

Exploring the Role of School Culture in Character Formation: A Qualitative Study of Vocational High Schools

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Keywords:

School Culture,
Character Education,
Pancasila Student
Profile,
Moral Values.

Abstract

The decline in youth morality, marked by increased violence, intolerance, and permissive attitudes toward unethical behaviour, poses significant challenges to the education sector. In Indonesia, this issue is reflected in the rising number of ethical violations committed by students within school environments. In response, the government has implemented the Character Education Strengthening Policy (Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter, PPK) alongside the Pancasila Student Profile Strengthening Project (Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila, P5) as part of the Merdeka Curriculum. The success of these policies, however, largely depends on the extent to which school culture can sustainably shape positive values and habits. This study aims to explore the role of school culture in character development among students at SMKN 1 Nisam and SMKN 1 Dewantara in Aceh Utara. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, utilizing interviews, observations, and documentation for data collection. The research focused on daily school activities, teacher role modelling, extracurricular program implementation, and the involvement of school stakeholders. Findings indicate that both schools have fostered institutional cultures that support character development, particularly in values such as religiosity, discipline, honesty, responsibility, and social care. Character building is facilitated through religious activities, organizational training, and project-based learning. However, differences exist in the consistency of implementation and role modelling between the two schools. In conclusion, collaboratively and sustainably managed school culture plays a crucial role in student character development. The integration of the P5 approach into daily school activities further strengthens school culture as a foundational pillar of character education.

Abstrak

Kata kunci:
Budaya Sekolah,
Pendidikan Karakter,
Profil Pelajar
Pancasila, Nilai
Moral

Article history:

Received: 02-05-2026

Revised 05-08-2026

Accepted 20-09-2026

Fenomena menurunnya moral remaja, yang ditandai oleh meningkatnya kekerasan, intoleransi, dan sikap permisif terhadap tindakan yang tidak etis, menjadi tantangan besar dalam dunia pendidikan. Di Indonesia, permasalahan ini tercermin dari banyaknya pelanggaran etika yang dilakukan oleh siswa di lingkungan sekolah. Untuk menjawab tantangan tersebut, pemerintah menetapkan kebijakan Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter (PPK) dan menerapkan Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila (P5) dalam Kurikulum Merdeka. Namun, keberhasilan kebijakan ini sangat dipengaruhi oleh bagaimana budaya sekolah dapat membentuk nilai dan kebiasaan positif secara berkelanjutan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi peran budaya sekolah dalam membentuk karakter siswa di SMKN 1 Nisam dan SMKN 1 Dewantara, Aceh Utara. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan metode pengumpulan data berupa wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Fokus penelitian meliputi kegiatan harian di sekolah, keteladanan guru, pelaksanaan program ekstrakurikuler, dan keterlibatan para pemangku kepentingan sekolah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kedua sekolah telah mengembangkan budaya institusional yang mendukung pembentukan karakter siswa, terutama dalam nilai-nilai seperti religius, disiplin, jujur, tanggung jawab, dan peduli sosial. Pembentukan karakter dilakukan melalui kegiatan keagamaan, pelatihan organisasi, serta pembelajaran berbasis proyek. Namun, masih terdapat perbedaan dalam hal konsistensi implementasi dan keteladanan di antara kedua sekolah. Kesimpulannya,

budaya sekolah yang dikelola secara kolaboratif dan berkesinambungan berperan penting dalam pembentukan karakter siswa. Pengintegrasian pendekatan P5 dalam aktivitas harian sekolah turut memperkuat peran budaya sekolah sebagai landasan utama pendidikan karakter.

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INTRODUCTION

Concerns over the moral decline of younger generations have become a pressing issue of global significance, including in Indonesia. (Narvaez, 2021) argues that the contemporary character crisis among adolescents stems largely from permissive parenting styles and the lack of morally reflective education (Ardianto et al., 2026; Febrianti et al., 2025; Hasanah & Husna, 2025). In the Indonesian context, this moral erosion is evidenced by the prevalence of youth violence, bullying, and the gradual degradation of social values—issues that pose significant challenges to the cultivation of student character (Aisyah & Fitriatin, 2025; Asnuddin et al., n.d.; Fahrudin & Warti'ah, 2023; Ismawati, 2023).

(Lickona, 2012) highlighted that since the 1980s and 1990s, symptoms such as increased aggression, moral relativism, and the normalization of dishonest behaviour have indicated a consistent trend of moral decline among youth—an observation that remains relevant today. This phenomenon is intrinsically linked to the weakened system of value internalization within both educational institutions and adolescents' social environments. (Pahmi et al., 2024) found that rising youth violence is influenced by the pervasive impact of social media, diminished social control, and the lack of character education that is holistically embedded into the school environment. Similarly, (Fajri et al., 2025; Haqqi et al., 2025; Setyawati et al., 2024; Sholihah et al., 2025, 2026; Zamroni et al., 2025) emphasized that moral relativism emerges when students lack a stable ethical foundation due to overly cognitive instructional approaches that neglect reflective character formation. In addition, (Adeoye, 2024; Ahmad & Syihabuddin, 2025; Anugrahesa & Karneli, 2024) revealed that limited moral awareness among students leads to the justification of unethical conduct, including cases of sexual misconduct and manipulative behaviour that contravene social ethics. These findings underscore the necessity of implementing character education approaches that are not merely procedural, but rather substantive and capable of engaging students' moral consciousness in a meaningful and enduring manner.

