

Solutions to Building Empathy in Elementary School Students Through Character Education: Literature Review

Adinda Anggi Cantika¹, Candra Utama²

¹Faculty of Education

²Department of Primary Teacher Education, State University of Malang, Malang, Indonesia

*Corresponding author, email: adinda.anggi.2301516@students.um.ac.id, candra.utama.pasca@um.ac.id

Keywords

Character education
Empathy
Elementary school students
Learning strategies

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the most effective and contextualized methods for character education that can foster empathy in elementary school students. Four scientific papers selected from ten original articles based on content quality and relevance were analyzed for this study using the literature review method. The results showed that character education has a significant role in fostering empathy, especially when using strategies such as ecoliteracy, role play, child-friendly learning, social projects, and integration of regional cultural values. However, the main obstacles are inadequate teacher preparation and failure to integrate empathy values into the curriculum. Therefore, to build a learning environment that promotes the development of empathy, educators, educational institutions and policy makers must take a systematic and cooperative approach. It is hoped that this research can serve as a basis for creative and useful character education methods in elementary schools.

1. Introduction

The personality of elementary school students is strongly influenced by character education, especially in terms of teaching the importance of empathy. Building harmonious and civilized social relationships requires empathy, the ability to understand and feel the feelings of others. Students who are taught the importance of empathy at a young age tend to be more socially sensitive, care more about others and recognize differences in the environment around them. Character education not only helps students to succeed academically, but also develops their morals and character over time.

But in reality, there are still many obstacles to overcome before character education can be implemented in primary schools. The main challenges include the scarcity of teaching materials, the absence of training on character-based approaches for teachers, and the lack of methodical approaches to incorporate empathy values into the curriculum. According (Febriani & Sahara, 2024), developing empathy in the classroom requires the right approach to ensure that empathy is not just a ceremonial practice. The authors highlight that if empathy is only taught normatively without enhancing practice during the learning process it will not develop as well as it could.

This shows that there's a gap between theory and practice when it comes to character education in elementary schools. Even though a lot of theories suggest the importance of teaching empathy, how it's actually done in schools isn't really structured and hasn't been talked about much in the literature. This study is here to fill that gap by looking at existing approaches and how they can be more contextual and effective in the classroom.

According to (Safitri, 2020), character education benefits children's overall growth across all cognitive, social and emotional domains. However, these findings also imply that the methods teachers use in the classroom have a significant impact on its success. Unfortunately, many educators still struggle to select and implement teaching strategies that can foster empathy and engage students' affective side. Therefore, a strategy guide that is applicable, contextual, and theoretical is needed.

To support character-based learning approaches, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory provides an important foundation that emphasizes that students' cognitive and social development is shaped through interactions with their environment, including teachers and peers. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). In the context of developing empathy, students need to be given space to actively interact in

collaborative and meaningful activities, so that social values such as caring and tolerance can be formed through real experiences.

In addition, Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986) reinforces the importance of role models in the learning process. Children learn through observation and imitation of the behavior of adults whom they consider role models. Therefore, the role of teachers as empathetic role models is crucial to the success of character education in elementary schools.

A number of studies have examined strategies for using character education to help primary school students become more empathetic. (Hilman et al., 2023), for example, showed how ecoliteracy-based education can foster social awareness of the environment and other living things, thereby increasing students' empathetic attitudes. However, (Atiasih et al., 2023) emphasized the importance of designing a child-friendly learning environment. They explained that children are better able to understand other people's emotions when they are in a fun and psychologically safe learning environment. According to these two studies, contextual techniques are very promising for fostering empathy.

However, there is no comprehensive synthesis that gathers various methods and methodically compares their efficacy. Therefore, a literature review is needed that not only explains existing approaches but also systematically compares their effectiveness, so that the results can be used as a reference by teachers and policymakers in designing more targeted character education.

Based on these conditions, the purpose of this study is to determine the best strategies for using character education to help elementary school students develop empathy. This research is expected to provide specific recommendations for educators and policymakers by looking at the approaches that have been used in different educational situations and the difficulties faced in practicing them. In addition, by offering a relevant and integrated methodology, this research seeks to close the gap in previous literature.

With this study, it is expected that students' social sensitivity can be optimized through character education as a means. A more complete understanding of the factors that influence empathy development will help teachers and policy makers in designing more effective and contextual learning programs. This study is also expected to be an initial foundation for further research that is more in-depth and innovative in the field of character education, especially at the basic education stage.

2. Method

This research uses a literature review method with a descriptive-analytical approach. The purpose of this review is to identify effective strategies in fostering empathy in elementary school students through character education, based on previous research results.

