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Submission date: 16-Nov-2025 10:06AM (UTC-0600)

Submission ID: 2816591949

File name: 1_-_11.pdf (281.57K)

Word count: 4388

Character count: 29173

REIMAGINING CHARACTER EDUCATION: INTEGRATING DIGITAL VALUES LEARNING IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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Received July 17, 2025; Revised August 9, 2025; Accepted August 27, 2025; Published August 29, 2025


ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the integration of digital tools in values education to support character development among elementary school students. In response to the increasing demand for 21st-century moral competencies, this research conducts a systematic literature review focusing on strategies, challenges, and innovations in digital-based character education. Using qualitative content analysis of 22 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025, the study identifies recurring patterns and contextual differences in the implementation of values learning across various countries. The findings highlight that approaches such as digital storytelling, gamified moral tasks, and project-based learning significantly foster student engagement, empathy, and ethical reasoning. However, key challenges remain, including inadequate teacher training, culturally irrelevant content, and limited infrastructure. The novelty of this research lies in its ecosystemic perspective, proposing a holistic framework that links pedagogy, technology, school culture, and local wisdom into one cohesive character education model. Unlike previous studies that isolate digital literacy from moral development, this research emphasizes participatory learning and student co-creation of values-based digital content. The study also introduces the concept of "contextual moral engagement," where values are integrated into students' daily lives through culturally grounded digital practices. In conclusion, digital integration in values education should move beyond tool-based interventions toward holistic, culture-sensitive, and participatory frameworks that empower students as moral agents in the digital age.

Keywords: digital values education, character development, elementary school, participatory learning, local wisdom

INTRODUCTION

Character education plays a fundamental role in shaping young learners' moral, emotional, and social development, particularly during the formative years of elementary schooling. Theories such as moral development (Kohlberg) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner) emphasize that values must be internalized through consistent interaction with teachers, school culture, and family environments (Hadi, Nursyam, & Lestari, 2025). These frameworks support the integration of values education across curriculum, co-curricular activities, and everyday student-teacher interactions (Farida, Yulianti, & Rachmawati, 2024). In early education, this integration is critical, as students

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are especially receptive to modeling and habituation during this developmental stage (Junaidi & Rohmani, 2024). Teachers serve as moral exemplars, influencing student attitudes through both explicit instruction and implicit behavior (Judijanto, Arifin, & Herawan, 2025). School-wide rituals, collaborative learning, and structured moral discourse further enhance the development of honesty, empathy, and responsibility (Sihombing, Widodo, & Pratiwi, 2024). However, traditional values education often lacks engagement and contextual relevance, reducing its impact on actual behavior (Yuliana, 2025). This necessitates a shift toward more interactive, meaningful, and context-sensitive character education models.

The integration of digital media into values education represents a transformative opportunity to reimagine how moral instruction is delivered in modern classrooms. Interactive tools such as digital storytelling, gamified apps, and online reflection platforms can support moral reasoning, empathy, and ethical decision-making when aligned with pedagogical goals (Astawa, Sadri, & Temaja, 2025). Constructivist learning theory suggests that children internalize values more effectively through active engagement and real-life application—both of which are enhanced by well-designed digital environments (Casmana, Widiyantje, & Fadillah, 2022). Recent research shows that when digital tools incorporate local cultural elements and involve student participation, the learning experience becomes more meaningful and memorable (Fitriah et al., 2025). Moreover, digital integration fosters digital citizenship and ethical technology use, two competencies critical in 21st-century education (Mahmuddah, Fitriah, & Setiawan, 2025). Despite this promise, many educators still lack the training and confidence to facilitate moral learning through digital platforms (Yuliana, 2025). There is also limited empirical evidence on long-term character outcomes from digital values learning programs, especially in elementary settings (Junaidi & Rohmani, 2024). Therefore, reimagining character education in the digital age requires a framework that is participatory, ecosystemic, and grounded in both pedagogy and cultural relevance.

