

An Investigation into Character Education in Early Childhood Education in Jos Metropolis: Considerations for Curriculum and Stakeholders

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Abstract

Holistic development is an important goal for early childhood education (ECE). However, not much research has been conducted on character education in the Nigerian context, especially in early childhood education (birth through age 8). Indeed, there is a pervasive perception that character is declining amongst the youth in Nigeria, evidenced in exam malpractice, substance abuse, and other social ills. Research has found that character education, which includes explicit and implicit educational activities that help students develop character strengths, positively impacts academic and social outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the implementation of character education in early childhood programmes in Jos Metropolis. A descriptive research design was conducted. A total of 135 administrators of ECE programmes and 701 parents of young children constituted the sample via purposive selection. The instruments for data collection consisted of a teacher interview protocol whilst parents completed a questionnaire. Results showed that only one out of four schools are implementing character education whereas almost all school administrators (99.17%) and parents (99.14%) are in favour of teaching character education. A major challenge for implementing character education is a lack of an effective curriculum. The study concluded that character education in Nigeria is an important area for additional research and action amongst educational stakeholders to integrate character education into school curriculums, especially from the early years. Based on the research findings, it was recommended that schools should integrate character education into their curriculum.

Keywords: Character Education, Early Childhood, Curriculum, Stakeholders

Introduction

Early childhood programmes can impact pupils' academic achievement and well-being through a curriculum that enhances learning and development in all domains (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2024; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). Learning and development can be categorized into five domains: physical, social, cognitive, character, and spiritual (Korb, 2018). Because development in each domain is influenced by growth in other domains, intentional teaching strategies impacting each domain are critical from birth through age 8 (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020). This means that early childhood educators are responsible not just for teaching academic knowledge, but just as importantly, for nurturing children's physical, social, character, and spiritual development.

Holistic learning has many positive outcomes for learners. Research has shown that holistic learning approaches lead to improved academic achievement (Hill, 2002), enhanced social and emotional skills (Durlak *et. al.*, 2011) and increased creativity and critical thinking abilities (Plucker & Renzulli, 1999). Additionally, holistic learning has been linked to better mental health and well-being outcomes, including reduced stress and anxiety (Hart, 2001) and improved self-esteem and self-concept (Marsh & Craven, 2006). Furthermore, holistic learning approaches have been found to promote greater student engagement and motivation (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), leading to a more positive and supportive learning environment.

One specific domain of development, character, plays a crucial role in life process as it influences thoughts, feelings and actions (Tackett *et. al.*, 2017). Character is a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation, and guide conduct (The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools, 2022). Research has shown that good character is linked to better academic performance (Durlak *et. al.*, 2011), improved mental health and well-being (Park & Peterson, 2009), and stronger social relationships (Gilliland & Dunn, 2003). Character is critical for optimal human development (Rashid *et. al.*, 2015). Good character is what parents look for in their children, what teachers look for in their students, what siblings look for in their brothers and sisters, and what friends look for in their peers (Park & Peterson, 2009).

Character education, which includes explicit and implicit educational activities that help pupils develop character strengths (The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools, 2022), has been shown to positively impact a range of important developmental outcomes. First, research has found that character education programs lead to improved academic achievement, including higher grades, and standardized test scores (Durlak *et. al.*, 2011). Second, character education has been linked to increased social-emotional skills such as empathy, self-awareness, and self-regulation (Hart, 2001). Again, character education has been shown to promote moral development and ethical reasoning, including increased moral responsibility and civic engagement (Narvaez, 2006).

Character education is implicitly written into Nigeria's *National Policy on Education* (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). First, the goals of education in Nigeria are to "Develop individuals into morally sound, patriotic, and effective citizens, inculcate national consciousness, values and unity, and development of appropriate skills, mental, physical and social abilities and competencies to empower the individual to live in and contribute positively to the society" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, p. 1-2). The phrase "morally sound," the need to inculcate values, as well as the competences to contribute positively to society all bespeak character education. Again, the *National Policy on Education* reads, "The quality of instruction at all levels of education shall be oriented towards inculcating moral and spiritual principles in inter-personal and human relations" (p. 2-3). Character education is included in instruction that will inculcate moral principles. Finally, character education is included in the policy for early childhood education, whereby one of the goals of Basic Education is to "Inculcate values and raise morally upright individuals capable of independent thinking" (p. 4). Values and morals are part of character education. In summary, character education features importantly throughout Nigeria's Policy on Education.

Statement of Problem

Character is declining amongst youth in Nigeria. This is evidenced in examination malpractice, substance abuse, and other social ills. Statistics showed that in 2019, there were 224,711 occurrences of test malpractice, affecting 11.26% of applicants who sat for West African Senior School Certificate Examination (Ajayi, 2024). According to Chukuwumeka (2024), 75% of students who take West African Examination Council and Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board examinations in special centers around the country, where examination malpractice is prevalent, were advised by their parents to go there.

This study sets examines the perspectives of early years parents and teaches whether character education can be one important strategy for addressing the decline in character amongst Nigerian youth.