In Indonesia, the issue is further illustrated by the increasing incidence of ethical violations among students, such as theft, group violence, and low levels of social empathy. In response to this condition, the Indonesian government introduced the Character Education Strengthening (PPK) policy through Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017. This policy emphasizes character formation through the integration of core moral values—such as religiosity, tolerance, honesty, responsibility, and independence—within an educational ecosystem that includes schools, families, and communities. The implementation of this framework has been reinforced under the Merdeka Curriculum through the development of the "Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila" (P5), which provides thematic, project-based learning experiences that contextualize and reflect national values in everyday learning (Ahadiyah et al., 2024; Musdalifa et al., 2025; Zhakina et al., 2025).

Character education is not transmitted through isolated academic subjects, but rather through the integration of values into school culture, habitual practices, and role modelling in daily school life. School culture, as a reflection of the collective values, norms, and practices of the school community, plays a central role in cultivating student character (Desmiati et al., 2023; Schein, 2010; Solechan, 2025; Syamsi et al., 2024). (Achadah et al., 2022) asserted that character formation through the internalization of values in daily school routines is more effective than formal teaching methods alone. This perspective aligns with (Schein, 2010) view of organizational culture—including school culture—as a set of shared assumptions learned and perpetuated within an organization, which significantly shapes the attitudes and behaviours of its members. Moreover, (Deal & Peterson, 2016) emphasized that a strong and positive school culture fosters a conducive learning environment and supports the holistic and sustainable development of student character and moral values. In this context, teachers serve not only as facilitators of instruction but also as moral exemplars. As (Buan, 2021) highlighted, teachers play a pivotal role in character internalization by modelling consistent behaviours that reflect the values they aim to instil.

Although various studies have addressed character education in terms of curriculum design and student behaviour, research examining the holistic contribution of school culture—particularly within vocational school settings—remains limited. Yet, students in vocational high schools (SMKs) face distinct moral and social challenges as they prepare for integration into the workforce. Therefore, a deeper understanding of how school culture influences character development in SMK environments is critically needed. Preliminary observations at SMKN 1 Nisam and SMKN 1 Dewantara revealed that both schools have implemented several character-building practices, such as group prayers, morning assemblies, and classroom cleanliness programs. However, these efforts vary in terms of consistency. At SMKN 1 Nisam, for instance, behavioural monitoring outside of instructional hours remains weak, and parental involvement in character education is limited. Meanwhile, at SMKN 1 Dewantara, some teachers show resistance to school culture initiatives, perceiving them as additional burdens, while some parents oppose the educational sanctions imposed on students. This study aims to explore how school culture is implemented at SMKN 1 Nisam and SMKN 1 Dewantara in North Aceh and how it contributes to character formation among students. The research focuses on daily routines, spontaneous activities, extracurricular programs, and the integration of P5 initiatives. By examining the role of school culture as a value-driven ecosystem, this study seeks to offer new insights into the contextual strengthening of character education within vocational school environments.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative paradigm through a case study approach to investigate the formation of student character within the ecological framework of school culture. The qualitative case study was deemed appropriate as it facilitates a nuanced exploration of how meaning is constructed by participants in their natural sociocultural context (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This methodological orientation is particularly suited to capturing the complexity, depth, and contextuality inherent in educational settings where values are not merely taught but lived and embodied. Data were collected using three complementary instruments: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and visual documentation. The semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit rich, reflective narratives from participants regarding their lived experiences and interpretations of school culture. These interviews were conducted in-person and, where

necessary, via telephone to accommodate participant availability. Non-participant observation enabled the researcher to capture spontaneous student behaviours and peer interactions within the school environment, without interfering in the natural flow of activities. Visual documentation—comprising photographs and video recordings—was employed to substantiate emergent findings, particularly in relation to recurring practices, symbolic artifacts, and nonverbal dimensions of school culture.

The design of the data collection procedures followed (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) framework for qualitative inquiry, which emphasizes immersive fieldwork, inductive data generation, and interpretive depth. Observations were conducted in naturalistic settings to preserve contextual authenticity, while interviews were crafted to provide space for participants to articulate their values, dilemmas, and moral reasoning. Document analysis was selective and purposive, focusing on artifacts and textual data (e.g., school regulations, activity reports) that illuminated the moral ethos of the school. To ensure methodological rigor, the trustworthiness criteria as proposed by Lincoln and (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) were applied—namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through triangulation of data sources and methods, prolonged engagement in the field, member checking, and peer debriefing. Transferability was supported through the provision of rich, thick descriptions of the research setting and context. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a clear audit trail of procedures, while confirmability was ensured by grounding interpretations strictly in the data corpus, minimizing researcher bias.