Despite strong national and institutional policies supporting character education, its practical implementation in elementary classrooms remains inconsistent and underdeveloped. Many schools still treat values education as an add-on rather than a core component of the curriculum, often sidelined by standardized academic demands (Yuliani, Kurniawan, & Suryani, 2024). Teachers acknowledge the importance of moral learning but frequently lack the pedagogical tools and confidence to facilitate character development meaningfully (Yuliana, 2025). Additionally, values instruction tends to be cognitive and lecture-based, limiting students' emotional engagement and behavioral transformation (Hadi, Nursyam, & Lestari, 2025). The absence of systematic evaluation tools further complicates the ability to monitor progress or adjust interventions (Hasibuan & Nasution, 2024). Often, character education is implemented sporadically or informally, with no clear link to broader school culture or digital learning opportunities (Junaidi & Rohmani, 2024). This results in values education that is more performative than transformative. Without a cohesive structure or reinforcement through school-wide

routines, moral learning rarely extends beyond the classroom (Judijanto, Arifin, & Herawan, 2025).

Although digital tools have potential to enhance values education, schools struggle with effective integration due to various structural and contextual barriers. Many teachers are unfamiliar with how to utilize digital media for moral instruction, resulting in either avoidance or superficial use of technology (Mahmuddah, Fitriah, & Setiawan, 2025). Infrastructure disparities across regions further widen the digital divide, limiting access to moral learning resources, especially in rural or underfunded schools (Megawati & Prahmana, 2024). Moreover, available digital character education content often lacks cultural relevance or adaptability to local school contexts (Farida, Yulianti, & Rachmawati, 2024). Studies show that values-based digital tools are rarely integrated into lesson plans or aligned with national curricula, reducing their pedagogical effectiveness (Astawa, Sadri, & Temaja, 2025). There is also minimal emphasis on student agency in current digital values programs, which tend to be teacher-led and didactic (JIPEUradeun Study, 2025). Additionally, there is a lack of empirical data on long-term impacts of digital moral instruction on real-life behavior, particularly at the primary level (Fitriah et al., 2025). These challenges underscore the need for teacher training, culturally relevant content, and student-centered digital design in values education (Casmana, Widiyantje, & Fadillah, 2022).

Although values education has been widely studied, few investigations have examined how digital media can be effectively and sustainably integrated into character development for elementary students. Existing literature tends to separate digital pedagogy from moral instruction, leading to a lack of unified frameworks that combine both domains in early education (Fitriah et al., 2025). Many studies focus on secondary education or general moral theory, overlooking the specific developmental needs and learning styles of younger children (Ramadhani, Kusumawardani, & Alfian, 2024). Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence on how localized, culturally relevant digital tools impact students' real-life character outcomes (Astawa, Sadri, & Temaja, 2025). Digital values education also often neglects participatory elements, missing opportunities to empower students as co-creators of moral content (JIPEUradeun Study, 2025). The scarcity of mixed-method research combining behavior observation, digital engagement metrics, and cultural adaptation adds to the gap (Mahmuddah, Fitriah, & Setiawan, 2025). Additionally, few models address the alignment between digital moral content, teacher training, and school culture in a systemic way (Megawati & Prahmana, 2024). This study aims to fill that gap by proposing an integrative, ecosystemic approach that connects pedagogy, digital tools, and contextual realities in character education.

This study offers novelty by proposing a comprehensive, ecosystemic framework that integrates digital media, teacher modeling, school culture, and student agency into a unified model for values education in elementary schools. Unlike previous research that treats digital tools as supplementary to moral instruction, this study positions them as central, participatory, and culturally adaptive components of character formation (Astawa, Sadri, & Temaja, 2025). It also highlights student co-creation—such as

designing digital storytelling, reflection videos, and moral games—as a strategy to foster deeper value internalization (JIPEUradeun Study, 2025). Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need to localize digital content by embedding cultural and religious wisdom into media design (Farida, Yulianti, & Rachmawati, 2024). Most current literature lacks integrative models that combine these elements into a single operational structure for early-grade learners (Fitriah et al., 2025). This study responds to that gap by bridging digital pedagogy with moral theory and practical school realities. Its innovation lies not only in content delivery but in shifting values education from teacher-led transmission to interactive, student-centered learning. Thus, the study contributes a fresh lens for reconceptualizing character education in the digital era.

