

Toward a Virtuous Generation: An Integrated Character-Education Framework and Mixed-Methods Action-Research Protocol for Secondary Schools in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: *Character education is increasingly expected to address not only moral knowledge but also the affective, social, and behavioural processes through which adolescents internalize and enact values. In Sri Lanka, policy discourse recognizes moral and civic development, yet a practical gap remains between stated educational aspirations and the systematic integration of values across curriculum delivery, classroom management, teacher modelling, peer interaction, school culture, and family engagement. This article synthesizes the theoretical and empirical foundations of a doctoral study and presents a publication-ready integrated framework and sequential mixed-methods action-research protocol for developing core values among secondary-level students in private international schools following the Sri Lankan national curriculum in Colombo. The framework integrates Lickona's moral knowing-feeling-action model, Kohlberg's developmental account of moral reasoning, Vygotsky's sociocultural mediation, Bandura's observational learning, and Rest's four-component model of moral behaviour. Respect, responsibility, and empathy are positioned as focal values because they jointly capture interpersonal recognition, self-regulation/accountability, and prosocial emotional responsiveness. The proposed design combines a baseline survey of 120 students, 50 teachers, and 50 parents; purposive qualitative interviews and focus groups; classroom observation; a two-cycle participatory action-research intervention; repeated psychometric assessment using the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire and the Personal and Social Responsibility Questionnaire; mixed-method integration; and expert validation of the final framework. The intervention operationalizes value formation through a code of conduct, a well-being domain embedded in lesson planning, cooperative/value-based pedagogies, reflective practice, and reinforcement tools. The contribution is a theoretically coherent and methodologically auditable pathway for moving character education from isolated moral messages toward school-based, observable, iterative, and context-sensitive practice.*

Keywords: character education, core values, well-being domain, empathy, mixed methods, responsibility, respect, secondary education, Sri Lanka, action research, moral development.

1. Introduction

Education systems are increasingly evaluated against a dual mandate: the development of cognitive competence and the formation of dispositions that enable learners to participate ethically, responsibly, and constructively in social life. Character education addresses the second mandate by treating schooling as a moral and social environment rather than as a neutral mechanism for transmitting academic content. Within this perspective, values are not peripheral slogans. They function as durable standards that shape judgement, relationships, self-regulation, civic conduct, and the interpretation of obligations toward others [1], [6], [8]. The problem is therefore not simply whether schools state desirable values, but whether students encounter sufficiently coherent experiences to understand, value, choose, practise, and sustain them.

The Sri Lankan case is especially important because the national educational vision emphasizes holistic development, civic cohesion, responsible citizenship, and preparation for a changing social and technological environment. Policy recognition, however, does not itself establish implementation. The underlying doctoral study identifies an implementation gap between the declared commitment to moral and character development and the everyday mechanisms through which adolescents learn

values in classrooms and schools. The gap includes inconsistent curriculum integration, uneven teacher modelling, limited reinforcement, pressure from examination-oriented cultures, changing family routines, peer influences, digital media, and a hidden curriculum that may contradict formal moral messages. The resulting research problem is not a generalized claim that values have universally declined, but the absence of a sufficiently systematic, context-sensitive, school-wide, and empirically evaluable process for cultivating core values among secondary students.

Secondary education is a strategically important setting for such inquiry. Adolescence involves increasingly complex moral reasoning, identity negotiation, sensitivity to peers, and greater personal agency. Kohlberg's developmental account suggests that moral judgement can be advanced through structured engagement with reasoning and dilemmas [2], while sociocultural and social-learning perspectives emphasize that adolescents learn through guided participation, dialogue, modelling, and reinforcement [3], [4]. These mechanisms imply that a successful intervention should not be reduced to a stand-alone ethics lesson. It should create repeated opportunities for moral cognition, affective commitment, collaborative enactment, reflection, and feedback.

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This article has two linked aims. First, it compresses the literature reviewed in the doctoral study into an integrated explanatory model of character formation centred on respect, responsibility, and empathy. Second, it translates that model into a sequential mixed-methods action-research protocol that can generate both explanatory evidence and practical improvement. The paper is therefore best understood as a conceptual-methodological or protocol article: it specifies the theory, research gap, design, measures, intervention logic, analytic strategy, integration procedures, and intended contribution without presenting uncollected outcome data.

