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Differences Between Teachers' and Parents' Perspectives on Character Education in Schools in the Community of Madrid

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ABSTRACT: This study analyses the differences and similarities between the perspectives of teachers and parents in the Community of Madrid regarding Character Education (CE) in schools. Using a mixed-methods design combining quantitative questionnaires and an open-ended question, data were collected from 444 teachers and 1020 parents. The results reveal a highly positive evaluation of CE by both groups, who agree on its importance for students' holistic development and its positive influence on academic performance. However, differences emerged regarding the attribution of responsibility, the prioritisation of virtues, and the perceived importance of CE compared to academic achievement. Additionally, few parents expressed concerns about potential ideological bias in the implementation of CE. The study concludes by highlighting the need for an educational alliance between teachers and parents grounded in shared language and co-responsibility, and the importance of revaluing relational virtues such as compassion to foster more inclusive and just educational communities.

Keywords: character education, virtues, parents, school, educational alliance, human flourishing

1. INTRODUCTION

In its most recent report, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development OECD, 2024) emphasizes that education must equip students with human capabilities that enable them to flourish personally while contributing to societal well-being, economic development, and environmental sustainability. In this context, the OECD presents human flourishing (eudaimonia) as the overarching aim of education, understood both as an individual and relational pursuit. Their *Learning Compass 2030* framework highlights that students should develop the

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knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed to shape a shared future built on well-being, sustainability, and agency (OECD, 2019). This broad and pragmatic conception draws on diverse traditions and models, without committing to a single philosophical account (Kristjánsson, 2019, 2023).

This view marks a paradigm shift from a narrow, technical, skills-based model to a more holistic understanding of human development and education. In line with the OECD Learning Compass 2030 (2019), well-being is affirmed as a key educational aim, while flourishing is presented as an even more ambitious and meaningful goal. Whereas well-being implies balance and satisfaction, flourishing entails the full development of one's potential through a virtuous and purposeful life.

Character Education (CE) emerges as a promising framework aligned with this vision. CE expands the purpose of education beyond academic achievement to include the ethical and moral formation of students. Arthur *et al.* (2017) define character as 'a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct' (p. 178), and character education as 'a sub-set of moral education, focused on the cultivation of positive character traits known as virtues' (p. 20). From this perspective, CE contributes to flourishing by fostering virtues such as honesty, justice, responsibility, and compassion. As Curren *et al.* (2024) emphasize, flourishing must be both objectively grounded and subjectively meaningful – enjoyed and valued by the student – and CE is essential in this process. By emphasizing virtue acquisition, CE supports not only present well-being but also future flourishing, in a way that respects individual autonomy while also highlighting the social nature of both virtues and human flourishing. Importantly, this vision of education is not opposed to academic success; on the contrary, research suggests that character education enhances academic outcomes (Benninga *et al.*, 2006; Jeynes, 2019). When embedded in the curriculum, CE can provide a foundation for morally aware and engaged citizenship and can transform how schools operate as spaces for personal and collective development (Department for Education, 2023).

According to Kristjánsson and VanderWeele (2024), the concept of flourishing is increasingly recognised as a central aim of holistic education. Dimensions such as character virtues, a sense of purpose, and personal agency are not only core to flourishing, but also impact on deliberate pedagogical development within schools. However, realizing character education and holistic education requires intentional and collaborative effort. Horizontal and deliberative cooperation between schools and families is essential for cultivating shared virtues, particularly in those areas where a clear moral consensus exists. Such collaboration can help to avoid ideological imposition and instead promotes critical reflection without indoctrination. Yet, to date there is a lack of existing empirical research that sheds light on how teachers and families understand character education and, even more so, how this understanding compares.

This study addresses the gap in existing research by examining how teachers and families in the Community of Madrid perceive character education (CE) within schools. It explores points of convergence and divergence in their views regarding the significance of character education, its connection to academic achievement, the virtues that warrant prioritization, and the respective responsibilities of educational institutions and families. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative survey data with qualitative responses to offer both breadth and depth of insight.

The paper is organized as follows: it first situates the inquiry within international and Spanish scholarship on family – school collaboration in CE; next, it details the research design and methodology; subsequently, it presents key findings from both teachers and families; and finally, it discusses policy and practice implications for character education.

By investigating an underexplored area, this work aims to inform educational policy and practice. The findings highlight domains of consensus that may reinforce collaboration between teachers and families, as well as divergences that should be addressed to prevent misunderstanding, mistrust, and ideological polarization.

International Perspectives on Family – School Collaboration in Character Education

Education is an intrinsically moral endeavour, shaped by intentionality and values throughout the learning process (López and Fernández, 2023). While families have traditionally been viewed as the primary agents of moral formation, schools also play a crucial role in shaping students' ethical understanding and behaviour (Fernández and López, 2022). However, there remains considerable ambiguity over which party bears ultimate responsibility for a child's moral development. Some families delegate this task to schools, while many teachers consider it a parental duty (Arthur *et al.*, 2017).

This lack of clarity creates a kind of 'no man's land' (Brooks, 2023), where either neither families nor schools take full responsibility for the moral development of young people or, at least, there is not clear and sufficient interplay regarding the formation of children. In such conditions, students may grow up in morally fragmented environments, lacking guidance and support. CE offers a structured and stable framework for cultivating moral reasoning, ethical behaviour, and virtue-based decision-making (Fernández and López, 2022; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). However, its successful implementation requires a strong educational alliance between families and schools—one that is often missing from educational governance frameworks in Spain (López Rupérez and García García, 2023), despite extensive evidence of the benefits of family – school cooperation for both academic and socio-emotional outcomes (Castro *et al.*, 2015; Levin, 2010; Schleicher, 2018).

