



Revisiting Character Education Practices in Indonesia A Critical Qualitative Inquiry into Structural and Pedagogical Weaknesses

I Wayan Kandia^{1*}, I Gusti Ngurah Santika², Ni Putu Shantia Sri Kusuma Dewi³, I Gede Candra Kirana⁴, I Putu Yoga Aviro Dwi Putra⁵ Dewa Ayu Ana Chandra Dewi⁶

¹Institut Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan Saraswati, Indonesia

^{2,3,4,5,6}Universitas Dwijendra, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: kandiaiwayan@yahoo.com

Received: March 20, 2026; Approved: April 12, 2026; Published: April 30, 2026

ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the structural and pedagogical weaknesses embedded in the implementation of character education in Indonesian primary and junior secondary schools. Although national education policies strongly emphasize character formation as a foundational goal, empirical evidence from prior studies and preliminary observations indicates persistent gaps between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Employing a critical qualitative multiple-case study design grounded in critical pedagogy, data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis across four schools representing diverse contexts (public-private and urban-rural settings). Cross-case thematic analysis identified four recurring and interrelated challenges: administrative formalism that prioritizes documentation over substantive practice; predominantly didactic instructional approaches that limit critical reflection; policy practice disjunction resulting from insufficient institutional alignment; and contradictions within the hidden curriculum that undermine the authenticity of moral messaging. The findings indicate that character education is frequently enacted as symbolic compliance, as evidenced by emphasis on documentation and ritualized activities rather than reflective learning processes. By situating these weaknesses within broader accountability structures and institutional pressures, this study moves beyond descriptive accounts of implementation challenges and offers a systemic explanation of their persistence. The research contributes to character education scholarship by providing a systemic explanation linking accountability structures to pedagogical practices, dialogical pedagogy, and culturally aligned school leadership. Meaningful reform, therefore, requires reorienting evaluation systems toward qualitative indicators of student reflection and aligning pedagogical practices with dialogical and context-responsive approaches.

Keyword: Character Education; Critical Qualitative Research; Structural Misalignment; Pedagogical Practice; Hidden Curriculum;

INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a strategic priority within the Indonesian national education system over the past decade. National initiatives such as the Character Education Strengthening Program, formally established through Presidential Regulation No. 87 of 2017, and the integration of the Pancasila Student Profile within the Merdeka Curriculum framework, reflect the Indonesian government's strategic positioning of character education not merely as a complementary component, but as a foundational pillar for shaping future

generations. These policy directions are further reinforced by national curriculum guidelines that emphasize holistic student development, encompassing moral, social, and civic competencies alongside academic achievement (Suharmi et al., 2025; Santika, 2022). Nevertheless, a growing body of empirical research, including qualitative case studies and systematic reviews conducted in Indonesian primary and secondary school contexts, consistently indicates that the normative aspirations embedded in these policies have not been fully translated into effective and sustained



practices at the school level. These studies point to recurring implementation gaps, particularly in aligning policy directives with classroom-level pedagogical practices and institutional capacities.

Previous research has consistently identified several recurring patterns in the implementation of character education in Indonesia, which can be broadly categorized into three interrelated domains: pedagogical limitations in classroom practice, institutional constraints at the school level, and inconsistencies between intended values and students' observable behaviors. For instance, Asri and Deviv (2024) identified substantial challenges, including gaps in teachers' understanding of character values, limited institutional resources, and student behaviors that do not consistently reflect the values being taught. Similarly, several systematic reviews highlight a persistent discrepancy between the theoretical framework of character education and its classroom implementation, particularly in primary schools, despite various strategies such as integrating character values into school culture and increasing parental involvement.

More specifically, a systematic literature review by Yuliani et al. (2026) emphasized the importance of instilling character values from an early age, yet noted that the affective dimension of learning encompassing students' moral reasoning, value internalization, emotional engagement, and ethical disposition often receives less systematic attention compared to cognitive development, which tends to be more easily measured and evaluated through standardized assessment systems. This finding aligns with research conducted by Nurhalizah et al. (2022), which demonstrated that character education practices in elementary and junior secondary schools remain fragmented and highly dependent on localized school traditions, frequently lacking robust evaluation mechanisms. Such findings indicate that although character education is institutionally embedded within formal policy frameworks, its

operationalization often lacks coherence and sustainability due to fragmented implementation strategies, weak alignment between policy directives and school-level practices, and the absence of consistent evaluation mechanisms that capture affective learning outcomes.

