

Character Education as a Strategy to Prevent Promiscuity Among Senior High School Students in Merauke

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ABSTRACT

Character education plays a critical role in shaping students' values and behaviors, serving as a preventive measure against social issues such as promiscuity. In Merauke, a region with distinct cultural and social dynamics, addressing adolescent behavior through character development is essential. This qualitative study employed a case study design to explore the impact of character education on preventing promiscuity among high school students in Merauke. Conducted in 2023, the research involved students, parents, and teachers at a local high school. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and direct observations, then analyzed thematically to examine the roles of educators and families in guiding students' moral development. Findings indicate that effective character education—integrating moral values, ethics, and social responsibility—significantly contributes to reducing risky behaviors among students. Collaboration between schools, parents, and communities enhances the effectiveness of these programs. Participants reported noticeable improvements in students' sense of responsibility and decision-making. However, challenges such as limited parental awareness and the pervasive influence of technology hinder optimal outcomes. The study highlights the importance of tailoring character education to the unique cultural context of Merauke. To address ongoing challenges, greater efforts are needed to involve families and integrate local values into the curriculum. Strengthening character education holistically may offer a sustainable strategy for mitigating adolescent promiscuity in the region.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education plays a central role in shaping individuals with quality and character (Janapati & Vijayalakshmi, 2024). As stated by Purwadhi (2019), the learning process and character building of students do not only depend on schools, but are also influenced by the family and community

environment. Thus, close collaboration between family, school, and community is crucial in creating individuals who are not only academically smart, but also have a strong personality (Xia, 2024). Parenting, in particular, greatly influences children's emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development (Sari, Sumardi, & Mulyadi, 2020). However, in reality, there are still many parents who do not fully realize their role in shaping children's character (Sumarni, 2022). Many parents are less than optimal in carrying out their functions, especially in terms of educating children about moral and social values.

In addition, rapid technological advances as part of the modernization process also have a significant impact on various aspects of life, including in terms of character education and adolescent morality (Ngafifi, 2014). According to Wahono (2018), character education not only aims to form individuals with integrity but also serves as a preventive measure against social problems, including promiscuity. Schools, as formal education institutions, have a great responsibility in educating students to not only master academic knowledge, but also have strong and moral characters. Strengthening character education is expected to help students, especially in Merauke, in facing increasingly complex social challenges, and keep them away from behaviors that can harm their future.

Adolescents, as the group most affected by technological developments, often fall into various social problems, including promiscuity that damages their morality (Subroto, Supriandi, Wirawan, & Rukmana, 2023). The expanding and uncontrolled digital world has a major negative impact, such as exposure to information that is wrong or incompatible with the values taught by families and schools (Dwivedi et al., 2022). Merauke, with all its cultural uniqueness and geographical location, faces similar social challenges. Learners in this area are often in complex social conditions due to external cultural influences that often clash with local values (Suryawan, 2018). Therefore, the implementation of character education that focuses on the formation of morals, ethics, and social responsibility is very important.

Bhattacharjee (2024) states that adolescence is characterized by great curiosity, including in sexual matters, so proper sexual education becomes an integral part of their personality formation. This education must be provided clearly and precisely by parents and the surrounding environment to prevent the spread of misinformation (Rinta Leafio, 2015). Adolescents, as part of an important component of national resilience, have a strategic role in determining the future of the nation (Sahil, 2018). Data from BKKBN (2012) shows that adolescents aged 16-21 years in Indonesia reach almost 30 million, reflecting the importance of preparing them to face future challenges. If adolescents are directed to channel positive energy and stay away from promiscuous sexual behavior, Indonesia has the opportunity to become a prosperous country. Conversely, if adolescents engage in promiscuous sexual behavior, this hope can be difficult to realize.

The problem of juvenile delinquency, especially promiscuity, is increasingly worrying and needs serious attention from all parties. The increase in the number of juvenile delinquency cases in recent years shows that promiscuity is becoming a bigger problem (Trijaka, 2021). The role of parents in preventing promiscuity is very important, as they can provide proper supervision and educate their children about the dangers of promiscuity and its impact on their future (Shafira & Asyiah, 2021).

