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Perspectives and attitudes of teachers on character education in schools in the Community of Madrid

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ABSTRACT
Character Education (CE) has gained attention as a response to ethical and social challenges in education, aiming to give moral development equal importance to academic achievement. While international models showcase CE's capacity to cultivate virtues such as honesty and resilience, in Spain it remains largely limited to civic education. This study explores Spanish teachers' perspectives on CE, focusing on its perceived relevance, key virtues, and implementation strategies. A total of 569 teachers were surveyed, with 477 from the Community of Madrid forming a representative sample. Using a mixed-methods approach, data was collected through an online questionnaire combining quantitative and qualitative items. Results show that 75.7% of teachers view CE as essential, citing its positive influence on academic outcomes and school coexistence. However, they also identify structural barriers, particularly a lack of teacher training. A key takeaway is the strong consensus on the need for a holistic approach to CE, one that embeds it into the curriculum and school culture and encourages collaboration with families. This aligns with international research that emphasizes whole-school strategies and shared responsibility in fostering character development.

Character Education (CE), a form of moral education rooted in the normative ethical tradition of virtue ethics, has gained increasing global relevance in recent years, driven by growing concerns about the apparent erosion of fundamental human values in contemporary society. These concerns are closely linked to the rise of individualistic tendencies, social fragmentation, and the prioritization of academic and technical performance over ethical and moral development in schools (Kristjánsson, 2023). In this context, education systems are often guided by a human capital logic, focused narrowly on productivity and measurable outcomes, thereby overlooking the holistic development of the person and their capacity to engage responsibly and meaningfully with others (Zayas et al., 2019).

In contrast, CE promotes a view of education that emphasizes the cultivation of virtues—enduring moral qualities such as honesty, justice, and compassion—as essential to personal growth and responsible citizenship (Kristjánsson, 2015). It seeks to provide a stable and coherent framework for moral decision-making, grounded in the development of character over time. This stands in opposition to moral relativism, the belief that moral judgments are purely subjective or culturally contingent, which can lead to ethical ambiguity and weaken shared standards of right and wrong. By fostering virtues as stable dispositions of thought, feeling, and action, CE aims to equip individuals with the internal resources needed to navigate complex moral landscapes with integrity.

In this context, when we speak of character, we generally refer to the set of personal traits that shape an individual, encompassing their emotional dimensions as well as their intellectual capacities, which influence their motivation and guide their behavior. These traits are not immutable; rather, they develop and transform over time through experiences, interactions, and the cultural environment. This constant process of evolution constitutes an essential personal dimension, described as the 'imprint of the heart' of each individual (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022).

Broadly speaking, three historically developed approaches to ethics are identified (Harrison, 2015): the deontological approach, focused on rules and norms; the consequentialist approach, which evaluates morality based on the outcomes of actions, as exemplified by the effective altruism movement; and virtue ethics, which emphasizes the development of the person as a moral agent, qualifying the flourishing life in a specific way. This last approach, rooted in ancient Greek thought, forms a central pillar of CE's theoretical framework and remains relevant in contemporary educational contexts, particularly in light of rapid technological and social transformations (Benninga et al., 2003). CE, which emanates from virtue ethics, represents the embodiment of this ethical perspective within the educational domain.

In this sense, CE represents a shift toward a virtue-based ethics that transcends both the mere fulfillment of rules and norms and the calculation of consequences in various situations. Instead, it focuses on the human 'being' and their continuous process of development. As Viktor Frankl (1995) stated,

> History gave us the opportunity to know humanity perhaps better than any other generation. Who, in reality, is man? He is the being who decides what he is. He is the being who invented the gas chambers, but he is also the being who walked into them with a firm step, murmuring a prayer (pp. 78–79).

This approach, grounded in the neo-Aristotelian perspective of habit as the pathway to virtue, the good life, and the common good, not only prepares students to face the challenges of modern life with integrity and discernment but also shapes them as ethical and responsible individuals and citizens (Kristjánsson, 2023).

Within this framework, our actions are not limited to achieving external goods or changing external states of affairs; rather, as Melina (2004) points out, 'they provide us with our true identity. The choices made by a person can be worthy or unworthy of them; in their free actions, the author of the act puts their own identity at stake' (p. 63). What is essential, therefore, is not merely knowing what virtue is, but living in accordance with it. A virtuous life involves seeking, internalizing, and assimilating values that guide people toward encountering others, giving and receiving, and sharing. Virtuous individuals not only perform good or valuable deeds but also, in doing so, become better themselves, developing their personal qualities and building their moral character (Fernández-Espinosa & López, 2022). Thus, CE is understood as a progressive effort toward personal excellence, which goes beyond mere adherence to ethical standards and connects the development of virtues to the core of what it means to be human.

This approach is developed through educational activities that help children and young people cultivate virtues such as justice, compassion, honesty, fortitude, and humility, which are essential for thinking, feeling, and acting ethically and for building meaningful relationships (Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, 2022). CE does not impose norms or mold personalities but rather fosters the holistic development of students, enhancing moral perception, ethical deliberation, intrinsic motivation, and responsible action (Kristjánsson, 2023). This continuous effort forms ethical and responsible individuals, prepares them for modern challenges, and creates school environments that promote self-realization (Fowers et al., 2024).

Character Education (CE) aspires to a deeper goal than the mere development of isolated virtues: promoting a meaningful life for each student, aligned with the common good. This concept, known as flourishing, has become a central objective of education, understood as the process of living fully and the holistic development of the individual in their personal and social dimensions (Kristjánsson, 2019). Inspired by the Aristotelian idea of eudaimonia, flourishing is not limited to a momentary state of subjective well-being but constitutes a life goal encompassing objective dimensions of good living, such as virtue, commitment to the common good, and the integration of internal capacities with external relationships (Fowers et al., 2024).

