taught at school become part of students' personal beliefs and everyday behavior. Understanding a moral principle does not necessarily lead to its consistent application, just as following school rules does not always indicate a genuine commitment to the values behind them. Internalization involves a gradual process in which students develop an understanding of particular values, recognize their personal and social significance, and begin to use them in guiding their decisions. Schuitema et al. (2008) highlight the importance of instructional strategies that encourage moral reflection, dialogue, perspective-taking, and ethical reasoning. Such experiences allow students to examine the meaning of values and consider their implications in situations that extend beyond the classroom.

This distinction between knowing and internalizing values is evident in studies of character education in Indonesian schools. Abdullah et al. (2019), in their investigation of three schools in Yogyakarta, identify limitations in approaches that place considerable emphasis on standardized character concepts while giving insufficient attention to students' social experiences. Their findings raise questions about how effectively prescribed values translate into meaningful behavior. Muassomah et al. (2025) approach the issue from a participatory perspective, showing how students can contribute to establishing shared expectations, practicing agreed-upon values, and evaluating their own behavior. Student participation creates opportunities for moral understanding to develop through experience, discussion, and shared responsibility. The cultural setting of a school also influences how character values are understood and practiced. Tohri et al. (2022) explore the potential of Sasak local wisdom as a foundation for character education in elementary schools. Their study highlights the educational relevance of local traditions while identifying challenges associated with curriculum support, teaching resources, and cooperation between schools and communities. Hanis et al. (2025) address similar concerns through the development of a value-based pedagogical model designed for a multiracial educational context. Both studies illustrate the importance of connecting character education with the social and cultural experiences of learners. Values may be widely recognized across educational systems, yet their interpretation and expression are shaped by local traditions, institutional expectations, and everyday relationships. Character internalization can therefore be understood as an ongoing educational process shaped by students' cognitive understanding, emotional engagement, behavioral experiences, and social environments. Its development

depends on how values are introduced, interpreted, reinforced, and practiced across different contexts. This understanding provides a foundation for examining the educational approaches and learning processes through which schools seek to cultivate character.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations of Character Value Internalization

Understanding how students internalize character values requires attention to the psychological and social processes involved in moral development. Several theoretical perspectives offer useful explanations of these processes, particularly Lickona's framework of character education, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Each highlights a different aspect of character formation, and their combined perspectives help explain why the development of values cannot be attributed to classroom instruction alone. Lickona's (1991) framework places moral knowledge, moral emotion, and moral action at the center of character development. Moral knowing concerns the ability to recognize ethical issues, understand moral principles, and make informed judgments. Moral feeling involves conscience, empathy, and the emotional commitment that motivates individuals to act according to their values. Moral action concerns the practical expression of these commitments through behavior. Japar et al. (2024) further examine these dimensions in relation to students' moral development, reinforcing the importance of considering cognition, emotion, and behavior as interconnected aspects of character. This framework is particularly useful for distinguishing students' understanding of a value from their willingness and ability to apply it in everyday situations.

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory explains character-related learning through observation, behavioral modeling, and reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environments. Students frequently encounter moral expectations through the conduct of people around them, especially teachers and other influential figures within the school. When teachers demonstrate fairness, honesty, responsibility, and respect in their daily interactions, they provide observable examples of how these values can be expressed. Research by Tarsono et al. (2025) highlights the relevance of teacher role modeling in elementary school character formation. However, observing positive behavior does not necessarily mean that students have adopted the underlying values. Opportunities to practice, evaluate, and regulate their own behavior remain important in developing a more personal understanding of moral responsibility. Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory offers a complementary explanation by emphasizing the role of social interaction and cultural participation in learning. From this perspective, students develop understanding through communication, shared activities, and guidance from more knowledgeable individuals. Character values gain practical meaning when students experience them through cooperation, negotiation, and interaction with others. Classroom discussions and collaborative tasks, for example, can create opportunities to explore fairness, empathy, responsibility, and respect. Burns et al. (2024), in a systematic review of peer collaboration in early educational settings, identify structured learning activities and adult guidance as important features of collaborative learning. Their findings also indicate that the outcomes of such activities vary, underscoring the importance of how social interactions are organized and supported.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory broadens this understanding by locating individual development within interconnected social environments. Students encounter character values through their experiences at school, at home, among peers, and in the wider community. These environments may reinforce similar expectations or expose learners to different interpretations of appropriate behavior. El Zaatari and Maalouf (2022), drawing on a bioecological perspective, emphasize the importance of relationships and environmental interactions in the development of students' sense of school belonging. Although belonging and character development are distinct outcomes, this perspective offers a useful basis for examining how students' experiences across different settings may influence value formation. These theories provide a multidimensional explanation of character internalization. Lickona clarifies the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of character; Bandura explains how observable behavior and self-regulation contribute to learning; Vygotsky emphasizes the social construction of understanding; and Bronfenbrenner draws attention to the wider environments in which students develop. Their combined insights support an examination of character education that considers educational practices, the values being cultivated, and the processes through which students develop personal commitments to those values.

2.3. Modes of Character Internalization in Formal Education

Schools adopt different approaches to integrating character education into students' learning experiences. Some approaches are incorporated directly into classroom instruction, while others emerge through school routines, interpersonal relationships, extracurricular activities, and engagement with families or communities. Reviews by Hadi et al. (2025) and Muzakkir et al. (2024) illustrate the range of strategies and institutional considerations associated with character education. These approaches can be understood as modes of internalization, referring to the educational arrangements through which students encounter and engage with character values. Curriculum integration provides a structured way of incorporating character values into learning objectives, instructional materials, classroom activities, and assessment. Through this approach, character development becomes part of subject teaching and everyday learning experiences. Sarkadi et al. (2022) examine the integration of character education into the Reflection, Engagement, Collaboration, and Elaboration (RECE) learning model within Pancasila and citizenship education. Their study illustrates how reflective and collaborative activities can connect the discussion of values with students' classroom experiences. Xu et al. (2025) similarly explore the integration of civic and moral education into physical education curricula, showing how character-related objectives can be incorporated into subject-specific learning. These studies demonstrate the possibilities of curriculum integration, although the inclusion of values in instructional design does not necessarily reveal the extent to which students internalize them.

Experiential learning approaches character development through students' direct involvement in meaningful activities. Experiences that require cooperation, responsibility, decision-making, and engagement with others provide opportunities to encounter moral values in practical situations. Lewis et al. (2003) illustrate how collaborative and reflective learning experiences can contribute to character development in secondary education. More recent studies examine similar processes through service-learning and community-based activities. Ruiz-Montero et al. (2025) investigate the development of prosocial leadership through service-learning involving primary school students and older adults, while Dölek et al. (2025) explore oral history as an educational activity connecting students with intergenerational experiences and social values. These approaches create opportunities for students to relate moral principles to situations in which their decisions and actions affect others. School culture provides another important context for character formation. Students encounter values through institutional routines, relationships, disciplinary practices, and the expectations shared by members of the school community. Thapa et al. (2013) emphasize the importance of school climate, particularly the social and relational conditions that shape students' experiences. Kotten et al. (2025) examine character education within culturally embedded institutional practices, highlighting the relationship between teacher identity, local values, and the school environment. Sobon et al. (2025) extend this perspective to boarding schools, where shared living arrangements and daily routines provide sustained opportunities for character development. These studies indicate that school culture can reinforce character values through experiences that extend beyond formal lessons.

