



Strengthening Character Education in Socially Vulnerable School Communities: A Qualitative Analysis of Value-Based School Culture and Sustainability Practices

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine how character education can be strengthened in socially vulnerable school communities through value-based school culture and daily practices that support long-term social sustainability. This research focuses on understanding how educators construct, negotiate, and reinforce character values in an environment marked by economic hardship, unstable family structures, and limited parental involvement, which often challenge the continuity of moral development at the primary school level.

Method: The study employed a qualitative case study design to capture the complexity of everyday interactions, institutional routines, and informal character-building strategies implemented by teachers and school leaders. Data were gathered through prolonged classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with school staff and students, and document analysis involving lesson plans, school rules, and visual artifacts that reflect moral expectations. Data were analyzed through iterative coding, constant comparison, and thematic synthesis to reveal underlying patterns that shape character formation in the school context.

Findings: The findings show that character values such as responsibility, honesty, discipline, and tolerance are not only introduced through formal instruction but are also cultivated through consistent modeling, spontaneous guidance, and routine school activities. Although external social pressures create behavioral inconsistencies among students, the school's collective efforts gradually build a more stable moral climate and offer protective factors that counteract the surrounding environment's risks.

Significance: The significance of this study lies in demonstrating that character education in vulnerable communities requires more than curriculum alignment; it demands a culturally responsive school culture, relational commitment from teachers, and continuous reinforcement strategies that sustain students' moral growth. The insights generated contribute to broader discussions on character education as a pathway to social sustainability in low-resource settings.

INTRODUCTION

Character education has become increasingly urgent in socially vulnerable communities where economic precarity and unstable family structures disrupt students' moral development. Schools that operate in such contexts frequently assume roles far beyond academic instruction as they attempt to stabilize behavioral norms and guide students toward ethical decision-making. Recent studies emphasize that sustainable development requires not only environmental competence but also socio-emotional and moral capacities that allow individuals to participate responsibly in society (Arbués et al., 2025; Giangrande et al., 2019). This makes character education a critical component of broader sustainability agendas, particularly in communities facing persistent hardships. Teachers working in vulnerable environments often describe moral

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inconsistency as a daily challenge, shaped by external pressures beyond the school's control. These challenges increase the need for intentional value-based practices that reinforce discipline, honesty, empathy, and responsibility. Understanding how these practices emerge in difficult circumstances therefore holds significant relevance for both character education theory and sustainability research. For this reason, studying character formation within vulnerable school communities becomes an important academic and practical endeavor.

Schools serving children from high-risk environments often face a mismatch between moral expectations set by educational policy and the realities encountered by learners outside the classroom. Several scholars argue that the transmission of moral values must be culturally responsive and grounded in the lived experiences of students if it is to be effective under conditions of social instability (Auerbach, 2007; Khalifa et al., 2016). This perspective becomes especially important as vulnerable communities experience disruptions in parenting, exposure to negative social influences, and pressures that weaken children's emotional resilience. At the same time, the school remains a primary site where consistent norms of behavior can be modeled and reinforced by educators through daily interactions. These dynamics highlight the crucial role of school culture in shaping and stabilizing students' moral orientation. As research increasingly recognizes the interdependence between character formation and sustainability, the need to understand how values operate in unstable environments becomes more pressing. Consequently, analyzing how schools respond to these contextual challenges offers insight into sustainable character-building strategies.

The academic significance of this topic is strengthened by studies exploring character formation within specific cultural and religious contexts, including Indonesian traditions that emphasize altruism, solidarity, and communal responsibility (Andriyanto et al., 2022; Thalgi, 2024)). These values hold potential as frameworks for reinforcing ethical behavior in school settings, particularly in communities under social stress. However, schools situated in vulnerable areas often struggle to translate such values into consistent daily practices due to a lack of parental reinforcement and external pressures that disrupt behavioral routines. This mismatch between cultural ideals and practical implementation requires deeper investigation to understand how schools compensate for environmental limitations. Research with this focus not only informs national character education policies but also provides insight into how schools can contribute to long-term social sustainability. For these reasons, this study seeks to explore how character values are strengthened through school culture, teacher modeling, and daily routines within socially vulnerable communities. Such exploration is essential for bridging the divide between theoretical expectations and practical realities in character education.

