

Integration of Child Developmental Psychology and Character Education in School Culture: Challenges of Indonesian Education in the Era of Digitalization

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Abstract: The era of digitalization has significantly transformed the landscape of education in Indonesia, not only in terms of learning technology but also in the psychological dynamics and character formation of children. This article aims to analyze the integration of child developmental psychology and character education into school culture and to identify the challenges of implementing this integration in Indonesia. This study employs a systematic literature review of scientific publications from 2020 to 2025 relevant to the themes of character education, school culture, and developmental psychology in the digital era. The findings indicate that digitalization influences children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and moral development. Therefore, character education approaches must be grounded in an understanding of psychological developmental stages. School culture serves as the primary medium for internalizing values through habituation, role modeling, and the hidden curriculum. However, integrating these elements faces psychological, cultural, and structural challenges. This article proposes a three-pillar integrative model of psychological, cultural, and digital ethics as a conceptual framework for strengthening character education in Indonesia.

Keywords: Developmental psychology, character education, school culture, digitalization, students.

Abstrak: Era digitalisasi telah mengubah lanskap pendidikan Indonesia secara signifikan, tidak hanya dalam aspek teknologi pembelajaran, tetapi juga dalam dinamika psikologis dan pembentukan karakter anak. Artikel ini bertujuan menganalisis integrasi psikologi perkembangan anak dan pendidikan karakter dalam budaya sekolah serta mengidentifikasi tantangan implementasinya di Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan systematic literature review terhadap publikasi ilmiah 2020–2025 yang relevan dengan tema pendidikan karakter, budaya sekolah, dan psikologi perkembangan di era digital. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa digitalisasi memengaruhi perkembangan kognitif, sosial-emosional, dan moral anak, sehingga pendekatan pendidikan karakter harus berbasis pada pemahaman tahap perkembangan psikologis. Budaya sekolah berperan sebagai medium utama internalisasi nilai melalui pembiasaan, keteladanan, dan hidden curriculum. Namun, integrasi keduanya menghadapi tantangan psikologis, kultural, dan struktural. Artikel ini menawarkan model integratif tiga pilar: psikologis, kultural, dan digital etik sebagai kerangka konseptual untuk penguatan pendidikan karakter di Indonesia.

Kata kunci: psikologi perkembangan, pendidikan karakter, budaya sekolah, digitalisasi, siswa.

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INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation is one of the most significant phenomena of the twenty-first century, reshaping nearly every aspect of human life, including education. The rapid development of information and communication technologies, the massive penetration of the internet, and the use of digital devices by children from an early age have created a new social ecosystem fundamentally different from that of previous generations. In Indonesia, the acceleration of educational digitalization has become increasingly evident since the COVID-19 pandemic. (Susetiyono and Fitri 2022), which prompted the widespread implementation of online learning. However, the impact of digitalization extends beyond the technical aspects of instruction and reaches the psychological, social, and moral dimensions of learners. (Herak 2025) (Abas and Susetiyono 2022).

Data indicate that Indonesian children are now active internet users from elementary school age. Interaction with social media, video platforms, online games, and various digital applications shapes their mindsets, behaviors, and value systems. In this context, children no longer learn solely from teachers and parents, but also from continuously operating digital algorithms. Learning environments are no longer limited by space and time; however, this condition simultaneously introduces new challenges in supervision, character formation, and value reinforcement.

Rahmatullah, Mulyasa, and Syahrani emphasize that the digital era 4.0 contributes to shifts in students' psychological patterns. (Rahmatullah et al. 2022), including multitasking tendencies, high levels of distraction, and preferences for more visual and instant learning styles. Meanwhile, Hanurawan identifies that the psychological characteristics of Indonesian elementary school children today show an increased need for social recognition. (Hanurawan et al. 2024), heightened sensitivity to digital responses, and a tendency toward online-based social comparison.

These transformations require the Indonesian education system to adapt not only technologically but also psychologically and culturally. Education cannot merely provide digital infrastructure; it must also manage the psychological and moral consequences of digital transformation. Normatively, Indonesian education prioritizes character formation. Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System affirms that education aims to develop learners' potential so that they become individuals who are faithful, pious, noble in character, intelligent, creative, independent, and responsible. This means that character education is not an additional program but the core of the entire educational process.