In Islamic primary schools, Prayatni, Ramli, and Sucilestari (2025) found that character education could be relatively well integrated into school management and extracurricular activities. However, they also reported persistent challenges, particularly the discontinuity between values taught in schools and those reinforced within family environments. This inconsistency undermines the internalization process and raises questions about the long-term effectiveness of school-based character formation. The study, while presenting relatively positive outcomes, still reveals unresolved practical obstacles related to sustained value integration in students' daily lives.

Furthermore, Rahmelia and Wijayanti (2025), through a literature-based analysis, identified inhibiting factors such as unsupportive school climates, insufficient teacher commitment as moral role models, and limited parental awareness and engagement. These findings underscore that the challenges of character education in Indonesia are multidimensional, involving structural factors (such as policy design and governance systems), pedagogical factors (including instructional approaches and teacher competencies), and socio-cultural factors (such as family influence, community norms, and broader social environments). Similar concerns have been raised in studies examining the integration of character values into subject-specific instruction, such as language learning, where time constraints, limited parental involvement, and unsupportive social environments constrain effective implementation.

Despite the growing body of literature, a significant proportion of existing studies



remains predominantly descriptive in nature, focusing primarily on identifying observable challenges and reporting implementation practices, rather than systematically examining the underlying structural and pedagogical mechanisms that generate and sustain these challenges across different educational contexts. They tend to outline practical challenges without critically examining how structural and pedagogical inconsistencies between national policy directives and classroom realities generate systemic discontinuities. Hadi et al. (2025), in their literature review, noted that themes such as teacher involvement, school environment, and curriculum integration are frequently discussed; however, comprehensive analyses of structural and pedagogical weaknesses remain limited. Consequently, there is a need for research that moves beyond surface-level identification of obstacles and interrogates the deeper mechanisms that shape implementation outcomes.

Methodologically, many previous studies rely on descriptive qualitative designs with relatively limited sample sizes and a primary focus on surface-level observations or teacher perceptions. While these approaches provide valuable contextual insights, they often lack the analytical depth and theoretical grounding necessary to explain how broader structural conditions such as policy frameworks and accountability systems interact with pedagogical practices to shape implementation outcomes. As Siregar (2025) argues, such approaches often lack a robust theoretical framework capable of explaining the broader structural and pedagogical dynamics that influence character education practices. This methodological limitation constrains the capacity of existing research to contribute to theoretical development and policy reform.

The novelty of the present study lies in its adoption of a critical qualitative approach, informed by perspectives from critical pedagogy and institutional theory, which enables a deeper examination of how power relations, policy

structures, and institutional practices shape the implementation of character education. Rather than focusing solely on surface-level obstacles, this study seeks to connect three interrelated dimensions: national policy frameworks, institutional readiness at the school level, and everyday pedagogical practices enacted by teachers. By exploring the lived experiences of teachers and students in both primary and junior secondary schools, this research aims to illuminate how administrative demands, accountability pressures, and curricular formalism may inadvertently weaken the transformative potential of character education.

Through this critical inquiry, the study addresses a significant research gap by offering a theoretically grounded explanation of why character education in Indonesia often remains normative and compliance-oriented rather than transformative and reflective. By situating empirical findings within broader discussions of structural alignment and pedagogical practice, the article aspires to contribute not only to the Indonesian discourse on character education but also to ongoing discussions on character education within comparable educational contexts in the Global South, particularly in systems facing similar challenges related to policy-practice alignment and institutional capacity.

