Promoting Mental Health Education through Character Development

Rajaa HASSINE

Teacher Trainer & Head of the English Department at the Regional Center for Education and Training Professions (CRMEF–Inzegane-SM), Morocco
Email: rajaahassinee@gmail.com

Abstract

In the 21st century, schools are increasingly called upon to address not only students' academic achievement but also their mental well-being and moral growth. This shift responds to the rising concerns about mental health issues among students, which can manifest in violent behaviors, substance abuse, delinquency, academic failure, and school dropout. In the Moroccan educational context, mental health education remains underrepresented in school curricula, and character education is often overlooked as a means to address these challenges. This study aims to investigate how character education can contribute to mental health promotion through examining the influence of learning and practicing values on reducing negative student behaviors, and assessing how character modeling by teachers can enhance students' social-emotional competencies. To achieve these objectives, a mixed-methods design was adopted, combining quantitative data from questionnaires administered to 450 students with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 40 teachers across secondary schools in diverse Moroccan regions. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS, while qualitative data were processed with NVIVO. Findings reveal that character education significantly improves students' mental health, fostering empathy, emotional regulation, social awareness, and self-management. Schools that actively promote character education report lower rates of aggression, absenteeism, and disengagement. However, the study identifies a lack of institutional support and structured teacher training as key barriers to effective implementation. The study concludes that integrating character education into school practices and teacher training programs offers a sustainable pathway to enhancing student well-being and advancing the quality of education in Morocco.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the late twentieth century, an increasing awareness about promoting students' personal development as well as social and emotional learning are of more importance than merely nurturing their academic skills. Assuring students' advancement today relies on their social-emotional skills, namely: collaboration, communication, and problem-solving. Hence, schools are urged to help develop the whole child, they are seen as responsible for fostering students' character and incorporating values, ethics and stressing the importance of inculcating mental health. In this context, this paper suggests that an effective implementation of character education would be not only effective at promoting the development of students' good character alone, but also is a promising approach to the fostering of students' mental health as well as a prevention of numerous

mental problems. Thus, there will be an improvement in the sense of caring and responsibility within the school environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There has recently been and increasing concern about the deterioration of values in the public educational system. Families, educators, policy makers and stakeholders are concerned with the physical, emotional, and mental health of students in an environment where incidents of violence are becoming more and more current. Whenever there is a violent event among students or between students and teachers, questions are raised about the reasons behind these negative behaviors. (Bulach, 2002) said in this regard that "Many school officials seek reasons for the increase in violence and negative behaviors in public schools" (p.79). However, educators think that character education may be an effective solution to the problem.

Research consistently shows that structured character-building initiatives contribute to improved student behavior, school climate, and overall moral development. The teachers interviewed in this study similarly perceived character education as highly beneficial, describing its expected impact using terms such as "good," "positive," and "helpful."

As mentioned before, in Moroccan schools, the term character education is not used, that is why most teachers asked for a definition of the term before starting the interview. Going back to the official documents related to education in Morocco, we can find the term values education which is broader in comparison to character education. However, both promote the same values or character traits, also they both emphasize the need to perpetuate and reinforce these traits in order to have a morally good future generation.

In this regard, (Mansouri, 2011) claimed in his article about character education in Morocco that:''The major goal of the programs would be to counter the Tsunami of this global culture negating Moroccan identity traits and distorting the socio-moral values. I believe that schools should design their own character education programs and educators should take part in that process. They are the tools of implementation and success. Many effective character education programs either recommend staff development or offer it as an option. If staff do not know how to implement it, they will likely implement it ineffectively.''

This implies that, without a clear vision about an effective program of character education, the implementation of this later is condemned to fail. On the other hand, its effective implementation would be of a great help to change the actual schools' situation, from schools where different aspects of negative behavior exist to schools where a healthy climate resides.

So, while answering this question, many teachers called for a real implementation of character education into every aspect of the school life like including character education in the school code of conduct, in textbooks, in school clubs and community service-learning clubs, in the behavior of all people working at school in order to witness the real impact of this implementation, which all teachers judged as positive and helpful to improve students' character. Hence, this reflects a broader consensus in the literature that successful character education requires clarity of purpose, trained staff, and a coherent school-wide strategy.

