

## Strategies for Effective Character Formation Among Preschool Learners in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Review

(Strategi Pembentukan Karakter Berkesan bagi Murid Prasekolah Abad ke-21: Satu Tinjauan Literatur)

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### ABSTRACT

*Character formation during the preschool years is critical for nurturing morally grounded, socially responsible individuals. In the 21st century, rapid technological advancement and cultural shifts have created new challenges and opportunities for implementing effective character education among young children. There is a growing need to synthesise current knowledge on strategies that promote holistic character development during this formative period. This review synthesises recent literature published between 2020 and 2025, sourced from Scopus, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, Elicit, and Scispace, focusing on studies and theoretical works that address strategies, pedagogical approaches, and contextual factors influencing character formation in early childhood education. Selected articles were analysed thematically to identify recurring methods and key considerations for effective practice. The analysis revealed that effective strategies for character formation include integrating character education into daily routines, adopting play-based learning methods, storytelling, role-playing, and incorporating music and the arts to engage children meaningfully. Embedding local cultural and religious values was identified as crucial in strengthening identity and fostering tolerance. Additionally, teacher competence, supported by ongoing professional development, active parental involvement, and collaboration with the community, was highlighted as an essential factor in reinforcing positive character traits. Opportunities for leveraging technology positively were noted, alongside caution regarding its potential risks. A comprehensive approach that combines varied pedagogical methods, culturally relevant materials, and strong collaboration among educators, parents, and communities is vital for effective character development among preschool learners. Insights from this review provide valuable guidance for practitioners and policymakers to design responsive and inclusive character education programs tailored to the complexities of the 21st century.*

**Key Words:** Character education; Early childhood education; Preschool learners; Pedagogical Strategies; 21<sup>st</sup> century learning

### ABSTRAK

*Pembentukan karakter pada peringkat prasekolah adalah kritikal untuk memupuk individu yang bermoral dan bertanggungjawab sosial. Dalam abad ke-21, kemajuan teknologi yang pesat dan perubahan budaya telah mewujudkan cabaran dan peluang baharu dalam melaksanakan pendidikan karakter yang berkesan kepada kanak-kanak kecil. Terdapat keperluan yang semakin mendesak untuk mensintesis pengetahuan semasa mengenai strategi yang menyokong pembangunan karakter yang holistik dalam tempoh pembentukan ini. Kajian ini mensintesis literatur terkini yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2020 hingga 2025, diperolehi daripada pangkalan data Scopus, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, Elicit, dan Scispace, dengan fokus kepada kajian dan karya teori yang membincangkan strategi, pendekatan pedagogi, dan faktor kontekstual yang mempengaruhi pembentukan karakter dalam pendidikan awal kanak-kanak. Artikel yang terpilih dianalisis secara tematik untuk mengenal pasti kaedah berulang dan pertimbangan utama bagi amalan yang berkesan. Analisis mendapati bahawa strategi berkesan untuk pembentukan karakter termasuk mengintegrasikan pendidikan karakter dalam rutin harian, mengamalkan pembelajaran berasaskan bermain, penceritaan, lakonan, serta memasukkan unsur muzik dan seni untuk menarik minat kanak-kanak secara bermakna. Penggabungan nilai budaya tempatan dan keagamaan dikenal pasti sebagai penting untuk mengukuhkan identiti dan memupuk sikap toleransi. Selain itu, kompetensi guru yang disokong dengan pembangunan profesional berterusan, penglibatan aktif ibu bapa, dan kerjasama dengan komuniti diiktiraf sebagai faktor penting dalam mengukuhkan sifat-sifat positif. Peluang untuk memanfaatkan teknologi secara positif turut dikenal pasti, di samping keperluan berhati-hati terhadap risiko yang mungkin timbul. Pendekatan komprehensif yang menggabungkan pelbagai kaedah pedagogi, bahan yang relevan dengan budaya, dan kerjasama kukuh antara pendidik, ibu bapa, dan komuniti adalah penting untuk pembentukan karakter yang berkesan dalam kalangan murid prasekolah. Dapatan daripada ulasan ini menawarkan panduan berharga kepada pengamal dan pembuat dasar untuk merangka program pendidikan karakter yang responsif dan inklusif, sesuai dengan kerumitan abad ke-21.*