The analytical process followed a systematic, multi-stage procedure as elaborated by (Leavy, 2022) Initial phases involved data preparation and organization, including verbatim transcription of interviews and systematic data cataloguing (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Immersion in the data was carried out to identify salient narratives and preliminary interpretive threads, which were documented through analytical memos (Saldaña, 2021). Subsequently, the data were subjected to *values coding*—a qualitative technique wherein segments of data were coded for latent or explicit references to values, ethical tensions, or socio-moral power dynamics (Saldaña, 2021). Similar codes were synthesized into categories, which were then abstracted into overarching themes that captured the moral and cultural logic embedded in school practices. The final interpretive stage involved cross-validating themes through method, theory, and investigator triangulation (Greene et al., 1989) thereby enhancing analytical robustness. Through this interpretive scaffold, the study aims to contribute empirically grounded insights into how character formation is socially constructed, negotiated, and sustained within the cultural ecology of vocational high schools. In deploying this rigorous analytical trajectory, the study aspires to not only enrich the discourse on character education in postsecondary institutions but also to offer a methodologically sound reference for scholars and practitioners committed to cultivating ethical, responsible, and socially conscious youth.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The institutionalization of school culture at SMKN 1 Nisam and SMKN 1 Dewantara embodies a structured endeavor to internalize the character values articulated in Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017 on Strengthening Character Education (Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter/PPK), while concurrently reflecting the core dimensions of the Pancasila Student Profile as promulgated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. Both schools demonstrate deliberate efforts to embed these values into their pedagogical and socio-cultural ecosystems

through routinized practices, albeit with distinct institutional emphases and orientations. At SMKN 1 Nisam, character formation is primarily situated within the framework of religious habituation and discipline-oriented routines. Manifestations of this orientation are evident in daily practices such as collective Qur’anic recitation (tadarus), congregational prayers, and the implementation of Teaching Factory (TEFA) pedagogy—an industry-aligned instructional model designed to foster professional work ethics, accountability, and perseverance. Conversely, SMKN 1 Dewantara prioritizes the cultivation of social awareness and intersubjective tolerance through student participation in intra-school governance structures (e.g., OSIS), anti-bullying campaigns, and literacy enhancement programs. These initiatives are strategically aligned to instil empathy, civic inclusivity, and affective engagement among learners.

The divergence in focus between these institutions underscores the inherently contextual and constructed nature of school culture. Far from a monolithic entity, school culture emerges as a situated interplay between local socio-cultural dynamics, student demographics, and the strategic orientations of school leadership. Consequently, the enactment of character values is not merely derivative of formal policy mandates but is actively mediated by institutional vision and the normative practices embedded in each school’s microculture. Empirical data reveal that SMKN 1 Nisam exhibits strengths in nurturing values associated with religiosity, discipline, industriousness, and personal responsibility. In contrast, SMKN 1 Dewantara demonstrates efficacy in promoting tolerance, social compassion, peaceful cohabitation, and the appreciation of academic and non-academic achievement. However, both schools exhibit limited integration of character values pertaining to intellectual autonomy—namely, critical thinking, democratic engagement, and a sustained culture of reading—suggesting a prevailing emphasis on behavioural and procedural dimensions of character, rather than its reflective and epistemic facets.

To substantiate these findings, Table 1 provides a comparative matrix of character value implementation across the two schools, referencing the eighteen core values prescribed in Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017. Data were triangulated through systematic field observations and semi-structured interviews with key school stakeholders, and analysed against the character achievement indicators outlined in the Pancasila Student Profile framework (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This comparative analysis elucidates the strategic function of school culture as a socio-pedagogical mechanism for character development within the vocational education milieu.

Table 1. Character Values Fostered at Vocational High Schools in North Aceh

No.	Character Values	SMKN 1 Nisam	Description (Nisam)	SMKN 1 Dewantara	Description (Dewantara)
1	Religiosity	Present	Morning recitations, congregational prayers, weekly Yasin recitations, students trained as imams and preachers.	Present	Congregational prayers, Yasin recitations, tadarus as a form of disciplinary action, enjoyable religious habituation.
2	Honesty	Present	Character education, CCTV monitoring, and reflection on real-life cases.	Present	Practical applications: student-run mini banks, laboratory responsibilities, and integrity