Through this focus on flourishing, CE provides students with a framework of virtues and skills that enables them to contribute to society ethically and meaningfully. Moreover, this approach positions itself as an alternative to the traditional educational model that exclusively prioritizes academic performance, directing education toward holistic human development in all its dimensions (Kristjánsson, 2023). By promoting personal excellence and the practice of virtues, CE seeks to help individuals reach their full potential, flourish fully, and contribute to the development of a more ethical and humane society.

In countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, leaders in promoting virtues and human flourishing through education (Fuentes, 2018), successful CE models have been implemented.

Notably, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (JCCV) in the United Kingdom fosters virtues such as solidarity, creativity, courage, and hope to enhance both students' academic performance and their positive behavior. These virtues enrich their human dimension and prepare them to contribute to social well-being (Fowers et al., 2024; Kristjánsson, 2023).

This study aims to explore and understand the perspectives and attitudes of teachers in the Community of Madrid regarding character education. Specifically, it investigates which virtues teachers consider most important, how they perceive the role and relevance of CE in schools, and through what means they believe it should be implemented. Drawing on a mixed-methods design, the study analyzes survey responses from 477 teachers and identifies both a strong professional commitment to character education and several structural challenges, including limited training, unclear institutional support, and tensions with family involvement. The findings also reveal that Spanish teachers view CE as essential to student flourishing and academic success, but perceive it as insufficiently embedded in policy and practice. The paper proceeds as follows: after a conceptual and legislative overview of CE, we review relevant literature on the role of teachers in character education, outline the methodology of the study, present the main results from both quantitative and qualitative analyses, and conclude with a comparative discussion and recommendations for future policy and teacher training.

The evolution of educational legislation on ethical and values education in Spain

Compared to other countries, Spain lags behind in implementing CE programs, revealing the need to revitalize this area (Fuentes, 2018). While other contexts combine academic training with personal and social virtues, Spain faces structural and cultural challenges in integrating this approach. CE has had a limited presence, influenced by a formalist and cognitive focus rooted in Kohlberg's theory (1981), which prioritizes moral judgment over the practice of virtues and has been criticized for failing to foster authentic moral behaviors. Consequently, values education in Spain has focused on democratic coexistence, sidelining the holistic moral development of students.

Regarding educational legislation, Spain has undergone significant evolution in its treatment of moral and values education, from the Organic Law regulating the Statute of Educational Centers (LOECE) in 1980 to the Organic Law for the Modification of the Organic Law of Education (LOMLOE) in 2020. Broadly, these laws have reflected societal changes that have impacted the orientation of moral education in schools. On the one hand, the LOECE introduced basic notions of moral and civic education, establishing 'moral and civic awareness' as a component of comprehensive education. However, the subsequent Organic Law regulating the Right to Education (LODE) reduced references to morality without specifying its practical application in education. Later, the General Organic Law of the Education System (LOGSE) of 1990 revisited the moral dimension, integrating it into the curriculum with an approach that aimed to combine academic knowledge with ethical appreciation. However, its constructivist orientation led to a possible moral relativism (Fuentes, 2018).

From 2006 onward, with the Organic Law of Education (LOE), citizenship education was consolidated, focusing on democratic values and civic coexistence. This approach, however, created confusion between values education and CE, limiting moral formation to aspects of socialization and avoiding a more comprehensive focus on the character development of students. The LOMCE in 2013 further accentuated this trend, moving away from explicit references to morality and focusing on civic competencies such as coexistence and respect, while neglecting a deeper, structural ethical development of virtues (Fuentes & Fernández, 2024).

This legislative evolution has generated significant confusion between moral education and values education, resulting in the implementation of programs that tend to focus on civic values, such as respect and tolerance, but exclude the concept of virtue and character as central to personal development. Thus, the emphasis on 'values' rather than 'virtues' has shaped an educational system that promotes adherence to certain principles of coexistence without achieving the development of robust moral character. This framework has influenced teachers' perceptions and their ability to implement CE programs, restricting their educational role to transmitting pragmatic values rather than working toward the holistic character development of students (Fuentes, 2018; Fuentes & Fernández-Espinosa, 2024).

This legislative analysis and the resulting confusion underscore the need for a clear framework that distinguishes between values education and CE, paving the way for programs that promote ethical and virtuous formation within the Spanish educational system (Fernández-Espinosa & López, 2022).

Teachers and character education

The development of character is fundamental in teacher education, not only because teachers serve as moral exemplars for their students (Joris & Sanderse, 2024; López & Fernández, 2024), but also because but also because their daily conduct significantly shapes the moral climate of the school. The idea that teachers are sources of moral influence is well-grounded in virtue ethics (Carr, 2007; Kristjánsson, 2019) and is supported by extensive empirical literature demonstrating that students frequently emulate the attitudes, behaviors, and character traits of their teachers (Bergem, 1990; Colnerud, 1997; Sanderse, 2013. Teachers' ethical agency is not simply about rule-following but about embodying and transmitting virtues such as fairness, care, and integrity in everyday interactions (Campbell, 2008). This view is echoed in international studies: for example, Lickona (1991) and Tirri (2011) have shown that students regard their teachers as key ethical role models, whether or not schools have explicit character education programs. Yet many teachers report feeling underprepared for this dimension of their work. Research indicates that although educators are often aware of their moral responsibilities, they receive little formal preparation in teacher education programs for navigating ethical dilemmas or cultivating their own practical wisdom (Maxwell & Schwimmer, 2016; Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2011). Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring that character education is not only 'taught' but also 'caught' through the example teachers set in their relationships, classroom practices, and institutional leadership.

In this context, Spanish teachers face challenges that hinder the effective implementation of CE programs. Increasing administrative demands and mental health issues, exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic, have led to a higher incidence of stress and burnout among educators. This affects both their well-being and their ability to act as virtuous role models for students (Granville-Chapman et al., 2024).

