THE ROLE OF CHARACTER EDUCATION IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how character education contributes to enhancing students' civic engagement through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Using the PRISMA 2020 framework, this review systematically identified, screened, and evaluated journal articles from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar published between 2015 and 2025. A total of 100 eligible peer-reviewed articles were included and analyzed using bibliometric mapping (VOSviewer) and narrative thematic synthesis. The VOSviewer network visualization positioned "character education" as the most central and dominant keyword, strongly connected to "student," "school," "implementation," and "values education," indicating that character education functions as a core axis in civic-related educational discourse. The thematic findings reveal five main pathways through which character education strengthens civic engagement: (1) internalization of values that transforms moral understanding into meaningful civic actions, (2) civic identity formation that reinforces students' sense of collective responsibility, (3) development of prosocial skills and social responsibility that broadens everyday civic participation, (4) supportive school climate and institutional culture that provides democratic spaces for student involvement, and (5) digital citizenship that guides ethical civic participation in online environments. Overall, the findings confirm that character education serves as a "moral engine" that supports sustainable, reflective, and inclusive civic engagement beyond normative civic knowledge. Future research should focus on more standardized civic engagement measurement, explore mediating factors such as civic identity and school climate, and further examine character-based civic engagement within digitally mediated contexts.

Keywords: Character education; civic engagement; digital citizenship; school climate; values education

1. INTRODUCTION

Democratic life today faces serious challenges because civic participation especially among younger generations does not always grow in parallel with the rapid currents of globalization and digitalization (Saud et al., 2023; Suhendar et al., 2023). This situation arises because shifts in the information ecosystem make young citizens more vulnerable to disinformation, polarization, and an "instant culture" that weakens concern for the public sphere and deliberative processes (Suhendar et al., 2023). Various policy reports emphasize that declining civic participation can be observed through weakening trust in public institutions and increasingly unequal political involvement, making citizen participation a crucial issue for social cohesion. The OECD also highlights that this trend signals the urgency of educational interventions to prepare young citizens who are able to participate meaningfully in democratic societies (Gottschalk & Borhan, 2023; Mertanen & Brunila, 2024). Therefore, strengthening students' civic engagement cannot rely solely on civic knowledge; it must be supported by character formation that cultivates care, responsibility, and public ethics.

Academically, civic engagement has been examined as a multidimensional construct that encompasses knowledge, attitudes, and participatory behaviors, while character education is increasingly viewed as a foundation that reinforces these dimensions (Alam et al., 2023; Ardoin et al., 2023). This relationship is logical because character education plays a role in instilling moral values, empathy, integrity, and social commitment prerequisites for the emergence of active civic orientations among adolescents. The ICCS 2022 framework positions civic attitudes and engagement as key domains influenced by school factors, learning processes, and civic culture, including participation through digital technology (Gómez & Suárez, 2023). Additional evidence from systematic studies on civic engagement in citizenship education indicates the need to strengthen experiential learning models and more precise evaluation to foster tangible civic involvement (Jerome et al., 2024; Myoung & Liou, 2022). Thus, the literature suggests that civic engagement does not stand alone as an outcome of the civic curriculum, but is closely linked to the internalization of character values as an "ethical energy" that drives social participation.

Based on these social conditions and developments in the literature, this article seeks to systematically map how character education contributes to enhancing students' civic engagement by synthesizing the findings of recent research (Hanafiah et al., 2024; Maulana & Milanti, 2023). This objective is important because scattered studies often discuss character education and civic engagement separately, creating a need for integrated evidence to explain the mechanisms of influence in a clearer and more testable manner. A systematic literature review approach enables researchers to screen, evaluate, and synthesize empirical studies to produce a comprehensive overview of intervention patterns, implementation contexts, and the most consistent civic engagement outcomes. Moreover, this synthesis is highly relevant to contemporary citizenship education needs, which demand not only "good students" in an academic sense but also "active citizens" who behave ethically in both digital and offline public spheres. Hence, this article aims to clarify the contribution of character education as a pedagogical strategy for strengthening civic engagement within the context of modern schooling.