**Kata Kunci:** Pendidikan karakter; Pendidikan Awal Kanak-kanak; Murid prasekolah; Strategi pedagogi; Pembelajaran abad ke-21

## INTRODUCTION

Character education in early childhood has gained growing attention as a foundation for nurturing morally upright, socially responsible individuals. The preschool years, often called the “golden age,” represent a critical period when children’s brains are highly receptive to learning values, attitudes, and behaviours that shape their future (Ginting, 2024). In the context of the 21st century, rapid technological progress, global interconnectedness, and evolving social expectations have created new complexities and opportunities for character formation. Studies have highlighted the importance of holistic strategies such as integrating local cultural values, adopting creative pedagogical methods, and fostering collaboration between educators, parents, and communities to reinforce character education effectively (Handoko & Sakti, 2023). Moreover, embedding character education into daily routines and learning activities has been recognised as an essential approach to help young children internalise positive traits (Omar et al., 2021). Despite these advancements, significant challenges remain in adapting character education practices to the needs of today’s dynamic educational environments.

Despite a growing consensus on the importance of character education in early childhood, many studies highlight persistent inconsistencies in its practical implementation across preschool settings. Sitanggang et al. (2025) found that although teachers recognise the need for character education, they often lack clear strategies to integrate it consistently into daily teaching practices, leading to fragmented efforts in nurturing children’s character. Similarly, Handoko and Sakti (2023) identified that even when educators have positive intentions, the absence of systematic planning and varied learning strategies reduces the effectiveness of character-building programs. Moreover, Susanto et al. (2022) emphasise that while 21st-century skills and technology offer new opportunities, they also introduce challenges, as teachers and parents struggle to adapt character education approaches to online or tech-mediated learning environments, particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. These issues point to a crucial gap in the current literature: the need for comprehensive, context-sensitive strategies that not only embed character education in daily preschool activities but also leverage technology effectively without compromising the holistic development of young learners. Addressing this gap is essential to inform better practices and support the development of character education programs that are both relevant and impactful in modern educational contexts.

To address these issues, this review seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What effective strategies for character formation

among preschool learners are identified in the 21st-century literature, and what are the key factors influencing their implementation?

2. What specific pedagogical methods, curriculum integrations, and learning environments are identified as effective for character formation in early childhood education in the 21st century?
3. How do the roles of educators, parents, and the community, as well as the integration of technology, influence the effectiveness of character formation strategies for preschool learners in the 21st century?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### INTEGRATING CULTURAL AND LOCAL VALUES

Integrating cultural and local wisdom into early childhood character education has been increasingly recognised as an effective approach to making moral values relatable and meaningful for young children. Nurani et al. (2024) emphasised that local stories, traditions, and community practices offer rich resources for educators to contextualise character lessons, allowing children to connect abstract moral concepts with real-life cultural experiences. This integration supports the development of self-identity, pride in local heritage, and tolerance for cultural differences. Fadhilah et al. (2024) highlighted that Malaysia’s curriculum includes explicit moral and religious instruction, while Indonesia’s approach emphasises Pancasila values woven across subjects, demonstrating the diverse ways cultural integration can shape character education. By grounding moral instruction in cultural values, children develop a sense of belonging, respect for their roots, and an understanding of social norms, which collectively strengthen their moral reasoning and social behaviour.

### PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES FOR CHARACTER FORMATION

Pedagogical strategies play a central role in fostering character development among preschool learners. Hartono and Sari (2020) showed that arts-based learning through dance, drama, and music creates engaging and reflective experiences that teach empathy, honesty, and cooperation. Performing arts offer children opportunities to express themselves, experience different perspectives, and practice social interactions in creative contexts. Wahyuni and Musayyadah (2024) found that role-playing centres provide structured yet flexible settings where children enact social roles, learn about moral dilemmas, and negotiate rules collaboratively. These approaches are consistent with child-centred learning theories, which emphasise active

participation, experiential learning, and emotional engagement as key to internalising values. Pedagogical methods like project-based learning, storytelling, and thematic exploration of character values have also been identified as effective in promoting moral understanding and positive behaviours by making abstract concepts concrete and relatable for young children.

#### THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS, PARENTS, AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

The success of character education programs depends heavily on the involvement and competence of educators, the active participation of parents, and supportive learning environments. Norrahman (2023) emphasised the need for educators to plan and manage character education intentionally, integrating moral values into daily activities and routines rather than treating them as separate lessons. Nazarullail and Maskulin (2022) found that parents' consistent modelling of values like honesty, discipline, and independence at home reinforces character-building efforts in schools, suggesting that collaborative partnerships between teachers and parents are crucial. Mulyadi (2020) provided insights from the Japanese education system, where character education is seamlessly embedded into daily interactions and routines without dedicated subjects, demonstrating how a school culture that prioritises respect, responsibility, and cooperation can effectively shape children's behaviour. Learning environments that encourage positive social interactions, offer emotionally safe spaces, and provide consistent routines contribute significantly to children's ability to internalise and practice moral values.

#### ADDRESSING CHALLENGES IN THE ERA OF DISRUPTION

The era of disruption, characterised by rapid technological change and crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, has presented new obstacles to effective character education in early childhood settings. Susanto et al. (2022) reported that educators face difficulties maintaining consistent moral instruction when shifting to online learning, as technology-mediated environments often limit meaningful social interactions essential for character formation. Nazarullail and Maskulin (2022) highlighted that parents tended to prioritise values such as honesty and discipline during the disruption era but often overlooked the importance of tolerance and empathy, leading to gaps in holistic character development. These challenges underscore the need for innovative strategies, such as combining digital tools with interactive activities that foster cooperation and emotional understanding. Strengthening communication and

collaboration between educators and families also emerged as a critical factor in ensuring consistent reinforcement of character values during periods of educational disruption. Research points to the importance of flexible, adaptive programs that can maintain the integrity of character education while accommodating shifts to hybrid or fully online learning models, ensuring children continue to receive opportunities to practice and internalise moral values despite external challenges.

#### METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a narrative review approach to synthesise current literature on effective strategies for character formation among preschool learners in the 21st century. The review aims to identify key pedagogical methods, curriculum integrations, contextual factors, and the roles of educators, parents, and technology in character education for young children.

#### SEARCH STRATEGY

A comprehensive search strategy was implemented to identify relevant literature using multiple reputable databases, Scopus, Google Scholar, Semantic Scholar, Elicit, and Scispace, each recognised for extensive peer-reviewed collections across disciplines. Systematic searches employed carefully selected keywords with Boolean operators such as AND, OR, and NOT to refine and target results effectively. For example, combinations like "character education" AND "early childhood" AND (tolerance OR respect) and "integration of cultural values" AND ("local wisdom" OR "indigenous knowledge") NOT "secondary education" were used to ensure direct relevance to the research objectives. This multi-database approach aimed to maximise the retrieval of pertinent studies by capturing high-impact journal articles indexed in Scopus alongside broader grey literature and recent research from platforms like Semantic Scholar and Google Scholar, while tools such as Elicit and Scispace further enhanced the efficiency and comprehensiveness of the search process.

#### INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Articles were selected based on predefined criteria established to ensure their quality and relevance for the review. Studies were included if they were published between 2020 and 2025, focusing on character education, tolerance, and the integration of local cultural values; any articles published outside these timeframes were excluded. The selection was limited to articles published in scientific journals, with other document types such as books,

conference proceedings, or notes excluded during the refinement process. Priority was given to articles within the social sciences discipline, as this field most directly addresses the pedagogical and sociocultural aspects of character formation. Furthermore, only articles written in English or Malay were included to ensure accessibility and contextual relevance. Finally, articles were chosen based on their direct alignment with the research themes, specifically studies exploring effective strategies for character education, fostering tolerance, and incorporating local cultural wisdom into early childhood education.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was conducted systematically on the 20 articles that met the predefined inclusion criteria. The selected articles underwent a comprehensive reading of their titles, abstracts, and full texts to achieve a holistic understanding of their content and relevance to the research objectives. A thematic analysis approach was then applied to identify recurring patterns, key themes, and core concepts related to character education, tolerance, pedagogical strategies, and the integration of local cultural values in early childhood education.

Each article was analysed inductively by assigning codes to key phrases, findings, and concepts reflecting emerging themes. The coding process was iterative, allowing for the continuous refinement of codes and categories as new insights were identified. Once coding was complete, similar codes were grouped into broader thematic categories, which were synthesised into overarching themes that captured critical aspects of effective strategies for character formation.

Finally, a comparative synthesis was carried out to explore similarities and differences across the studies, taking into account contextual factors such as geographical location, educational settings, cultural backgrounds, and pedagogical practices. This comprehensive thematic analysis provided nuanced insights into best practices, contextual challenges, and opportunities for enhancing character education among preschool learners in the 21st century, serving as a foundation for evidence-informed recommendations.

RESULT

Here’s a summary of findings on effective strategies for character formation among preschool learners in the 21st-century literature, categorised into four key themes:

TABLE 1: Summary of Findings on Effective Strategies for Character Formation Among Preschool Learners

Authors (Year)	Theme	Sub-themes	Findings Summary	Challenges / Opportunities
Istiana et al., 2024	Pedagogical Approaches and Curricular Integration	Lesson planning integration: concept frameworks	Developed a conceptual framework and preliminary assessment instrument for measuring kindergarten teachers’ competence in integrating character education into lesson plans; identified key components of teacher competence needed for effective integration.	Lack of standardised assessment tools; diverse interpretations of “good character”; need for adaptable frameworks aligned with 21st-century challenges.
Nurani et al., 2024	Pedagogical Approaches and Curricular Integration	Local wisdom; play-based learning; digital media integration	Proposed character learning models based on local wisdom and digital tools; identified the need to adapt learning environments to cultural backgrounds; highlighted the importance of media and creative play to stimulate character traits in early childhood.	Insufficient integration of local intelligence into digital media; limited technology resources for teachers; opportunity to develop innovative, culturally relevant and tech-integrated models.
Wahyuni & Musayyadah, 2024	Pedagogical Approaches and Curricular Integration	Role-playing learning centres	Role-playing model effectively builds children’s social skills, empathy, and moral understanding through active, experiential learning.	Opportunities: High engagement; Challenges: Requires teacher creativity and preparation for effective implementation.