With all these challenges, strengthening character education is a preventive measure that can not only shape the morality of adolescents, but also help them face the complexity of the growing social world, especially in the midst of the rapid influence of foreign cultures and the digital world.

2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the role of character education in preventing promiscuity among high school students in Merauke. This study was conducted in 2023, involving all high school students in Merauke as the main participants. The choice of the case study method allows researchers to investigate phenomena in depth in a specific social context and provides a more comprehensive picture of the interaction between social factors and character education.

The data sources in this study consist of in-depth interviews and direct observation. Interviews were conducted with parents, teachers and students to explore their views on the impact of promiscuity and how character education can play a role in its prevention. In addition, observations were made of social interactions in the classroom and extracurricular activities related to character education. This observation aims to identify the active role of parents and teachers in guiding students to be wiser in dealing with social interactions outside school.

For data processing, thematic analysis was used to identify the main themes that emerged from the interviews and observations. This process was carried out by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts and observation notes, then grouping information relevant to the research focus, namely character education and prevention of promiscuity. Each theme was analyzed in depth to reveal the relationship between factors, as well as the role of parents and teachers in the existing social context.

Furthermore, to maintain data quality, researchers used triangulation techniques, combining interviews, observations, and related documents to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Meanwhile, the analysis process was carried out using NVivo software, which facilitates the systematic grouping and analysis of qualitative data. The selection of this software allows researchers to organize extensive and complex data, and facilitate drawing more accurate conclusions.

The selection procedure for the participants and the documents analyzed was done using certain criteria. Students selected were those who were active in school activities and had a direct link to the character education program. Meanwhile, parents and teachers involved in the interviews had a direct role in educating and guiding students in their social lives. All data collected from various sources were analyzed to identify patterns and relationships relevant to the research focus, namely the impact of character education in reducing promiscuity among students.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

Character education plays a crucial role in shaping individuals with integrity, morality and social responsibility. Lickona (1991) states that the main purpose of character education is to instill values such as honesty, responsibility, and empathy in learners. Berkowitz and Bier (2004) emphasize that character education should be applied consistently in various environments, whether at school, home, or community, by linking moral theory with daily practice. In Indonesia, character education is an important part of the 2013 Curriculum, which integrates character values in every subject and activity at school (Kemdikbud, 2013). In this context, some relevant character education models include Values-Based Education, which teaches moral values through formal learning and extracurricular activities, and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), which focuses on developing students' social and emotional skills. Research shows that SEL models can help adolescents manage their feelings and behaviors, and reduce engagement in risky behaviors such as promiscuity (CASEL, 2020).

The issue of promiscuity among Indonesian adolescents has increasingly become a deep social concern. Suryadi and Yuliana (2019) identified several causative factors, such as lack of religious understanding, peer influence, and family disharmony, which can exacerbate the tendency of promiscuity among adolescents. Research by Wijaya et al. (2022) in Jakarta found that 60% of adolescents were involved in premature romantic relationships, which often led to premarital sexual behavior, with peers and a lack of adequate sex education as dominant factors. Character education that involves parents and teachers in strengthening morality and ethics can serve as a preventive measure against promiscuity among teenagers. In an area like Merauke, with its distinctive culture and social challenges, the implementation of character education based on local values, such as gotong royong and mutual respect, is needed. Suryawan (2018) explains that external cultural influences that often conflict with local values exacerbate the complexity of youth character building in the area. Therefore, character education in Merauke must integrate local cultural values to achieve greater relevance and effectiveness in shaping the personality of adolescents.

