

Early Childhood Education: Early Character Education: Cultivating Empathy and Discipline in Early Childhood Education Children

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) plays a strategic role in shaping the foundation of a child's complete personality, including character values such as empathy and discipline. This study aims to describe the process of instilling these values through a contextual, natural, and participatory learning approach. Using descriptive qualitative methods, this study involved teachers, principals, and parents from several PAUD institutions in Indonesia. Data collection techniques were carried out through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies. The results showed that the value of empathy was instilled through storytelling, role-playing, and social interactions that build children's emotional awareness, while discipline was developed through habituation, classroom rules, and a reflective approach. Furthermore, collaboration between teachers, principals, and parents proved crucial in creating a consistent character education ecosystem. This study also identified challenges in implementing character education, such as differences in children's backgrounds, limited learning media, low parental participation, and teacher readiness. The success of instilling values is greatly influenced by an understanding of social dynamics and the application of natural, developmentally appropriate learning. This study confirms that character education from an early age must be carried out holistically, adaptively, and sustainably, in order to form a generation that is empathetic, independent, and responsible.

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) occupies a strategic position in the national education system because it provides the initial foundation for a child's comprehensive growth and development. During early childhood, between the ages of 0 and 6, children experience rapid brain development and are highly responsive to environmental stimulation. Child development experts refer to this period as the golden age, during which nearly 80 percent of brain structure and function are formed, and basic behavioral patterns are established (Nurachadijat & Selvia, 2023). Therefore, what children acquire during this phase, including habits, values, and emotional experiences, will significantly influence the direction of their future personality development. In this context, PAUD education plays a key role not only in developing children's cognitive

and motor skills but also serves as the primary medium for instilling character values that will shape their moral and social identity (Suryana, 2021).

One of the major challenges in early childhood education is how to shape children's character in a holistic, balanced, and enjoyable way. Two core values that are crucial in character development are empathy and discipline (Zulfah, 2024). Empathy is a child's ability to recognize and understand the feelings of others, which forms the basis for prosocial behaviors such as caring, sharing, helping, and building healthy relationships. Without empathy, children will struggle to form positive social relationships and tend to be egocentric. Meanwhile, discipline serves as a guide for children in behaving according to agreed-upon rules, being able to delay desires, manage emotions, and develop a sense of responsibility for their actions. Discipline is not just about obedience, but more importantly, about self-awareness and internal control, developed through habituation and role modeling (Lapanda et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, in many early childhood education institutions, character education has not been a structured priority. Some educators still focus on achieving academic aspects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, while the affective aspects, which are the foundation of character, receive less attention. Furthermore, the methods used to instill character values are sometimes authoritarian or verbalistic, without actively and reflectively involving children in the learning process (Muttaqin et al., 2025). As a result, children may understand the rules but fail to experience the meaning of the values taught. Yet, early childhood learns most effectively through direct experience, observation, imitation, and meaningful play. Therefore, a more contextual, enjoyable approach is needed that holistically engages children in the character-building process (Akbar, 2020).

This article presents a character education model based on the values of empathy and discipline using experiential learning and play-based learning approaches, adapted to the psychosocial developmental stages of early childhood (Utsman & Puspasi, 2025). This article integrates a pedagogical approach that positions children as active subjects in value formation, involving elements of narrative, social simulation, role-playing, emotional reflection, and habituation in a consistent environment. Furthermore, this article emphasizes the importance of synergy between schools, families, and communities in establishing a sustainable character education ecosystem. This multi-stakeholder engagement model is crucial because children learn character not only in the classroom but also from interactions at home and in their surrounding environment. Instilling empathy and discipline will be more effective if the entire environment of a child's life brings these values to life in a tangible and consistent manner (Abdurrahman et al., 2025).