The primary objective of this study is to examine how digital-based values education can be systematically integrated into elementary school environments to promote character development. It seeks to identify the key strategies, tools, and contextual factors—such as teacher readiness, school culture, and digital infrastructure—that influence the success of such integration (Mahmuddah, Fitriah, & Setiawan, 2025). The study also aims to explore how culturally relevant content and participatory approaches can enhance the internalization of values such as empathy, honesty, and responsibility (Ramadhani, Kusumawardani, & Alfian, 2024). Additionally, it intends to uncover the challenges that hinder effective implementation, particularly in under-resourced school settings. Another goal is to propose an ecosystemic framework that aligns digital pedagogy, character values, and contextual realities in a coherent model (Megawati & Prahmana, 2024). By doing so, the research will provide practical guidance for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers. It also aims to contribute to the academic discourse by filling existing gaps in digital character education literature (Fitriah et al., 2025). Ultimately, the study aspires to reimagine values education in a way that resonates with the needs of 21st-century learners.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literature review method to investigate how digital-based values education can be integrated into elementary school settings. The review systematically analyzes 22 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025, selected based on their relevance to character education, digital pedagogy, and primary school contexts (Aryasutha, 2025). Data sources were obtained from reputable academic databases such as Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and DOAJ using keyword combinations like “digital values education,” “character development,” and “elementary schools” (Syafika & Marwa, 2024). The inclusion criteria covered empirical and theoretical studies focused on digital character education in early grades, written in English or Bahasa Indonesia. Exclusion criteria included studies with unclear methodology or those not directly related to primary education. All selected articles were organized using Zotero and analyzed through thematic coding to extract recurring concepts and contextual variations (Hadi, Nursyam, & Lestari, 2025). This literature-based approach is appropriate because it allows for a broad understanding of trends,

challenges, and innovations while identifying research gaps. The method supports the study's goal to synthesize current knowledge and propose a holistic framework for digital values education in primary education settings.

The data collection process in this study was conducted through systematic searches of educational databases including Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, and DOAJ. Boolean keyword combinations such as "character education," "digital values," "elementary school," and "digital pedagogy" were used to refine results (Syafika & Marwa, 2024). The inclusion criteria required studies to be published between 2020 and 2025, peer-reviewed, and focused specifically on values education at the elementary level. A total of 45 articles were initially identified, and after applying screening filters, 22 were selected for in-depth analysis (Aryasutha, 2025). Articles not meeting methodological transparency, relevance to primary education, or digital integration focus were excluded. All selected studies were stored and managed using Zotero to ensure consistency and traceability. Metadata such as title, year, journal, country, and research design were recorded in a data extraction table. This systematic process ensured the selected literature reflected diverse regions, contexts, and values education practices.

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and innovations in digital-based values education. Articles were first read thoroughly, and then coded using both deductive categories (such as "teacher role," "digital strategy," "assessment," and "cultural context") and inductive codes that emerged during reading (Hadi, Nursyam, & Lestari, 2025). Thematic matrices were developed to compare findings across different regions, educational levels, and technological applications. Special attention was paid to under-researched themes such as participatory learning, student agency, and localized digital media. Cross-study comparison enabled identification of successful strategies, unresolved challenges, and contextual adaptations (Syafika & Marwa, 2024). This analytical method allowed the synthesis of diverse evidence into a coherent framework for digital character education. The thematic analysis also revealed significant literature gaps, particularly around long-term behavioral outcomes and culturally embedded digital practices. The approach was suitable for summarizing trends and forming theoretical insights to guide future empirical research (Aryasutha, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The literature review identified several effective strategies for integrating digital tools into values education at the elementary level. Key approaches include digital storytelling, character-based animations, and gamified learning platforms designed to promote empathy, cooperation, and respect. As shown in Table 1, the most frequently cited strategy was project-based learning with moral reflection tasks delivered through digital platforms. This approach encourages students to engage actively with moral dilemmas while developing their creativity and digital literacy. Teacher-led modeling through online forums or video messages was also noted as a valuable tool in guiding students' moral thinking. Most studies emphasized the importance of aligning content

with local culture and student life to make values more relatable. Schools that embedded digital moral lessons in daily routines saw more consistent behavioral outcomes. These strategies underscore the importance of interactive, contextualized digital learning to foster character development.

