Building the Independent Character of Elementary School Students

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ABSTRACT

The cultivation of independent character among elementary school students is crucial in the 21st century. Strong character traits such as empathy, integrity, responsibility, and resilience help students navigate challenges and make positive contributions to their communities. This research focuses on the development of independent character among students during the COVID-19 pandemic. A descriptive research method with a qualitative approach was used, involving observation, interview, and documentation as data collection techniques. The subjects of the research were the school principal, teachers, students, and parents. The data was analyzed through source triangulation techniques to identify opportunities and challenges in the development of character, including in-class learning activities, school culture, and extracurricular activities. In-class learning provides a foundation of knowledge and values, while the school community creates a supportive and inclusive environment. Extracurricular activities allow students to develop skills and interests and expose them to new experiences. Effective integration of these three elements helps students become well-rounded and independent individuals.

Introduction

Character building is very important for students in the 21st century. In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, it is essential that students develop a strong sense of character, including traits such as empathy, integrity, responsibility, and resilience. Having strong character helps students navigate challenges and make positive contributions to their communities, both locally and globally. It also helps them establish healthy relationships, both personally and professionally, and fosters a sense of purpose and fulfillment in life [1-2].

In addition, strong character can have a positive impact on academic performance, as students with strong character are more likely to persevere in the face of adversity and make responsible choices. Therefore, character education is an important aspect of a student's overall development and should be integrated into the curriculum along with academic subjects.

The role of parents, community, and schools in character building is crucial and interdependent. Each has an important part to play in helping students develop strong character. Parents play a key role in character development by setting an example for their children through their own behavior and by teaching values and morals [3-4]. They can also provide a supportive environment that fosters growth and development. The community, including extended family, friends, and neighbors, can provide additional support and positive role models. By participating in community activities and volunteering, students can learn the importance of giving back and developing a sense of civic responsibility. Schools, as the primary educational institutions, have a unique opportunity to contribute to character development. Through formal character education programs, as well as by promoting a positive school culture that supports academic and personal growth, schools can help students develop the skills and traits necessary to lead fulfilling and responsible lives. It's important to note that all three of these groups must work together to create a holistic and supportive environment for students. When parents, community, and schools work together to promote character development, students are more likely to thrive and achieve their full potential.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the character building of students [5]. The pandemic has disrupted students' lives in many ways, from interrupting their education to separating them from friends and loved ones. This has presented new challenges that can test their resilience and character. On one hand, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of qualities such as empathy, responsibility, and adaptability, as students have had to navigate new learning environments, adhere to health and safety protocols, and support their loved ones through difficult times. The pandemic has also created new stressors that can negatively affect character development, such as increased screen time, reduced physical activity, and limited opportunities for social interaction [6]. Therefore, it's important for

parents, schools, and communities to continue to provide support and resources to help students navigate these challenges and continue to develop strong character. This may include providing opportunities for physical activity, promoting healthy relationships, and providing mental health support to students who may be struggling with the effects of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has both highlighted the importance of character and presented new challenges to character development [7]. By working together, parents, schools, and communities can help students build resilience and navigate these challenges in positive ways. The research objectives that can be identified from the information is to study the effectivenss and impact of integrating character building in in-class learning and school community, and extracurricular activities in elementary school students.

Methods

This research uses a descriptive research method with a qualitative approach, which was conducted at the SDIT Insan Utama Yogyakarta (an Islamic elementary school-based institution), Indonesia. The subjects of this research are the school principal, teachers, students, and parents, and the object of the research is the cultivation of independent character during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection techniques used are observation, interview, and documentation. Data is analyzed through the stages of data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The analysis is grouped to find opportunities and challenges in the development of elementary school students' character. The aspects revealed include in-class learning activities, school culture, and extracurricular activities. These three aspects are explored in depth through source triangulation techniques.