The main argument of this article asserts that character education constitutes a strategic pathway for enhancing civic engagement because it operates on students' internal dimensions values, moral judgment, and social habits which are essential prerequisites for consistent civic action. This argument is well grounded because civic engagement is shaped not only by external stimuli such as school programs or organizational activities, but also by personal dispositions such as integrity, empathy, responsibility, and commitment to the common good all of which are core targets of character education (Suhendar & Halimi, 2023). Conceptual evidence from the ICCS indicates that civic engagement involves attitudes and participatory tendencies shaped through learning experiences in schools and social environments, including digital spaces that increasingly determine how young people engage civically (Alva et al., 2023). From a policy perspective, the OECD also argues that declining civic participation should be addressed through educational strengthening that cultivates democratic competencies and social cohesion (Timidi & Okuro, 2024). Therefore, character education can be understood as a "moral engine" that ensures civic engagement goes beyond normative knowledge and is transformed into reflective, inclusive, and sustainable civic practice.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to comprehensively analyze the role of character education in enhancing students' civic engagement (Alvinca, 2025). The selection of the SLR approach was based on the need to produce a transparent, replicable synthesis of scientific evidence grounded in rigorous selection procedures. The reporting process of this review followed the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, particularly in the stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and the final inclusion of articles for analysis (Page et al., 2021).

The research data sources were obtained from reputable academic databases widely used in education and social science studies, namely Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The literature search was conducted using Boolean operators by combining key terms relevant to the two core variables of the study (character education and civic engagement).

The keyword strings used included:
- "character education" OR "moral education" OR "values education"
- "civic engagement" OR "civic participation" OR "citizenship engagement"
- student OR school OR adolescent

Accordingly, the main search query was formulated as follows:
("character education" OR "moral education" OR "values education") AND ("civic engagement" OR "civic participation" OR "citizenship engagement") AND (student OR school OR adolescent).

To ensure relevance to developments in modern education and digital citizenship, the search was limited to articles published between 2015 and 2025, and only peer-reviewed journal articles were included.
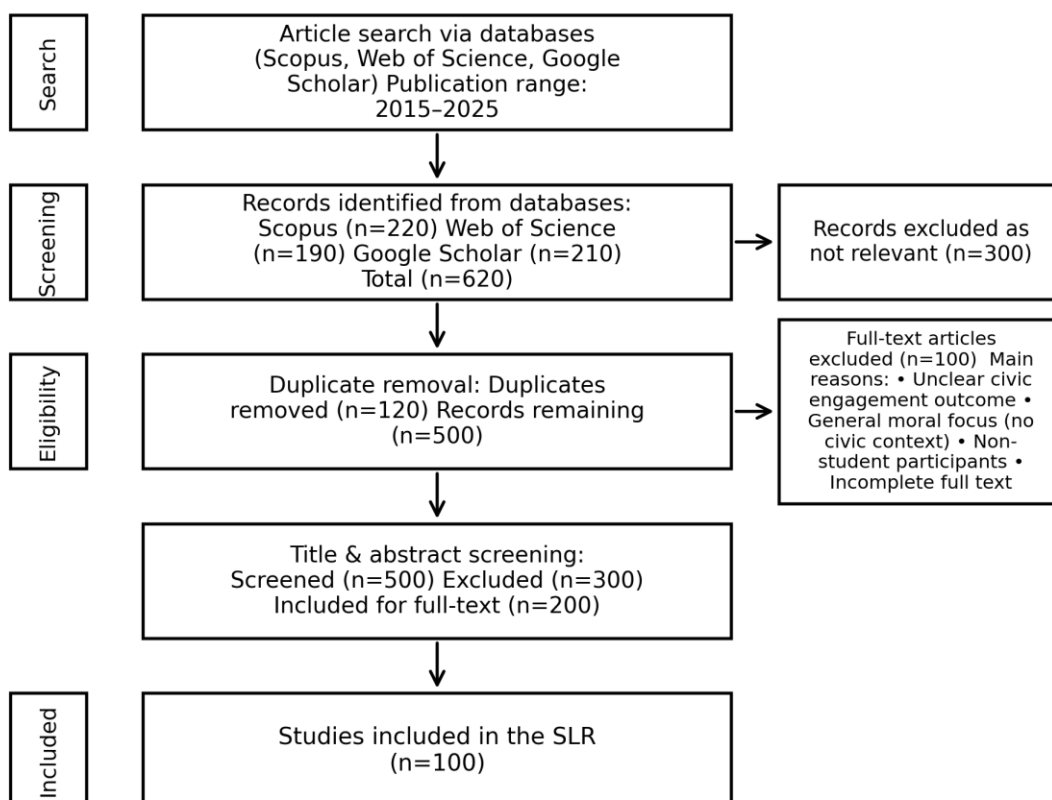
Figure 1. prism analysis

Based on Figure 1, data from the 100 eligible articles were then extracted using a systematic matrix comprising the following components:

