

Friendship and character education: A systematic review

Amistad y educación del carácter: una revisión sistemática

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Abstract:

This paper presents a systematic review of scientific articles on friendship and character education (CE) published between 2007 and 2021. It seeks to identify the dominant theories from which CE is approached, how friendship is understood in the studies, and what specific relationship is built between friendship and character; in other words, the extent to which it is posited that friendship can be harnessed to acquire virtues. Results indicate a prevalence of a psychological approach to CE, linked to an instrumentalist perspective on friendship, which associates it with certain benefits. However, this approach is closely followed by a philosophical-moral view that understands friendship as a good in itself and, consequently, highlights its humanizing potential. The Aristotelian framework for understanding friendship and character stands

out within this approach. The relationship between friendship and character in the selected articles is explored through 5 categories that emerged in the analysis: 1) friendship for character; 2) character for friendship; 3) friendship and transgressions; 4) teachers' and students' perceptions of the influence of friendship; and 5) analysis of programmes that include friendship in the curriculum.

Keywords: friendship, character education, systematic review, moral education, virtue, character strengths.

Resumen:

Este trabajo presenta una revisión sistemática de artículos científicos publicados entre 2007 y 2021 sobre la amistad en relación con la educación del carácter (EC) con

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el objetivo de identificar cuáles son las *perspectivas teóricas* predominantes desde las que se aborda esta cuestión, cómo se comprende en los trabajos la *amistad* y cuál es la *relación* concreta que se establece entre esta y el carácter, es decir, en qué medida se entiende que la amistad puede servir para desarrollar virtudes. Los resultados apuntan a un predominio del enfoque psicológico en la manera de abordar la EC, ligado a una perspectiva instrumentalista de la amistad que la asocia a determinados beneficios, pero no alejado de otro enfoque, filosófico-moral, que comprende la amistad como un bien en sí mismo para la vida y, en consecuencia, pone de relieve su po-

tencial humanizador. Dentro de este enfoque sobresale el recurso al marco de comprensión aristotélico. La relación entre amistad-carácter en los artículos seleccionados se explora a través de 5 categorías que emergieron en el análisis: 1) el carácter para la amistad; 2) la amistad para el carácter; 3) amistad y transgresiones; 4) percepciones del profesorado/alumnado sobre la influencia de la amistad, y 5) análisis de programas en los que la amistad aparece como contenido educativo.

Descriptor: amistad, educación del carácter, revisión sistemática, educación moral, virtud, fortalezas del carácter.

1. Introduction

Rooted in the sphere of personal intimacy, character is formed in the company of others, especially in the relationship with the person's *significant* others. As Taylor (2016) observes, the genesis of the mind is not a monologic process; instead, people's identities — and, consequently, their ways of being — are always defined through dialogue. In this dialogue, which sometimes includes disagreement and struggle, people's characters are mutually shaped. Friends find one another through this dialogue, like two intimacies open to being saturated, in Ortega y Gasset's terms, where each one comes forward with its circumstances and its own self (Rumayor, 2015).

From *care* in attachment relationships — an outpouring of love that is giv-

en, without which the person cannot be herself (Cabada, 1994) — to *friendship*, which makes life bearable and worth living (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1985), *the others are a condition of possibility for the self*. This means that the singularity and originality of the person, who is capable of novelty and personal initiatives, emerge in the relationship with others, as one's own voice only makes sense in communication with them. In other words, the person's original contribution is devised precisely in their company and arises from those relationships. Without the scaffolding that the others provide, the person's capacity for manifestation is very limited. On this basis, singularity and sociability are not in conflict, but instead are inseparable moments of personhood.

Therefore, rather than enjoying the autonomy of a self-sufficient subject, we are

affected by a radical heteronomy. This involves not only being “bound by responsibilities” (Ortega, 2013, p. 413) towards the others, but also that our personal possibilities of understanding, loving and doing are, though not limited, really affected by those with whom we interact, which make up our particular origin (Arendt, 2013). This open or porous human nature is what makes the person capable of resonance, like a musical instrument (Rosa, 2019), in a distinctively singular way, in contrast to the impoverishing shielding of a buffered self. Character is developed *with* others — in their company — and *through* others — with their scaffolding — and this even also sometimes happens *for* them. Therefore, “*the longing for relation is primary*” (Buber, 1970, p. 78).

This openness of human nature does not just display a dimension of lack nor only expresses human insufficiency or the need for others to make survival possible, as a reductionist biological explanation might claim (Carr, 2018). Instead, the capacity to “overcome separation” (Fromm, 2014, p. 27) and generate humanising relationships reveals the wealth provided by the possibility of perfecting oneself creatively from others, engendering shared projects that are not in one or other of the individuals that promote them, but “between” them (Buber, 2018), and which are connected to the respective individual projects in such a way that they are not limited to respecting them, but they also foster them, taking them beyond themselves.

Plato (2015) expresses this duality of human relationships — their merely in-

strumental or utilitarian dimension and their finalistic dimension, when they are understood as goods in themselves — in his representation of love in the *Symposium*, where love is, paradoxically, depicted at the same time as being a kind of wealth and as a kind of poverty. Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1985) notes something similar when distinguishing between different types of friendship (for pleasure, for utility, and of character), depending on which dimension, instrumental or moral, is prioritised in them based on the purpose for which they are conceived. For Aristotle, only friendship that is built on virtue can be called true friendship.

Within this framework, analysing the quality of the relationships that individuals are capable of generating serves as a good criterion for measuring the vigour of their societies and, consequently, also their malaises. In Buber’s terms, it is the “sphere of between” that needs to be examined since this is precisely what distinguishes human beings from other realities.

This article focuses on friendship relationships from the theoretical framework of humanism, which sees them as a type of interpersonal relationship that expresses the *dialogic* human essence. As a relationship that seeks to be authentic — based on seeking the good for the other for its own sake —, friendship represents a way to enhance the person’s character and so advance in the flourishing of societies, overcoming the failure of the political and social projects of individualism

and liberalism, as well as different kinds of modern collectivisms.