2. Theoretical and Empirical Foundation

2.1 Character Education as an Integrated Developmental Process

Lickona's account provides the organizing moral-development logic for the study. Character is treated as the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action [1]. This formulation is significant because it prevents values education from being reduced to declarative knowledge. A student may correctly define respect yet fail to demonstrate it in conflict; may endorse responsibility but avoid accountability; or may recognize another person's distress without acting empathically. The educational task is therefore to align cognition, affect, motivation, and behaviour through intentional and repeated experiences. Empirical reviews of effective

Table I: Theory-to-Mechanism Mapping for the Integrated Framework

Lens	Core mechanism	Educational implication	Protocol application
Lickona	Moral knowing, feeling, action	Align cognition, affect, and conduct	Explicit value teaching, reflection, enactment
Kohlberg	Development of moral reasoning	Use age-appropriate dilemmas and dialogue	Guided discussion and reflective judgement
Vygotsky	Social mediation and scaffolding	Values are learned in interaction	Cooperative learning and teacher facilitation
Bandura	Modelling, reinforcement, self-efficacy	Adults and peers shape behaviour	Teacher modelling, feedback, conduct reinforcement
Rest	Sensitivity, judgement, motivation, implementation	Moral action requires multiple processes	Code of conduct, well-being, practice and reflection

character-education programs similarly indicate that successful initiatives tend to combine explicit ethical focus, interactive pedagogy, modelling, social-emotional competence, aligned behavioural expectations, and opportunities for participation rather than relying on didactic instruction alone [6].

The focal values in this study—respect, responsibility, and empathy—are treated as mutually reinforcing rather than independent virtues. Respect concerns recognition of others' dignity, legitimate boundaries, perspectives, rights, and social worth. Responsibility extends beyond obedience toward self-regulation, accountability, effort, reliability, and willingness to accept the consequences of choices. Empathy concerns affective responsiveness, concern for others, and the capacity to resonate with another person's emotional state. Taken together, the three values connect interpersonal recognition, intrapersonal regulation, and prosocial responsiveness. This configuration is particularly suitable for classroom environments because it can be operationalized through observable interactions, collaborative tasks, conduct expectations, reflective prompts, helping behaviour, and teacher-student relationships.

a) Five Complementary Explanatory Lenses

No single theory fully explains how students progress from exposure to values toward stable moral conduct. The framework therefore integrates five complementary perspectives. Lickona identifies the broad domains of knowing, feeling, and acting [1]. Kohlberg explains developmental changes in moral reasoning and supports the educational use of structured moral dialogue [2]. Vygotsky locates learning within language, social interaction, and guided participation, making peer collaboration and teacher scaffolding central to value formation [3]. Bandura explains

observational learning, modelling, reinforcement, and self-efficacy, clarifying why teacher conduct and peer norms can amplify or weaken formal messages [4]. Rest's four-component model adds the process conditions required for moral behaviour: sensitivity to the moral features of a situation, judgement about what ought to be done, motivation to prioritize the moral course, and character/implementation sufficient to act [5].

These perspectives converge on an important proposition: values become educationally meaningful when schools create a coherent ecology of explanation, modelling, participation, reinforcement, reflection, and authentic action. The conceptual framework consequently treats formal curriculum, pedagogy, classroom management, relationships, co-curricular activity, family communication, and the hidden curriculum as interacting channels. This is consistent with broader character-education scholarship emphasizing whole-school coherence and sustained practice [7], [8].

b) Why Respect, Responsibility, and Empathy?

The literature reviewed in the thesis shows that character frameworks across jurisdictions vary in terminology but repeatedly emphasize values functionally equivalent to respect, responsibility, care, compassion, honesty, integrity, self-regulation, and citizenship. This cross-context recurrence supports the selection of respect, responsibility, and empathy as a parsimonious focal set rather than an exhaustive catalogue of virtues. The selection is also developmentally coherent: respect governs interaction with others; responsibility directs self-regulation and commitment; and empathy links moral attention to another person's emotional condition. Character education research further suggests that virtues are strengthened when they are explicitly named, modelled by adults, embedded in routines,

practised in social contexts, and reinforced through school climate [6], [7].