Article sources were obtained through Google Scholar as the main database, using keywords such as: "character education", "empathy in elementary school students", "character learning strategies", and "empathy development in elementary school". The search was conducted on articles published between 2020 and 2025, with inclusive criteria including: (1) articles available in full-text, (2) containing empirical data or theoretical reviews related to character education and empathy, (3) focusing on elementary school level, and (4) published in accredited national or international journals.

From the initial search results, ten articles were obtained that met the basic criteria. After selection based on topic relevance, data quality, and context suitability, four articles were selected for further analysis. The selected articles were considered the most representative because each discussed a different approach to character education and focused directly on the development of empathy in elementary schools. The selection process was carried out in stages, starting with matching titles, reviewing abstracts, and reading the entire article to ensure that the data presented was in-depth and relevant to the focus of the research.

The analysis technique was thematically descriptive, by identifying the main themes, patterns, and similarities and differences in approaches to building student empathy. The analysis process began with reading each article in its entirety, then noting key points related to methods, learning strategies, and findings. After that, the collected data is grouped into several thematic categories such as: types of strategies (e.g., role playing, e-literacy, or child-friendly learning), implementation context, and challenges faced. From here, comparisons are made to see which strategies are most effective, in what context, and with what approach. The findings are then synthesized to obtain a comprehensive and thorough understanding.

3. Results and Discussion

One of the social skills that should be developed from an early age, especially in elementary school, is empathy. Besides making a person more compassionate and caring, the ability to empathize with others increases harmony in social interactions in the school environment. One effective and relevant method to foster noble values through is character education. It is expected that children will grow not only cognitively but also emotionally and socially when principles such as caring, responsibility, and tolerance in the learning process.

Several studies have shown that character-based education can help students develop their empathy. Child-friendly learning approaches, role-playing methods and even diversity-based education have been developed to help students understand the perspectives of others and social situations in the environment around them. This shows that empathy is not only based on moral theory but also on the application of truth and compassion in daily school life.

In classroom practice, role playing can be done in a simple way. For example, teachers can prepare short scenarios about everyday situations that involve feelings, such as a child feeling excluded or a friend experiencing difficulties. Students are asked to play roles and discuss what they feel during role play. Teachers then facilitate joint reflection to explore different perspectives.

Child-friendly learning approaches Teachers play an important role in creating a safe and positive classroom environment where all students feel valued and encouraged to express their opinions and feelings. Activities such as group discussions, story sharing time, or regular activities such as “morning circle” where students are free to express their feelings are examples of child-friendly learning approaches.

For eco-literacy learning, it can be applied through activities such as tending school gardens, cleaning the surrounding environment, or creating environmental observation journals. In this process, students learn about compassion, responsibility, and the interdependence between humans and other living creatures.

Meanwhile, a diversity-based approach can be implemented by encouraging students to learn about each other's history, culture, and customs. Activities such as “class culture day,” sharing stories about families, and playing traditional games from different regions can be simple yet effective ways to foster mutual respect.

However, in practice, much effort is still needed to help students develop empathy through character education. Some of the main obstacles include:

1. Teachers have not yet received sufficient training on how to use empathy-based learning techniques. In addition, teachers are unable to consistently apply character-based approaches due to time constraints and a dense academic curriculum.
2. Schools and parents do not provide maximum support for the development of empathy in students. This also poses a challenge in itself. In some cases, the development of empathy is not part of daily learning and is often considered a personal matter for students or the responsibility of religious teachers and guidance counselors alone.

3. Another obstacle is the absence of clear school policies that support character education. Teachers sometimes place more emphasis on cognitive material than on the development of affective domains such as empathy, especially in the absence of explicit standards or policies.
4. The lack of systematic evaluation of the results of student empathy development is also a challenge. Many schools currently do not have adequate processes or tools for character assessment, as empathy is more difficult to measure than math scores.
5. Therefore, research is needed on various studies that have been conducted to determine efficient methods for developing empathy based on character education in elementary school students.
6. In this research, the author traced a number of scientific articles to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies that have been developed. From the search results, ten articles relevant to the topic were obtained. The articles were then reviewed and selected based on the suitability of the context, the substance of character education and the focus on developing student empathy. After the selection process, 4 most representative articles were selected to be further analyzed in accordance with the purpose of writing and the title of the article. The article selection strategy can be seen in table 1, as follows:

Table 1. Article selection strategy

No	Discussion categories	Search	Search Result
1	Search results Search year 2020-2025	Google	10
2	Relevant Titles	Cendekia	10
3	Presenting different solutions		4
Results discussed			4

