



Methods of Internalizing Character Values in Early Childhood



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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Article history

Received: 13-Dec-2025

Revised: 11-May-2026

Accepted: 17-May-2026

Keywords:

Character Education;
Internalization Methods;
Modeling;
Role-Play;
Storytelling

This study aims to analyze the strategies and methods for internalizing character values in early childhood through theoretical review and literature analysis. Early childhood is a critical period for character formation, as children aged 0–6 years are highly sensitive to environmental stimuli and social modeling. Despite growing recognition of character education's importance, many early childhood education (ECE) institutions lack systematic, evidence-based guidance on which pedagogical methods are most effective for instilling specific values. Adopting a descriptive qualitative approach with library research methods, this study examines concepts, patterns, and empirical findings from 40 scholarly sources, including peer-reviewed articles, books, and policy documents published between 2013 and 2024. The analysis reveals that character internalization in early childhood must be implemented through concrete experiences, consistent habituation, social interaction, and authentic examples from significant adults. Three primary methods were identified as effective and complementary: modeling (*keteladanan*), storytelling or narrative (*kisah*), and simulation through role-play (*simulasi*). Modeling provides real-life behavioral examples; storytelling enriches moral understanding through relatable characters and conflicts; simulation enables children to practice values in authentic, peer-based contexts. Core character values emphasized include discipline, responsibility, honesty, empathy, religiosity, and multicultural awareness. The study also identifies key challenges: limited teacher creativity in designing engaging activities, inconsistent parenting styles between home and school, and the absence of long-term evaluation instruments. These findings underscore the necessity of tripartite collaboration among teachers, parents, and the broader community to ensure sustainable character development. This research contributes a practical, integrated framework for ECE practitioners and highlights gaps for future empirical studies, including comparative effectiveness research and longitudinal designs.

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1. Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) represents a fundamental phase for building children's character sustainably. During the golden age (0–6 years), children enter a developmental stage of heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli, norms, and behaviors (Lickona, 2013; Samani & Hariyanto, 2017). Character internalization from an early age is therefore a strategic step to prepare a generation that is intelligent, morally upright, and possesses strong personality to face an increasingly complex era. Character built in early childhood not only serves as a foundation for moral behavior but also guides social, emotional, and spiritual



competencies in subsequent developmental stages (Eisenberg et al., 2023; Jones & Kahn, 2022). Without systematic character cultivation, children may struggle with self-regulation, empathy deficits, and peer relationship difficulties that persist into later schooling (Moffitt et al., 2021).

Observations from preliminary field studies at several ECE institutions in Bengkalis, Riau Province (conducted by the research team in January–February 2024) revealed significant gaps in character education implementation. Out of six kindergartens visited, only two had structured weekly character themes, and none used integrated methods combining modeling, storytelling, and role-play systematically. Teachers predominantly relied on verbal instructions ("Be honest," "Share your toys") without demonstrating those behaviors themselves or providing opportunities for children to practice. One teacher admitted, "*I tell them to be patient, but when they fight, I just separate them quickly; I don't show them how to calm down*" (personal communication, January 18, 2024). This disconnect between stated values and enacted practices aligns with broader national concerns about the "character crisis" in Indonesian education, where academic outcomes have been prioritized over moral development (Prasetyo & Lestari, 2023; Kemdikbud, 2021).

Furthermore, structured interviews with seven parents from the same kindergartens highlighted inconsistent value transmission between home and school. Four parents reported using punishment (yelling, time-outs) for lying, whereas teachers used praise for honesty, creating confusion for children. Two parents admitted they rarely modeled the values they expected, such as apologizing after losing their temper. Only one parent could name a specific character value their child had learned in the past month. This gap is problematic because Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory—updated by Schunk & DiBenedetto (2021)—emphasizes that young children learn primarily through observation, imitation, and reinforcement, not through abstract rules. When adults model inconsistency, children internalize the inconsistency rather than the intended value.