Teacher role modeling is closely related to school culture but places greater emphasis on educators as influential examples of character in practice. Teachers communicate values through their behavior, their treatment of students, and their responses to everyday situations. Arthur (2011) highlights the relevance of teachers' personal character to students' educational expectations, while Nurbayan and Sanusi (2025) examine how teachers integrate character values into their pedagogical practices. The consistency between what teachers communicate and what they demonstrate is especially important because students regularly observe how moral principles operate in real relationships. Teacher role modeling thus represents a distinct educational approach, even though it frequently interacts with curriculum practices and the broader school environment. Character education also extends into family and community settings. Students' experiences outside school influence how they understand and apply the values encountered during formal instruction. Budiwan et al. (2020) examine a family-supported collaborative learning model designed to cultivate character values among junior high school students. Aminudin and Hasan (2025) similarly explore the roles of teachers and parents in children's character formation. Their work highlights the importance of communication and cooperation across educational environments, particularly when schools seek to develop values that students are expected to practice consistently in daily life. These modes of internalization often overlap in practice. A curriculum-based activity may involve experiential learning, teacher modeling, and participation in community life. School culture

may reinforce values introduced through lessons, while family relationships can influence how students interpret those values. Distinguishing these modes remains useful for understanding the settings and organizational approaches through which schools seek to support character development.

2.4. Dimensions of Character Values Targeted in Education

The values addressed through character education reflect a broad understanding of students' personal, moral, and social development. Character is associated with ethical conduct, emotional competence, intellectual dispositions, civic responsibility, and the search for meaning in life. The Values in Action framework organizes character strengths into six broad virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Ruch & Stahlmann, 2024). Reviews by Feraco and Casali (2025) and Oguni et al. (2025) further illustrate the diversity of character-related constructs examined in educational and psychological research. This conceptual breadth makes it useful to distinguish the main value domains addressed in formal schooling while recognizing the relationships among them.

Moral–Ethical values provide a foundation for students' understanding of appropriate conduct and responsibility toward others. This domain includes honesty, integrity, fairness, respect, and accountability. Developing these values involves learning to recognize ethical considerations, evaluate possible actions, and understand their consequences. Schuitema et al. (2008) emphasize the role of moral reasoning and discussion in educational practice. Syarifatunnisa et al. (2025), examining youth sports, explore how moral, competence, and status values relate to attitudes toward moral decision-making. Their study highlights the relevance of ethical evaluation in situations where students must weigh personal interests against moral expectations. Social–Emotional values concern students' ability to understand emotions, establish constructive relationships, and respond sensitively to others. Empathy, compassion, cooperation, emotional regulation, and interpersonal responsibility are central to this domain. Durlak et al. (2011), in a meta-analysis of school-based social and emotional learning programs, report improvements in students' social-emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance. Subsequent meta-analyses by Taylor et al. (2017) and Cipriano et al. (2023) provide further evidence concerning the outcomes of school-based social-emotional learning interventions. Yuan et al. (2025) also examine connections between social-emotional competence, character development, mental health, and academic outcomes. These findings establish the educational relevance of social-emotional development, although improvements in emotional and interpersonal competence should be distinguished from the internalization of ethical commitments. Civic–Citizenship values relate to students' responsibilities as members of social and political communities. They include tolerance, solidarity, justice, participation, leadership, and concern for collective well-being. Althof and Berkowitz (2006) identify important connections between moral education, character development, and citizenship. Jagers et al. (2019) broaden this discussion by emphasizing equity, identity, and meaningful participation within transformative social and emotional learning. These perspectives highlight the importance of preparing students to engage constructively with social differences and participate responsibly in shared community life.

Religious–Spiritual values represent another dimension of character education, particularly in educational systems where moral development is closely connected with religious teachings and cultural traditions. Such values may include spirituality, gratitude, religious commitment, respect, and responsibility toward others and the environment. Nasron (2025) examines the integration of Islamic values into local-content subjects, while Amrullah et al. (2025) investigate the relationship between Islamic education and environmental programs in supporting character development. These studies show how religious and spiritual orientations may be connected to social and ecological responsibilities. Their interpretation and educational expression, however, remain sensitive to the cultural and institutional settings in which they are taught. Discipline–Work Ethic values concern the dispositions that support responsible and sustained engagement in learning and daily activities. Perseverance, diligence, self-discipline, independence, and commitment to responsibilities are particularly relevant. Rahe and Jansen (2025) investigate relationships between selected character virtues and academic performance, including the relevance of self-regulation and courage. Sholeh et al. (2025) examine character-related development through a reading-learning approach based on multiple intelligences. These studies connect character education with students' learning dispositions, while leaving room for further investigation into the extent to which such dispositions reflect internalized personal values. Although these five domains offer a

useful classification, individual values frequently cross conceptual boundaries. Responsibility has moral, civic, and academic dimensions; self-regulation is relevant to emotional development and disciplined behavior; and empathy may support both interpersonal relationships and ethical decision-making. The categories therefore provide a way of organizing the values addressed in educational research without implying that character development occurs within separate or independent domains.

2.5. Pedagogical Mechanisms of Character Value Internalization

The educational setting in which character education takes place provides only part of the explanation for how students develop values. Equally important are the learning processes through which students interpret moral expectations, acquire behavioral dispositions, and develop personal commitments. In this context, pedagogical mechanisms refer to the processes through which educational experiences are expected to support value internalization. Literature on character and moral education identifies several relevant mechanisms, particularly habituation, modeling, reflection, value dialogue, moral dilemma engagement, and social practice (Bandura, 1986; Puka, 2005; Schuitema et al., 2008).

Habituation involves the repeated practice of behaviors associated with particular values. School routines, shared responsibilities, and regular participation in collective activities may help students develop behavioral consistency over time. Pujiastuti et al. (2026) examine the role of routine school practices in character strengthening, highlighting how institutional activities can provide recurring opportunities for students to exercise responsibility and discipline. Yet habitual behavior presents an important challenge for understanding internalization. A student may consistently follow a rule because it has become familiar or because the school expects compliance. Whether that behavior reflects a personally endorsed value requires further consideration of the student's understanding and motivation. Modeling operates through students' observation of others and their interpretation of the consequences of behavior. Bandura (1986) explains how individuals learn from behavioral examples within their social environments. In schools, teachers and peers provide frequent opportunities for students to observe honesty, fairness, cooperation, and responsibility in practice. The influence of these examples depends partly on their consistency and credibility. Positive models can communicate how values operate in everyday situations, although students may still need opportunities to reflect on the reasons underlying the behavior they observe.

Reflection provides an opportunity to connect experience with moral understanding. Through reflection, students consider their decisions, examine their responses to particular situations, and evaluate the consequences of their behavior. Sarkadi et al. (2022) incorporate reflection into classroom learning through the RECE model, which connects reflective activities with engagement and collaboration. Ruiz-Montero et al. (2025) examine service-learning experiences that create opportunities for students to consider prosocial responsibilities in practical settings. These approaches demonstrate how reflection can be incorporated into character-oriented learning activities. Its contribution to lasting internalization, however, depends on how students interpret their experiences and apply those insights beyond the immediate learning context. Value dialogue encourages students to discuss moral principles, consider alternative viewpoints, and explain their judgments. Through dialogue, learners encounter different interpretations of values and examine the reasons that support particular ethical positions. Moral dilemma engagement addresses a related process by presenting situations in which competing values or responsibilities must be considered. Schuitema et al. (2008) highlight the educational significance of moral discussion, perspective-taking, and ethically relevant learning situations. Prihandoko (2023) similarly discusses cognitive approaches to stimulating students' moral reasoning. Both mechanisms create opportunities for students to develop a more considered understanding of values through explanation, discussion, and evaluation. Social practice places character education within actual interactions and shared activities. Students encounter responsibilities through collaboration, community engagement, service-learning, and participation in school life. Muassomah et al. (2025) illustrate how participatory character education can involve students in establishing and evaluating shared expectations. Dölek et al. (2025) examine values education through oral history activities, while Ruiz-Montero et al. (2025) investigate prosocial leadership through intergenerational service-learning. These studies provide examples of how educational activities can create opportunities for students to exercise values in relationships with others.