Table 1. Digital Strategies for Values Education in Elementary Schools

Strategy	Frequency (Studies)	Sample Tools Used	Learning Focus
Project-Based Learning	14	Google Classroom, Padlet	Responsibility, empathy
Digital Storytelling	10	Storybird, Canva	Empathy, honesty
Gamified Moral Quizzes	9	Kahoot, Classcraft	Integrity, decision-making
Video-Based Role Modeling	7	Teacher-recorded moral scenarios	Role modeling, reflection
Collaborative Blogging	5	Kidblog, Edublogs	Expressing values, discussion

Despite these promising strategies, implementation faces several challenges, particularly related to teacher readiness, content adaptation, and infrastructure limitations. Table 2 presents recurring barriers categorized by frequency and education context. Many teachers lack digital pedagogical training, leading to underutilization or misalignment of digital tools with moral objectives. Furthermore, character education resources are often generic and fail to reflect local cultural narratives, reducing student engagement and value internalization. Schools in rural areas also face serious infrastructure gaps that limit consistent integration of technology. Several articles pointed out a lack of systemic support from school leaders and inadequate collaboration with parents in reinforcing digital values at home. Finally, monitoring tools to assess student character growth through digital platforms remain underdeveloped. These findings highlight that without ecosystemic support—spanning curriculum, training, and infrastructure—digital values education risks being tokenistic rather than transformative.

Table 2. Challenges in Digital-Based Character Education Implementation

Challenge	Frequency (Studies)	Affected Context	Description
Teacher digital training gaps	13	Urban & rural	Lack of competence in using digital moral tools
Cultural irrelevance of content	11	Multicultural classrooms	Content does not match local wisdom or context
Limited internet and device access	10	Rural schools	Infrastructure limitations hinder digital learning
Weak parent–school collaboration	7	General	Lack of reinforcement of values at home
No standard character assessment tools	6	National	Difficulty evaluating values-based behavior online

The findings demonstrate that while digital strategies such as project-based learning, storytelling, and gamified moral activities effectively support character development, their success is highly dependent on contextual alignment and teacher competence. The integration of moral content into digital platforms is most impactful when it reflects students' cultural backgrounds and daily experiences, reinforcing theories of contextual and experiential learning (Fitriah et al., 2025). However, barriers such as limited infrastructure and inadequate teacher training continue to impede implementation, particularly in rural and underserved schools (Megawati & Prahmana, 2024). These challenges align with broader findings that emphasize the need for systemic support—including curriculum adaptation, stakeholder collaboration, and ongoing digital literacy training—to optimize character education outcomes (Mahmuddah, Fitriah, & Setiawan, 2025). Furthermore, the lack of standardized assessment tools limits the ability to track behavioral impact and improve program quality (Aryasutha, 2025). This reinforces the necessity of developing evaluation models tailored to digital moral instruction. Ultimately, the research underscores that technology alone is insufficient—values education must be embedded in a responsive, participatory ecosystem that supports moral development holistically.

The literature reveals a growing consensus that the integration of digital media into character education is most effective when rooted in constructivist and participatory learning theories. Tools like digital storytelling, gamification, and collaborative platforms are shown to improve emotional engagement and ethical reflection in young learners (Casmana, Widiantie, & Fadillah, 2022). However, their effectiveness depends on teachers' pedagogical capacity and the cultural alignment of content (Fitriah et al., 2025). Research suggests that moral learning should not be separated from technology use but rather embedded into everyday digital classroom practices (Mahmuddah, Fitriah, & Setiawan, 2025). When values are transmitted through interactive and student-centered digital activities, such as moral scenario games or peer video projects, students demonstrate better internalization of empathy, respect, and responsibility (Astawa, Sadri, & Temaja, 2025). Additionally, localized content rooted in indigenous and religious values reinforces identity and relevance in students' moral development (Ramadhani, Kusumawardani, & Alfian, 2024). Yet, despite these benefits, many schools still treat character education and digital learning as separate initiatives, limiting their potential (Judijanto, Arifin, & Herawan, 2025). This disconnection underscores the need for integrative frameworks that unite pedagogy, media, and culture.

Several studies highlight the central role of teachers as both digital facilitators and moral exemplars, particularly in early education. Yet, gaps in training, confidence, and systemic support often hinder educators from utilizing digital tools to promote values education effectively (Yuliana, 2025). Studies emphasize that professional development programs must include not only technical skills but also ethical instruction and culturally responsive pedagogy (Megawati & Prahmana, 2024). Ecosystemic alignment between curriculum, teacher behavior, school culture, and family engagement has been cited as essential for the sustainability of digital moral instruction (Farida, Yulianti, &

Rachmawati, 2024). Moreover, character values taught digitally are best reinforced through school rituals, peer collaboration, and reflective discussions led by teachers (Hadi, Nursyam, & Lestari, 2025). Without structural integration, character education often becomes fragmented or superficial, even with access to modern technologies (Yuliani, Kurniawan, & Suryani, 2024). Literature also calls for policy-level attention to ensure moral instruction is not marginalised in favor of academic performance metrics (Hasibuan & Nasution, 2024). Therefore, the literature confirms that successful integration of digital values education requires both micro-level strategies and macro-level educational reforms (Syafika & Marwa, 2024).