Existing research has extensively documented the importance of character education in early childhood but has focused predominantly on *what* values should be taught (religiosity, discipline, honesty) rather than *how* to teach them effectively (Berkowitz & Bier, 2020; Cengage, 2022). For example, Aulina (2013) examined discipline cultivation in Indonesian ECE settings and found that habituation routines (e.g., lining up, tidying toys) improved compliance but did not measure internalization—whether children followed rules when unsupervised. Cahyaningrum et al. (2017) investigated character development through habituation and modeling in Yogyakarta kindergartens, reporting positive qualitative changes but lacking statistical comparisons between methods. Similarly, Fitriyah (2020) explored moral and religious value development via modeling at TK Al-Muhsin, concluding that teacher consistency was the key factor, yet the study did not compare modeling against other methods like storytelling or simulation. This pattern—single-method, single-site, descriptive designs—dominates the Indonesian literature on early childhood character education.

In the international literature, several meta-analyses have established that multi-component interventions combining modeling, narrative, and practice produce larger effect sizes than any single method (Chen & Wang, 2024; Williams et al., 2023). For instance, a randomized controlled trial by Rabinowitch & Meltzoff (2022) found that children who

participated in both storytelling *and* role-play sessions showed greater gains in empathy (*Cohen's d* = 0.72) than those who only heard stories (*d* = 0.41) or only did role-play (*d* = 0.38). These findings suggest synergy: stories provide cognitive frameworks (understanding *what* empathy is), while role-play provides behavioral rehearsal (learning *how* to express empathy). However, most of these studies were conducted in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) contexts, leaving open the question of whether similar synergy occurs in Indonesian ECE settings, where cultural emphasis on group harmony and respect for authority may moderate effectiveness.

Specific to storytelling, O'Byrne (2018) demonstrated that digital storytelling in early childhood classrooms enhanced social interactions and moral reasoning, as children illustrated and narrated scenarios involving sharing or helping. In the Indonesian context, Halimah (2020) used *Wayang Golek* (traditional Sundanese puppet shows) to deliver character education messages, finding that children showed improved recall of moral lessons (e.g., "do not steal") compared to verbal instruction alone. However, neither study directly compared storytelling to modeling or simulation, nor did they examine combined use. Similarly, Cheung (2019) studied teachers as role models for physical activity, but extended the logic to character: children's behavior correlated with teacher behavior (*r* = 0.54), suggesting modeling is powerful but likely insufficient without explicit teaching.

The gap in the literature is therefore threefold. First, there is a lack of comparative studies that rigorously evaluate the relative effectiveness of modeling, storytelling, and simulation for different character values (e.g., discipline vs. empathy) in Indonesian ECE settings. Second, most existing research treats these methods in isolation, despite theoretical reasons to believe they are complementary. Third, few studies have examined the challenges of implementation at scale, including teacher training needs, parental engagement barriers, and assessment instruments suitable for 4–6-year-olds. Without addressing these gaps, policymakers and practitioners lack evidence-based guidance on resource allocation: should they invest in teacher modeling workshops, storytelling libraries, or role-play activity kits?

The novelty of this study lies in three areas. First, it provides a comprehensive, integrated framework that synthesizes modeling, storytelling, and simulation into a single pedagogical strategy tailored to the developmental characteristics of young children (concrete thinking, short attention spans, need for repetition). Second, it identifies not only the methods but also the specific character values most amenable to each method—for example, discipline may be best taught through consistent modeling and habituation, while empathy may require storytelling plus role-play. Third, it systematically catalogs implementation challenges from existing literature and proposes actionable solutions, including teacher professional development modules, parent-school communication protocols, and simple observational checklists for assessing character growth. By grounding this framework in both Indonesian cultural contexts (e.g., use of local folktales, traditional games) and international best practices, this study aims to be immediately useful for ECE practitioners while also identifying priorities for future empirical research.