For teachers to effectively foster character development in students, they need specific training in CE, particularly in the virtue ethics approach. However, in Spain, teacher training in this area is limited, resulting in a lack of confidence among educators to teach CE in a robust and effective manner. This lack of preparation has also weakened the moral authority of teachers, reducing their role as reference figures in the ethical development of students (Torres, 2016). The erosion of this moral authority has been exacerbated by sociocultural changes and increasing distrust in educational institutions, making it challenging for teachers to be perceived as models of virtue.

In this context, it is crucial to understand teachers' attitudes toward CE in Spain, as they play a fundamental role in its implementation. Although the importance of CE is widely acknowledged, little has been explored about how teachers perceive and value character development in students. This study aims to fill that gap by seeking to understand not only teachers' perceptions but also the potential influence of CE on students' well-being and personal flourishing.

Comparative research provides valuable context for interpreting Spanish teachers' views on character education. In the United Kingdom, Arthur et al. (2018) found that over 80% of teachers viewed character education as central to their role, a figure closely aligned with the 75.7% in our Spanish sample. Austrian data similarly show that 94.6% of teachers prioritize character over academic results, although they report significant structural barriers to its implementation (Kropfreiter et al., 2024). Preliminary findings from the European TEPACE project, involving over 2,600 teachers across seven countries, confirm a widespread conviction in the importance of character education, though its perceived value relative to academic achievement and preferred virtues varies across national contexts (Bernhard et al., 2025). Beyond Europe, there is also a growing concern about developing virtues in young people, and character education has become a priority. In China, Lee et al. (2021) found that secondary school teachers perceived character education as essential but noted that their effectiveness in implementing it could be improved, and they reported challenges such as curriculum overload and academic pressure on students. In turn, Chung (2023) reports that school leaders in Hong Kong regard character education as a key component of students' holistic development, while expressing concerns that an emphasis on academic performance may overshadow this goal. Similarly, in Indonesia, Muhtar and Dallyono (2020)

report that teachers view character education as fundamental for preparing responsible citizens, emphasising that it should be embedded transversally across the education system, and highlight both the difficulty of balancing it with academic demands and the crucial role of family collaboration in the success of character education programmes. While institutional support and cultural expectations differ, these international data point to a shared professional commitment to character education, alongside common challenges such as insufficient training, unclear policies, and tensions with performance-driven agendas.

Focusing on character in schools does not mean 'correcting' individuals but helping them grow in self-determination, cultivating virtues such as solidarity, justice, compassion, fortitude, humility, and hope. These qualities are essential for personal and collective well-being and are crucial for equipping students to face the current and future challenges of society, thereby promoting their full development or flourishing.

The objective of this study is to explore and understand teachers' perspectives and attitudes regarding the character development of students by evaluating the virtues they consider most relevant, their opinions on the importance of CE, and the means through which they believe CE should be delivered.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 569 teachers from Spain. For the analysis, a representative sample of 477 teachers from the Community of Madrid was used. Of these, 309 (69.6%) were women, 112 (25.2%) men, one person (0.2%) indicated another unspecified option, and 22 (4.6%) preferred not to respond. Regarding age, 5 participants (1%) were between 18 and 24 years old, 68 (14.3%) between 25 and 34, 123 (25.8%) between 35 and 44, 145 (30.4%) between 45 and 54, 78 (16.4%) between 55 and 64, 6 (1.3%) were 65 years or older, and 19 (4%) preferred not to respond. These and other characteristics of the sample are detailed in Table 1.

Regarding missing values, given that the total percentage of missing values is low (4.3%) and the sample size is sufficient for conducting the analyses, no imputation of missing values was performed.

In the following Figure 1, the percentage of teachers who teach each subject is presented.

Instruments

The questionnaire used in this study was developed within the framework of a broader project involving 12 European countries and based on the JCCV questionnaire (2018). Administered through the Qualtrics platform, the questionnaire consisted of 11 quantitative questions addressing which virtues teachers considered most important, the importance they assigned to CE compared to academic achievement, and how CE should be delivered. At the end of the questionnaire, an open-ended question was included to explore in greater depth the teachers' perspectives and explanations regarding CE in schools. Additionally, the questionnaire included sociodemographic questions about gender, age, years of teaching experience, type of institution, educational stage, and subjects taught.

Procedure

A mixed-methods design was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The study was approved by the ethics committee. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling technique was used. The questionnaire was distributed through schools partnered with the university and via the Madrid Regional School Council. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to beginning the questionnaire.

For the quantitative data analysis, the SPSS statistical software (version 29) was used. Descriptive analyses included frequency and percentage calculations, with graphical representations for these data. For the qualitative analysis, Atlas.ti software (version 24.2.0) was employed to conduct an inductive content analysis, which yielded the following categories: importance of CE, relevant values in CE, alignment of

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample.