However, social realities reveal various symptoms of a character crisis among the younger generation, such as increasing cases of bullying, misuse of social media, intolerance, and low academic integrity. Subandi, Character crisis exacerbated by the penetration of global digital culture, which does not always align with Indonesia's local and religious values.

The implementation of character education in elementary schools is often formalistic. (Jhon et al. 2021), limited to slogans, curriculum documents, and ceremonial activities. The internalization of values has not

yet become a living, daily practice embedded within school culture. This condition reflects a gap between normative policy and practical implementation in the field.

In the context of digitalization, the challenges of character education have become increasingly complex. Children are exposed not only to values from school and family environments but also to virtual spaces that often present different norms. Therefore, character education must be reconstructed to remain relevant to children's psychological development in the digital era.

One weakness in the implementation of character education lies in the lack of integration with theories and findings from developmental psychology. In fact, each developmental stage possesses unique characteristics that influence how children understand values, norms, and morality.

According to Piaget's theory, elementary school children are in the concrete operational stage, where logical thinking begins to develop but remains dependent on concrete experiences. (Piaget 1976). Character education programs that are overly abstract and normative without concrete experiential learning tend to be difficult for children to internalize. School-age children are in the stage of industry versus inferiority, during which the need to feel competent and recognized is particularly strong. In the digital era, recognition comes not only from the physical environment but also from social media. Dependence on online validation may significantly influence identity formation.

Meanwhile, in Kohlberg's theory of moral development, school-age children are generally in the early conventional stage. (Walrath 2011), where moral orientation is based on rule compliance and social acceptance. However, anonymity and freedom in digital spaces can blur the boundaries between right and wrong, making the internalization of moral values require a more reflective approach. The psychological characteristics of Indonesian children today are increasingly complex due to intense digital exposure. Therefore, character education that is not grounded in developmental psychology risks becoming ineffective.

School culture represents a system of values, norms, habits, symbols, and practices embedded in the daily life of educational institutions. It is shaped not only by the formal curriculum but also by social interaction, teacher role modeling, traditions, and the hidden curriculum. Maryam and Ari (2025) show that the development of school culture in the digital era faces serious challenges due to the shift from collectivist values toward individualism and the penetration of global culture. Schools are no longer the sole centers of value socialization, as children also learn from digital environments that are often beyond institutional control.

From a sociological perspective, school culture functions as a mechanism for reproducing social values. However, in the context of digitalization, this value reproduction must compete with global values transmitted through online media. Therefore, school culture must be reconstructed to remain adaptive without losing its local and national value identity. A strong school culture can serve as a buffer against the negative impacts of digitalization. Teacher role modeling, principal leadership, and

the habituation of values in daily activities become primary instruments in the internalization of character.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a literature review approach, using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design, to analyze and synthesize research findings on the integration of developmental psychology and character education within school culture in the era of digitalization. This approach was chosen because the study's objective is not to collect empirical field data but rather to construct a conceptual framework and theoretical analysis based on previously published scientific findings. (Mengist et al. 2020). Through a systematic literature review, the processes of searching, selecting, and analyzing literature are conducted in a systematic, structured, and transparent manner, thereby enhancing the academic credibility and accountability of the research.

The data sources in this study were obtained from national and international scientific articles published between 2020 and 2025. This time frame was selected to ensure that the analyzed literature remains relevant to the contemporary dynamics of educational digitalization. The literature search was conducted across several academic databases, including Google Scholar, DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), Garuda (Garba Rujukan Digital), Semantic Scholar, and journal portals indexed in SINTA and Scopus. The search process employed combinations of keywords such as "child developmental psychology," "character education," "school culture," "educational digitalization," "character education in the digital era," and "school culture and child development." The use of combined keywords was intended to yield comprehensive yet focused results aligned with the study's scope.

The literature selection process was carried out in several stages. The first stage involved identifying articles based on the relevance of their titles to the research theme. The second stage consisted of abstract screening to ensure alignment with the focus on integrating developmental psychology, character education, and school culture within the context of digitalization. The third stage involved a full-text review to evaluate methodological rigor, depth of analysis, and conceptual contribution to this study. Selected articles were those demonstrating methodological clarity, published in reputable academic journals, and relevant to the Indonesian educational context, or that provided conceptual implications applicable to that context. Non-scholarly opinion pieces, popular essays, or writings lacking methodological clarity were excluded from the analysis.