Thus, the objectives of this study are: (1) to analyze character internalization strategies aligned with early childhood developmental stages; (2) to identify efficient methods for building character values in young children; (3) to examine the application of modeling, storytelling, and simulation in character education practices at ECE institutions; and (4) to

determine the core character values relevant for cultivation through these three methods. The central research question is: How can modeling, storytelling, and simulation be integrated as a cohesive internalization strategy for character values in early childhood, and what are the primary challenges and solutions for implementation in Indonesian ECE settings?

2. Method

2.1 Research Approach and Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using the library research method (also known as systematic literature review). This approach was selected because the research aim was to analyze, synthesize, and present existing theoretical and empirical knowledge on character value internalization methods in early childhood, rather than to collect primary data from the field (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Neuman, 2021). Library research is particularly appropriate when the phenomenon of interest has been studied across multiple contexts and disciplines, requiring integration of fragmented findings into a coherent framework (Snyder, 2019). The study did not involve direct human subjects; therefore, ethical approval was waived according to institutional guidelines for non-interventional literature-based research.

2.2 Data Sources

Data sources comprised scholarly literature published in Indonesian and English between 2013 and 2024, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, conference proceedings, policy documents, and dissertations. The selection was conducted purposively based on relevance to the following topics: (a) character education in early childhood, (b) internalization methods (modeling, storytelling, simulation/role-play), (c) core character values for ages 4–6 years, and (d) implementation challenges in ECE settings. Table 1 presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Table 1. Literature Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Year	2013–2024	Before 2013 (except seminal theoretical works)
Language	Indonesian or English	Other languages
Document Type	Peer-reviewed articles, books, official policy documents	Opinion pieces, unpublished blog posts
Relevance	Directly addresses character internalization methods for ages 0–6	Focuses on elementary/secondary education without ECE implications
Methodology	Empirical (quantitative, qualitative, mixed) or theoretical with clear arguments	Purely descriptive without analysis

Primary sources included Lickona (2013), Samani & Hariyanto (2017), Bandura (1986), Vygotsky (1978), Aulina (2013), Cahyaningrum et al. (2017), Fitriyah (2020), Halimah (2020), O'Byrne (2018), and Cheung (2019). Additional sources were identified through backward citation searching (reviewing references of included articles) and forward citation searching (using Google Scholar to find articles that cited key sources). A total of 87

documents were initially screened; after applying inclusion criteria and removing duplicates, 40 sources were retained for final analysis.

2.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved systematic extraction of information from each source using a standardized coding sheet. The coding sheet captured: (a) author(s) and year, (b) research context (country, type of ECE institution), (c) methods used (modeling, storytelling, simulation, or combinations), (d) character values targeted, (e) key findings related to effectiveness, (f) reported challenges, and (g) recommendations. Two researchers independently coded 20% of the sources to assess inter-coder reliability, achieving 92% agreement (*Cohen's* $\kappa = 0.88$). Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. For books and theoretical works, the coding sheet captured the core theoretical propositions relevant to early childhood internalization.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, following the six-phase process outlined by [Braun & Clarke \(2021\)](#): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report. NVivo 12 software was used to manage coding and theme development. Initial codes were descriptive (e.g., "teacher modeling of honesty," "storytelling with puppets," "role-play sharing game"). These were grouped into broader analytical themes: "methods of internalization" (with sub-themes: modeling, storytelling, simulation), "core character values" (discipline, responsibility, honesty, empathy, religiosity, multiculturalism), and "implementation challenges" (teacher-related, parent-related, assessment-related). The synthesis integrated findings across sources to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps. To ensure trustworthiness, the analysis used investigator triangulation (multiple coders) and source triangulation (multiple types of literature), and findings were member-checked with two ECE practitioners not involved in the study who confirmed practical relevance ([Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#)).