Theoretical frameworks also highlight that character education must address the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of morality (Lickona, 1996a). Effective programs help students understand, internalize, and practice core values in real contexts. This requires coordinated efforts across multiple domains of school life including the curriculum, extracurricular activities, school climate, and interpersonal relationships.

Related to this, scholars emphasize that character development is not the responsibility of teachers alone. Parents, administrators, and the broader community all play essential roles (Stone & Dyal, 1997; Pearson & Nicholson, 2000). Creating a "culture of good character" depends on collective modeling of moral behavior and consistent value reinforcement at home, in the classroom, and throughout the community.

However, research also shows that such comprehensive engagement is often lacking. Lickona (1997) emphasized that without full participation of all stakeholders, character education efforts remain fragmented and insufficient to address deep-rooted behavioral challenges. Conversely, empirical studies in various contexts demonstrate that well-designed character education programs lead to improvements in academic performance, behaviors, and school climate (Marshall, Caldwell, & Foster, 2011). These findings support the argument that character education is both a preventive and developmental tool with long-term positive outcomes. Despite strong international evidence supporting the effectiveness of character education, the Moroccan public school system still lacks a structured, coherent, and widely implemented approach in this area. The findings of this study reveal several interrelated gaps that help explain why character education remains underdeveloped in Moroccan schools.

First, there is a conceptual gap. Many teachers are unfamiliar with the term character education, reflecting the absence of a shared conceptual framework across the system. While "values education" appears in official documents, the lack of clarity around character education as a structured pedagogical approach limits teacher' ability to understand, adopt, and implement it effectively.

Second, a clear curricular gap exists. Character-building elements are insufficiently integrated into textbooks and extracurricular activities, which leaves students with few opportunities to learn, practice, and internalize positive values in meaningful contexts. This lack of curricular alignment weakens the potential impact of any isolated character-related initiatives.

Third, there is a significant training gap. Teachers do not receive sustained professional development focused on character education, which restricts their capacity to apply appropriate strategies, design value-based learning experiences, or model the behaviors they aim to cultivate. Without targeted training, even well-intentioned teachers lack the necessary tools for effective implementation.

Fourth, a stakeholder engagement gap affects the broader ecosystem of character development. Parents and community members are not sufficiently involved in supporting or reinforcing character education, despite strong evidence that moral development is most successful when adults across all contexts collaborate and model shared values.

Finally, an overarching implementation gap persists. Moroccan schools do not adopt a comprehensive, whole-school model of character education aligned with international best practices. As a result, existing efforts remain fragmented, limited in scope, and unable to produce long-term, systemic change.

In light of these gaps, the present study aims to examine teachers' perceptions of the value and feasibility of implementing character education in Moroccan public schools. It also seeks to identify the structural conditions necessary for successful adoption, thereby contributing to the development of a more coherent and effective approach to character development within the Moroccan educational system.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Before examining the theoretical foundations that underpin both character education and mental health, it is important to understand the attributions of the issue and the need behind inculcating social and emotional learning as well as character development in Moroccan educational institutions. This study claims that encouraging character development through reading, writing, discussions, decision-making exercises and debates, and teaching conflict resolution to help students learn to resolve conflicts in fair, non-violent ways will have a positive impact not only on students' academic achievement but also on their mental health.

In the same context, during the process of fostering students' character, schools may reap additional benefits from the character education implementation. "Social and emotional learning programs pave the way for better academic learning. They teach children social and emotional skills that are intimately linked with cognitive development" (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). In the same line of thought, social-emotional learning is defined as "the process through which students learn to recognize and manage their emotions. Social-emotional learning forms a systematic framework for addressing the social and emotional needs of students" (Davis, 2003).

(Bulach, 2002) believes that "If students practice behaviors associated with forgiveness, sympathy and kindness, bullying behavior should decrease" (p.79). Bullying is known to be one of the major causes of increased violence in Moroccan schools, it has a damaging effect on students, mentally, emotionally, physically, and academically.