The Sri Lankan literature contributes a contextual reason for moving beyond policy-level value statements. Work on value education in the national curriculum has emphasized the importance of translating moral concepts into teachable experiences, while the doctoral study highlights the need to connect student, teacher, and parent perspectives with observed classroom practices and an evaluable intervention [14], [15]. The educational relevance of this focus is reinforced by the national school context, in which government schools dominate enrolment while private and international schools form a smaller but pedagogically distinctive sector. The study deliberately focuses on private international schools in Colombo that follow the Sri Lankan national curriculum in order to maintain curricular comparability while examining settings with sufficient flexibility for iterative classroom intervention [16].

c) From Fragmented Messages to a Comprehensive Approach

A comprehensive approach is defined here as coordinated action across explicit curriculum integration, teacher modelling, cooperative learning, reflective dialogue, classroom codes of conduct, reinforcement/action forms, well-being-oriented lesson planning, student participation, co-curricular opportunities, family engagement, and school-level support. The approach is comprehensive in three senses. First, it addresses moral cognition, emotion, motivation, and action. Second, it operates across formal, non-formal, and hidden curricula. Third, it involves multiple actors—students, teachers, parents, and institutional leaders—whose messages can otherwise be inconsistent.

Three intervention mechanisms are particularly central. A code of conduct converts abstract values into shared behavioural expectations and supports moral sensitivity and judgement by clarifying the social consequences of choices. A well-being domain embedded in lesson plans connects emotional awareness, empathy, belonging, regulation, and respectful relationships to academic instruction. Cooperative and value-based pedagogies create opportunities to enact responsibility and respect in peer interaction rather than merely discussing them. The intervention also uses reflective/action forms to document implementation and enable teacher-researcher reflection across successive cycles. Cooperative-learning research provides an empirical basis for the view that structured peer interdependence can strengthen social interaction and participation when appropriately facilitated [9].

2.2 Research Gap and Contribution

The literature indicates four gaps that justify the proposed study. The first is an implementation gap: educational systems may articulate desirable values without specifying how those values are consistently embedded across lesson design, classroom management, relationships, assessment, and school routines. The second is an evidence-integration gap: many studies rely on either stakeholder perceptions or

single-method evaluations, whereas character formation involves observable behaviour, subjective meaning, social context, and developmental processes that benefit from mixed evidence. The third is a design gap: frameworks are often imported or proposed conceptually without being iteratively built from local baseline data, qualitative explanation, classroom observation, intervention experience, and expert review. The fourth is a Sri Lankan context gap: there is limited context-specific work that jointly includes students, teachers, and parents and then carries their evidence forward into intervention design and framework validation.

The study's contribution is therefore not merely a list of recommended virtues. It is a methodological architecture linking theory to practice through a sequence of evidence. Stakeholder priorities identify what should be emphasized; qualitative inquiry and observation explain why existing practices succeed or fail; action research tests feasible mechanisms in authentic classrooms; psychometric and behavioural indicators provide structured evidence of change; mixed-method integration identifies convergence and divergence; and expert review assesses the coherence and transferability of the final framework. This sequence creates an auditable path from literature to context, from context to intervention, and from intervention to a validated practice model.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy and Design

The research is grounded in pragmatism because the problem requires both interpretation of meaning and evaluation of practical consequences. Pragmatism rejects the requirement to privilege a single epistemological method and instead selects methods according to their fitness for answering the research questions [17]–[20]. Quantitative evidence is used to estimate priorities, patterns, and change; qualitative evidence explains stakeholder experiences and contextual mechanisms; action research supports improvement through iterative practice; and expert validation evaluates the proposed framework. This combination is consistent with mixed-method scholarship that emphasizes methodological pluralism and purposeful integration rather than simple coexistence of separate datasets [18].

The design is sequential, multi-phase, and mixed, with an embedded participatory action-research component. The doctoral methodology specifies a baseline survey of 120 students, 50 teachers, and 50 parents; a qualitative explanatory phase involving interviews and focus groups; classroom observation; action-research implementation using planning-action-observation-reflection cycles; and expert validation of the framework. The sequence is methodologically powerful. Findings at the end of each phase are formally transferred to the next through integration memos that record what was learned, what decision followed, and how that decision addresses the research objectives.

