



Fostering Empathy and Positive Character in Elementary School Students through the School Environment

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Abstract:

Background: Empathy is an essential social competence that supports children's moral development and helps build positive relationships and conflict resolution; however, technological advancements and social changes have reduced direct social interactions among children, potentially weakening their social sensitivity. Therefore, character education in elementary schools plays a strategic role in fostering empathy and positive behavior.

Aims: This study aims to analyze the role of the school environment in fostering empathy and positive character in elementary school students.

Methods: This study employed a qualitative approach using a library research method. Data were collected from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and relevant educational documents published between 2015–2025. The data were analyzed using content analysis to identify key themes related to empathy, character education, and school environment

Results: The findings reveal that the school environment plays a significant role in developing students' empathy and positive character. Key factors include teacher role modelling, positive school culture, integration of character values into learning, habituation programs, and collaboration between school and parents. A supportive and inclusive environment enhances students' social awareness, cooperation, and responsibility.

Conclusion: The school environment is a fundamental element in fostering empathy and positive character. Therefore, schools need to implement holistic and sustainable character education strategies to support students' social and moral development.

Keywords: Character Education, Elementary School, Empathy, School Environment, Social Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Education in the 21st century is not only oriented toward developing students' intellectual abilities but also toward strengthening character formation, especially in the face of challenges in the digital era (Mainita et al., 2025; Zahrah & Dwiputra, 2023). The rapid advancement of technology and the increasing use of digital media among children have reduced direct social interaction, which potentially leads to declining social sensitivity, empathy, and prosocial behaviour (Aqodiah et al., 2023; Herak, 2025). This phenomenon is increasingly evident in elementary school students, who, are at a crucial developmental stage in forming values, attitudes, and behaviours that will shape their

future personalities. Therefore education at the elementary school level must emphasize not only academic achievement but also the development of moral and social values such as empathy, responsibility, cooperation, and tolerance (Febriani et al., 2024).

Empathy, as one of the core components of character education, is not merely the ability to feel what others feel but also involves cognitive and affective dimensions. Cognitively, empathy refers to the ability to understand others' perspectives, while affectively, it involves the capacity to emotionally respond to others' feelings (Bowman-Smith et al., 2021; Widarno & Harimurti, 2023). According to emotional intelligence theory, empathy is a key element in building healthy social relationships and fostering prosocial behaviour. Students with well-developed empathy tend to show higher levels of cooperation, care, and respect toward others (Febriani et al., 2024; Tikkanen et al., 2024). Thus, empathy plays a fundamental role in shaping students' social competence both in school and in broader social contexts.

However, various empirical findings indicate that problems related to low empathy are still prevalent in educational environments. Cases such as bullying, lack of respect among peers, and low social concern reflect the insufficient development of students' social and emotional competencies (Nunes et al., 2025; Santamaría-Villar et al., 2021). Research shows that these issues are often linked to limited opportunities for

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meaningful social interaction and inadequate integration of character education in learning processes (Elias, 2025; Radigales et al., 2025). This condition highlights the urgent need to strengthen empathy-based character education from an early age.

In this context, the school environment becomes a crucial factor in fostering empathy and positive character. Based on social learning theory, children learn behaviours and values through interaction, observation, and imitation within their social environment (Amalia et al., 2025). Schools serve not only as academic institutions but also as social environments where students interact with teachers and peers, making them strategic spaces for character development. A positive, inclusive, and supportive school environment can facilitate the internalization of values such as cooperation, responsibility, and respect (Cholifah & Faelasup, 2024; Tuhuteru et al., 2025). Furthermore, teachers play a central role as models of empathetic behaviour, as their attitudes and interactions significantly influence students' character formation (Febriani et al., 2024).

Previous studies have confirmed the importance of the school environment in shaping students' empathy. For instance, (Febriani et al., 2024) found that students' empathy levels are influenced by the quality of social interactions in schools. Other studies highlight that character education programs, active learning strategies, and inclusive approaches contribute positively to the development of empathy and prosocial behavior (Febriani et al., 2024). However, most of these studies tend to focus on specific instructional strategies or the role of teachers individually, rather than examining the school environment as a comprehensive system (Martinsone & Žydzūnaitė, 2023; Mulvey et al., 2021).