The rationale for this study emerges from growing evidence that character education contributes directly to long-term social sustainability by shaping individuals' capacity for empathy, cooperation, and ethical reasoning. Scholars have noted that sustainability is not merely a technical or environmental framework but a moral commitment to ensuring collective well-being across generations (Henderson & Loreau, 2023; Zhanbayev et al., 2023). This broader view highlights the importance of integrating values-based education into daily school practices, particularly in communities where social instability disrupts children's moral formation. In such contexts, educators must adopt relational, consistent, and culturally grounded approaches to value transmission. These approaches reinforce school routines that act as protective structures against environmental risks. Understanding how these processes unfold in vulnerable school settings is therefore essential for strengthening the theoretical and practical

foundations of character education. This rationale positions the study at the intersection of sustainability, pedagogy, and community resilience.

Emerging research underscores the central role of socio-emotional competencies in advancing sustainability goals, emphasizing that empathy, ethical awareness, and cooperation are necessary foundations for responsible citizenship (Arbués et al., 2025). Schools with strong value-based cultures consistently demonstrate higher levels of student engagement and moral responsibility, as shown in cross-country analyses. In Indonesia, studies examining cultural traditions reveal how altruism and solidarity contribute to the development of moral behavior when embedded in educational settings (Saimun, 2025). Other research indicates that character education is most effective when integrated through modeling, spontaneous guidance, and consistent routines rather than isolated instructional modules (Mustarsida et al., 2023). Additional findings from physical education and sustainability studies show that the development of responsible behavior requires holistic learning environments that promote both discipline and reflective thinking (Baena-Morales & Ferriz-Valero, 2025). Collectively, these studies affirm the importance of contextualized, culture-aware, and routine-based character formation.

Further literature explores the influence of teacher development, institutional collaboration, and community engagement in shaping sustainability-conscious learners. Research on inquiry-based activism shows that teachers who engage in reflective and collaborative practices are better equipped to integrate moral and sustainability values into daily classroom interactions (Solano et al., 2024). Studies on grassroots environmental stewardship also highlight the significance of school–community partnerships in strengthening value transmission among students (Susilo, 2022). Investigations into compassion-driven entrepreneurship reveal the potential of ethical thinking as a foundation for socially responsible innovation (Lindvert, 2023). Meanwhile, research on moral value systems in national development emphasizes the importance of shared ethical frameworks for societal progress (Sutoyo et al., 2021). Together, these studies confirm that character education and sustainability are deeply interconnected but also reveal that most research focuses on stable or resourced environments rather than vulnerable ones. This gap forms the basis for the present study.

Although the literature highlights strong connections between character education and sustainability, relatively few studies examine how these processes function within socially vulnerable school communities. Existing research tends to focus on well-supported institutions, leaving limited understanding of how teachers navigate external pressures such as poverty, fragmented family structures, and behavioral inconsistency among students. Studies on socio-emotional competencies describe the importance of moral development but do not fully address how such competencies can be stabilized when external environments undermine consistency (Arbués et al., 2025). Likewise, research on teacher activism and community engagement demonstrates promising approaches yet does not clarify how these methods adapt to contexts marked by persistent instability. This oversight leaves a critical gap in explaining how schools can maintain sustainable value-based practices in structurally disadvantaged environments. The present study addresses this gap by exploring the mechanisms teachers and school leaders use to reinforce character values despite ongoing challenges. This analysis contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable character development across diverse educational settings.