Family – school collaboration has been widely recognised, above all in UK and USA, as a key enabler of holistic education and character development. Foundational literature (Arthur, 2003; Berkowitz, 2011; Lickona, 1992) consistently affirms that moral education is most effective when parents and educators work together intentionally. Nevertheless, empirical studies conducted some time ago now reveal that this collaboration is often limited by structural, cultural, and communicative barriers (Berkowitz and Bier 2005; Hornby and Lafaele 2011; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). More recent data from the UK highlight both the potential and the challenges of this partnership (Harrison *et al.*, 2023).

Other international studies, such as that by Chen *et al.* (2023) in China, note that family – school collaboration fosters more effective, holistic learning environments. In Ireland, Hannon and O’Donnell (2022) evidence that teachers require more training in socio-emotional and character education to better engage, and engage with, families. In Tanzania, Mngarah (2017) observes a shared sense of moral responsibility between parents and educators, yet also states that practical cooperation remains limited. In Switzerland, Paccaud *et al.* (2021) find high parental satisfaction but minimal participation in decision-making – especially among families with children who have special educational needs. Meanwhile, Valavi *et al.* (2022) report in Iran that morally involved parents encourage ethical development at home and in the community. By contrast, Arifin *et al.* (2024) found no significant link between family moral education and adolescent personality in Indonesia, suggesting that the impact of family-based moral formation is culturally contingent. In this context, factors such as the strong role of religious institutions, community norms, and schooling structures may mediate adolescent personality development, highlighting the need to interpret findings within their specific cultural settings.

In Spain, which provides the context for the present study, previous research on teachers’ perspectives and attitudes toward character education found that teachers regard it as an essential component of holistic education (Fernández-Espinosa *et al.*, 2025). However, few studies have examined character or moral education in relation to family – school collaboration in Spain. CE is not considered a national priority, though there is evidence that schools are interested in students’ character and character formation (Fernández-Espinosa *et al.*, 2025; Fuentes, 2018). Yet, ensuring holistic education requires effective cooperation between teachers and families (Berkowitz and Bier, 2007, 2017; Harrison *et al.*, 2023); Egidio’s (2020) review identifies such collaboration as a key factor in both academic and socio-emotional development at the primary and secondary levels.

De Soria and Naval (2023) argue that the legal framework in Spain limits families’ participation in educational decision-making, although engagement tends to increase when parents feel they share responsibility

with schools for their children's moral education. Similarly, although not focusing explicitly on CE, a study by Aierbe-Barandiaran *et al.* (2023) suggests that family involvement is strongly influenced by teachers' attitudes and school culture, factors that are highly relevant to the successful implementation of character education.

There remains a significant gap in the literature regarding how families and teachers in Spain understand their roles in CE. To date, no study has systematically examined how each group perceives its responsibilities, the importance of CE within the school curriculum, or the virtues that should be prioritised – leaving unanswered questions that are essential for designing coherent and structured collaboration strategies. Taken together, the international literature underscores the promise – and fragility – of family – school collaboration for CE, yet Spain remains under-studied. Filling this gap is valuable nationally, because Spain's mixed public – charter – private system and decentralised governance create coordination challenges in precisely the areas where collaboration is most needed (cf. Egidio, 2020; López Rupérez *et al.*, 2020). It is also valuable internationally. Evidence from Spain provides a comparative test case for plural, policy-driven systems across Europe, offering transferable insights into where stakeholder perceptions converge, where they diverge, and how these patterns shape effective CE design and implementation (see also Harrison *et al.*, 2023).

Informed by the existing literature, this study is grounded in virtue ethics, a tradition that views human flourishing as inseparable from the cultivation of stable moral dispositions. Virtues are not isolated behaviors, but enduring traits developed through education, habit, and critical reflection (Kristjánsson, 2013). According to the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022), virtues include moral, civic, intellectual, and performance virtues, which are integrated through practical wisdom (*phronesis*), the capacity to deliberate well about what is good in each situation.

From this perspective, character formation is not accidental but the result of all educational practices, explicit and implicit (Spaemann, 2003). As articulated by Fernández and López (2022), educational neutrality is a myth: every pedagogical act shapes character, for better or worse. Therefore, virtue education must be intentional, systematic, and aligned with the ultimate aims of education: personal growth and the common good (Arthur *et al.*, 2017; Kotsonis, 2022).

Informed by this ethical framework, the present study investigated how teachers and families in the Community of Madrid perceive the role of CE in schools. It aimed to identify points of convergence and divergence in how both groups (i.e., teachers and families) understand the development of character and virtues in young people.

To guide this inquiry, the following research questions were formulated:

- (1) How do teachers and families in the Community of Madrid perceive the role and importance of character education in schools?
- (2) How do teachers and families perceive the relative importance attributed to character education and academic achievement by each other and by their children/students?
- (3) How do teachers and families perceive their respective responsibilities for character education in relation to one another and to the school curriculum?
- (4) To what extent do teachers' and families' perspectives converge or diverge regarding the virtues that should be prioritised in character education?

2. METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample was obtained through non-probabilistic convenience sampling from the Community of Madrid.¹ For the teachers, 309 (69.6%) were women,² 112 (25.2%) were men, 1 (0.2%) identified as another unspecified option and 22 (5%) preferred not to answer. Regarding age, 5 (1%) were aged between 18 and 24, 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 or older, and 19 (4%) preferred not to answer. Regarding the type of school, 55 (10.5%) teachers were from public schools, 159 (33.3%) were from private schools, 227 (47.6%) were from charter schools and 3 (0.6%) were from other types of schools. Charter schools are models of schools that combine characteristics of public and private schools, and where education is subsidized by the state.