Results

A. In-class teaching and learning integration

The integration within subject matter is a strategy used by the school to cultivate independent character in the learners. The integration refers to the cultivation of character being incorporated into another subject matter, so during the learning process, the teacher incorporates religious values into the learning. For example, before learning, the teacher inserts stories of good examples related to the material, teaches students to be honest in completing tasks, to work independently, to engage in discussion, to independently seek information, and to independently present ideas.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the learning and teaching activities are conducted with one class divided into two groups, limited face-to-face learning and remote learning at home online. This online learning can be developed to form the value of independent character. This is strengthened by the statement of Baxter Magolda [8], as online learning can be customized to meet the needs of students, thus requiring students to understand themselves, their needs

for the process, to be independent in managing learning, and to be responsible and disciplined in the process taken. Therefore, online learning can form the value of independence character in elementary school students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One suggestion to integrate the independent character of students in the classroom would be to use a more student-centered approach in teaching. This can include incorporating activities that promote critical thinking, problem solving, and self-directed learning. For example, teachers can assign group projects or individual tasks that require students to research and present their findings. This not only promotes independent learning but also helps students to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills. Additionally, teachers can also encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning by setting clear goals and expectations, providing regular feedback, and creating opportunities for self-reflection and self-assessment [9-13]. Another approach could be to incorporate character education into the curriculum, by incorporating lessons and activities that focus on values such as honesty, responsibility, respect, and kindness. By doing this, students can not only learn about the importance of these values, but also have the opportunity to practice them in a supportive learning environment. Implementing these suggestions in an online mode can be a bit challenging, but with some adjustments, it can still be done effectively. Here are some tips for implementing these suggestions in an online mode:

1. Encourage self-directed learning: Provide students with a variety of online resources and materials to help them learn independently. This could include online tutorials, videos, interactive simulations, or other digital resources. Assign tasks and projects that require students to work independently and research information on their own.

2. Foster collaboration and teamwork: Make use of virtual collaboration tools such as video conferencing, discussion forums, or instant messaging to facilitate group work and encourage teamwork. Assign group projects or tasks that require students to work together and share ideas.

3. Incorporate character education: Incorporate character education lessons and activities into the online curriculum. For example, teachers can assign readings, videos, or activities that focus on specific values, and then facilitate online discussions or activities to help students reflect on these values.

4. Encourage self-reflection and self-assessment: Encourage students to reflect on their own learning and progress. This can be done through online journals, self-reflection activities, or self-assessment quizzes.

5. Provide regular feedback: Provide students with regular feedback on their progress and performance. This can be done through online assessments, discussion forums, or one-on-one virtual meetings with the teacher.

By implementing these suggestions in an online mode, educators can help students develop independent characters and promote a positive learning environment.

B. School Community Integration

The development of school culture in relation to self-development with a bias towards fostering values and character is comprised of four activities, including routine activities, spontaneous activities, exemplification and conditioning [14]. The following is a description of these activities that take place at school.

Routine activities in the cultivation of independent character through habituation of independent activities include students always completing tasks independently and not cheating. If they have difficulty completing tasks, they can seek help from teachers or parents if the task is homework. Additionally, school also has life skill activities, such as students being required to take turns cleaning their classrooms as per a set schedule, and assisting parents with cooking, sweeping, and washing dishes independently with supervision. These activities can enhance students' independent character, as outlined in a study by Kusumadewi et al. [15], where tasks assigned by teachers are not solely related to cognitive aspects, but can also be useful for daily life.

Spontaneous activities in the cultivation of independent character are evident when students take turns cleaning their classrooms as per a set schedule without waiting for instructions, students complete exercises independently before the start of lessons, and sometimes, teachers instruct students to check their surroundings for litter and to clean it up if present. There are also religious teachings and contests.