Ultimately, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced and analytically rigorous understanding of the weaknesses embedded in current character education practices. Its findings are expected to generate theoretical insights and practical recommendations that can inform policymakers, educational leaders, and scholars committed to advancing more authentic, reflective, and contextually responsive models of character education.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in a critical interpretive paradigm, drawing upon principles



from critical pedagogy and interpretivist inquiry. This paradigm positions knowledge as socially constructed while simultaneously recognizing the influence of power relations, institutional structures, and policy regimes in shaping educational practices. Accordingly, the study not only interprets participants' experiences but also critically examines how structural constraints and normative expectations influence the enactment of character education in school contexts. A critical qualitative approach was selected to enable both interpretive understanding and structural critique. Methodologically, this approach informed the selection of data sources (multi-level actors), the emphasis on uncovering contradictions between policy and practice, and the use of iterative coding strategies aimed at identifying not only observable patterns but also underlying structural mechanisms. In contemporary educational research, qualitative inquiry serves not only as a means of exploring social phenomena but also as a framework for analyzing power relations and policy-practice dynamics embedded within educational contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023). Therefore, this study situates participants' experiences within broader social and institutional structures in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of character education implementation.

A multiple-case qualitative design was adopted, with each school treated as a bounded case and the implementation of character education serving as the primary unit of analysis. The study followed by a comparative case study logic, enabling both within-case analysis to capture contextual depth and cross-case analysis to identify recurring patterns and structural variations across different institutional settings. Case study methodology enables in-depth exploration of policy implementation processes within real-life and context-specific settings (Yin, 2023). The research was conducted in four schools—two primary schools and two junior secondary

schools—located in urban and semi-urban areas in [specify province/region], Indonesia. These locations were selected to reflect variation in socio-economic conditions, school governance structures, and access to educational resources, which are considered influential factors in shaping the implementation of character education policies. These sites were purposively selected to represent variation in institutional types (public and private) and socio-cultural backgrounds. Such variation was essential to capture the complexity of how character education policies are enacted across diverse educational environments (Laksana, 2023; Sila, 2024).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on predefined criteria, including (1) direct involvement in planning or implementing character education activities, (2) a minimum of two years of professional experience within the school, and (3) willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. This ensured that participants possessed sufficient experiential knowledge to provide meaningful insights into the implementation process. The participants included eight teachers (including civics and religious education teachers), four homeroom teachers, two school principals, and twelve upper-grade students at each educational level. Including participants across leadership, instructional, and student roles allowed for triangulation of perspectives and enriched the analysis of how national policies are translated into everyday pedagogical practice (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Data were collected over a three-month period, during which each school was visited multiple times. A total of [specify number] interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately [duration], alongside repeated classroom observations to capture variations in instructional practices over time. Student interviews focused on their lived learning experiences and their perceptions of the effectiveness and authenticity of character



education practices. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to ensure systematic inquiry while allowing flexibility to explore emerging context-specific issues (Merriam & Tisdell, 2022).

Non-participant observations were guided by a structured observation protocol focusing on key dimensions such as teacher-student interaction patterns, instructional strategies, classroom climate, and the explicit and implicit integration of character values within teaching practices. Observations were crucial in identifying discrepancies between formal lesson planning and actual pedagogical enactment. Document analysis included lesson plans, instructional modules, school policy documents, and evaluation reports to examine administrative and structural dimensions influencing implementation. The integration of these three data collection methods strengthened the credibility of findings through methodological triangulation (Tracy, 2022).

Data analysis was conducted iteratively using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke. The process involved familiarization with data, systematic coding, theme development, and ongoing refinement. Qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo) was utilized to organize and manage the coding process, enhancing analytical transparency and rigor. The analysis involved an initial phase of open coding to identify meaningful units of data, followed by pattern coding to group related categories, and thematic synthesis to develop higher-order themes. Rather than strictly adhering to grounded theory procedures, the coding process was adapted to align with a critical thematic approach that emphasizes both interpretation and structural analysis. This was followed by axial coding to establish relationships between structural factors such as administrative demands and curriculum regulations and pedagogical practices within classrooms. Finally, selective coding was used to construct overarching themes that explain systemic patterns underlying implementation weaknesses. The analytical process was reflexive

and recursive to ensure depth of interpretation and to avoid superficial categorization (Saldaña, 2023).