Following the selection process, the eligible articles were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. The analysis began with the identification of key concepts related to children's psychological development in the digital era, the implementation of character education, the dynamics of school culture, and the challenges of educational digitalization. These concepts were then categorized into broader themes reflecting patterns and trends identified in previous research. The subsequent stage involved conceptual synthesis, integrating findings from various studies to construct a coherent and systematic analytical framework. A narrative synthesis approach was employed to connect disparate yet complementary perspectives, yielding a comprehensive understanding of the integration of developmental psychology and character education within school culture.

To ensure the validity and credibility of the review, this study prioritized literature from reputable, indexed national and international journals. A comparative analysis of research findings was conducted to minimize single-source bias and ensure triangulation of perspectives. The review also integrates

classical developmental psychology theories, such as those proposed by Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg, with contemporary research on educational digitalization and school culture. An interdisciplinary approach encompassing perspectives from psychology, education, and educational sociology was adopted to enrich the analysis and strengthen the theoretical argumentation.

As a literature review, this study has limitations: it does not involve empirical field data and depends on the quality and availability of the published works analyzed. Nevertheless, this approach enables the researcher to provide a comprehensive mapping of recent scholarly developments and to formulate a conceptual model that may serve as a foundation for future empirical research. Therefore, the literature review methodology employed in this study is expected to make a substantial theoretical contribution to the development of character education grounded in developmental psychology within the framework of school culture in the era of digitalization.

DISCUSSION

Digital Transformation, Child Psychology, and Character Education in Indonesia

Digital transformation represents one of the most significant phenomena of the twenty-first century, reshaping nearly every aspect of human life, including education. The rapid advancement of information and communication technologies, widespread internet penetration, and early exposure of children to digital devices have created a fundamentally new social ecosystem distinct from previous generations. In Indonesia, the acceleration of educational digitalization became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated the implementation of large-scale online learning. However, the impact of digitalization extends beyond the technical dimension of instruction, reaching into students' psychological, social, and moral domains.

Current data indicate that Indonesian children are active internet users from elementary school age. Their interaction with social media platforms, video-sharing services, online games, and various digital applications shapes their cognitive patterns, behaviors, and value systems. In this context, children no longer learn exclusively from teachers and parents but also from continuously operating digital algorithms. Learning environments have become unlimited in space and time, yet this expansion introduces new challenges in supervision, character formation, and value reinforcement.

Rahmatullah, Mulyasa, and Syahrani emphasize that the digital era 4.0 contributes to psychological shifts among students. (Rahmatullah et al. 2022), including multitasking tendencies, heightened distraction, and a preference for visual and instant learning styles. Hanurawan further identifies emerging psychological characteristics among Indonesian elementary students. (Hanurawan et al. 2024), such as increased need for social recognition, sensitivity to digital feedback, and tendencies toward online social comparison. These transformations require Indonesia's educational system to adapt not only technologically but also psychologically and culturally. Providing digital infrastructure alone is insufficient; educational institutions must also manage the psychological and moral implications of digital transformation.

Normatively, Indonesian education prioritizes character formation as its central objective. Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System states that education aims to develop learners' potential to become individuals who are faithful, pious, noble in character, intelligent, creative, independent, and

responsible. (Database Peraturan | JDIH BPK, n.d.). Thus, character education is not an auxiliary program but the core foundation of the entire educational process. Nevertheless, social realities reveal symptoms of a character crisis among younger generations, including rising cases of bullying, misuse of social media, intolerance, and declining academic integrity. character crisis exacerbated by the penetration of global digital culture, which does not always align with Indonesia's local and religious values.

Jhon, Zubaidah, and Mustadi found that character education implementation in elementary schools often remains formalistic (Jhon et al., 2021), limited to slogans, curriculum documents, and ceremonial activities. The internalization of values has not fully manifested in daily school culture, indicating a gap between normative policy and practical implementation. In the context of digitalization, challenges in character education are becoming increasingly complex. Children are exposed not only to values from school and family environments but also to diverse norms present in digital spaces. Therefore, character education must be reconstructed to remain relevant to children's psychological development in the digital era.

One weakness in the implementation of character education lies in its limited integration with developmental psychology theories. Each developmental stage has unique characteristics that influence how children understand values, norms, and morality. According to Piaget's theory, elementary school children are in the concrete operational stage, where logical thinking begins to develop but remains dependent on tangible experiences. Character education programs that are overly abstract and normative without concrete experiential components tend to be difficult for children to internalize.