This study aims to analyze how character education is strengthened through school culture, teacher modeling, and daily routines within socially vulnerable school communities. It seeks to understand how educators maintain value-based practices despite environmental pressures that complicate students' moral development. The study hypothesizes that sustainable character formation in vulnerable contexts relies more on relational and routine-based interactions than on formal curriculum structures. It also suggests that teacher consistency, school-wide norms, and culturally responsive strategies are essential for stabilizing students' behavior. By examining these processes qualitatively, the study aims to uncover how value transmission operates within real-world constraints. The findings are expected to enhance theoretical frameworks on character education and offer practical insights for schools in similar contexts. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader discussions on integrating character education into sustainability agendas.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how character education is strengthened within socially vulnerable school communities. The case study approach was chosen because it allows an in-depth examination of complex social interactions, institutional routines, and teacher strategies that cannot be captured through quantitative methods alone. This methodological choice aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of contextual understanding when analyzing socio-emotional competencies and sustainability-oriented practices (Andersson et al., 2025; Castaño et al., 2025). The design enabled the researcher to examine how values are transmitted through everyday patterns of behavior rather than through explicit curriculum components. Fieldwork was conducted over an extended period to capture variations in interactions that occur naturally within the school setting. The design also allowed triangulation of multiple data sources to strengthen the credibility of findings and reduce interpretive bias. Attention was given to ensuring that data collection remained sensitive to the sociocultural realities of the participants. Through this approach, the study aimed to reveal how character formation is maintained despite environmental pressure and institutional constraints.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of classroom teachers, school leaders, and selected students from a primary school located in a socially vulnerable community. Teachers were included because they serve as the primary agents of value transmission through modeling, interaction, and behavioral reinforcement. School leaders participated due to their role in shaping institutional culture and implementing sustainability-oriented policies that influence daily school practices (Altassan, 2025; Boeske, 2023). A small number of students were included to provide insight into how value-based practices are experienced and interpreted from the learner's perspective. Participants were selected purposively to ensure that those with direct involvement in character-building routines were adequately represented. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the recruitment process, including voluntary participation and confidentiality protections. The composition of the sample allowed the study to examine multiple layers of influence that shape character education in vulnerable contexts. This multi-perspective approach strengthened the depth and validity of the data while maintaining alignment with the study's aims.

Instruments

Data were collected using three primary instruments: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were conducted to capture real-time interactions, behavioral routines, and implicit value reinforcement strategies enacted by teachers. Interviews provided opportunities to explore participants' interpretations of character formation processes and the challenges they encounter within the school environment (Sakti et al., 2024; Yan & Wang, 2022). Document analysis included examining lesson plans, school regulations, visual displays, and artifacts that reflect institutional expectations regarding student behavior. These instruments were chosen because they enable the identification of both explicit and implicit forms of value transmission, which previous studies have highlighted as crucial for successful character development in vulnerable communities (Gamage et al., 2021; Mertens, 2021). The combination of multiple instruments supported data triangulation, increasing the trustworthiness of the findings. All instruments were reviewed to ensure cultural appropriateness and alignment with the sustainability-oriented focus of the study. Together, these tools facilitated a comprehensive understanding of character education mechanisms operating within the school.

Data Analysis Plan

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with iterative coding and constant comparison techniques. The initial phase involved open coding of observation notes, interview transcripts, and documents to identify recurring patterns related to value transmission and sustainability-oriented practices (Latino et al., 2024; Mead et al., 2022). Codes were then refined into broader themes that reflected the interplay between teacher modeling, school routines, and contextual challenges in the community. Throughout the process, analytic memos were used to document emerging insights and reduce interpretive drift, consistent with recommendations in sustainability and character education research (Aragona & Acampa, 2025; Nagashima & Gibbs, 2022). Triangulation across data sources helped ensure internal coherence and strengthened the credibility of thematic interpretations. Themes were continuously compared with existing literature to identify areas of convergence and divergence, supporting both theoretical grounding and potential contributions to the field (Marzi et al., 2025; Walsh & Rowe, 2023). Particular attention was given to examining contradictions or tensions in the data, which provided insight into the school's adaptive strategies in navigating vulnerability. The final themes were synthesized to develop an integrated explanation of how character education supports social sustainability in the studied context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Findings Overview

The analysis revealed three major themes illustrating how character education is strengthened within socially vulnerable school communities. Teachers consistently modeled core values such as honesty, responsibility, and empathy through daily routines and informal interactions that occurred throughout the school day. Students demonstrated gradual improvement in behavioral consistency as they became more accustomed to predictable school routines and teacher expectations. Observations showed that the reinforcement of values was most effective when embedded in structured activities such as morning greetings, cleanliness checks, and cooperative tasks. Interviews confirmed that students viewed teachers as moral

exemplars, particularly because many lacked consistent guidance at home. School leaders emphasized that stability in routines was essential for countering external pressures that often disrupted children's emotional regulation. Document analysis further illustrated that the school deliberately embedded moral language in rules and visual displays that encouraged respectful behavior. These findings collectively indicate that the school's value-based culture functioned as a stabilizing force amid contextual instability.

