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**Participatory-Based Character Education:
Indonesian School Children's Experiences**

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PARTICIPATORY-BASED CHARACTER EDUCATION: INDONESIAN SCHOOL CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

Character education has been subjected to a top-down approach with a student center system. The values embedded completely come from the teachers or the school. This study explored how the participatory learning model could effectively instill character values in students. Students are given space to be involved and subjected to a series of character education processes. It aims to describe how students' and teachers' participation could compile the points of character values, how students apply the learning materials designed together, and how they are involved in providing evaluations for themselves and their friends. The qualitative descriptive method was employed in the current study. It aimed to observe and listen to the stories of students and teachers regarding their involvement in the process of curriculum development. Documentation on the learning modules was made for data collection. The data were taken by considering the representation of students and teachers. They engaged in every pulse of the learning process, which led to cognitive and affective development. The research proposed a cooperative investigation alongside other educational institutions, factoring in both the type and affiliation of these schools, aiming to produce more diverse and well-rounded outcomes.

Keywords: Character Education; Participatory Learning; Dignity; Character Values; Student's Primary School.



A. Introduction

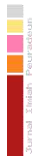
Character education has been subjected to a top-down approach with a student center system. The values embedded within are purely initiated by the teachers or the school. Character education is generally used as a tool by the authorities to uphold the status quo encompassed by educational institutions (Husni, 2020). Students are positioned as passive subjects who accept the character activity curriculum provided by the institution or teacher. The teacher dictates good grades to be done and bad grades to be avoided without involving students. The space for student expression and participation is limited by the top-down learning model. Students' opinions are not accommodated in building character education. They are not directly involved in finding concepts and procedures in the character curriculum. The curriculum series is taken for granted as given by the teacher. Meanwhile, character education must be packaged as a "knowledge intermediary" involving teachers and students (Walker et al., 2015). Students' involvement in the process of character education opens their skill development in providing responses and growing confidence. Character education with a participatory model could lead to discovery.

The nature of character education is a form of knowledge accumulation process to create a good impact on humans (Rokhman et al., 2014). This process adopts character values reflected through personal thoughts, emotions, and behavior, such as inculcating the values of responsibility, discipline, patience, and perseverance (Rawana et al., 2014). Character education can be obtained from many aspects, one of which is family, which is the earliest place to effectively instil the value of character education (Hyoscyamina, 2011; Purwaningsih, 2010; Roshida & Nik Haslinda, 2007; Suarmini et al., 2016; Subianto, 2013). In addition to the family, the school environment is also a source of individual character formation. School can shape students' attitudes, behavior, character and leadership through assignments and social interactions within (Rokhman, 2014; Kistoro et al., 2023; Parhan et al., 2024). Likewise, social and religious institutions can also provide meaningful values for individuals who ultimately make social and religious institutions central for character value formation (Haningsih, 2008; Nuralisa and Adha, 2003; Kustati et al., 2024).

According to Bates (2019), character education can increase academic achievement and positive contributions to individuals through the habit of delegating responsibility to students and imitating the desired role model. By cultivating character education for individuals and students, the existing education can encourage the perspective of individual deficits and normalize the ideals of the individual. However, according to Ofsted, it needs moral involvement that allows individuals to psychologically construct moral values, and thus they can be measured and instilled properly (Bates, 2019).

Dignity is lexically a noun, yet it contextually refers to “self-evident”, which describes its manifestation within education (Espinoza, 2020). It promotes an understanding of the right of participation and the power of democracy. Espinoza (2020) added that the issues regarding dignity were usually treated deductively and inductively. In educational activities, it counted on social action oriented to meaning, ethics, cognition, and pedagogy. In addition, it relied on mental work to create meaning. High (2017), on the other hand, sees dignity as a form of exploring the impact and potential of individuals on the community within the school environment. He then described ten important elements of dignity from Hicks, which were acceptance of identity, where dignity was upheld when people felt free to express themselves. This is exemplified by inculcating teachings in students such as sharing, being open-minded, as well as studying the perspectives and experiences of others. Another element is inclusion that allows students to have “intrinsic value” as human beings. This value can help students to consider other people as a single member, so that students can also uphold the values of democracy and mutual respect.