3	Tolerance	Present	Non-local students are well accepted, with a counseling approach grounded in humanistic values.	Present	during examinations. Non-Muslim students are given social space; school fosters interethnic respect and understanding.
4	Discipline	Present	Strict attendance policies, educational sanctions, and monitoring through CCTV.	Present	Active Disciplinary Committee, gradual behavior reinforcement, student involvement in maintaining order.
5	Responsibility	Present	Students manage school events and assume leadership roles.	Present	Students run mini banks, manage peer finances and administration, and repay cooperative loans independently.
6	Independence	Present	Students autonomously manage school activities and resolve technical issues during events.	Present	Students produce soap, calculate production costs, and deliver presentations without teacher assistance.
7	Creativity	Present	Vocational product design, Teaching Factory projects, production of marketable goods and services.	Present	Poetry contests, floral board creations, liquid soap products, and freedom in language and design exploration.
8	Democracy	Present	Students participate in campaigns and OSIS elections; training by local legislative members.	Absent	Democratic practices are limited; formal deliberative forums are lacking, though responsibility training begins in Grade 10.
9	Curiosity	Present	Emerges through teacher-student interaction; not yet a structured cultural practice.	Present	Developed during classroom learning, though not formally institutionalized.
10	Hard Work	Present	Vocational training, project-based learning, students assist at home yet maintain attendance.	Present	Classroom routines, academic mentoring, motivational efforts, and self-funded internships.

11	Love of Peace	Present	Anti-bullying programs and mental health support initiatives.	Present	Anti-bullying team, peace-themed P5 projects, and no reported inter-school conflicts.
12	Nationalism	Present	Naval Scout program, daily flag ceremonies, recitation of the Proclamation, and scouting.	Present	Monday ceremonies, Independence Day events, and national symbol displays.
13	Patriotism	Present	Ceremonies, scouting, Naval Scout activities, and national sailing program.	Present	Independence Day competitions, national attributes, and patriotic symbols.
14	Appreciation of Achievement	Present	Display of trophies, plaques, and student work.	Present	Poetry competitions, student projects sold to the public, recognition of student achievements.
15	Communicativeness	Present	Master of Ceremony roles, legal awareness debates, and bilingual debates.	Present	Student greetings to teachers and guests, OSIS communication, and polite interpersonal interactions.
16	Reading Interest	Absent	Reading corners are underutilized; students prefer online searches.	Absent	Limited reading culture; the library is not actively used.
17	Environmental Awareness	Present	Tree planting campaigns, morning cleanups, and teacher-student collaboration.	Present	'Sabtu Peugleh Sikula' (School Cleanup Saturday), with student participation in cleaning activities.
18	Social Awareness	Present	Visits to sick students, disaster relief donations, and teacher home visits.	Present	Disaster fundraising, student-led aid for sick peers, and independent donation drives.

The institutionalization of school culture at SMKN 1 Nisam and SMKN 1 Dewantara is operationalized through a multifaceted and systematically embedded framework within the schools' daily routines. Core practices such as flag ceremonies, classroom stewardship, and morning prayers function as ritualized mechanisms that cultivate positive behavioral patterns while embedding foundational values of responsibility and nationalism. These structured routines are complemented by spontaneous, context-sensitive interventions, wherein behavioral infractions are addressed with pedagogical tact and humane corrective measures. Central to this cultural edifice is the exemplary conduct of educators, who transcend their pedagogical

roles to serve as moral exemplars. Their verbal interactions, demeanor, and unwavering commitment to punctuality and discipline provide a living curriculum of ethical standards. Furthermore, the strategic deployment of extracurricular programs and habituation initiatives under the auspices of the *Projek Penguatan Profil Pelajar Pancasila* (P5) act as deliberate conduits for character formation. These programs intricately weave the philosophical tenets of Pancasila into tangible experiences relevant to students' socio-cultural realities. A distinct hallmark of each institution lies in its localization strategy—for instance, SMKN 1 Dewantara's "Sabtu Peugleh Sikula" program embodies the internalization of indigenous cultural values, particularly those emphasizing communal solidarity and mutual cooperation. Collectively, these initiatives extend beyond mere behavioral regulation, constituting a dynamic, continuous process of contextualized character habituation.

Notwithstanding these systematic efforts, both institutions grapple with notable impediments that challenge the sustainability and profundity of character value internalization. At SMKN 1 Nisam, circumvention of surveillance mechanisms, such as students concealing vehicles outside monitored zones, indicates gaps in enforcement. Efforts to foster a culture of literacy and environmental stewardship—manifested in reading corners and arboreal campaigns—struggle with consistency and longevity. Moreover, character assessment procedures remain largely informal and lack methodological rigor. A further concern is the sporadic inconsistency in faculty adherence to disciplinary expectations, exemplified by tardiness and unsanctioned absences during instructional time.

In response, strategic interventions have been articulated to mitigate these challenges. Prioritization of enhanced teacher role modelling underscores the pivotal role of educator presence and active participation in character-building endeavours. Concurrently, intensified collaboration with parental and community stakeholders is operationalized through initiatives such as home visits and inclusive community engagement programs to fortify the character development process. Technological augmentation via Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) serves as a supplementary surveillance instrument to optimize behavioural oversight. Significantly, the development of empirically grounded character evaluation instruments predicated on moral indicators is underway, aiming to provide systematic frameworks for assessing attitudinal and value-based habituation.