Exemplification in character education is carried out by teachers and all school staff, from their behavior and attire. Results of research into exemplification in the cultivation of independent character include teachers dressing modestly and in accordance with Islamic principles, always applying the 5S (smiling, greeting, speaking politely, behaving courteously, and being well-mannered), guiding students to select class leaders through voting, and then entrusting the selected class leaders with the responsibility of maintaining the cleanliness of their classrooms. Teachers also help maintain cleanliness, tidiness, and keep their own belongings in order. They teach students to always behave honestly in their tasks and to be proud of their own learning. The role of educators in character education is crucial in determining whether the values taught are consciously implemented [16-17]. Exemplification in the cultivation of independent character can be interpreted as the exemplification carried out by teachers and all school staff in character education, including the way they dress, maintain their behavior and language. If teachers behave badly, students will follow suit.

Implementing character building in an elementary school requires a comprehensive and well-structured approach. The success factors of such an implementation are numerous, but some of the most important ones include:

1. Leadership support: The school administration must be fully committed to character building and provide leadership and support to teachers and staff.

2. Involvement of all stakeholders: Parents, teachers, staff, and students must be involved in the character building program to ensure its success.

3. Consistent implementation: The character building program must be consistently implemented across the school, with all stakeholders following the same guidelines and expectations.

4. Encouragement of student participation: Encouraging student participation in character building activities and programs is important in promoting the development of positive character traits.

5. Resources and support: The school must have adequate resources and support, including funding, training, and materials, to ensure the success of the character building program.

C. Extracurricular Implementation

Extracurricular activities are those that are carried out outside of regular class hours and are intended to help develop the abilities of students [18]. In Dahliyana's [19] research, extracurricular activities have the potential for character education habituation development. This is because every extracurricular activity in principle already carries values of character.

At this school, extracurricular activities are not mandatory for all students, but at least students must participate in two extracurricular activities. This school has Scout, Silat, Science Club, English Club, Swimming, Junior Writer, Market Day, Painting, Qiro'ah, and Hadroh extracurricular activities. The extracurricular activities related to independence, such as scouting and silat, are observed. However, at present, during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the regulations that exist for extracurricular activities are temporarily discontinued. Hence, extracurricular activities are not running as they should be for the time being.

The benefits of building character in schools are that students become aware of what is right and wrong, more polite, more knowledgeable about manners, respectful of others, able to perform the practices taught by the Prophet, and able to fulfill their obligations in Islam. In general, it will also have a positive impact on the surrounding community, becoming self-sufficient and not dependent on others [20-21].

Based on the above explanation, it can be concluded that the strategy for building self-character, which is applied in the school, includes integration in learning, school culture, and extracurricular activities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the strategy for building self-

character is still being implemented through integration in learning and school culture with some adjustments. However, extracurricular activities are not carried out due to following existing health regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whether or not extracurricular activities should be incorporated with the curriculum is a matter of debate. On one hand, incorporating extracurricular activities into the curriculum can help to provide a more well-rounded education for students. For example, by including activities such as sports or music in the curriculum, students can develop important skills like teamwork, leadership, and discipline. Additionally, students can be exposed to new experiences and interests that they might not have had the opportunity to pursue otherwise.

Some argue that extracurricular activities should remain separate from the curriculum in order to avoid overloading students with too much work. They also argue that incorporating extracurricular activities into the curriculum can lead to a reduction in the quality of instruction as teachers may feel pressured to focus more on these activities than on traditional academic subjects. Additionally, incorporating extracurricular activities into the curriculum can also limit student choice and freedom, as they may be required to participate in activities they have little interest in.

Ultimately, the decision of whether or not to incorporate extracurricular activities into the curriculum depends on the specific context and the goals and priorities of the school. Some schools may choose to incorporate certain extracurricular activities into the curriculum as a way to enhance students' overall education, while others may prefer to keep extracurricular activities separate in order to maintain a focus on academic subjects.

The implementation of extracurricular activities should take into account several key factors to ensure its success:

1. Relevance: The activity should be relevant to the students and address their needs, interests, and abilities.

2. Planning and Preparation: Adequate planning and preparation should be in place to ensure the smooth implementation of the activity, including setting clear goals and objectives, identifying resources needed, and determining the steps necessary to achieve the desired outcomes.