- Article identity (authors, year, journal);
- Research location/context (country, school level);
- Research design (quantitative/qualitative/mixed methods);
- Forms of character education (curriculum, school programs, interventions, school culture);
- Civic engagement indicators (civic attitudes, participation, civic responsibility, social concern);
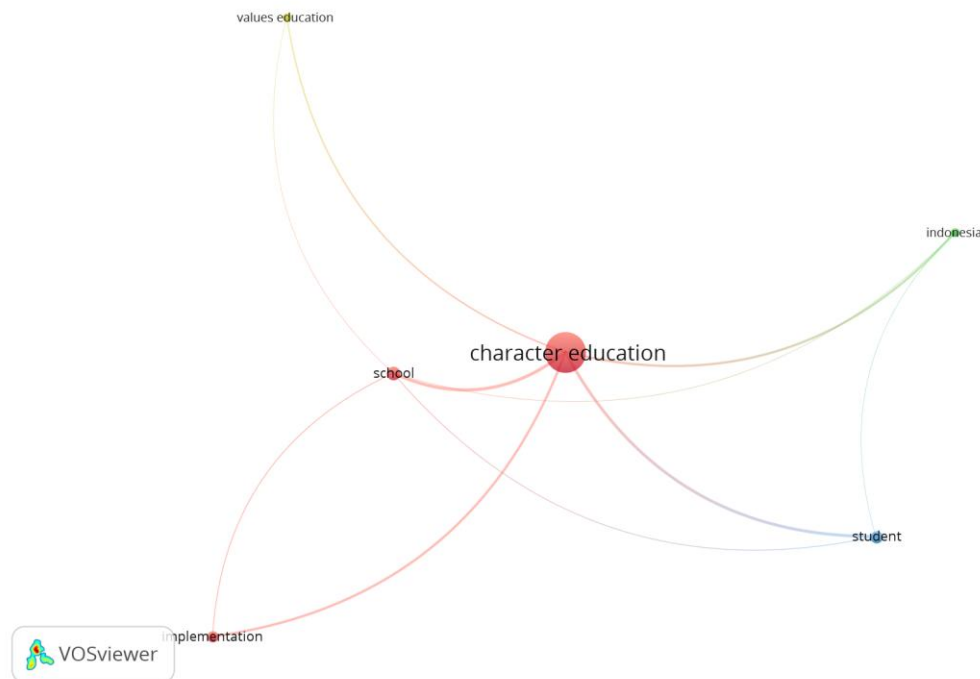- Key findings and research implications

3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Character Education as the Foundation of Civic Engagement

Based on the VOSviewer network visualization, "character education" in Figure 2 appears as the largest and most central node, indicating that this keyword is a core topic in the collection of 100 reviewed articles. The dominant node size indicates a high frequency of occurrence, while its position in the center of the network confirms that character education serves as the main axis connecting various other concepts relevant to student engagement in social and public life. This visual finding supports the statement in

Subsection 3.1 that character education serves as a moral and social foundation that encourages students' readiness to participate in the civic sphere.

Figure 2. Network visualization "character education"

Furthermore, the most visible relationship is the strong connection between "character education" and the nodes "student" and "school." These two nodes indicate that the discourse on character education in the literature is largely situated in the context of students as the primary actors and schools as the institutional spaces where civic values are formed. This interconnectedness reinforces the argument presented in Subsection 3.1 that character does not develop merely as normative knowledge, but through an institutionalized educational process within schools and is embedded in students' learning experiences. In other words, civic engagement in this body of research is positioned as an outcome of the educational ecosystem, rather than simply the result of external socio-political factors (Evans et al., 2020).

The node "implementation" appears on the side of the network and is connected to "character education" through "school." This suggests that many articles do not only discuss character education conceptually, but also emphasize practical aspects of implementation within school environments for example, through habituation programs, curriculum integration, social project activities, and the strengthening of school culture. This relationship aligns with the core narrative of Subsection 3.1, which conceptualizes character education as a "moral engine" that transforms civic education from an abstract concept into real practice. The "implementation–school–character education" linkage confirms that the formation of civic engagement is strongly influenced by how character education is operationalized, not merely promoted as a normative ideal.

In addition, the node "values education" emerges as directly connected to the core ("character education"). Interpretively, this indicates that character education in the

literature is often understood as closely intersecting with values education that is, the process of internalizing ethical values such as integrity, empathy, responsibility, and justice (Saragih et al., 2025; L. Sun, 2025). Although the term "civic engagement" does not explicitly appear in the VOSviewer map you shared, the strong relationship between character education and values education suggests that the dataset emphasizes moral disposition and attitudinal readiness as the foundations of civic participation. This is fully consistent with Subsection 3.1, where civic engagement is not understood as formal participation alone, but rather as rooted in internal values that sustain long-term involvement.

