

**Preschool Teachers' Beliefs and Practices on Character Education for
Sustainable Development**

Anna Phang Wai Leng^{1*}, Amanda Manesha Abraham², Nurul Salwana Binti Mohd Multazam Khair³,
Madhubala A/P Bava Harji⁴

Faculty of Education, Languages, Psychology and Music, SEGi University, Kota Damansara,

Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia^{1*&2&3&4}

Correspondence author: annaphangwl@segi.edu.my^{1*}

annaphangwl@segi.edu.my^{1*}, aabr2512@gmail.com², nurulsalwanakhair@segi.edu.my³,
madhu@segi.edu.my⁴

ABSTRACT

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is integral to quality education and a lifelong learning process. This study explores how character education can contribute to sustainable development within pedagogical practices, focusing on preschool settings to cultivate moral citizens. It addresses a gap in existing literature, as few studies have examined this topic in preschool environments. Specifically, this research investigates the beliefs and practices of preschool teachers regarding Early Childhood Character Education (ECCE) and the relationship between their beliefs and practices. A total of 118 preschool teachers from the Petaling Jaya area participated in this study, which employed a quantitative research design utilizing questionnaires for data collection, enabling descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Findings indicate that the majority of preschool teachers hold positive beliefs about the effects of character education and actively implement it in their classrooms. A significant positive correlation was found between their beliefs and practices. Moving forward, the implementation of Character Education for Sustainable Development should involve collaboration among various stakeholders. This research provides valuable insights for preschool teachers and policymakers, highlighting the importance of contextualizing character education within the local context. Further research is recommended in the Malaysian setting, ideally using qualitative methods to obtain more in-depth and nuanced data.

Keywords: Beliefs, practices, character education, early childhood, sustainable development

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Early childhood growth and development have garnered increased attention, as children represent the future driving force of the nation. It is essential to ensure they receive a quality education that prepares them for a rapidly changing world (Bae & Sukumaran, 2022). Preschool teachers are expected to recognize the importance of balancing academic achievement with positive behavior and attitudes. The Framework for the National Preschool Standard-Based Curriculum emphasizes that “Spirituality, Attitudes, and Values” aim to develop knowledgeable and competent individuals who can practice these values for the betterment of families, society, and the nation at large (KSPK, 2017).

Instilling a strong sense of character in early childhood is crucial for personal growth and success. According to Hafizi, Kamarudin, and Ibrahim (2024), the Malaysian education system is beginning to acknowledge the significance of character education in shaping future leaders and citizens. This initiative aims to cultivate a better generation that can reform the education system, fostering a peaceful and morally upright society alongside academically proficient individuals. Thus, the cultivation of character education is vital, as the virtues and principles developed through character building lay the foundation for a life of integrity, adaptability, and the ability to learn ethical and moral skills beyond the confines of the classroom.

Salahudin and Alkrienciehie (2013, as cited in Hasanah & Deiniatur, 2019, p. 32) stated that "character is a characteristic of a person or group of people that contains values, abilities, moral capacity, and determination in facing difficulties and challenges." In the context of education, character building can be interpreted as value education, character education, moral education, and personality education, all aimed at developing students' abilities to make sound decisions, maintain goodness, and wholeheartedly realize and spread positive values in their daily lives.

Additionally, Lickona (1991) described character education as an intentional and proactive effort to instill and encourage good character in students, fundamentally focused on teaching children to discern right from wrong. The concept of right and wrong is most clearly demonstrated in the choices we make, which vary among individuals and are grounded in moral standards such as respect, honesty, empathy,

accountability, and equality, to name a few. This foundation must be established for young children within their school environment to foster a positive atmosphere, enhance student attitudes, and promote constructive behavior. Evaluative studies have shown that character education positively impacts the school climate and student behaviors or attitudes (Lickona, Shaps, & Lewis, 2007).

Although it is unclear if the state of morality among the youth today solely depends on moral and character education, it is apparent that character education can and should be part of the solution (Developmental Studies Centre, 1998). Research has found that children develop a moral sense at around 18 months (Lamb & Feeny, 1995). Hence it is possible to begin incorporating this into the curriculum of preschools. However, the challenge is finding out how character education should be implemented to create the desired impact on the character development of children (Bebeau et al., 1999). Teachers are regarded as models of ethical behavior, demonstrating high levels of respect, responsibility, moral concern, and moral reasoning through their actions both in and out of the classroom, as well as their responses to morally significant events in the world (Lickona, 1991). Therefore, it is essential for teachers to be aware of their individual beliefs and practices regarding character education in order to implement it effectively.