Table 2. Strategies for building empathy in elementary school students

Articles	Research Methods	Findings	Solution
IMPLEMENTATION OF CHILD-FRIENDLY LEARNING CONCEPTS IN BUILDING STUDENT EMPHATY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS.	Qualitative Descriptive	This article discusses character education with a child-friendly learning approach.	Child-friendly learning is very effective in creating an environment that supports the development of empathy. This concept emphasizes the importance of creating a safe, comfortable and fun atmosphere for children, where they feel valued and accepted. When children feel valued, they are more likely to understand the feelings of others, which is the basis of empathy.
The role of educators in building children's empathy through the role-playing method in the Aisyiyah 01 Playgroup, Semarang City, Semarang State University, Indonesia, must play the highest role as an agent for	Qualitative	This article discusses building empathy in elementary school students through the Role Playing method.	Educators play an important role in building children's empathy, especially through the role playing method. In this method, students are invited to take part in situations that involve emotions or social

developing
 children's
 empathy that is worthy
 of being
 emulated.
 (Chairunnisa i Raharjo
 2024).

problems. By playing

the role of another
 person, children can

feel and understand
 the other person's
 point of view, which
 strengthens their
 empathy skills.

Teachers as role
 models are also very
 influential in this
 regard, as children
 tend to imitate the
 behavior they see
 around them.

Building Empathy in
 the School
 Environment: The
 Importance of
 Character Education in
 a Diverse Society.
 Innovative
 Multidisciplinary
 Journal.(Febriani i
 Sahara 2024).

Literature
 Review

This article discusses
 building empathy in the
 school environment
 through character
 education.

The importance of
 character education in
 a diverse environment.

At school, children
 come from different
 backgrounds, be it
 culture, religion or
 family values.

Character education
 that teaches tolerance,
 respect and empathy
 will help them to
 coexist peacefully
 despite differences.
 Learning about these
 differences helps
 children to better
 understand others and
 reduce discriminatory
 attitudes.

Ecoliteracy Learning
 to Improve Students'
 Empathy in
 Elementary Schools.
 (Hilman, Akmal, I
 Rahmawati Permana
 2023).

Experiment

This article discusses
 efforts to increase
 students' empathy
 through Ecoliteracy
 learning.

Ecoliteracy education
 that teaches the
 interconnectedness
 between humans and
 the environment can also
 be a means to develop
 empathy. Children who
 are taught to care for
 the environment tend
 to be more sensitive to
 other living things, and
 this can expand their
 empathy not only
 towards fellow humans,
 but also towards nature
 and other living things.

The role-playing method is thought to be more effective in enhancing interpersonal empathy because it involves direct emotional experiences, allowing students to experience being someone else in real situations in addition to learning the theory of empathy. Each approach has its own benefits and contexts of application.

The child-friendly method places a strong emphasis on fostering a polite, safe, and fun learning environment in the classroom, all of which significantly boost children' emotional intelligence and readiness to comprehend the emotions of others.

On the other hand, eco-literacy has shown potential in fostering a broader sense of empathy not only towards other people, but also towards the environment and other living things. This environmental literacy works very well in project-based and thematic learning environments.

Lastly, in a heterogeneous society, it is critical that students comprehend the variations in social and cultural origins, which is made possible by diversity-based approaches. By encouraging kids to embrace and value the diversity around them, this method fosters empathy that is inclusive. Teachers can adaptably mix these strategies based on the needs of their students and the conditions of the classroom by being aware of the traits and advantages of each one.

Overall, the results of this literature review suggest that it is not possible to use just one approach. It requires a range of integrated approaches, including humanist-based teaching, direct experiences that engage children in their social and environmental interactions, and structured interventions. To foster an environment that promotes the long-term growth of empathy, educators and educational institutions play an important role. In helping children continue to grow into people who are not only intelligent, but also empathetic and caring, educators must be able to serve as role models for their students and integrate empathetic values into all aspects of teaching.

The author provides a solution through project-based learning with a social focus is one of the more effective and contextualized strategies. This strategy can be used in addition to some of the approaches discussed earlier. This approach asks students to collaborate in groups to identify and address social problems that occur in the neighborhood, such as bullying, injustice, or environmental issues. As a facilitator, the teacher helps students plan, investigate and solve their chosen problem. Students will present their findings and reflect on the process. Through this activity they actively participate in understanding and solving problems that others are experiencing, students not only gain knowledge of the academic subject but also cultivate empathy. Because it provides real-world experiences that inspire them to care and participate in social awareness, this approach is ideal for use in elementary schools.