This study offers a new perspective by integrating digital pedagogy, localized cultural content, and school ecosystem alignment into a unified model for values education in elementary schools. While existing studies often treat digital tools and moral education separately, this research bridges the two into a cohesive and interactive framework (Fitriah et al., 2025). The study introduces the concept of “ecosystemic digital values education,” where character development is not limited to classroom instruction but is reinforced through digital co-creation, teacher modeling, and parental engagement (Farida, Yulianti, & Rachmawati, 2024). It also emphasizes the shift from didactic delivery toward student-centered, technology-enhanced moral learning, where children participate actively in producing moral messages through media such as video blogs and interactive stories (Astawa, Sadri, & Temaja, 2025). Unlike prior models that focus solely on curriculum or content, this study recognizes the influence of infrastructure, culture, and leadership as integral components. As such, it positions character education as a systemic innovation rather than a stand-alone intervention (Mahmuddah, Fitriah, & Setiawan, 2025). This broader conceptualization has not yet been fully explored in existing Indonesian or Southeast Asian elementary school contexts (Ramadhani, Kusumawardani, & Alfian, 2024).

Another unique contribution of this study lies in its emphasis on participatory values learning, where students are not passive recipients but active agents in shaping digital moral content. Most prior research focuses on teacher-led instruction or top-down curriculum design, while this study encourages bottom-up innovation through student involvement in creating digital narratives, discussion boards, and value-based projects (JIPEUradeun Study, 2025). Furthermore, the research integrates local wisdom, religious teachings, and socio-cultural relevance into digital character education design—an aspect rarely prioritized in global character education models (Ramadhani, Kusumawardani, & Alfian, 2024). The novelty is further strengthened by identifying the importance of emotional engagement and contextual reflection, achieved through interactive media rather than conventional lectures (Casmara, Widiantie, & Fadillah, 2022). This approach aligns with current educational technology trends that favor student voice, creativity, and moral expression within safe digital environments (Megawati & Prahmana, 2024). Unlike standard digital literacy programs, this model emphasizes ethical citizenship and personal growth, providing an integrated roadmap for both cognitive and affective character development. Therefore, this research enriches the global discourse on digital moral

education with a culturally rooted, participatory framework relevant to diverse educational settings.

This study provides significant global value by offering a scalable and culturally adaptable framework for integrating digital tools into values education at the primary level. In an era where moral decline and digital overexposure among children are increasingly global concerns, this research proposes a balanced model that fosters ethical awareness alongside digital fluency. It contributes to international discourse by presenting an Indonesian-based approach that integrates local wisdom into digital character learning—something often absent in Western-centric models (Farida, Yulianti, & Rachmawati, 2024). The emphasis on student participation, teacher modeling, and school-family collaboration offers universal relevance for character development policies worldwide (Fitriah et al., 2025). Moreover, the framework aligns with global education agendas such as UNESCO’s Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), which promotes values-based learning through innovative pedagogy (Mahmuddah, Fitriah, & Setiawan, 2025). The study may inspire educators and policymakers in culturally diverse or resource-limited settings to design ethical learning ecosystems that are both tech-driven and values-rooted. Its participatory and contextual methodology is especially applicable to nations balancing modernization with moral preservation in early education.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that integrating digital media into values education holds significant potential for enhancing character development among elementary school students, particularly when implemented through participatory, contextual, and culturally relevant strategies. Effective approaches include digital storytelling, project-based learning, and gamified moral tasks, which foster deeper engagement with ethical concepts. However, successful implementation depends heavily on teacher readiness, infrastructure availability, and alignment with school culture and local values. The research also reveals critical gaps in teacher training and evaluation systems that limit the effectiveness of digital moral instruction. A systemic, ecosystemic model—combining pedagogy, culture, technology, and stakeholder collaboration—is essential for sustainable values education. This study offers a novel framework that centers students as co-creators of digital moral narratives. Ultimately, digital-based character education must be holistic, localized, and integrated into everyday school practices to have lasting impact.

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