The mechanisms described in the literature are closely connected and may operate simultaneously. Social practice can provide experiences for reflection, dialogue may support moral reasoning, and habituation may develop alongside modeling. Their presence in educational programs, however, should be distinguished from evidence of their effectiveness. Brown et al. (2023), in a comprehensive meta-analysis of character education

programs, report a small positive average effect alongside considerable variation across studies and evidence of publication bias. Research on social-emotional interventions also indicates that outcomes depend on program characteristics and implementation conditions (Li et al., 2023; Mertens et al., 2022). These findings highlight the need to examine how pedagogical mechanisms are implemented and evaluated before drawing conclusions about their contribution to sustained character development.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) design combining bibliometric analysis and directed content analysis to provide a comprehensive account of character education research in formal school settings. The combined approach enabled analysis at two complementary levels: a macro level, involving bibliometric mapping of publication trends, influential sources, and collaboration patterns; and a micro level, involving an in-depth examination of modes of internalization, targeted character values, and pedagogical mechanisms. The review was conducted through systematic stages of study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and analysis to support transparency, traceability, and replicability. The research was undertaken between December 2025 and January 2026.

3.2 Data Source and Search Strategy

The data were retrieved from Scopus, a scholarly bibliographic database selected for its broad literature coverage and established content-curation standards (Baas et al., 2020). Compared with Web of Science (WoS), which has historically applied stringent selection criteria but offers more limited coverage in some disciplines, Scopus indexes a wider range of journals, potentially reducing selection bias in multidisciplinary evidence synthesis (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Other databases, such as Google Scholar, may include non-academic or predatory publications and exhibit inconsistencies in metadata that can compromise the reliability of bibliometric indicators (Martín-Martín et al., 2018). Scopus, by contrast, applies quality-control procedures through its Content Selection and Advisory Board (CSAB), which evaluates sources against scholarly and peer-review standards (Pranckutė, 2021). Moreover, its substantial overlap with major databases, including a considerable proportion of publications indexed in WoS, makes it an efficient single source for mapping the international research landscape while retaining broad coverage of relevant studies (Martín-Martín et al., 2018). The search strategy combined terms representing the study's core concepts across article titles, abstracts, and keywords. The first group of terms captured processes of value internalization; the second addressed the central concepts of character education; and the third identified formal schooling contexts through terms referring to schools, curricula, teaching and learning, and school culture. Higher education was explicitly excluded to maintain the review's focus on primary and secondary education. The search string was as follows:

> TITLE-ABS-KEY (("internaliz" OR "inculcat" OR "integrat*" OR "cultivat*" OR "habituat*" OR "embed*" OR "foster*" OR "infus*")* AND ("character education" OR "moral education" OR "values education" OR "character building" OR "ethical education" OR "moral development") AND ("school" OR "formal education" OR "classroom" OR "k-12" OR "student*" OR "curriculum" OR "extracurricular" OR "co-curricular" OR "school culture" OR "school climate" OR "hidden curriculum" OR "teaching method*" OR "pedagog*")* AND NOT ("higher education" OR "university" OR "college" OR "undergraduate" OR "tertiary education" OR "medical school" OR "nursing"))

3.3 Study Selection and Inclusion Criteria

Study selection followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), encompassing identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion, as illustrated in **Figure 1**. During identification, the systematic title-, abstract-, and keyword-based search retrieved 1,208 records from Scopus. At the initial screening stage, 750 records were excluded through filters relating to publication years (2016–2026; n = 320), subject area (social sciences; n = 280), document type (articles and reviews; n = 110), and publication language (English; n = 40). This left 458 records for title and abstract screening. Subsequently, 410 full-text articles underwent eligibility assessment, of which 48 were excluded because they did not substantively address character education in formal schools. The inclusion stage yielded 385 articles for bibliometric analysis to address RQ1. Further selection based on contextual relevance and depth of discussion identified 30 articles for detailed content analysis addressing RQ2–RQ4. These procedures were designed to enhance the transparency, consistency, and reproducibility of the review process.

3.4 Data Analysis

3.4.1 Bibliometric Analysis

Bibliometric analysis was undertaken to address RQ1 by mapping publication trends, influential sources and authors, the distribution of countries and organizations, and patterns of scientific collaboration across the 385 documents. Bibliographic records for eligible publications provided data on authors, affiliations, countries, journals, publication years, citations, and keywords. Descriptive analysis was used to identify annual publication trends and the most productive sources. Network analyses examined co-authorship at the author, country, and organizational levels, while keyword co-occurrence analysis was used to identify the field's conceptual structure. Network visualizations and thematic maps were generated using VOSviewer and Biblioshiny, with standard indicators, including link strength, clusters, and node size, used to represent the intensity of collaboration and thematic relationships.

3.4.2 Content Analysis

To address RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4, directed content analysis was conducted on the 30 articles selected through the systematic review. A deductive coding framework was developed from foundational literature on character education and value internalization. For RQ2 (Modes of Internalization), studies were coded according to five educational arrangements: curriculum integration (embedding character values in curricula, learning objectives, and instructional materials); experiential learning (cultivating values through direct experience, activities, projects, or service-learning); school culture (developing character through school climate, shared norms, and institutional practices); teacher role modeling (teachers exemplifying values through everyday pedagogical interactions); and family–community involvement (extending opportunities for value internalization beyond school through families and communities). For RQ3 (Targeted Character Values), the values identified were organized into five domains: moral–ethical (honesty, integrity, and responsibility); civic–citizenship (citizenship, democracy, and patriotism); religious–spiritual (religious values and spirituality); social–emotional (empathy, cooperation, and emotional regulation); and discipline–work ethic (discipline, perseverance, and work ethic). For RQ4 (Internalization Mechanisms), the coding indicators comprised habituation (repeated behavioral practice), modeling (learning from examples), reflection (individual or collective reflection), value dialogue (discussion of values), moral dilemma (learning through ethical dilemmas), and social practice (participation in authentic social activities). Each article was independently coded for explicit or implicit evidence of these indicators in its research design, implementation context, and empirical findings. The resulting framework enabled a systematic comparison of the relationships among modes of internalization, targeted values, and pedagogical mechanisms.

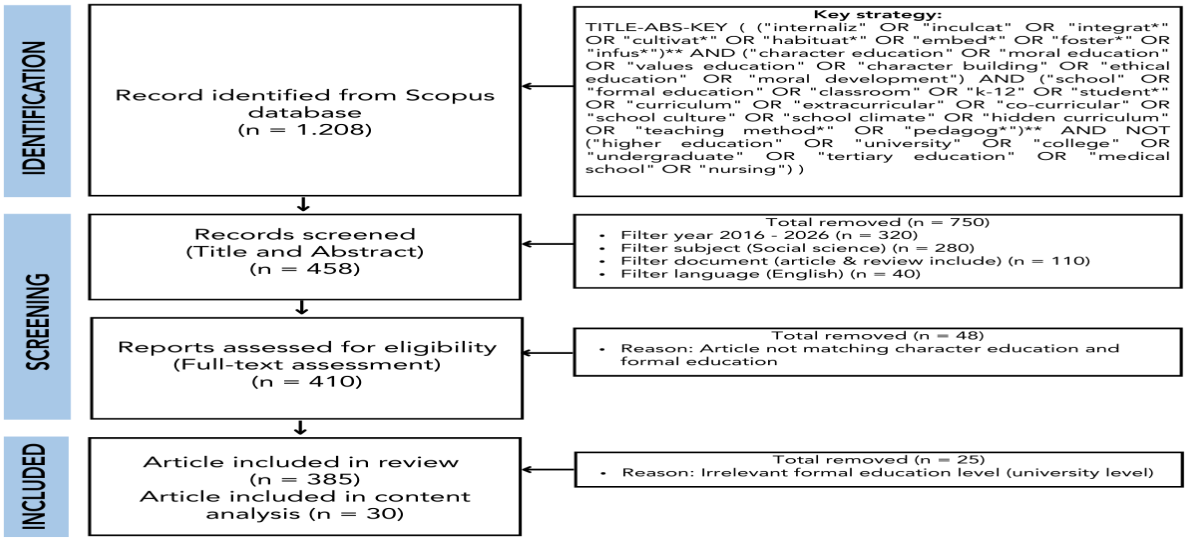


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram
Source: Authors' compilation, 2026.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Publication Trends, Influential Sources, Authors, Countries, and Thematic Evolution of Character Education Research

