

Character education programmes in primary school: A systematic review

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Abstract: The school, as an educational body, cannot separate itself from the task of providing an integral education. However, various difficulties arise when an educator decides to form the character of his pupils. For instance, one such difficulty is selecting the correct method from among the multiple schools of thought that exist on the formation of character and ideal of the human person. In this research, a systematic review has been carried out in three databases with the aim of examining character education programmes or guides for character education in primary schools. Eighteen publications were found and analysed in relation to their objectives, terms used, place of origin and researchers cited. Finally, it was noted a paucity of articles on the application of character education, a disconnection between theory and practice and a reluctance to use the term virtue.

Keyword: Character education, programme, virtue, value, and primary school.

Introduction

When we consider a person to be well-educated or mis-educated, we are not referring to whether he or she knows mathematics or any other school subject, but to a deeper conception of education. That is, education that shapes what is most unique to a person –that identifies them from the rest– their dispositions and their moral motivations for action, i.e., their character (Berkowitz and Lickona in Bernal et al., 2015; Fuentes & Sánchez-Pérez, 2020).

It is often thought that character education should be excluded from the family. It is true that the role of the family is paramount because many aspects of character formation are learned from role models and it is in the family that children can find stable role models (Ahedo & Millán, 2020). However, there is a collective mindset that teachers are expected to educate character and morals. A UK study of over 5,000 primary and secondary school students shows that they expected moral education from their teachers and believed that it could influence their moral development (Arthur, 2011).

Moreover, as Bernal et al. (2015) point out, character education encompasses all dimensions of the person: “reason as well as emotions, knowing how to act as well as acting, the physical dimension as well as the spiritual, the individual dimension as well as the social dimension”. At school, the child becomes one of many, i.e., a social being (Amilburu et al., 2018). Therefore, it will be here where this dimension can be mainly formed. Thus –and being aware of the great relevance of the family in the shaping of character– the school must also assume the role of collaborating in the education of character.

On the other hand, a neutral education is not possible, because character is always being formed –or unformed– whether consciously or not (Fernández-Espinosa & López-González, 2023). To provide good character education, it must be exercised consciously. However, when an educator decides to educate the character of his students, he may encounter these difficulties: what is the ideal character model, which way to educate, and how to do it?

Although there have been different understandings of character education throughout history, character education through virtue has re-emerged in the United States since the 1990s (Arbués & Naval, 2018), as the published bibliography shows (Bennigna, 1991; Bennigna and Wynne, 1998; Berkowitz, 1999, 2000, 2002; Derochey Williams, 1998; Lickona, 1991, 1997; McClellan, 1992; Ryan and Lickona, 1991; Ryan and Bohlin, 1999; Schaps, Battistichy Solomon, 1997; in Bernal et al., 2015).

Virtues are defined as good operational habits (Aristóteles; Kristjánsson, 2015) and people are defined by how we live, i.e., what we do frequently (Fuentes & Sánchez-Pérez, 2020). Therefore, we consider that virtues can shape our character. In this way, the first two questions could be answered: the ideal model of character is that of the virtuous person; and character is educated through virtue. However, the third question remains unanswered: How to educate character in the school? To answer this question, we could ask: Are there any publications on programmes to be applied in primary education that can guide teachers in educating the character of their pupils?

The main aim of this research is to examine programmes or guidelines about character education to be applicable at primary schools. This is specified in the following objectives: to conduct a systematic of character education programmes for the primary education stage; and to analyse the character education programmes found. In each of the selected publications we will analyse the following aspects: the objectives; the use of terms related to character education such as virtue, courage, emotion and moral; the language and country of publication; as well as the researchers cited.

Method

The method used to search for character education programmes was a systematic review, following the PRISMA protocol, which allows for a comprehensive overview and avoids possible biases in the searches (Sánchez-Serrano et al., 2022).

Firstly, the object of the search was identified: publications showing character education programmes or interventions in primary schools; and the inclusion and exclusion criteria were then established. In the following table we can see the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Table 1
Inclusion and exclusion criteria

| | Inclusion criteria | Exclusion criteria |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Year of publication | Being published in the last 10 years from the time of the searches (2012-2021). | Being published before 2012. |
| Language | Being in English or Spanish. | Being in a language other than English and Spanish. |
| Context | Being contextualised in the primary Education. | Not being contextualised in the Primary school. |
| | Being contextualised in the current education system. | Being a historical publication. |
| Accessibility | Being open access or partially accessible (enough to ensure that all inclusion criteria are met). | Not being open access or not being able to ensure that the other inclusion criteria are met. |

The search was carried out in three different databases –Education Resources Information Center, Web Of Science and Dialnet–, using the keywords set –virtue, value, character, moral, primary education, primary school, programme, plan, intervention– with Boolean "AND" and "OR". Eighteen studies were selected after applying the inclusion criteria. The selection processes are presented in the following flowcharts.