Table II: Objective–Method Alignment

Objective	Primary evidence	Analytic emphasis	Contribution to framework
1) Identify priority core values	Student/teacher/parent surveys; focus groups	Ranking, descriptive statistics, thematic meaning	Select focal values and indicators
2) Examine deterioration/weak-enactment factors	Survey scales; interviews; parent/student accounts	Patterns plus contextual themes	Specify barriers and enabling conditions
3) Analyse current teacher practices	Teacher survey/interviews; observations; document review	Practice profiles and observed enactment	Define feasible pedagogical mechanisms
4) Design and evaluate interventions	Pre/post measures; observations; action forms; reflections	Change, effect size, implementation evidence	Refine intervention components
5) Develop and validate framework	Integrated findings; expert review	Joint display and structured validation	Finalize coherent context-sensitive model

3.2 Setting, Population, and Sampling

The target population comprises secondary-level students, teachers responsible for secondary classes, and parents or guardians of secondary students in private international schools in the Colombo District that follow the Sri Lankan national curriculum. The accessible population is restricted to three participating schools that satisfy the inclusion criteria and grant institutional permission. The national-curriculum requirement reduces major curricular heterogeneity while retaining an organizational context in which international-school practices and pedagogical flexibility can be examined.

The planned quantitative sample comprises 220 respondents: 120 students, 50 teachers, and 50 parents. Schools will be selected purposively based on the required institutional characteristics and access to intervention classrooms. Students and parents will be selected to ensure representation across relevant secondary grades, using systematic or random procedures where complete sampling frames are available. Teachers will be selected based on their direct involvement in secondary teaching and values-related practices. Qualitative and action-research participants will be selected purposively to provide relevant and information-rich perspectives [29], [30].

The qualitative phase will involve 10 semi-structured teacher interviews and three student focus groups of approximately 6–8 students each. Teachers will be selected based on their experience with secondary students and involvement in values or character education, while focus-group participants will be drawn from the student sample to reflect varied perspectives. Six classroom observations will be conducted across three teachers/classes. The action-research component will involve three teachers and their respective classes, selected based on willingness to participate, access to the target classes, and capacity to implement the intervention cycles. Five experts with relevant expertise in character education, curriculum, educational psychology, teacher education, research methodology, or secondary education will be purposively selected to review and validate the proposed framework.

A pilot study was conducted approximately six months

before the main data collection with 10 teachers, supported by limited teacher and student feedback on language and contextual appropriateness. The pilot assessed the feasibility, clarity, administration time, sequencing, cultural fit, and preliminary reliability of the instruments. Findings were used to refine the instruments and procedures, and pilot data were kept separate from the main study to avoid influencing the principal analysis.

3.3 Sequential Procedure

Phase 1 is a baseline quantitative survey designed to map current values-education practices, stakeholder priorities, perceived deterioration factors, behavioural expectations, and school climate. Questionnaires are aligned with the study objectives and operational definitions. Phase 2 uses semi-structured interviews and focus groups to explain patterns identified in the baseline data. Interviews allow participants to elaborate on teacher practices, barriers, family-school consistency, and classroom experiences [24], [25], while focus groups provide insight into shared perceptions, norms, and differing perspectives among participants [26]. Phase 3 uses classroom observations to compare reported practices with enacted practices, focusing on indicators such as peer collaboration, respectful communication, responsibility, empathy-related responsiveness, teacher modelling, and reinforcement [27], [28].

The action-research phase then converts prior findings into practice. Participating teachers and the researcher collaboratively plan, implement, observe, and reflect on value-focused strategies. The design follows the iterative logic of participatory action research, in which change and inquiry are linked through cycles rather than separated into a one-time treatment [31]–[33]. The study specifies two action-reflection cycles over a two-week action period. Each cycle starts from evidence, implements a refined strategy, documents teacher and student responses, and uses structured reflection to improve the subsequent cycle. The final validation phase synthesizes all evidence into a proposed framework and submits the framework to experts in curriculum, character/value education, educational psychology, teacher education, research methodology, or secondary education.