Objectives of Study

The main aim of this study was to investigate the implementation of character education in early childhood programmes in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria. Specific objectives of the study are to:

- ascertain the number of early childhood schools implementing character education in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria.

- identify the proportion of school administrators who believe that character education should be taught in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria.
- identify challenges that school administrators face in implementing character education in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria.
- ascertain the number of parents of young children who believe that character education should be taught in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria.

Research Questions

- How many early childhood schools are implementing character education in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria?
- What proportion of school administrators believe that character education should be taught in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria?
- What challenges do school administrators face in implementing character education in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria?
- How many parents think that character education should be taught in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria?

Methodology

This research adopted a descriptive research design to examine schools that incorporate character education in early childhood education. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to collect data. Qualitatively, the investigation involved conducting in-depth interviews with school administrators which were transcribed, coded and analysed to determine their practices and experiences with character education. Quantitatively, a questionnaire was administered to parents to investigate their beliefs about character education.

The target population for the study included both administrators of nursery and primary schools as well as parents of nursery and primary pupils. A total of 135 school administrators at private schools were selected. (Public schools were excluded as they were on strike at the time of data collection.) In order to select schools, research assistants were assigned a geographical area within Jos Metropolis and went to every nursery/primary school in their geographical area. This ensured that both low-income and high-income schools were selected.

Parents of nursery or primary pupils responded to a questionnaire as part of a larger experiment examining the impacts of a character education curriculum. For parent report, schools were purposively selected as being low-income schools. All parents of one classroom between Nursery 3 and Primary 2 in each school were invited to a parent meeting to collect data for this study. A total of 701 parents completed the questionnaire item addressing one of the research questions in this study.

An open-ended interview protocol with 11 interview questions was used to collect data from school administrators. The data were collected as part of a broader interview process, with this study specifically focusing on responses to the following three questions: Is character education being taught at the nursery-primary levels in your school? Do you think that character education should be taught to children? What challenges do you face at your school in teaching character education? Probing questions were employed to elicit more detailed insights. Specifically, after the first question of whether character education was taught at their school, participants were asked to describe the nature of the character education.

Parents in the study completed a questionnaire. The item on the questionnaire relevant to this study focused on responses to the question, "Character education can be taught as a subject, just like English and mathematics are taught as subjects. Character education means directly and purposefully teaching good morals and ethics, like honesty, respect, and treating others fairly. "Do you think that character education should be taught to children?" Parents ticked either Yes or No. The questionnaire was translated into Hausa using back-translation procedures for parents with limited understanding of English. Each questionnaire had the English version printed on one side of the paper and the Hausa version printed on the other side of the paper.

School administrators were interviewed according to a structured protocol, with each session being audio-recorded for transcription. The interviews were completed over the course of five working days. The duration of the full interviews ranged from 14 minutes to 56 minutes. These interviews were conducted at the participants' respective schools between 8:00 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. The recorded interviews were then transcribed verbatim for subsequent data analysis.

Parents completed the questionnaire during a parent meeting, with the process spanning 10 working

days. On average, administering the full questionnaire took about 30 minutes. Parent meetings were conducted at the participants' respective schools, where their children are enrolled, between 8:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. Two research assistants guided the parents in completing the questionnaire by reading each item out loud to ensure that parents with limited literacy could complete the questionnaire. Each item was read three times: first in the language that most parents were comfortable in (e.g., English for most schools), then in the other language (Hausa), and again in the first language (English).

Open-ended items were analysed through qualitative content analysis. To answer the first research question about whether schools taught character education, character education was operationally defined through consensus of four researchers, with inclusionary and exclusionary criteria. The operational definition was "a character education curriculum/subject distinct from other subjects." Responses that were included as character education were moral education, ethics, character themes per month (or other timeframe), focused discussions on character during circle time or other group discussions, and specific times dedicated to talking about character. Responses that were excluded include religious education, civic education, social studies, disciplining children, assembly, and extracurricular activities. Two researchers coded administrators' descriptions of the character education at their school against this operational definition. Discrepancies in coding were discussed until a consensus was reached.

Analysis of the second research question about whether school administrators believed character education should be taught was straightforward as administrators almost always gave clear a yes or no response. The third research question addressing the challenges of character education was analysed by first reading over the transcripts for themes. Themes were operationally defined, and responses were then coded by two researchers using the same procedure as in research question one. Descriptive statistics were used to answer the final research question about parents' beliefs of character education.

Results

The first research question asked, how many early childhood programs are implementing character education in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria. Based on the coding procedures described above, results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Character Education being Taught in Nursery and Primary Schools.

	Frequency	Percent ¹
Yes, Character Education is Taught	34	25.95
No, Character Education not Taught	97	74.05
No Response Given	4	
Total	135	

As can be seen in Table 1, few nursery and primary schools teach character education. Despite character education featuring prominently in Nigeria's *National Policy on Education*, few schools in Jos Metropolis are actually teaching character education.

The second research question asked, what proportion of school administrators believe that character education should be taught in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Administrators' Beliefs of whether Character Education Should be Taught.