From Erikson's perspective, school-age children experience the stage of industry versus inferiority, characterized by a strong need for competence and recognition. In the digital era, recognition is derived not only from physical environments but also from social media platforms. Dependence on online validation may influence identity formation. Meanwhile, in Kohlberg's moral development theory, school-age children are generally in the early conventional stage, where moral orientation is based on rule compliance and social acceptance. However, anonymity and freedom in digital environments may blur moral boundaries, requiring more reflective approaches to moral internalization.

Hanurawan (2024) stresses that the psychological characteristics of Indonesian children today are increasingly complex due to intense digital exposure. Therefore, character education that lacks grounding in developmental psychological understanding risks becoming ineffective. School culture represents a system of values, norms, habits, symbols, and practices embedded in daily institutional life. It is shaped not only by formal curriculum but also by social interaction, teacher role modeling, traditions, and the hidden curriculum. Maryam and Ari (2025) argue that developing school culture in the digital era faces serious challenges due to shifts from collectivist values toward individualism and the penetration of global culture. (Maryam and Ari 2025). Schools are no longer the sole centers of value socialization, as children simultaneously learn from often uncontrolled digital environments.

From a sociological perspective, school culture functions as a mechanism for reproducing social values. In the context of digitalization, however, this reproduction must compete with global values transmitted through online media. Therefore, school culture must be reconstructed to remain adaptive while preserving local and national identity. A strong school culture can serve as a protective buffer against the negative impacts of digitalization. Teacher role

modeling, principal leadership, and habituation of values in daily activities become essential instruments for character internalization.

Character Education in the Digital Era Paradigm

Character education in the Indonesian context is rooted in the values of Pancasila, religiosity, and local wisdom, emphasizing cooperation (*gotong royong*), tolerance, and integrity. However, the dynamics of digitalization demand a conceptual repositioning of character education to better adapt to social change. Character education can no longer be understood merely as the normative transmission of values; rather, it must function as a reflective process that enables children to navigate moral complexities within digital spaces.

Research by John et al. (2021) indicates that character education in elementary schools often remains at the administrative level, such as listing values in curriculum documents or conducting ceremonial activities. The internalization of values has not yet been fully integrated into daily practices. This condition reflects a gap between conceptual frameworks and practical implementation. In the digital era, this gap becomes increasingly evident as children encounter pluralistic, often contradictory value systems in online environments.

Subandi et al. (2025) highlight the emergence of a character crisis exacerbated by the penetration of global culture through digital media. (Subandi et al. 2025). Values of individualism and unrestricted self-expression frequently conflict with the collectivist values that characterize Indonesian society. Therefore, character education must bridge local values with global realities, ensuring that children maintain their cultural identity while adapting constructively to digital environments.

The importance of digital literacy as an integral component of character education (Azka et al. 2025). Digital literacy extends beyond technical proficiency with devices; it encompasses critical thinking, media ethics, and digital social responsibility. Character education that fails to incorporate digital literacy risks becoming irrelevant. In this context, character education should include learning about digital footprints, cybersecurity, and the moral consequences of online actions.

Furthermore, character education must be aligned with children's developmental stages. Elementary school children require concrete and contextual approaches rather than abstract moral lectures. The integration of socio-emotional learning (SEL) approaches can be an effective strategy for fostering empathy, emotional regulation, and social skills. Thus, developmentally grounded character education does not merely emphasize what is right or wrong, but also helps children understand the moral reasoning underlying their actions.

School Culture as an Integrative Ecosystem

School culture constitutes a system of values and practices embedded in the daily life of educational institutions. Values are transmitted not only through the formal curriculum but also through social interactions, traditions, symbols, routines, and role modeling. (Budiyono et al. 2024). The concept of the *hidden curriculum* explains that children learn from the atmosphere, norms, and lived experiences they encounter every day. Thus, school culture plays a strategic role in integrating developmental psychology into character education.

Maryam and Ari (2025) demonstrate that schools in the digital era face significant challenges in maintaining value consistency. (Maryam and Ari 2025). When the values taught at school are not aligned with those children encounter in digital spaces, normative tensions arise, potentially leading to confusion and moral

ambiguity. In such situations (Diananda 2025) school culture must serve as a stable moral anchor, providing coherence and guidance amid competing value systems.