For the family respondents, 722 (66.4%) were women, 272 (25%) were men, 1 (0.01%) selected another unspecified option, and 21 (1.9%) preferred not to respond. With regard to age, 218 (20.1%) were between 18 and 24, 368 (33.9%) between 25 and 34, 208 (19.1%) between 35 and 44, 201 (18.5%) between 45 and 54, and 25 (2.3%) between 55 and 64.

In terms of missing data, there were 33 cases with missing values in the teacher sample and 67 cases in the family sample. As the sample size was sufficient to carry out the analyses, it was decided not to impute the missing data. All these characteristics, among others, are shown in [Table 1](#).

Instruments

As part of the European Teachers' and parents' perspectives on Character Education in Europe (TEPACE) project, which involves 12 participating countries and aims to analyse teachers' and families' perspectives and attitudes

Table 1. Characteristics of the teacher and family samples

	n (%)
Teachers	
Gender	
Women	309 (69.6%)
Men	112 (25.2%)
Another unspecified option	1 (0.2%)
I prefer not to answer	22 (5%)
<i>Missing</i>	33 (6.9%)
Total	477
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%)
<i>Missing</i>	33 (6.9%)
Total	477
Type of school	
Public schools	55 (11.5%)
Private schools	159 (33.3%)
Charter schools	227 (47.6%)
Other types of schools	3 (0.6%)
<i>Missing</i>	33 (6.9%)
Total	477
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%)
<i>Missing</i>	33 (6.9%)
Total	477
Educational stage	
Early Childhood Education	63 (14.2%)
Primary Education	129 (29.1%)
Compulsory Secondary Education, High School or Basic Vocational Training	279 (62.8%)
<i>Missing</i>	33 (6.9%)
Total	477
Families	
Gender	
Women	722 (66.4%)
Men	272 (25%)
Another unspecified option	1 (0.1%)

(Continued)

TABLE 1. (Continued)

I prefer not to answer	n (%)
<i>Missing</i>	21 (1.9%)
Total	71 (6.5%)
Age	1087
Between 18 and 24 years old	218 (20.1%)
Between 25 and 34 years old	368 (33.9%)
Between 35 and 44 years old	208 (19.1%)
Between 45 and 54 years old	201 (18.5%)
Between 55 and 64 years old	25 (2.3%)
<i>Missing</i>	67 (6.2%)
Total	1087
Marital status	
Single mother/father	272 (25%)
Married	722 (66.4%)
Widowed	1 (0.1%)
Divorced or separated	21 (1.9%)
<i>Missing</i>	71 (6.5%)
Total	1087
Highest level of education completed	
Basic Education	8 (0.7%)
Secondary Education	20 (1.8%)
Basic Vocational Training	16 (1.5%)
Higher Vocational Training	75 (6.9%)
Bachelor's Degree or equivalent	224 (20.6%)
Master's Degree or equivalent	584 (53.7%)
Doctoral or equivalent	93 (8.6%)
<i>Missing</i>	67 (6.2%)
Total	1087
Do you believe in any religion?	
Yes	799 (73.5%)
No	221 (20.3%)
<i>Missing</i>	67 (6.2%)
Total	1087

towards CE, a questionnaire was adapted based on the studies by Harrison *et al.* (2022) and the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2018), with prior permission obtained. Some items were modified to suit the specific interests of the research and to ensure the instrument's applicability across the participating countries.

The questionnaire consisted of 11 quantitative questions addressed separately to teachers and families. These questions explored participants' perceptions of the importance of CE in schools, the potential impact of its implementation on academic performance, the virtues considered most relevant

to cultivate, and the means through which CE should be delivered. To assess virtue priorities, respondents were also asked to select and rank the three most important virtues for children to develop from a list of eight (civility, compassion, confidence, curiosity, good judgement, honesty, resilience, and service), each accompanied by a brief definition.

To gain a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives, an open-ended question was included, inviting respondents to elaborate freely on their views: *'Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your thoughts on the subject of character education in educational institutions?'* This allowed for richer and more nuanced insights beyond the structured items. The questionnaire also incorporated a series of sociodemographic questions, including age and gender, among others.

Procedure

This study used a single survey instrument that generated both quantitative and qualitative data. Ethical approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of the university where one of the authors works. The questionnaire was distributed through the Regional School Council of the Community of Madrid and via schools affiliated with the same university. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling method was used, and all participants signed an informed consent form prior to completing the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

For the quantitative analysis, SPSS (version 29) was used. Frequency and percentage analyses were conducted, along with graphical representations of the data. For the qualitative data analysis, Atlas.ti (version 24.2.0) was employed. A content analysis was conducted using an inductive approach, with the categories coded based on those identified in the participants' responses. The initial inductive codes were then consolidated into four overarching themes, which correspond to the thematic structure used in the Results section. The analytical procedure followed the guidelines proposed by Taylor and Bogdan (1987).

3. RESULTS

The analysis of the data revealed both areas of strong agreement and notable differences between teachers and families in their views on character education. The findings are presented thematically. First, we examine the shared importance attributed to character education, its perceived relationship with academic outcomes, and how both groups balance the role of character and academics.