	n (%)
Gender	
Women	309 (69.6%)
Men	112 (25.2%)
Another unspecified option	1 (0.2%)
I prefer not to answer	22 (0.5%)
Total	**444**
Missing	*33 (6.9%)*
Age	
Between 18 and 24 years old	5 (1%)
Between 25 and 34 years old	68 (14.3%)
Between 35 and 44 years old	123 (25.8%)
Between 45 and 54 years old	145 (30.4%)
Between 55 and 64 years old	78 (16.4%)
65 and older	6 (1.3%)
I prefer not to answer	19 (4%)
Total	**444**
Missing	*33 (6.9%)*
Type of school where you teach	
Public schools	55 (11.5%)
Private schools	159 (33.3%)
Charter schools	227 (47.6%)
Other types of schools	3 (0.6%)
Total	**444**
Missing	*33 (6.9%)*
Years of teaching experience	
Between 0 and 3 years	50 (10.5%)
Between 4 and 10 years	127 (26.6%)
Between 11 and 20 years	126 (26.4%)
Between 21 and 30 years	91 (19.1%)
More than 30 years	39 (8.2%)
I prefer not to answer	11 (2.3%)
Total	**444**
Missing	*33 (6.9%)*
Educational stage where you teach	
Early Childhood Education	63 (14.2%)
Primary Education	129 (29.1%)
Compulsory Secondary Education, High School or Basic Vocational Training	279 (62.8%)
Total	**444**
Missing	*33 (6.9%)*
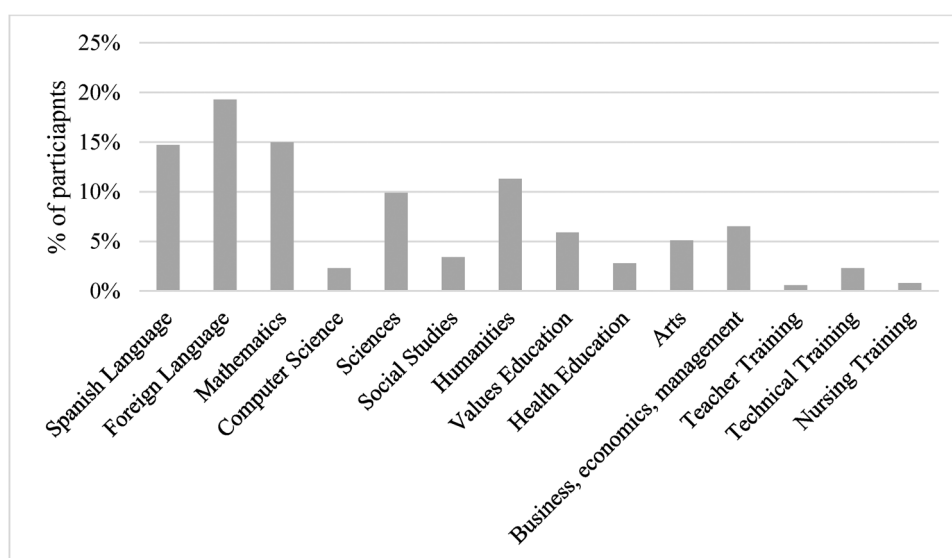
Figure 1. Percentage of teachers by subject taught.

CE, methods for implementing CE, and structural challenges to CE. All qualitative analyses were subjected to a triangulation process among the three researchers conducting the study to enhance validity and reliability.

Results

Importance of character education in schools

Teachers' responses unanimously highlighted the importance of CE in the school context. In fact, 75.7% of the surveyed teachers strongly agreed with the statement that CE in schools is very important as you can see in Figure 2.

School vs. family: differing perspectives on responsibility

The survey results reveal a certain degree of discrepancy among teachers regarding the role of CE in schools versus the family. Some believe that character education is primarily the responsibility of the family and that schools should only intervene to reinforce it or address issues of coexistence in exceptional cases. For these teachers, character and values should be instilled at home, while schools should focus on curriculum-based learning. This perspective is partially explained by the limitations they face in addressing CE due to family influence, which, according to their comments, reduces the impact of their interventions: *'This type of learning is limited by family education, where teachers can do something, but their influence is minimal'.*

Regarding the family context, some teachers warn of the potential for conflict if there is no alignment between the personal and family values of students and those of the educational institution. Additionally, they highlight the workload caused by an overwhelming curriculum and excessive bureaucracy. As one teacher commented: *'Don't burden teachers even more… Some are burned out from all the fronts they have to manage. Is character education a priority? Yes, it is. But we need to carefully evaluate all the priorities educators are being asked to address'.* This reinforces the stance of a minority who believe schools should limit their role to academic responsibilities and maintaining a healthy environment for coexistence, leaving the primary responsibility for character education to the family.

CE as fundamental to holistic development

On the other hand, most teachers emphasize the high importance of CE as fundamental to the holistic development of students, noting that it contributes to their personal and emotional growth as well as their academic and social performance. As one teacher affirmed: *'I am convinced that character education is the key to people achieving their full potential and happiness, regardless of their circumstances'.* According to these teachers, CE is an essential tool that prepares students to face the challenges of daily life and
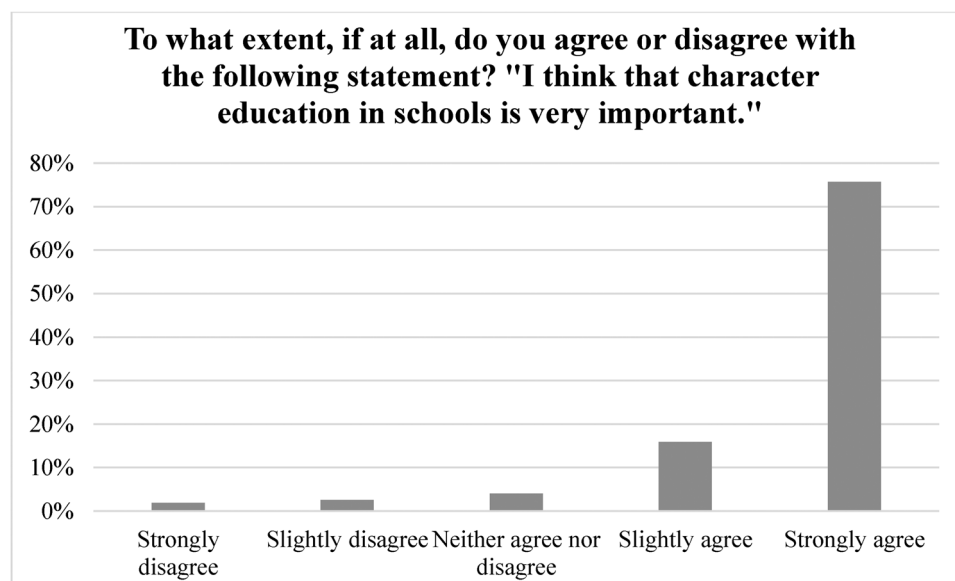

Figure 2. Percentage of agreement with the statement 'I think that CE in schools is very important'.

the workplace. They also observe that, in professional settings, attitudes and emotional skills are often valued more than technical competencies. This is supported by the statement of a vocational training teacher: *'Throughout my years of experience in vocational education, I can assure you that for job placement, employers always prioritize attitude over technical skills'.*

Moreover, educating for character helps shape responsible citizens committed to the common good, capable of making ethical decisions in both personal and professional contexts.