Therefore, there is a clear research gap regarding how the overall school environment encompassing school culture, social interactions, learning processes, and institutional practices collectively contributes to fostering empathy and positive character in elementary school students. Addressing this gap is important to provide a more holistic understanding of character education implementation. Based on this background, this study aims to analyze, through a literature-based approach, the role of the school environment in fostering empathy and positive character among elementary school students.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research method that focuses on the conceptual analysis of fostering empathy and positive character in elementary school students through the school environment. The data sources were obtained from several academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, and other relevant educational databases. The literature search was conducted using specific keywords such as "empathy," "character education," "school environment," "elementary school," and "prosocial behavior."

The inclusion criteria for selecting the literature were: (1) articles published in the last ten years (2015–2025), (2) peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reputable research reports, (3) studies relevant to empathy, character education, and school environment, and (4) publications written in English or Indonesian. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria included: (1) articles not directly related to the research focus, (2) non-academic sources, and (3) studies with incomplete or unclear methodologies.

This research is descriptive qualitative in nature, aiming to systematically describe and interpret the concepts of empathy, positive character, and the role of the school environment based on existing literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Maknun & Aisyah, 2023). The theoretical framework of this study refers to Lickona's theory of character education, Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence and empathy, and Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Bertiliya et al., 2025).

Data collection was carried out through documentation techniques, including identifying, selecting, reviewing, and organizing relevant literature (Suciati et al., 2023). Data analysis was conducted using content analysis by categorizing key themes related to empathy, positive character, and the school environment, and then synthesizing the relationships among these concepts to draw comprehensive conclusions (Krippendorff, 2019). To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, source triangulation was applied by comparing and cross-checking information from multiple credible sources such as academic books, journal articles, and previous empirical studies (Sugiyono, 2019).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

3.1.1 The Role of the School Environment in Forming Students' Empathy and Positive Character

The synthesis of various studies indicates that the school environment plays a fundamental and systemic role in shaping students' empathy and positive character. Rather than functioning merely as a place for knowledge transmission, schools act as social ecosystems where values are internalized through continuous interaction. A conducive school environment characterized by safety, emotional support, and positive relationships does not only facilitate social interaction but also strengthens the internalization of moral values such as care, respect, and cooperation.

Findings from (Maknun & Aisyah, 2023) collectively suggest that empathy is not an isolated trait but is strongly influenced by environmental conditions and social dynamics within the school. The contribution of empathy to prosocial behavior (19.6%) indicates that empathy serves as a foundational driver of students' social actions. However, this also implies that other environmental and instructional factors contribute significantly, highlighting that empathy development requires a holistic approach. Thus, the school environment should be understood as an integrative

system where social interaction, emotional climate, and institutional culture simultaneously shape students' character.

3.1.2 The Role of Teachers and Learning in Developing Students' Empathy

The findings reveal that teachers hold a strategic and multidimensional role in fostering students' empathy, not only as knowledge transmitters but as moral agents and behavioral models. The effectiveness of empathy development is closely linked to how consistently teachers demonstrate empathetic attitudes in their daily interactions. This supports the perspective of social learning theory, where students learn behaviors through observation and imitation.

Moreover, the integration of empathy values into learning processes shows stronger outcomes compared to conventional cognitive-oriented instruction. Studies by (Afifah et al., 2024) indicate that experiential learning methods—such as sociodrama, storytelling, and social activities—enable students to engage both cognitively and affectively, thereby deepening their understanding of others' emotions. Project-based social learning further reinforces this by providing collaborative experiences that foster cooperation and social sensitivity.

However, these findings also suggest that the success of such approaches depends on teachers' pedagogical competence and their ability to design meaningful learning experiences. Without proper implementation, these methods may become procedural rather than transformative. Therefore, teacher readiness and training remain critical factors in optimizing empathy-based learning.

3.1.3 Strategies for Creating a School Environment that Supports Empathy dan Positive Character

The study identifies that fostering empathy and positive character requires comprehensive and sustainable strategies embedded within school culture. Strengthening character education through daily practices, shared values, and institutional norms is more effective than isolated programs. Findings from (Ilham Nasution & Shafa Aqilla, 2022) indicate that when empathy is integrated into school culture, it promotes tolerance, cooperation, and social responsibility among students.

Social-based activities such as group work, sharing programs, and community service provide authentic contexts for students to experience diversity and practice empathy directly. These activities bridge the gap between conceptual understanding and real-life application, making empathy a lived experience rather than merely a taught concept.