Moral and values education has long been recognized and acknowledged in the Malaysian school curriculum as it teaches students to uphold their civic duties as individuals and citizens of a nation. Values are considered decisive in education for sustainable development and linked to moral and social responsibility (Huckle, 2008). Character or moral education begins in preschools, as outlined in the Standard National Preschool Curriculum (Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan, KSPK), followed by the Primary School Curriculum (Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah, KSSR), and finally the Secondary School Curriculum (Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah, KSSM).

This study aims to address the gap in existing research concerning preschool settings by highlighting preschool teachers' beliefs and practices regarding early childhood character education. It is essential to investigate how preschool teachers in Malaysia understand and implement character education in early childhood classrooms.

Research objectives:

1. To investigate preschool teachers' beliefs on Early Childhood Character Education.
2. To investigate preschool teachers' practices on Early Childhood Character Education.
3. To investigate the relationship between preschool teachers' beliefs and practices on Early Childhood Character Education.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Character Education in Young Children

The Malaysian Teacher Standards outline the professional competencies teachers should attain, and teacher training institutions should provide support to help teachers further develop essential competencies, including professional values, knowledge and understanding, and teaching and learning skills (Abdul Karim et al., 2022). The growth and development of young children naturally involve many different aspects that are interrelated and contribute to providing holistic development. As much as children must develop their academic skills, building good attitudes and behaviours is equally essential. Children start developing individual preferences and character traits during their early years. Therefore, aligning these with positive social values and traditions of their respective community and nation, in general, is essential. Young children encounter various experiences throughout their life, and at the point of adolescence, most of the values they have learnt in their early childhood days will come into play and will act as the foundation on which the choices they make are based. According to Walsh (1990), education prepares young people for their social experiences. It promotes three main dimensions of education – growth and expansion of knowledge, training of their mental ability and character development. For example, teaching children how to reflect on their actions

and later transferring that knowledge to those around them may help them empathize and sympathize when necessary. The welfare of an individual is the purpose and reason for designing sustainable development

based on universal moral principles (Busoi, 2015). Character education also helps young children develop in many other areas of their life and should not be viewed only as a means of disciplining and controlling children's actions. Nucci (2015) says that character education should not be compared to behaviour control, discipline, teaching, or training, as it is much broader. Character is ultimately an inclusive term referring to an individual as a whole. Hence, it focuses on reinforcing the concept of a holistic child by shifting the emphasis to long-term learning and growth.

Approaches to Character Education

According to Shouse (2004), there are many ways in which character can be taught, as the teaching and learning process takes place both informally and formally. Shouse believed that character development often occurs informally and is a more natural process in specific events, peer social interactions and even in the atmosphere or culture of a school. Meanwhile, formal character development is more likely to occur through more fixed forms such as specific instructions, rules, punishments and classroom projects. Jackson (1968) pointed out that teachers' influence on their students does not stop at academics but also through "the hidden curriculum". This is said to occur outside the planned lessons or specific agendas set by the teachers (Jackson, 1992). There has been much discussion by several theorists (e.g., Bennett, 1997; Kohlberg, 1986; Lickona, 1991) who recommend different ways to impart knowledge on character education in schools as they specify what is required to take place to stimulate character development. The two primary approaches that stand out are the classroom pedagogy approach and the school culture approach. Stengel and Tom (2006) state that the classroom pedagogy approach consists of a curriculum, instructions, and materials used within the classroom, which are related to character development, while the school culture approach focuses on creating a whole school environment that would encourage character development in return. A few examples of certain elements that are used to help educators teach and develop character, according to Ryan and Bohlin (1999), include mission statements, character traits that are both valued and rewarded, as well as any professional expectations that have been expressed which are in line with character development. Dewey (1916) emphasized the teachable moments or events that take place throughout the day, which are of good use for teachers to take advantage of for character building.