The purpose of this article is to illustrate the urgency of early character education by emphasizing the importance of empathy and discipline as the foundation of children's social behavior, identifying the challenges of implementing character education in early childhood education institutions, and offering concrete strategies that can be used by educators and parents in developing children's character holistically. With a more applicable and enjoyable approach, this article is expected to be a real contribution in the development of character education at the early childhood education level, as well as encourage a transformation of the early childhood education paradigm that does not only pursue academic intelligence, but also prioritizes the formation of strong human values. Early childhood education is not only about preparing children to enter elementary school, but also about preparing children to become empathetic,

independent, and responsible human beings—values that are the foundation of a peaceful and civilized society.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at in-depth understanding of the process of instilling empathy and discipline in early childhood in early childhood education institutions. The research locations were generally determined at several early childhood education institutions in Indonesia, taking into account the diversity of social contexts and learning approaches applied. The research subjects consisted of teachers, principals, and parents of students actively involved in character education activities. Data collection techniques were carried out through participatory observation of learning activities, in-depth interviews with key informants, and documentation studies in the form of daily lesson plans, teacher notes, and documentation of children's activities. Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach with steps ranging from coding to identifying main themes that reflect the practice of learning empathy and discipline values. To maintain the validity of the data, triangulation techniques were used, including source and method triangulation, as well as member checking with selected informants. This approach allows researchers to capture the dynamics of character education contextually and naturally, and illustrates the strategic role of educators and the surrounding environment in shaping children's personalities from an early age.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Practice of Instilling Empathy Values in Daily Learning Activities

Observations and interviews show that empathy is instilled through various interactive learning activities that engage children's emotional aspects. Teachers actively use storytelling methods with characters facing social or emotional conflicts to stimulate children to think and feel what the characters feel. (Rusmiati., 2023) For example, in a story about a child who loses a toy, the teacher invites students to discuss: "How would you feel if you lost something you care about?" Furthermore, role-playing activities are also an effective tool. Children are invited to play the role of a friend who is sad, angry, or happy, while other friends are taught how to respond to these feelings. Group games such as putting together puzzles or taking turns throwing balls into baskets foster a sense of togetherness and mutual understanding (Suminar, 2019).

Documentation studies show that the daily learning plan (RPPH) has explicitly included elements of empathy values, for example with learning objectives such as "Children are able to show concern for friends who are experiencing difficulties." Teacher notes record each child's development in expressing empathy, both verbally and non-verbally.

Strategies for Instilling Discipline Values Through Daily Routines and Class Rules

Discipline is instilled consistently through habituation and the application of clear and simple rules. In interviews, teachers explained that children are introduced to a structured daily routine, such as morning prayer, putting their bags away, and following instructions in a mutually agreed-upon order. This routine gradually fosters a sense of order and responsibility (Amelia & Dafit, 2023).

Teachers also implement symbolic systems, such as rewarding children with star stickers for arriving on time or completing assignments well. This provides both

intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for children to comply with the rules. When children break the rules, teachers don't immediately punish them but instead engage in a reflective dialogue, such as asking, "Why didn't you put your toys away after using them?" This encourages children to understand the consequences of their actions. Activity documentation shows that classroom rules are developed through participation with children, using pictures and visual symbols easily understood by young children. This demonstrates that discipline education is not authoritative, but rather dialogic and participatory.

The Role of Teachers, Principals, and Parents in Collaborating on Character Education

Interviews with key informants revealed that instilling character values such as empathy and discipline in early childhood education institutions cannot be achieved in isolation, but rather requires synergy from all parties involved in children's education, particularly teachers, principals, and parents. The collaboration between these three elements is a crucial foundation for creating an educational environment conducive to early childhood character development (Suriansyah & Aslamiah, 2015).

a. The Role of Teachers as Facilitators and Role Models of Character Values

Teachers play a central role as the spearheads of character education implementation in the classroom. Beyond simply delivering learning materials, teachers play a role as facilitators of children's social and emotional development. They actively observe children's behavior, provide positive reinforcement, and create an inclusive and compassionate learning environment. Empathy is fostered through concrete examples in everyday interactions, such as showing concern for a sad child or helping a friend experiencing difficulties (Agustin et al., 2024).