Apart from inclusion, the elements of security and recognition are also important. They also emphasize the function of the element of inclusion, in which students are encouraged to share and accept others. The other important elements are justice, benefit of doubt, understanding, independence and accountability. Dignity is also perceived as the responsibility to learn, lead, and manage. This responsibility creates the context of “accountability” as one of the important elements of dignity in education. It also generates a context in which students must be respected, encouraged, and criticized (Gershon, 2018).



With this understanding, Callan (1983) clarified that the meaning emphasis of dignity lies in the context of education, that it can equate oneself with others. However, Harless (2018) viewed that the dignity in an educational environment can also be dangerous when an individual has excessive dignity and no longer respects others. Therefore, it is necessary to maintain dignity as a principle to respect and accept the existence of others, which is the right of every individual.

Participatory learning is one of the four pillars of education, in addition to education, collaboration, and problem-based base (Citrawathi, 2016). It is a form of taking, listening, sharing experiences and participation of students in learning. The characteristics of participatory learning are motivation, a conducive learning atmosphere, group learning activities, and encouragement to students to solve problems (Yunita et al., 2017). According to Arbarini et al. (2018), participatory learning can encourage students' reading and numeracy skills by connecting local potential and resources. It relies on the ADDIE model, which consists of 5 stages: analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation. The analysis stage is a defining process through the needs and task analysis. The design stage refers to the determination of learning objectives, such as deciding strategies, media, and sources that could support the learning. The third stage is implementation, in which the students can experience the learning design. And, the final stage is evaluation, which aims to discover changes in student motivation and competence (Arbarini et al., 2018).

Apart from the above stages, Arbarini et al. (2018) proposed 6 other important stages of participatory learning, which are building intimacy, identifying students' needs, formulating learning objectives, organizing programs, implementing learning activities, and evaluating the activities. Through participatory learning, work practices and collaborations can direct learning to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of education. In addition, it can provide opportunities for students to develop knowledge and learning through social interaction. However, it is highly recommended to be systematically implemented. Teachers must involve students and each division in learning to develop the students' quality (Citrawathi, 2016). Participatory

learning could mean a 'combination of exploration and engagement processes' which can improve student attitudes and learning achievement (Parandekar, 2014). It is no wonder that more than 80% students responded positively to this learning model (Arbarini et al., 2018).

The approach of building character education so far tends to be teacher-centered (Almerico, 2014; Niemiec, R. M., 2018; Washington, 2017; Wening, 2012). Good values which should be embraced by children have been formulated by institutions and curriculum development teams (Muassomah et al., 2020; Islami, 2016). Along with that, the character education model is sometimes integrated with religious values (Budirahayu, T. et al., 2017; Anwar et al., 2024), which causes the students to be excluded from discussing material and concepts in education (Saepudin, E. et al., 2020). Supriyadi (2019) also shows that the student success assessment model that is integrated with character education has proven to be effective. Besides, Abdullah points out that schools only introduce students to standardized concepts without directly involving them in social processes and practices (Abdullah, et al., 2019). The research gap lies in the limited direct involvement of students in character formation, as current approaches remain predominantly institution- and teacher-centered with minimal active participation from children. The novelty of this study lies in developing a participatory-based character education model that draws on the lived experiences of Indonesian school children.

This paper aims to address existing gaps in character education practices, particularly concerning the implementation of participatory models that have largely positioned students as passive subjects whose voices remain unheard. To achieve this aim, the study formulates three research questions: first, how are students involved in the overall process of character education? Second, how do students participate in the evaluation of educational practices? Third, to what extent are students engaged in the development of the character education curriculum? This study seeks to explore students' lived experiences as key actors in the character formation process. By foregrounding students' perspectives, character education is expected to move beyond institutional and



teacher-centered approaches toward a dialogic and reflective space that actively involves learners' voices and needs.

This paper is written under the argument that the participatory approach involving students in the educational process could build self-confidence. Courage appears with the trigger for their involvement in the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of the character education curriculum. They feel challenged to continue to be productive and to be a part of the knowledge development.

B. Method

This paper is based on research conducted at an elementary school in Malang, East Java, Indonesia, namely SD Muhammadiyah 9. Character education at this school has been developed using a participatory approach, implemented not only through teacher or institutional directives but also by incorporating students' voices. Students are actively involved in various stages of curriculum formulation. Their perspectives on good and bad character are acknowledged and accommodated by teachers and the school, and subsequently integrated into the guidelines for character education.

