INSTITUTIONAL DISCONNECT IN CHARACTER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN YOGYAKARTA

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Abstract

The implementation of character education during the early transition phase in urban elementary schools encounters significant structural barriers. This study aims to map and analyze the network of operational constraints affecting character education programs in five public elementary schools in Yogyakarta City. A qualitative case study methodology was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews with 16 purposively selected informants, including principals, coordinators, and teachers. Thematic coding was applied to visualize causal relationships among the identified issues using ATLAS.TI software facilitates data analysis. The results reveal five principal clusters of constraints: environment, parents, program, students, and teachers. At the macro level, urban social inequality and parental dysfunction, such as neglect and denial, contribute to behavioral crises among students. Structural ambiguity within curriculum modules leads to operational confusion. The accumulation of these challenges creates a dual burden and systemic burnout among educators, hindering their emotional engagement in the classroom. In conclusion, the inability to instill ethical values in young children is attributed not to pedagogical shortcomings but to broader ecological dysfunction. The findings recommend implementing structured psychoeducation for parents and developing assessment instruments aligned with children's psychological development.

Keywords: *Character Education; Elementary School; Yogyakarta City; Qualitative Research*

INTRODUCTION

The start of elementary school, especially Grade 1, is a key stage for character education. It provides a foundation for stopping moral decline by integrating moral knowledge, emotional growth, and ethical behavior into school habits early (Bebeau et al., 1999; Lickona, 1992). Still, efforts to strengthen character across schools face significant practical challenges, which limit their impact. Project-based methods were first meant to help students develop social ethics and empathy (Lev et al., 2020; Markula & Aksela, 2022). However, studies still show major system problems, like in Yogyakarta City. Even though it is known for education, reports show more violence between minors at school (KemenPPPA, 2024) , which points to a link between not applying character education and rising violence. This trend shows that schools struggle to translate character education theory into concrete safety practices, even in elementary grades.

This structural failure remains largely unexamined in current literature. Most studies focus on normative assessments at the macro level and overlook systematic analysis of social ethics components (Amanah & Haryanto, 2018; Assa'diyah, 2021). Alternatively, investigations are limited to extracurricular activities (Masruraini et al., 2023). Descriptive methodologies do not provide an analytical synthesis of the underlying causes. They also do not address how pedagogical confusion among educators and the breakdown of stakeholder collaboration undermine the core objectives of character education programs. The literature lacks an evaluative framework that defines the ecosystem of character education failure. This is especially true during the most vulnerable phase—the first year of formal education (Grade 1)—in

urban areas experiencing increased violence.

To address this gap, the present study seeks to map and critically analyze the implementation challenges of character education programs in Grade 1 classrooms in Yogyakarta City. Thematic analysis of field data identified operational barriers and explicitly traced how these barriers lead to specific implementation difficulties. By clarifying these cause-and-effect patterns, the study demonstrates how and why these challenges impede program success. This empirical mapping of grassroots implementation issues provides policymakers with a clear foundation for decisively assessing and enhancing the operational design of character education programs.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study to investigate a contemporary phenomenon defined by specific spatial and temporal constraints: the operational impasse of character education programs in urban elementary schools, particularly during the early transition phase of students (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This methodology facilitates a comprehensive understanding of complex real-world phenomena and the subjective perspectives of policy implementers who address behavioral crises among young children.

The research was conducted at five public elementary schools in Yogyakarta, selected through purposive sampling based on multiple criteria. Yogyakarta was chosen due to its high incidence of child abuse cases, which frequently occur within school environments and involve peers or educators as perpetrators (KemenPPPA, 2024). The selection criteria included: (1) designation as a third-batch Pilot School to ensure relevance to current operational guidelines, (2) prior implementation of the "ethics toward humanity" component in the character education program, and (3) a focus on Grade 1 or Phase A for evaluation. Focusing on public schools addresses potential value homogeneity biases in religiously affiliated private schools and enables observation of dynamics within a socially diverse environment.