Interestingly, the node "Indonesia" appears as a distinct node connected to "character education" and "student." This indicates that part of the literature within the 100 analyzed articles has a strong geographical focus or case-study emphasis on the Indonesian context. Therefore, the findings in Subsection 3.1 regarding the formation of civic engagement among secondary school adolescents are not only broadly relevant but also supported by strong empirical grounding in Indonesia's national education context, which is widely recognized for promoting character education as both a policy program and a school-culture initiative. The presence of the "Indonesia" node also implies that character education research is intertwined with specific socio-cultural dynamics that shape students' civic attitudes and participatory dispositions.

Overall, this VOSviewer map presents a structure that is consistent with Subsection 3.1: character education functions as the main hub connecting students, schools, implementation, and values education as key components in the formation of civic engagement. This means that civic engagement in this context can be understood as the cumulative result of moral value internalization (values education), school institutional processes (school), students' lived experiences (student), and program implementation strategies (implementation) (Lin, 2015). Through this synthesis, the VOSviewer network visualization confirms that character education serves as a moral social foundation that moves civic engagement from a conceptual domain toward practices that are more concrete, reflective, and sustainable.

Internalization of Values: From Moral Knowing to Civic Doing

The first and most dominant theme is that character education enhances civic engagement through the internalization of values (Komalasari & Saripudin, 2018). Studies within this category emphasize that effective character learning does not stop at delivering moral concepts (moral knowing), but encourages students to reach the stages of moral feeling and moral action (Rawanoko et al., 2021). When values such as responsibility, care for others, and integrity become part of students' everyday habits, civic engagement increases naturally, particularly in the form of concrete social actions.

In several studies, value internalization occurs through habituation-based approaches, self-reflection practices, and repeated prosocial actions. For instance, character education programs that integrate social activities (such as donations, community service, environmental clean-up campaigns, and collective community work) have been shown to increase students' willingness to participate in public activities without external pressure. These results indicate that internalized character values become an intrinsic motivation that drives civic behavior (Y. Sun et al., 2023).

The analysis of this theme reinforces the argument that character education is a strategic pathway for building civic engagement because it touches the core foundation of action students' value structures and ethical orientations (Evans et al., 2020). When moral values are transformed into social habits, civic engagement is no longer merely a "ceremonial" activity, but rather becomes a form of meaningful participation.

Civic Identity Formation: Character Education as a Shaper of Young Citizens' Identity

The second theme indicates that character education plays a role in shaping civic identity, namely how students understand themselves as part of a social community that carries collective responsibilities (Mas' ud et al., 2024). Many articles explain that students who are consistently exposed to character education programs tend to develop higher self-awareness regarding their role as members of society and demonstrate a more participatory orientation toward public issues (Purwaningsih, 2024).

In these studies, the formation of civic identity generally emerges through a combination of (1) value-based narratives within the school environment, (2) teachers' role modeling, and (3) participatory experiences that provide students with opportunities to "act as citizens" on a small scale. In this context, character is not merely a personal attribute but becomes a marker of social identity that shapes how students interact, respond to problems, and position themselves within their community dynamics.

From an analytical perspective, civic identity can be viewed as a "bridge" that explains why character education can strengthen civic engagement in a sustainable manner. Students who already perceive themselves as responsible citizens are more likely to engage consistently in social actions because such engagement becomes part of their self-definition, rather than simply an academic obligation or a school requirement.

Prosocial Skills and Social Responsibility: Character Education Fostering Care and Social Action

The third theme focuses on the contribution of character education to enhancing prosocial skills and social responsibility (Alfirević et al., 2023). In many articles, civic engagement is measured through indicators such as willingness to help others, cooperative tendencies, empathy toward vulnerable groups, and readiness to contribute to solving social problems.

Character education generally builds prosocial skills through collaborative learning, value-based activities, and ethical communication practice within the school environment (Syafe'i, 2017). The reviewed studies indicate that students who consistently receive character reinforcement are better able to develop tolerance, respect for differences, and inclusive attitudes. Ultimately, this broadens the forms of students' civic engagement, not only within school organizations but also in their everyday social interactions.

The analysis of this theme suggests that civic engagement is not always expressed through formal political activities; rather, it includes the most fundamental forms of social involvement the ability to become citizens who are caring, empowered, and responsible. In this sense, character education functions as "social capital" that strengthens interpersonal relationships and students' collective capacity to build a healthy community.