4.1.1 Publication Trends Over Time

Figure 2 depicts trends in publications on character education in formal schools between 2016 and 2026. Publication output increased gradually through 2024, followed by a pronounced rise in 2025. Specifically, the number of articles rose from 11 in 2016 to a relatively stable annual range of 33–41 between 2020 and 2024, before reaching 112 in 2025. This expansion may reflect growing scholarly concern with character education in the face of contemporary global challenges, including perceived crises of values, students' social and emotional well-being, and the demands of twenty-first-century education (Durlak et al., 2011b; Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025; Witasari et al., 2025b). The increase may also signal a broadening of the research agenda beyond normative perspectives toward more empirical, context-sensitive, and interdisciplinary approaches, including links with social–emotional learning, sustainability education, and curriculum reform. Character education is thus receiving increasing attention as a strategic area of international educational research. The 2026 data, however, are preliminary and should not be interpreted as representing a complete annual trend, since the search was completed in January 2026.

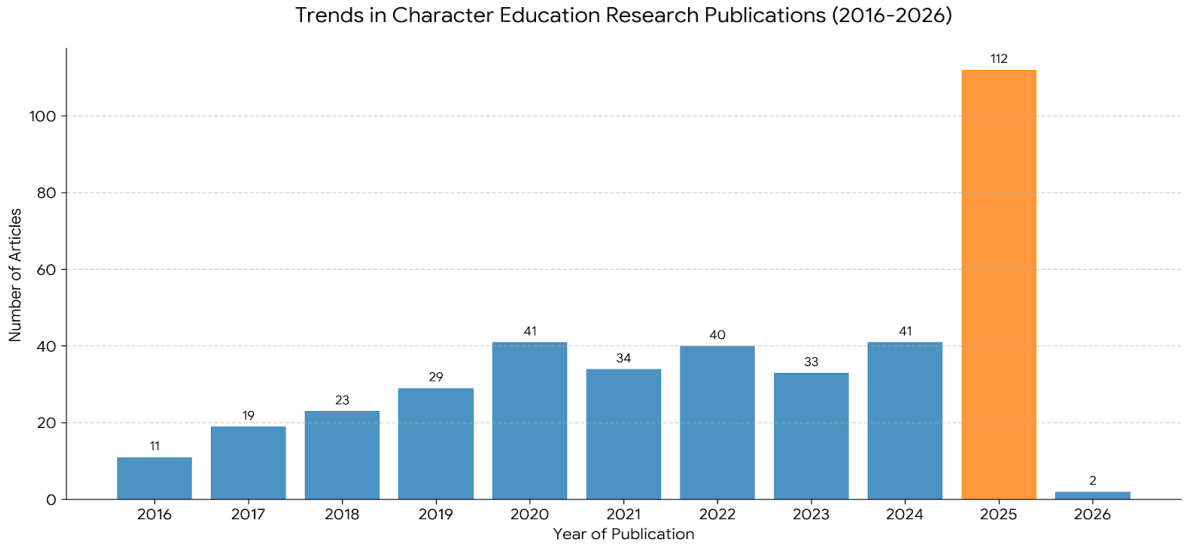


Figure 2. Publication Trends in Character Education Research

Source: Authors' compilation from Scopus data, analyzed using Biblioshiny (bibliometrix R package), 2026.

4.1.2 Influential Journals and Sources

Table 1 presents the leading publication outlets for character education research in formal schooling, assessed by number of articles (N), h-index, g-index, m-index, and total citations (TC). The *Journal of Moral Education* was the most productive source (N = 27), with a comparatively substantial citation profile (TC = 114) and moderate h- and g-index values. These results highlight its role as a major outlet and conceptual reference point for research in this field. Some journals with smaller publication counts nevertheless attracted higher citation totals. For example, the *International Journal of Instruction* published seven articles with 168 citations, whereas the *European Journal of Educational Research* published six articles with 112 citations. Their relatively high h- and g-index values suggest that their contributions have attracted sustained scholarly attention despite lower publication volumes. Indonesian national and regional journals, including *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* and *Cakrawala Pendidikan*, also feature in the dataset, with competitive h- and m-index values. Their presence indicates an important contribution from research grounded in local, religious, and cultural contexts. Overall, the indicators in **Table 1** reveal a heterogeneous publication landscape, in which high-volume sources coexist with journals exerting considerable citation influence. The development of character education research is therefore reflected in both the volume of publications and the scholarly reach and relevance of the articles produced.

Table 1. Most Influential Sources in Character Education Research

Sources	N	h_index	g_index	m_index	TC
Journal of Moral Education	27	5	10	0.556	114
Education Sciences	8	2	3	0.25	14
Jurnal Pendidikan Islam	8	4	6	0.667	39
Educational Philosophy and Theory	7	5	7	0.5	52
International Journal of Instruction	7	6	7	0.667	168
International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research	7	2	3	0.222	9
Journal of Social Studies Education Research	7	6	7	0.667	111
Educational Process: International Journal	6	2	2	1	6
European Journal of Educational Research	6	6	6	0.857	112
International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change	6	2	4	0.25	17
Cakrawala Pendidikan	5	5	5	0.556	59
Cogent Education	5	2	3	0.5	9
International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research	5	3	5	0.5	26
Frontiers in Education	4	2	4	0.4	23
Journal of Ecohumanism	4	1	1	0.333	2

Source: Authors' compilation from Scopus data, analyzed using Biblioshiny (bibliometrix R package), 2026.
Note: N = number of documents; TC = total citations.

4.1.3 Collaboration Networks in Character Education Research

Figure 3 illustrates the country-level co-authorship network in character education research, in which collaboration is concentrated around several prominent countries. Indonesia is the largest and most extensively connected node, with links to Malaysia, Australia, Thailand, the Philippines, the Netherlands, and Israel. Within the analyzed dataset, this pattern positions Indonesia as an important contributor to research output and as a bridge in international collaboration on character education in formal schools. The United Kingdom and the United States also connect networks across regions, consistent with their visible roles in the wider educational research landscape. In Asia, Malaysia, China, Singapore, and Hong Kong form a discernible regional collaboration cluster, reflecting the region's contribution to the field. Nevertheless, the network remains relatively sparse and is dominated by bilateral links. Thus, despite the development of international collaboration, considerable scope remains for more integrated global research partnerships.