Key informants included five school principals, five program coordinators, and six first-grade classroom teachers, for a total of 16 participants. First-grade teachers were prioritized as primary informants because this grade marks a critical transition from preschool to formal elementary education, a period when the development of social and ethical foundations is particularly susceptible to conflict with familial influences. The sample size was determined by data saturation, defined as the point at which further interviews did not yield new insights into the range of obstacles encountered.

Main data were collected from March to June 2025, using open and in-depth interviews. The interview questions were made by the researcher, not based on other studies, but followed the steps of the national character education program in Phase A. This made it possible to ask open questions about problems while focusing on how the program worked in schools. Before starting, five experts in education and review checked the interview questions for quality and fairness, especially to ensure they could truly identify the root problems. Data collection followed strict rules: everyone signed a written consent, and a system was used to keep names anonymous.

Non-numeric data were analyzed using ATLAS.ti software through a three-stage thematic coding process (Naeem et al., 2023). The initial stage involved disaggregating interview transcripts into distinct operational constraints. Axial coding was then used to identify causal relationships among these categories. Finally, selective coding refined these constraints, revealing central themes related to the failure of character education ecosystems. Data validity was ensured by applying qualitative rigor criteria, including credibility through source

triangulation—cross-referencing data from principals, coordinators, and teachers—and dependability through the maintenance of audit trails during analysis in ATLAS.ti.

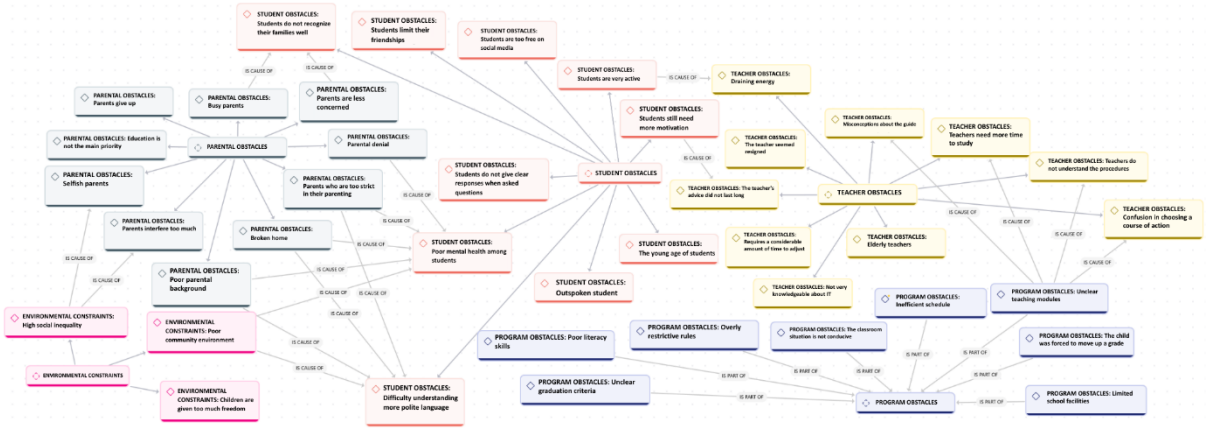
RESULTS

Network Mapping and Implementation Challenges

A thematic analysis of interview transcripts from informants at four elementary schools was conducted using ATLAS.ti software. This analysis identified five primary clusters of obstacles to implementing character education: environmental, parental, program, student, and teacher.

Figure 1 presents the network map generated from the data coding. This map reveals a complex system. Arrows labeled "is cause of" show cause-and-effect relationships. The network shows that macro-level obstacles—such as social and environmental inequalities and unclear program modules—directly cause micro-level obstacles, especially the double burden on teachers and student behavioral crises.