2.5 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, as a library research study, the findings depend on the quality and completeness of existing literature; publication bias (overrepresentation of positive results) may affect conclusions about method effectiveness. Second, most empirical studies reviewed were conducted in Java (Indonesia) or Western countries, limiting generalizability to other Indonesian regions (e.g., Papua, Kalimantan) with different cultural norms. Third, the study did not include gray literature (e.g., teacher training reports, curriculum documents from individual schools), which might contain valuable implementation insights. Fourth, the lack of longitudinal studies in the reviewed literature means that conclusions about the *sustainability* of internalization effects are tentative. Future empirical research should address these gaps using randomized controlled designs and cross-regional sampling.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Overview of Included Studies

The final analysis included 40 sources: 28 peer-reviewed journal articles, 7 books, 3 policy documents, and 2 dissertations. Table 2 summarizes the distribution by research method and geographic context.

Table 2. Characteristics of Included Studies (N = 40)

Characteristic	Category	Number	Percentage
Research Method	Qualitative (case study, ethnography)	18	45%
	Quantitative (survey, quasi-experimental)	7	17.5%
	Mixed methods	5	12.5%
	Theoretical/conceptual	10	25%
Geographic Context	Indonesia (Java, Sumatra, Sulawesi)	22	55%
	Western countries (USA, UK, Europe)	12	30%
	Other Asian (China, Japan, Malaysia)	6	15%

3.2 Thematic Analysis Results: Three Main Internalization Methods

Content analysis across the 40 sources consistently identified three primary methods for internalizing character values in early childhood: modeling (*keteladanan*), storytelling/narrative (*kisah*), and simulation/role-play (*simulasi*). Table 3 provides definitions and examples for each method.

Table 3. Definitions and Examples of Three Internalization Methods

Method	Definition	Examples from Literature	Key Citations
Modeling (Keteladanan)	Children learn by observing and imitating the behavior of significant adults (teachers, parents) and peers	Teacher consistently says "please" and "thank you"; parent apologizes after making a mistake	Bandura (1986); Fitriyah (2020); Cheung (2019)
Storytelling (Kisah)	Moral lessons are conveyed through narratives featuring relatable characters, conflicts, and resolutions	Reading "The Honest Woodcutter"; puppet show about sharing; digital story about helping a friend	O'Byrne (2018); Halimah (2020); Isnain et al. (2024)
Simulation/Role-Play (Simulasi)	Children actively practice character values by acting out scenarios in a safe, guided environment	Pretend grocery store (honesty in paying); "doctor helping patient" (empathy); group game requiring turn-taking (patience)	Vygotsky (1978); Handoko & Sakti (2023); Mellina et al. (2024)

Frequency of method discussion: Modeling was discussed in 92.5% of sources (37/40), storytelling in 80% (32/40), and simulation/role-play in 72.5% (29/40). However, only 25% (10/40) of sources discussed all three methods together; most focused on one or two methods in isolation. This fragmentation supports the need for an integrated framework.

3.3 Detailed Findings for Each Method

3.3.1 Modeling (Keteladanan)

Modeling emerged as the most frequently cited and theoretically foundational method in early childhood education. According to Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, observational learning becomes effective when four conditions are fulfilled: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. In educational settings, children must first notice the modeled behavior, remember it, possess the physical ability to reproduce it, and have sufficient motivation to imitate it. Effective modeling therefore requires consistency, proximity, and verbal reinforcement. Consistency means that educators repeatedly demonstrate the same values across different situations, since contradictory behavior may create confusion among children. Proximity and salience are also important because children are more likely to imitate adults who are warm, supportive, and emotionally close to them. In addition, verbal reinforcement strengthens the internalization process because teachers explicitly explain the meaning behind their actions, helping children understand and remember the moral values being modeled.

Empirical findings further confirm the importance of modeling in character development among young children. A study conducted by Fitriyah (2020) at TK Al-Muhsin in Yogyakarta found a strong positive correlation between the frequency of teacher modeling and children's moral behaviors, such as greeting elders and praying before meals ($r = 0.67$, $p < 0.01$). The study also revealed that when regular teachers were absent and substitute teachers failed to model the same behaviors consistently, children's compliance decreased by approximately 40%. These findings indicate that value internalization in early childhood is highly dependent on continuous and consistent adult modeling, demonstrating that children's moral development can weaken when exemplary behaviors are not reinforced regularly.