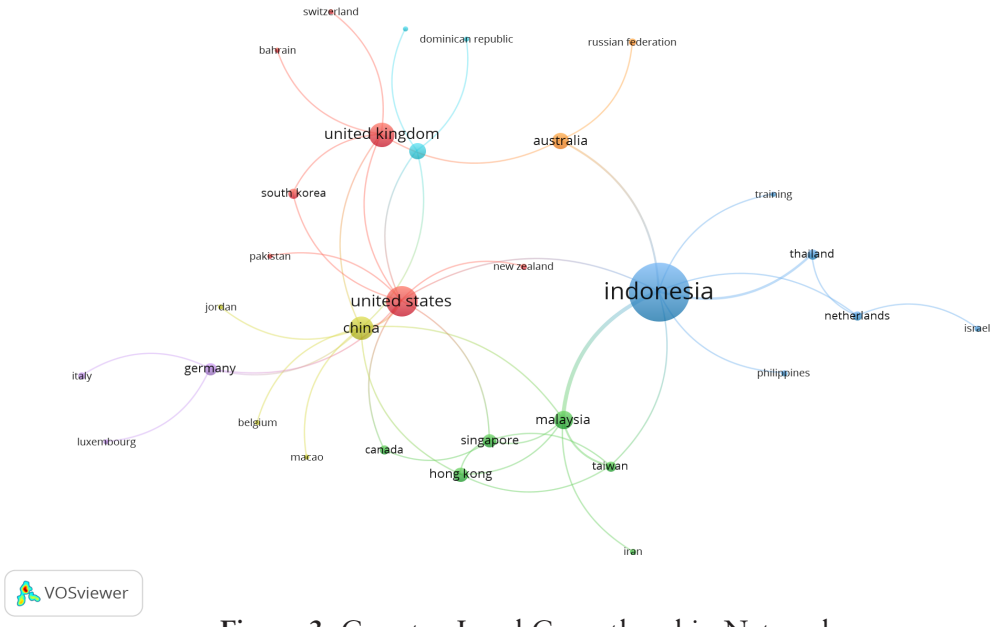


Figure 3. Country-Level Co-authorship Network
Source: Authors' compilation based on Scopus data, analyzed using VOSviewer, 2026.

The author-level co-authorship analysis in **Figure 4** identifies 34 authors (items) organized into five relatively distinct collaboration clusters. The network contains 93 links, with a total link strength of 94, indicating collaboration that is largely concentrated within small groups and only weakly connected across clusters. Several authors occupy comparatively central positions in their respective clusters, notably Nurhasanah, N., Sumantri, M. S., and Wajdi, M. B. N. Nurhasanah, N., for example, has seven direct collaboration links (links = 7) and a total link strength of seven, suggesting that the recorded collaborations each occurred once or had similar intensity. Nurhasanah is associated with two documents in the analyzed dataset. Overall, the network is characterized by recurring collaboration within relatively bounded teams and limited interaction among clusters. This pattern suggests that character education research continues to rely heavily on established author groups or institutional teams, while wider cross-group networks remain less developed. Expanding collaboration across these groups could strengthen knowledge integration and contribute to the maturation of the field.

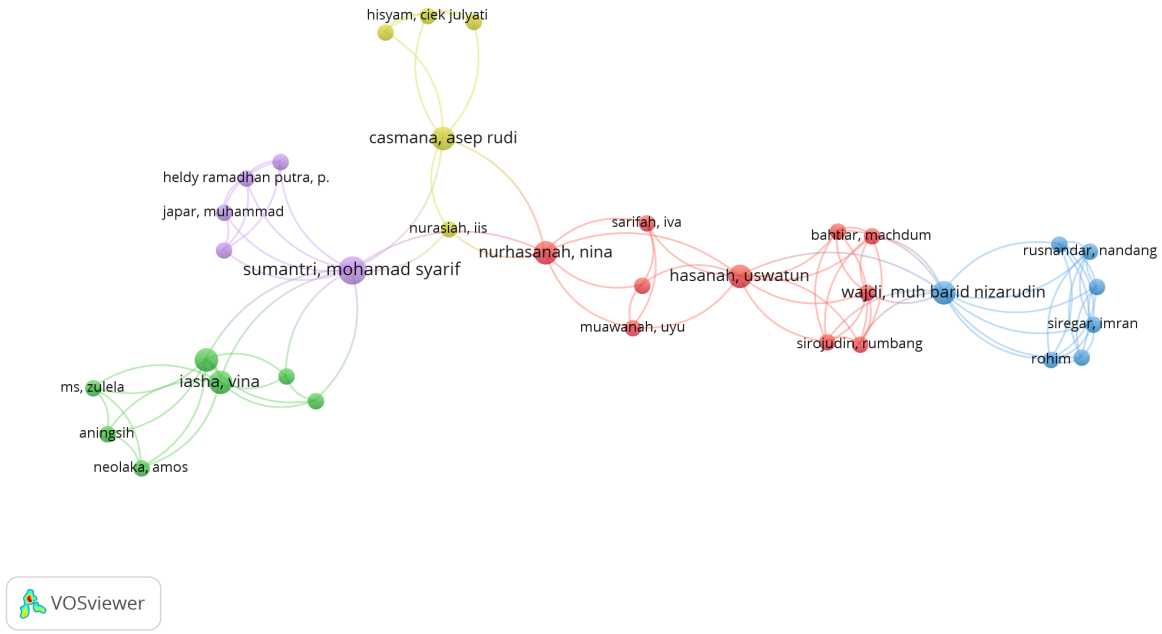


Figure 4. Author-Level Co-authorship Network
Source: Authors' compilation based on Scopus data, analyzed using VOSviewer, 2026.

Figure 5 presents the organizational co-authorship network, showing that collaboration is concentrated in particular institutional clusters, many of which involve Indonesian higher education institutions. Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI) appears as the largest node, with extensive connections to institutions such as Universitas Negeri Jakarta, Universitas Galuh, and Universitas Negeri Semarang. Within this network, UPI thus functions as both a prominent contributor and an institutional collaboration hub. Another notable cluster comprises religiously affiliated universities, particularly State Islamic Universities (UIN) and Muhammadiyah universities, highlighting the prominence of moral and religiously oriented educational contexts in character education scholarship. Although several institutions have established relatively cohesive partnerships, connections between clusters remain limited and often reflect regional proximity or existing institutional affiliations. The findings therefore point to opportunities for broader cross-institutional collaboration at both national and international levels.

