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Cognitive and Emotional Engagement in Character Formation: A Phenomenological Study of School Family Synergy

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study examines how character values are developed through cognitive and emotional engagement within school–family collaboration. It focuses on the roles of teachers, parental involvement, and student participation in supporting character formation.

Methodology: A descriptive phenomenological design was used with nine purposively selected participants, including school leaders, teachers, parents, and students. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documents, then analyzed thematically using ATLAS.ti 7. Credibility was ensured through triangulation and member checking.

Main Findings: Teacher shape character through modeling and instructional guidance; parents reinforce values through example and communication; and students show engagement through reflection and cooperative behavior. Strong school family synergy shared routines, communication, and aligned expectations enhances character habituation, though challenges remain in teacher capacity, parental involvement, and cultural constraints. Cognitive and emotional engagement act as mediating processes in character formation and align with contemporary character education theories. The study also highlights a contextual gap in the existing literature, particularly the limited attention to culturally grounded and community-based approaches in character education.

Novelty/Originality of this study: The study offers a culturally rooted phenomenological model integrating cognitive emotional engagement with school family collaboration. Policies should reinforce educator training, parental participation, and consistent value-based routines across home and school settings.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Character education has become an essential component of contemporary education as educators strive to strengthen students' moral, social, and emotional capacities. Several studies indicate that effective character development requires cognitive engagement where students understand values and moral reasoning and emotional engagement where values are internalized through empathy, reflection, and affective involvement [1],

[2]. Other research further emphasizes that character education becomes more effective when supported by structured learning environments and reinforced through daily routines and habits [3], [4]. In addition, character formation does not only take place in the classroom. Collaboration between schools and families plays a significant role in value transmission, as shared expectations, communication, and consistent reinforcement strengthen students' character development [5]-[7]. Previous studies also reveal that parental attention, involvement, and habituation at home influence children's motivation, emotional regulation, and moral understanding [5], [8]. while teachers contribute through role modeling, instructional guidance, and the creation of an emotionally supportive classroom climate [9]-[11].

Although collaborative approaches are increasingly discussed, most studies still focus on school-based or teacher-centered interventions. Research that explains how cognitive and emotional engagement operates within dynamic interactions among educators, parents, and students remains limited, particularly within culturally diverse contexts [12]-[14]. Phenomenological studies exploring how individuals experience and make meaning of value formation, emotional involvement, and school–family collaboration are also scarce [15]-[17]. Furthermore, several studies show that character education becomes less effective when emotional support, parental involvement, and cultural contextualization are neglected; such conditions weaken moral internalization, reduce consistency between school and home expectations, and limit the cultural relevance of character-building programs [18]-[20]. These conditions indicate a clear research gap, namely the lack of contextual understanding of how character values are co-constructed through cognitive and emotional engagement across school and home environments.

Addressing this gap is crucial to develop a more comprehensive character education model suited to socio-cultural contexts. The findings of this study are expected to provide empirical contributions to collaborative mechanisms that strengthen value internalization, especially in regions with strong cultural identities such as East Nusa Tenggara. This study is urgent because without understanding the relational, emotional, and collaborative dynamics between schools and families, character education programs risk remaining procedural and less meaningful in students' daily lives In response to the identified gap, this study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of educators, parents, and students in the process of character formation. The investigation focuses on cognitive emotional engagement patterns, forms of school family collaboration that support value habituation, and contextual barriers in implementation. Through this approach, the study aims to generate in-depth understanding that can inform more integrative character education strategies.

This study aims to explore how character values are formed through cognitive and emotional engagement within collaborative interactions among educators, parents, and students in East Nusa Tenggara. Specifically, the research objectives are: 1) To analyze the experiences of educators, parents, and students regarding cognitive and emotional engagement in character formation; 2) To identify forms of school–family collaboration that support the habituation of character values; 3) To examine contextual challenges that influence the implementation of collaborative character education

2.   RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of educators, parents, and students in character formation through cognitive engagement and emotional engagement. Phenomenology enables researchers to capture subjective meaning-making, affective experiences, and value internalization processes in natural settings, which aligns with the objectives of this study [21]. The research was conducted in the Nusa Tenggara region, an area characterized by rich cultural diversity, where school family collaboration and children's developmental conditions are closely shaped by various socio-cultural and environmental factors [22].