Table 1. Observed Value-Based School Practices

Core Value	Observable Practice	Frequency	Teacher Role
Responsibility	Classroom duties, rotating task assignments	Daily	Providing supervision and constructive feedback
Honesty	Reporting lost items, guided self-reflection	Weekly	Modeling honesty and giving corrective guidance
Discipline	Lining up, attendance rituals, punctuality routines	Daily	Setting standards and monitoring consistency
Empathy	Peer assistance, informal conflict mediation	Daily	Guiding emotional responses and reinforcing empathy
Cooperation	Group-based learning, shared work responsibilities	Weekly	Facilitating teamwork and collaborative behavior

This table summarizes the core values observed during fieldwork and the routines through which they were reinforced. The column on frequency illustrates how often each practice occurred within the school's schedule. The consistency of daily routines contributed significantly to the internalization of discipline, responsibility, and empathy among students. Teachers played a central role in modeling and reinforcing these routines, aligning with the overall goal of promoting sustainable character formation in a vulnerable community context.

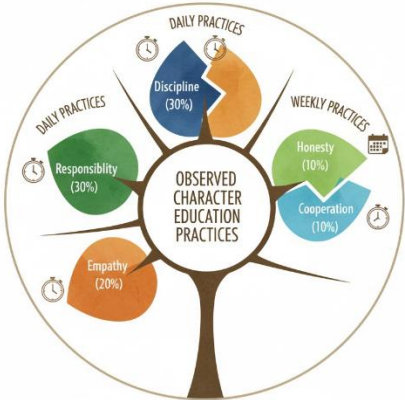


Figure 1. Frequency of Value-Based Practices

The figure illustrates the distribution of character-related practices documented during classroom observations. Daily routines primarily reinforced discipline and responsibility, demonstrating the school's emphasis on consistent behavioral expectations. Empathy-building activities appeared frequently in spontaneous teacher-student interactions. Weekly practices such as honesty reflection sessions and cooperative group tasks complemented daily routines. These patterns reveal that values were transmitted through a combination of structured and naturalistic events, supporting the broader themes identified in the qualitative analysis.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that character education in socially vulnerable settings requires relational, routine-based mechanisms rather than solely curriculum-

driven interventions. This aligns with the position that socio-emotional competencies are foundational for long-term sustainability and must be nurtured continuously in daily interactions (Arbués et al., 2025). Teachers' modeling of empathy and responsibility functioned as a form of situated learning, especially relevant in communities where students lack consistent moral guidance outside school hours (Mustarsida et al., 2023). The centrality of school culture in reinforcing value-based practices parallels research showing that culturally grounded approaches help sustain altruism and solidarity among learners (Saimun, 2025). Observed routines also resonate with literature emphasizing that structured daily practices strengthen ethical behavior more effectively than isolated character lessons (Baena-Morales & Ferriz-Valero, 2025). The results further reflect sustainability studies indicating that institutional stability plays a decisive role in shaping students' moral resilience (Awais et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2023). Teachers' leadership in moral formation echoes findings that educator consciousness is critical for advancing sustainability through value transmission (Solano et al., 2024). These connections illustrate that the school's approach fits within global theoretical frameworks linking character, sustainability, and community-based educational practices (Sutoyo et al., 2021).

The results also highlight how teacher consistency and school-wide routines act as protective structures that counter the effects of external social instability. This dynamic mirrors the argument that grassroots collaboration and routine-based engagement enhance environmental and social responsibility in marginalized contexts (Susilo, 2022). Daily reinforcement of discipline and responsibility mirrors findings from moral development research that emphasize habitual practice as a driver of behavioral internalization (Sutoyo et al., 2021). Students' reliance on teachers as moral role models aligns with studies demonstrating the influence of mentorship and ethical leadership in forming learner character (Whitlock, 2024). The emotional support provided by teachers reflects broader sustainability frameworks showing the importance of compassionate guidance in fostering socially responsible attitudes (Lindvert, 2023). The combination of structured routines and spontaneous interactions observed in this study echoes findings that multi-layered value transmission strengthens students' resilience in vulnerable communities (Awais et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2023). Furthermore, the use of culturally attentive practices reinforces arguments that character formation must integrate local values to remain meaningful and sustainable (Saimun, 2025). These parallels illustrate how the school succeeded in constructing a moral environment that stabilizes learners' behavior despite contextual adversity. Ultimately, the findings confirm that character education in vulnerable communities is inseparable from sustainability-focused educational strategies (Solano et al., 2024).