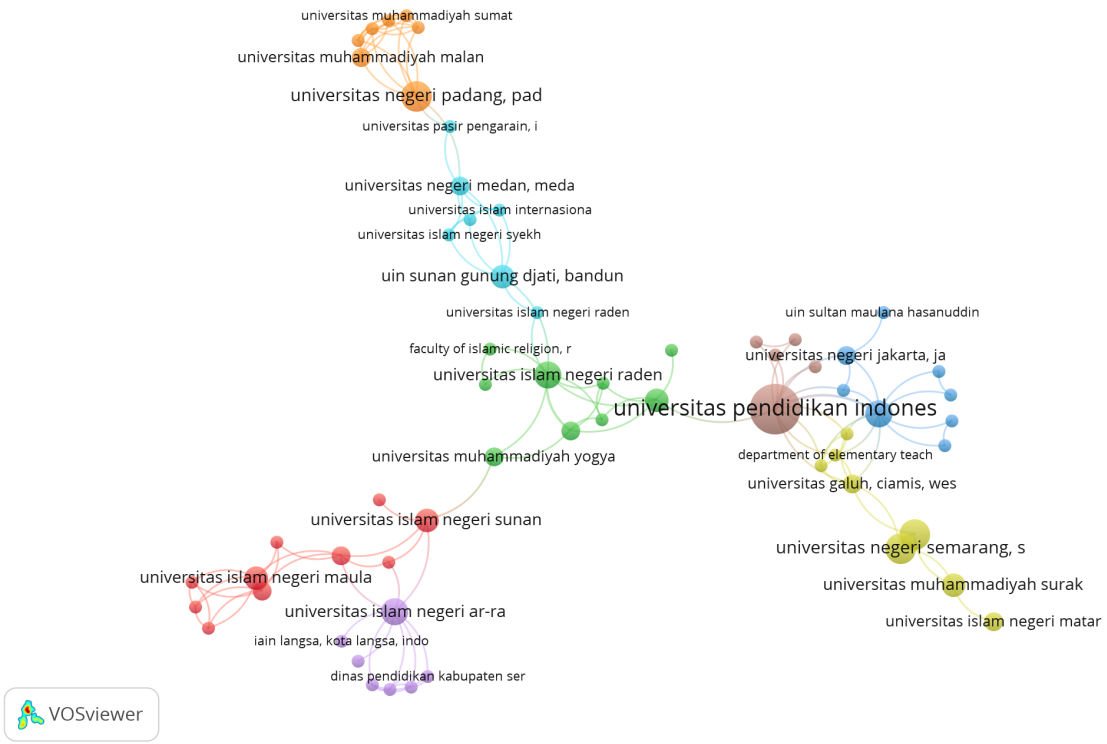


Figure 5. Organizational Co-authorship Network
Source: Authors' compilation based on Scopus data, analyzed using VOSviewer, 2026.

4.1.4 Keyword Co-occurrence Network

The keyword co-occurrence analysis presented in **Figure 6** identifies 122 keywords organized into eight interconnected clusters, with 358 links and a total link strength of 457. These results indicate a conceptually diverse and overlapping thematic structure. The terms "character education" and "moral education" are the most central and prominent keywords, linking otherwise distinct research themes.

Cluster 1, the largest and most central grouping, focuses on character, character building, and character development. It is closely associated with the implementation of policy and school-level practices, as reflected in keywords such as curriculum 2013, educational values, extracurricular, leadership, and local culture. This profile suggests a strong implementation-oriented and contextual emphasis, particularly within Indonesian education. Cluster 2 represents curricular and citizenship-related concerns, bringing together citizenship education, curriculum development, global citizenship education, social–emotional learning, and teacher beliefs. These themes point to curriculum reform and the development of teachers' capacity to support values education across primary and secondary schooling. Cluster 3 highlights pedagogical and experiential approaches, including civic engagement, experiential learning, project-based learning, moral dilemmas, critical thinking, and empathy, suggesting a strong emphasis on active learning alongside prescriptive approaches to students' moral and personal development. Cluster 4 reflects the philosophical and ethical foundations of character education, including moral education, ethics education, Confucian pedagogy, educational leadership, and role models, thereby underscoring the place of ethical values, leadership, and exemplification in educational change. Cluster 5 connects character education with twenty-first-century concerns through digital citizenship, literacy, language learning, religious moderation, and social and emotional learning, reflecting adaptations to digital and multicultural contexts. Cluster 6 foregrounds processes of value internalization, with terms such as habituation, hidden curriculum, community of inquiry, and philosophy for children, drawing attention to implicit learning processes and educational environments, including vocational schools. Cluster 7 centers on key educational actors and sociocultural values, including teachers, parents, schools, *akhlakul karimah* (virtuous conduct), national culture, and virtues, highlighting school–family collaboration and culturally and religiously grounded values. Finally, Cluster 8 concerns contemporary policy and formal schooling, featuring Merdeka Curriculum, religious education, religious values, moral reasoning, and thematic learning model. These themes indicate close connections among character education, curriculum policy, and religious values education. These eight clusters

portray character education as a multidimensional, interdisciplinary, and context-dependent research field that brings together ethical values, pedagogy, curriculum policy, educational stakeholders, and the challenges of twenty-first-century schooling.

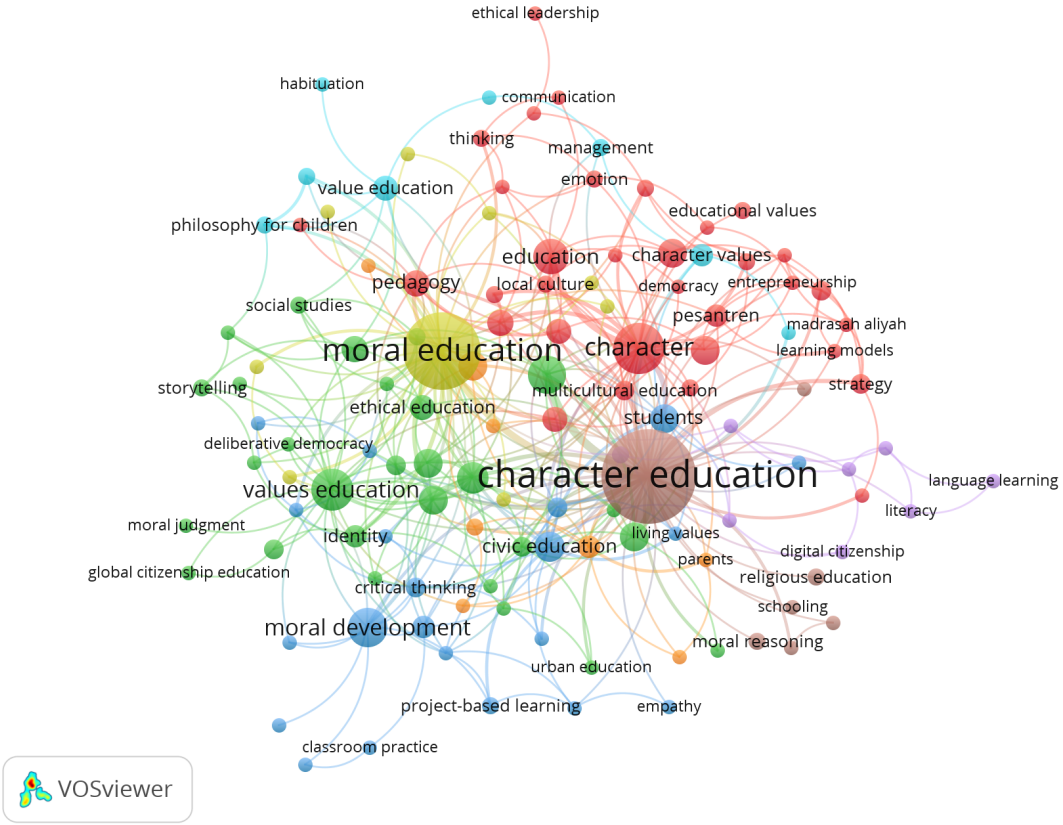


Figure 6. Keyword Co-occurrence Network
Source: Authors' compilation based on Scopus data, analyzed using VOSviewer, 2026.

4.2 Findings of the Content Analysis

The analysis of 30 selected articles provides a focused account of character education in formal school settings. In addition to the publication patterns addressed by the bibliometric analysis (RQ1), it examines the modes through which character values are internalized (RQ2), the values targeted by character education initiatives (RQ3), and the pedagogical mechanisms through which these values are cultivated (RQ4).

4.2.1 Modes of Character Internalization in Formal Education

As shown in **Figure 7**, curriculum integration was the most frequently identified mode of character internalization across the reviewed studies. The evidence indicates that character values were embedded directly in curricular design, learning objectives, and instructional materials. One example is the Moral-Flexible Learning Model, which incorporates ethical values expressed through Confucian idioms (Chengyu) into digital curricula and flexible learning, with reported improvements in self-regulation and inquiry-related values (Zhang et al., 2026). Curriculum integration was also evident in religious education and locally developed subjects, where religious values and environmental responsibility were explicitly embedded in lesson plans and school activities (Amrullah et al., 2025b; Nasron, 2025b). Quasi-experimental studies further reported statistically significant improvements in moral understanding, collaboration, and student character when local-wisdom-based approaches and multiple-intelligences-based learning were integrated into curricula (Sholeh et al., 2025b; Sujana et al., 2025).
Experiential learning was reported in 19 articles (63%), indicating the prominence of direct experience and active student participation as opportunities for value development. In one activity-based approach, SMART moral education was associated with significant improvements in prosocial behavior and filial piety among left-behind children (To et al., 2025). Quantitative and qualitative evidence further suggested that sport-based

learning and service-learning can foster independence, cooperation, empathy, and prosocial leadership (Nur et al., 2025; Ruiz-Montero et al., 2025b). Dölek et al. (2025) also reported that oral history activities involving students, teachers, and families could cultivate solidarity, responsibility, and respect across generations.

