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Optimizing Classroom and Activity-Based Character Education: A Comprehensive Guide to Best Practices and Implementation Strategies in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the best practices and implementation strategies inherent to classroom and activity-based Character Education Programs in early childhood education. The study meticulously outlines critical variables such as careful program planning, diverse learning strategies, active student participation, and the pivotal role of teacher support. Results reveal five essential best practices and implementation techniques: meticulous planning, utilization of varied learning approaches, encouragement of active student involvement, ongoing program evaluation, and alignment with extant literature. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the integral function of teachers as both instructors and environmental architects. Implications extend to educational practitioners and policymakers by offering a robust program design, implementation, and assessment framework. Despite the comprehensive scope, limitations include the specificity to early childhood contexts, calling for broader research into varied educational levels. The study thereby contributes a nuanced perspective to existing literature and is an indispensable resource for stakeholders in education.

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Introduction

Character education is an integral part of education that aims to shape students' excellent and ethical character. In education, students' nature or morality can be considered an essential foundation for personal and social development. Good feelings can help students make the right decisions, take responsibility for their actions, and interact positively with others (Surya, 2017). In the current era of globalization and technological advancement, character education is increasingly important because students often face challenges that demand high integrity and honesty. In this case, character education can help students develop the moral and ethical abilities to meet these challenges (Panggabean, 2022). In addition, character education also allows students to understand universal human values and appreciate the differences that exist among them. Through character education, students are encouraged to reflect on and understand the meaning of values such as honesty, cooperation, concern for others, discipline, respect for diversity, and many more. This helps them develop sensitivity to the needs of others and encourages them to participate in activities that benefit society (Lubis & Karnati, 2022).

Based on the research results (Suri, 2021), many parents and educators still need to understand appropriate and effective character education for early childhood, especially in the Yogyakarta area. This results in the need for proper and effective character education programs. In education, character development is essential to forming a generation with positive values and strong ethics. However, there needs to be more understanding of best practices and

practical implementation strategies in classroom and activity-based character education programs. This creates a need to identify this issue more clearly, analyze existing research gaps, and explore novel aspects that can be explored (Ardin & Syafril, 2021). This problem can be caused by various factors, such as a lack of attention to character education in schools, a lack of opportunities to practice these values in daily life, and a lack of parental involvement in educating their children's character. Character development in education is crucial in shaping a generation with integrity, enthusiasm for learning, and readiness to face life's challenges (Amini & Wiyani, 2022). Character development is not only about conceptual understanding but also involves actual practice in daily life. If students do not have the opportunity to apply the values in their everyday social interactions, conflicts, and decisions, then the values may be challenging to instill deeply (Alfianti, 2021).

Character education helps students academically grow as responsible individuals who care about others and their environment (Bahri, 2015). A holistic and comprehensive approach to character education can help create a better, more ethical generation that can contribute positively to a better society (Brannon, 2013). Character education focuses on students' cognitive and intellectual development and emotional, social, and spiritual aspects. In a holistic approach, character education should include developing all aspects of students' personalities, such as social skills, emotional skills, leadership, ethics, morals, and spirituality (Agung, 2018). In this way, students at school and at home develop academically and holistically as individuals with strong character and high ethics. A comprehensive approach to character education is critical because students' feelings are formed at school, at home, and community (Winterbottom & Schmidt, 2022). Therefore, character education should include partnerships between schools, families, and communities to shape positive character in students (Devries, 2012). In this case, parents and the districts are also essential in supporting and shaping students' positive surfaces.

Classroom and activity-based character education for early childhood is an approach that emphasizes character building through the learning environment in the classroom and activities carried out by children. This program is expected to help students develop positive character values through fun and meaningful learning experiences (Singh, 2019). Best practices in the classroom and activity-based character education programs include (1) careful planning of character education programs by considering the character values to be achieved and appropriate learning strategies; (2) the use of diverse learning strategies such as discussions, simulations, role plays, and project activities to facilitate students in understanding and internalizing the desired character values; and (3) active participation of students in activities relevant to character values such as social activities, volunteer activities, and environment-based activities to help students apply character values in daily life (Paul et al., 2022).