The data in this study were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted over a period of 30 days by engaging directly in the school environment and entering various classrooms to understand the series of character education activities collaboratively designed by teachers and students. A series of interviews with eight students was carried out over 10 days at the school to obtain information regarding their involvement in the development, implementation, and evaluation of the character education curriculum. These eight students were appointed by teachers as character ambassadors, one from each class, spanning from Grade 1 to Grade 6. A character ambassador is a student assigned the responsibility of recording classmates' behaviors or utterances that are considered inconsistent with the school's established rules. The appointment of these ambassadors rotated periodically. Supporting documents included character education manuals, prayer and Quran recitation monitoring books, and note sheets documenting

student evaluations or monitoring of peer behavior. All these documents served as essential data sources to support the findings of this study.

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively and descriptively through four main stages: data reduction, data display, data interpretation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting, simplifying, and organizing raw data from observations and interviews to focus on information relevant to the research objectives. The data display stage refers to presenting the reduced data in the form of narratives, tables, or visual representations to facilitate the identification of emerging patterns. Data interpretation was carried out by assigning meaning to the organized information and relating it to relevant theories or social contexts. The final stage, conclusion drawing, involved synthesizing the findings into key insights derived from a systematic analysis. The data were categorized and ordered according to the research topics, then presented descriptively using both textual and visual formats. In certain sections, innovative and creative reflections were incorporated to generate knowledge grounded in field-based experiences and to enable new interpretations within the context of participatory character education.

All research procedures were conducted in compliance with ethical standards. Prior to data collection, the researchers obtained permission from the school authority and informed consent from participants. The confidentiality and anonymity of all participants were strictly maintained, and their involvement was entirely voluntary.

C. Results and Discussion

Character education has been implemented so far top-down with values translated by the teacher, while students are treated as passive subjects who gain objectification in character education. The participatory model places students as active subjects involved in the character education process. The involvement can be found in the whole process of character education, in the interactive relationship between teachers and students, and educational evaluation.



1. Results

a. Student involvement in the whole character process

In participatory education, students are involved in the whole process of character education, which includes the stages of designing the education curriculum, defining and formulating the scope of character education, and implementing character education.

The first stage, the curriculum design, involves students by inviting them to discuss designing character education through defining and determining the scope, form, and integrative pattern of character education. In making a definition, children are included to perceive character education in the form of good attitudes and behavior regarding Islamic morals. Character values are formulated together since the first week of the new academic year, established two hours every day for one week. The formulation of characters in the form of actions and behavior is explained and exemplified by the teacher through stories and fairy tales in the form of both books and films. Students ask one after another about the form of good behavior that has been done or witnessed every day. On the occasion, the teacher explains in detail and writes down the character value points on the board. Thus, the series of discussions that have been going on for one week resulted in the formulation of an educational curriculum that has been agreed upon between teachers and students.

The second stage is the formulation of the character education scope. It covers not only behavioral points but also the place and time of implementation. The teacher stands in the front and asks the students about the elaboration of each point that has been formulated. Soon after, the students take turns delivering their responses on the questions. If the students' ideas agree with the key points, the teacher notes them down on the board. The places in which the students do activities are also on concern for character education formulation, such as formulating the recommended behaviors in the classroom, in the mosque, around the yard, in the canteen, in the bathroom, in the restroom and along the school corridor. In terms of time, students are invited to formulate the values without any particular bond except the time for prayers. Meanwhile, the assessment for the

students' character education starts right after they enter the school gate until they go home, and even activities at home are monitored.

The third stage, student involvement, can also be found in the implementation. Students directly observe other friends performing character education programs around the school. Once a week, two students take turns to be a character team. They are assigned to pay attention and supervise their friends who commit violations at school since they enter the school yard until they go home. The witnessed violations, either in the form of action or utterance, are recorded on paper that has been prepared by the teacher. The note is then reported to the teacher before they go home. As a student of grade 3 (Child 1) confessed:

"I was in charge of the character team, I inspected my friends who violated and I took notes, before going home, I submitted the notes to the teacher".

The student participation may lead to awareness of the characters that have been formulated jointly between students, teachers, and schools.