Second, we explore perceptions of priorities, including how each group views the other's emphasis and how they believe pupils themselves prioritise character development. Third, we consider views on responsibility for character education and the virtues that should be cultivated. Finally, we address concerns about ideology and indoctrination, as well as structural challenges that limit the effective implementation of character education.

Shared Importance of Character Education

This section presents the data relating to the research questions that focused on how teachers and families perceive the importance and impact of character education in relation to students' academic achievement. The data revealed strong agreement between families and teaching staff on the importance of character education (CE). Specifically, Figure 1 shows that 75.7% of teachers and 77.8% of families *strongly agreed* that CE is very important in schools, 15.9% of teachers and 16.1% of families slightly agreed, 4% of teachers and 3.7% of families neither agreed nor disagreed, 2.5% of teachers and 1.1% of families slightly disagreed, and 1.9% of teachers and 1.3% of families strongly disagreed. The data suggests, therefore, that the majority of respondents viewed character education as important in schools.

In addition, in their responses both teachers and parents reported the positive influence of character education on academic performance, as well as social and emotional well-being. As Figure 2 shows, 69.6% of teachers and 63.3% of families reported their view that greater attention to CE in schools would positively affect academic results to a large extent. This view was reinforced

To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following statement?: "I think that character education in schools is very important"

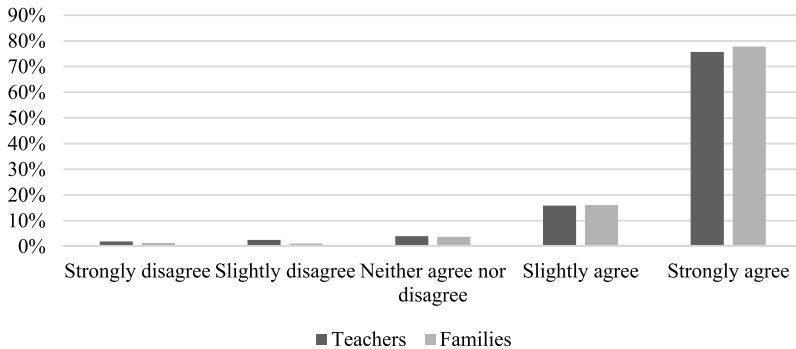


Figure 1. Level of agreement with the statement: 'I believe Character Education in schools is very important'

How, if at all, do you imagine a greater focus on character education would impact your child's attainment?

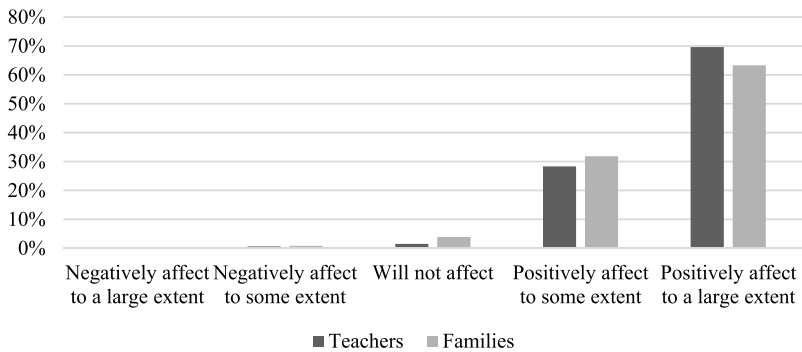


Figure 2. Teachers' and families' perceptions of the impact of character education on academic performance

by qualitative responses drawn from the survey. One teacher, for example, stated that CE is *'a fundamental aspect of the educational process to promote the integral development of children, in academic terms and in their personal and social growth and well-being'*, while a parent echoed this connection between character and achievement, stating that *'Character education is more important because, by educating character properly, pupils would achieve better academic performance'*. Another parent highlighted the broader relevance of character education: *'I believe it's very important because it is what will make them good people and happy. And able to face problems and have good mental health'*.

Balancing Character and Academics

The importance that parents and teachers attached to character education becomes even more evident when compared with the value they place on academic performance. Accordingly, Figure 3 presents the results indicating whether parents and teachers consider it more important for their children and students to develop good character or to achieve high academic grades in exams. A total of 89.3% of teachers and 84.8% of families considered character development to be as important as – or even more important than – academic achievement. This view also appeared in the qualitative responses. One parent remarked: *'There are nuances – academic results are extremely important, but I believe that developing good character has a very positive impact on achieving them (managing frustration, having a sense of self-improvement, etc.)'*. Another added: *'Educational institutions should not only work on character, but also on*

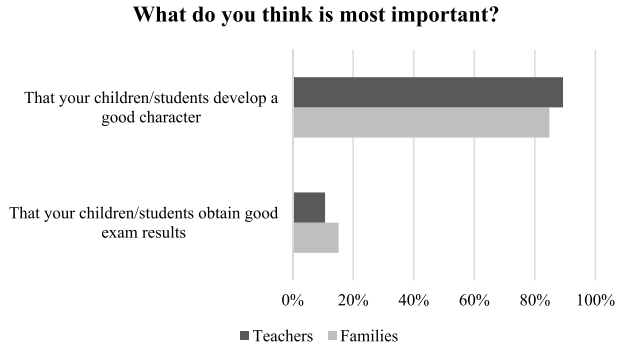


Figure 3. Which do you consider more important: character development or achieving good exam results?

the acquisition of knowledge and academic achievement. Both seem very important to me'.

Teachers expressed similar views. One noted: *'Developing a resilient, patient, honest character, with high self-esteem, compassion, generosity ... helps you achieve good academic results'*. Another commented: *'For me, it is more important that students are educated as human beings and that they learn to live in a changing and complex world. And that they are able to think for themselves, rather than simply covering the full content of my subject curricula'*.