Conversely, SMKN 1 Dewantara faces a distinctive constellation of challenges. Despite robust programmatic support, student engagement with cleanliness initiatives remains suboptimal. Parental attitudes occasionally impede policy enforcement, with some parents resisting disciplinary measures imposed on their offspring. Additionally, teacher commitment to cultural programs is uneven, frequently perceived as ancillary workload beyond core responsibilities. The absence of structured democratic platforms curtails students' capacity to articulate aspirations, thereby limiting participatory governance and ownership of school culture. To address these constraints, the institution advocates a comprehensive disciplinary culture encompassing all school constituents—students, teachers, and staff—enforced through equitable and consistent educational sanctions. The P5 framework is leveraged to instil social values and cooperative competencies through contextually resonant activities. Strengthened community involvement permeates both the strategic planning and operational phases of character culture initiatives. Moreover, targeted professional development focused on character education, alongside the reinforcement of student representative forums, aims

to cultivate a robust ecosystem that empowers active engagement and collective ownership of a positive school culture.

The present study elucidates that the school culture at SMKN 1 Nisam foregrounds religious values, industriousness, and discipline through structured routines such as communal worship, formal greetings, and the integration of the Teaching Factory program. These practices facilitate the internalization of character by providing students with authentic experiential learning within a values-oriented environment, corroborating the theoretical framework advanced by Lickona (1991). These findings are consistent with Suriadi and Supriyatno (2020), who assert that religious character education can be systematically embedded within school culture through the promotion of values such as cleanliness, honesty, and discipline, operationalized through curricular and extracurricular management.

The inculcation of character values within educational settings transcends mere normative prescription, necessitating comprehensive pedagogical and institutional strategies. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides a robust conceptual lens by delineating the multilayered social systems—ranging from microsystems such as family and school to the broader macrosystem of society—that collectively influence student character development. Within this framework, school culture constitutes a pivotal microsystem with direct and tangible effects on students' value formation and behavioural dispositions. A school culture that is consistent, inclusive, and value-driven fosters a resilient and sustainable ecosystem conducive to character growth. Complementarily, (Bandura & Walters, 1977) explicates that individual behavioural patterns are predominantly acquired via observational learning and imitation of salient role models, notably educators and school leadership. The modelling process enables students to assimilate character values not merely through didactic verbalization but through vicarious reinforcement manifested in the moral comportment exhibited by teachers. Accordingly, the cultivation of a robust school culture demands congruence between the espoused values and the ethical conduct exemplified by educators as moral agents.

Further, the Character Education Partnership (CEP) framework (2008) underscores the imperative of a whole-school approach involving the entire school community in nurturing a character-building milieu. CEP posits that effective character education necessitates coherence of values permeating all dimensions of school life—including the formal curriculum, hidden curriculum, institutional policies, and interpersonal relationships—thus engendering an environment where virtues are consistently reinforced and internalized. In juxtaposition, SMKN 1 Dewantara prioritizes values such as tolerance, peace, social empathy, and academic achievement through initiatives including student council engagement, anti-bullying campaigns, and literacy promotion programs. These initiatives substantiate the findings of (Tuati et al., 2020) who highlight the efficacy of social and collaborative student activities in cultivating responsibility, cooperation, and empathy. (Lave & Wenger, 1991) Situated Learning Theory further enriches this understanding by positing that character acquisition is most efficaciously achieved through participation in authentic communities of practice. Such engagement enables students to learn not only conceptually but through active, contextualized involvement in meaningful social practices—such as communal service, democratic deliberations, and civic participation.

The divergent emphases on character dimensions between the two schools substantiate (Hoy & Miskel, 1991) contention that school culture is a socially constructed and contextually contingent phenomenon reflecting collective values. SMKN 1 Nisam

epitomizes a normative culture grounded in religiosity, whereas SMKN 1 Dewantara embodies a more pluralistic and participatory ethos. Nevertheless, the comprehensive implementation of character dimensions as mandated by Government Regulation No. 87/2017 and the Profil Pelajar Pancasila remains uneven. Democratic engagement and a proclivity for reading are underrepresented in practical enactment. This aligns with (Marini, 2018) observations regarding the marginalization of certain character values due to local normative incongruities or the inherent challenge in directly observing such values. (Bandura & Walters, 1977) theoretical insights affirm that values which are observable and reinforced through rituals and discipline are more readily internalized, whereas reflective values such as critical thinking and democratic participation necessitate more sophisticated pedagogical strategies. (Kohlberg, 1981) Theory of Moral Development delineates that these higher-order moral values evolve through advanced stages of moral reasoning. Moreover, (Freire, 2009) advocates for critical pedagogy that fosters dialogic interaction and active student participation to embed democratic and critical thinking dispositions authentically. Hence, effective character education demands an integrative approach that couples direct moral exemplification with critical reflective learning—an aspect currently underdeveloped in existing habituation programs.