While there is a *civic* meaning of friendship (*philia politike*), whereby all human beings can recognise one another as equals as they belong to the same family (Nussbaum, 2014), thus achieving a solid base for civic coexistence that goes beyond the paradigm of *suspicion*, this article refers to friendship in the sphere of private interpersonal relationships. It focuses on them after acknowledging their importance for life — as a result of: (a) the frequency of the interaction between friends; (b) the intimacy of the links established and, consequently, their intense emotional charge, and (c) the prevalence of them throughout life —, which makes them an especially fertile terrain for CE, in line with recent research (Kristjánsson, 2022).

Through the review of literature about friendship that we carry out, we intend to examine how they can contribute to personal growth and, therefore, what dynamics must be activated to increase the *quantity* of humanising friendships and their *vigour/quality/depth*, measured in terms of their educational potential.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to perform a systematic review (SR) of scientific articles published between 2007 and 2021 on friendship in its relationship with CE. The choice of the last 15 years has to do with analysing how character education has been understood after Lawrence Kohlberg's death,

who ruled out the possibility of character education, as he did not believe in virtue as an end of moral education. In other words, the present article aims to analyse whether the selected works understand that friendship has the potential to educate the different dimensions of character, with the purpose of examining their findings and revealing similarities and differences between them. The specific objectives that were pursued are:

1. To identify scientific documents that: consider friendship in its educational potential, specifically, as contributing to CE, understanding friendship as an interpersonal relationship and not in a civic or political sense, and CE as an approach to moral education that aims at cultivating all the person's capacities which are necessary to act as human beings, increasing positive freedom. These capacities can be classified into the four dimensions of intellectual, performative, moral and civic character (Shields, 2011).

2. To provide a general description of the articles and their methodological approach: their publication date, the universities or research centres of origin, the method used (theoretical, quantitative, qualitative, mixed or intervention proposal not implemented yet), as well as the populations studied.

3. To analyse critically their results, the theoretical perspectives from which they are carried out and their limitations, thus identifying future lines of re-

search. This includes collating the most significant findings of the studies about how friendship can contribute to character development, as well as analysing the theoretical frameworks from which character and friendship are understood, pointing to their possible limitations.

2. Method

An SR is a rigorous method for critically analysing the results of previously selected primary studies, regardless of their methods, to integrate their conclusions with the aim of revealing similarities and differences so that these can inform decision-making (Higgins & Thomas, 2021). This contribution specifically considers the theoretical orientation and the conclusions reached in each article as terrain from which to advance in the practice of CE. The analysis of the documents includes studying how the theoretical perspectives of each piece of research might have influenced its findings. In other words, it seeks to identify the theory from which the results are reached and its assumptions, which allow — and limit — the understanding of the topic. Synthesising their results makes it possible to reveal gaps and future lines of research.

2.1. Steps in the study

Step 1. PICO question: The research questions that guided this SR were structured in line with the PICO methodology (Patient–Intervention–Comparison–Outcome):

1. What are the *theoretical perspectives* from which CE, and friendship

as a path towards it, is tackled? As a consequence of this, (i) how is character understood? and (ii) which particular dimension of it is brought into focus?

2. How is *friendship* understood? Is there a qualitative classification or distinction of various types of it?
3. What is the specific *relationship* established between friendship and character? To what extent is it understood that friendship can help develop virtues?

Step 2. Inclusion/exclusion criteria: The requirements for selecting the works were: (a) empirical or theoretical articles, (b) written in Spanish/English, (c) published in scientific journals indexed in the Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, or Dialnet databases, (d) between 2007 and 2021, (e) which deal with the question of friendship, and (f) relate it to CE.

The exclusion criteria left aside: (a) studies not related to education, (b) studies that did not have an explicit focus on improving character, and (c) studies that did not explicitly consider friendship as a *means* for educating some of the human faculties, even though they dealt with friendship in other regards.

Step 3. Literature review: The descriptors used in the search for documents were “friendship” combined with “character education” and “moral education”. We consulted four databases: SCOPUS, Web of Science, ERIC and Dialnet (Graph 1).

GRAPH 1. Search strings.

SCOPUS

(TOPIC("friendship") AND TOPIC (character education)) AND PUBYEAR > 2007 AND PUBYEAR < 2021-06-01 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE,"ar"))

This same search chain is repeated for the following descriptors:

FRIENDSHIP (TOPIC) + MORAL EDUCATION (TOPIC)

Each of the two searches was filtered by "Education & Educational Research" as area of research and by language (English or Spanish).

WoS

(TITLE-ABS-KEY("friendship") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("character education")) AND PUBYEAR > 2007 AND PUBYEAR < 2022 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE,"ar"))

This same search chain is repeated for the following descriptors:

FRIENDSHIP (TITLE) + MORAL EDUCATION (TITLE-ABS-KEY) AND PUBYEAR > 2007 AND PUBYEAR < 2022 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE,"ar"))

Then, in each of these two searches, articles in English and Spanish were selected in "Language".

DIALNET

(friendship) AND (character education) AND PUBYEAR > 2007 AND PUBYEAR < 2009 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE,"ar"), Subject "Psychology and education"

This same search chain is repeated for the following descriptors and for the 2010–2020 and 2020–2029 time ranges:

FRIENDSHIP + MORAL EDUCATION

Each of these searches was filtered by language, including articles in Spanish and English

ERIC

(Any field("friendship") AND any field (character education)) AND PUBYEAR > 2007 AND PUBYEAR < 2021-06-01 AND (LIMIT-TO (Evaluated by experts)

This same search chain is repeated for the following descriptors:

FRIENDSHIP (Any field) + MORAL EDUCATION (Any field)

Source: Own elaboration.