This participatory model of character education illustrates how meaningful student involvement across curriculum design, scope formulation, and implementation stages cultivates a deep sense of ownership, responsibility, and internalization of shared moral values. By engaging students not merely as recipients but as co-creators of the character education process—from defining behavioral expectations to monitoring peer conduct—this approach fosters active reflection and reinforces communal accountability. The integration of storytelling, open discussions, and peer-led observation embeds character values into daily school life, both spatially and temporally, ensuring that ethical development is contextual, consistent, and collectively maintained. Ultimately, this collaborative framework transforms character education from a top-down directive into a lived, participatory culture of shared moral engagement.

b. Student-teacher interaction in the character education process

The participatory character education model can be implemented through an interactive relationship between students and teachers. The



interaction is established in at least three conditions: in designing learning models, in decision-making, and in evaluating character education.

Student-teacher interaction in designing a character learning model could be in the form of character formulations. The following figure lists the detailed description.

Table 1. The formulation of character activity

| No. | Character | Code |
|-----|---|--|
| 1. | Character 1 Smiling, greeting, shaking hands Putting sandals/ shoes in order Complete attributes Reciting prayer once entering the school | Modesty, politeness, and neatness |
| 2. | Character 2 The courtesy of hearing and answering the call to prayer The courtesy of taking prayer (shalat) The courtesy of listening to religious speech The courtesy of dzikr after prayer The courtesy of tidying up prayer materials | Spirituality and responsibility |
| 3. | Character 3 The courtesy of standing in line The courtesy of coming in and out of class The courtesy of doing a prayer Singing the national anthem | Discipline and nationalism |
| 4. | Character 4 The courtesy of eating and drinking The courtesy of eating in the canteen | Modesty and honesty |
| 5. | Character 5 Brushing teeth after eating | Clinelines and health |
| 6. | Character 6 Keeping drawers clean Cleaning the class according to the schedule | Cleanliness, neatness, groupwork, and care |
| 7. | Character 7 The courtesy of coming into the restroom | Cleanliness, responsibility and spirituality |
| 8. | Character 8 Memorizing short chapters of the Quran and daily prayers | Spirituality and honesty |

Table 1 describes the character values that have been built and agreed upon by the teachers and students, which cover several daily activities. They

successfully formulate eight characters, covering spiritual values, cleanliness, health, politeness, honesty, discipline, nationalism, responsibility and neatness. These values are continuously applied by children around the school environment, and some points are also applied at school and home or outside the school. The habituation of these activities has created a tradition of good character. Similarly, the resulting product is in the form of monitoring the five daily prayers and reciting the chapters of the Qur'an, as listed in Table 2.

Table 2. The formulation of character activity

| Month: | | Year: | | | | | | | | | |
|--------|------|--------|-------|---------|-------|------------------|-------|-----|-----------|---------|--|
| Date | Fajr | Dhuhur | Ashar | Maghrib | Isya' | Quran Recitation | | | Signature | | |
| | Time | Time | Time | Time | Time | Chapter | Verse | Juz | Parent | Teacher | |
| 1 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| . | | | | | | | | | | | |
| . | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 31 | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table 2 shows that activities in the form of time sharing and agenda items were arranged jointly between students and teachers. Children are invited to participate in controlling themselves, and the activities carried out according to the request in the column. In the monitoring book, 31 rows describe activities for one month. The column is filled in every day and reported to the teacher every weekend, and an assessment is made at the end of the month. Discipline, commitment and honesty of students in reporting the activities without teacher supervision have been created, with their involvement in the preparation of the agenda.



Figure 1: Monitoring prayers and quran recitation

Figure 1 illustrates the results of students' daily prayers and Quran recitation monitoring. The teachers provide assessments every weekend and at the end of the month.

Interaction between students and teachers also occurs in decision-making. The teachers tend to ask students for actions or decisions which result in consequences, such as the implementation of a program. Regarding the implementation of a program that has been formulated, each student is given two-character books. The first book contains a series of character formulations according to Figure 1, and the second book is related to prayers and Quran recitation monitoring, as in Figure 2. Students consciously implement it without coercion and report the values implemented and abandoned. The involvement of students in making these decisions has facilitated the internalization of character values in students, especially elementary school students. This interactive way of involvement places them as active subjects whose opinions are appreciated in educational decisions.

Furthermore, students are involved in evaluating the implementation of character education through a peer group. Students in groups are asked to evaluate the daily behavior of their friends at school. A student of grade 1 (Child2) said:

"I also get a turn at controlling and supervising every activity of my friends. I record the behavior that contradicts the formula which we already set together".