To ensure trustworthiness, credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of multiple data sources, and member checking conducted with selected participants to validate emerging interpretations. Transferability was supported through thick description of research contexts, enabling readers to assess applicability to other settings. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting methodological decisions and analytical steps. Confirm ability was strengthened through reflexive journaling and systematic documentation of data interpretation processes to minimize researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as developed in contemporary qualitative scholarship). Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of data sources and methods, as well as member checking with selected participants. Transferability was addressed through detailed contextual descriptions of the research setting. Dependability was ensured through maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting data collection and analytical procedures. Confirm ability was supported by reflexive journaling and preservation of raw data records to enhance transparency and minimize researcher bias.

All research procedures adhered to established ethical standards and were approved by [name of institutional review board or ethics committee]. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and additional parental consent was secured for student participants. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage protocols. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. Through a systematic and reflexive



methodological framework, this study aims to generate findings that are not only descriptive but also analytically rigorous and critically engaged with the structural and pedagogical realities of character education practices in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study, derived from cross-case thematic analysis of interview transcripts, classroom observations, and institutional documents, reveal that the weaknesses of character education practices in Indonesian schools extend beyond technical shortcomings. Instead, they are deeply embedded within interrelated structural, pedagogical, and cultural dimensions, as evidenced by recurring patterns observed across multiple data sources and participant groups. Through iterative thematic analysis, four major themes consistently emerged across cases, with varying degrees of intensity and manifestation: (1) administrative formalism and symbolic compliance, (2) moral instruction without critical internalization, (3) policy-practice disjunction, and (4) contradictions within the hidden curriculum. These themes were identified through repeated coding cycles and were supported by converging evidence across interviews, observations, and document analysis.

1. Administrative Formalism and Symbolic Compliance

One dominant finding concerns the formalistic orientation of character education implementation. Teachers consistently reported that character values were systematically inserted into lesson plans, often as a procedural requirement. For instance, one teacher noted, 'We always include character values in the lesson plan because it is required, but in practice, we do not always have time to explore them deeply in class.' Such accounts were corroborated by document analysis, which showed explicit inclusion of character values in

planning documents but limited evidence of their pedagogical enactment. However, classroom observations demonstrated that these values were rarely operationalized through structured pedagogical strategies. This gap appears to be influenced by a combination of time constraints, curriculum density, and performance-oriented evaluation systems, which collectively discourage teachers from engaging in reflective and dialogical approaches that require extended instructional times. Instead, they were often articulated as declarative statements at the beginning or end of lessons without structured reflection.

This pattern of emphasizing documentation over practice suggests a disconnect between formal compliance and substantive implementation. Such a pattern aligns with what prior scholarship conceptualizes as 'symbolic policy enactment,' in which institutional actors fulfill formal requirements without necessarily transforming underlying practices (Ball et al., 2022). Similarly, Indonesian studies have noted that character education frequently becomes an administrative obligation rather than a transformative pedagogical practice (Rahmelia & Wijayanti, 2025; Santika & Tripayana). The present findings extend this argument by demonstrating how accountability pressures—particularly documentation and reporting—redirect teachers' attention toward procedural fulfillment rather than reflective engagement.

Several teachers, particularly those in public schools with stricter administrative requirements, expressed concern that excessive reporting demands limited their pedagogical flexibility. However, this perception was less pronounced in some private school contexts, indicating variation in how accountability pressures are experienced across institutional settings. This aligns with research suggesting that bureaucratic accountability frameworks may inadvertently weaken teachers' moral agency (Biesta, 2022; Sila et al, 2025; Santika et al, 2025)). Rather than cultivating ethical



dialogue, teachers often relied on standardized moral slogans aligned with national curriculum mandates.

2. Moral Instruction Without Critical Internalization

A second theme highlights the dominance of didactic moral instruction. Character education was frequently delivered through lecturing, advice-giving, or moral storytelling. While such approaches transmitted normative values, they rarely facilitated critical dialogue or student reflection.

This finding resonates with international research indicating that moral education becomes ineffective when confined to transmission models rather than dialogical engagement (Nucci et al., 2023). Observational data in this study revealed minimal opportunities for students to question, interpret, or contextualize moral principles within their lived realities. Students frequently described character education sessions as repetitive and instructional rather than reflective. As one student explained, 'The teacher usually reminds us to be honest and respectful, but we don't really discuss why or how it applies in real situations.' This indicates limited opportunities for deeper moral engagement.