Impact and Benefits of Character Education

Campbell and Bond (1982) say that there are four key questions to be brought to light when discussing character development, and that is; to understand what good character is, what causes or prevents it, how good character can be measured to provide constructive feedback and lastly, how it can be best developed. The process of developing a child's character is continuous and lifelong. Primarily, character education can help young children learn to be aware of people's feelings, their role and contribution to their community and nation, and how best to adapt to various situations they will encounter throughout life. Huitt (1997) states that three main issues occur in the present day in educating young people. The first issue is developing a vision to help one discover or define their mission and preferred lifestyle. The second is developing one's character in determining the direction and quality of life, and the third is about competence in executing a task. Despite some confusion on how character education is based more on morality or religious values or practices, it is indeed a form of educating and developing a child in various aspects throughout life to help them cope with the demands or responsibilities in the different phases of their life. For example, character education is closely related to the social-emotional curricula as it teaches children social skills and awareness, personal improvement or self-management, problem-solving, or decision-making. Earlier studies have found that higher academic achievements, positive student motivation, and fewer behavioural issues are among the positive results of the application of character education in schools (Bergmark, 2008; Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009; Katilmis et al., 2011; Parker et al., 2010; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). These few skills can be used to facilitate the development of children directed to solve the three problem areas mentioned earlier. Similarly, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) requested that schools contribute not only to the academic performance of students but to their character as well (Benninga et al., 2006). It is crucial for a school to understand their role as a channel of academic education and character education.

Character Education for the 21st Century

As we look into the goal of education, for as long as we can remember, it has always been aimed towards cultivating confident and compassionate individuals who become successful learners, give back to their communities, and ultimately serve as ethical citizens who serve society well (Bialik et al., 2015). The

difficulties humanity faces in the 21st Century may occur at a societal, economic and personal level. These struggles could be a mixture of greed, financial instability, climate change, racial crises, globalization, employment opportunities and even our happiness (Bialik et al., 2015). Character education focuses mainly on acquiring and strengthening good qualities or virtues, values, and the ability to be wise when making decisions to live a holistic life and produce a holistic society. Our interdependency as humans can serve as both a strength and a weakness. Nobel Prize winner Christian de Duve once said: "We have evolved traits such as selfishness, for example, which may very well lead the human race to extinction – so we must learn how to overcome them as well." (De Duve & Patterson, 2010). This also stresses the importance of individual awareness in ensuring our collective well-being. Research has proven that the extent of student knowledge and skills, which go beyond academics, is critical in predicting their achievements and is proven to be useful later in the workforce (Camille, 2012).

Additionally, to cater to the challenges and struggles of the 21st Century, future citizens must make informed and wise decisions from a sense of personal and ethical responsibility. Based on a study done by the Centre for Curriculum Redesign (2015) in their attempts to develop a framework for character qualities, they identified six main qualities that would be useful for a 21st-century citizen. However, these qualities are still being determined. Other debatable definitions and perspectives may exist. These six qualities are mindfulness, curiosity, courage, resilience, ethics and leadership. It is said that these qualities, in particular, help an individual become more aware of their surroundings and can respond to their environments accordingly. It also encourages lifelong learning as individuals will respond to their "thirst for knowledge" therefore, are continuously learning new information that can help them in their day-to-day experiences. Other than that, these qualities also instil confidence in standing up for what is right and just in society while distinguishing between perseverance and ego when making tough decisions. Lastly, it teaches us how to reason and participate in practical discussions for self-improvement and in the face of adversities as leaders of tomorrow. The support required for providing education that will meet the needs of today's world is a worldwide goal as it will continue to change over time and can only be overcome with unity.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for this quantitative study were collected using a self-administered questionnaire adapted and modified from Jason Alex Ampel's (2009) study on Character Education. The first section of the questionnaire includes items regarding the demographic details of preschool teachers. In contrast, the second section consists of 25 items that address the beliefs and practices of preschool teachers concerning early childhood character education. Participants were required to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with each item on a 4-point Likert scale.

The study's population included 118 preschool teachers from various schools in Petaling Jaya, representing different age groups. A reliability coefficient for the instrument was calculated using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha, yielding a highly reliable coefficient of 0.95. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS statistics software, employing both descriptive and correlation analyses. The descriptive analysis addressed the first two research questions, while the correlation analysis focused on the third research question: "What is the relationship between preschool teachers' beliefs and practices regarding early childhood character education?"

As part of the ethical considerations for this study, informed consent was obtained from participants, outlining the study's purpose and the use of the gathered information while ensuring their anonymity.

4.0 FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic profile data (such as gender, age, academic qualification, teaching experience and present teaching position) of the research participants collected in Section A. The 25 items in Sections B and C aimed to measure the preschool teachers' beliefs and practices on early childhood character education and were also analyzed using descriptive statistics. A

Pearson's correlation was conducted to answer the third research question: to find the relationship between preschool teachers' beliefs and practices on Early Childhood Character Education.

A total of 118 preschool teachers participated in this study, of which 13 (11%) were male participants and 105 (89%) were female participants, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Gender of the Participants

Gender	n	%
Male	13	11.0
Female	105	89.0
Total	118	100.0

Among the 118 preschool teachers who participated in this study, 67 (56.8%) were aged 18 to 24, while only 5.1% were aged 50 to 64. These figures are presented more clearly in Table 2.