A total of nine participants were involved in this study using a purposive sampling technique, in which informants were selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. These participants consisted of one school principal who serves as the policymaker and determines the direction of character education implementation at the school, two Religious Education teachers who are directly involved in the learning process and the instillation of moral and religious values in students, three parents representing the family's perspective in value habituation and educational support at home, and three students as the primary subjects who directly experience the internalization of character values both in school and at home. This composition of participants was deliberately chosen to obtain a comprehensive understanding of character education practices through school–family collaboration from multiple viewpoints

Participants were included in this study if they had direct involvement in character-building activities either within the school environment or at home. The demographic information collected consisted of gender, profession (or school grade level for students), and work/class experience, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Informants

Informant Code	Gender	Role	Experience/Class
T1	Male	School Principal	23 Years
T2	Female	Catholic Religious Education Teacher	15 Years
T3	Female	Islamic Religious Education Teacher	18 Years
T4	Male	Parent of Student	15 Years
T5	Male	Parent of Student	-
T6	Female	Student	Grade XII
T7	Female	Student	Grade XII
T8	Male	Student	Grade XII
T9	Female	Student	Grade XII

Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants who could articulate experiences related to character development and collaboration. This technique is appropriate for phenomenological studies that prioritize the depth of experience over sample size [23]. Data were collected using three instruments: semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis. The semi-structured interview guide was developed based on established dimensions of character education, which include moral values, cognitive emotional engagement, modeling, parental involvement, and collaborative routines [24], [25]. with several items adapted from previous studies on classroom character practices and value internalization [26] Observations were conducted to capture real interactions and behavior within the school and home contexts, focusing on teacher modeling, character-building routines, parental participation, and students' emotional responses, following observation categories commonly used in studies on character habituation and discipline [27]. In addition, document analysis was carried out on school character policy documents, communication records between teachers and parents, and student activity reports, which provided institutional evidence to support and triangulate the interview and observation data [28].

Qualitative rigor was ensured using several strategies. Credibility was achieved through triangulation of interviews, observations, and document analysis [29]. Dependability was maintained by developing a clear audit trail documenting coding decisions and analytic procedures. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memos and an external expert review [29]-[31]. Transferability was supported by providing thick and detailed descriptions of the participants and research context. Because this was a qualitative study, statistical measures such as Cronbach's alpha were not applicable. Instead, expert judgment was used to verify the conceptual clarity and coherence of the interview and observation instruments [32].

Data were collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis. The interviews were conducted for approximately 45–60 minutes, audio-recorded with participant consent, and carried out in Indonesian to ensure clarity and ease of communication. Observations were implemented to capture real-time behavior related to character formation, including teacher modeling, daily character routines, and students' emotional engagement during school activities [33],[34]. In addition, document analysis was performed by reviewing character program materials, school regulations, and communication logs between teachers and parents to support and validate the findings obtained from interviews and observations [35].

Data analysis was carried out using Thematic Analysis with the assistance of ATLAS.ti 7, following established procedures for qualitative coding and theme construction[36]. The analytical process involved several steps, starting with familiarization with interview transcripts and observation notes, followed by generating open codes, categorizing the codes into conceptual clusters, and identifying major themes such as cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, role modeling, parental reinforcement, and school–family synergy [37]. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and theoretical perspectives on character formation [38].Throughout the analysis, network views, memos, and code co-occurrence tools were utilized to strengthen analytic reliability and ensure transparency in the interpretation process

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis produced five major themes that explain how character values are formed through cognitive and emotional engagement in school–family collaboration. These themes include: 1) Teachers' moral modeling and instructional guidance; 2) Parental reinforcement and home-based habituation; 3) Student participation and reflective behavior, and; 4) School-family synergy is the foundation of character formation.

Teachers' Moral Modeling and Instructional Guidance

The results reveal that educators serve as central agents of character formation through embodying moral behavior, providing structured value-based instruction, and offering consistent emotional support. Teachers routinely model values such as respect, discipline, empathy, and responsibility in their daily

interactions, arriving early, demonstrating patience, using polite language, and responding to conflict with problem-solving approaches. These behaviors are consistently observed, interpreted, and imitated by students, reinforcing the long-standing assertion that character is more effectively taught through examples than through direct instruction [39], [40].