Furthermore, (Ilham Nasution & Shafa Aqilla, 2022) demonstrate that structured empathy training programs can significantly reduce negative behaviors such as bullying while enhancing social awareness. However, challenges identified by (Ilham Nasution & Shafa Aqilla, 2022), such as limited instructional time and lack of teacher preparedness, indicate that implementation

barriers still exist. This suggests that successful character education requires not only well-designed programs but also institutional support, adequate time allocation, and continuous professional development for teachers.

Overall, the synthesis of findings highlights that creating an empathy-supportive school environment is a complex process that involves the integration of school culture, teacher roles, learning strategies, and institutional policies. Without a holistic and consistent approach, efforts to foster empathy and positive character may not achieve optimal outcomes.

3.2 Discussion

This study demonstrates that the school environment should not be understood merely as a supporting educational context, but rather as an integrated ecosystem that collectively shapes students' empathy and positive character development. The findings indicate that empathy formation is influenced by the interaction of multiple interconnected dimensions, including school culture, emotional climate, social relationships, institutional practices, teacher role modeling, and learning experiences. In this sense, character development is not produced through isolated instructional activities alone, but through continuous social and emotional experiences embedded within everyday school life.

This conceptualization extends previous studies that primarily focused on specific instructional strategies, teacher-centered approaches, or individual character programs. While earlier research confirmed that teachers and learning methods influence empathy development, this study contributes a broader perspective by emphasizing that the entire school ecosystem functions as a dynamic and interdependent system in character formation. Thus, the novelty of this study lies in positioning the school environment as a holistic ecosystem where values are consistently constructed, practiced, and reinforced through institutional culture and daily interactions.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings strengthen social learning theory, which explains that behavior is developed through observation, imitation, and interaction within social contexts. However, this study expands the application of the theory by demonstrating that social learning in schools operates not only through interpersonal interaction but also through the broader emotional and institutional climate created by the school environment. Students internalize empathy and positive values not solely from direct instruction, but also from the norms, routines, relationships, and collective experiences that characterize the school ecosystem.

The findings also support Lickona's framework of character education, particularly the integration of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Empathy, as part of moral feeling, becomes a central foundation that encourages prosocial behavior such as cooperation, helping, tolerance, and respect for others. In addition, Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence is reinforced through the finding that empathy develops more effectively within emotionally supportive

environments that encourage positive social interaction and emotional connectedness among students.

Another important contribution of this study is the emphasis on the emotional climate of the school as a significant component of character development. A safe, inclusive, and supportive atmosphere enables students to feel valued, accepted, and emotionally secure, which subsequently encourages the emergence of caring and prosocial behavior. This finding suggests that empathy development is not solely cognitive or instructional in nature, but also relational and emotional. Therefore, schools need to prioritize the creation of emotionally healthy environments as part of sustainable character education practices.

Furthermore, the role of teachers emerges as multidimensional within this educational ecosystem. Teachers function not only as facilitators of academic learning but also as moral agents who shape students' emotional and social experiences. The integration of empathy into participatory and experiential learning activities such as collaborative projects, storytelling, social interaction, and reflective discussions provides meaningful opportunities for students to practice perspective-taking and social sensitivity in authentic contexts. This finding indicates that character education becomes more effective when empathy is embedded within students' lived experiences rather than delivered merely as theoretical knowledge.

This study also reveals that institutional practices and school culture play a crucial role in sustaining empathy development. Habituation programs, collective school values, social activities, and collaborative relationships between teachers, students, and parents contribute to creating consistency in character formation. Therefore, empathy and positive character should be viewed as outcomes of systemic educational processes rather than temporary programmatic interventions.

In practical terms, the findings imply that schools should adopt holistic character education policies that integrate emotional climate, positive school culture, inclusive interaction, and experiential learning into everyday educational practices. Teacher professional development should also emphasize emotional competence, relational pedagogy, and strategies for creating supportive classroom environments. By doing so, schools can function not only as centers of academic achievement but also as ecosystems that nurture students' social, moral, and emotional growth comprehensively.

However, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary data through a library research approach. Future studies are recommended to conduct empirical investigations using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method designs to examine how specific dimensions of the school ecosystem influence empathy and character development in real educational settings.