Step 4. Review process: Steps and flow chart. For the literature review process, we prepared a manual for coding the studies (title of the publication, objectives, CE theory from which it is devised, dimension of character proposed, definition of friendship and typology, conclusions reached about the friendship–character relationship, methodological design, and population stud-

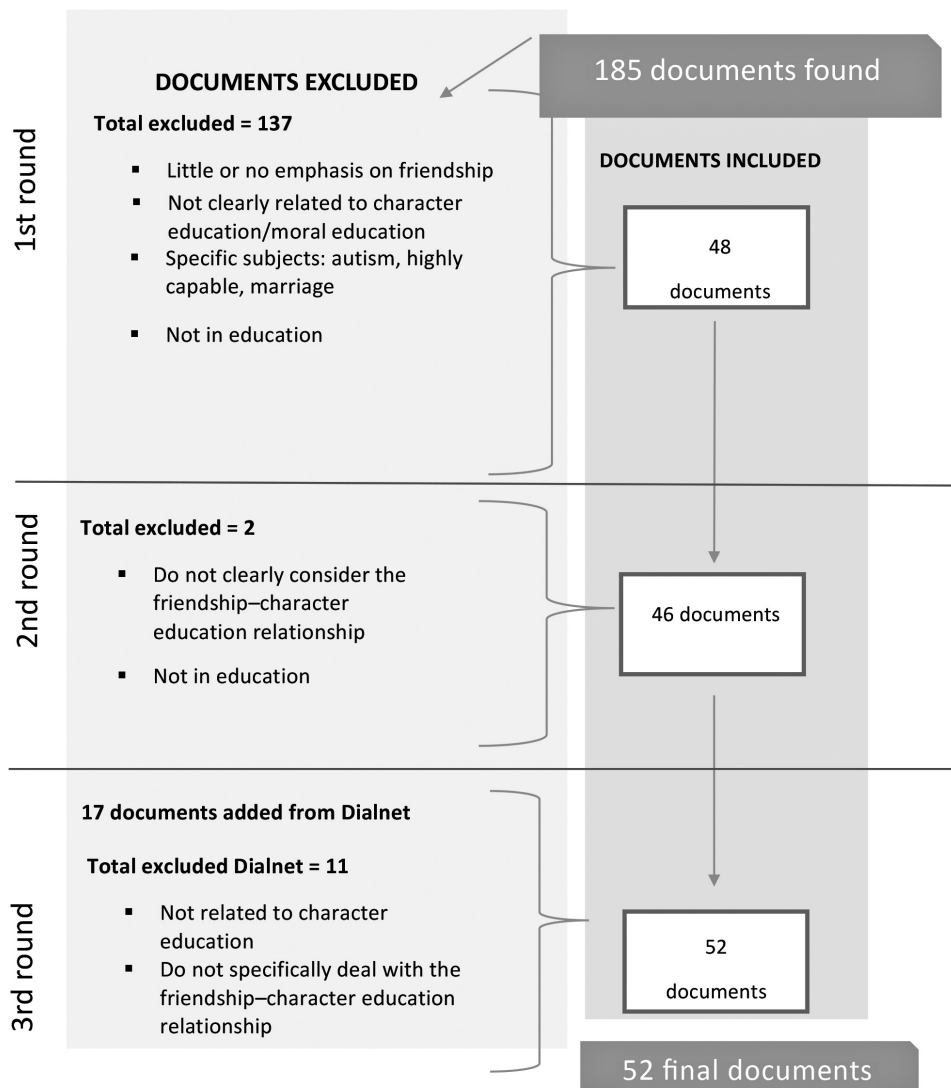
ied), which provided common criteria for their analysis. During the process, special attention was paid to explaining in detail why the studies should or should not be included in the research, and this was reviewed and discussed within the group.

Graph 2 shows the review process and its steps, fulfilling the PRISMA

criteria (Page et al., 2021). From a total of 185 documents found in the first round, which did not include the Dialnet database, 137 were excluded, leaving 48 documents to be read. In the second round, another 2 were excluded, and so

46 texts were reviewed, and, in the third and final round, the relevant documents from Dialnet were added. Of the 17 documents found in this database, 11 were ruled out, and so the final sample comprised 52 documents.

GRAPH 2. Flow chart.



Source: Own elaboration.

Step 5. System for coding and synthesis of results: The 52 documents were

analysed using a coding system comprising: (1) extrinsic variables relating to the

year of publication and the universities from which they originated; (2) methodological variables relating to the research methods and study populations; and (3) substantive variables relating to the conceptualisation of friendship, theoretical frameworks used, and conclusions about the educational potential of friendship.

We performed a quantitative, descriptive analysis of the extrinsic and methodological variables (frequencies and percentages), and analysed the substantive variables following Flick (2018) and Gibbs (2018). The process involved identifying “units of meaning”, that is to say, patterns of ideas or similar themes to group those studies that shared similar meanings, giving a list of emerging categories. Through triangulation between the researchers, these were adjusted through repeated comparisons and reflection throughout the process.

3. Results

The results are presented in three blocks. (1) Following a *general* and *methodological description* of the studies, we considered (2) their *theoretical perspectives* and, consequently (2.1) how they understand character, what dimension of it they consider and the interests from which they propose its cultivation, as well as (2.2) the conceptualisation of friendship used in them. This analysis enables a meta-theory of the question analysed. (3) Thirdly, the *findings* of the research regarding the *friendship-character relationship* are considered, that is to say, the ways in which they report that friendship can contribute to the formation of character. We present

this last point according to emerging categories taken from the analysis.