Teachers also implicitly integrate character instruction into academic lessons and explicitly during classroom routines. They prompt moral reasoning by encouraging students to reflect on the consequences, empathize with others, and consider alternative responses to challenges. This integration aligns with McGrath et al.'s framework of character education, which highlights the need for coherence between academic content and value-based teaching [2]. This also supports the argument that moral reasoning is strengthened when students are cognitively engaged in discussions that challenge their thinking and broaden their social understanding.

Emotional engagement is a significant mediator in this process. Teachers who express warmth, encouragement, and emotional availability create a psychologically safe environment, a condition that neuroscientific literature links to improved self-regulation, emotional resilience, and moral development [41]. Students in this study frequently described feeling comfortable, supported, and trusted by their teachers, which facilitated their willingness to participate, admit their mistakes, and seek guidance. This supports the evidence that emotional safety enhances children's openness to internalizing values and developing sustained prosocial behaviors. The combined influence of modeling, cognitive instruction, and emotional presence suggests that teacher engagement operates at multiple levels behavioral, cognitive, and affective–to shape moral understanding and habituation. Such multidimensional engagement provides a strong empirical foundation for the argument that character education is not merely pedagogical but relational in nature [42]-[44]. These findings are shown in Figure 1.
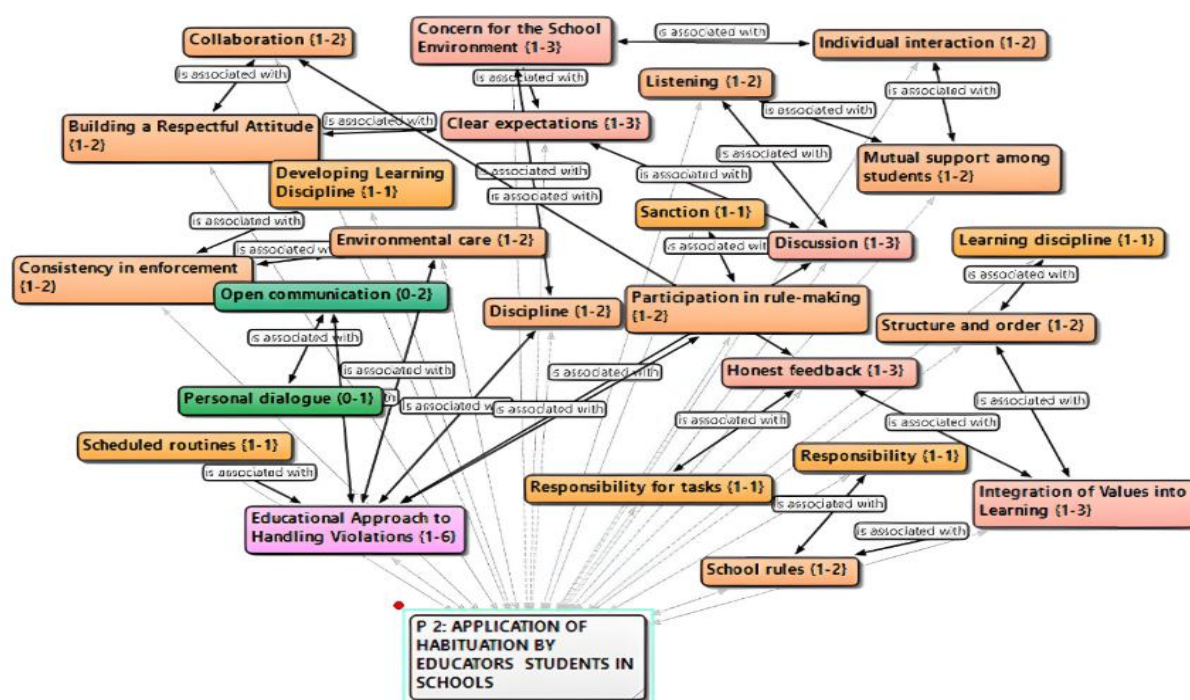

Figure 1. The Role of Educators

Parental Reinforcement and Home-Based Habituation

This study also highlights the pivotal role of parents in extending character formation beyond the school environment. Parents reinforce school values through consistent daily routines, such as household responsibilities, prayer time, respectful communication, and expectations of discipline. These findings align with Lally and Gardner's habit formation theory[45], which posits that repeated actions in stable contexts gradually become automatic behaviors, forming the basis of moral habits. Parents also act as moral communicators, discussing right and wrong, guiding children through emotional challenges, and correcting misbehaviors through direct feedback. As students navigate conflicts at home or in school, parental dialogues help them develop moral reasoning and emotional literacy skills that are essential for long-term character development.