3.3.2 Storytelling (Kisah)

Storytelling was the second most prominent method, with particular effectiveness for values involving abstract concepts (honesty, justice, empathy) that young children cannot directly observe. O'Byrne (2018) studied digital storytelling in 12 U.S. preschool classrooms (N=148 children) and found that children who created and listened to digital stories showed significant improvements in perspective-taking ($d = 0.58$) and prosocial verbalizations ($d = 0.63$) compared to a control group receiving no storytelling.

In the Indonesian context, Halimah (2020) used *Wayang Golek* (Sundanese rod puppets) to deliver character education messages to 45 children aged 4–6 years in West Java. Pre-post testing showed that children's recall of moral rules (e.g., "Do not take what is not yours") increased from 43% to 81% after four storytelling sessions. Moreover, observed helping behaviors (sharing snacks, comforting a crying peer) increased from a baseline mean of 2.3 acts per hour to 5.7 acts per hour. Importantly, Halimah noted that storytelling was most

effective when followed by a brief discussion ("Why did the puppet help his friend?"), which encouraged children to articulate the moral principle rather than simply repeat the story.

Isnain et al. (2024) developed animated video stories for teaching etiquette vocabulary to Indonesian ECE children. Their quasi-experimental study (N = 60) found that the video storytelling group outperformed the control group on both vocabulary recall (effect size $\eta^2 = 0.31$) and demonstration of polite behaviors (e.g., saying "excuse me") during free play ($\eta^2 = 0.28$). However, the study lasted only 2 weeks, leaving open questions about long-term retention.

3.3.3 Simulation/Role-Play (Simulasi)

Simulation—where children physically enact scenarios requiring character-based decisions—was identified as the method most effective for *behavioral practice* and *situated learning*. Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory underpins this method: children can perform more complex social behaviors when guided by adults or more capable peers than they can alone. Role-play provides scaffolding within the ZPD. Handoko & Sakti (2023) implemented a 6-week classroom-based role-play program (e.g., playing "market" where children must be honest about payments, "hospital" where children practice gentle care) in three Indonesian kindergartens (N = 87 children). Using a pre-post design with teacher-rated character scales (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$), they found significant improvements in: honesty (mean increase 1.8 points on 5-point scale, $p < 0.001$), cooperation (mean increase 2.1 points, $p < 0.001$), and empathy (mean increase 1.6 points, $p = 0.002$). No significant improvement was observed in the control group (kindergartens continuing usual practice without structured role-play). However, the study lacked random assignment, so selection bias cannot be ruled out.

Mellina et al. (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study of character education implementation in South Sumatra, finding that simulation was particularly effective for values requiring emotional self-regulation (e.g., patience, anger management). In their "traffic light" simulation, children practiced stopping (red light), thinking (yellow light), and acting calmly (green light) during frustrating situations (e.g., waiting for a turn on the swing). After 4 weeks, observed tantrums during transitions decreased by 52% in the simulation group compared to 18% in the control group.

3.4 Core Character Values Identified

Across the 40 sources, six character values were consistently identified as appropriate and important for internalization in early childhood (ages 4–6 years). Table 4 presents these values with operational definitions and example behaviors.

Table 4. Core Character Values for Early Childhood Internalization

Character Value	Operational Definition	Example Observable Behaviors	Frequency in Sources
Discipline (Disiplin)	Following rules and routines without external reminders	Lining up, raising hand before speaking, completing a task before playing	85% (34/40)
Responsibility (Tanggung Jawab)	Completing assigned tasks and caring for personal belongings	Putting away toys, watering plants, feeding class pet, bringing homework folder	80% (32/40)

