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Implementation of Character Education in Elementary Schools through an Ecological Approach

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to evaluate how to implement character education in elementary schools using an ecological approach. The approach applied is qualitative research. Data was obtained from observation, interviews and document research. Research finds that the best way to implement character education is to create a conducive school environment, integrate character values in learning, involve parents and the community, utilize the natural environment, and develop character-based extracurricular programs. By considering the relationship between students and the surrounding environment, the implementation of character education in elementary schools can be effective through an ecological approach. The results of the study show that the implementation of character education using an ecological approach in elementary schools provides a comprehensive and contextual framework. This method allows schools to create a comprehensive learning environment, where characters are not only taught in theory but also practiced in various everyday situations by students.

Keywords: Character education, elementary schools, ecological approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Character education has emerged as an important focus in the educational framework in various countries, including Indonesia. This emphasis is based on the recognition of the importance of character development from a young age (Aslan et al., 2019). It serves as the foundation for the formation of a nation that is believed by strong moral principles. Basic education institutions play a vital role in instilling character values, as they are the initial formal setting for children's learning (Wening, 2012). Indonesia's current educational landscape is limited in its capacity to produce graduates who have adequate levels of intellectual prowess. Many graduates from educational institutions demonstrate high academic performance, intelligence, and the ability to assimilate knowledge quickly. However, significant deficiencies in ethical behavior and personal attributes are common among them (Dasopang et al., 2022; Lubis & Wangid, 2019). The basic purpose of education is to cultivate individuals with character, noble disposition, and human qualities (Santrock, 2011; Wolfolk, 2016). This unfortunate situation arises from shortcomings in

the implementation of character education in educational institutions (Syafe'i, 2017). Experts articulate that micro character development can be broken down into four basic pillars, namely instructional activities in the classroom, daily practices that include the cultural evolution of formal and informal educational units, co-curricular and/or extracurricular involvement, and routine activities that occur at home and in the community.

However, challenges often arise in the implementation of character education in elementary education settings, including excessive theoretical organization, inadequate integration into daily learning practices, and gaps in comprehensive participation from all stakeholders in schools and the wider community (Agustin et al. al., 2021; Suyanto, 2012). Consequently, a more rigorous and contextually relevant approach is essential for the effective implementation of character education.

Concepts, such as ecology proposed by Bronfenbrenner (Rahayu & Wigna, 2011), offer an interesting perspective to be applied in the field of character education. This framework emphasizes the importance of individuals engaging with diverse environmental systems throughout the process of human development. In the context of character education, the ecological approach views character development as the result of complex interactions between students and various environmental areas, including family, educational institutions, and community contexts.

The aspiration to cultivate individuals who embody peace, honesty, responsibility for environmental management, and other noble qualities is aimed at cultivating a unique Indonesian identity characterized by an inner life that allows individuals to distinguish and pursue goodness and truth, regulate their impulsive desires, engage in critical and creative thinking, demonstrate perseverance, and consistently strive for self-improvement. While this endeavor is undoubtedly challenging, the development of individuals with such an inner life is essential as a basic element for virtuous human thinking.

The application of character education through an ecological lens in elementary education institutions has shown encouraging results in the comprehensive development of student character (Zainuri, 2018). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory related to human development explains the interrelationship between individuals and their environmental context throughout the developmental journey. With regard to character education, the ecological approach stresses the interaction between students and their environments such as family, educational institutions, and social contexts in the process of character formation.

Character education can be defined as education in values, manners, morals, and character (Ismatullah, 2019). The purpose of character education is to teach students to make good choices, maintain what is good, realize, and spread goodness in everyday life (Ainiyah, 2013; Dasopang et al., 2023). The great principles of the indigenous people gave birth to a paradigm that was assimilated from the intrinsic values of customary wisdom, which can be operationalized in character education, consisting of 1) Adherence to the principle of balance between humanity and the environment. This ethos is compromised by the practice of annual monoculture planting, as it disrupts the life cycle of various organisms. 2) Commitment to accountability in relation to all actions related to nature management. In the context of ecological management, the Kasepuhan community consciously refrains from using chemicals, because such actions are considered to endanger the ecological balance. 3) Comply with the regulations set, especially customary law. 5) Serious efforts to preserve the natural environment. Recognition of social diversity and cultivating empathy for one's environment are essential. The formation of committees that focus on equity, inclusion, and communal solidarity is essential.