Although several studies have explored the concept of Character Education, there still needs to be more literature regarding identifying best practices that suit different age groups and learning environments. Meanwhile, previous research tends to focus more on theory than practical implementation in the classroom. In conclusion, there is a need for more research that focuses on concrete strategies to integrate character education into daily activities in schools. In an ever-evolving era, the potential utilization of technology, integration across subjects, and active engagement of students in character-building are promising areas of novelty. In addition, research that considers the role of local culture in Character Education Programs can provide new insights into shaping authentic and relevant character to students. The study has a more solid and clear foundation by more sharply detailing the research's problem statement, gap analysis, and novelty aspects. This will help guide the research process more effectively and contribute meaningfully to developing classroom and activity-based Character Education.

Implementing this program requires careful planning, diverse learning strategies, active student participation, and ongoing teacher support. This study explores the best practices and implementation strategies of classroom and activity-based character education programs. Students' active involvement becomes an essential element in designing their character.

Students can directly apply the values taught in a real-world context Through engaging in various interactive activities, such as group discussions, simulations, role plays, and collaborative projects. This allows them to develop a deeper understanding of character concepts. Thus, this study aims to explore and analyze the best practices and implementation strategies of classroom and activity-based Character Education Programs. With a focus on careful planning, diverse learning strategies, active student participation, and ongoing support from teachers, this research aims to provide in-depth insights and practical guidance for education practitioners in implementing this program successfully.

Methods

This research uses qualitative research using a case study approach, where one or several classes implementing an activity-based character education program are selected as research subjects. The research subjects were principals and teachers at Hamemayu Kindergarten Yogyakarta who successfully implemented a classroom and activity-based character education program in their school. The selection of participants should be based on relevant criteria, such as teaching experience, students' participation in character-based activities, and knowledge of the character education program. Data collection techniques that can be used include interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Interviews can be conducted with teachers and students related to the implementation of the character education program, as well as the impact students feel in developing character values. Classroom observations can be conducted to see how the character education program is implemented in daily activities in the classroom. Document analysis can be done to obtain information about the content of the curriculum and class notebooks. Data obtained from data collection techniques can be analyzed using the content or narrative analysis method. The content analysis method will analyze the data by identifying themes or patterns that appear in the data. Meanwhile, in the narrative analysis method, the data will be analyzed by telling the story that appears in the data.

Result

3.1. Best Practices in Effective Classroom and Activity-Based Character Education Programs.

Best practices in an effective classroom and activity-based character education program include things like character education program planning, diverse learning strategies, and active student participation in activities relevant to the character values to be achieved. Character education program planning is an essential best practice in developing classroom and activity-based character education programs. Careful planning will consider the character values to be completed and the appropriate learning strategies. In an interview with the principal, she revealed that character education program planning should be tailored to the needs of students and the school environment. The principal also emphasized identifying character values relevant to students' social and environmental conditions.

The best classroom practice and activity-based character education programs are careful program planning by considering the character values to be achieved and appropriate learning strategies. In addition, diverse learning strategies such as discussions, simulations, role plays, and project activities are also very effective in helping students understand and internalize the desired character values."

The statement contains two main points in the best practices of effective classroom and activity-based character education programs. The first point is careful program planning. A character education program must have clear and measurable objectives. Planning the schedule carefully and considering character values is necessary to achieve these goals. The program should be tailored to the characteristics of the students and their classroom environment, as well as considering appropriate learning strategies. In this case, teachers as instructors must understand and master the character values to be achieved and how to integrate them into daily learning activities. The second point is the use of diverse learning strategies. The second point

is the use of various learning strategies. Students have different learning styles, hence the need to use diverse learning strategies to help them understand and internalize the desired character values. This aligns with the opinion (Kusumastuti, 2020) that by utilizing these various learning strategies, teachers can create an inclusive learning environment and effectively support students' character development. In addition, it is essential to continuously evaluate and adjust the method used to ensure that character values are genuinely integrated into students' learning experiences.