Perceptions of the Other Group's Priorities

Despite the consensus between teachers and parents about the importance of CE, some misconceptions between the groups could be identified in the data. Parents in the sample reported their view that teachers prioritise academic results *over* character development. So too, teachers in the sample reported their view that parents prioritise academic results *over* character development. This is clearly shown in Figure 4; 84.9% of teachers and 57.9% of parents reported believing that the other group views academic achievement as more important than character development.

Perceptions of Pupils' Priorities

Figure 5 illustrates that a significant proportion of parents (45.4%) and a smaller proportion of teachers (23.5%) suggested that pupils value character development and academic achievement equally. However, the responses also reveal inconsistencies: some parents reported that their children prioritise character, whereas some teachers believe students focus more on academic attainment.

What is most important to your children's teachers/your students' parents?

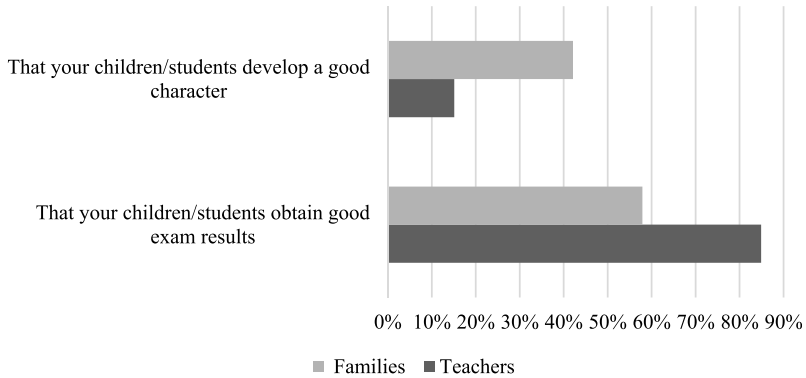


Figure 4. What do you think is more important to your children’s teachers/families: academic achievement or character development?

How important do you think it is for your children/students to develop a good character compared to academic achievements?

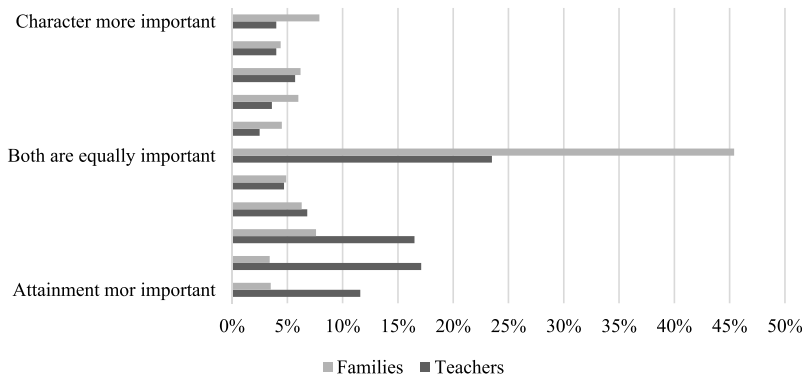


Figure 5. Importance that teachers and families believe their pupils/children place on character development compared to academic achievement

The key finding here is not that pupils were directly surveyed, but that adults hold divergent perceptions of pupils’ priorities – both within each group and between the two groups. These differences reinforce the broader theme of misalignment in family – school understandings of character education, which may complicate efforts to establish shared expectations and collaborative strategies.

Responsibility for Character Education

A notable difference identified in the data concerned where the primary responsibility for character education is placed. Many parents in the sample viewed character education primarily as a parental duty, with schools playing a supporting role. In contrast, teachers were more likely to regard character education as a shared responsibility and to consider the school an ideal environment for fostering character, given the ethical and relational opportunities it provides. However, this pattern in the quantitative data was not universal, as some parents also indicated in their qualitative responses that responsibility should be shared between home and school. For example, one mother stated: *'I believe character education in educational institutions is important; however, I think that if families do not continue this work at home, the outcomes will not be very significant'*. Another added: *'Just as we parents work on this, teachers should also work on it and provide us with guidance on how to encourage good character in our children'*.

In the open-ended responses, teachers affirmed the need for collaboration with families, though they recognised the limitations of their role. As one teacher explained: *'CE in schools is very important, but it will go unnoticed if it does not begin at home. The school can only collaborate with the family in character education'*. Another said: *'We can't do anything if nothing is being done at home to shape the character of their children. The school can help, but it cannot replace the family's role'*.

Again, in the qualitative data, both teachers and parents emphasised the need for teamwork in CE underscoring the importance of a joint approach. Teachers particularly valued consistency across home and school to avoid giving mixed messages to pupils, while parents highlighted the importance of communication and support to reinforce values taught and emphasised at home. As one parent explained: *'The school complements and supports the education children receive at home, constituting part of a joint effort between the family and the educational institution'*. Similarly, a teacher stressed: *'The school can help, but it cannot replace the family's role.'*

Virtues Prioritised by Teachers and Families

In the questionnaire, participants were presented with a predefined list of virtues, based on the Jubilee Centre's typology of moral, civic, intellectual, and performance virtues (2022), and were asked to select those they considered most important to cultivate in schools. The analysis of these responses reveals both shared priorities and notable differences between teachers and parents. In this context, to 'mention' a virtue refers to that virtue being selected from the list by a given proportion of respondents.