Teachers also act as role models in demonstrating discipline. By arriving on time, speaking politely, and adhering to class rules, teachers set a concrete example that children can easily imitate. A teacher's consistent daily behavior significantly determines how children absorb and practice these values.

b. School Principals as Policy Directors and Strengtheners of School Culture

The principal plays a strategic role in shaping the school's vision and culture, emphasizing the importance of character education. Through policies outlined in the institution's curriculum and annual work program, the principal ensures that the values of empathy and discipline are not merely extras, but rather an integral part of the learning process (Furkan, 2013). Several principals interviewed stated that they encourage teachers to design character-based thematic activities, conduct regular supervision of the implementation of habituation activities, and collaborate with parents and the surrounding community. This support provides teachers with the space to be more creative and reflective in implementing learning strategies that shape children's character (Wahyingsih et al., 2025).

c. Parents as Strategic Partners in Character Education

The role of parents in early childhood character education is crucial, especially since the family environment is the first place children learn social and moral values. Parents who are actively involved in the educational process in early childhood education (PAUD) have a positive impact on the success of children's character development (Japar et al., 2023).

In several early childhood education institutions studied, parenting classes, regular meetings, and communication forums between teachers and parents were conducted. As a result, parents became more aware of the importance of showing empathy to their children and implementing consistent discipline at home. For example, some parents started getting their children into the habit of tidying up their toys after playing or encouraging them to discuss their feelings after experiencing conflict with friends (Darmadji, 2020). Many parents also take the initiative to create a home environment that supports the values taught at school, such as establishing daily routines, modeling empathetic behavior towards other family members, or instilling the value of responsibility through simple activities such as helping with housework.

d. Collaborative Synergy: Building a Character Education Ecosystem

Data triangulation between observations, interviews, and documentation shows that the success of instilling the values of empathy and discipline depends heavily on a shared vision and communication between teachers, principals, and parents. When all parties share the same perception of the importance of character education and are willing to work together, these values are more easily ingrained in children (Darmadji, 2020). This synergy creates a supportive educational ecosystem, where school is a safe and enjoyable place to learn, and home is a continuation of the values taught. Children do not experience confusion or value conflict because there is consistency between what is taught at school and what is practiced at home (Buan, 2021). Thus, collaboration between teachers, principals, and parents is not merely complementary, but rather a fundamental component in developing character in early childhood. This collaborative model demonstrates that effective character education can only occur in a harmonious, participatory, and sustainable educational climate.

Obstacles and Challenges in the Value Instillation Process

Although the implementation of character education in early childhood education institutions has shown quite positive results, there are a number of obstacles and challenges faced in the process of instilling empathy and discipline in early childhood. These challenges arise from various aspects, including the children, educators, supporting facilities, and parental involvement. Understanding these obstacles is crucial for designing more adaptive and sustainable strategies for character education (Hasanah, 2024).

a. Differences in Children's Social and Cultural Backgrounds

Children attending early childhood education institutions come from families with diverse social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. These differences significantly influence children's perceptions of values such as empathy and discipline. Children who grow up in a democratic and warm family environment tend to more easily understand the concepts of sharing, listening, and restraint. Conversely, children from strict or permissive environments may have difficulty expressing empathy or following rules (Salsabilah et al., 2024).

Teachers face challenges in developing an inclusive and responsive approach to these differences. A one-way approach or generalization of all children risks leaving some behind in the process of internalizing values. Therefore, teachers need pedagogical sensitivity to recognize individual children's characteristics and adapt learning methods, both emotionally, cognitively, and socially (Redhana, 2024).

b. Limited Facilities and Media to Support Character Learning

In some early childhood education institutions, particularly those in remote or underdeveloped areas, limited teaching aids and educational media are a major obstacle. Yet, instilling values in early childhood requires a concrete, visual, and engaging approach. Media such as picture books, hand puppets, animated videos, or educational games significantly help children understand the concepts of empathy and discipline in a contextual and engaging way (Urfa et al., 2024).