Thus, according to the teachers, CE not only opens doors at the professional and social levels but also ensures that students become well-rounded, balanced individuals capable of living healthily both in society and with themselves. For this reason, 89.3% of teachers believe it is more important for students to develop good character than to achieve high exam scores as shown in Figure 3. This is also reflected in some statements like this of one teacher who considers CE a *sine qua non* condition for achieving good academic performance: *'For me, it's essential that my students know how to make good decisions, have good friendships, and be honest, hardworking, and respectful. And this can only be achieved through CE. Thanks to all of this, they will become disciplined, organized, and achieve good academic results'.*

Shared responsibility between school and family

Most teachers believe that CE should be a shared effort between the family and the school, emphasizing that it is impossible to adequately address it without the active participation of families. Many respondents point out that, although schools can reinforce and develop character, the initial learning of virtues and values must begin at home. In this regard, they see families as key players in this task and stress that CE cannot fall solely on the school: *'CE in schools is very important, but it will be ineffective if it does not start at home. The school can only collaborate with the family in CE. And the effort invested will only be effective if we work together'.*

They also warn of the gap between the primary goals of schools and families, with families often prioritizing academic achievement over character development. This disconnect complicates CE, especially when the values promoted at school are not reinforced at home. Therefore, teachers consider it essential to establish coordinated communication between both parties and to design a joint plan for CE that includes training and information for parents. Additionally, they suggest that families could benefit from specific programs and resources, just as teachers require training in this area.

CE as a cross-cutting element in education

In the classroom, teachers emphasize that CE is a key cross-cutting element across all subjects. There is clear consensus on the importance of role modeling, as teachers believe that their daily actions and
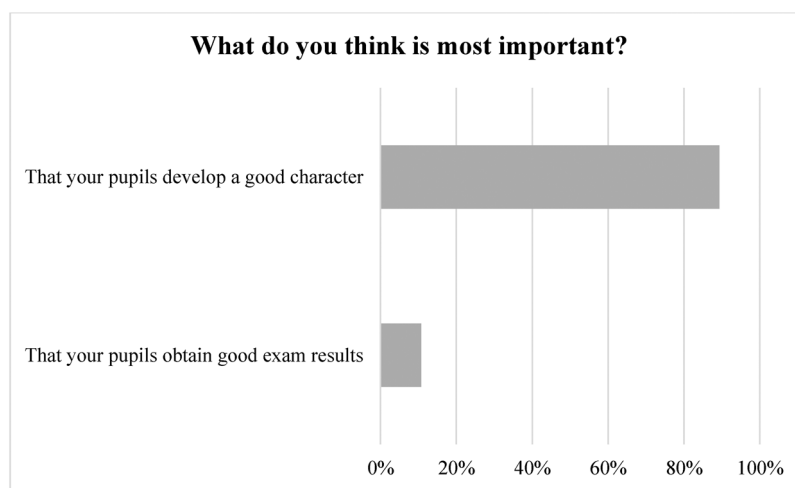

Figure 3. Percentage of teachers who consider developing good character in students more important than achieving high exam scores.

behaviors are an essential pedagogical tool. Students learn not only from what is explicitly taught but also from the example they observe in their teachers' attitudes, actions, and decisions. Authenticity, consistency, empathy, and integrity are seen as essential traits in this behavior. As one teacher noted: *'The teacher's daily example and their way of addressing problems is the right way to educate character, correcting attitudes, giving advice, but above all leading by daily example through their behavior'.*

Many teachers highlight the daily opportunities the school environment provides to educate for CE, especially by supporting students in managing their emotions and building resilience in the face of personal challenges. As one teacher commented: *'I believe that the daily life of a school offers many opportunities to educate the character of both students and teachers. The first step is to educate the character of teachers so that, through their example, students do the same. As a teacher, I frequently encounter students who do not want to work because they are in a bad emotional state, perhaps because they performed poorly on an exam, had a bad night's sleep, or had an argument with their parents or friends. These situations are ideal for CE'.*

Regarding the cross-cutting nature of CE, 64.5% of teachers believe that it should be taught through all subjects in the curriculum, while 57.1% think it should also be integrated into the ethos of the school culture as shown in Figure 4.

Need for training and institutional support

To achieve this, many teachers call for more training in CE, as 48.8% report having received no training in this area (see Figure 5). They believe that more robust training would enable them to transmit values and virtues more effectively to students. However, some remain skeptical about the effectiveness of such training, instead suggesting entry exams for initial teacher education that assess the character of prospective teachers.

Although teachers acknowledge the importance of CE, many observe that its cross-cutting nature contributes to it being neglected and undervalued in most institutions. It often fails to receive the necessary attention either in schools or within families, particularly in higher educational stages, where it tends to be overshadowed by academic performance and curriculum demands as students advance through their education.