3.1. General and methodological description of the studies

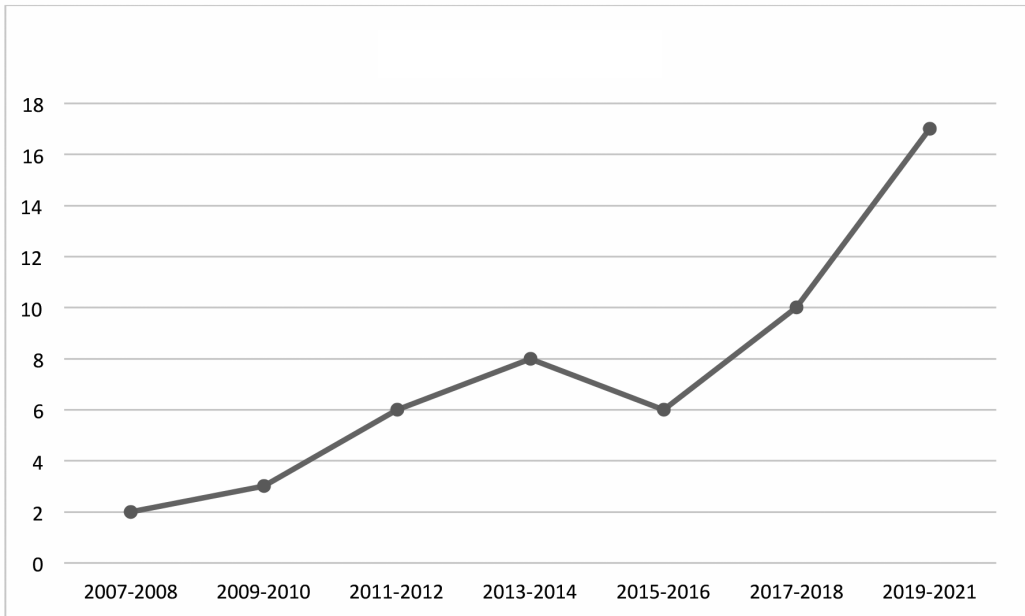
A total of 51.92% of the works are from the 2017-2021 period, with 2020 being the year with the most publications. No works from 2007 met the inclusion criteria and only one from 2008 did (Graph 3).

Universities from the USA (30.776%), UK (21.15%), Turkey (17.31%), and Spain (9.61%) were involved in in the studies. Switzerland (5.77%) and Germany (3.85%) had fewer works. The Netherlands, Sweden, Ireland, Italy, Croatia and, outside Europe, Canada, Australia, India, the Philippines, and Japan contributed one work each (1.92%).

With regards to the methodological designs of the 52 works, 17 are theoretical (3, 4, 10, 21, 23, 25, 26, 27, 30, 31, 35, 37, 38, 39, 44, 51, 52), 14 use quantitative methodologies (1, 2, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 22, 24, 28, 29, 32, 36, 46); another 14, qualitative 5, 6, 7, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 40, 42, 45, 47, 48, 49) and 4 mixed (33, 34, 41, 43). There is one literature review (8) and two intervention proposals (15, 50) (Graph 4).

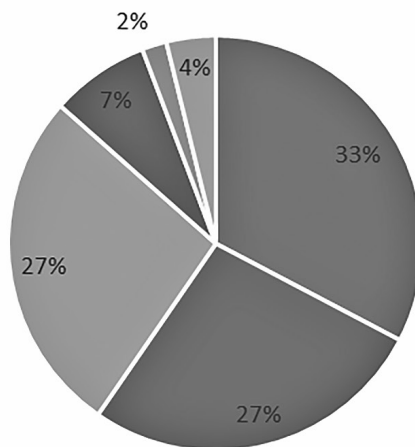
In relation to the populations studied, 17.31% of the studies refer to *early-years* pupils, 30.77% consider the primary stage, 32.69% secondary, and only 5.77% analyse friendship in university students, although 32.69% do not focus on one specific stage. Some works refer to two stages simultaneously (e.g., primary and secondary: 11, 13, 14, 17, 33, 36), with the aim of comparing the effect of friendship in different ages.

GRAPH 3. Years of publication.



Source: Own elaboration.

GRAPH 4. Methodological designs.



- Theoretical
- Quantitative
- Qualitative
- Mixed method
- Bibliographic review
- Intervention proposal

Source: Own elaboration.

3.2. Theoretical perspectives of the studies

Of the works, 50% have a psychological focus, 36.54% have a moral focus, and 13.46% include both perspectives.

Within the *psychological* focus, various theoretical references can be seen: 42.31% (1, 14, 17, 18, 19, 23, 31, 36, 45, 47, 50) start from the theoretical framework of *socio-emotional learning*; 19.23% (2, 6, 9, 12, 43) are based on *positive psychology* when analysing the effect of the possession of certain character strengths on acceptance by peers, number of friendships, and quality of friendships. Works 6, 33, 40, 46 take as their reference point *communities of care* (Noddings, 2010) and 13 is based on *Piaget's* conceptualisation of morality as something that the child learns in everyday interactions with peers. Works 13, 16, 20, 27, 29, 42, 50 relate to *social learning theory*, in which people learn from one another (learning by observation, imitation, and modelling). Study 50 applies this, from the perspective of social education to attitudes towards disability, which “are learned, expressed, and modified in social contexts” (p. 43), so that cultivating friendship among those who are different appears as the highest level of their integration.

Within the *philosophical-moral* focus, present in 36.54% of the studies, a large number of studies explicitly refer to Aristotle (3, 4, 10, 26, 37, 38, 39, 44, 49, 51, 52). The rest (5, 15, 16, 48, 21, 22, 30, 32), albeit from other approaches, also take

an interest in the question of moral good, which entails a normative and not just descriptive scope.

The character dimension that is considered most is the *moral* one (23 works consider it: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 26, 29, 30, 35, 37, 38, 39, 41, 45, 49, 51, 52), although the *civic* aspect is also present in 15 studies that refer to different types of transgressions (bullying — 1, 11, 36, 45, 47, 17, 18; exclusion — 13, 42, 50; lack of academic honesty — 16,41; and intrapersonal — 7). Some take an interest in the *emotional* dimension (2, 9, 14, 33, 34, 36, 43, 46), but only three of them refer to *intellectual* character (4, 9, 10).