Through a successful character education program, an improvement in student behavior and school climate should occur and this result should trickle into an improvement in academic achievement and test scores (Bulach, 2002). In the same line of thought, (Lickona, 1989) describes good character as knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good. This implies that teaching good character imparts in students several moral qualities, including both thoughtful decision-making and moral reasoning (Bernardo, 1997).

Another positive side of character education is; it guides students emotionally; emotional qualities inherent in character education are conscience, self-respect, empathy, self-control, and humility. In addition to these characteristics, students develop moral competence, including the virtues of listening and cooperating, will to make judgments and act upon decisions, and moral habit (Thomas Lickona, 1989). Hence, character education assists students in their development of decision-making skills.

As mentioned before, students can benefit in multiple ways from character development, implemented in the school as far as it includes a broad range of concepts such as positive school culture, moral education, just communities, caring school communities, social- emotional learning, positive youth development, civic education, and service learning.

Eventually, these approaches promote the intellectual, social, emotional, and ethical development of young people, moreover, they share a commitment to help young people become responsible, caring, and contributing citizens within their communities. Thus, educating the mind and promoting ethical values that lead to success for individuals as well as for society.

Specifically, two very different approaches to understanding moral development have gained wide-spread attention in recent years, according to (Tappan, 1998). He defines these two approaches as the cognitive-developmental approach and the character education approach. In the cognitive-developmental approach, students pass through specific stages that mark changes in underlying structure of moral thought. Joseph and Efron (2005) note that this approach can be linked to the "just community" world. Students form a democratic community and foster a sense of collective responsibility when asked to deal with moral dilemmas that arise in their community. However, the character education approach is much more traditional and sticks to teaching children a core set of values, often by using stories or narratives (Tappan, 1998). However, Tappan (1998) feels that neither of these widely debated approaches to moral education is entirely effective on its own, but rather a Vygotskian socio-cultural perspective would successfully combine the best elements from both approaches.

4. METHODOLOGY

To collect data relevant to the objective of this study, the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview were used to elicit information from teachers and students on their opinions and perceptions of the role that implementing character education would have on students' mental health. This study focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both qualitative and quantitative data as a method (N. Ivankova, Creswell, & Plano Clark, 2007). In the same context, Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) stated that the notation quad + qual "indicates that both quantitative and qualitative methods were used at the same time during the research, and both have equal emphasis in the study" (p. 41)

Similarly, this study is composed of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and a survey that is based on Likert scale questions because the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches "provides a better understanding of the research questions of this study than either approach alone" (N. Ivankova et al., 2007). Further to this, there is a description of the population and the research sites that were selected to participate in this study as well as the procedures applied in data collection and data analysis and finally methods that assure the validity of the study.

To this end, the semi-structured interview was used to collect data from forty teachers and the questionnaire was administered to two hundred and fifty students to elicit data on their perspectives on character education and mental health. This study adopts a quantitative-qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. In this respect, the use of (SPSS) and (AMOS) programs aimed to analyze the quantitative data, while the (NVIVO) software was used to analyze the qualitative data collected from the interview. The data was collected from teachers and students from different

secondary schools from different regions in Morocco, namely Agadir, Casablanca, Fes, and Marrakech, Assila and Kliaa. Therefore, students would certainly have different socio-educational backgrounds and perhaps have different reasons and motivations for learning the language from students in Assila or Kliaa, which are small cities, located in the north and the south of Morocco, respectively, and where students come from different socio-educational backgrounds. This sample of Moroccan cities, schools, teachers and students has helped to reflect the diversity characterizing the Moroccan society.

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

How does the implementation of character education promote mental health education?

How do learning and practicing values at school affect students' behavior?

How do learning and practicing values at school affect students' negative behavior?

The data of this mixed method study was collected from a variety of sources including, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The rationale behind using both qualitative and quantitative approaches in this study is to triangulate the research data and to provide the study with a thorough insight.