Figure 1. Nurturing Children's Character Through Traditional Play Activities

For example, learning strategies such as discussions, simulations, role plays, and project activities can help students understand character values in different and exciting ways so that they can be more easily remembered and applied in daily life. Overall, the best practice in classroom and activity-based character education programs is to develop a well-thought-out program by considering the character values to be achieved and the appropriate learning strategies and using diverse learning strategies to help students understand and internalize the character values. By incorporating character values into every lesson, students can experience how character values can be applied in daily life. Through real-life examples, students can understand essential character values and how they can help them become better individuals (Novitasari et al., 2019).

Practical activities such as role plays, or collaborative projects are also very effective in developing students' social and emotional skills. Students can learn to communicate well, appreciate differences, work together, and solve problems by engaging students in activities requiring cooperation and interaction with classmates. Choosing activities appropriate to the student's age and interests is essential. The selection of exciting and fun activities can motivate students to participate more actively in character learning. An excerpt from an interview with one of the teachers:

"I try to incorporate character values in every lesson I teach. I will take real-life examples relevant to the topic and discuss the character values that can be learned from it. In addition, I also incorporate practical activities such as role plays or collaborative projects that emphasize the development of students' social and emotional skills..."

By involving students in the evaluation process, we can determine to what extent the program is practical and applicable to students. In addition, recording the positive behavioral and attitudinal changes seen in students during and after the program is implemented is also very important. This can provide tangible evidence of the program's effectiveness and ensure that the implemented classroom-based character education program positively impacts students. In student interviews, I will ask how the program has helped them improve their social and emotional skills. I will also ask for feedback on the activities and materials that were most effective in assisting them to understand the character values taught. By paying attention to

students' feedback, I can improve the classroom-based character education program for the future and ensure that the program provides maximum benefits to students (Surya, 2017).

3.1. Implementation strategies for classroom and activity-based character education programs

In addition to planning, using diverse learning strategies is an effective best practice in classroom and activity-based character education programs. Teachers who successfully implement this program use learning strategies such as discussions, simulations, role plays, and project activities to help students understand and internalize the desired character values. In an interview, one teacher stated that using diverse learning strategies can facilitate students in understanding character values in a fun and meaningful way.

"Students' active participation in activities relevant to character values is also an effective best practice in classroom and activity-based character education programs. Students' active participation in social, volunteer, and environmental-based activities can help them apply character values daily."

Such activities can help students develop social skills, empathy, and social responsibility. In conclusion, best practices in effective classroom and activity-based character education programs include careful planning of character education programs, use of diverse learning strategies, and active participation of students in activities relevant to the character values to be achieved. Teachers who successfully implement this program can adapt these best practices to the needs of students and the school environment.

"For example, I use simulations to help students understand the value of cooperation and honesty. Students play the role of a team that has to complete a task together and apply the principles of cooperation and honesty. In addition, I also use project activities such as making posters or videos about specific character values, which help students internalize the values creatively....."

In this statement, the teacher gave examples of two effective learning strategies for teaching students character values: simulations and project activities. Simulation is used to help students understand the importance of cooperation and honesty. In the simulation, students are given a task that must be completed together as a team, so they must apply the principles of collaboration and honesty in completing the task. By doing this simulation, students can concretely understand how cooperation and openness can help them achieve their goals effectively. In addition, teachers also use project activities such as making posters or videos about specific character values. In these project activities, students can express their creativity by internalizing the character values learned in class. Students can apply the character values creatively and interestingly using various types of media, such as posters or videos (Andiarini et al., 2018). Both learning strategies are very effective in helping students understand and internalize character values as they learn from theory and apply them in concrete situations. In the long run, it can help students to internalize the character values and use them in daily life.

"Student participation in activities relevant to character values such as social, volunteer, and environment-based activities can help students apply them in their daily lives. For example, students can develop cooperation and empathy skills through volunteering or social activities that they participate in. Thus, students' participation in such activities can help them strengthen the character values they have learned in class."

The statement from one of the respondents illustrates that students' participation in activities relevant to character values, such as social activities, volunteer activities, and environment-based activities, can help students apply the character values they have learned in class in their daily lives. For example, students involved in volunteering or social activities can develop cooperation and empathy skills, character values often taught in class. By engaging in activities relevant to character values, students can also strengthen and internalize these character values. In this context, students' participation in such activities provides opportunities for students to apply character values in real-life situations. It offers meaningful experiences that help them holistically develop character values. In this case, the role of teachers is vital in

planning and implementing activity-based character education programs that can encourage student participation in activities relevant to character values. Thus, students' involvement in such activities can help optimize the development of character values and support the success of the broader character education program.