Figure 1. Program Implementation Constraints



Pink Cluster: External Pressures and the Community Environment

Barriers to instilling ethical values often come from outside the school. The data shows two main issues. First, differences in students' economic and family backgrounds in cities cause social tension from an early age. Second, students face harsh language and bullying in their neighborhoods, making things harder for schools. Educators see these challenges directly in their work.

> "*And third, manners towards older people, because previously here, the language used was very harsh, extremely harsh... the environment is used to being rough, used to bullying.*" (Teacher 1, SDN T1).

Gray Cluster: The Spectrum of Parental Role Dysfunction

This cluster serves as an intermediary between adverse environmental influences and students. The analysis delineates dysfunction along two axes: educational neglect and denial. Regarding child neglect, the absence of constructive role models and the presence of dysfunctional family backgrounds are identified as contributing factors. Parents frequently demonstrate insufficient concern for their children's mental health needs. In the context of school-related challenges, educational institutions often reach an impasse when addressing student behavioral issues, as parents may refuse to acknowledge these problems in their children's classrooms.

> "*The parents are completely apathetic [luweh luweh]. It means... they refuse to let their child join the [therapy]. They simply do not care... therefore, without the parents' cooperation, any collaborative effort with the school simply will not work.*" (Teacher 1, SDN P).

"*Sometimes the parents argue that if the other friends had not started it [the provocation], their child would never behave like that [insulting or mocking others]*" (Teacher 1, SDN B).

Blue Cluster: Structural Ambiguity of the Program

Challenges in the character education program stem from poor structural design. Ambiguous guidelines and lesson plans confuse. New curriculum rules force teachers to adapt quickly, increasing administrative work and shifting focus away from students' character development.

"*Some schools, and even the teachers, do not fully understand the P5 [character education] program. It is sporadic; meaning, when Monday comes, we are confused. We ask, 'What are we supposed to do?' That is why it is perceived as difficult.*" (Teacher 1, SDN P).

"*Why is it like this? I mean, it is simply exhausting, because we genuinely do not know how it is actually supposed to work.*" (Coordinator, SDN M2).

Orange Cluster: Manifestations of a Student Behavior Crisis

The challenges faced by students are identified as symptoms of underlying issues within their families and the educational program. The assessment found that students exhibiting high levels of hyperactivity struggled to maintain concentration and frequently used impolite language. Additionally, students' naivete, attributable to their youth, often clashed with the harsh conditions of their environment, leading to candid, unfiltered remarks that incited discord among peer groups.

"*First-grade students tend to be very open and vocal; they often blurt things out unintentionally [keceplosan]... saying things directly [without a filter], which is what we must constantly guide.*" (Teacher 1, SDN B)

"*Their physical activity never stops; sometimes they just roll around at the front of the class, being hyperactive... even when things are already arranged neatly, they pull them apart and create a mess.*" (Compilation of observations, Teachers of SDN P & M2).

Yellow Cluster: Saturation Point and the Double Burden on Educators

As frontline practitioners, teachers encounter numerous challenges arising from systemic factors. The analysis reveals that teachers experience burnout due to a dual burden: administrative pressure from unfamiliar modules and the need to address individual student behavioral issues. Character development is further impeded by technical limitations, particularly for senior teachers adapting to new technologies.

"*Especially for the senior teachers [yang sepuh], because they sometimes do not grasp the intent [of the new modules], it takes them a significantly longer time to learn.*" (Coordinator, SDN P)

"*Advice does not last long... The challenge is that teachers must be relentlessly proactive and patient [grepeh in Javanese]; a teacher must never tire of reminding or advising the students.*" (Teacher 1, SDN B).

DISCUSSION

The study's causal network mapping shows that broader social contexts influence educational institutions. Analysis using ATLAS. ti reveals that shortcomings in character education in urban elementary schools align with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1979): the macro-environment, exemplified by urban social inequality, and meso-environmental factors, such as family dynamics, both fail to offer an adequate ethical framework. This lack undermines micro-level efforts, a

problem most notable during the Grade 1 transition, when children's moral development still depends on guidance from authority figures.