Another student, grade 2 (Child3) added:

"The results of the supervision were recorded, reported, and submitted to my teacher".

In addition to performing evaluation through peer-groups, students also assess themselves, by giving a check on the column of the activities conducted, and by crossing out the column violated. Involvement in this evaluation creates honesty and discipline among students.

The interactive relationship between students and teachers in this participatory character education model fosters a collaborative ethos that enhances the internalization and sustainability of moral values. Through shared formulation of character activities, joint structuring of daily spiritual monitoring, and participatory decision-making, students are not passive recipients but co-constructors of their moral learning environment. The use of character and monitoring books—designed, implemented, and assessed in partnership—builds a structured yet flexible system that encourages discipline, accountability, and self-reflection. Furthermore, the integration of peer- and self-evaluation empowers students to actively engage in moral judgment and reinforces a sense of shared responsibility within the school community. This reciprocal engagement nurtures not only cognitive understanding but also emotional commitment to the values being taught, ultimately transforming character education into a dynamic, lived experience grounded in mutual respect and continuous dialogue.

c. Student involvement in evaluation

Active student participation occurs not only at the design and learning practice but also at the evaluation process. Involvement in the evaluation process contains three important meanings: the first, a change in the educational paradigm from treating students as objects to subjects; the second, the meaning of the teacher's recognition or appreciation of the students'



competence and intellectuality; and the third, the meaning of equality between teachers and students.

The change in the educational paradigm to student subjectivity can be seen from the formulation of a series of curricula in which most schools are more dominated by the decisions of teachers and educational institutions. Certain students, such as class leaders and active and critical children, are called by the teacher and invited to have a dialogue about the concept of character education. Students respond firmly to every question and statement of the teacher, even though there is still an inappropriate use of vocabulary. A student of grade 5 (Child4) said:

“Good behavior includes lending pencils, erasers, and rulers, arriving late, paying attention to the teacher when explaining the material, wearing uniforms according to regulations, praying, and expressing greetings”.

In addition, a student of grade 4 (Child5) also described:

“Unfavorable behavior, such as fighting, disturbing other friends, bullying, ganging/ not taking in line”.

In other words, the subjective treatment of students has been built by giving them the right to participate in the preparation of the curriculum.

The teacher's acknowledgment of the students' abilities occurs in the form of giving appreciation. Inspiration and student responses are recorded by the class teacher to be brought to the meeting forum of all teachers with the principal. Each teacher reads out the results of his dialogue with students, to look for common ground and standardization of words in the character education curriculum. The involvement of students represented by their respective classroom teachers has provided enlightenment in formulating a curriculum that has not been explored so far. In line with that, every point in the character education curriculum can be understood by students and can be implemented without being forced. In other words, the involvement of students in structuring the concept of education can build new ideas of knowledge for the appreciation given.

Equality between students and teachers can be experienced directly by students in various forms of interaction. A student of grade 3 (Child6) said:

"One day, I was called by my teacher for an opinion on the results of my observations on the behavior of my friends while on duty as a character team".

He reported that the violations committed by male friends are more disturbing to other friends, saying rude words and ignoring the queuing culture. Meanwhile, grade 4 (Child7) reported that:

"The records on violations committed by female friends are mostly concerning friendship with certain students and forgetting to do prayers".

Another student, grade 6 (Child8), reported the same thing, but there is a slight difference:

"Which is reluctant to carry out class picket assignments and speak while listening to the Friday sermon".

A series of notes reported to the teacher is the involvement of students in evaluating the character of their friends, while the teacher observes and calls the related students and gives them advice.

The integration of students into the evaluation process signifies a transformative shift in educational dynamics—from hierarchical to participatory—where learners are acknowledged as active agents in shaping and assessing moral development. This paradigm shift fosters student subjectivity, as seen in their direct involvement in curriculum formulation, their articulation of moral concepts, and their contributions to peer assessment. Teachers' recognition of students' insights, brought into institutional dialogue through teacher meetings, not only validates student voices but also democratises educational decision-making. Moreover, this practice cultivates a culture of mutual respect and intellectual trust, where equality between teachers and students is actualized through dialogic engagement and shared responsibility. By empowering students to critically reflect on and report behavioural patterns among peers, the model reinforces moral awareness and accountability within a communal framework. Thus,



student participation in evaluation is not merely procedural but epistemic, enabling the co-creation of moral knowledge that is grounded in lived experience and dialogical affirmation.