A notion of character can be observed in the works that regards it as something that mediates behaviour, formed by a set of features that give people a stable predisposition to act in a given way, and it is understood that these can be cultivated to improve a type of behaviour. Nonetheless, study 7 has a *situationist* vision, in which how people act is determined by the circumstances in which they find themselves. With regard to this vision, the results of study 1 show, in relation to bullying, how character remains across contexts, and that there is an association between traditional bullying and cyberbullying. In other words, people carry their roles as bully/assistant/defender from the real world to the virtual world.

In relation to the conceptualisation of friendship, it is must be underlined

that friendship in itself is the central topic of interest in only 48.08% of the research works (3, 4, 9, 11, 13, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 26, 28, 29, 33, 34, 35, 36, 38, 39, 40, 44, 49, 51, 52), while in the remaining 51.92% it appears in a derived way or emerges as a variable that contributes to certain behaviours. Many studies take its definition for granted, using the term in its everyday or intuitive sense. Most of the works (67.31%) do not differentiate between distinct types of friendship — compared with the 32.69% that do (1, 3, 4, 9, 16, 21, 22, 26, 35, 38, 39, 42, 43, 45, 49, 51, 52) —, although in the wake of their conclusions it can be inferred that there are relevant qualitative differences for their educational purpose.

Two perspectives on friendship can be distinguished: a dominant *instrumentalist* one relating to the psychological focus, in 61.54% of the works, which consider friendship to be a factor that *protects* against certain behaviours and promotes integration or, on the contrary, as a *risk* factor that can lead the individual to lose herself, to feel “*out of character*” (7, p. 133); and a *finalistic* perspective (32.69%), which, beyond the utility that friendship produces (for well-being, non-violence, etc.), understands it as a good in itself, and is more frequent in the ethical focus (3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 16, 21, 26, 33, 35, 38, 39, 44, 46, 49, 51, 52). No article expresses an *aesthetic* comprehension directed to self-discovery and self-recognition of one’s own authenticity through the friend as an *alter ego*, which results in a certain sim-

ilarity of styles, although three articles do mention this (3, 37, 49).

In addition to the articles that follow the Aristotelian perspective of friendship characterised by reciprocal good will (e.g., 3, 4, 49), ones that detail the *six functions* that friendship can fulfil stand out in particular. (9): intimacy, stimulating company, help, partnership of trust, self-validation, and emotional security; and the link of this to five character features (15): “Seeks goodness for themselves, seeks goodness in the other, does a good deed for the other, chooses companions of good character, and helps the other to do the right thing” (15, p. 62). Study 21 mentions three necessary conditions for friendship: “Shared activities, the passions of friendship, and acknowledgement of the fulfilment of the first two conditions, constituting an acknowledgement of and consent to the special relationship” (p. 3).

3.3. The friendship-character relationship: emergent categories

The results from the analysis of this relationship are structured around five emergent categories. Table 1 shows the categories, subcategories, and inductive coding.

1. Character for friendship (9, 12, 19, 25, 32, 37, 39, 46, 49): this includes the works that analyse *the influence of one’s character on friendship relationships*. In other words, ones that show *how having certain character traits is necessary/expedient in order to have (more and better) friendship relations*.

TABLE 1. Inductive coding categories and subcategories.

Categories	Subcategories	Codes
Character for friendship (character→friendship)	Character suitable for making friendships	Acceptance by peers
		Character strengths relevant for friendship
	Quantity of friendships	Number of friends
	Quality of friendships	Friendship functions fulfilled
		Satisfaction with the relationship
	Intimacy of the friendship	
	Depth of the friendship	
Friendship for character (friendship→character)	Nature/essence of the friendship	Purpose of the friendship
		Meaning of the friendship
		Motives of the friendship
	Improving character	Acquisition of virtues
		Perfecting
	Humanisation	
Transgressions and friendship	Bullying	Friendship as a protective factor against victimisation
		Risk factors for bullying linked to friend- ship
	Discrimination on grounds of race/disability	Intergroup friendship as a protective factor
		Character traits that reduce exclusion
	Interpersonal transgressions	Friendship as a motivator of intrapersonal transgressions
Academic dishonesty	Friendship and lack of academic integrity	
Teacher and student perceptions of the influence of friendship on character	Teacher perceptions	The influence of friendship on the well-be- ing of the students
		Friendship for the moral development of students
		The influence of friendship on the charac- ter strengths of the students and teachers
	Student perceptions	Positive valuation
		Relationship with social behaviour
Analysis of programmes	Literature for charac- ter education	Friendship between people
		Identification of character profiles
	Socio-emotional compe- tence through cultiva- tion of friendship	Reduction in emotional and behavioural problems
		Academic Performance
	Homeschooling	Friendships of homeschooled children

Source: Own elaboration.

Study 9 presents how character strengths influence *acceptance* in the peer group, the *quantity* of friends, and the *quality* of friendships (measured in terms of friendship functions fulfilled and satisfaction with the relationship). Study 49 reports what a group of German early-years and primary children most valued in their friends, namely being virtuous, when operationalising the definition of friendship during play: a friend is someone you can “best play with” (p. 354) (does not cheat, is not a bad loser, does not give false promises of play, does not fail to claim potential victories, etc.). So, friendship is at risk when there is a lack of virtue, when “one of the two partners has not (yet) attained a moral plane that would allow for a symmetrical ethical exchange to occur” (pp. 358-359). In other words, “friendship only thrives within an ethical framework” (p. 361), so that friendship is virtue or requires virtue, in correspondence with the Aristotelian explanation of the most perfect sense of it.

2. Friendship for character (3, 4, 10, 21, 22, 23, 26, 27, 33, 34, 35, 38, 43, 44, 48, 51, 52): the 16 works included in this category consider the influence of friendships on improving character and enquire into the *primarily or fundamentally* educational nature of friendship, that is to say, its *de jure* educational character, even though it is *de facto* also associated with other motives. Therefore, its meaning or purpose for the process of development of the person is analysed.