School leadership and teacher role modeling are key determinants in shaping a strong school culture. Children tend to imitate observable behaviors rather than merely listening to advice. Therefore, teachers' integrity in the use of technology and digital communication becomes an integral component of character education (Hasanah et al., 2025). Educators are not only facilitators of knowledge but also moral exemplars whose digital conduct, such as responsible social media use, respectful online communication, and ethical information sharing, implicitly teaches students appropriate digital behavior. Schools must therefore cultivate a healthy digital culture, including clear policies on gadget usage, ethical guidelines for online communication, and structured supervision of students' digital activities.

Beyond internal institutional dynamics, a strong school culture requires active collaboration with families. Given that digital spaces transcend the physical boundaries of schools, character education rooted in school culture must involve parents as strategic partners. Consistency between school values and family practices strengthens moral internalization. Parental engagement in monitoring digital behavior, reinforcing ethical norms, and modeling responsible technology use is essential to ensure that character education extends beyond classroom walls.

Furthermore, school culture in the digital era must move beyond reactive control toward proactive value formation. Rather than merely restricting technology use, schools should create structured opportunities for critical dialogue about digital experiences. Open discussions about cyberbullying, misinformation, digital footprints, online identity, and algorithmic influence can help students develop reflective moral awareness. Such dialogical practices encourage students to critically examine their digital interactions and align their actions with ethical principles. (Azka et al. 2025).

From a developmental psychology perspective, school culture should be designed to correspond with students' cognitive, emotional, and moral development stages. Elementary school children in the concrete operational stage benefit from experiential learning approaches such as collaborative projects, community service activities, and simulation-based moral problem-solving. These practices transform abstract moral concepts into tangible experiences. At the same time, integrating socio-emotional learning (SEL) within school culture fosters empathy, emotional regulation, cooperation, and responsible decision-making competencies that are crucial in navigating digital interactions.

In addition, school culture functions sociologically as a mechanism for reproducing values and forming identities. In a digitalized society characterized by rapid information exchange and cultural hybridization, schools serve as mediating institutions that balance global influences with local and national identity. A consciously constructed school culture that emphasizes Pancasila values, mutual respect, inclusivity, and collective responsibility can counterbalance the tendencies toward excessive individualism often amplified in digital environments.

Moreover, creating an integrative ecosystem requires structural coherence between policy, pedagogy, and daily practice. Character values should not only appear in vision statements and ceremonial events but also be reflected in assessment systems, conflict-resolution mechanisms, peer interaction norms, and digital engagement policies. When institutional systems consistently embody shared values, students experience moral consistency that strengthens internalization.

In this context, school culture becomes a space of moral resilience that equips children to confront the complexities of the digital world. Through habituation, reflective practices, participatory dialogue, and consistent role modeling, schools can foster a safe and supportive environment in which students can develop a solid moral identity. Ultimately, an integrative school culture does not merely protect children from the negative impacts of digitalization but empowers them to become ethically responsible and culturally grounded digital citizens.

CONCLUSION

Based on discussions on character education in the digital era, it can be concluded that strengthening children's and adolescents' character is an urgent necessity amid the rapid, complex advancement of technology. The digital era offers vast opportunities to access information and develop individual potential; however, it also presents serious challenges, including moral degradation, ethical crises, low self-control, and exposure to values that may conflict with national social and cultural norms. Therefore, character education must not be positioned as a supplementary component, but rather as the fundamental foundation of the educational system, particularly at the elementary and secondary levels, when children's psychological and moral development is in a crucial formative phase.

Substantively, effective character education must be integrated into school culture rather than taught merely as classroom content. Values such as religiosity, responsibility, discipline, honesty, empathy, and digital literacy need to be embodied through habituation, teacher role modeling, self-development programs, and a school environment that consistently reflects these principles. School culture becomes a strategic instrument because it shapes collective habits that students gradually internalize.

On the other hand, synergy among schools, families, and the broader community plays a decisive role in the success of character education, as moral formation does not occur partially but through continuous social experiences. Thus, character education in the digital era should aim to develop individuals who are not only academically and technologically competent but also morally, emotionally, and socially mature. A holistic approach integrating developmental psychology, strengthening school culture, and digital supervision and literacy becomes essential for preparing a generation capable of utilizing technology wisely without losing its identity and the noble values of the nation.

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