Figure 1
Flowchart of Eric and WOS searches

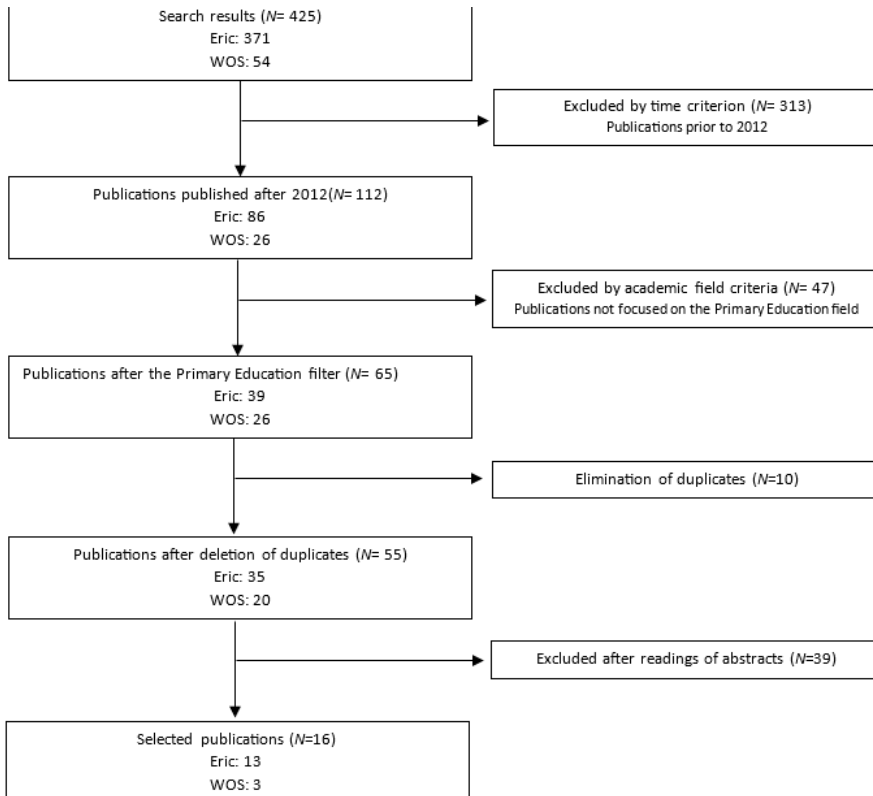
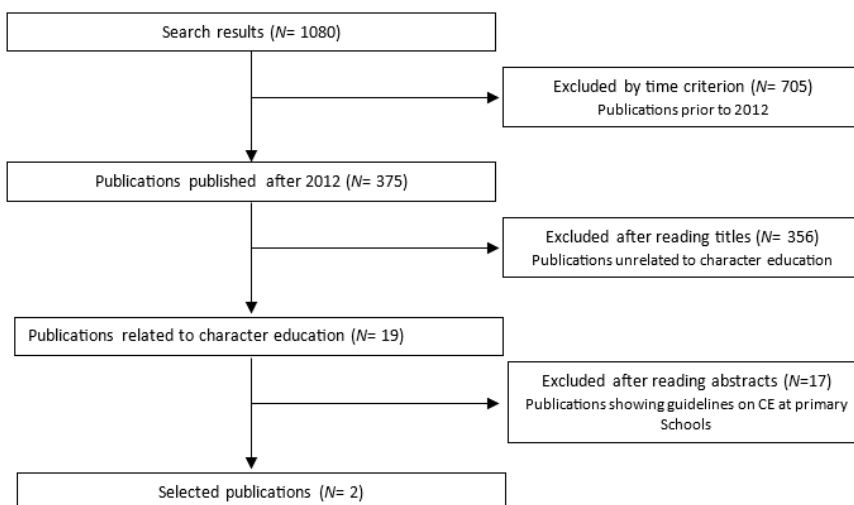


Figure 2
Flowchart of Dialnet searches



Results

Table 2 lists the 18 studies included in the systematic review with the main objective.