These limitations force teachers to be creative with whatever tools they have, which are sometimes insufficiently engaging or ineffective in conveying values. This situation also has the potential to reduce teachers' motivation to design varied and innovative learning. Therefore, support from the government and relevant institutions in providing character education resources is a crucial aspect that needs to be strengthened.

c. Low Parental Participation and Readiness

One significant challenge in character education in early childhood education (PAUD) is the suboptimal involvement of parents. Some parents view character education solely as the responsibility of the PAUD institution, resulting in less active participation in their child's educational process. Others are busy with work, so they don't have enough time to attend parenting classes or communicate regularly with teachers (Pandia et al., 2022).

Lack of communication between teachers and parents results in a misalignment of values between home and school. Children can experience confusion when behaviors encouraged at school are not reinforced or even contradict what happens at home. For example, if children are taught to queue and take turns at preschool, but are not given similar examples at home, the consistency of character development is disrupted (Siregar, 2021).

Teachers and principals also face challenges in persuasively conveying the importance of this collaboration. A communicative, non-judgmental, and empowering approach is needed to ensure parents feel involved, valued, and motivated to participate in their children's character education process.

d. Readiness and Competence of Educators in Managing Character Education

Although not explicitly mentioned by all informants, observations revealed that not all teachers have adequate preparation or training in delivering character education, particularly on the values of empathy and discipline. Some teachers still employ authoritative or one-sided advisory approaches, without involving children in emotional or social reflection (Mistiningsih, 2025).

This demonstrates the importance of improving teacher capacity through ongoing training in child-centered learning and social-emotional education. Teachers need to be equipped with concrete strategies to help children recognize their feelings, express empathy, and internalize discipline, not out of fear of punishment, but out of understanding its meaning.

Contextual Dynamics and Naturalness of the Learning Process

This research emphasizes the importance of understanding the social and contextual dynamics in the character formation process of early childhood. Character education cannot be applied uniformly, because each PAUD institution is located in a different social, cultural, and geographical environment. Local characteristics significantly influence the approach used to instill values such as empathy and

discipline. For example, in some PAUDs in rural areas, empathy is cultivated through activities such as sharing garden produce, community service, or small-scale mutual cooperation among students, reflecting the strong values of togetherness within their communities (Afriani, 2018). Meanwhile, in PAUDs in urban areas, the approach used is more oriented towards social discussions, simulations of emotional situations, and the use of digital media and thematic multimedia to stimulate children's understanding of more complex social situations. These dynamics indicate that the character learning process is adaptive to existing environmental conditions and local customs.

The naturalness of the learning process is also a prominent characteristic of character education activities in early childhood education (PAUD). Children do not feel like they are being "taught" formally, but rather directly experience the values through various enjoyable activities, such as role-playing, listening to stories, interacting with friends, and engaging in structured yet flexible routines. Through these activities, children unconsciously internalize the social and moral values being taught. This natural, experiential learning process aligns with constructivist theory, which states that children construct knowledge and understanding through direct interaction with their environment. Therefore, the success of character education depends heavily on the teacher's ability to design contextual, relevant learning activities that bridge children's real-life experiences with the values they wish to instill. This approach enables children to grow as individuals who not only know but also are able to feel and practice the values of empathy and discipline in their daily lives (Alfadhilah, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS

Character education at the early childhood education (PAUD) level is a crucial foundation for developing a child's holistic personality, particularly instilling empathy and discipline from an early age. Research shows that the process of instilling these values is most effective when implemented through a fun, contextual, and participatory approach, such as role-playing, storytelling, and incorporating them into daily activities. Teachers play a central role as facilitators and role models, while principals support this through policies that integrate character values into school programs. Furthermore, parental involvement has proven crucial in strengthening value consistency between home and school. The research also uncovered various challenges that hinder the success of character education, such as children's diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, limited learning resources, low parental participation, and teachers' limited pedagogical capacity to implement a reflective character approach that engages with children's emotional aspects. Successful character education requires synergy between teachers, principals, and parents in creating a supportive, natural, and sustainable learning ecosystem. Therefore, PAUD education focuses not only on children's academic readiness but also on the development of human values, which serve as an important foundation for their future growth and development.

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