3.2.1 Implications

The findings of this study imply that schools should no longer be viewed merely as places for academic instruction but as integrated educational ecosystems that

shape students' empathy and positive character through continuous social and emotional experiences. Empathy development is influenced not only by classroom instruction but also by the interaction of school culture, emotional climate, social relationships, institutional practices, teacher role modeling, and meaningful learning experiences. Therefore, character education should be implemented holistically by integrating emotional support, positive school culture, inclusive interactions, and experiential learning into everyday educational practices.

The study also highlights the importance of creating a safe, supportive, and inclusive school climate where students feel respected, valued, and emotionally secure. Such an environment encourages the development of caring attitudes, cooperation, tolerance, and prosocial behavior. Consequently, school leaders should prioritize policies that foster emotionally healthy learning environments, while teacher professional development should strengthen emotional competence, relational pedagogy, and the ability to integrate empathy into collaborative, reflective, and experiential learning activities.

3.2.2 Research Contribution

This study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing the school environment not merely as a supporting educational context but as an integrated ecosystem that collectively shapes students' empathy and positive character development. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasized teacher-centered approaches, instructional strategies, or individual character education programs, this study demonstrates that character formation emerges from the interaction of multiple interconnected dimensions, including school culture, emotional climate, institutional practices, teacher role modeling, social relationships, and everyday learning experiences.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings extend social learning theory by showing that learning occurs not only through direct observation and interpersonal interaction but also through the broader emotional and institutional climate established within schools. The study further reinforces Lickona's character education framework by emphasizing empathy as a central component connecting moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. In addition, the findings strengthen Goleman's emotional intelligence theory by illustrating that empathy develops more effectively within emotionally supportive environments that encourage meaningful social interaction and emotional connectedness. Overall, the novelty of this study lies in positioning the school environment as a holistic and dynamic ecosystem in which values are continuously constructed, practiced, and reinforced through institutional culture and daily interactions.

3.2.3 Limitation

This study has several limitations. First, it relies exclusively on secondary data collected through a library research approach, which limits the ability to directly observe how the dimensions of the school

ecosystem operate in authentic educational settings. Second, because the findings are synthesized from previous studies, they do not provide empirical evidence regarding the magnitude or causal relationships among school environmental factors, empathy, and character development. Therefore, the conclusions presented in this study should be interpreted as conceptual rather than empirical.

3.2.4 Suggestion

Future research is recommended to examine the proposed school ecosystem framework through empirical studies using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approaches. Such studies could investigate the individual and combined effects of school culture, emotional climate, teacher role modeling, institutional practices, and social relationships on students' empathy and character development across different educational contexts. Longitudinal research is also encouraged to explore how empathy develops over time within school ecosystems.

From a practical perspective, schools should adopt comprehensive character education policies that integrate empathy into curriculum implementation, school culture, extracurricular activities, and daily interactions among teachers, students, and parents. Strengthening teacher professional development in emotional competence and relational pedagogy is also recommended to support the creation of sustainable learning environments that promote students' moral, social, and emotional development.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the literature review, this study aimed to analyze the role of the school environment in fostering empathy and positive character in elementary school students, and the findings confirm that the school environment plays a central and influential role in this process. A conducive, safe, and inclusive school environment supports the development of empathy, social awareness, responsibility, and cooperation through continuous social interaction and value internalization. Teachers function as key agents who act not only as facilitators of learning but also as role models who demonstrate empathetic behavior in daily interactions. Furthermore, the development of empathy is influenced not only by classroom instruction but also by the broader school ecosystem, including school culture, habituation programs, social activities, and positive interpersonal relationships.

The main contribution of this study lies in providing a comprehensive perspective that positions the school environment as an integrated system in character formation, thereby enriching theoretical discourse on character education, particularly by strengthening the relevance of social learning theory, emotional intelligence, and moral development theory in the context of elementary education. Practically, this study implies that schools should design holistic and sustainable character education programs by creating inclusive environments, integrating empathy values into

learning, and strengthening collaboration between teachers, families, and communities. Thus, education at the elementary level should not only focus on academic achievement but also prioritize the development of students' character and social competence as essential foundations for their future lives.

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6. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

NYR conceptualized the study, conducted data analysis, and wrote the manuscript. TM contributed to literature review and data collection. AL assisted in data interpretation and manuscript editing. S supervised the research process and provided critical revisions to the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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