Table III: Sequential Mixed-Methods and Action-Research Protocol

Stage	Participants/data	Purpose	Output	Feeds into
Pilot	Small teacher/student sample	Feasibility, clarity, cultural fit	Refined tools	Baseline
1) Baseline	120 students; 50 teachers; 50 parents	Map priorities, barriers, practices	Quantitative pattern profile	Qualitative sampling/questions
2) Qualitative	10 teacher interviews; 3 student focus groups (6–8 students each)	Explain mechanisms and meanings	Themes and contextual explanations	Intervention design
3) Observation	6 classroom observations across 3 teachers/classes	Verify enacted practice	Observation profiles	Intervention refinement
4) Action research	3 teachers/classes; two action-reflection cycles	Test and refine strategies over two cycles	Pre/post, logs, observations, reflections	Integrated framework
5) Expert validation	3 purposively selected expert	Assess coherence, feasibility, coverage	Validated/refined framework	Final model

a) Intervention Architecture

The intervention operationalizes the integrated theory through three core components and supporting reinforcement mechanisms. The first component is a well-being domain embedded in lesson planning. Activities include emotional awareness, reflective prompts, empathy-building, mindfulness/attention, supportive peer interaction, and opportunities for students to express and interpret feelings. This component links affective readiness to moral motivation. The second component is a shared code of conduct. Rather than functioning only as a disciplinary instrument, the code is explicitly taught, modelled, discussed, and connected to the values of respect and responsibility. It therefore clarifies the behavioural meaning of the focal values and provides a common reference point for feedback.

The third component is value-based pedagogy: cooperative learning tasks, moral/ethical discussion prompts, reflective journaling, contextually relevant scenarios, peer support, and structured opportunities for students to exercise agency. Action forms and teacher reflective logs support fidelity and iterative learning. In the first action cycle, teachers and the researcher jointly develop and implement the tools; observation evidence and teacher reflections identify ambiguity, resistance, or promising practices; the second cycle then incorporates modifications. The purpose of this architecture is not to claim that a short intervention can permanently transform character, but to test whether coherent mechanisms can improve the visibility, consistency, and enactment of value-oriented practice.

b) Instruments and Measurement

Instrument development begins with the operational

definitions and literature review, followed by an objective-item matrix, expert assessment of content relevance and clarity, language/cognitive checking with members of the target population, pilot administration, item analysis, and reliability assessment. Established measures are used only after confirming conceptual fit, permissions where applicable, cultural appropriateness, wording, and scoring procedures. This process is important because values-related self-report is susceptible to social-desirability bias and because instruments developed in other contexts may not automatically retain validity in Sri Lankan secondary schools.

Empathy is measured with the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (TEQ), a 16-item self-report scale developed to assess empathy primarily as an affective construct [39]. Items are rated on a five-point frequency scale from 0 (never) to 4 (always), with negatively keyed items reverse scored and higher total scores representing higher empathy. The study uses baseline and repeated administrations during the action phase, interpreting TEQ scores alongside observation and reflective data rather than as a stand-alone proof of moral change.

Responsibility is measured with the Personal and Social Responsibility Questionnaire (PSRQ), developed by Li, Wright, Rukavina, and Pickering [40]. The instrument contains 14 items across personal and social responsibility dimensions, including effort, self-control, perseverance, accountability, respect, cooperation, helping, and positive contribution. Repeated administration allows the study to examine short-term directional change during action cycles while triangulating self-report with behavioural records and classroom observation.

Table IV: Measurement and Analysis Plan

Construct/Evidence	Instrument/Source	Timing	Analysis
Empathy	Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (16 items)	Baseline and repeated action-phase points	Reliability; descriptive change; matched comparison/effect size
Personal/social responsibility	PSRQ (14 items)	Baseline and repeated action-phase points	Subscale/composite reliability; change analysis
Stakeholder priorities/barriers/practices	Structured questionnaires	Baseline	Frequencies, means, SDs, scale scores
Teacher/student/parent meanings	Semi-structured interviews and focus groups	Post-baseline	Reflexive thematic analysis
Enacted classroom practice	Observation protocol; field notes	Pre/during intervention	Pattern coding and thematic/behavioural comparison
Implementation learning	Action forms; teacher logs; reflections	Each cycle	Process themes, fidelity/feasibility evidence
Framework validity	Structured expert review	Final phase	Content/logic appraisal and revision

c) Data Analysis and Mixed-Methods Integration

Quantitative analysis begins with data screening, missing-data assessment, coding checks, and descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages summarize categorical responses; means and standard deviations summarize continuous or composite variables where justified. Internal consistency is examined before multi-item scores are calculated. Pre/post comparisons are selected according to scale characteristics, distribution, and matching structure, and are accompanied by effect sizes and confidence intervals rather than relying on statistical significance alone. SPSS is suitable for the planned descriptive and inferential procedures [37]. The use of Likert-type measures is justified for capturing graded attitudes and perceptions, provided the analysis respects scale properties and psychometric evidence [38].

Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, observations, reflections, and documents are analysed thematically. The analytic sequence includes familiarization, coding, category development, candidate themes, theme review and definition, and production of an interpretive account [35], [36]. An audit trail, coding memos, explicit attention to negative cases, and participant or peer checking strengthen trustworthiness. The goal is not merely to count themes but to identify mechanisms that explain why particular value-education practices are experienced as credible, inconsistent, feasible, resisted, or effective.

Integration is planned through connecting, building, and merging. Baseline patterns connect to purposive qualitative sampling and interview questioning. Quantitative and qualitative findings jointly build the intervention content. During interpretation, joint displays compare numerical patterns, stakeholder explanations, observed classroom practice, and action-phase outcomes for each objective. Areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence are reported explicitly. The final framework is therefore an integrated inference rather than a product of a single dataset, consistent with contemporary mixed-method principles [17], [18].

d) Rigor and Ethics

Methodological rigor is addressed differently across strands but integrated at the design level. Quantitative quality includes instrument piloting, item analysis, reliability assessment, transparent scoring, appropriate handling of missing data, and reporting of uncertainty. Qualitative credibility is supported through information-rich sampling, triangulation, an audit trail, reflexive memoing, negative-case analysis, and checking procedures. Action-research rigor is strengthened by documenting the decision chain from evidence to modification across cycles. Expert validation adds a final layer by assessing whether the framework is theoretically coherent, sufficiently comprehensive, feasible, and contextually defensible.

Ethical protections are especially important because many participants are minors and because classroom research creates power asymmetries. The protocol requires institutional ethical approval, school permission, written parent/guardian consent, student assent, age-appropriate information, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw without educational penalty. No student is

labelled as virtuous, deficient, or morally problematic. Teachers participate as collaborators rather than as objects of performance appraisal. Identifiers are removed from instruments and reports; codes and pseudonyms are used; findings are reported in aggregate; digital files are password protected; and retention/disposal follow the approved ethics protocol. The intervention consists of ordinary educational activities designed to be non-stigmatizing and minimally disruptive.

3.3 Integrated Framework and Propositions

The framework emerging from the literature and methodology can be summarized as a staged causal-practical chain. Contextual influences- family routines, school culture, peer norms, digital media, academic pressure, and adult modelling- shape the opportunity structure in which values are learned. The comprehensive intervention then supplies coordinated mechanisms: explicit value language, teacher modelling, structured expectations, cooperative enactment, affective/well-being support, reflection, reinforcement, and stakeholder consistency. These mechanisms are expected to strengthen moral sensitivity and reasoning, affective commitment, self-regulation, empathy, and perceived responsibility. Repeated enactment within authentic classroom interaction is then expected to improve observable value-consistent practices. The framework is finally refined through evidence and expert judgement rather than treated as a fixed package.

For subsequent empirical reporting, five propositions can be specified without overstating causal certainty. P1: stronger coherence between explicit values, teacher modelling, and classroom routines will be associated with stronger student perceptions of respect and responsibility. P2: well-being and empathy-oriented lesson elements will be associated with higher empathy-related self-report and more prosocial interaction. P3: cooperative/value-based pedagogies will provide more frequent opportunities for students to enact responsibility and respectful peer behaviour than predominantly didactic instruction. P4: teacher reflective cycles will improve implementation fidelity and contextual fit between action-research cycles. P5: a framework derived through mixed evidence and expert validation will demonstrate greater contextual relevance than a framework imported without local adaptation. These propositions are intended as organizing expectations for analysis, not as pre-claimed findings.

4. Discussion

The principal conceptual implication is that character education should be treated as an implementation system rather than a content addition. The literature repeatedly indicates that effective approaches do not depend on a single lesson, slogan, or disciplinary rule [6], [7]. The integrated framework explains why: moral conduct requires the coordination of cognition, affect, motivation, social modelling, opportunity, and practice. A curriculum can therefore be formally value-rich while the lived environment remains value-poor if teacher behaviour, peer norms, assessment incentives, and classroom management contradict the formal message. Conversely, modest

curricular content can become educationally powerful when embedded in consistent modelling, dialogue, collaborative action, and reflective reinforcement.