Studies 3 and 4, taking a neo-Aristotelian line, argue that while various classes of

friendship can be distinguished, the most perfect one is the educational type, in other words, that which happens between individuals who, through it, become better, more capable of understanding and acting: the perfect friendship is “knowledge-enhancing, virtue-enhancing, and life-enhancing in general terms” (3, p. 135). Therefore, it is established that its nature or essence lies in this educational capacity, which thus emerges as a criterion for valuing the appropriateness of continuing with certain friendships or ending them.

From different interests, but with the same underlying idea, study 21 considers academic friendship, that is to say, friendship between university teachers, as a source of humanisation in the workplace that makes it possible to connect and not dissociate the personal and the professional, inasmuch as friendship has to do with human flourishing.

3. Transgressions and friendship: this category contains the 15 studies that analyse the influence of friendships on various types of transgressive behaviour. Among these, bullying stands out (1, 11, 17, 18, 36, 45, 47), as does exclusion of people who are different based on race (13, 42) or disability (50). Two studies (16, 41) cover the relationship between friendship-academic dishonesty, and the influence of friendship on interpersonal transgressions (7).

4. Teacher/student perceptions of the influence of friendship (2, 5, 6, 20, 28): Pieces of research that examine teachers’

perceptions of the influence of friendship on different aspects of character are grouped here: specifically, perceptions of student well-being (1), of the moral dimension of character (5), and of some character strengths (love, kindness, and forgiveness) (6). Works 20 and 28 analyse students' perceptions.

5. Analysis of programmes: this includes the works that analyse the effectiveness of programmes, didactic proposals, or educational options that consider friendship.

Works 15, 50, and 30 all turn to literature to improve character. To do so, they identify friendship between people: study 15, through the Able Minds programme in a prison setting, with *The Lord of the Rings*; study 50 offers a literature-based intervention proposal for the inclusion of disabled students.

Study 14 provides the first empirical evaluation of the KooLKids SEL programme applied to 854 Australian children, which, among its content, considers friendship. Study 8 evaluates the socialisation of *homeschooled children*, including their capacity for friendship, to determine whether the different dimensions of character are well cultivated through this educational option.

4. Discussion

The dates of publication of the works display a clear growth in interest in the educational sense of friendship, which is notably concentrated in

English-speaking countries, with the USA and UK leading in number of publications. Turkey is in third place, followed by Spain. This concentration of studies in English-speaking countries does not necessarily reflect a special interest in this question in this geographic area but could be because more is published in these countries. Nevertheless, it has to be underlined that the revival of CE since the 1990s has from centres in the USA, and that the centres with the longest history in this field are in this area, whose model is spreading to and being imitated in other regions.

Regarding the methodologies used, there is no clear preference for quantitative or qualitative methods, but the fact that 32.69% of the works are theoretical does stand out as it reflects an interest in exploring the foundations of friendship as a means of character education. From this effort to lay foundations, we can expect that the number of empirical works will increase in the next few years. The samples used show that secondary school is the stage that attracts the most attention, which is consistent with the special importance of friendship in this developmental stage.

Regarding *theoretical perspectives*, while the psychological perspective is predominant, the distance from the philosophical-moral focus is not relevant, indicating an interest in a humanistic model of learning (Regmi, 2015), as well as in normative questions that provide the foundations and assumptions of the psychological perspective.

The notion of character as mediating in behaviour is in line with the Aristotelian understanding of character as a second nature, which, while able to change, is stable and predisposes people to act in a certain way. Only one study (7) expresses a *situationist* vision that is somewhat sceptical of character, in which people's actions are determined by their different contexts.

The emphasis on the moral dimension of character is perceived in the works is in line with the “moral turn” we have seen in the field of education (Ibáñez-Martín, 2015), which is evident in the explicit commitment to transcultural core values (6; Brooks et al., 2019; Bernal et al., 2015; McGrath, 2015) which, far from being cultivated through indoctrination and mechanical, routine, or acritical habituation (4) as a way of acting according to the values of tradition to perpetuate its structures (Hurtado, 2013), are debated with the learner as necessary character traits to create a desirable society.

Moral character education is ambitious when these values are based on their intrinsic worth, and not just how they benefit co-existence in a liberal society — something that does not happen in many studies, as mentioned below — because it discusses the *ends* for which living is worthwhile and, therefore, it is related to *wisdom* in the Aristotelian sense: it is a *wisdom-centred education* which, as study 10 notes, is “born from love” (p. 96). That is to say, it has love as a principle in both senses of the term: as a material cause and as the final cause, and it *formally* consists of a cultiva-

tion of the inwardness or arrangement of the loves that form the character.

In effect, from the loving guidance and care that teachers provide (material cause), which naturally occurs in friendship and is essential for the success of CE, educational action involves directing the feelings to the love that forms their foundation, which is love of good (formal cause), and for that purpose, as positive psychology notes, all human beings have (efficient cause) inner assets or positive character traits they can build on to develop their potential. This education that aspires to wisdom is loving in the ultimate sense, as a *final* cause, because it is unitive: it sets out to coordinate those who are distinct, contrasting with the division that pride brings. But, like friendship, “it does not involve uniformity of opinions, but ... harmony of hearts that are awake” (Panikkar, 1993, p. 325). In this sense, like friendship and love in any of their forms, we could say that education enraptures: it takes one outside oneself and is manifested as practice of vital openness.

Affection and care are specific components of friendship relationships, in other words, their presence in them is taken for granted (as study 6 notes, friendship is translated into behaviours that evince the character strengths of love and kindness), and so they are an especially fertile terrain for CE, since, as Berkovitz and Bier indicate (2017), people learn more effectively from people with whom they feel requited and emotionally linked. If, for this reason, it is recommended that school should be an extension of the family on the basis of

the school's great capacity for moral influence (2; Berkowitz, 2005), we can with even more reason deduce the character forming potential of friendships, whose closeness to the individual is greater than that of the school.