In addition, advances in technology, especially the internet and social media, also influence adolescent behavior. Adolescents who are active on social media are more open to information that can influence their behavior, including in aspects of sexuality and relationships between the opposite sex. Research by Dwivedi et al. (2022) revealed that the negative impact of uncontrolled use of social media, such as promiscuity, can be minimized through character education that emphasizes the ethical use of technology. This is in line with Wahono's (2018) opinion, which emphasizes the importance of character education as a preventive measure to overcome the negative impact of rapid technological development. Therefore, character education that involves collaboration between families, schools and communities, and is adapted to the local cultural context and technological developments, can help adolescents face the challenges of promiscuity more wisely and avoid behaviors that can harm their future.

Character education can also be seen as a process of personality development through the internalization of moral values and behavior in accordance with social and cultural norms (Sudartini, 2024). Permady & Zulfikar (2021) revealed that the purpose of character education is to create individuals who have integrity, responsibility, and social awareness, and are able to behave in accordance with the values held in social life. Character education focuses on building positive attitudes, such as discipline, honesty, empathy and respect, which are very important in personal development and social relationships. Hasanah (2019) quoted Kohlberg who stated that human moral development goes through several stages, from pre-conventional, conventional, to post-conventional stages, and character education plays an important role in helping learners move from behavior based on punishment or reward to behavior based on universal moral principles.

Adolescence, especially for high school students in Merauke, is a period of self-discovery that requires guidance so as not to stray in negative directions, such as promiscuity. Promiscuity violates applicable norms and often appears in the environment and mass media, with examples of behavior such as smoking, drinking alcohol, brawls, drugs, and free sex (Verkuyten, 2018). This problem is alarming and is influenced by several factors that trigger this deviant behavior. The following is an explanation of the factors that cause promiscuity among high school students:

3.1.1 The Role of Family in Shaping Students' Character

The findings reveal that family factors significantly influence adolescent behavior, especially in relation to free association. Families that are unstable, particularly those experiencing divorce or disharmony, often become the backdrop for adolescents seeking escape outside the home, making them more vulnerable to engaging in free association. Adolescents who grow up in broken homes are more likely to become involved in risky behaviors due to the lack of attention and affection from their parents. Moreover, the lack of religious education and parental supervision exacerbates this situation. For instance, students whose parents do not monitor their interactions with their romantic partners or fail to provide adequate supervision of their activities outside the home are more prone to engage in inappropriate behaviors, such as dating without clear boundaries.

Table 1. Family Factors Influencing Free Association Among Adolescents

Factor	Impact on Free Association	Example Findings
Unstable Family Background	Seeking attention outside home, negative influence	Adolescents from divorced families tend to seek attention outside the home.
Lack of Religious Education	Lack of understanding of moral norms	Adolescents do not understand boundaries in relationships with the opposite sex.
Weak Parental Supervision	Involvement in unmonitored relationships	Parents not supervising their children's dating activities.

3.1.2 Influence of Media and Technology

Uncontrolled access to mass media and the internet is identified as a primary factor influencing adolescent behavior, particularly in terms of free association. Social media and the internet provide platforms that allow adolescents to interact with their peers, including in unhealthy or inappropriate relationships. The research found that adolescents who have unrestricted access to social media tend to be more open to information related to sexuality and relationships with the opposite sex. Content that promotes a hedonistic, free-spirited lifestyle strengthens negative norms that could lead adolescents to engage in free association. Therefore, it is important for character education in schools to include ethics on technology and social media use, as well as to educate about the consequences of online behavior.

Table 2. The Influence of Media and Technology on Free Association

Factor	Impact on Free Association	Example Findings
Unrestricted Access	Exposure to negative content and risky behavior	Adolescents access sexual content online without parental supervision.
Influence of Social Media	Promoting unhealthy lifestyle norms	Adolescents are influenced to adopt a free-spirited lifestyle promoted on social media.

3.1.3 Impact of Character Education in Preventing Free Association

Character education plays a crucial role in shaping students' personalities and preventing risky behaviors such as free association. Based on interviews with teachers and parents, the findings suggest that character education, which incorporates moral and ethical aspects, helps adolescents understand social boundaries and strengthens their sense of responsibility in relationships. Programs based on local values, such as mutual cooperation, respect for others, and helping one another, have been particularly effective in shaping adolescents' behavior. Moreover, a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) approach, which is taught in schools, helps students manage their emotions and develop better social skills, thus preventing them from engaging in unhealthy relationships.