Several factors underpin the efficacy of character formation via school culture. Primarily, teacher role modelling is paramount; educators serve not merely as conveyors of values but as tangible exemplars whose daily conduct profoundly influences student character development, resonating with (Lickona, 2012) framework and reinforced by (Bandura & Walters, 1977) emphasis on modelling. Second, cultural consistency manifests through ritualized activities such as Quranic recitations, congregational prayers, and communal labour, which constitute habitual practices fostering a conducive moral environment (Murcahyanto & Mohzana, 2023). (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) microsystem concept further accentuates the salience of immediate environmental factors in moral development. Third, active stakeholder involvement—including school leadership and community participation—plays an instrumental role in sustaining an institutional climate supportive of character education (Murcahyanto & Mohzana, 2023).

Conversely, several constraints impede the optimal realization of character education. The absence of systematic character evaluation tools impairs the capacity to assess program efficacy, a gap highlighted by (Astuti et al., 2023) Program discontinuities, exemplified by the deterioration of reading corners, reflect deficient monitoring and sustainability mechanisms (Murcahyanto & Mohzana, 2023). Socioeconomic heterogeneity among students presents further challenges, as economic disadvantages limit access to resources necessary for participation in extracurricular and character-building activities. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) macrosystem perspective situates economic context as a critical determinant of social-emotional development and school engagement. (Coleman, 1988) further elucidates that limited familial social and economic capital constrains students' opportunities for active involvement in character-enhancing school environments. Finally, the paucity of forums facilitating student voice curtails the cultivation of democratic values, with the (Fitzgerald, 2024) emphasizing participatory decision-making as essential to democratic education.

Table 2 synthesizes the enabling and inhibiting factors influencing character education implementation within these vocational schools. Enablers include teacher exemplification, consistent cultural practices, and stakeholder support (Bandura & Walters, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lickona, 2012; Murcahyanto & Mohzana, 2023). whereas impediments encompass the lack of systematic assessment, program

discontinuities, socio-economic disparities, and limited democratic engagement spaces (Astuti et al., 2023; Coleman, 1988; Fitzgerald, 2024). These findings derive from qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews and direct observations in two vocational high schools.

Table 2. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors in Character Education Based on School Culture

Aspect	Description	Reference
Supporting Factors		
Teacher Role Modeling	Teachers serve as moral exemplars through their concrete actions within the school environment.	Lickona (1991)
Consistent School Culture	Positive habituation fostered through religious and social activities.	Murcahyanto & Mohzana (2023)
Stakeholder Support	Involvement of principals and external parties facilitates a character-supportive environment.	Murcahyanto & Mohzana (2023)
Inhibiting Factors		
Lack of Evaluation	Absence of systematic instruments for assessing character development.	Astuti, Istiyono & Widiastuti (2023)
Inconsistent Programs	Program failures due to weak monitoring and sustainability mechanisms.	Murcahyanto & Mohzana (2023)
Student Backgrounds	Socioeconomic disparities hinder the effectiveness of character education programs.	Coleman (1988)
Limited Democratic Forums	Lack of student forums limits opportunities for democratic learning and expression.	Fitzgerald (2024)

The implementation of school culture as a vehicle for character formation at SMKN 1 Nisam and SMKN 1 Dewantara faces both systemic and cultural challenges. Although both schools have conducted culture-based programs such as religious activities, communal work, and literacy initiatives, the sustainability and evaluation of character education programs have yet to reach an optimal level. At SMKN 1 Nisam, supervision of student behaviour outside the classroom remains weak, particularly during break times. Practices such as students manipulating space – for example, hiding vehicles to skip class – reflect a lack of synergy between the school and its broader social environment. Several programs, including the "Million Trees Movement" and classroom literacy activities, have yet to achieve their full potential due to inadequate follow-up systems. Character evaluation remains informal, lacking standardized indicators. Internally, teacher role modelling shows inconsistency. Some teachers have been recorded arriving late or leaving school outside designated hours. This discrepancy creates a gap between the values taught and those exemplified. The internalization of punctuality, as a fundamental aspect of character education, remains incomplete. (Lickona, 2012) emphasizes that consistency in role modelling is a crucial element for successful character education.

Meanwhile, SMKN 1 Dewantara faces challenges related to student awareness. Despite the availability of sanitation facilities, littering behaviour persists, indicating incomplete internalization of cleanliness values. Some parents demonstrate resistance to the implementation of educational sanctions and show limited involvement in supporting character education. Furthermore, some teachers perceive habituation programs as additional burdens rather than integral professional responsibilities.