Critical pedagogy literature emphasizes that authentic character formation requires dialogical processes enabling learners to negotiate moral meaning (Freire, 1970/2000; hooks, 2023). However, the data show that teachers often perceived dialogue as time-consuming and potentially disruptive to classroom control. This reinforces prior findings that time constraints and curriculum density restrict reflective pedagogy in Indonesian contexts (Suharmi et al., 2025; Suarningsih et al., 2024)).

These findings suggest a tendency for character education practices to take on a performative dimension, where the articulation of moral values is emphasized more than the processes that enable students to critically engage with and internalize those values. Such

pedagogical reductionism undermines students' capacity to internalize values autonomously.

3. Policy-Practice Disjunction

A third critical theme concerns the gap between national character education policies and school-level realities. Although policy frameworks articulate holistic character development, implementation often remains fragmented.

Participants acknowledged that national curriculum frameworks emphasize the integration of character education across subjects. However, teachers reported limited guidance on how to translate these expectations into concrete lesson designs. For example, while policy documents require the integration of values such as integrity and responsibility, teachers often rely on implicit references rather than structured activities that explicitly engage students in moral reasoning. However, teachers reported limited professional development on how to operationalize integration meaningfully. This disjunction reflects broader policy implementation challenges identified in Global South educational systems (Tikly, 2022; Kartika & Bagus, 2023). Policies frequently assume institutional readiness without addressing contextual constraints such as teacher workload and resource disparities.

The findings support previous Indonesian research noting that character education integration remains uneven and dependent on individual teacher initiative (Nurhalizah et al., 2022). Yet this study advances the discussion by highlighting structural misalignment: policy mandates emphasize moral transformation, while institutional evaluation systems prioritize measurable academic outputs.

This structural tension creates what Apple (2023) describes as "contradictory reform logics," where schools are expected to foster moral depth within systems dominated by performance metrics. Consequently, character education is symbolically affirmed but practically marginalized.

4. Hidden Curriculum Contradictions



Perhaps the most significant finding concerns contradictions within the hidden curriculum. While explicit instruction promoted honesty, respect, and responsibility, observed institutional practices occasionally contradicted explicitly taught values. For instance, in several classrooms, disciplinary practices involved public reprimands that emphasized compliance rather than reflection, potentially undermining values such as respect and empathy that were simultaneously promoted in formal instruction. For example, some disciplinary approaches relied on public reprimands that inadvertently undermined dignity and empathy (Kandia, 2023; Sujana & Pali, 2024).

This paradox aligns with longstanding scholarship on the hidden curriculum, which argues that institutional norms and power relations shape moral learning more profoundly

than formal instruction (Giroux, 2022). Students in this study demonstrated acute awareness of inconsistencies.

Moreover, teachers themselves acknowledged difficulties modeling ideal conduct under stressful working conditions. This reflects Biesta's (2022) argument that moral education requires institutional coherence, not merely teacher exhortation. Without alignment between institutional culture and moral discourse, character education becomes rhetorically strong but experientially weak. Between stated values and adult behavior. Such contradictions weakened the credibility of character education messages.

Table 1. Summary of Emergent Themes and Structural Implications

No.	Theme	Key Findings	Structural Implications
1.	Administrative Formalism	Character values inserted in documents but minimally enacted	Compliance culture prioritizes reporting over reflection
2.	Didactic Moral Instruction	Predominance of lecture-based moral advice	Limited dialogical engagement restricts internalization
3.	Policy-Practice Disjunction	Weak translation of policy into pedagogy	Structural misalignment between reform goals and evaluation systems
4.	Hidden Curriculum Contradictions	Institutional practices contradict moral discourse	Lack of cultural coherence undermines authenticity

5. Critical Synthesis with Previous Research

While earlier Indonesian studies have identified practical challenges—such as teacher preparedness and parental involvement (Prayatni et al., 2025; Rahmelia & Wijayanti, 2025)—they often frame these issues as isolated implementation gaps. The present study extends prior research by systematically linking observable implementation challenges to underlying structural mechanisms, such as

accountability systems and institutional expectations, thereby offering a more explanatory rather than purely descriptive account.