Table 3. The Impact of Character Education on Preventing Free Association

Aspect of Character Education	Impact on Free Association	Example Findings
Moral Development	Helps students recognize boundaries in relationships	Character education teaches students not to engage in premarital sexual relationships.
Programs Based on Local Values	Strengthens social responsibility and ethics	Character education emphasizing mutual cooperation and respect reduces the tendency toward free association.
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)	Develops emotional management skills	Students participating in SEL programs are better able to manage their emotions and avoid risky behavior.

3.2 Discussion

This study utilized a qualitative case study approach to examine the role of character education in preventing free sexual relationships among high school students in Merauke. The case study method was selected for its capacity to provide a deep and nuanced understanding of complex social phenomena—specifically, how character education is applied within the context of local schools and how it influences adolescent behavior (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted at several senior high schools in Merauke and involved students, parents, and teachers as participants.

Participants were carefully selected based on their direct relevance to the topic under investigation. Students in grades XI and XII who actively participated in school activities were chosen to offer insights based on their lived experiences. Additionally, parents who were open to discussing their perspectives on character education and adolescent relationships were included, as well as teachers who were directly involved in implementing character development programs in schools.

Data collection was carried out through in-depth, semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich, qualitative responses (Patton, 2015). These interviews explored the participants' views on the influence of character education in shaping moral awareness and in helping to prevent free sexual relationships among adolescents. The questions were framed around key areas such as students' experiences in social interaction, the role of parental guidance in moral formation, and how teachers assist students in overcoming peer pressure and other behavioral challenges. A conducive, non-judgmental environment was maintained during the interviews to ensure participants could speak freely and comfortably. This approach helped uncover nuanced perspectives that might have been otherwise overlooked in a more rigid or quantitative research design.

The data collected were analyzed thematically, beginning with the transcription of each interview to preserve the authenticity of participant voices (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The next step involved open coding to identify patterns and significant themes across the different interviews. These codes were further organized into overarching themes that addressed the implementation of character education and its effectiveness in preventing risky sexual behavior among students. To ensure the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing responses from students, parents, and teachers to identify consistent patterns and discrepancies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The research also adhered to ethical standards, ensuring informed consent, protecting participant confidentiality, and respecting their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence or pressure (BERA, 2018).

One of the central findings of this study is that character education in Merauke is not presented as a separate subject but is woven throughout all areas of academic instruction. It is systematically incorporated into lesson plans, known as *Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran* (RPP), using diverse teaching strategies and instructional techniques. This integration allows students to encounter and engage with character values in a variety of contexts, thereby reinforcing their understanding and encouraging the internalization of these values over time (Yongliang, 2023). However, this process is not without its challenges. Teachers often struggle with the development of character-based lesson plans due to the absence of standardized guidelines from the government and inconsistencies in the expected format of RPP documents (Fahmawidiarti, Kusdiana, & Ganda, 2018). These obstacles can lead to confusion and uneven implementation across schools. To address these difficulties, schools in Merauke have organized workshops to help teachers understand how to effectively embed character education into their instructional practices. These workshops aim to establish consistency and clarity in how character values are communicated and reinforced within the classroom. Creating a joyful and engaging learning environment has also been highlighted as a key factor in sustaining student interest and participation in character-building activities (Kakazu & Chow, 2023).

Beyond the academic curriculum, character education in Merauke is further supported through self-development programs that emphasize holistic student growth. These include leadership training, extracurricular activities, and community service projects that provide students with opportunities to engage in collaborative and socially meaningful experiences. Such programs serve as platforms where students can practice and reflect on values such as teamwork, empathy, and ethical behavior (Marwan, Firdaus, & Handayani, 2024). Importantly, these activities are designed to resonate with the cultural and social context of Merauke, ensuring that the values being taught align with the community's expectations and norms. This alignment enhances the relevance and effectiveness of character education. Such initiatives play a crucial role in instilling essential values like honesty, tolerance, discipline, and responsibility, which are indispensable for students' personal and social development.