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Sakti et al., 2024	Pedagogical Approaches and Curricular Integration	Integration of local cultural values	Integrating local cultural values in ECE enriches character building; direct experience in cultural activities strengthens cooperation and tolerance.	Opportunities: Preserving cultural identity; Challenges: Risk of perpetuating outdated cultural biases if not contextualised.
Chung, 2023	Pedagogical Approaches and Curricular Integration	Music-based moral education	Music is used as a tool to teach moral values like empathy and respect; principals support play-based music activities for moral learning.	Opportunities: Engaging children creatively; Challenges: Teachers' limited pedagogical content knowledge and varying parental attitudes.
Hasanah et al., 2023	Pedagogical Approaches and Curricular Integration	Habituation programs in the new normal	Flag ceremonies build patriotism; Duha prayers and Quran recitation strengthen religiosity; physical activities promote care for the environment.	Opportunities: Reinforcing moral habits post-pandemic; Challenges: Ensuring parental continuity at home.
Handoko & Sakti, 2023	Pedagogical Approaches and Curricular Integration	Classroom & activity-based strategies	Emphasises careful program planning, varied learning strategies, active student participation, and ongoing teacher support for effective character education.	Opportunities: Structured planning; Challenges: Limited application beyond the early childhood context.
Arsyad et al., 2023	Pedagogical Approaches and Curricular Integration	Integrating Islamic values	Embedding Islamic principles improves cultural identity, moral development, and social skills in early childhood education.	Opportunities: Culturally relevant curriculum; Challenges: Sensitivity to diverse cultural contexts.
Mulyadi, 2020	The Crucial Role of Educators	Moral education; hidden curriculum; early intervention	Revealed Japan's approach to character education from early childhood, using moral and personality education embedded in daily life; teachers act as role models without formal moral subjects; emphasised cooperation, discipline, responsibility, and empathy as key outcomes of early character education.	Challenges include ensuring consistency across schools and homes; the opportunity to adapt hidden curriculum strategies to other contexts to instil strong moral character early; and the need for parent-school cooperation to reinforce values.
Suyitno, 2024	The Crucial Role of Educators	Religious, discipline, and independent character formation	Effective character building is achieved through structured programs teaching religiosity, time discipline, and self-reliance habits in kindergartens.	Opportunities: Clear integration steps; Challenges: Ensuring consistency among educators and families.
Ainnin & Ismail, 2024	The Crucial Role of Educators	Islamic education integration	A holistic approach integrating Islamic values (honesty, gratitude) effectively builds character in the digital era; teacher and family collaboration is emphasised.	Opportunities: Combining faith-based and modern strategies; Challenges: Balancing religious teachings with technological changes.
Aisyah, 2023	The Crucial Role of Educators	Teacher competencies in character education	Teachers' competencies in instilling responsibility, honesty, discipline, cooperation, and tolerance significantly impact children's character development.	Opportunities: Teacher training; Challenges: Diverse teacher backgrounds and competence levels.

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Ginting, 2024	The Crucial Role of Educators	Holistic value-based learning	Value-oriented parenting, positive social interactions, and experiential learning strengthen character in early childhood.	Opportunities: Holistic strategies; Challenges: Influence of technology and media.
Norrahman et al., 2023	Stakeholder Collaboration and Environmental Support	Planning frameworks; school-parent collaboration	Emphasised comprehensive management planning involving identification of character values, lesson planning, and play/social activities; highlighted the role of educators and parents in consistent character education; stressed integration of character into all learning activities.	Limited teacher training resources; inconsistent application at home and school; opportunity for structured collaboration frameworks and community engagement.
Rahmah Izhama & Muarifuiddin, 2024	Stakeholder Collaboration and Environmental Support	Family involvement & social-emotional learning	Parents enrolling children in nature-based PAUD to reduce gadget use; integrated activities foster social-emotional skills and positive behaviour.	Opportunities: Utilising outdoor learning; Challenges: Limited parental time and consistency at home.
Hanurawati et al., 2023	Stakeholder Collaboration and Environmental Support	Home-based character education	The success of character formation at home depends on parenting patterns, emotional support, and modelling positive behaviour by parents.	Opportunities: Strong family foundation; Challenges: Inconsistent parental involvement due to busy routines.
Sitanggang et al., 2025	Contextual Factors and Implementation Challenges	Cultural integration, digital literacy, and tolerance building	Found that effective character education programs integrate cultural values, religious understanding, and digital literacy; highlighted regional variations with a concentration of studies in Indonesia; identified multicultural perspectives and interactive methods as key success factors.	Research gaps in long-term impact, standardised measurement tools, and digital strategies; opportunity to build culturally responsive programs fostering tolerance.
Fadhilah et al., 2024	Contextual Factors and Implementation Challenges	Curriculum comparison (Indonesia vs. Malaysia); policy alignment	Compared character education in Indonesia (Pancasila-based) and Malaysia (moral & ethics-based); found shared goals but differences in curriculum structure; emphasised teacher-student collaboration in character formation across both countries.	Differences in curricula present challenges for standardisation; opportunities for cross-country learning to adopt best practices; need for alignment with cultural and educational policies.
Nazarullail & Maskulin, 2023	Contextual Factors and Implementation Challenges	Parental involvement at home	Most parents prioritise instilling honesty (95.05%) and discipline, but tolerance scores lowest, revealing limited attention to teaching tolerance values.	Opportunities: Strengthening tolerance education; Challenges: Lack of consistent home-school collaboration.
Susanto et al., 2022	Contextual Factors and Implementation Challenges	Integration with 21st-century skills during the pandemic	Online learning offers opportunities for technology-based character learning, but limits interaction; parental involvement is essential.	Opportunities: Integrating tech with character education; Challenges: Reduced direct engagement, digital divide.