5. FINDINGS
5.1. Quantitative results
Promoting Students' Mental Health through character development

Table 1: The variable about students' social-emotional learning

Variable	Number of Items	Inter-Items Correlation Significance	Cronbach's Alpha	KMO & Bartlett	AVE
Student's social emotional learning	**11**	**0.000***	**0,79**	**0.837 ***	**46,91 %**

***: Significant at 1% level

The fourth variable tackles students' social-emotional learning. This variable involves eleven items stressing the improvement in behavior that may occur if certain values are implemented within schools, like including: respect students will respect everyone in return, with caring bullying will decrease, implementing fairness will enable students to solve conflicts fairly by taking the right decision, stressing trust will improve students' self-confidence and enhance building strong relationships with their teachers, honesty will help diminish the problem of cheating in exams, with the practice of citizenship we will have not only good students, but also good citizens.

Then added that, the school climate will be positive and healthy with the implementation of values and will help students understand the importance of using them in daily life in order to improve their character. The last item in this variable concerns students' opinion about the impact that learning and practicing values at school will have on their behavior.

The table above shows that all the items of this variable are correlated significantly at the level of 1%, which confirms a very good reliability of the measurement scale used to measure the concept. In addition to this, the Cronbach's Alpha test gives a satisfactory value of (α cronbach $= 0,79 \geq 0,70$) which guarantees a good internal consistency. Concerning the KMO and Bartlett test for sphericity, it is significant at 0.837 which is very close to 1%. Finally, the average variance extracted shows a good percentage of 46,91 %.

5.2. Qualitative results

Students' character development and social-emotional learning

From the interviews, teachers suggested some strategies to help their students improve their behavior, develop their character and acquire social and emotional competencies. One of the most difficult challenges for teachers is trying to change some students' negative behavior into a positive one. The mind map below demonstrates suggestions from teachers so as to attain this objective.

Word tree 1: Strategies to promote good character traits and social-emotional Learning
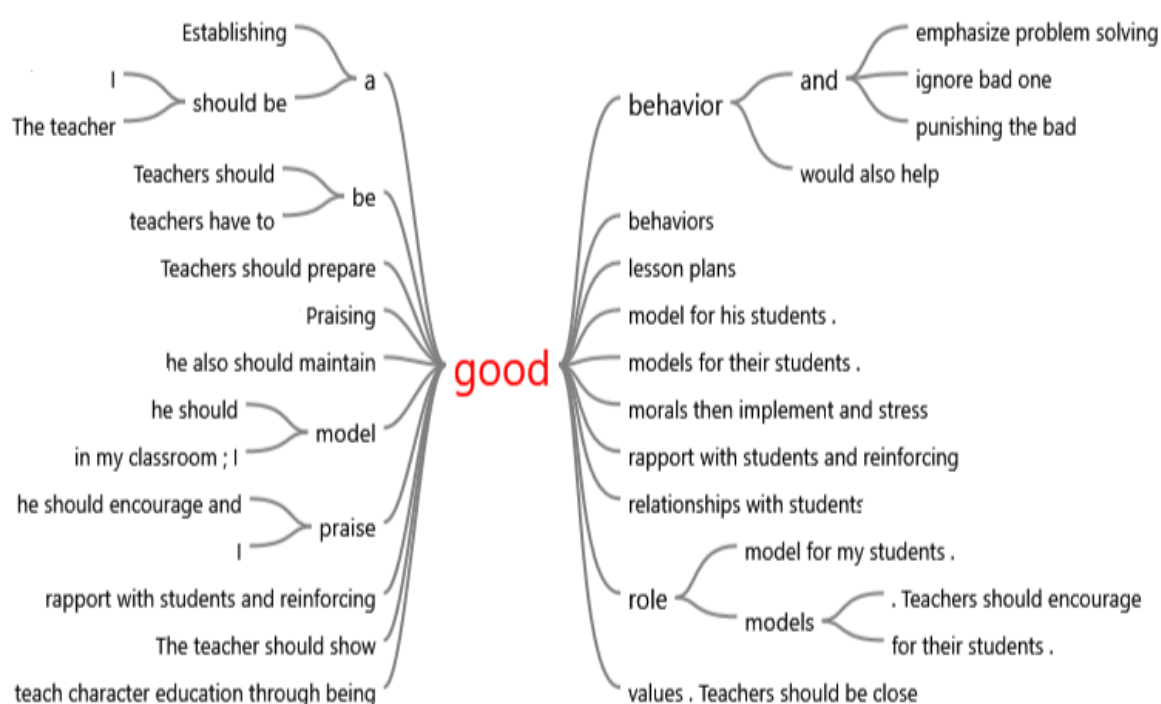
According to the mind map, most respondents suggested that teachers should be friendly with their students, communicate with them and be good role models for them. Communicating, listening and understanding your student are essential steps for creating trustful relationships with them, teachers should love their students, be tolerant with them and praise their positive behavior and find solutions for changing the negative one.