Linking CE to academic and personal success

Despite this, many teachers emphasize the connection between academic performance and character development, arguing that the virtues and skills acquired through CE equip students to achieve their
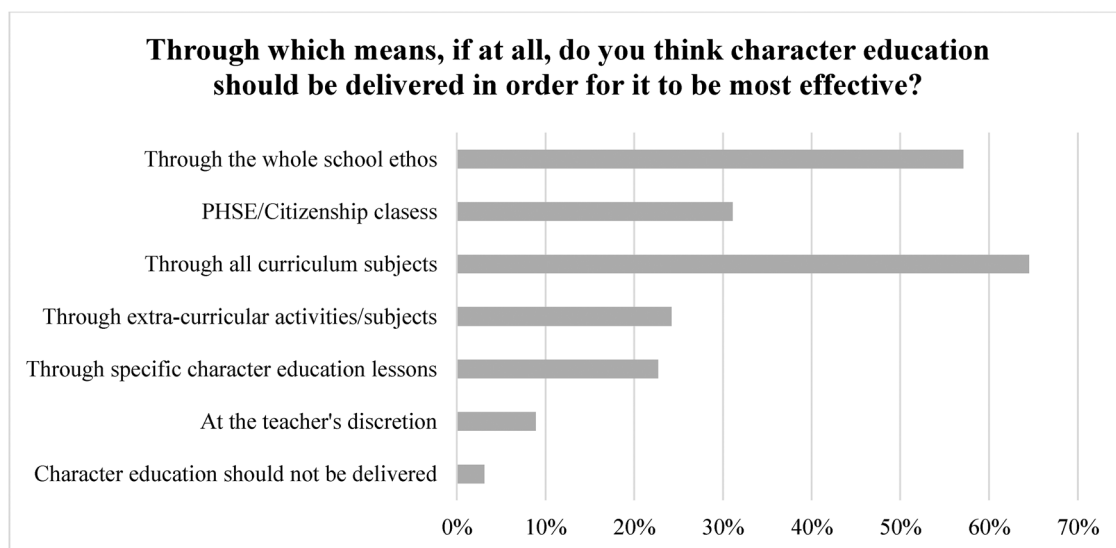
Through which means, if at all, do you think character education should be delivered in order for it to be most effective?

Figure 4. The percentage of methods through which teachers think CE should be delivered to be most effective.
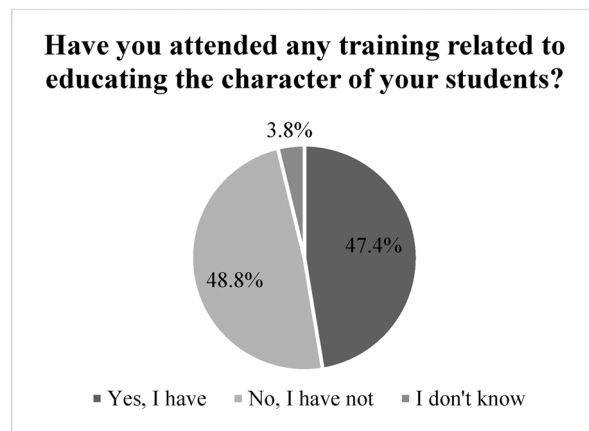
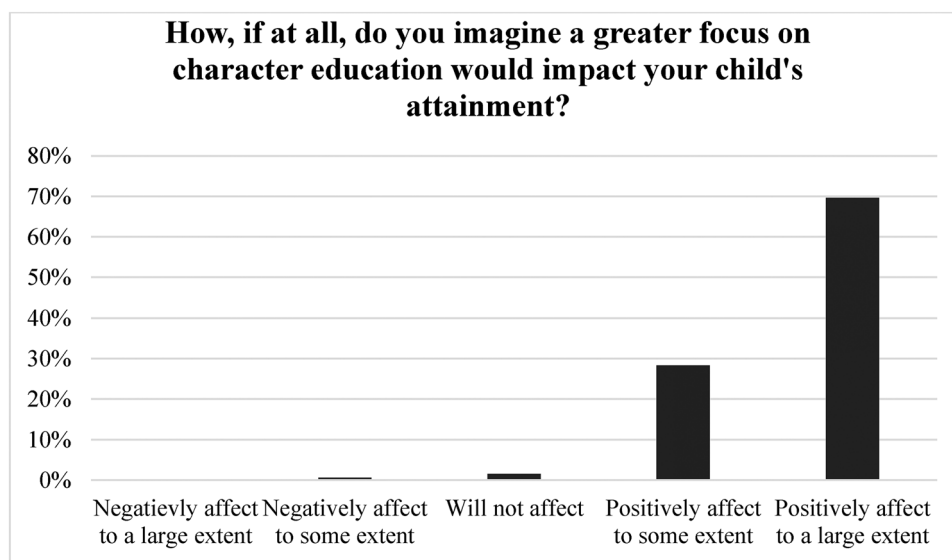**Figure 5.** Percentage of teachers who have attended CE training.

Figure 6. Percentage of teachers who think that greater focus on CE would positively impact academic performance.

curricular goals. As shown in Figure 6, a total of 69.6% of teachers believe that greater attention to CE would positively impact academic performance. Some even suggest that associating CE with academic performance could increase its relevance both within schools and in society. However, they caution against using the importance of character as an excuse to mask academic failure, insisting that both aspects must be addressed complementarily to achieve true holistic education.

Key virtues for character development

Regarding the character virtues that teachers consider most important, they identify honesty (47.2%), resilience (46.1%), good judgment (45.3%), and civility (40.9%) as key virtues to cultivate in their students (Figure 7). Additionally, their responses highlight honesty, patience, respect, empathy, and resilience as fundamental to CE in the school context, recognizing them as pillars that not only promote academic success but also personal and social development.