School Climate and Institutional Culture: Civic Engagement Grows Through a Supportive Environment

The fourth theme emphasizes that the effectiveness of character education in enhancing civic engagement is highly dependent on school climate and institutional culture (Ariani et al., 2022). Articles included in this theme indicate that character education produces a stronger impact when schools establish a tangible value system such as fair rules, a culture of dialogue, democratic practices, and supportive teacher–student relationships.

In these studies, civic engagement develops because schools provide concrete spaces for participation, such as classroom deliberations, student forums, leadership programs, student organizations, and social project–based learning models. A positive school climate strengthens students' engagement because they feel safe, respected, and given opportunities to express their opinions. This aligns with the assumption that civic engagement requires a sense of belonging and the belief that students' contributions are meaningful.

The analysis of this theme highlights that character education should not be implemented merely as instructional content; rather, it must be embodied as a cultural system. If schools only teach values without demonstrating them in practice, students' civic engagement tends to become superficial or merely formalistic.

Digital Citizenship and Contemporary Engagement: Civic Engagement in the Era of Social Media

Another prominent theme in the literature is the relationship between character education and civic engagement within the context of digital citizenship (Li et al., 2025). Several articles indicate that students' civic engagement today increasingly takes place through social media, online communities, and other forms of digital participation (Oden & Porter, 2023). In this context, character education functions as an ethical control mechanism to prevent students' digital participation from turning into destructive behaviors such as hate speech, cyberbullying, or the spread of misinformation (Akbar & Armiyanti, 2023).

Studies within this theme emphasize that character education strengthens the moral dimensions of technology use, including digital responsibility, communication ethics, and tolerance for diversity. In this way, character education becomes a critical instrument for guiding digital civic engagement so that it remains constructive and oriented toward the public good.

Analytically, digital civic engagement reinforces the urgency of this study because students' forms of participation have shifted from conventional spaces to algorithm-driven environments. This means that character education remains relevant and is becoming even more essential as a foundation to ensure that civic engagement is not "distorted" by cultures of virality and polarization.

4. CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review (SLR) examined the role of character education in enhancing students' civic engagement by synthesizing evidence from 100 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025. Following the PRISMA 2020 procedure, the review ensured transparent and replicable screening and selection stages, enabling a focused mapping of how character education contributes to students' civic attitudes and participatory orientations within the school context. Overall, the findings confirm that character education functions as a moral and social foundation that strengthens students' readiness to engage in public life, not merely through formal civic participation but also through broader forms of engagement such as social concern, community participation, volunteering, tolerance, and democratic problem-solving.

The bibliometric mapping using VOSviewer further reinforces this conclusion by positioning "character education" as the most central and dominant node, strongly connected to "student," "school," and "implementation." This pattern highlights that the discourse on character education is primarily situated within educational ecosystems where schools serve as institutional spaces for shaping civic values, while students become key actors of civic development. The presence of "values education" as an interconnected node indicates that character education is commonly operationalized through value internalization processes, linking integrity, empathy, responsibility, and justice to the moral dispositions necessary for long-term civic involvement. Moreover, the emergence of "Indonesia" as a connected node suggests that the Indonesian context holds a notable place in the literature, reflecting how national character education agendas are frequently studied as strategies for strengthening civic identity and participation.

The thematic synthesis identified five major pathways through which character education enhances civic engagement. First, character education supports the internalization of values, transforming moral understanding into meaningful civic action. Second, it shapes civic identity by fostering students' awareness of collective responsibility as members of society. Third, it strengthens prosocial skills and social responsibility, broadening civic engagement into everyday social practices. Fourth, it emphasizes the role of school climate and institutional culture, showing that civic engagement grows more strongly when character values are consistently practiced through democratic and supportive school environments. Finally, it highlights the importance of digital citizenship, where character education becomes an ethical compass guiding students' civic participation in online spaces amid contemporary risks such as polarization, hate speech, and misinformation.

In conclusion, character education can be understood as a "moral engine" that enables civic engagement to move beyond normative civic knowledge toward reflective, inclusive, and sustainable civic practices. This review implies that future character education programs should be integrated not only into classroom instruction but also into school culture and experiential learning opportunities, including digital civic engagement contexts. Further studies are recommended to develop more standardized measurements of civic engagement outcomes, explore mediating factors such as civic identity and school climate, and examine how character education interventions respond to evolving participation patterns in the digital era.

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