This finding is in line with the theory of Vygotsky, L. S. (1978), who considers the importance of learning through social interaction. Vygotsky explained that students develop with the help of others, such as teachers or classmates. In this project learning, students work together to solve social problems, such as bullying or environmental issues, with support from the teacher. Through groupwork and teacher guidance, students not only understand the academic material but also learn to care about the problems around them. In this way, students not only gain knowledge, but also experience that teaches them to be more empathetic and caring towards others.

3.1 Conclusion

Students in primary schools benefit greatly from character education in terms of developing empathy. Student empathy has been successfully nurtured through the use of strategies such as role play, ecoliteracy, child-friendly education and social initiatives. However, the lack of adequate teacher preparation and integration of empathy values in the curriculum continues to hinder its implementation. There is a need for curriculum strengthening and ongoing training for teachers that specifically incorporates empathy values. Increasing cooperation with the community and parents is also needed to build a nurturing learning environment. The contribution of this article is to provide a summary of useful strategies in empathy-based character education. Its limitations lie in the limited number of sources and the absence of direct implementation tests.

Teachers can implement practical strategies such as integrating social-based project activities into learning, leading reflection sessions after role-playing, and creating habits that encourage students to express their feelings and listen to each other. To foster empathy in a more organized and sustainable manner, schools can also create annual character-based programs such as “love month” or “empathy ambassador program”.

Further research is recommended to test the effectiveness of the strategies through field studies and the development of scalable learning models. Experimental research can also be conducted to determine the specific effects of certain approaches (e.g., role playing vs. eco-literacy) on the

development of student empathy. In addition, contextual studies in different regions or cultures can provide new insights into how empathy develops in different social environments.