The second strategy agreed upon is that teachers should model good behaviors in front of their students. Because exposing students to good character traits will make them think critically about their own character and develop a personal opinion about it, then maybe adopt it in the future. Thus, being a good role model for your students will create a positive impact on their moral attitude.

Concerning the classroom, teachers need to set a code of conduct at the very beginning of the school year. Including morals and values in lesson plans is also a good idea. Moreover, creating a positive classroom environment is substantial for improving students' behavior, providing students with

opportunities where they can care or take the responsibility is very efficient. For this reason, creating a school club that promotes good character traits is primordial since most of students love extra-curricular activities and demonstrate a big interest in engaging them.

Lastly, teachers said that parents and all stakeholders should take part in the process of developing students' character to the better, so as to create a harmonious environment where all people share the same moral and values and more importantly acquiring the required skills to understand and manage their emotions, show care and concern for others, establish positive relationships and be accountable in making decisions.

The Impact of Character development on Student's Behavior and Mental Health

According to the findings of the study, bullying, cheating and physical violence are the most prominent negative behaviors that are noticed by teachers in the Moroccan school environment. On the other hand, the most used strategies to ameliorate students' behavior are setting a code of conduct at the beginning of the school year and communicating with students while creating schools' clubs and volunteering in community service clubs are still very far from the objective.

This section is about the impact that character education has on students' behavior. Implementing character traits in schools has for sure an impact on the behavior of its students, teachers answered this question according to their experience in this subject, the word cloud below shows their responses.

## Word map 1: The impact of Character development on Student's Behavior and Mental Health

According to the word cloud, it can be noticed that most teachers had quite the same answer on the question, they said that implementing character education will have a good and a great impact on the behavior of students. More than that, they claimed that implementing character traits will help students change their negative behavior into a positive one, so they will in a way improve, ameliorate and develop their behavior.

Another word mentioned repeatedly in the word cloud is citizen, teachers said that implementing character education will not only improve students' behavior, but also assist them become better citizens that own social emotional competencies because while shaping a good character, students will become respectful, honest, trustworthy, caring, responsible and more importantly they will become good citizens that will contribute positively in the development of their country.

Word tree 2: The impact of Character education on students' Mental Health
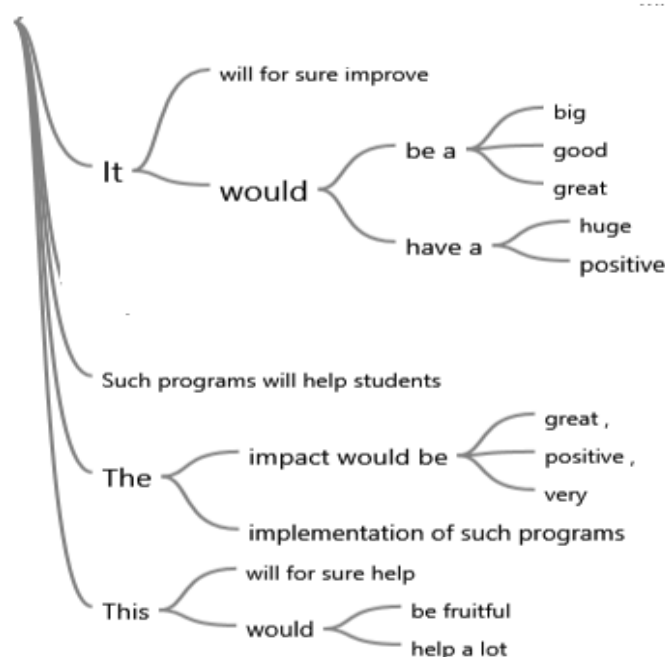
The mind map above provides us with an overview of the answers which are very similar. Teachers answered that emphasizing character development would be effective in promoting mental health education. They responded that it will definitely help students a lot improve both their character and behavior.

6. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative sections provide converging evidence that character education has a significant and positive influence on students' behavior, social-emotional learning, and overall mental health. By integrating results from Sections 4 and 5, this discussion highlights how teachers and students perceive the role of character education and identifies the structural challenges that currently hinder its implementation in Moroccan public schools.

6.1.Character Education as a Promoter of Mental Health

The quantitative results indicate strong internal consistency among items measuring students' social-emotional learning, with high reliability ($\alpha = 0.79$) and satisfactory KMO values. Students agreed that practicing values such as respect, caring, fairness, trust, honesty, and citizenship would decrease bullying, reduce cheating, strengthen relationships, and build self-confidence. These findings support the first research question by demonstrating that character-

building practices meaningfully contribute to emotional regulation, healthy relationships, and a positive school climate, all key components of mental health.

In addition to this, qualitative data reinforce this interpretation. Teachers consistently described character education as a preventive tool that reduces negative behaviors and provides students with coping strategies and emotional skills. They emphasized that values instruction helps students manage their emotions, resolve conflicts fairly, and develop empathy which strongly aligns with mental health promotion.

6.2. Impact on Students' Behavior and School Climate

The study revealed a clear consensus among teachers that character education improves student behavior. Quantitative findings show that students perceive a direct link between learning values and behavioral improvement, while qualitative responses reveal how teachers observe this relationship daily. Teachers reported that the most frequent behavioral issues such as bullying, cheating, and physical violence could be mitigated through systematic character instruction.

The qualitative data further highlight strategies teachers consider effective: clear codes of conduct, positive classroom environments, consistent modeling of moral behavior, and structured extracurricular opportunities. These strategies correspond to recognized components of successful character programs internationally, suggesting that Moroccan teachers intuitively identify best practices even in the absence of formal training.

6.3. Gaps Between Perceived Need and Actual Practice

Findings from both data sets point to a substantial gap between teachers' strong belief in character education and the limited extent to which it is implemented in schools. Many teachers demonstrated conceptual confusion, noting that they were unfamiliar with the term "character education" and required clarification before responding to interview questions. Participants also highlighted the lack of structured integration, observing that values are not systematically embedded in textbooks, extracurricular activities, or the wider school culture. Additionally, teachers expressed a clear need for professional development to implement character education effectively, echoing international research that identifies training as a crucial prerequisite for success. Both teachers and students further emphasized insufficient stakeholder involvement, particularly the weak engagement of parents and community members, which undermines the sustainability of behavior change. Collectively, these findings confirm that while teachers recognize character education as essential, structural and system-level barriers prevent its full implementation.

6.4. Alignment with International Research

The results of this study align strongly with global findings. Research shows that well-designed character education programs enhance academic performance, reduce behavioral problems, and improve school climate (Marshall, Caldwell & Foster, 2011). Similarly, Lickona (1996, 1997) argues that character development must be comprehensive, community-supported, and integrated into all aspects of school life; all these are conditions that are currently lacking in

Moroccan schools. Teachers' calls for whole-school implementation, role modeling, and parental involvement echo these international principles. Their perspectives reinforce the idea that character education is not an isolated activity but a systemic approach requiring clarity, coordination, and commitment.

6.5. Summary

Overall, the findings demonstrate that both teachers and students view character education as a powerful mechanism for improving behavior and supporting students' mental health. Despite this shared recognition, Moroccan schools continue to face significant conceptual, curricular, training, and stakeholder engagement gaps that undermine effective implementation. While teachers express strong support for integrating character education into daily school life, they currently lack the resources, training, and structural conditions necessary to do so meaningfully. These insights collectively highlight the urgent need for a coherent and well-designed character education framework in Moroccan public schools that encompasses curriculum, school climate, teacher development, and community participation to ensure a sustainable impact.