From the list of virtues, the top three selected by both groups were:

- *Honesty* (moral virtue): mentioned by 47.2% of teachers and 43.4% of parents
- *Resilience* (performance virtue): 46.1% of teachers and 59% of parents
- *Good judgement* (intellectual virtue): 45.3% of teachers and 52.9% of parents

This convergence suggests a modest shared core of values. Yet beyond this limited consensus, Figure 6 highlights some divergences. Families, for instance, gave far greater weight to confidence (58.3%) than teachers (31.9%), pointing to a family emphasis on inner security and individual success. By contrast, teachers were more likely to prioritise civility (40.9% vs. 23.5%) and curiosity (30% vs. 20%). Meanwhile, compassion was mentioned by 25% of parents and 27% of teachers, and service was scarcely selected by either group (15%).

The qualitative responses provided reinforce the similarities and divergences found in the quantitative data. In their open-ended responses, parents often emphasised virtues connected to personal effort, perseverance, and self-improvement. One parent, for example, highlighted the role of *effort* in personal growth: *‘It’s important to foster the value of effort and the satisfaction of achieving your goals and overcoming the frustration of not reaching them’*. Teachers, meanwhile, framed character in civic and relational terms, consistent with their higher prioritisation of civility and curiosity. For example, one teacher explained: *‘Character is forged through a culture of effort, respect, and empathy. Setting limits, enforcing rules, valuing good manners, and recognising the worth of the person as a social being increase self-esteem, critical thinking, and happiness’*. Another teacher emphasised: *‘It is essential to involve students in*

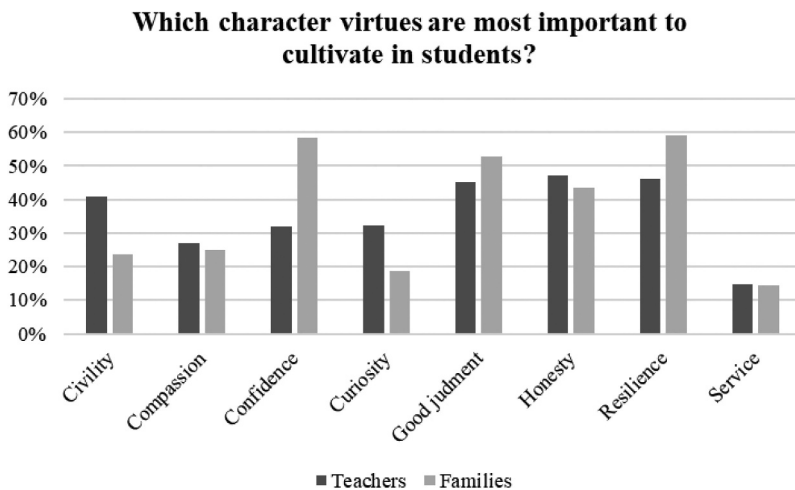


Figure 6. Frequency with which each virtue was selected by teachers and parents

rules for coexistence and in critical thinking so they can become active citizens in a democracy'.

Taken together, these findings highlight a notable difference in emphasis: the parents tended to prioritise virtues that support autonomy, resilience, and personal well-being, whereas the teachers were more likely to stress civic and communal dimensions of character.

Concerns About Ideology and Indoctrination

In the qualitative comments of the survey, a very small number of parents, 25 out of those surveyed, expressed concern that CE could become a vehicle for indoctrination or could be shaped by political or religious ideologies. These parents stated their preference that CE be based on what they typically referred to as 'universal' and/or 'neutral' values. One parent, for example, stated that: *'It must be very clear what ideas character education is based on, and we must be very careful with ideologies that try to turn our children into people shaped by those same ideas'*. Another added: *'Character and values are learned at home. School is not the place for a teacher to indoctrinate children with their own ideas'*. A few parents questioned whether character can even be intentionally cultivated in schools, viewing character instead as an innate trait.

By contrast, nine parents expressed an alternative view: that CE should be explicitly linked to Christian values. One commented: *'I miss an explicit reference to Christian values in several of the questions – especially in those about decision-making factors and values to be promoted. [...] Christian schools have always focused on character formation'*. Another said: *'The education of virtues is something [...] society has abandoned, mistakenly believing it to be an exclusively religious domain. In other countries where multiple religions coexist, values are taught nonetheless – and interestingly, this often leads to improved academic outcomes as well. That said, in my case, I prefer to teach my children Christian values.'* Notably, just one of the teachers surveyed raised concerns about ideological bias or the legitimacy of CE in schools.

Structural Challenges

Despite holding differing views in some respects, the analysis revealed that parents and teachers agree that character education is highly important, as shown in the data presented above. However, the qualitative analysis of their responses also reflects their perception that character education receives insufficient attention within the current Spanish education system, as illustrated in the excerpts from parents and teachers presented below. In relation to this, a recurring theme across many parental accounts was the perception that the current system over-emphasises curriculum and academic performance,

neglecting emotional and moral development. One parent, for instance, stated: *'I think character education isn't given importance in Spain, and even if there is a will, the current education model doesn't make it easy'*. Another observed: *'The current system rewards, reinforces, and motivates academic performance, forgetting any other kind of formation which, in fact, will be the most important one for the rest of their lives'*. Some parents also criticised a lack of teacher commitment, with one reporting *'Nowadays teachers barely have authority, and that's why they are not really motivated to get involved [...] In general, we need more engagement from teachers and school leaders'*.