Table 2

Age of the Participants

Age	n	%
18-24	67	56.8
25-34	33	28.0
35-49	12	10.2
50-64	6	5.1
Total	118	100.0

As for the academic qualifications, a large majority of 67 (66.1%) participants hold a degree qualification, while only 1 (0.8%) participant has a professional degree, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Academic Qualification of the Participants

Academic Qualification	n	%
SPM	4	3.4
Certificate	4	3.4
Diploma	27	22.9
Degree	78	66.1
Masters	1	.8
PhD	3	2.5
Professional Degree	1	.8
Total	118	100.0

The figures indicate that 96 participants (81.4%) have 1 to 5 years of teaching experience, while a smaller percentage, 7 participants (2.5%), have 11 to 15 years of teaching experience, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Teaching Experience of the Participants

Teaching Experience	n	%
1-5 years	96	81.4
6-10 years	12	10.2
11-15 years	3	2.5
> 15 years	7	5.9
Total	118	100.0

Regarding their current positions, 47 participants (39.8%) are assistant teachers, while only 2 participants (8.1%) are class teachers, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5*Present Position of the Participants*

Present Position	n	%
Assistant teacher	47	39.8
Class teacher	45	38.1
Senior teacher	2	1.7
Others	24	20.3
Total	118	100.0

The mean and standard deviation of the preschool teachers' beliefs and practices on Early Childhood Character Education used in the study are presented in Table 6 and Table 7. The analysis of the total scores for the beliefs of the 118 Early Childhood Character Education participants indicated an overall mean of 3.54, which falls between 3.27 (0.781) and 3.69 (0.562). Meanwhile, the analysis of the total scores for the practices on Early Childhood Character Education of the 118 participants indicated an overall mean of 3.60, which falls between 3.39 (0.627) and 3.72 (0.451). Using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient, the relationship between preschool teachers' beliefs and practices in Early Childhood Character Education shows a positive correlation whereby both beliefs and practices complement each other and tally based on the responses. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure that the assumptions of normality and linearity were not violated. There was a strong positive correlation between preschool teachers' beliefs and practices on Early Childhood Character Education, $r = 0.591$, $N = 118$, $p < 0.05$.

Table 6*Preschool Teachers' Beliefs on Early Childhood Character Education, N=118*

Items	M	SD
1. To have character is to have a set of qualities that make you into a holistic person.	3.55	.564
2. Character education is necessary to transmit core values to students.	3.59	.510

3. Students would benefit from high-quality character education programs in school.	3.56	.674
4. Educators have a responsibility to model appropriate behaviours for students.	3.69	.562
5. Schools should assume the central role of shaping the character of youth.	3.27	.781
6. Character education is an important part of a curriculum.	3.55	.533
7. Character education can contribute to improved student achievement.	3.56	.515
8. Character education is as important as academic education.	3.62	.522
9. Moral lessons learned in the social interactions of daily school life has a great influence on students.	3.59	.603
10. Character education can help build a student's self-esteem.	3.61	.614
11. Character education prepares students to become responsible citizens.	3.60	.601
12. Character education can reverse the perceived moral decline of today's society.	3.39	.667
13. Character education helps students to develop human qualities such as justice, compassion, respect and courage.	3.55	.635
14. Negative student behaviours can be reduced through character education.	3.36	.661

Note. M indicates mean; SD indicates standard deviation.

Table 7

Preschool Teachers' Practices on Early Childhood Character Education, N=118

Items	M	SD
1. I am comfortable discussing issues of right and wrong with students.	3.58	.589
2. I am comfortable modelling appropriate behaviours for students.	3.63	.552
3. I am constantly searching for better ways to develop the character of students	3.58	.544
4. I integrate character education across the curriculum each day.	3.39	.627

5. I provide students with opportunities during the school day to practice good citizenship.	3.45	.622
6. I encourage students to practice fairness (justice, equity and equality) in various situations.	3.62	.553
7. I strive to maintain a caring classroom environment.	3.65	.496
8. I teach moral qualities such as honesty in my classroom.	3.69	.462
9. I teach values such as self-respect in my classroom.	3.64	.515
10. I provide opportunities for students to practice consideration in my classroom.	3.62	.488
11. I teach patience by helping students realize that they must wait for their turn.	3.72	.451

Note. M indicates mean; SD indicates standard deviation.