Character education is not solely the responsibility of educational institutions, but rather families and communities are integral parts of effective implementation (Subianto, 2013). This is based on the understanding that character development is not static and can be influenced dynamically. Many contributing factors and challenges related to character

in the child's macro system, including parents, educators, and social contexts, significantly shape a child's character from an early age.

Given that the family serves as the primary context in which a child encounters the outside world, parents play an important role in the development of their child's character (Dasopang & Lubis, 2021; Lubis & Dasopang, 2020; Zainuri, 2018). In addition, the dynamics of family relationships greatly impact the formation of a child's character and internalization. In addition, a child's character is shaped by interactions with peers and educators in an academic environment. Since institutional education has the potential to enhance children's cognitive abilities and competencies, it is essential in nurturing intelligent, creative, and responsible individuals (Schunk, 2012). The socio-cultural environment also plays a fundamental role in character formation. Children observe and engage with social relationships that are influenced by their community environment. Thus, the interaction between school, community context, and parental interactions result in a cumulative contribution to character development. The primary goal of character education is to explain the process by which children develop their character, enabling them to exhibit appropriate behavior (Kristiawan, 2016). This effort is associated with beneficial outcomes, such as improved academic performance, decreased attrition rates, and reduced incidences of delinquency among children (Lubis & Lubis, 2024; Nurliza et al., 2024; Silvia et al., 2023). With this goal in mind, the efficacy of character education can be significantly enhanced when educators actively instill and reinforce character principles through their pedagogical methodologies. The interactions that occur between individuals in diverse moral contexts facilitate the theoretical and practical instruction of character education (Zuchdi, 2012). Educators play an important role in instilling character in children and implementing the process of moral education, thereby ensuring the successful integration of character education into the curriculum.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative case study approach to deeply understand how the implementation of character education is carried out through an ecological approach. Data collection was carried out through three main methods, namely 1) Observation: Experts conducted direct observations of the learning process, the relationship between students and teachers, and the physical condition of the school; 2) Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, students, and parents to obtain diverse views and 3) Document evaluation: School documents such as curriculum, lesson plans, and school policies were analyzed to understand the strategy for implementing character education.

Data examination was carried out thematically, by looking for patterns and themes that emerged from the collected data. Data triangulation was practiced to confirm the validity and reliability of the research results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Integration of Character Values in the Curriculum

Integrating character into the curriculum is an important part of implementing character education through the ecological method. This is the same as Lickona's (1999) view which emphasizes that the importance of moral values must be integrated into all aspects of school life. In this study, it was concluded that schools that successfully implemented this approach used several key strategies. 1) Clear insertion of character values such as honesty, responsibility, and empathy in the learning plan for each subject. For example, in mathematics lessons, students learn not only the concept of calculation, but also integrity in reporting results and responsibility in completing assignments. This is in accordance with the findings of Faslia et al. (2023) which states that character education is more effective if integrated with the academic curriculum; 2) Application of active and contextual learning methods: The schools in this study used learning methods

that allowed students to be actively involved in the experience and practice of character values. For example, through the project learning method, students learn not only subject matter, but also hone their collaboration, leadership, and social responsibility skills. Active and contextual learning is more effective in developing social-emotional skills and character than traditional teaching methods (Lubis, 2019; Nur Wangid et al., 2018); 3) Development of community-based learning projects: Projects that directly involve students with social and environmental issues in the community were carried out in schools in this study. For example, students participate in initiatives to maintain environmental cleanliness or participate in anti-bullying campaigns at the community level.