Teachers particularly emphasize the importance of a culture of effort and discipline, which they believe help students face adversity with strength and optimism, fostering a persevering attitude in the face of challenges. Along these lines, they also stress the need for students to learn how to manage frustration and accept defeat. As one teacher stated: *'Character is forged through a culture of effort, respect, and empathy. Setting limits, demanding the fulfillment of obligations, valuing proper conduct, and understanding the*
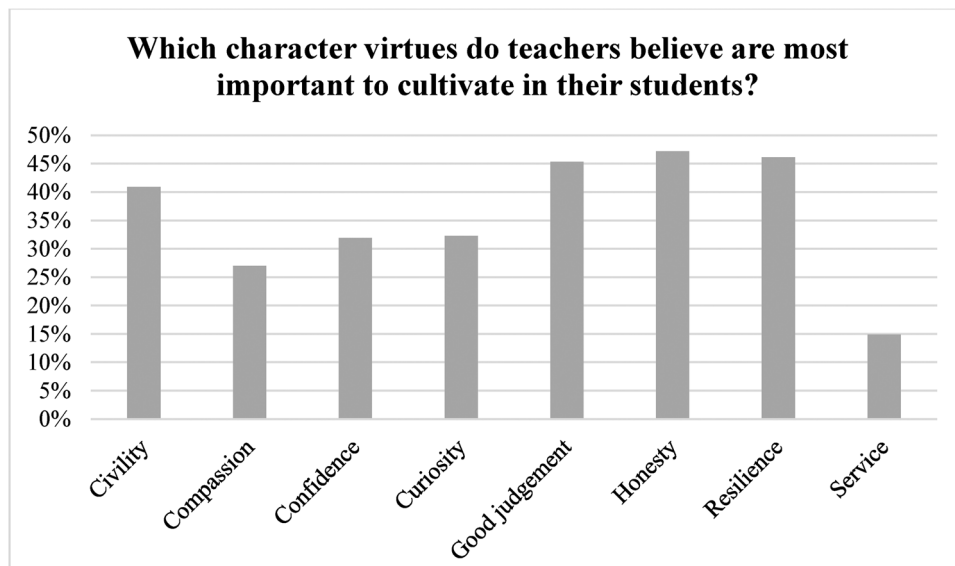
Figure 7. The percentage of virtues teachers consider most important to cultivate in students.

worth of a person as a social being increase self-esteem, critical thinking, and happiness. In today's society, it is essential to reclaim the true meaning of discipline, motivation, and rights'.

Additional considerations for CE

Other aspects mentioned to a lesser extent as essential include the ability to make good decisions, intra- and interpersonal emotional management, and the development of self-esteem; according to teachers, these are crucial for shaping confident and balanced individuals. Additionally, teachers advocate for an education that integrates critical thinking and active participation in democratic coexistence, preparing students to become responsible and engaged citizens.

Discussion

A purely technical view of education has sidelined a more holistic approach, leading in some cases to poor academic outcomes, as reflected in recent global PISA reports (OECD, 2023). In response to this reality, the OECD itself advocates for a shift toward education that prioritizes human flourishing, an objective that includes Character Education (CE) (Kristjánsson, 2023).

The central purpose of CE is the holistic formation of the individual, focusing on the flourishing of individuals and their ability to act with integrity in society (Arthur et al., 2016). In addition to pursuing these goals, the results of this study confirm that implementing CE in schools has an indirect positive impact on academic performance. A total of 89.3% of teachers consider character development more important than academic outcomes, and 69.6% assert that CE positively influences academic achievement. This relationship is supported by Jeynes (2019), who demonstrates how CE is associated with improved academic outcomes from kindergarten through the first year of university. According to this analysis, CE not only fosters virtues such as love, integrity, compassion, and self-discipline but also significantly enhances academic performance.

Studies such as that by Benninga et al. (2003) further corroborate this connection. In their analysis of CE programs in elementary schools, they found that these schools not only exhibited better academic indicators during the implementation year but that this positive effect extended into the following two years. Over a four-year period, schools with robust CE programs achieved higher scores on California's Academic Performance Index (API) and the Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT9). They identified three key CE-related factors contributing to these results: the ability of schools to ensure a clean and safe physical environment, the modeling and promotion of strong CE by parents and teachers, and opportunities for students to make meaningful contributions to their schools and communities.

Currently, one of the greatest challenges in school coexistence is bullying or school violence (Tognetta et al., 2016). Bullying, defined as the use of power to harm others verbally, physically, or psychologically (Mutiara, 2023), poses a serious risk to victims, with consequences such as depression or suicide (Azúa et al., 2020). In this context, the results of the present study highlight civility as one of the most important virtues to cultivate in schools. CE, when framed within the educational domain, enables the holistic development of students by fostering values and virtues (Fernández-Espinosa & López, 2022). Promoting civility and compassion can help create a climate of respect, empathy, and cooperation in classrooms, positioning CE as a tool to build more compassionate and collaborative schools free of violence.

Another key finding is the consensus among teachers regarding the importance of CE as a foundation for the holistic formation of students. The virtues most highlighted by teachers include, in order of importance, honesty, resilience, good judgment, and civility. They also emphasize the importance of values such as discipline, effort, and perseverance, all within a safe environment that supports students' social and personal development beyond meeting curriculum requirements.

However, the results also reflect a widespread perception that CE does not receive the necessary attention, despite its positive impact on students. Teachers point to its limited presence in current educational legislation, emphasizing the need to integrate it more firmly into the educational system.

Currently, schools in the Community of Madrid, as well as in Spain, include the subject *Education for Citizenship,* which addresses civic values and constitutional education. However, based on the CE framework and the results of this research, teachers believe it is important for schools to address not only civic values but also ethical principles and human virtues.

Most teachers believe that CE should be delivered across all curriculum subjects or transversally through the school culture. In this sense, teachers—key actors in educational practice—highlight the need for a paradigm shift where CE is integrated into the entire ethos of the school culture.