Character Value	Operational Definition	Example Observable Behaviors	Frequency in Sources
Honesty (Kejujuran)	Telling the truth even when facing potential punishment	Admitting to breaking a rule, returning found items, not hiding mistakes	75% (30/40)
Empathy (Empati)	Recognizing and responding to others' emotional states	Comforting a crying peer, sharing snacks without prompting, using kind words	88% (35/40)
Religiosity (Religiusitas)	Showing respect for spiritual practices and moral teachings from religion	Saying prayers before meals, greeting with religious salutation, showing respect for places of worship	70% (28/40)
Multicultural Awareness (Multikulturalisme)	Respecting differences in ethnicity, language, religion, and customs	Playing with children from different backgrounds, using polite terms for different languages, celebrating diverse holidays	55% (22/40)

Notably, multicultural awareness was discussed less frequently (55%) than other values, which may reflect the predominant focus on religious and national values in Indonesian ECE policy (Kemdikbud, 2021) rather than a judgment of its unimportance. However, given Indonesia's extreme ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity (over 700 languages, six officially recognized religions), the authors argue that multicultural awareness should be elevated as a core value.

3.5 An Integrated Framework for Method Application

Based on the synthesis, Figure 1 presents a proposed integrated framework showing how the three methods can be applied sequentially or in combination depending on the character value and the child's developmental level.



Figure 1. Integrated Framework for Character Internalization in Early Childhood

The literature suggests that different character values require different instructional emphases: discipline is primarily strengthened through consistent modeling and habituation, empathy develops most effectively through storytelling and simulation that encourage perspective-taking, while honesty requires the integration of all four stages—particularly simulation activities that allow children to practice truth-telling in low-stakes situations before encountering real moral dilemmas (Helmi, 2021).

3.6 Implementation Challenges Identified

Synthesizing the challenges reported across 28 empirical studies revealed three main categories. Table 5 summarizes these challenges with frequency and illustrative quotes from the literature.

Table 5. Implementation Challenges in Character Internalization

Challenge Category	Specific Challenge	Frequency	Illustrative Quote from Literature
Teacher-related	Limited creativity in designing engaging stories/simulations	71% (20/28)	"Teachers often fall back on worksheets or verbal instructions because they lack training in dramatic play facilitation" (Handoko & Sakti, 2023)

Challenge Category	Specific Challenge	Frequency	Illustrative Quote from Literature
	Inconsistent self-modeling (teacher says one thing, does another)	64% (18/28)	"I observed a teacher telling children not to shout, then shouting at a child five minutes later. The children looked confused" (Cahyaningrum et al., 2017)
	Lack of time to plan integrated activities	57% (16/28)	"Curriculum demands for literacy and numeracy leave little room for character activities" (Mellina et al., 2024)
Parent-related	Inconsistent parenting styles between home and school	68% (19/28)	"At school we teach sharing; at home, parents tell children not to share because toys are expensive" (Fitriyah, 2020)
	Low parental involvement in reinforcing values	61% (17/28)	"When we send home character worksheets, only 30% of parents complete them with their child" (Isnain et al., 2024)
Assessment-related	Absence of valid, age-appropriate measurement tools	54% (15/28)	"We don't know if internalization actually lasts. Most studies stop at 3 months" (Helmi, 2021)
	Over-reliance on teacher ratings (subjectivity, halo effects)	46% (13/28)	"Teachers may rate children they like higher, regardless of actual behavior" (O'Byrne, 2018)

3.7 Gaps in the Existing Literature (From Synthesis)

Despite the promising findings on character internalization methods, the analysis identified several important gaps that require further investigation. First, comparative effectiveness studies remain very limited, as only a few studies directly compared the impacts of modeling, storytelling, and simulation, and none were conducted within the Indonesian cultural context. Consequently, it remains unclear whether certain methods are universally effective across all character values or whether specific approaches are more suitable for particular values, such as simulation for empathy or modeling for religious discipline. Second, the issue of longitudinal sustainability has not been adequately explored. The longest follow-up period identified in the reviewed studies was only six months, which is insufficient to determine whether early childhood character internalization persists into later developmental stages, including elementary education and adolescence.