Furthermore, the study revealed that collaboration between teachers and parents enhances consistency in value reinforcement. Parents reported adjusting home rules to align with school expectations after participating in meetings, informal conversations, or WhatsApp communication. This synchronization of expectations aligns with international studies demonstrating that aligned school-home routines significantly improve children's discipline, motivation, and responsibility [46], [47].Cultural influences in East Nusa

Tenggara shape parental involvement. Communal values, such as mutual cooperation, respect for elders, and shared responsibility, create a supportive social environment that echoes school messages. Shome's analysis of cultural embeddedness in moral formation[48], [49] explains why children in collectivist contexts often display stronger adherence to community norms than those in individualistic settings. Thus, culture amplifies the moral ecosystem, making character practices more meaningful and anchored in lived realities.

However, some parents face challenges, such as limited time due to economic pressures, lack of confidence in assisting their children academically, or inconsistent application of rules. These constraints mirror the structural challenges faced in low-income regions, as reported in other studies. Such limitations indicate the need for stronger parent empowerment strategies and structured school family communication systems.These findings are illustrated in Figure 2.
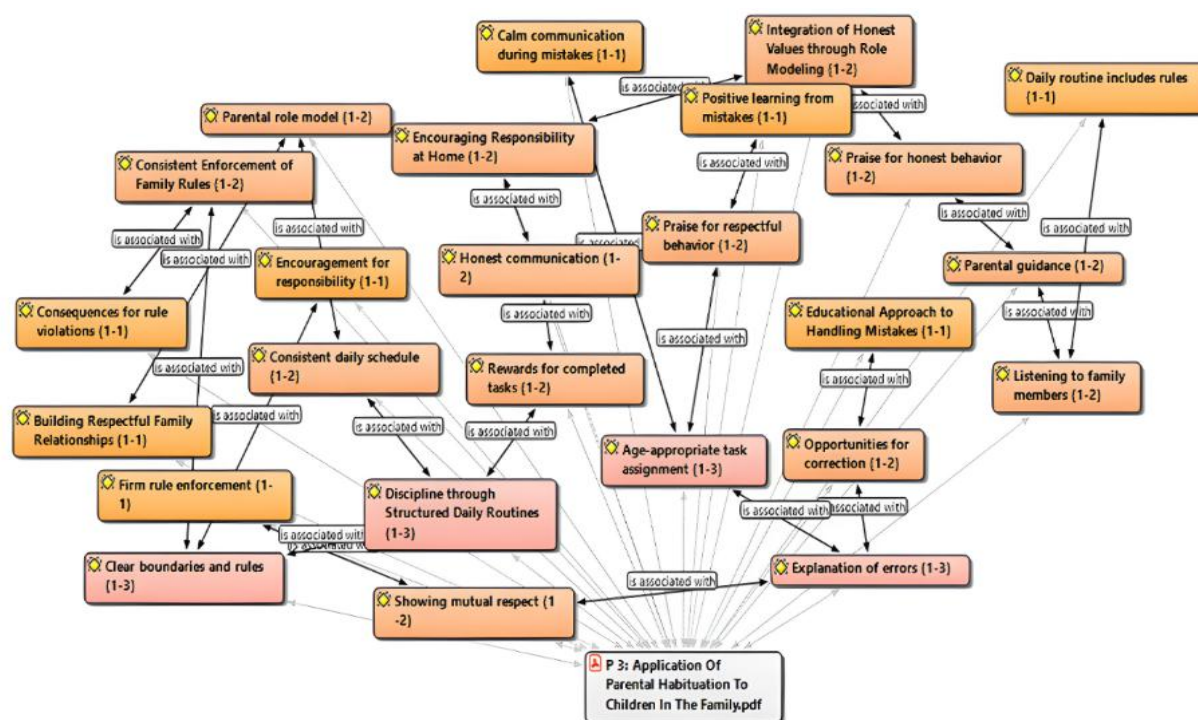