The second implication concerns the balance between universality and context. Respect, responsibility, and empathy are defensible focal values because they recur across diverse character-education traditions and map onto basic interpersonal and self-regulatory functions. Yet the precise behavioural meaning of each value is culturally mediated. For example, responsibility must be distinguished from unquestioning obedience; respect must not suppress legitimate disagreement; and empathy must be translated into prosocial action rather than sentimental identification. The study's use of Sri Lankan stakeholders, school observation, and iterative intervention is therefore methodologically important because it allows universal moral constructs to be operationalized within local educational realities rather than imposed as abstract definitions. The third implication is methodological. Educational value formation is poorly captured by a single measurement mode. Self-report can identify perceived change but is vulnerable to desirability bias; observation can document enactment but may be reactive or context-bound; interviews explain meaning but are not population estimates; action research supports improvement but may introduce practitioner-researcher bias. The mixed-method architecture treats these limitations as reasons for integration rather than for abandoning any one form of evidence. Convergent evidence increases confidence, complementary evidence enriches explanation, and divergent evidence becomes analytically valuable because it exposes mismatches between belief, policy, and practice.

A further contribution is the explicit use of iterative action research. Character education is often discussed normatively—what schools ought to do—without sufficient attention to feasibility, teacher workload, timing, student receptivity, and adaptation. The two-cycle design transforms implementation problems into data. If teachers find a conduct tool too punitive, a reflection prompt too abstract, or a well-being activity difficult to integrate with curriculum time, these observations become part of the framework-development process. This is consistent with the pragmatic aim of producing knowledge that is explanatory and usable rather than detached from practice [19], [31], [32].

5. Practical And Policy Implications

For teachers, the framework offers a practical shift from occasional moral reminders to planned value integration. Lesson plans can include an explicit well-being/value objective alongside academic outcomes; cooperative tasks can assign responsibilities that make accountability visible; reflection can ask students to interpret the moral consequences of choices; and feedback can name the value being enacted. For school leaders, the framework suggests that character education should be audited across classroom rules, teacher modelling, co-curricular activity, reward systems, family communication, and disciplinary practice rather than delegated to a single subject or event.

For curriculum designers and teacher educators, the framework implies that values should be operationalized in observable pedagogical terms. Training should therefore include modelling, dialogue facilitation, cooperative learning, ethical dilemma discussion, restorative reinforcement, reflective practice, and the interpretation of psychometric and observational evidence. For policy makers, the study offers a pathway for translating broad national aspirations into a school-level implementation model that can be piloted, evaluated, adapted, and scaled. However, scaling should follow evidence of feasibility across more diverse school sectors rather than assuming direct transfer from Colombo private international schools.

6. Limitations And Future Research

The protocol has important boundaries. The setting is limited to private international schools in the Colombo District that follow the Sri Lankan national curriculum, which restricts generalizability to government schools, rural settings, and schools following foreign curricula. The intervention period is short and cannot establish long-term internalization of values. Repeated self-report measures remain vulnerable to social desirability and testing effects. The researcher's involvement in action research may influence implementation and interpretation, requiring reflexive documentation and triangulation. The framework also focuses primarily on the school and classroom even though family, media, religion, and community exert substantial influence on adolescents' values.

Future research should use longitudinal studies and replicate the study in government and rural schools, including Sinhala and Tamil versions. Further research should also incorporate behavioural and peer-report measures and compare specific intervention components to identify the most effective approaches. Clustered or quasi-experimental designs could test effectiveness once feasibility and ethical acceptability have been established. Future work should also examine whether school climate, teacher self-efficacy, parental alignment, digital citizenship, or socioeconomic context moderate intervention outcomes.

7. Conclusion

A defensible approach to character education must explain how values move from policy and vocabulary into lived student behaviour. The integrated framework presented here combines moral cognition, affect, social mediation, observational learning, motivation, and action with a practical school-based intervention architecture. Its distinctive contribution is the linkage of theory to a sequential evidence process: stakeholder mapping, qualitative explanation, classroom observation, iterative action research, psychometric and behavioural assessment, mixed-method integration, and expert validation. In the Sri Lankan secondary-school context, this architecture provides a rigorous basis for examining whether respect, responsibility, and empathy can be cultivated more coherently through everyday teaching and school culture. The protocol does not pre-claim moral transformation; instead, it establishes a transparent method for testing, refining, and validating a comprehensive approach to values

education.

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Author Note

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