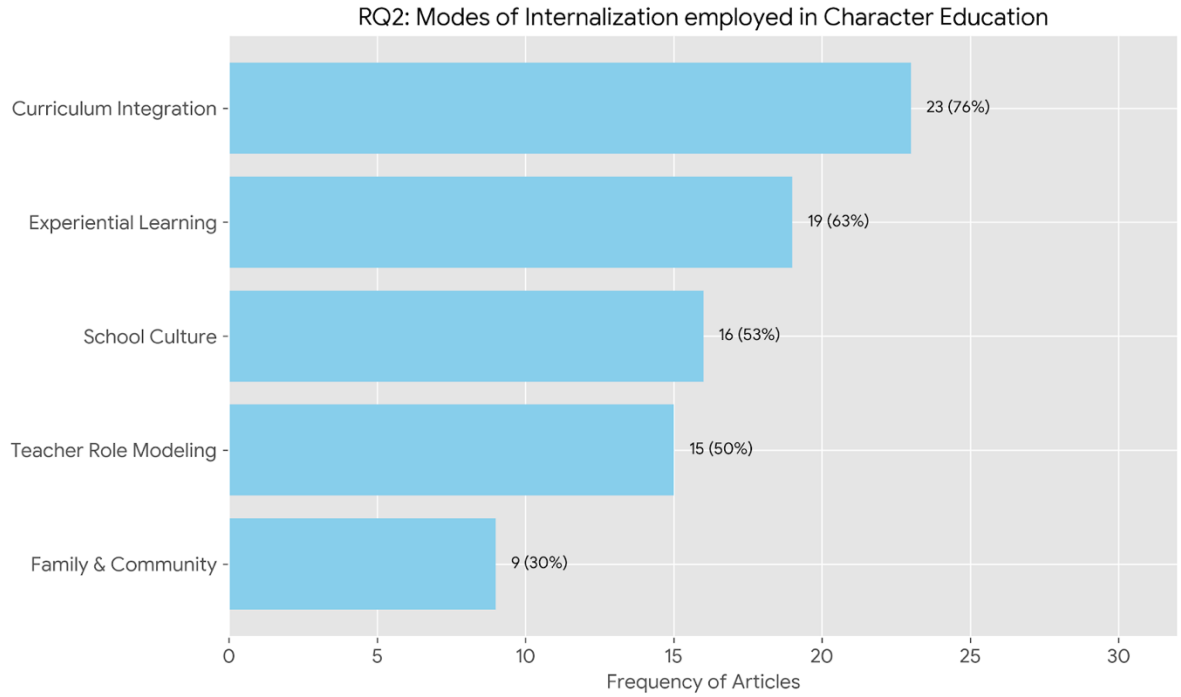


Figure 7. Modes of Internalization in Character Education
Source: Authors' compilation, 2026.

School culture featured in 16 articles (53%), indicating that character development is shaped by formal classroom instruction as well as the broader school climate and shared institutional practices. Studies reported that emotional-expression approaches in music education supported students' emotional competence and more harmonious classroom relationships. School cultures grounded in religious, social, and locally valued traditions were associated with greater discipline, empathy, and trust among members of school communities (Kotten et al., 2025b; Nizariah et al., 2025). In boarding schools, character education was described as a holistic process embedded in school and residential life, including healthy routines, spirituality, exemplary figures, and extracurricular activities (Sobon et al., 2025b).

Teacher role modeling was identified in 15 articles (50%), particularly where teachers were explicitly positioned as central moral actors. Kotten et al. (2025) showed how teachers' character, grounded in local spiritual and communal values, contributed to trust, student discipline, and professional collaboration within schools. Similarly, Nurbayan and Sanusi (2025) identified teachers' daily pedagogical practices as an important means of cultivating religious values, integrity, and cooperation, while noting the limited integration of educational technology. However, in several other studies, teacher modeling remained an implicit component and was not explicitly operationalized as a primary variable (Fernández-Espinosa et al., 2025; Lin, 2025).

Family–community involvement was the least frequently examined mode, appearing in nine articles (30%). Nevertheless, studies that addressed the roles of families and communities reported that school–family partnerships could reinforce the consistent enactment of moral and religious values and help parents guide children's behavior (Aminudin & Hasan, 2025; Ilyas & Suriyani, 2025; Nizariah et al., 2025). Engagement with families and local communities also extended opportunities for value-related learning beyond the classroom and school environment (Amrullah et al., 2025b; Dölek et al., 2025b).

4.2.2 Landscape of Targeted Character Values in the Literature

Social–emotional values were among the most frequently targeted domains, with studies reporting empirical outcomes associated with humanistic teaching and social and emotional learning (SEL). These approaches were linked to improvements in empathy, motivation, psychological well-being, and school climate (Amini et al., 2025;

Arbués et al., 2025). Studies A6, A11, and A19 likewise reported gains in emotional regulation, self-confidence, and social relationships through emotional-expression activities, humanistic animated learning media, and service-learning (Mahendra et al., 2025; Piličiauskaitė & Gabnytė Bizevičienė, 2025; Ruiz-Montero et al., 2025b). Moral–ethical values were addressed through changes in students' dispositions and moral reasoning. Honesty, responsibility, fairness, and perseverance were cultivated through cultural idioms and traditional arts (Notosutanto et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2026). Quantitative studies also linked moral values with lower acceptance of cheating and more ethical attitudes toward decision-making (Syarifatunnisa et al., 2025b; To et al., 2025). Civic–citizenship values appeared primarily in citizenship education and public policy contexts. Study A9 indicated that incorporating ideological and political education into physical education curricula supported sportsmanship, patriotism, and civic responsibility (Xu et al., 2025). Curriculum reform and service-learning were also associated with civic awareness and social cohesion (Ruiz-Montero et al., 2025b; Tusa et al., 2025). Religious–spiritual values were documented particularly in studies situated within religious and culturally specific educational contexts. Integrating religious values was associated with spirituality, tolerance, discipline, and positive social behavior, often alongside other moral and social values (Aminudin & Hasan, 2025; Nasron, 2025b; Nizariah et al., 2025; Safitri et al., 2025). Discipline–work ethic values, by contrast, more often appeared as implicit outcomes. Studies A3, A16, A21, and A30 described perseverance, independence, and discipline as developing through routine practices, physical activity, and boarding-school environments (Andriyanto et al., 2025; Nur et al., 2025; Safitri et al., 2025; Sobon et al., 2025b).