Despite the attention that the moral dimension of character receives, references to "good" character in many studies have a significant limitation as, rather than referring to strictly moral content, they refer to well-being and the capacity to display functional behaviour in society. For example, study 14 pursues the development of competences that are "essential for becoming a good student, a good citizen, and a good worker" through an SEL programme (14, p. 2). But what supposedly makes the student/citizen/worker "good" is not explained here, that is to say, its content remains hidden. Furthermore, this is not explained but rather it is taken for granted, as is the capacity to function effectively in society, with health and well-being and without violence.

Although even the studies that focus most on the subjective well-being of the individual, like 2, recognise that this is incomplete if objective elements (eudaimonic) relating to the realisation of certain types of acts are not included, the focus on well-being, mental health, and non-violence monopolises the interest of many of the works that link these, instrumentally, with certain effects (improved academic performance, life expectancy, productivity, fewer behavioural problems, etc.).

Study 9 also understands that being a "good" friend involves having certain character strengths, but here "good" does not have a moral sense. Instead, *with regard to others*, it is related to providing them with well-being or satisfaction and, *with regard to oneself* with obtaining results that are desirable or useful in life (being liked/being accepted and having well-being). Therefore, the goodness of friendship seems to be limited to its benefits.

This does not just happen with character that is regarded as good, but also with the notion of friendship used: fewer studies consider the intrinsic value or the good for the self or internal good of friendship in relation to its contribution to the growth of the person, beyond the external goods with which it is associated (3).

This perspective in which friendships start and end following the logic of the *homo economicus* appears explicitly in study 11, which presents an understanding of it based on cost-benefit — "participants choose their friendship ties and behaviours based on calculations of individual costs and benefits" (p. 2097) —, and also in 16, when referring to friends for academic benefits, or in 50 and 13, when referring to their benefits for the integration of people who are different. However, this utilitarian approach contradicts the results that these same studies achieve, which emphasise the humanising and hence inherently valuable, sense of friendship, revealing the limitation of the theoretical framework that is explicitly assumed.

According to study 10, the educational potential of friendship occurs on the basis of *action* in which the friends join one another. That is to say, the root of friendship is in something one *does*, not something one *has* (feelings, company, etc.), and so, in a fundamental sense, it is necessary for friends to seek the same. As a result, friendship links people in action, and its *dynamic* character, which other research underlines (3, 11), can be discerned here.

Regarding their typology, only a third of the works make it explicit that *not all friendships are equal*, although, in many that do not do so, a qualitative distinction is apparent as they refer to a variety of functions that friends fulfil, which in some cases refer to concrete benefits that can be obtained from them. For example, study 1 links the qualities of a friend to her capacity to prevent victimisation; 13 and 50 relate certain features of friendship to reduced exclusion.

With regards to the emerging categories, we can highlight the following:

Regarding the first category relating to the contribution of “character for friendship”, some studies (e.g. 9, 49) investigate what the ideal friend is like, what is valued in her, and what is the relationship of certain character traits with the satisfaction of friendship and the functions that the friend fulfils (to determine how particular character traits “serve” better than others to fulfil certain characteristic functions of the friend — entertaining company, intimacy, trust, etc.).

Nonetheless, the centre of interest of these works is not “the role that friends and friendships might play in the development and co-development of character strengths” (9, p. 35), that is to say, how one’s own character is improved *with* friends and *thanks* to them, in other words, *between* them, even though it is precisely here that the CE that the friendship is capable of (“friendship for character”) comes into play.

Therefore, the studies in the first category only give clues about what the *conditions for friendship* are, in other words, what character traits it is useful to have to be accepted and to have a large number of quality friends, but there are no indications about how *in* it — in the dynamic relationship of friends — character develops mutually in the “zone of proximal development” (3, p. 136) in which each person can grow precisely thanks to the company and action of the other, that is to say, through the scaffolding that this provides.

While studies 3, 4, 8, 9, 49 refer to this, none of them pause to analyse *how this happens and what strategies can be adopted to favour personal growth among friends*, just as — from the other side of the coin — only studies 8 and 6 make suggestions on how to promote the relationship while individuals develop personally and so that they do it. In Buber’s words (2018), how the “sphere of between” is cultivated once it has been generated. Kristjánsson, in study 4, gives clues to the central component for it being *dialogue*, and the title of study 49 also indicates this (“Often the lack of conversation has

ended a friendship”). In other words, what happens in relations of friendship that have the effect of helping their subjects improve their character is a *process of discernment, of accompanied intellectual enquiry* through which friends “become partners in the ongoing task of talking their own half-formed evaluative commitments into a full-fledged and determinate stance in the world” (4, p. 345), having adjusted their perspectives from the contributions of the other to make them more suitable, truer. In this dialogic process, the individual takes the step from mere habit or acritical routine of virtue to full virtue, that is, reasoned, when judging the behaviour in which the person has been initiated in her upbringing (4). This distancing of oneself from the education one has received occurs naturally in the context of friendship, when leaving the house and encountering ways of living that differ from one’s own, that is, in the relationship with those who are *others*, but who, owing to friendship, become others-like-me, coming to recognise one another mutually.

From this framework, it is necessary to enquire into how this dialogue between friends can be promoted and accompanied to develop their character and, therefore, what educational strategies can be used with this aim. For example, studies 13 and 50, when confirming that certain friendships — intergroup ones — contribute to improving moral sensitivity, they ask *how this happens, what specific dynamics in the interpersonal relationship favour it* and they express the need for more research to explore these mechanisms.