2. Discussion

This study shows that students' involvement in the character education process provides constructive knowledge, evaluative abilities, and influences teacher decision making. Learning process is dialogical. Where students can influence teacher policy in student personality education. Therefore, the character education process can be more successful. Participation-based learning has increased students' ability to predict and interpret the problems they face (Xing et al., 2015). Participatory approach can also provide students with real experiences that enable them to learn new activities and develop their skills, as well as advocate for their interactions with society (Palisano et al., 2012).

The finding of the current study confirms that the participatory learning model generates great interest for students in learning as a result of their involvement in a series of character education processes. It fosters self-confidence by bringing students to participate actively in the midst of the learning process. According to Latta et al. (2017), a collaborative approach that involves teachers and students can explore critical and creative ways of thinking. The educational atmosphere is formed, so it can trigger children's enthusiasm for learning other materials. The involvement of students in the overall formulation of character education has subjected and fostered self-confidence (Arbarini et al., 2018; Nasrullah et al., 2024).

Participatory models provide feedback for students, which allows education to provide not only knowledge but also three aspects of students' development. The first is dignity. Students are given an appreciation presented by their voices in modelling character value points. The second is self-esteem. Students have the confidence to express opinions and ask questions to the teachers, parents, and friends. The third is acknowledgement. Students feel valued and appreciated for the abilities they have achieved (Mahanani et al.,

2022). This participation creates an impetus for students to implement character values formulated and agreed upon. The student involvement brings about discovery in students, where they find elements of a new culture in a way and an idea created together (Janssen et al., 2014).

The involvement of students in character education provides positive spirit and enthusiasm, which contributes to a more dynamic learning environment and supports the development of students' moral and emotional intelligence (Yunita et al., 2017; Tabrani et al., 2024). Students who were previously shy, timid, and prone to crying become more confident in expressing their opinions and more open to both friends and teachers. Students no longer need to be accompanied by their parents to the classroom. Parents only escort them in front of the school gate, and they go directly to the classroom. Student involvement not only grows self-confidence in the learning process but also brings broad influence on the students' character, such as discipline, respect with time, and respect for others (Amerstorfer & Frein, 2021; Komalasari & Yakubu, 2023; Salim et al., 2024). It can foster great enthusiasm to change students' personalities (Mulawarman et al., 2024; Rusmana et al., 2024; Hasibuan et al., 2025).

The results of this study are different from those of other studies, which show that character education tends to be carried out more top-down and monological. The teacher conveys the character values provided in the curriculum for students to internalize and improve their learning outcomes (Jeynes, W. H., 2019). According to Syafe'i (2017), Islamic boarding schools are the most effective institutions in building character education. Islamic boarding schools enforce rules in order for students to obey since they are awake in the morning until they get back to sleep (Hasibuan et al., 2025). In contrast, O'Connor & McNabb (2020) found that students with disabilities experience a narrower range of participation options than their non-disabled peers. Whilst this research suggested that character education with a participatory approach involving students in formulating a series of curricula can instill students' independence and sovereignty.

The participatory model shows a transformation in the world of education with a paradigm shift. Education cannot only be operationalized



based on teacher-center and student-center, but it also needs interaction between teachers and students. Students are not the object of education, yet they cannot go independently without the direction and guidance of the teacher. At the age of development, students of elementary school still need teacher guidance, role models, and teacher figures (Komalasari & Yakubu, 2023; Masturin, 2022). Along with that, they are actively involved in conceptualizing and structuring the policies of the schools. Interactive learning is very relevant to applying as an educational paradigm, in which teachers always involve students actively in any activities. Thus, the education system must be able to answer the needs of students by providing facilities for the learning process and better prepare them to face future life (Aslan & Reigeluth, 2013; Hernthaisong et al., 2017; Salim et al., 2024).

The meaning of engagement in the context of character development is not merely a method or learning strategy, but a form of recognition of students' existence and potential in shaping themselves. Engagement opens space for dialogue, creates meaningful experiences, strengthens moral identity, and encourages ongoing personal transformation (Rusmana et al., 2024; Hasibuan et al., 2025). As emphasized by Dobson & Dobson (2021), students' participation in character education has enhanced their sense of meaning and potential for creative thinking.