3.2. The role of teachers in supporting the implementation of classroom and activity-based character education programs

To support the implementation of classroom and activity-based character education programs, teachers must have sufficient knowledge and skills about character education and be able to implement it in daily learning. In addition, teachers must also be able to monitor and evaluate the programs that have been implemented to determine the extent of the program's success and make improvements if necessary. Teachers in schools have a vital role in supporting the implementation of classroom and activity-based character education programs. Here are some of the parts of teachers in supporting the program

Teachers must build positive character in children from an early age. Teachers can model good behavior and teach positive values such as honesty, cooperation, tolerance, etc. In this way, children will learn and internalize these positive values. A conducive classroom environment is critical in supporting children's character building. Teachers should be able to create a comfortable, safe, and fun classroom environment. This can be done by providing adequate facilities, arranging the classroom attractively and cleanly, and organizing sufficient learning time. Teachers must apply learning approaches that are fun and appropriate to children's needs. This can be done using creative learning media, such as pictures, songs, stories, etc. This way, children will understand the learning material more easily and feel happy to learn. Teachers should also be able to involve parents in the child's learning process. Teachers can provide information about children's development and how parents can help children learn and build positive character.

"In my opinion, the role of teachers in PAUD schools is vital in supporting the implementation of classroom and activity-based character education programs. Teachers should be able to build positive character in children from an early age, maintain a conducive classroom environment, apply fun learning approaches, and involve parents in the learning process."

The role of teachers in schools is vital in shaping positive character in children from an early age, as well as supporting the implementation of classroom and activity-based character education programs. Teachers must be able to create a conducive and safe learning environment for children so that they feel comfortable and happy when they are at school. In addition, teachers must be able to apply fun and varied learning approaches so that children feel interested and motivated to learn. Fun learning will help children absorb the subject matter better. In addition, involving parents in the learning process is also very important. Teachers can include parents in classroom activities, such as presentations or discussions. This will help parents understand what the children are learning at school so they can help them learn at home.

"In my daily learning, I model good behavior and teach positive values such as honesty, cooperation, and tolerance. I also always create a comfortable, safe, and fun classroom environment by providing adequate facilities and arranging the classroom attractively and cleanly. I also use creative learning media, such as pictures, songs, stories, and so on, to make it easier for children to understand learning materials and feel happy to learn. In addition, I always communicate with parents to provide information about children's development and how parents can help children learn and build positive character".



Figure 2. The teacher discusses with students regarding learning activities.

Creating a Structured and Continuous Learning Plan As a teacher, it is essential to have a structured and continuous learning plan. This plan should include learning objectives, teaching materials, methods, and ways to evaluate student progress. With a structured and well-organized plan, you can ensure that students learn effectively and by the curriculum. Students feel accepted and recognized in the classroom when given equal opportunities to participate and contribute. Understand students' different cultures, religions, and backgrounds, and strive to create an inclusive and welcoming classroom environment for all students. In addition, technology can be a handy tool in supporting learning and improving interaction with students. Learning apps or programs can help teachers facilitate teaching or use social media to facilitate communication with students or parents. Providing constructive feedback is also one of the effective ways to help students improve their learning.

Discussion

Character education is one of the most important aspects of shaping one's personality. Therefore, schools need an effective and well-integrated character education program in their daily learning activities (Sudaryanti, 2015). Classroom and activity-based character education programs are one way that schools can implement character education in teaching and learning activities. This program will teach the desired characters through activities conducted inside and outside the classroom (Agboola & Chen, 2012). This approach allows students to learn character values through daily interactions and activities outside the classroom. Some activities that can be done in the school to encourage character learning are group discussions, presentations, case studies, and simulations. Students can also be involved in social activities outside the school, such as social service activities, visits to orphanages or hospitals, and environmental activities (Nazarullail & Maskulin, 2023). In addition, character education can also be implemented through extracurricular programs such as art activities, sports, and student organizations. Students can learn character values in these programs, such as cooperation, responsibility, leadership, and honesty. Schools can help students develop positive attitudes, good behavior, and strong character by implementing character education in teaching and learning activities. This will help students become better individuals who are ready to face future challenges (Sobarna & Hakim, 2017)