This paradigm shift represents a significant challenge for education in Spain, requiring support from public policies. Internationally, there are CE models implemented through public policies, such as in the United Kingdom, where CE is included in the educational inspection system, and schools are considered high quality for personal development only if they provide evidence of CE implementation.

These findings resonate with those reported in other international contexts. In the United Kingdom, where character education has been integrated into national policy and school inspections through OFSTED's emphasis on personal development, teachers report both a strong commitment to CE and clearer institutional support (Arthur et al., 2018). In contrast, Spanish teachers, while equally valuing CE, express frustration over the absence of structural frameworks, limited training, and policy ambiguity (Fuentes, 2018; Fuentes & Fernández-Espinosa, 2024). Recent data from Austria also reveal that although 94.6% of secondary school teachers consider character more important than academic performance, implementation is hindered by curricular overload and insufficient institutional backing (Kropfreiter et al., 2024). At the European level, preliminary results from the TEPACE study (Bernhard et al., 2025) show that while support for CE is widespread among teachers, national contexts differ considerably in terms of virtue priorities, perceived relevance, and available resources. In the United States, character education is typically promoted through local or school-led initiatives rather than national mandates, resulting in variable practices and limited scalability (Jeynes, 2019). In the Asian continent, for their part, a high importance is also attached to character education, both by teachers and at a more structural and institutional level, but significant obstacles to its development are also noted, such as academic pressure on students, curriculum overload, and the difficulty of achieving effective collaboration with families in this regard (Chung, 2023; Lee et al., 2021; Muhtar & Dallyono, 2020). These comparisons underscore that although professional commitment to character education is strong across countries, the effectiveness of its implementation is deeply shaped by policy, training systems, and broader cultural factors.

In Spain, the implementation of CE faces systemic and structural barriers that teachers identify as urgent to address. Among these are excessive bureaucratic demands (González-Valero et al., 2021), which limit access to programs and resources, and the lack of a clear legislative framework to support teachers in CE initiatives. This gap creates an ambiguous situation: while the importance of holistic, value-based education is recognized, teachers lack the tools and authority to implement it effectively.

Furthermore, the progressive loss of teachers' authority, both institutionally and socially, exacerbates this issue. In many cases, teachers are perceived merely as facilitators of learning (Fernández-Espinosa,

2022), which limits their ability to influence the character development and virtues of students. This devaluation of the teaching role makes it even more challenging to incorporate CE as a central educational practice.

CE does not imply indoctrination or a paternalistic approach in which teachers impose a moral agenda on students without their consent or active participation (Kristjánsson et al., 2025). In this sense, education is not a neutral act; every educational action has inherent intentionality. True education cannot be reduced to the passive transmission of information or the paternalistic guidance of students' development. Instead, it must be oriented toward an ethical and intentional approach where students are active agents in their own formation process (López & Fernández, 2022).

Therefore, it is essential to adopt legislative measures that not only regulate and promote CE but also include training programs for teachers and school leadership teams. These initiatives should aim to strengthen their role as agents of educational transformation and ensure that CE can be fully integrated into schools as a tool for the holistic development of students (Kristjánsson, 2023; Collados Torres et al., 2024).

The results also reveal discrepancies regarding who is responsible for character education. Some teachers believe that CE primarily falls under the responsibility of families, while the majority view it as a joint educational task. In this regard, some teachers call for greater and better communication between educators and families, as well as collaborative actions, arguing that disagreement between families and schools on how to approach CE hinders students' development in this area. This finding aligns with the observations of Lohmann et al. (2018), Epstein (2008), and Epstein and Hollifield (1996), who emphasize that frequent interaction and communication between schools and families increase the likelihood that students will receive consistent messages reinforcing the importance of school, effort, creative thinking, and mutual support.

The main idea of exemplarism, according to Zagzebski (2013), lies in selecting moral examples through individuals identified as exceptional because of the admiration they inspire in others. In this sense, an important aspect highlighted by teachers in implementing CE is leading by example through their actions and words, as this appears to be the most effective and transversal way to educate character. This underscores the power of modeling. Exemplary teacher leadership involves teachers serving as role models for their students and inspiring them through their way of being (López et al. 2024; Martínez & Fuentes, 2024). Thus, it is necessary not only to address the needs of students but also those of teachers and their leadership training to ensure the effective implementation of CE.

The results of this study indicate that 47.4% of teachers have received training in CE, highlighting the need to continue working on the development and implementation of teacher leadership programs within the CE framework in schools.

The study's limitations include the representativeness of the sample and the generalizability of the results, which cannot be extrapolated to all of Spain. Although the survey includes the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022) definition of CE, teachers experience some difficulty identifying it due to their lack of training in the subject. Future research should ensure sufficient sample representativeness at the national level and obtain institutional support to carry out this work.

Conclusion

This study has explored the perspectives and attitudes of teachers in the Community of Madrid regarding CE. It serves as a precedent for the development of similar studies in other autonomous communities in Spain. Implementing CE requires commitment from government bodies and political leaders to offer holistic education to the educational community in our country.

In this direction, public policies need to be developed to transform schools into 'character schools' (UK Department for Education, 2019), where the aim of education is not solely the acquisition of intellectual concepts and technical skills but also the challenging yet essential task of teaching students to 'be human'.

The implementation of CE represents a challenge that involves not only the educational community but society as a whole: teachers, families, school leadership teams, and political leaders, all of whom must commit to shaping society of tomorrow. The well-being and flourishing of our students—and teachers—must be the central axis around which education is articulated.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Verónica Fernández Espinosa**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Paloma Redondo Corcobado**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft; **Marta Velázquez Gil**: Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethical approval

The research received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Universidad Francisco de Vitoria under protocol number 39/24.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [VF], upon reasonable request.

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