Implications

The study's findings offer several implications for character education policy, practice, and sustainability research. First, the results indicate that schools in vulnerable communities need structured routines that reinforce values consistently throughout the school day. Second, teacher modeling must be prioritized in professional development programs, as educators serve as the primary moral anchors for students who face instability in their home environments. Third, policymakers should consider integrating sustainability concepts with character education frameworks to strengthen social cohesion in marginalized populations. Fourth, the adoption of culturally grounded practices may help align school-based moral expectations with community values, making character programs more resilient. Fifth, the study provides empirical support

for the growing argument that sustainability is fundamentally linked to socio-emotional competencies rather than solely ecological awareness. Sixth, the findings suggest that future interventions should incorporate emotional support mechanisms to address the psycho-social needs of vulnerable learners. Seventh, researchers may use this study to further explore how institutional culture functions as a buffer in contexts of social adversity. Finally, this research affirms the need for multi-layered strategies that unite daily routines, teacher consciousness, and community involvement to sustain moral development over time.

Limitations

This study acknowledges several limitations that influence the interpretation and generalizability of the findings. First, the research was conducted in a single primary school, which may limit the transferability of the results to other educational settings with different socio-cultural profiles. Second, the use of qualitative methods provides depth but restricts broader generalization across populations. Third, the data relied on teacher and student reports, which may be shaped by social desirability or limited self-awareness. Fourth, the duration of fieldwork, although extended, may not have captured long-term changes in student behavior. Fifth, document analysis was limited to available school records and may not fully represent informal practices. Sixth, the absence of parental perspectives reduces insight into the home–school value interplay. Seventh, the study did not compare vulnerable and non-vulnerable schools, which limits the ability to differentiate contextual effects. Finally, the findings may be influenced by researcher interpretation, though triangulation was used to reduce this risk.

Suggestions

Future studies should consider including multiple schools to increase the diversity of contexts and strengthen comparative analysis. Researchers are encouraged to integrate parental and community perspectives to better understand the external factors influencing students' moral development. Quantitative or mixed-method approaches may also provide complementary evidence regarding the effectiveness of value-based routines. Professional development programs for teachers in vulnerable communities should incorporate training on sustainability-oriented character-building strategies. Further exploration is needed to understand how digital tools might support moral learning in unstable environments. Comparative research between rural and urban vulnerable schools could also reveal important contextual distinctions. Longitudinal studies would help track changes in student behavior over extended periods. Finally, interventions should be designed collaboratively with school stakeholders to ensure that strategies remain culturally grounded and contextually relevant.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that character education in socially vulnerable school communities is most effectively strengthened through a combination of consistent routines, relational teacher modeling, and culturally grounded value reinforcement that operates across the school day. The daily practices observed reveal that moral values such as responsibility, discipline, empathy, and cooperation are gradually internalized when students experience repeated, predictable interactions that provide stability amid external social instability. Teachers serve as central agents in this process, not only through explicit instruction but through subtle behavioral cues, emotional support, and spontaneous guidance that help students navigate complex moral situations. The integration of value-based routines with a

supportive school culture positions the institution as a stabilizing force that fills gaps left by inconsistent moral exposure at home. These findings confirm that character formation in vulnerable environments is inseparable from the broader goals of social sustainability, which require moral resilience and ethical awareness to be cultivated continuously. The study also highlights the importance of culturally responsive approaches that align school-based moral expectations with the lived realities and values of the surrounding community. By revealing how value transmission unfolds within daily interactions, this research contributes to theoretical discussions on sustainable character education and provides practical insights for schools facing similar challenges. Overall, the study underscores that character education in vulnerable communities must be viewed not as a supplementary program but as an essential, integrated framework for building long-term social well-being.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Lukman Hakim Alfajar conceptualized the study, developed the research framework, and led the overall design of the investigation from initial formulation to refinement during data collection. Sekar Purbarini was responsible for conducting field observations, managing participant interviews, and organizing the primary qualitative data used in the analysis. Agung Hastomo contributed to the analytical process by coding data, synthesizing thematic patterns, and ensuring the coherence between empirical findings and theoretical perspectives. All authors collaboratively reviewed the literature, refined methodological procedures, and validated the interpretation of results to maintain academic rigor. Lukman Hakim Alfajar drafted the initial manuscript and integrated feedback from co-authors into the revised versions. Sekar Purbarini enhanced the narrative coherence and ensured that contextual elements of the school environment were accurately represented. Agung Hastomo strengthened the discussion section by aligning findings with current sustainability and character education scholarship. All authors read, approved, and agreed to the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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