International scholarship increasingly emphasizes that character education effectiveness depends on systemic coherence rather than isolated interventions (Lickona & Davidson, 2023). The data in this study corroborate this perspective, demonstrating that pedagogical weakness cannot be separated



from institutional structures and accountability frameworks.

Furthermore, comparative research across Southeast Asia indicates similar tensions between moral rhetoric and policy-driven standardization (Tan, 2022). However, this study contributes a context-specific analysis grounded in lived experiences, offering empirical evidence that structural contradictions shape pedagogical limitations.

6. Theoretical Implications

The findings not only support but also extend critical pedagogical frameworks by demonstrating how institutional accountability structures can constrain dialogical learning processes, thereby limiting the realization of transformative moral education in practice. Drawing from Freirean theory, moral learning emerges through critical reflection and praxis rather than compliance. The dominance of administrative rationality reflects what Giroux (2022) describes as neoliberal influences in education—where measurable outputs overshadow moral and democratic formation.

Thus, the novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing character education weakness not merely as insufficient teacher capacity, but as a systemic misalignment between moral aspirations and institutional logics.

7. Practical and Policy Implications

The study suggests three primary reform directions:

- a. Shift evaluation systems from documentation-based compliance toward reflective pedagogical indicators.
- b. Provide sustained professional development emphasizing dialogical moral pedagogy.
- c. Align school culture and leadership practices with explicitly articulated character values.

Without structural coherence, character education risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

CONCLUSIONS

This study critically examined the structural and pedagogical weaknesses embedded in the implementation of character education practices in Indonesian primary and junior secondary schools. The findings demonstrate that the limitations of character education are not primarily rooted in the absence of policy commitment, but rather in the disjunction between normative aspirations and institutional realities, as evidenced by four recurring patterns identified in this study: administrative formalism, predominantly didactic instructional practices, policy–practice misalignment, and contradictions within the hidden curriculum. These empirically grounded patterns indicate that structural and pedagogical constraints systematically shape the implementation gap observed across cases. Although national frameworks strongly emphasize moral development as a foundational goal of education, their enactment at the school level is frequently constrained by administrative formalism, didactic instructional patterns, and institutional inconsistencies.

The study identified four interrelated weaknesses. First, character education is often reduced to administrative compliance, where values are documented in lesson plans without being meaningfully integrated into pedagogical practice. Second, instructional approaches remain predominantly transmissive, emphasizing moral exhortation rather than dialogical engagement and critical reflection. Third, a structural gap persists between policy mandates and the practical capacities of schools, particularly in terms of professional development and institutional alignment. Fourth, contradictions within the hidden curriculum undermine the credibility of explicit moral instruction, as students observe discrepancies between proclaimed values and institutional behavior.

These findings suggest that character education reform requires more than incremental adjustments or additional training



modules. Instead, it demands systemic realignment. Evaluation systems need to move beyond documentation-based compliance by incorporating qualitative and process-oriented indicators, such as students' reflective journals, classroom dialogue analysis, and teacher reflective practices. These indicators would enable a more accurate assessment of how character values are internalized and enacted, rather than merely documented in instructional plans. Teachers require sustained professional support to implement dialogical moral pedagogy that fosters critical consciousness rather than passive moral reception. Moreover, school leadership must cultivate institutional cultures that consistently embody the values formally articulated in curricula.

Theoretically, this study contributes to character education scholarship by advancing a systemic explanatory framework that links structural factors such as accountability regimes and policy design with pedagogical practices and classroom-level experiences. Unlike prior studies that predominantly attribute implementation challenges to teacher capacity or student behavior, this research demonstrates how institutional logics and policy pressures actively shape and constrain pedagogical possibilities, thereby offering a more integrated and multi-level understanding of character education implementation. By adopting a critical qualitative lens, the research highlights how accountability regimes, institutional pressures, and pedagogical traditions interact to shape the lived realities of moral education.

Ultimately, meaningful character formation cannot be achieved through symbolic policy affirmation alone. It requires coherent institutional structures, reflective pedagogical practices, and ethical consistency across school cultures. Without such alignment, character education risks remaining rhetorically powerful yet pedagogically superficial.

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