Inconsistencies in teacher role modelling weaken the internalization process of character values (Gunawan, 2022; Lickona, 2012).

These findings align with (Tinus & Wulandari, 2021) who stress the necessity of comprehensive planning and the involvement of all stakeholders to strengthen culture-based character education. (Fuad et al., 2022) similarly assert that collaboration among family, teachers, and the community is indispensable for an effective school culture. Without such synergy, character-building efforts tend to be symbolic and fail to foster long-term moral awareness. Several remedial measures have been attempted. At SMKN 1 Nisam, the role of teachers has been reinforced through active participation in social and religious activities and collaboration with parents via home visit programs. The use of CCTV has also been introduced as a social control instrument. However, aspects of role modelling—particularly punctuality—require further enhancement through internal supervision and professional development. The urgent need for systematic character evaluation remains, as suggested by (Lickona, 2012), by employing clear and measurable moral indicators.

At SMKN 1 Dewantara, a comprehensive culture of discipline has been enforced for all school members. Educational sanctions such as memorizing religious chants for tardy students serve as an approach to instil responsibility. The P5 program is also implemented through social actions as a tangible manifestation of character education. Nonetheless, improving teacher professionalism remains essential so that school culture is regarded as an integral part of education rather than merely an administrative obligation (Gunawan, 2022). Evaluation tools based on rubrics or performance assessments still need development to measure the impact of school culture on student character. Overall, the success of school culture implementation in character formation depends on consistent role modelling, collective involvement, and the presence of structured evaluation systems. (Hoy & Miskel, 1991) highlight that alignment between the school and family environments is a fundamental foundation for shaping character values. Thus, effective character education requires the integration of values throughout school life in a comprehensive, sustainable, and contextual manner.

Table 3 presents several challenges faced by these two vocational schools in implementing character education and the solutions undertaken to address them. Problems such as weak supervision, lack of parental involvement, and inconsistent teacher role modelling are major challenges at SMKN 1 Nisam. Meanwhile, SMKN 1 Dewantara confronts obstacles related to student awareness of cleanliness and some teachers' perception of school culture as a burden (Astuti et al., 2023; Murcahyanto & Mohzana, 2023). The applied solutions reflect institutional efforts to foster a school environment conducive to comprehensive character development.

Table 3. Challenges and Strategic Interventions in the Implementation of School Culture at Two Vocational High Schools

School	Challenges	Strategic Interventions
SMKN 1 Nisam	Insufficient monitoring and enforcement of student behaviour beyond classroom settings	Implementation of home visitation programs
	Limited parental engagement in character education initiatives	Active involvement of teachers in community and social activities
	Inconsistency in teachers' exemplification of desired character values	Deployment of surveillance technologies (e.g., CCTV) to enhance behavioural oversight

	Absence of systematic and standardized character assessment tools	Development of a comprehensive character evaluation framework with clearly defined indicators
SMKN 1 Dewantara	Inadequate student internalization of hygiene and environmental responsibility	Establishment of a punctuality and discipline culture
	Parental resistance toward the application of educational sanctions	Implementation of reflective and constructive disciplinary measures
	Perception among some educators that school culture initiatives represent additional burdens rather than core responsibilities	Operationalization of the P5 program emphasizing active social engagement
		Provision of targeted professional development and training for teaching staff

Table 4 delineates the essential components for the effective implementation of character education within school settings. Paramount to this process is the consistent demonstration of exemplary behavior by educators and school leadership, as the internalization of character values transcends mere instruction and necessitates embodiment through observable conduct (Gunawan, 2022; Lickona, 2012). Additionally, the collaborative engagement among all stakeholders fortifies a holistic ecosystem conducive to character development (Fuad et al., 2022). The deployment of systematic and multifaceted evaluation mechanisms, encompassing both performance-based assessments and qualitative observations, is critical to rigorously monitor and enhance program efficacy (Astuti et al., 2023). The integration of these elements into the quotidian practices of the institution is indispensable for the sustainable inculcation of character values, thereby embedding them within the very fabric of the school’s cultural milieu (Hoy & Miskel, 1991).

Table 4. Critical Success Factors for Character Education Based on School Culture

Key Components	Description	References
Consistency of Role Modeling	Teachers and school principals serve as role models through their actions, not merely rhetoric.	Lickona (2012); Gunawan (2022)
Stakeholder Synergy	Collaboration among teachers, parents, and the community fosters a comprehensive character ecosystem.	Fuad (2022)
Structured Evaluation	Assessment using rubrics, observation, and performance-based evaluation to measure character development outcomes.	Istiyono (2023)
Daily Value Integration	Character education extends beyond formal programs and is internalized into the school’s cultural practices.	Hoy & Miskel (2013)