This review synthesises findings from 20 studies, organised into four key themes: pedagogical approaches and curricular integration; the crucial role of educators; stakeholder collaboration and environmental support; and contextual factors and implementation challenges.

Pedagogical approaches and curricular integration emerged as a dominant theme across the literature. Researchers have consistently found that integrating character education into lesson plans (Istiana et al., 2024) and culturally relevant curricula (Nurani et al., 2024; Sakti et al., 2024) provides meaningful ways for children to develop values such as honesty, empathy, and cooperation. Strategies such as role-playing (Wahyuni & Musayyadah, 2024), music-based moral education (Chung, 2023), and Islamic-based habituation programs (Hasanah et al., 2023; Arsyad et al., 2023) have shown positive impacts in engaging children actively and helping them internalise character traits. However, challenges identified included the need for teacher creativity, limited societal awareness of the importance of early childhood education, and the risk of perpetuating outdated cultural norms if local values are not contextualised. Opportunities lie in creative curricula and innovative, culturally adapted programs.

Studies emphasising teacher competencies and modelling behaviour highlighted the crucial role of educators. Teachers' abilities to instill discipline, responsibility, and tolerance were found to significantly influence character formation outcomes (Aisyah, 2023; Suyitno, 2024). Studies of Japan's hidden curriculum model (Mulyadi, 2020) and holistic approaches to Islamic education (Ainnin & Ismail, 2024; Ginting, 2024) demonstrated that educators' roles extend beyond academic instruction to shaping moral habits through daily routines and interactions. Challenges included varying teacher backgrounds and limited professional development opportunities, while opportunities focused on structured training to enhance teachers' competence and confidence in delivering character education.

Stakeholder collaboration and environmental support emerged as essential for reinforcing character education. Studies have shown that effective character formation depends on strong partnerships among educators, parents, and the broader community (Norrahan, 2023; Hanurawati et al., 2023). Family involvement, especially in home-based character learning, was found to reinforce values instilled at school (Izhama & Muarifuddin, 2024). Environmental strategies, such as nature-based learning programs, offer opportunities to reduce gadget dependence and promote social-emotional skills. However, inconsistency in parental involvement and limited time were key barriers to consistently reinforcing character traits at home and school.

Contextual factors and implementation challenges highlighted the complexities of applying character

education strategies in diverse settings. Studies have pointed to regional curriculum differences (Fadhilah et al., 2024) and cultural integration gaps (Sitanggang et al., 2025), indicating that successful programs must align with local cultural values, religious understandings, and community contexts. Research during the pandemic (Susanto et al., 2022) revealed both opportunities and challenges. While technology opened new avenues for character education, it also limited social interaction and risked widening inequalities due to digital divides. Furthermore, Nazarullail & Maskulin (2022) found that parental focus on honesty and discipline overshadowed the teaching of tolerance, underscoring the need to emphasise holistic character values.

Overall, the findings reveal that effective character formation in preschool learners requires combining engaging pedagogical strategies with culturally and contextually relevant content, empowering educators with adequate training, fostering strong family-school partnerships, and addressing contextual challenges in implementing comprehensive character education programs in the 21st century.