Table 2
Results

| Code | Reference | Research objective |
|------|---|---|
| A1 | López Díaz-Villabella (2015) | To design a programme that responds to the emotional education needs of the students of an educational centre |
| A2 | Zavala Coronado & Martínez Gutiérrez (2018) | To present a workshop to promote student responsibility |
| A3 | (Nida, 2019) | To propose a model of a lesson plan for character formation in primary education |
| A4 | Krek et al. (2019) | To evaluate school moral education plans (compulsory in all schools in Slovenia) |
| A5 | Vũ & Hằng (2020) | To show a guide for the design of a lesson plan for moral education |
| A6 | Flay & Phil (2014) | To evaluate the Positive Action programme in different contexts |
| A7 | Suhartini et al. (2019) | To conduct a character education programme based on the local wisdom of Sudanese culture |
| A8 | Snyder et al. (2012) | To evaluate the Positive Action programme from the perspective of teachers, parents, and students. |
| A9 | Silverthorn et al. (2017) | To assess the impact of the Positive Action programme on the self-esteem of students from disadvantaged backgrounds |
| A10 | Khoury (2017) | To evaluate a character education programme. |
| A11 | Anggraini & Kusniarti (2016) | To propose a model of character education for primary education through theatre. |
| A12 | Wuryandani et al. (2019) | To evaluate the contribution of a literature programme to character education |
| A13 | Almerico (2014) | To develop character education through good literature |
| A14 | Bavarian et al. (2016) | To evaluate the impact of the Positive Action programme on healthy behaviours. |
| A15 | Hanson et al. (2012) | To evaluate the intervention of a character education programme |
| A16 | Berg & Aber (2015) | To evaluate social and character development programmes |
| A17 | Duncan et al. (2017) | To evaluate the impact of the Positive Action programme on social-emotional learning and behaviour |
| A18 | Hinerman et al. (2014) | To implement a holistic social and character development programme in a school to reduce violence. |

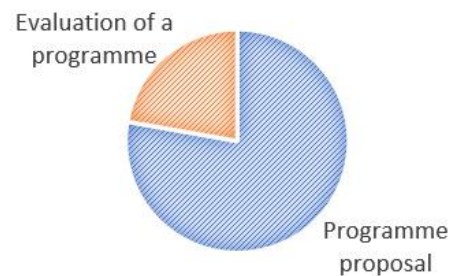
Result discussion

Concerning the purpose of the publications

Within the selected articles, a division can be made according to the aim of the study. In this way, we can classify the publications into two groups: those publications that aim to present a character education programme (although this has not always been developed) and those that aim to evaluate a character education programme.

Both groups fulfil the objective of this research: to show character education programmes, the former showing programmes proposed by the authors of the publication, and the latter showing programmes carried out by third parties and analysed by the authors of the study. Of the 19 publications, 14 (78%) present a proposal for character education programme and 4 (22%) evaluate a character education programme. Figure 3 shows a graph of the classification of the articles according to their objective.

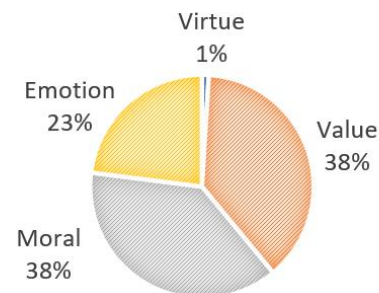
Figure 3
Objectives



Concerning the terms used

A count has been made of the number of times each article uses the following concepts related to CE: virtue, value, moral, emotion. Each of these terms has a different connotation and reflects a different educational orientation (Ahedo et al., 2022; Bernal et al., 2015). The most frequently used terms were value (38%) and moral (38%), followed by emotion (23%). The least used term was virtue (1%).

Figure 4
Used terms

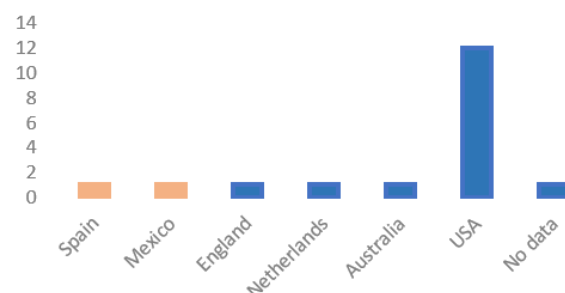


Although there has been a resurgence of character education through virtue (Ahedo & Millán, 2020; Arbués & Naval, 2018; Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022; Bernal et al., 2015; Kristjánsson, 2015), the term virtue has fallen into disuse (Nasarre, 2022). This trend has also been observed in recent Spanish education laws (Fuentes, 2018).

Concerning language and place of publication

Most of the selected publications are in English and come from the USA, whereas only 2 of them (11%) are in Spanish. In Figure 5 we can see a graph with the countries where they were published.