The findings of this study yield several strategic recommendations for Vocational High Schools in North Aceh Regency aimed at enhancing character education through the development of school culture as a contextual medium for the internalization of Pancasila values. Firstly, it is imperative that each Vocational High School cultivates a school culture that is both contextually relevant and deeply embedded in everyday practices. Initiatives such as the *Sabtu Peugleh Sikula* program at SMKN 1 Dewantara and the regular practices of *tadarus* and congregational prayers at SMKN 1 Nisam exemplify how character values—namely religiosity, social responsibility, and cooperation—can be organically fostered through meaningful and consistent routines. Consequently,

other educational institutions are encouraged to adopt analogous approaches that synthesize local wisdom with systematic habituation, rather than superficially integrating character education solely into curricular content (Lickona, 2012; Sakti et al., 2024). Supporting this notion, (Sakti et al., 2024) assert that a robust school culture constitutes a conducive environment for the sustained inculcation of character virtues.

Secondly, the optimization of teachers' roles as exemplars and facilitators in the character development of students must be prioritized. While positive influences of teacher role modelling were observed in both schools, empirical data reveal inconsistencies in professional conduct, particularly with respect to punctuality and attendance at SMKN 1 Nisam. This underscores the necessity for ongoing professional development programs designed to foster consistent exemplary behaviour, as deviations in teacher conduct may attenuate the efficacy of character education initiatives (Lickona, 2012). This argument is substantiated by (Hamid et al., 2022) who demonstrate that inconsistencies in teacher role modelling significantly undermine character education outcomes. Thirdly, the establishment of an integrated and systematic character evaluation framework within academic processes is essential. Current assessment methods rely predominantly on subjective, informal observations, insufficient for providing comprehensive insights into the trajectory of student character formation. Accordingly, the development and implementation of instrument-based assessments—encompassing behavioral observation, reflective journaling, and peer evaluations—should be promoted by educational authorities to enhance the objectivity and rigor of character assessments (Handayani et al., 2023). Accurate and structured evaluation mechanisms not only facilitate a clearer understanding of student character progression but also inform continuous pedagogical refinement and intervention.

Fourthly, the advancement of literacy and democratic culture within schools remains an ongoing challenge warranting significant attention. The cultivation of a reading culture and the development of democratic participation skills have yet to reach optimal levels. Hence, the revitalization of literacy programs and the establishment of student forums for expression are critical strategies to empower students as active agents within the school community, rather than passive recipients of externally imposed programs (Gunawan, 2022). (Wahyuningsih, 2022) highlights the pivotal role of literacy culture in fostering critical and empathetic thinking, while (Novitasari et al., 2023) contend that extracurricular activities grounded in democratic principles effectively nurture participatory and responsible student citizenship. Fifthly, character education must be conceptualized as a collective responsibility necessitating multi-stakeholder collaboration. The engagement of parents, community leaders, the business sector, and religious institutions is indispensable in creating a supportive environment conducive to character strengthening. Consequently, educational authorities should institutionalize character education indicators as key criteria within school supervision and evaluation protocols. Moreover, sustained cross-sector partnerships are vital to ensuring alignment between the values promulgated within schools and those prevailing in broader societal contexts (Hoy & Miskel, 1991). Empirically, (Natadjaja, 2022) demonstrates that cross-sector collaborations utilizing service-learning methodologies effectively enhance social awareness and student accountability. Complementarily, (Supandi et al., 2024) affirm that active school committee involvement strengthens the synergy between schools and communities in safeguarding character education values.

The critical importance of fostering active moral engagement among students is accentuated by (Lickona, 2012) while (Watts et al., 2021) advocates for the integration of character education across all facets of curricular design, evaluation, and the professional ethos of educators. (Salman, 2022) further reinforces this paradigm by asserting that the holistic integration of values throughout the school culture constitutes the most efficacious strategy for character education. Thus, the success of character education hinges on the comprehensive and sustained application of core values throughout the entire educational ecosystem. (Herman et al., 2021) further posit that effective character education is actualized through the establishment of a structured, continuous school culture. This encompasses activities such as the internalization of interfaith tolerance, the conduct of ceremonies fostering collective discipline, the formation of collaborative working groups (PokJa), and the promotion of active student engagement in the learning process. Additionally, extracurricular programs such as scouting and the formal recognition of student achievements contribute to a positive school climate that supports the internalization of character values. This holistic approach substantiates that consistent integration of moral values within the fabric of school life facilitates a more profound and sustainable character development among students.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that school culture serves as a strategic foundation for character development in vocational high schools. Core values such as religiosity, responsibility, and social care are cultivated through meaningful habituation and exemplary behaviour demonstrated by school members. However, challenges including inadequate character evaluation, inconsistency among educators, and limited parental support continue to impede its effectiveness. Improvement efforts focusing on strengthening teacher roles, implementing the P5 program, and fostering cross-sector partnerships must be accompanied by measurable evaluations, teacher training, and enhancement of literacy initiatives and participatory spaces for students. Collaboration among schools, families, and communities remains the key to achieving a holistic and successful character education in SMKs.

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