Character education is also promoted through various school-wide programs designed to reinforce positive behavior and social accountability. These programs include the use of student journals, which encourage self-reflection; anti-corruption education, which builds integrity; and digital mentoring programs that provide ongoing support and guidance. These initiatives aim to help students cultivate good habits that they can internalize and carry into their adult lives (Lickona, 2021). The integration of character education into everyday routines makes it a lived experience rather than an abstract concept, enhancing its long-term impact. Schools such as SMA YPK Merauke have also taken a proactive approach by forming partnerships with external stakeholders—including the police, healthcare professionals, religious leaders, and alumni—to address broader social issues like juvenile delinquency and substance abuse. These collaborations amplify the effectiveness of school efforts by creating a unified support system that extends beyond the classroom.

Parental involvement has emerged as another critical component in the successful implementation of character education. Through digital platforms such as WhatsApp groups, schools maintain regular communication with parents to share updates, address concerns, and collaboratively monitor student behavior. This approach fosters a sense of shared responsibility between the school and the home, reinforcing the consistency of moral and behavioral expectations (Elmanora, Hastuti, & Muflikhati, 2017). When parents are actively involved in character education, students receive more coherent and reinforced messages about acceptable conduct, which helps solidify their moral compass. Students are more likely to adopt positive behaviors when there is alignment between the values emphasized at school and those reinforced at home (Lickona, 2004).

At the core of the character education initiatives in Merauke are the 18 values set forth by the Indonesian Ministry of National Education. While all 18 values are considered important, SMA YPK Merauke places particular emphasis on 14 key values: religiousness, honesty, tolerance, discipline, hard work, creativity, independence, curiosity, love for the homeland, peace-loving, love of reading, environmental awareness, social care, and responsibility. These values are embedded not only in the curriculum but also in the overall school culture, shaping the behaviors and attitudes of both students and staff. By cultivating an environment that consistently promotes these values, schools aim to prevent harmful behaviors and foster the development of ethical, compassionate, and socially responsible individuals (Kemendiknas, 2010).

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the importance of a comprehensive, culturally informed approach to character education in addressing adolescent behavioral issues such as free sexual relationships. The integration of character values across academic subjects, self-development programs, school-wide initiatives, and partnerships with families and communities collectively creates a supportive environment that guides students toward positive choices. While challenges such as inconsistent guidelines and technological distractions remain, the commitment of schools in Merauke to instill strong character traits in their students offers a promising model for reducing risky behavior and promoting holistic youth development. Ensuring the sustainability and continued improvement of these character education practices will require ongoing collaboration, policy support, and a willingness to adapt to evolving social dynamics.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that character education in senior high schools in Merauke plays a vital role in preventing juvenile delinquency and fostering positive student behavior. By integrating character values such as religiosity, honesty, tolerance, discipline, hard work, independence, and responsibility into academic subjects—particularly Civics and Religious Education—as well as reinforcing these values through extracurricular activities, role modeling by teachers, and structured reward and sanction systems, schools have created an environment conducive to moral development. However, the effectiveness of character education is limited by several factors, including students' personal inclinations and self-control, individual differences, and external influences from families,

communities, and digital media. These challenges highlight the need for a more collaborative approach that actively involves parents, community members, and media stakeholders, while also encouraging schools to tailor character education methods to the cultural and social contexts of their students. Furthermore, there is a need for schools to adopt more innovative and adaptive pedagogical strategies to ensure sustained student engagement. Although this study provides valuable insights, it is limited by its qualitative, context-specific focus, which may restrict the generalizability of its findings. Therefore, future research should consider longitudinal studies to assess the long-term behavioral outcomes of character education and comparative studies across different regions or cultural backgrounds to explore how diverse social environments shape the design and impact of character education programs. These approaches will offer a more comprehensive understanding of how character education can be effectively implemented across varying educational and cultural landscapes.

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