This study's participatory character education model aligns with emerging global trends in education that emphasize student agency, dignity, and democratic engagement. In Finland, the education system integrates student voice through classroom democracy and peer mediation programs, reflecting a belief that students should be active participants in building school values (Sahlberg, 2015). In Canada, character education is often embedded in student-led conferences and peer assessment strategies, empowering learners to reflect on their moral development and take responsibility for their learning communities (DeLuca et al., 2015). Meanwhile, Japan implements the tokkatsu program (tokubetsu katsudō), which includes daily class duties, peer discussions, and school rituals as integral parts of cultivating discipline, responsibility, and social harmony (Bjork, 2011; Takahashi, 2019). These international models share a

commitment to participatory moral education that honors the voices and agency of students. The Indonesian model presented in this study – where children co-design character curricula, monitor peers, and evaluate values – resonates strongly with these global practices. Thus, it offers a context-sensitive contribution to the global discourse on participatory pedagogy and strengthens the conceptual foundation that education is not merely about transmitting values but about co-constructing ethical understanding through lived experience.

Beyond the comparative insights with Finland, Canada, and Japan, the findings of this study also carry broader global significance. The participatory model of character education developed in Indonesia demonstrates that children's voices can become a critical epistemic resource in shaping moral and educational frameworks (Dobson & Dobson, 2021; Espinoza, 2020). This contribution enriches global educational discourse by emphasizing that participatory approaches are not merely cultural adaptations, but rather a universal pedagogical paradigm that values dignity, agency, and collaboration (Walker et al., 2015; Gershon, 2016). In contexts where educational systems remain highly centralized and teacher-driven, the Indonesian experience offers an alternative pathway to reframe education as a dialogical and democratic space (Abdullah et al., 2019; Tabrani ZA et al., 2024). Such an approach is particularly relevant for countries seeking to address challenges of inclusivity, social cohesion, and civic responsibility in diverse societies. Therefore, this study not only validates international practices but also provides a conceptual and practical model that can be adapted, tested, and refined across different cultural and institutional landscapes.

Despite its valuable contributions, this study is not without limitations. The research was conducted in a single private Islamic elementary school, which constrains the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. The cultural and institutional characteristics of this setting – such as its religious affiliation, organizational structure, and pedagogical culture – may not fully represent the diversity of schools across Indonesia or in other



countries. In addition, the data were collected within a relatively short period of time and relied primarily on qualitative observations and interviews, which may not capture the long-term dynamics of character development.

D. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that character education in Indonesia has long been dominated by a top-down, teacher-centered approach that limits students' voices and participation. Through the implementation of a participatory model, the findings reveal that involving students directly in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of character curricula not only nurtures their behavioral change but also strengthens their self-confidence, sense of responsibility, and democratic engagement. The results highlight that character education can be transformed into a dialogical and collaborative process where students and teachers act as co-creators of values rather than participants and instructors in a one-directional transmission.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of participatory education theory by positioning students' voices as a critical epistemic resource in shaping moral knowledge and educational practice. It provides evidence that participatory character education can function not only as a pedagogical strategy but also as a conceptual framework that challenges hierarchical structures in education and promotes equity and inclusivity. Practically, the study offers schools a model that can enhance moral formation by embedding dignity, collaboration, and agency within the curriculum. This novelty distinguishes the present work from previous studies that predominantly focused on institutional or teacher-driven approaches, by demonstrating that children's lived experiences can become a foundation for sustainable and transformative character education.

Given the study's limitations—particularly its focus on a single Islamic private elementary school—future research should broaden the scope to include diverse educational settings such as public schools, rural and urban institutions, as well as schools with secular orientations. Cross-

cultural comparative studies would be valuable in testing the adaptability of this participatory model in different contexts, while longitudinal research could provide insights into the sustainability of participatory approaches and their long-term effects on moral identity and behavioral consistency. Additionally, incorporating quantitative methods alongside qualitative approaches could generate more comprehensive evidence to support policy development in character education.

Ultimately, this study affirms that participatory character education is more than a teaching method—it is a transformative paradigm that redefines the relationship between teachers and students as equal partners in the moral learning process. By recognizing and amplifying children's voices, education becomes not only a process of value transmission but also a collaborative endeavor of meaning-making that fosters dignity, inclusivity, and social cohesion. The novelty and significance of this model lie in its potential to inspire both national and international educational reforms, ensuring that character education evolves as a just, reflective, and future-oriented practice.

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