Teachers, in contrast, focused any criticism about the lack of policy attention to character education on the lack of resources and training. One remarked: *'I believe character education is essential, and teachers should be given tools to implement it consciously in the classroom'*. Another added: *'Dealing properly with character education with our students is not easy – we need specific training'*. Structural issues were also raised by some teachers, with one for example suggesting that: *'In many cases, the school general programmes (PGA) result in character education being pushed into the background. We need a project or strategy that brings together schools' academic structures and initiatives so that character education can be properly taught'*.

4. DISCUSSION

Our first research question concentrated on how teachers and families perceive the importance of character education in schools, and the results of this study reveal a strong consensus between parents and teaching staff regarding the value of Character Education (CE) as a core component of students' holistic development. Our second research question was interested in how teachers and families perceive the importance and impact of character education in relation to academic achievement. The data suggests that teachers and parents recognise the positive influence of character education, not only on emotional and social well-being but also on academic achievement. This shared outlook provides a solid foundation for educational proposals focused on the cultivation of virtues and the full flourishing of pupils – an aim highlighted in recent international frameworks (Kristjánsson, 2023; OECD, 2024) and within Spain itself. In the Spanish context, the LOMLOE (2020) incorporates *Educación en Valores Cívicos³Éticos⁰⁶¹* as a compulsory subject in secondary education, signalling a policy-level commitment to civic responsibility, ethical reflection, and democratic coexistence. While framed primarily in terms of civic and citizenship education, these initiatives demonstrate that concerns for moral and character formation are present within Spanish educational policy, even if the explicit terminology of 'character education' is less common (Fuentes, 2018; Fuentes and Fernández-Espinosa, 2024).

The parents and teachers in this study both emphasized the interdependence of personal character and academic performance. Parents and teachers highlighted that resilience, effort, honesty, and emotional balance were key virtues that not only foster better learning outcomes but also prepare pupils to cope with life challenges. These results are significant because they reveal a shared perception among teachers and families that character education contributes both to academic achievement and to pupils' social and emotional well-being. In this sense, the results echo theoretical perspectives which argue that CE should not be regarded as peripheral but as integral to education's broader aims (Arthur *et al.*, 2017; Kristjánsson and VanderWeele, 2024; Lickona, 1996). While the present study does not demonstrate the causal effects of CE on academic or human development, it does highlight that parents and teachers in Spain perceive CE as inseparable from those outcomes – an alignment that has important implications for how schools and families might collaborate in this area.

Despite the shared appreciation for CE, the data also reveal notable obstacles to its effective implementation. As we examined in relation to our fourth research question, one of the most relevant results concerns the differing views between parents and teachers regarding who holds primary responsibility for CE and that parents and teachers tend to misperceive one another's priorities.

These misperceptions function as obstacles because they can erode trust and hinder the formation of a shared educational vision and relationship: if parents assume that teachers care more about exam results, and parents assume that families place academics above character, opportunities for genuine collaboration are weakened. Instead of fostering a proactive alliance around shared values, communication can become more reactive and fragmented, focused on immediate issues rather than long-term virtue development. This lack of clear and sustained dialogue contrasts with the recommendations of authors such as Kristjánsson and VanderWeele (2024), who highlight the importance of horizontal and deliberative collaboration between school and family in educating for shared virtues.

These misperceptions align with Harrison *et al.*'s (2023) findings in the UK context. Although our data do not directly measure the quality of collaboration, the persistence of mutual misperceptions suggests a potentially fragile relational, which may help to explain why, as the literature indicates, family – school partnerships often become reactive – focused on managing problems – rather than proactive in cultivating shared virtues (Ellis *et al.*, 2015; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

The consequences of relational misunderstandings between parents and teachers are well-documented in recent literature. Current research demonstrates that parents and teachers consistently agree on the importance of constructive communication for student success and wellbeing (National Institute for Direct Instruction, 2025; Zulauf-McCurdy *et al.*, 2024). Kaplan Toren (2025) confirms

that trust serves as a vital component of enduring partnerships, directly influencing the quality of parent – teacher relationships and student outcomes. Collaborative efforts, as emphasized by recent frameworks, must be built on mutual trust, respect, and equality to ensure coherence and sustainability in educational partnerships (Harrison *et al.*, 2023; Qing *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, research highlights that the positive impact of family involvement in schools is substantial, and the teacher’s willingness to actively foster participation is an essential precondition for achieving the well-established benefits of family engagement on student outcomes (Baxter and Kilderry, 2022; Padilla and Madueño, 2022). Without these foundational elements, collaborative engagement efforts tend to lack coherence and sustainability (Proff *et al.*, 2025).

These relational barriers are compounded by structural limitations. Despite the robustness of the framework proposed by López Rupérez *et al.* (2020) for evaluating the quality of educational governance in Spain, one important omission stands out: the lack of systematic consideration of family-school collaboration as a core dimension of the system. Although the instrument makes tangential reference to family consultation (item 1.4.5), it does not fully acknowledge the role of families as co-responsible actors in the educational process. This gap contrasts with extensive international evidence showing that family involvement is a decisive factor in academic performance, character development, and pupils’ social-emotional well-being (Castro *et al.*, 2015; Hernández-Prados *et al.*, 2023; Jeynes, 2023). From a democratic and relational governance perspective, active family participation strengthens the legitimacy of educational policy and contributes to a more inclusive school culture.

Including specific indicators on family – school collaboration would strengthen the analytical framework for evaluating the quality of educational governance proposed by López Rupérez *et al.* (2020). At present, their model only makes tangential reference to family consultation, without recognising families as co-responsible actors in education. Expanding the model in this way would enhance its holistic and multi-level character and better align it with the principles of subsidiarity and shared responsibility.