In addition, important concerns related to cultural relevance and inclusivity remain largely unaddressed. Many storytelling and simulation approaches were originally developed in Western contexts and later implemented in Indonesia without proper cultural adaptation, resulting in narratives and scenarios that may not align with Indonesian children's social realities and local wisdom. None of the reviewed studies systematically adapted materials using indigenous cultural elements such as local folklore or traditional games like congklak and gobak sodor. Furthermore, the literature revealed a significant lack of inclusion of children with disabilities, as no empirical study explicitly involved children with autism, developmental delays, or behavioral disorders. This gap suggests that current character internalization methods may not yet accommodate the needs of neurodiverse

learners and highlights the urgent need for more inclusive and culturally grounded research in early childhood character education.

4. Discussion

The findings of this synthesis indicate that modeling, storytelling, and simulation are complementary methods that support different dimensions of character internalization in early childhood. Drawing from Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, modeling serves as the foundational mechanism because children first learn moral behavior through observing significant adults (Bandura, 1986). However, observational learning alone does not guarantee deep moral understanding, since children may imitate actions without comprehending their ethical meaning (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2021). Storytelling therefore functions as a cognitive bridge that helps children understand the emotional and moral consequences of behavior, while simulation and role-play provide opportunities for children to practice self-regulation and social negotiation in guided contexts (O'Byrne, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). This sequential process aligns with Lickona's (2013) framework of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, demonstrating that effective character education requires exposure, understanding, and repeated practice simultaneously.

International findings further reinforce the importance of integrating these methods. Berkowitz & nd Bier (2020) reported that teacher modeling was identified as a crucial factor in 89% of early childhood character education studies, although many educators overestimated their own consistency when observed directly. Similarly, Rabinowitch & Meltzoff (2022) emphasized that coherent storytelling significantly improves children's moral recall and empathy development. Nevertheless, the Indonesian context differs from many Western settings because character education is often framed within religious and Pancasila-based values rather than explicit multicultural education. As noted by Muhammad et al. (2022), this creates an urgent need for culturally responsive approaches that explicitly address diversity and tolerance within Indonesian early childhood education programs.

The synthesis also revealed that the effectiveness of each method depends largely on the type of character value being targeted. Modeling appears most effective for simple and observable behaviors such as discipline, politeness, and cleanliness, whereas storytelling is more powerful for values requiring empathy and moral reasoning (Cheung, 2019; Halimah, 2020). Simulation and role-play were found to be particularly effective for emotional self-regulation because children need direct practice to manage frustration, conflict, and peer interaction (Handoko & Sakti, 2023). Importantly, structured role-play with teacher facilitation produced significantly stronger outcomes than unstructured pretend play, indicating that play alone is insufficient unless accompanied by guidance, reflection, and reinforcement.

Another important debate emerging from the literature concerns the tension between habituation and understanding in moral education. Some studies argued that repeated routines alone are sufficient for developing discipline (Aulina, 2013), while others emphasized that habituation without comprehension merely produces compliance rather than genuine internalization (Lickona, 2013). This synthesis suggests a developmental compromise in which younger children benefit more from repetition and modeling, whereas older preschool children increasingly require storytelling and reflective discussion to support

moral reasoning. Consequently, the integrated framework recommends that all three methods be used across age groups, although the instructional emphasis should vary according to children's developmental stages.

The implementation of character internalization methods also faces several practical challenges related to teacher competence, parental involvement, and assessment practices. Studies showed that professional development programs combining theoretical instruction, demonstration, and micro-teaching significantly improved teachers' confidence and implementation quality (Chua & Wong, 2024). Coaching and video reflection further increased modeling consistency among teachers (Cheung, 2019). At the family level, parent education workshops and home activity kits strengthened home-school collaboration and increased parental participation in character education activities (Kaya & Deniz, 2023; Isnain et al., 2024). In terms of assessment, researchers recommended the use of observational checklists, child-friendly moral vignettes, and peer nomination techniques to reduce subjectivity and improve reliability (Cahyaningrum et al., 2017; Mellina et al., 2024).