Creating a Supportive School Environment

Schools play a very important role in shaping students' characters through the environment they provide. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, the school microsystem environment is one of the contexts that greatly influences children's development. In implementing character education using an ecological approach, the schools in this study used various strategies. Some of these strategies are 1) School buildings that reflect character values: These schools design physical facilities that clearly display character values. For example, the application of motivational slogans on school walls, the creation of "reflection corners" in each classroom, and the arrangement of school gardens that promote positive social relationships. This method is in accordance with the theory of "hidden curriculum" that the school atmosphere can be an effective indirect learning tool; 2) Consistent and fair application of school rules: The schools in this study used a rule system that did not only focus on punishment, but emphasized understanding the natural consequences of actions and the restoration process. For example, when a student violates a rule, they are not only sanctioned but also involved in reflective discussions and corrective steps. This method is in line with the idea of "positive discipline" which is more effective in shaping students' personalities and responsibilities than traditional punishment methods; 3) Peer mentoring program: A program where senior students become mentors to their classmates is adopted by these schools. This program not only supports junior students in adjusting to school but also stimulates the development of responsibility and leadership in senior students.

Family and Community Involvement

The ecological approach highlights the important relationship between different microsystems in a child's life, such as school, family, and community. In this study, schools implemented various strategies to increase family and community participation. Some of these strategies are 1) Regular parenting programs: The content of these sessions includes topics such as how to communicate effectively with children, apply positive discipline, and strategies to support children's character development. Research states that structured and meaningful parental involvement has a significant positive impact on character formation in education; 2) Collaborating with community leaders and local institutions: The schools in this study actively involved community leaders and local institutions in character education programs. For example, inviting religious leaders to talk about moral principles, or working with local environmental organizations for nature conservation projects. This method is in line with the idea that "community schools" are successful in creating a holistic learning environment and supporting students' academic and character development; 3) Joint social and environmental activities: These schools coordinate activities that involve students, families, and the community simultaneously, such as cleaning the environment or holding a charity bazaar. These activities not only improve the relationship between school, family, and community, but also provide opportunities for students to apply character values in a wider environment. This is in accordance with

the results of research stating that participation in community social activities can have a positive impact on the formation of adolescent personality.

The application of character education using an ecological approach in elementary schools has great potential in shaping students' character as a whole. However, the success of this implementation depends on the commitment and cooperation of all parties involved, as well as the school's ability to create a learning environment that consistently supports character formation. The biggest obstacle is integrating school values with students' home and community life, and ensuring the sustainability of the program on an ongoing basis. Ecological theory considers child growth from three different environments: microsystem, ecosystem, and macrosystem. All three systems support individual growth in developing specific physical and mental characteristics.

The microsystem includes the environment in which individuals live, including family, peers, school, and social environment. In the microsystem, there is a lot of direct interaction with social agents such as parents, friends, and teachers. In the process of interaction, individuals not only receive but also participate in forming and developing microsystem settings. Each person gains experience from each activity and plays a role in forming personal relationships with their microenvironment. The microsystem environment in question includes parents, siblings, teachers, friends, and mentors. Environmental influences play a major role in the growth of individuals, especially children from an early age to adolescence. The role of parents in the family is considered very important as agents of child socialization so that the family has a major impact on the formation of children's character. Each part of the microsystem interacts with each other, such as family experiences with school experiences, school experiences with religious experiences, family experiences with peer experiences, and family relationships with neighbors. Consequently, every issue that arises in a microsystem subsystem will affect other microsystem subsystems. For example, the situation at home can affect a child's behavior at school. Children who are not accepted by their parents may have difficulty building good relationships with teachers.

The ecosystem is a broader social system in which the child is not directly involved in interaction, but has a major influence on the development of the child's character. Subsystems involve the professional environment of parents, relationships with siblings such as younger siblings, older siblings, or other relatives, and school policies. For example, work experience can affect a woman's relationship with her husband and children. A mother may receive a promotion that requires additional travel, which can cause conflict in marriage and change the pattern of interaction between parents and children. Other ecosystem environments that do not directly interact with individual children but have a significant impact include newspapers, television, doctors, extended family, and so on. The macrosystem is the outermost layer of the child's environment. The macrosystem subsystem consists of various elements such as state ideology, government, traditions, religion, law, customs, culture, and others, where their influence will be felt in the formation of the child's character. According to Berk in the Mujahidah journal, the culture referred to in this subsystem includes patterns of behavior, beliefs, and the results of all forms of human life that are passed down from one generation to the next.