An effective character education program can help students understand and internalize the desired character values (Hoge, 2012). In this case, careful planning is needed to structure

the program appropriately and follow the desired objectives. In addition, diverse learning strategies are also necessary to accommodate students' various learning styles and enable them to understand character values in ways relevant to their life experiences (Lee, 2016). Students' active participation in activities pertinent to character values is also essential in ensuring the success of this program. Through active participation in activities such as discussions, role plays, and social activities, students can learn character values firsthand and develop the skills necessary to apply them daily (Hollingshead, 2009). Teachers also play an essential role in supporting the implementation of this program. Teachers also play an indispensable role in supporting the implementation of this program. Teachers must communicate effectively with students and parents to ensure that the program is well explained and understood by all relevant parties (Amaluddin, 2018). In addition, teachers must provide continuous support and supervision so that students continue to practice the character values and the program can run smoothly. Overall, a compelling character education program requires careful planning, diverse learning strategies, the active participation of students in activities relevant to character values, and continuous support and supervision from teachers. The program can help students develop the skills and character values necessary for success (Gunawan, 2017).

The integration of the character education program with the curriculum and daily classroom activities can be done in the following ways: Inserting character values in the curriculum. Teachers can add character values to the curriculum (Maharani & Syamsi, 2018). For example, in Mathematics lessons, teachers can add the weight of responsibility by assigning students to work on problems and collecting their work at the specified time. This way, students can learn the importance of completing tasks on time and being responsible for their work. Making daily activities a venue for character learning Teachers can use daily activities in the classroom as a venue for character learning (Hidayat et al., 2022). For example, teachers can use cleaning up after class as an opportunity to learn the value of cooperation. In this way, students can learn the importance of working together and helping each other achieve common goals (Muhtar & Dallyono, 2020).

Using case examples relevant to students' lives, Teachers can use case examples pertinent to students' lives in character learning. For example, teachers can discuss bullying cases that often occur in schools as a place to learn the value of empathy and respect for differences. In this way, students can learn about respecting differences and not committing actions that harm others. Organizing extracurricular activities that support character learning Teachers can organize extracurricular activities that support character teaching. For example, teachers can organize scouting activities to learn the values of courage, independence, and cooperation (Cheung & Lee, 2010). This way, students can learn the importance of courage, freedom, and collaboration. By integrating the character education program with the curriculum and daily activities in the classroom, students are expected to develop character values that are important for everyday life.

The implications of these findings are manifold. Educational practitioners are provided with a robust framework for designing, implementing, and assessing character education programs. Additionally, the role of the teacher extends beyond simple instructional duties, becoming an architect of the educational environment conducive to character development. The study is indispensable for future early childhood education curriculum planning and policy formulation.

By rigorously examining the best practices and implementation strategies in the classroom and activity-based character education programs, this study adds a nuanced layer to the ongoing discourse in the field. It aligns with previous research and provides more detailed guidelines, highlighting the indispensable role of teachers and the need for a holistic approach to effective character education.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this study was to systematically explore and analyze optimal practices and strategies for classroom and activity-based Character Education Programs, focusing on careful planning, diverse learning strategies, active student participation, and robust teacher support. The findings delineate several critical best practices, including meticulous program planning, incorporating varied learning methods, and the essential role of ongoing evaluation. Moreover, teachers are central to practical implementation, responsible for instruction and shaping a conducive educational environment. The study's implications extend beyond providing a robust framework for educational practitioners; it is a pivotal resource for future curriculum planning and policy formulation in early childhood education. However, the study is confined in its scope to early childhood settings. It could benefit from further research examining its applicability to older age groups and the influence of cultural and socio-economic variables. Future studies could delve into these limitations, offering insights into scalability across different educational levels and socio-cultural environments, thereby fostering a more nuanced understanding of character development in educational settings.

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