6.6. Limitations and Future Research

This study, while offering valuable insights into the status of character education in Moroccan public schools, is subject to several limitations. First, the findings rely heavily on self-report data from teachers and students, which may be influenced by social desirability bias or incomplete recall. Additionally, the study employed a cross-sectional design, capturing perceptions at a single point in time; as such, it cannot establish causal relationships between character education practices and student outcomes. The research is also situated within a specific cultural and educational context which is Moroccan public school system, this may limit the generalizability of the results to other settings with different social norms, policy structures, or educational priorities.

Future research should address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs that track changes in students' behavior, attitudes, and mental health over time as character education initiatives are introduced. Experimental or quasi-experimental studies could also be used to evaluate the effectiveness of specific character education interventions within Moroccan schools. Furthermore, research is needed to identify and test models of teacher training that best prepare educators to integrate character education into their daily practice. Comparative studies across regions or countries would also enrich understanding of how cultural context shapes the implementation and outcomes of character education programs. Such efforts would contribute to developing a more evidence-based, context-sensitive framework for character education in Morocco.

7. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to a growing body of research emphasizing the importance of character education as a foundation for students' academic, social, and emotional development. In the Moroccan context, the findings reveal a strong consensus among teachers and students that

character education is essential for improving behavior, fostering well-being, and cultivating a positive school climate. Yet, despite this broad recognition, character education remains inconsistently practiced due to conceptual ambiguity, limited curricular integration, insufficient teacher training, and weak stakeholder engagement. These gaps indicate that the potential of character education in Moroccan public schools is far from fully realized.

The study underscores the need for a coherent, system-wide approach that embeds character education across curriculum, pedagogy, school culture, and community partnerships. Such an approach requires clear conceptual frameworks, sustained professional development, alignment with national educational priorities, and active involvement of parents and local communities. Addressing these structural conditions is critical for ensuring that character education moves beyond fragmented efforts toward a comprehensive model capable of shaping students' long-term personal and academic growth.

At the same time, the study acknowledges its limitations, including reliance on self-reported perceptions and its cross-sectional design, and it calls for more robust research methodologies to further examine the impact of character education in this context. Future studies can offer deeper insights into effective strategies and provide evidence that informs policy and practice.

Ultimately, the findings advocate for the integration of character education as a central pillar of school reform in Morocco. By investing in well-structured character education initiatives, the Moroccan educational system has the opportunity to cultivate not only academically capable learners but also responsible, empathetic, and resilient citizens who can contribute meaningfully to society.

REFERENCES

Bernardo, R. (1997). Character Education School Climate Survey for Students-End of the Year: Greyden Press.

Bulach, C. R. (2002). Implementing a character education curriculum and assessing its impact on student behavior. *The Clearing House, 76*(2), 79-83.

Davis, M. (2003). What's wrong with character education?, *American Journal of Education*, *110*(1), 32-57.

Ivankova, N., Creswell, J., & Plano Clark, V. (2007). Foundations and approaches to mixed methods research. First steps in research. Pretoria: Van Schaik, 253-282.

Joseph, P. B., & Efron, S. (2005). Seven worlds of moral education. *Phi Delta Kappan, 86*(7), 525-533.

Lickona, T. (1989). Educating the moral child. *The Education Digest, 55*(1), 45.

Lickona, T. (1996a). Educating for character: A comprehensive approach. *YEARBOOK-NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF EDUCATION, 96*, 45-62.

Lickona, T. (1997). The teacher's role in character education. *Journal of education, 179*(2), 63-80.

Mansouri, M. (2011). Character Education in Marocco. *Marocco World News Fez*.

Marshall, J. C., Caldwell, S. D., & Foster, J. (2011). Moral education the CHARACTER plus Way®. *Journal of moral Education, 40*(1), 51-72.

Narvaez, D., & Lapsley, D. K. (2008). Teaching moral character: Two alternatives for teacher education. *The Teacher Educator, 43*(2), 156-172.

Pearson, Q. M., & Nicholson, J. I. (2000). Comprehensive character education in the elementary school: Strategies for administrators, teachers, and counselors. *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development, 38*(4), 243-251.

Stone, C., & Dyal, M. A. (1997). School counselors sowing the seeds of character education. *Professional School Counseling, 1*(2), 22-24.

Tappan, M. B. (1998). Moral education in the zone of proximal development. *Journal of moral Education, 27*(2), 141-160.