Figure 5
Country of publication



Concerning the researchers cited

On the other hand, we analyse the link between these publications and some of the researchers in the field of character education. We checked whether the articles cited relevant authors in this field. To this end, we selected the researchers mentioned in Bernal et al. (2015) as relevant in the different character education proposals. These are: M. Watson and N. Nodding from the core values perspective; R. Drevies from the moral proposal; and M. Berkowitz, T. Lickona, M. Davidson, E.A. Wynne, K. Ryan and D. Narváez from the virtue ethics. In addition, it was decided to expand with the Jubilee Centre researchers J. Arthur and K. Kristjánson.

The figure 6 shows the number of publications in which each researcher has been cited. The most cited researchers were T. Lickona and M. Berkowitz (in five publications each), both from the virtue ethics perspective. We can also see that 5 of these researchers have not been cited in any of the publications.

Furthermore, the figure 7 shows the percentage of publications that have cited these authors. It is striking that more than half do not cite any of these authors.

Finally, we also wanted to test the influence of positive psychology and emotional education in the programmes found. For this purpose, some prominent researchers of positive psychology and emotional education were selected. According to Lupano and Castro-Solano (2010) the most important researchers from the positive psychology are Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi, Diener, Peterson, Grant, Veenhoven, Delle Fave, Vázquez, and Casullo, so we search them. In addition, the following researchers in the field of emotional education were selected: Salovey, Mayer, Goleman and Bisquerra. Searches revealed that only one article cited several of these researchers (from the positive psychology and emotional education field), while the others cited none.

Conclusion

Despite the large number of publications reviewed, only 18 have been selected. This may reflect the fact that there are quite several publications on character education at the theoretical level, but these are significantly reduced when it comes to its application in primary classrooms. In addition, most publications show a programme but very few evaluate it. There is therefore a lack

Figure 6
Publications where each author has been cited

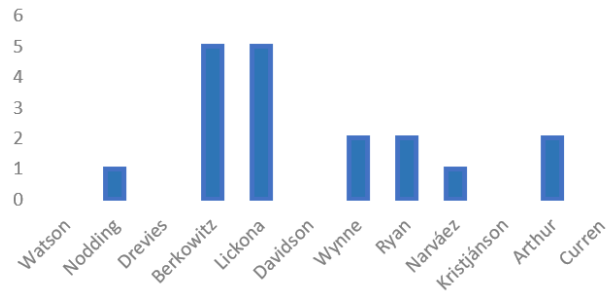
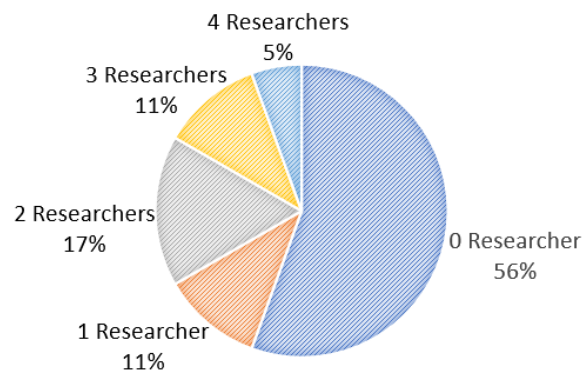


Figure 6
Number of relevant researchers cited per publication



of research that applies and evaluates character education programmes in schools, especially in the Spanish-speaking world.

Furthermore, there is a noticeable disconnection between theoretical research and practical research on Character Education, as the most representative researchers on this topic are hardly cited in the intervention programmes.

Moreover, within these selected proposals, very few of them are actually character education interventions. This can be seen in the very limited use of the term virtue. The disproportionately greater use of the terms value and moral show a cognitive and normative education –influenced by the thinking of Kolbherg and Kant–. However, "a good character consists in knowing the good, loving the good and doing the good" (Lickona, 2000 in Arbués & Naval, 2018). Therefore, it is not enough to educate the cognitive and volitional dimension. These proposals, although good and necessary, are not enough; an authentic proposal for character education must undoubtedly be based on virtue (Bernal et al., 2015; Fuentes, 2018; Kristjánsson, 2015).

Lastly, it is striking how few publications are found in Spanish. Moreover, the aim of these is to design an intervention, while all publications showing an evaluation of a CE programme are all in English. This shows a certain delay in this field in the Spanish-speaking world and a more extensive and prolonged trajectory in the Anglo-Saxon sphere. In addition, most of the publications came from the USA, as it was there that it began to make a resurgence.

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