Like study 4, studies 8 and 6 offer some indications about how the appropriate conditions for establishing positive relations of friendship are created. They note that the quality/depth of the friendship is promoted when a context of support, love, security, and care is offered that is characterised by personalisation, as happens in the family. Regarding homeschooled children, study 8 notes that they have better social competence (“they apparently have higher quality relationships both with close friends and with parents and other adults” (pp. 8-9) and that they scored “significantly higher than public school children on feelings of closeness to best friends” (p. 7) because their parents adapt experiences of socialisation to their individual personalities and needs in a way that is not possible in conventional schools, and these conditions of personalisation and support favour their capacity to establish quality friendships. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the strengths of love and kindness in teachers (6) so that when they model them, they create a school culture of care and relations of secure attachment that make it possible for children also to develop these strengths and, consequently, friendship.

Friendship is presented differently in the articles grouped under the heading of “friendship and transgressions”. On the one hand, when considering bullying or discrimination, friendship appears as a *factor of protection* against victimisation. On the other, “feeling unpopular and being friendless appeared as risk factors for (cyber)victimisation” (1, p. 347). Furthermore, friendships have a positive influence

on character when they display certain characteristics: when they are intergroup (13, 50), moral character is improved (a higher sense of the perception of the badness of exclusion is achieved as is a more notable use of moral reasoning) as is their socio-cognitive dimension (reduction in prejudice, greater personal security, and more social satisfaction) (50); exclusion on grounds of disability is reduced when they display certain character features (capacity and will to defend the other, reciprocity in a relationship of trust, and popularity). In contrast, other articles present friendship as a motive that can contribute to transgression (intrapersonal — 7 —, or academically dishonest behaviour — 16 —).

In any case, these studies start from a common idea: that *friends have a powerful capacity for influence*, which intensifies in early adolescence. This occurs in both a positive and a negative sense: friends have a potential to transform the capacity to act as they socialise and promote certain actions, and so they play a fundamental role in the development of the character.

Nonetheless, *this influence is modulated* by: (a) certain moral characteristics of the person (the greater the moral disconnection, the greater the influence of friendships); (b) age (it is more marked in early adolescence than in childhood, given the external pressure to conform to the norms of the group, based on the need for acceptance and belonging — 1, 11); and (c) the qualities of the friend (50, 13, 26).

Therefore, the benefits that friendship can provide to CE *do not always occur*: age

matters and, evidently, so do the traits of the friend, which it is necessary to learn to discriminate. As Aristotle observes, the humanising character of friendship depends on the type of friends one has, and so people must be taught to cultivate friendships with this in mind, especially in adolescence, something that is missing in the moral training of secondary-school students, which is currently limited to preventing risk behaviour.

Friends' capacity for influence explains how, over time, people *become accustomed* to each other (11, 13), as they mutually encourage one another towards certain forms of behaviour, thinking, and feeling, which come to be reinforced. Number 11 corroborates this hypothesis — from the mutual assimilation of friends in its one-year longitudinal study — and this happens more among young adolescents (aged 11-14) than children (aged 9-10).

Not only do we come to resemble our friends over time, but we also initially *choose those who display a certain "similarity in values, cognitive style and social skills"* (13, p. 64). That is to say, *people associate with people who are like them* and then mutually reinforce one another. In the case of bullying, "*young adolescents were more likely to form new friendships with peers who were similar in bullying*" (11, p. 2099). And, regarding racist attitudes, "*excluding students associate with other excluding students*" (13, p. 55). This agrees with the Aristotelian vision (ca. 350 B.C.E./1985), in which friendship develops between people who are equal in virtue.

Taking this into account, intervention programmes should not just be directed at the individual, but should consider *friendship networks, groups, and their dynamics* (13, 11) to examine what behaviours are socialised, are approved by the group and become normative, and affect the norms of the group. Study 16 refers to the importance of the culture (*ethos*) of the communities and the need to modify it as one of the keys to educating character, in line with the proposal of Berkowitz and Bier (2005, p.10) of a “*caring community*” or “*ethical learning community*” (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 382).

In the fourth category, regarding teachers’ and students’ perceptions of the importance of friendship, there are discrepancies between the articles. On the one hand, study 10 and the teachers from study 5 see it as a value at risk that must be revitalised when faced with an atmosphere of mistrust of the other that generates violence as a defence system, as well as faced with the individualism that, according to the authors, is fostered from the family.

However, study 2 underlines how neither teachers nor families placed high value on the importance of friendship for the well-being of the children, faced with the actual perspective of them. This disparity between the perspective of children and that of adults, and between the teachers themselves in different studies, shows that the educational capacity of peers has been underestimated.

The analysis of the programmes grouped in the fifth category allow us to conclude, firstly, that the representation of relations of friendship through narrations has a great inspiring potential (15, 50), even in a context such as prison. Furthermore, the identification of “character profiles” helps to detect the thought mechanisms used for making good/bad decisions.

And secondly, it is not easy to promote friendship, as no difference was found in prosocial behaviour detected following the implementation of the KooLKids SEL programme, despite it having a module focussed on friendship (14). The clues that study 8 provides point to the need to personalise the experiences of socialisation to adapt them to individual needs from a context of support and care.

5. Conclusions

The literature review carried out here shows that, of the 52 documents found that analyse the relationship between friendship and character relationship, only 48.08% focus on friendship as the central topic, contrasting with the other articles, which consider it in a derivative way. This lack of articles is especially striking in the context of educational research, given the recognised impact of friendship on adolescence in particular, but also the considerable value attributed to it in any stage of development.

The psychological-instrumental focus on friendship is predominant in

the documents analysed. However, this is not far from the philosophical-moral perspective that appears in many works based around the Aristotelian framework. The results achieved show that, while the influence of friendship on character is recognised under certain conditions, to which special attention is paid in relation to different types of transgressions, the specific mechanisms

through which this influence operates and, in consequence, the educational dynamics that would have to be generated to multiply their positive effects are not known. Therefore, this SR identifies a future area for research into educational strategies aimed at strengthening relationships of friendship since these are a chance, an opportunity — like a gift — to become a better person.

ANNEX 1. List of the 52 primary documents.

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