Table 8

Pearson's Correlations Between Preschool Teachers' Beliefs and Practices on Early Childhood Character Education

	Belief	Practice
Beliefs	.	
Practices	.591**	.

*Note. **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1:

What are preschool teachers' beliefs on Early Childhood Character Education?

Shared beliefs among teachers are crucial for fostering positive outcomes, as they guide decision-making and teaching practices. The results of this study revealed that preschool teachers' beliefs significantly influence the effectiveness of character education and its impact on students. This study explored teachers' agreement with statements about character education at both institutional and personal levels. Most respondents agreed that character education develops holistic individuals and instills core values, emphasizing the central role of schools in shaping young children's character.

Teachers' beliefs, practices, and attitudes are essential factors for understanding and improving the educational process, as they shape children's learning, motivation, and achievement. Each teacher possesses unique visions, knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, and values regarding preschool programs, which are reflected in their daily actions (Wai Leng et al., 2021, p. 70). Overall, character education was seen as vital for enhancing young children's achievement, reducing negative behavior, and fostering responsible citizenship. Furthermore, teachers believed that children would benefit from high-quality character education programs, considering character education an integral part of the curriculum. In summary, these findings reflect a broad consensus on the importance of character education, with overwhelmingly positive responses.

Research Question 2:

What are preschool teachers' practices on Early Childhood Character Education?

This study showed that preschool teachers practice character education by teaching moral qualities, self-respect, consideration, and patience throughout the school each day. They discuss right and wrong during conflicts and model appropriate behaviors for children to emulate. Teachers actively seek better ways to develop young children's character through formal and informal learning experiences. The current results further revealed that integrating character education across the curriculum is widely practiced by teachers, with efforts focused on providing opportunities for students to practice good citizenship, fairness, and caring through classroom habits and management techniques. These practices aim to foster positive good attitudes and behaviours that children carry beyond school, enriching their interactions in various situations. Silay (2022) in her study highlights that character education and moral education should be used interchangeably as the objective is the advancement of human beings in terms of virtues. She further emphasised that there is no restriction of character education on formal education as it exists during all stages of life. Hence, to be able to apply successful character education, preschool teachers must be well-equipped regarding character development prior to service.

Research Question 3:

What is the relationship between preschool teachers' beliefs and practices on Early Childhood Character Education?

The study found a strong positive correlation between preschool teachers' beliefs and practices regarding early childhood character education. Teachers believe that character education is influenced by values, behavior, and environment, emphasizing their responsibility to model good habits and integrate character education across the curriculum. The teachers aimed to teach fairness, honesty, respect, and patience while seeking innovative methods to adapt to societal changes. According to Berkowitz and Grych (2000), if society is to flourish and the world in which we live is to be safer and more benevolent, it must be populated by individuals with good and healthy character. Early childhood educators play a crucial role in fostering character development in young children. Respondents who strongly agreed on the importance of character education also demonstrated consistent practices, reflecting their awareness of their roles in shaping youth

development. This alignment between beliefs and practices underscores educators' commitment to fostering well-rounded character development.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This research investigated preschool teachers' beliefs and practices on Early Childhood Character Education and the relationship between the two components. As educators continue to put in the effort to enhance character education and integrate it across the curriculum, it is also good to keep in mind that additional efforts are required by other relevant parties in the hopes of working together to achieve the common goal. More workshops or campaigns can be organized in schools to raise awareness and encourage the discussion of character development and education among parents and teachers. The first step in changing any system is understanding a society's or community's perception and beliefs towards the subject matter in focus. Based on the findings from this study, at least 12.5% of respondents believe that it is not only the school's responsibility alone to shape the character of youth. After all, what is learnt at home or in schools should be reinforced by both parties if children are to understand and digest what is being asked of them entirely.

Moving on, a recommendation for parents would be to remember to practice and emphasize basic mannerisms which demonstrate relatable values and qualities such as patience, fairness, honesty, and respect for self and others, as highly agreed upon in the findings from this research. Again, it is essential to reinforce what is taught in school; therefore, if teachers are practicing these habits or preparing caring classroom environments for their students to learn from, the same should be done in the home setting, which will provide some form of consistency. Meanwhile, teachers can do their part by modelling the desired and appropriate behaviours related to character education and practicing the same rules and ethics by setting expectations in the early stages. As a result, this would encourage a ripple effect among the students, and students naturally learn a lot from their peers during their daily interactions. Finally, the results from this study show that most preschool teachers share a common belief in the positive effects of early childhood character education and have already begun actively incorporating character education in their lessons or interactions with students as a means for improved student behaviour.

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