## DISCUSSION

This review highlights several key insights into strategies for effective character formation among preschool learners in the 21st century. Findings show that integrating character education into daily teaching through creative pedagogical methods, such as role-playing, storytelling, music, and arts, significantly enriches children's understanding of moral values (Wahyuni & Musayyadah, 2024). These interactive approaches engage young learners and help translate abstract concepts like honesty, empathy, and tolerance into concrete experiences they can internalise. This supports theories of active and experiential learning, which suggest children learn best by doing and reflecting on their actions.

The findings also emphasise that educators are central to the success of character education programs. Teachers' character, knowledge of moral education, and ability to model positive behaviours shape children's moral development both directly and indirectly (Suyitno, 2024). Studies in various contexts, including Islamic and Japanese models, demonstrate that character formation is more effective when educators naturally embed moral lessons into daily routines rather than as isolated activities (Mulyadi, 2020). However, varied teacher competencies, lack of structured training, and inconsistent planning across schools remain challenges that could limit the success of character education initiatives. This suggests the need for comprehensive professional development programs to equip educators with practical strategies and confidence to deliver character-focused instruction consistently.

Moreover, the discussion reveals that effective character education extends beyond the classroom, necessitating collaboration among parents, teachers, and the community. Strong home-school partnerships reinforce values taught at school, while environmental supports like nature-based learning and culturally relevant activities can further enhance social-emotional development (Hanurawati et al., 2023; Rahmah Izhama & Muarifuddin, 2024). Nonetheless, studies have identified barriers such as inconsistent parental involvement, time constraints, and limited awareness of the importance of character education, which can hinder the consistent reinforcement of positive traits across various environments. Strengthening communication between educators and families, as well as community engagement programs, is critical for overcoming these barriers (Norrahman et al., 2023).

Contextual factors, including cultural diversity, regional curriculum differences, and socioeconomic disparities, add complexity to the effective implementation of character education. This review shows that programs must adapt to local values and community norms to ensure relevance and acceptance. Challenges such as those highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the shift to online learning, revealed both opportunities and drawbacks: technology provided new tools for character education but also limited meaningful social interaction essential for practising moral behaviours (Susanto et al., 2022). These findings underline the importance of designing flexible, culturally sensitive, and context-specific character education programs that can respond to changing circumstances and diverse learning environments.

Overall, the discussion suggests that effective character formation in preschool learners necessitates a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach that combines creative pedagogical strategies, empowered educators, engaged families, and community support. Policies and practices should prioritise training for teachers, provide culturally relevant materials, and foster collaboration with parents and communities to ensure character education programs address the complexities of today's world while nurturing morally grounded and socially responsible children.

## CONCLUSION

The main objective of this review was to identify effective strategies for character formation among preschool learners in the 21st century by synthesising recent research on pedagogical methods, stakeholder roles, and contextual challenges. The findings revealed that creative pedagogical approaches such as role-playing, arts-based learning, and culturally integrated curricula help young children internalise moral values like honesty, empathy, and tolerance. Additionally, the crucial roles of educators,

strong family-school collaboration, and culturally relevant content were identified as key factors in reinforcing character education. Contextual challenges, including technological barriers and inconsistent parental involvement, were identified as significant factors affecting implementation.

In conclusion, effective character formation in preschool education requires a holistic approach that combines engaging teaching strategies, empowered educators, and active support from families and the community. The research suggests that policymakers and practitioners should prioritise teacher training, design flexible character education programs tailored to diverse cultural contexts, and enhance communication between schools and families to ensure consistent reinforcement of values. These findings also suggest the need for educational environments that strike a balance between technology use and opportunities for meaningful social interaction.

One limitation of this review is that it focused solely on articles published in English and Malay from 2020 to 2025, which may have excluded relevant studies in other languages or earlier periods. Additionally, the narrative synthesis approach limits the ability to generalise findings quantitatively. Future research could address these limitations by conducting meta-analyses with broader inclusion criteria across languages and timeframes, or by exploring longitudinal studies to examine the sustained impacts of different character education strategies on preschool learners' moral development.

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