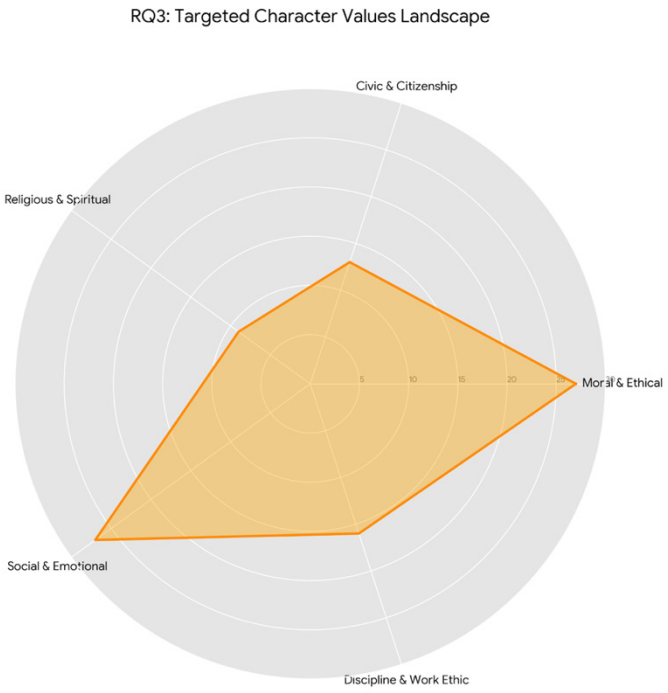


Figure 8. Landscape of Targeted Character Values
Source: Authors' compilation, 2026.

Figure 8 displays a broadly symmetrical, butterfly-shaped profile in which moral–ethical and social–emotional values are the two most prominent domains, each appearing in 27 articles. Religious–spiritual and civic–citizenship values are represented more selectively, reflecting their greater dependence on specific educational contexts than the more widely targeted moral and social–emotional domains.

4.2.3 Pedagogical Mechanisms of Value Internalization

Figure 9 summarizes the mechanisms identified for RQ4, distinguishing more traditional, transmissive approaches from constructivist and reflective approaches. Although habituation remained prominent, reflection was the most frequently reported mechanism (17 articles). This distribution suggests a greater emphasis in the reviewed literature on participatory and reflective processes alongside established behavior-oriented practices; it does not, on its own, establish a causal or historical shift in effectiveness.

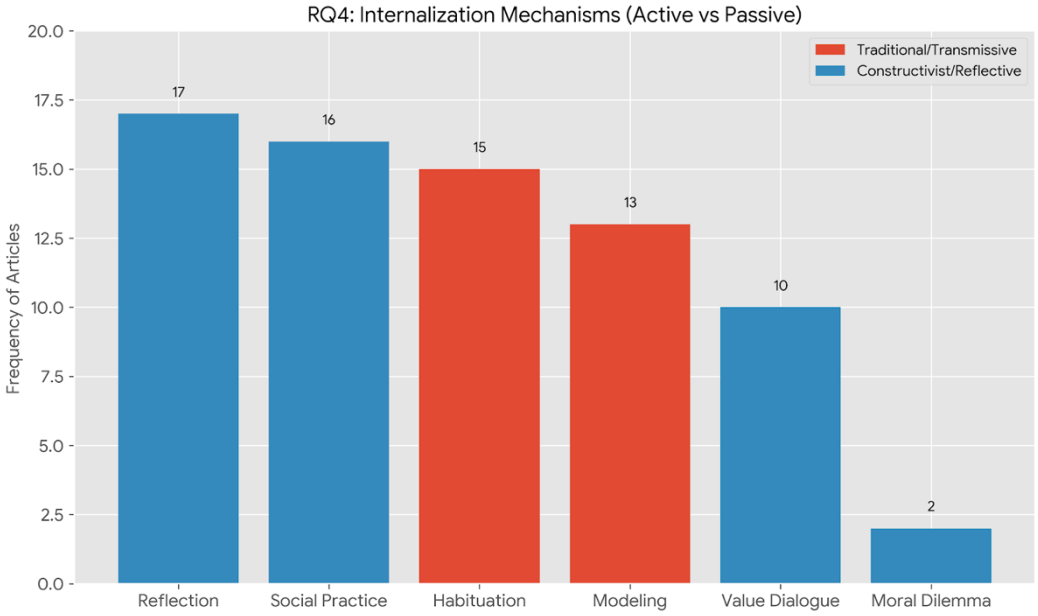


Figure 9. Mechanisms of Character Value Internalization (Active vs. Passive)
Source: Authors' compilation, 2026.

Habituation was observed in repeated practices and institutional routines associated with relatively stable behavioral patterns. Daily activities, sports participation, and boarding-school life were reported to support discipline, cooperation, and self-regulation (Muassomah et al., 2025b; Nur et al., 2025; Piličiauskaitė & Gabnytė Bizevičienė, 2025; Sobon et al., 2025b). Modeling was particularly prominent in studies by Kotten et al. (2025) and Nurbayan and Sanusi (2025), in which students encountered values through observing teachers and other exemplars. Role modeling also appeared in artistic and cultural activities (Notosutanto et al., 2025) and religiously oriented school environments (Aminudin & Hasan, 2025). Reflection involved students interpreting their experiences and developing an understanding of the values they had encountered. Structured reflection through discussion, journaling, or digital activities was reported to support both cognitive and affective engagement with values (Piličiauskaitė & Gabnytė Bizevičienė, 2025; Ruiz-Montero et al., 2025b; Zhang et al., 2026). Value dialogue was evident in studies involving discussions of ethical principles and deliberation about moral issues. Lam (2025) and Piličiauskaitė and Gabnytė Bizevičienė (2025) suggested that dialogue grounded in artistic activities and Confucian ethics could foster more critical and contextually informed understandings of values. Moral dilemma engagement was the least frequently reported mechanism and appeared in research involving moral reasoning and ethical decision-making in classroom and sport contexts (Syarifatunnisa et al., 2025b; Zhang et al., 2026). Finally, social practice involved students participating in authentic social activities. The reviewed studies suggested that sustained collaboration and community engagement provided opportunities for students to enact and develop character values in meaningful relationships (Dölek et al., 2025b; Nizariah et al., 2025; Ruiz-Montero et al., 2025b).

5. CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive synthesis of the development and practice of character education in formal schools through a systematic literature review integrating bibliometric and content analyses. The findings show substantial growth in character education research, including a particularly significant rise in publications in 2025, reflecting heightened scholarly interest in its role in responding to twenty-first-century educational challenges. At the level of educational practice, the content analysis identified curriculum integration and experiential learning as the most frequently reported modes of internalization, followed by school culture, teacher role modeling, and family–community involvement. Social–emotional and moral–ethical values were the principal targets, whereas civic–citizenship, religious–spiritual, and discipline–work ethic values were more context-specific and often implicit. The analysis of pedagogical mechanisms further suggested an emphasis on constructivist approaches alongside traditional behavior-oriented practices, with reflection and social practice

receiving greater attention than habituation alone.

The study's originality lies in its layered analytical framework, which systematically links modes of internalization, targeted character values, and pedagogical mechanisms while integrating macro-level bibliometric mapping with micro-level content analysis. This approach offers a more coherent account of character education as both a developing research field and a set of practices enacted in formal schooling across different cultural and policy contexts.

The findings underscore the importance of designing character education as a holistic and integrated endeavor in which curricula, learning experiences, school culture, teacher role modeling, and family and community engagement form complementary components of a wider educational ecosystem. For practitioners, the synthesis offers evidence-informed directions for moving beyond predominantly normative or declarative approaches toward more reflective, participatory, and context-sensitive pedagogies. For policymakers, it highlights the need for curriculum and educational evaluation frameworks that explicitly recognize social–emotional, moral, and civic development as integral dimensions of educational quality.

Future research should broaden the evidence base by including additional international databases and adopting longitudinal designs to examine how character education practices evolve over time. Empirical studies are also needed to test the causal relationships among modes of internalization, pedagogical mechanisms, and students' character-related outcomes. Further investigation of family and community participation, alongside the integration of digital technologies in character value internalization, would help develop more relevant, inclusive, and sustainable approaches to character education.

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