References

- Afifah, Elliya Nafilatul, Dwi Astutik, Siti Masitoh, i Imro Atul Khoidah. 2024. «Pembentukan Empati Siswa Melalui Pengembangan Metode Pembelajaran Aqidah Akhlak di Madrasah Ibtidaiyah». *Social Science Academic* 2(2):163-80. doi: 10.37680/ssa.v2i2.5795.
- Albab, Muhammad Ulul, i Siti Rohmah. 2023. «Efektivitas Program Jum ' at Berkah dalam Penumbuhan Sikap Empati Peserta Didik Di Sekolah Dasar Nahdlatul Ulama 1 Trate Gresik». 1(2):206-15.
- Andrianie, Santy, Restu Dwi Ariyanto, i Rosalia Dewi Nawantara. 2017. «Meningkatkan Keterampilan Empati Siswa Sekolah Dasar Melalui Paket Bimbingan Peningkatan Empati». *Bikotetik (Bimbingan dan Konseling Teori dan Praktik)* 1(2):66. doi: 10.26740/bikotetik.v1n2.p66-72.
- Atiasih, Atiasih, Asti Nur Hadianti, i Lukman Hamid. 2023. «Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini dan Tumbuh Kembang Anak serta Tantangan Era Super Smart Society 5.0». *JURNAL SYNTAX IMPERATIF : Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Pendidikan* 4(5):622-29. doi: 10.36418/syntax-imperatif.v4i5.293.
- Bandura, A. (1986). «Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory». Prentice-Hall.
- Chairunnisa, Maharani Lulu, i Tri Joko Raharjo. 2024. «Peran Pendidik dalam Membangun Empati Anak Melalui Metode Role Playing di Kelompok Bermain Aisyiyah 01 Kota Semarang Universitas Negeri Semarang , Indonesia paling tinggi harus berperan sebagai agen pengembangan empati anak yang patut di teladani». (4).
- Cipta, Eliva Sukma, Alpi Syaban Husaeni, Cici Cahyati, i Fadhli Anwar. 2023. «Analisis Pengaruh Media Digital terhadap Perkembangan Karakter Siswa Sekolah Dasar». *Ainara Journal (Jurnal Penelitian dan PKM Bidang Ilmu Pendidikan)* 4(3):109-15. doi: 10.54371/ainj.v4i3.271.
- Damanik, Muhd Hayyanul, Adinda Rahmah Rangkuti, Alifia Bilqish, i Hasny Delaila. 2024. «Strategi Mengatasi Tantangan Literasi Humanis di Sekolah Dasar untuk Pembentukan Karakter Positif». *Edu Society: Jurnal Pendidikan* 4(3):2012- 21.
- Dwi Saputra, Agra, i Alanisa Tunnaifa. 2024. «Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter Pada Anak Sekolah Dasar». *PHENOMENON : Multidisciplinary Journal Of Sciences and Research* 2(02):69-92. doi: 10.62668/phenomenon.v2i02.1222.
- Febriani, Sucita, i Indah Sahara. 2024. «Membangun Empati diLingkungan Sekolah: Pentingnya Pendidikan Karakter dalam Masyarakat yang Beragam». *Jurnal Multidisiplin Inovatif* 8(6):427-38.
- Hamidaturrohmah, irfana saidatul, i surayya shahnaz. 2020. «Hamidaturrohmah dan Saidatul Irfana : Implementasi Pembelajaran Dengan Konsep Ramah Anak Dalam Membangun Empati Siswa di Sekolah Dasar 132 IMPLEMENTASI PEMBELAJARAN DENGAN KONSEP RAMAH ANAK DALAM MEMBANGUN EMPATI SISWA DI SEKOLAH DASAR». *Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar : Jurnal Tunas Nusantara* 2(1):132-42.
- Hartati, Yulia Linda. 2023. «Analisis Dampak Pendidikan Karakter Terhadap Perkembangan Sosial Dan Emosional Siswa». *Jurnal Multidisiplin Indonesia* 2(7):1502-12. doi: 10.58344/jmi.v2i7.310.
- Hilman, Irfan, Rudi Akmal, i Rima Rahmawati Permana. 2023. «Pembelajaran Ekoliterasi Untuk Meningkatkan Sikap Empati Peserta Didik Di Sekolah Dasar». *Jurnal PGSD UNIGA* 2(2):1-7. doi: 10.52434/jpgsd.v2i2.3085.
- Lulu Rahma Aulia, Nur Kholisoh, Vadila Zikra Rahma, Deti Rostika, i Ranu Sudarmansyah. 2024. «Pentingnya Pendidikan Empati Untuk Mengurangi Kasus Bullying Di Sekolah Dasar». *Morfologi: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan, Bahasa, Sastra dan Budaya* 2(1):71-79. doi: 10.61132/morfologi.v2i1.291.
- Nurhayati, Hermin, i Nuni Widiarti, Langlang Handayani. 2020. «Jurnal basicedu. Jurnal Basicedu». *Jurnal Basicedu* 5(5):3(2), 524-32.
- Safitri, Khanifatul. 2020. «Pentingnya Pendidikan Karakter Untuk Siswa Sekolah». *Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai* 4(1):264-71.
- Sagala, Kartika, Lamhot Naibaho, i Djoys Anneke Rantung. 2024. «Tantangan Pendidikan karakter di era digital». *Jurnal Kridatama Sains Dan Teknologi* 6(01):1-8. doi: 10.53863/kst.v6i01.1006.
- Santy Andrianie, Muslihati, M. Ramli. 2018. «Learning Untuk Meningkatkan Empati Siswa Sekolah». *Ilmu Pendidikan: Jurnal Kajian Teori dan Praktik Kependidikan* 3(2):196-202.
- Sarah, Siti, Yeni Wardatunnissa, Yuyun Yuningsih Ratnasari, i Eva Nursa'ban. 2024. «Peran Guru Dalam Menerapkan Pendidikan Karakter Pada Siswa Sekolah Dasar». *Pendidikdas: Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar* 5(2):1-5. doi: 10.56842/pendikdas.v5i2.363.
- Sari, Cindy Gupita. 2022. «Peningkatan karakter empati pada sekolah berbasis budaya, SD Sanggar Anak Alam Nitiprayan Yogyakarta». *Wacana Akademika: Majalah Ilmiah Kependidikan* 6(2):129-134.
- Soraya, Intan, Nurika Khalila Daulay, i Mardinal Tarigan. 2023. «Manajemen Program BPI (Bina Pribadi Islam) dalam Membentuk Akhlak Peserta Didik di SMP IT Al-Hijrah». *El-Mujtama: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat* 4(2):1268-80. doi: 10.47467/elmutjama.v4i2.5114.

Sundari, Niken Dwi, i Puji Purnomo. 2023. «Pengembangan LKPD menggunakan model pedagogi reflektif untuk menumbuhkan karakter empati siswa kelas IV SD». *Taman Cendekia: Jurnal Pendidikan Ke-SD-an* 7(01):1-15. doi: 10.30738/tc.v7i01.14457.

Susanti, Rina. 2024. «Pengaruh Program Pendidikan Berkarakter Terhadap Pembentukan Sikap Empati Siswa Sekolah Dasar». *Jurnal Review Pendidikan Dan Pengajaran (JRPP)* 7(1):2290-2302.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). «Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes». Harvard University Press