Previous research described the family as a passive support (Marzuqi & Marzuki, 2022; Perbowosari et al., 2025). In contrast, this study identifies a more harmful dysfunction: proactive denial, where some parents deny their children's behavioral issues to protect their upper-middle-class status, stopping dialogue. Han et al. (2020) assumed that home quality consistently predicts school readiness; this study challenges that view by showing that, in competitive urban areas, parents' physical presence does not necessarily indicate emotional engagement. Consequently, first-grade students—still egocentric—rely on schools for character development, often under unequal conditions.

Implementation challenges grow when environmental dysfunction meets program ambiguities. From an educational evaluation view, teachers' uncertainty about instructional modules shows a major planning failure (Stake, 1967; Stufflebeam & Coryn, 2014). Earlier studies, like Mulyani et al. (2023), noted general administrative confusion. This study, however, highlights another key issue—the lack of standardized diagnostic and formative assessment tools. Without these tools, the program cannot respond to 7-year-olds' developmental needs.

Without measurable assessments, teachers cannot track children's moral development (Mak, 2019). This gap undermines Lickona (1992) character education framework comprising three components: moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Teachers are often limited to administrative tasks, such as ceremonies or projects, and lack tools to determine whether first graders, who are still in the concrete operational stage, have actually learned and demonstrated empathy. Consequently, implementation becomes mechanical and fails to address the essence of ethical growth.

The study's combined findings about student and teacher challenges reveal an underlying issue: educator vulnerability. In contrast to previous research that attributes teacher failures to generational gaps or limited digital skills (Uno & Lamatenggo, 2016), this study shows that teacher resignation more accurately reflects a self-protective response to burnout resulting from working conditions.

Systemic exhaustion arises from two key factors: teachers must independently interpret ambiguous curriculum modules and manage first-grade students who are naturally hyperactive and lack self-reliance, especially without parental support. Reaching a breaking point after continual efforts to address behavior that stems from home, educators' capacity to serve as role models declines. This supports Palade & Pascal (2023) claim that empathy-based interventions only work when facilitators are fully engaged. Exhaustion lessens teachers' emotional presence, so their reprimands and guidance become superficial and ineffective in the face of student resistance. Together, these dysfunctions create an ecosystem of failure, clarifying why violence persists in secondary schools: the educational foundation is increasingly fragile.

Although this study offers valuable insights, it faces methodological limitations. Specifically, the data collected represent only institutional perspectives—those of school principals, coordinators, and teachers—not parents. Therefore, barriers attributed to parents, such as indifference and denial, are documented solely on the basis of educators' subjective views, which may introduce bias. To address this limitation, future research should include multiple stakeholders. Incorporating diverse perspectives will clarify whether parental resistance stems from social egoism or misunderstandings within schools.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that failures in

implementing humanistic ethics among first-grade students in Yogyakarta reflect not only technical-pedagogical challenges but also broader systemic dysfunction. Environmental disparities and family denial disrupt educational synergy during critical development phases. Ambiguity in operational modules forces teachers to handle both administrative and psychological challenges on their own, leading to burnout and reducing genuine value transmission to mere compliance with the curriculum.

The results indicate that classroom interventions alone cannot address parental dysfunction without cohesive, multisector support. The study recommends that schools replace administrative meetings with targeted psychoeducational programs to align parenting styles and address parental denial. Specifically, schools should schedule regular workshops for parents on child development and communication skills, provide joint teacher-parent reflection sessions to set consistent home-school expectations, and implement follow-up support meetings for families facing challenges. At the policy level, develop assessment tools that are sensitive to the developmental stage of seven-year-olds and move away from outcome-only targets for teachers. Policymakers should lead collaborative forums that unite educators, family representatives, and community leaders to co-design practical strategies for home-school coordination.

This research maps failures in grassroots character education, highlighting that early character building relies on deep emotional collaboration among educators, families, and the environment, rather than the breadth of curriculum documents.

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