Figure 2. The Role of Parents

Student Participation and Reflective Behavior

Students are not passive recipients but active contributors to character formation. The study shows that students engage in the following: Reflective thinking (evaluating their own actions, intentions, and mistakes); Collaborative learning (working together, sharing resources, resolving conflicts); emotional expression (managing anger, showing empathy, comforting peers), and self-regulation in response to the teacher's feedback. These behaviors demonstrate that students internalize values through both cognitive understanding and emotional experiences. This finding aligns with moral psychology research that identifies reflection and emotional awareness as core components of moral identity development [50]-[53]. Students' reflections, often prompted by teachers questions or personal experiences, show increasing levels of self-awareness and moral judgment. This confirms that character formation is strengthened when learners actively evaluate and adjust their behavior rather than merely following rules. The study also revealed that emotional engagement (e.g., empathy, guilt, and gratitude) plays a direct role in value internalization. Students who experience emotional connections with teachers, peers, or parents tend to remember and adhere to moral expectations more effectively. This supports earlier research noting that emotions serve as anchors for ethical behavior and long-term character development [54]-[56]. Overall, the findings emphasize that student agency through reflection, collaboration, and emotional contribution is essential for transforming external values into internal commitments. These findings are illustrated in Figure 3.
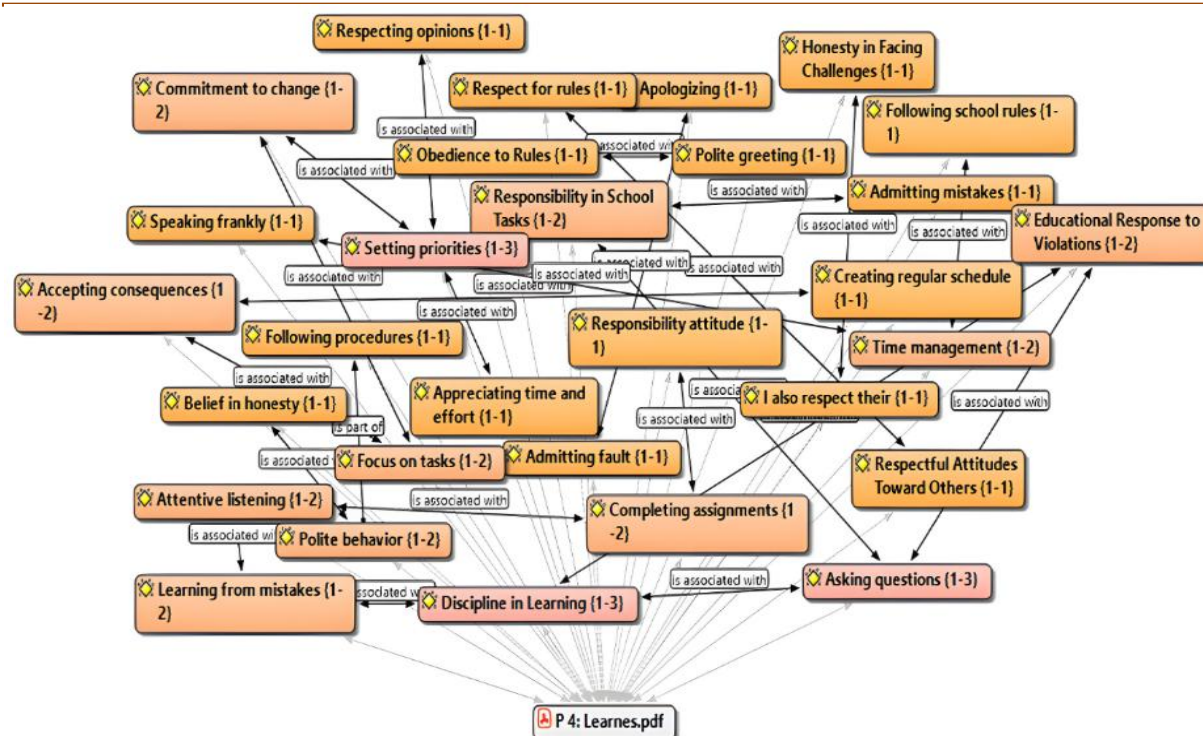
Figure 3. Student Participation