3. Support and Resources: Adequate resources and support should be provided to the students, teachers, and administrators involved in the activity to ensure its success. This may include funding, equipment, and professional development opportunities.

4. Inclusivity and Diversity: The activity should be inclusive and accommodate the needs and abilities of all students, regardless of their background or personal characteristics.

5. Safety and Well-being: The activity should prioritize the safety and well-being of the students involved and have clear policies and procedures in place to address any concerns or incidents that may arise.

By addressing these key factors in the implementation of extracurricular activities, schools can ensure that they provide meaningful and engaging opportunities for their students and support their overall academic and personal growth.

There have been a number of studies that have explored ways to overcome the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on character development. Physical activity has been shown to have a positive impact on mental and emotional health, and can help students develop resilience. Studies have recommended incorporating physical activity into students' daily routines, either through structured exercise or outdoor play, to help them stay healthy and active during the pandemic. Maintaining social connections is important for students' overall well-being and can help them develop empathy and social skills. Studies have recommended using technology to connect with friends and family, participating in virtual social activities, and reaching out for help when needed. The pandemic has resulted in increased stress and anxiety for many students, which can negatively affect character development. Studies have recommended providing mental health support, such as counseling, therapy, or support groups, to help students manage their emotions and stay resilient during this time.

The disruptions caused by the pandemic have made it difficult for students to stay engaged in their education. Studies have recommended using technology to connect with teachers and classmates, setting achievable goals, and seeking additional support when needed to help students stay motivated and engaged in their learning. Therefore, the home environment can play a significant role in character development, especially during the pandemic when students are spending more time there. Studies have recommended creating a positive and supportive home environment by promoting healthy relationships, providing structure and stability, and fostering a sense of community. Overall, these findings emphasize the importance of providing support and resources to help students navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to develop strong character. By working together, parents, schools, and communities can help students build resilience and achieve their full potential.

It's important to have a specific strategy for building character in elementary school students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the unique challenges posed by the pandemic, it's important to approach character education in a way that is tailored to the needs of young children. Here are a few strategies that may be effective for elementary school students. The pandemic has created many challenges for students, and it's important for them to understand that others may be struggling as well. By emphasizing empathy and kindness, students can

learn to be supportive and understanding of their peers and others who may be going through difficult times.

Encourage responsibility and self-care is essesntial. With students spending more time at home, it's important to teach them to be responsible for their own well-being. This can include things like taking care of their health, completing their homework, and being responsible for their own belongings. Social interaction is important for young children, and it can be difficult for them to connect with others during the pandemic. Encouraging positive relationships through virtual playdates, writing letters, or sending videos to friends can help students feel connected and supported.

Related to the competencies, foster creativity and imagination should be highlighted. The pandemic has limited students' opportunities for physical play and exploration, which can negatively affect their creativity and imagination. Encouraging creative activities like drawing, building, or imaginative play can help students continue to develop these important skills. The pandemic has disrupted many aspects of students' lives, and it's important for them to have a stable and structured environment at home. This can include creating a consistent routine for schoolwork, meals, and bedtime, and providing a calm and supportive atmosphere for learning and play. These strategies can help elementary school students build character during the COVID-19 pandemic by promoting positive relationships, self-care, and resilience. By working together, parents, teachers, and communities can help young children navigate this challenging time and build the foundation for a successful future.

Conclusion

Independent character building for elementary school students is a crucial aspect of education. This can be achieved through a combination of in-class learning, school community, and extracurricular activities. In-class learning provides students with a foundation of knowledge and values, while the school community helps to create a supportive and inclusive environment. Extracurricular activities offer students opportunities to develop skills and interests, as well as expose them to new experiences. When these three elements are integrated and implemented effectively, students are provided with the tools they need to grow into well-rounded and independent individuals. By prioritizing character development, schools can create a positive impact on the future of students, their families, and the wider community.

Conflict of Interest

The authors should declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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