Cultural relevance emerged as another critical consideration for effective implementation in Indonesia. Several studies highlighted that Indonesian children respond more positively to local folktales, traditional games, and familiar social contexts than to imported Western narratives (Halimah, 2020). Storytelling using local legends such as Malin Kundang or Keong Emas, as well as role-play scenarios involving gotong royong and traditional markets, can make moral values more meaningful and relatable for children. At the same time, teachers must avoid stereotyping cultural groups and instead present diversity as a positive and natural part of classroom life (Novitasari et al., 2024). This finding indicates that culturally grounded pedagogy is essential for sustaining children's engagement and identity development.

Despite the growing body of literature, several important research gaps remain unresolved. Most existing studies rely on short-term interventions and secondary data, making it difficult to determine whether character internalization persists over time (Helmi, 2021). In addition, the majority of Indonesian studies were conducted in Java, leaving non-Javanese cultural contexts underrepresented. The literature also showed a lack of inclusion of children with disabilities, despite the increasing emphasis on inclusive education in Indonesia. Future studies therefore need to conduct longitudinal, experimental, and culturally diverse research designs that examine how modeling, storytelling, and simulation function across different populations, regions, and developmental needs.

Overall, this synthesis contributes theoretically by integrating the perspectives of Bandura, Vygotsky, and Lickona into a unified framework for early childhood character internalization. The findings demonstrate that modeling, storytelling, and simulation are not competing approaches but synergistic methods that address different barriers to moral development. Modeling teaches children what to do, storytelling explains why moral behavior matters, and simulation helps children practice moral action in emotionally meaningful situations. Consequently, authentic character formation requires deliberate, consistent, and integrated efforts across schools, families, and communities. The ultimate implication of this study is that investment in teacher training, culturally relevant learning materials, and sustained parent engagement is essential for strengthening character education in Indonesian early childhood settings.

5. Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive literature analysis conducted, this study concludes that the internalization of character values in early childhood is a structured, multi-stage process that requires intentional pedagogical design aligned with children's developmental characteristics (ages 4–6: concrete thinking, imitation, short attention spans, need for repetition). Three methods consistently emerged as effective and complementary: modeling (*keteladanan*), storytelling/*kisah* (narrative), and simulation/role-play (*simulasi*). Modeling serves as the foundational mechanism, providing observable behavioral examples that children naturally imitate. Storytelling enriches moral understanding by embedding values in relatable narratives with clear conflicts and resolutions, thereby building moral knowing and feeling. Simulation allows children to practice value-based behaviors in low-stakes, guided environments, transferring knowledge into consistent action. The synergy among these methods—each addressing a distinct barrier to internalization—is more effective than any single method alone. Core values appropriate for this age include discipline, responsibility, honesty, empathy, religiosity, and multicultural awareness, with the relative emphasis of each method varying by value type (e.g., empathy benefits most from storytelling plus simulation; discipline benefits most from modeling plus habituation).

The study also identifies three clusters of implementation challenges: teacher-related (limited creativity, inconsistency, time constraints), parent-related (inconsistent home-school values, low engagement), and assessment-related (lack of valid longitudinal tools). Addressing these challenges requires systemic solutions, including professional development workshops for teachers, parent education and home activity kits, and observational checklists with behavioral anchors. The proposed integrated framework (Figure 1) offers a practical, sequential guide for ECE practitioners, while the discussion provides specific recommendations for teachers, principals, parents, and policymakers. Future research should employ cluster randomized controlled trials to test the framework causally, include diverse Indonesian regions beyond Java, adapt methods for children with disabilities, and measure long-term sustainability with follow-ups of at least two years. Despite the limitations of a library research design, this synthesis advances the field by moving beyond fragmented, method-specific studies toward an integrated, evidence-based framework for character internalization in early childhood. Ultimately, building a generation of moral, empathetic, and responsible citizens begins with deliberate, joyful, and culturally grounded character education in the earliest years—and that education requires not just good intentions, but also well-trained teachers, engaged parents, and supportive policies working in concert.

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