	Frequency	Percent ¹
Yes, Character Education should be taught	119	99.17
No, Character Education should not be taught	1	0.83
No Response Given	15	
Total	135	

Table 2 shows that administrators in Jos Metropolis were almost unanimous in agreeing that character education should be taught in nursery and primary schools, with only one school administrator disagreeing. Even though school administrators believe that character education should be taught, very few are teaching character education. Therefore, it is important to examine the challenges confronting character education, which is the topic of the third research question.

The third research question asked, what challenges do school administrators face in implementing character education in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria. Table 3 first presents whether school administrators perceived that there were challenges to implementing character education.

Table 3. Administrators' Beliefs of whether there are Challenges to Implementing Character Education.

	Frequency	Percent ¹
Yes, there are challenges	86	78.18
No, there are no challenge	24	21.82
No Response Given	25	
Total	135	

As can be seen from Table 3, 78% of school administrators in Jos Metropolis perceive there are challenges to implementing character education. The challenges that school administrators reported were coded according to seven themes, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Challenges for Character Education.

Theme	Definition	Frequency	Percent ¹
Parent Beliefs	Parents have differing beliefs on what character strengths should be taught (including religious differences)	28	32.56
Lack of Parent Cooperation	Parents do not support character education, including parents do not support character development in the homes or lack of awareness about the importance of character education	20	23.26
Difficulty of Children Learning Character	Character is difficult for young children to learn; They are not able to or interested in learning about character	18	20.93
Lack of Curriculum/Materials	Lack of a coherent character curriculum, textbooks, and/or materials	13	15.12
Not in the Curriculum	Character education is not part of the school's curriculum	6	6.98
Lack of Time	Character education is not in the timetable or the timetable is too full	5	5.81
Other	Other challenges such as lack of funding, peer pressure, and lack of awareness that character education can be taught	7	8.14

As seen in Table 4, the most commonly mentioned challenge of character education is parent beliefs, meaning that parents have different beliefs of character, such as religious differences. For example, one administrator said, "I said we're having challenges with parents. You know, we have individual differences and as such you will see that this child will come with a belief on his family or from the background... When you bring your own, they would now look at it strange." The next most frequently mentioned challenge was lack of parent cooperation. School administrators who mentioned this theme focused mostly on parents not enforcing good character in the home or parents were not aware of the importance of character education. Other commonly mentioned challenges of character education were related to curriculum, including lack of a coherent curriculum

(N=13), that character education is not in the school's curriculum (N=6), or that character education was not on the school's timetable (N=5).

The last research question asked, how many parents think that character education should be taught in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria. Results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Parents' Beliefs of whether Character Education Should be Taught.

	Frequency	Percent
Yes, Character Education should be taught	695	99.14%
No, Character Education should not be taught	6	0.86%
Total	701	100%

Table 5 shows that almost all of the surveyed parents believed that character education should be taught.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the implementation of character education in early childhood programmes in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria. The first research question addressed the number of early childhood programs that implement character education. The results show that only about 1 out of every 4 schools are teaching character education, in contrast to Nigeria's *National Policy on Education* which promotes character education in schools. Given that growth in each developmental domain is influenced by growth in other domains (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020), children in these schools where character education are not taught may not demonstrate holistic development, especially in the domain of character. This limits the potential developmental progress that is impacted by character education, such as improved academic achievement (Hill, 2002), enhanced social and emotional skills (Durlak et al., 2011) and increased creativity and critical thinking abilities (Plucker & Renzulli, 1999).

The second research question addressed school administrators' beliefs of whether character education should be taught whereas the fourth research question addressed the same belief amongst parents of young children. There was widespread agreement amongst both school administrators and parents that character education should be integrated into the school curriculum. Similarly, Birhan and colleagues (2021) also found that parents in Ethiopia support the inclusion of character education in preprimary and primary schools. The discrepancy found in this study between school officials' and parents' beliefs and actual practice merits increased attention as to the challenges and opportunities of character education in early childhood education in Jos Metropolis and beyond.

The third research question addressed school administrators' perceptions of the challenges of implementing character education. The two most commonly cited challenges were about parents, including differing beliefs amongst parents and lack of parent cooperation. However, as noted by the results from the fourth research question, parents are almost all in favour of character education being taught in the schools. All but one of the other commonly mentioned challenges was regarding a character education curriculum.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made.

- First, schools should integrate character education into their curriculum. The benefits of teaching character education in the classroom include better academic performance
- Therefore, awareness campaigns should be made to school administrators about parents' beliefs of character education.
- Experts in early childhood education should focus their attention on developing character education curriculums.
- Educational researchers should conduct research examining the impacts of character education amongst Nigerian children – especially young Nigerian children.

Conclusion

This study concluded that very few nursery/primary schools in Josteach character education, in contrast to Nigeria's *National Policy on Education* which promotes character education in schools. The study also showed school administrators were almost unanimous in agreeing that character education should be taught in nursery and primary schools, and parents also strongly supported the teaching of character education. An important challenge noted by educators in implementing character education was the lack of a character education curriculum, so educational stakeholders should focus attention on developing a character education curriculum for the Nigerian context. Character education in Nigeria is an important area for additional research and action amongst educational stakeholders.

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