Role of Family

The role of the family is very important in shaping the character of children. If the family has a strong structure and functions well, it will have a positive impact on all family members. As the smallest part of society, the family is responsible for meeting the needs of its children such as religion, psychology, food, drink, and others. As the subsystem closest to children, the family has an important role in shaping their character through education, care, and socialization of positive values. To ensure success, character education should start at an early age, or what is often referred to as the golden age according to psychology

experts. Age is considered an important factor in determining a child's ability to develop their talents.

Character development from parents involves the process of knowing and acting to form habits. Having good knowledge does not necessarily mean having good character. If children are not trained to do good, then they may not be able to act according to the knowledge they have. The success of both stages can be achieved if parents are able to be examples or provide examples to their children. For example, if the basic character of discipline is developed, when children learn discipline from an early age and parents remain consistent, then discipline will become a habit for children. If a child understands the importance of discipline and is accustomed to discipline, then disciplined behavior will emerge naturally from his own awareness and not because of pressure from others. Children's discipline at home will affect their behavior when they start school.

Friends of the same age

Peers are a component of the microsystem that allows them to interact directly with children. Involvement with peers is very important in children's development because in the end children tend to obey the rules of their peers more than the rules at home or at school. Relationships between peers play a very important role in children's development, especially adolescents, both emotionally and socially. Buhrmester said that peer groups are a place to get affection, empathy, understanding, and moral guidelines, as well as a place to experiment and gain independence from parents. Meanwhile, Robinson also stated that adolescent relationships with peers not only provide important emotional support during the adolescent transition, but can also cause stress for adolescents. The thing to remember is that the influence of peers can shape a child's personality. The theory of developmental ecology states that children will be influenced by the characteristics of their peers. Several studies have shown the impact of peers. For example, peers who consistently provide social support will affect adolescents' self-confidence levels. Confirmation from others, in the form of emotional support and social approval, greatly influences adolescents' self-confidence. The existence of good personal relationships provides stability, confidence, and attention that can increase students' sense of belonging, self-esteem, and self-acceptance, and create a positive atmosphere for the learning process. Good support from peers can reduce the causes of student achievement failure, such as negative beliefs in academic competence and anxiety when taking tests.

The Role of the School Environment

The school environment acts as an official educational environment that influences the development and formation of children's character. Schools can also be called the second educational environment after the family which has an important role in developing children's character. Colgan emphasized that schools are ideal places to form character, because all students from various backgrounds will study there. In addition, most of today's students' time is spent at school, which means that schools have an important role in forming students' character. Children's character education must be carried out comprehensively, where schools need to teach children about values cognitively, affectively, and practically. According to Kurniawan, this goal can be achieved by integrating character education into every subject in the school environment. Learning related to norms or values in each lesson needs to be sharpened, explained, and connected to everyday life. Thus, children will find it easier to internalize norms or values through this method.

The Role of Environmental Culture

The cultural part of the environment can be used as a center for character education. The diversity of individuals in a group will affect the development of children's character

in the community. Optimally, character education must be aligned with local wisdom in the environment where the child lives. The relationship between education and culture cannot be denied. Hasan Langgulung stated that education concerns two main interests, namely the development of individual potential and the inheritance of cultural values. This shows that the outlook on life of a society or nation is very much related, so that it cannot be separated because they are interdependent.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of character education using an ecological approach in elementary schools provides a comprehensive and contextual framework. This method allows schools to create a comprehensive learning environment, where character is not only taught in theory but also practiced in various everyday situations by students. The success of implementing this strategy is highly dependent on the seriousness and cooperation of all related parties, from the principal, teachers, students, parents, to the entire community. The main problem is how to integrate the values taught in schools with everyday life in the family and community environment of students. Character education is directed to emphasize certain values such as respect, responsibility, honesty, caring, and fairness and help students to understand, pay attention to, and carry out these values in their own lives to achieve success in life. Character education in schools can be implemented through exemplary behavior by teachers and can also be instilled through continuous habituation.

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