School Family Synergy as the Foundation of Character Formation

One of the strongest patterns observed is the synergy between the school and family, which forms a unified moral ecosystem that reinforces values across multiple settings. When teachers, parents, and students share consistent expectations, daily routines, and communication patterns, children experience a stable environment that accelerates the habituation of character. This ecological consistency aligns with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and is supported by contemporary character education research [57], [58]. The findings show that children internalize values such as discipline, respect, and cooperation more effectively when similar expectations are consistently reinforced across microsystems, particularly at home and school. This synergy is strengthened through routine communication between teachers and parents, shared behavioral rules and expectations, joint involvement in school activities, and the use of cultural narratives that highlight communal responsibility. Nevertheless, several systemic constraints were identified, including inconsistent teacher modeling, socio-economic pressures that limit parental involvement, gaps in communication, reliance on punitive rather than reflective discipline practices in some homes, and cultural tensions between modern educational expectations and traditional norms [59]-[61]. Despite these challenges, the study reveals that even partial alignment between school and family environments can significantly improve character development outcomes.

This study provides a new contribution to character education research by developing a phenomenological model of character formation that integrates cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and school–family synergy into a single conceptual framework. The findings demonstrate that emotional engagement, relational warmth, empathy, and psychological safety function as key mediating mechanisms linking teacher role modeling, parental reinforcement, and students' active participation. Thus, character development is not merely the result of value transmission at the cognitive level, but also relies on the quality of affective interactions that enable students to internalize and embody moral values meaningfully. This research further extends habit-formation theory by showing that the alignment of routines, expectations, and character habituation between home and school plays a vital role in strengthening moral internalization. The study also identifies several structural challenges, including limited teacher competence in implementing character-oriented pedagogy, low parental involvement, and sociocultural factors that are not yet fully integrated into character programs. These findings offer new insights for designing character education strategies that are more context-sensitive and culturally grounded. The key implication of this study is the need for a holistic and relational model of character education, balancing cognitive and emotional aspects. Schools must strengthen teachers' roles as moral exemplars and facilitators of emotionally supportive learning environments, while parents need to be empowered as active partners in value habituation at home. The results also serve as a basis for developing integrated teacher training and parenting programs that support collaborative character formation.

This study is limited by a relatively small number of participants and its focus on a single region, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the research is phenomenological in nature and does not include quantitative validation; therefore, further empirical testing is required to measure the effectiveness of the proposed model at a broader scale. Future research is encouraged to expand participant diversity and include schools from different contexts to enrich the findings. Developing a collaborative school–family intervention model and testing it through experimental or mixed-method designs is recommended to evaluate practical impact. Schools are also advised to design character habituation programs that align home and school routines, accompanied by guidance for teachers and parents to build sustainable character formation synergy

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that effective character formation emerges from the interplay of cognitive and emotional engagement and collaborative interactions among educators, parents, and students. Teachers shape character through moral modeling, structured routines, and supportive emotional climates, confirming the central role of adult exemplars in value internalization, as highlighted in prior character education studies. Parents reinforce these values through consistent communication, habitual practices at home, and alignment of expectations, supporting research showing that parental involvement significantly influences children's motivation and moral behavior. Students actively participate in the process by engaging in reflection, collaboration, and emotional expression, indicating that character development is not unidirectional but is co-constructed. The synergy between home and school creates a coherent moral ecosystem that accelerates value habituation, an ecological consistency that is rarely emphasized in the existing character education literature. This study contributes a contextualized phenomenological model that integrates cognitive–emotional mediators with school-family synergy. This study fills a notable gap in earlier character education research, which often treats teacher behavior, parental involvement, and student participation as separate strands rather than as an interconnected system. The findings also underscore the importance of cultural context, particularly communal values in East Nusa Tenggara, in shaping character formation processes. Overall, the study affirms that character education must not be viewed as a single program but as a holistic, relational, and culturally grounded practice involving all stakeholders in the learner's ecosystem.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

VBT contributed to the conceptualization of the research and the drafting of the initial manuscript. HB, FMUB and FRG contributed to the development of the research instruments and was involved in the data collection process. Sutarto was responsible for data processing and analysis. All authors participated in the review and editing of the manuscript and approved the final version of the article.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the generation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript. All aspects of the research, including data collection, interpretation, and manuscript preparation, were carried out entirely by the authors without the assistance of AI-based technologies.

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