A minority of parents in our study expressed concerns about potential ideological or religious bias in CE. Although not widespread, these concerns highlight the importance of clearly defining the principles and objectives of CE. While some parents fear the risk of indoctrination, others advocate for a stronger presence of religious values, particularly those rooted in Christianity. These tensions stand in contrast to the perspective of teachers, who did not express similar concerns. From a philosophical and pedagogical standpoint, concerns about ideological bias in CE can be addressed by showing that contemporary neo-Aristotelian approaches are rooted in a strong secular tradition focused on human flourishing, independent of – but relatable to – specific belief systems (Fernández *et al.*, 2024; Kristjánsson *et al.*, 2025).

Virtue cultivation can be based on ethical principles that are broadly shared across families and teachers – such as honesty, resilience, and good judgment – principles which also resonate with wider virtue-ethical traditions that emphasise moral, civic, intellectual, and performance virtues (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). These overlapping commitments provide a common foundation for CE, allowing moral formation to be pursued without losing philosophical depth or social relevance, while also avoiding the risks of ideological imposition (Kristjánsson and VanderWeele, 2024).

In our fifth research question, we examined which virtues teachers and families prioritized, and while teachers and families agreed on several core virtues – such as honesty, resilience, and good judgment – the data also revealed some divergences in their priorities. One finding concerns compassion. Although mentioned by both groups (25% of families and 27% of teachers), compassion did not emerge as a top priority. This contrasts with findings from Harrison *et al.* (2023) in the UK, where compassion was among the three virtues most valued by parents and teachers, and with studies in Finland (Tirri, 2011) and Canada (Malti, 2016), where teachers and students alike consistently place compassion and empathy at the heart of moral education. This suggests that, in the Spanish context, compassion is comparatively underemphasised, a finding that merits closer attention.

Compassion – deeper than empathy – involves not only recognising others' suffering but also taking action to alleviate it. Its comparatively low ranking in our sample fits into a broader pattern as we have mentioned: parents placed much stronger emphasis on performance virtues such as confidence (58.5%) and perseverance/effort, while teachers gave greater weight to civic and intellectual virtues, particularly civility (40.9%) and curiosity (32.3%). This contrast highlights differing educational priorities: families tend to focus on emotional security and individual success, whereas teachers place more emphasis on social engagement and critical thinking. Together, these results suggest that while both groups share a small common core of virtues (e.g., honesty, resilience, judgment), beyond this there is some fragmentation.

These results suggest that certain relational and prosocial virtues – such as compassion and service – may need more explicit attention in Spanish CE to avoid being overshadowed by individual-oriented performance virtues (Arthur *et al.*, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015). They also reveal potential points of tension in family – school collaboration: if parents prioritise virtues that prioritise personal well-being and teachers emphasise civic and intellectual growth, shared educational strategies may be harder to achieve without deliberate dialogue and alignment (Egido, 2020; Harrison *et al.*, 2023). Finally, the results indicate that strengthening compassion and civic mindedness in school programmes could complement, rather than compete with, families' focus on confidence and perseverance, thereby creating a more

balanced approach to character formation (Albright and Weissberg, 2010; UNESCO and MGIEP, 2021). As Lickona and Davidson (2005) argue, moral character is revealed in both intention and action; educating for compassion means teaching young people to ‘see through the eyes of others’ and to act with humanity (Fraser-Andrews and Yeomans, 2023). Ensuring that both families and teachers see this as a shared priority is essential for nurturing inclusive school communities and preparing students for flourishing lives. To bridge the divides identified in this study, it is essential to construct a shared language grounded in values and virtues. As Arthur *et al.* (2015) and Brant *et al.* (2022) argue, virtue literacy is not only critical for pupils’ moral development but also essential for fostering a coherent and participatory educational culture.

Ultimately, the success of CE depends not only on its curricular inclusion but on the strength of the alliances that sustain it. Building a culture of character requires more than shared values; it demands institutional commitment, relational trust, and a deliberate effort to bridge differences through mutual respect. Only through such an integrated and dialogical approach can CE truly foster human flourishing in today’s diverse educational landscape.

The findings of this study return us to the core objective of this study: to explore convergences and divergences in the way families and teachers in Spain perceive CE and their respective roles within it. The evidence gathered points to both the promise and the complexity of establishing a shared, sustainable CE culture. Future policies and training programmes should consider not only the value placed on CE but also the nuanced differences in how families and educators understand and implement it in practice.

5. CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into how teachers and families in the Community of Madrid perceive Character Education (CE). Despite its regional scope and the use of non-probabilistic sampling – both of which limit generalisability – the findings reveal a strong shared commitment to the value and importance of CE generally. At the same time, the study identifies important barriers to implementation. Chief among them is the lack of consensus around who holds primary responsibility for CE. While many parents see CE as a task for which responsibility lies primarily in the home, teachers tend to view CE more as a shared responsibility in which schools play a prominent role. These differing perspectives are also reflected in the types of virtues each group prioritises: families focus more on performance and intellectual virtues linked to personal development, while teachers place greater emphasis on civic and intellectual virtues related to social responsibility.

Nonetheless, the shared recognition of the potential of CE for the holistic development of individuals offers a strategic opportunity – provided that these tensions are addressed. A genuine educational alliance, grounded in mutual trust, sustained communication, and a shared language of virtues, is essential. As Granados and Granados (2009) note, an alliance goes beyond agreements on norms; it involves a common vision of education and co-responsibility for students' growth. In sum, the positive disposition toward CE shown by both families and educators in Madrid provides a strong foundation. To build on it, policy and practice must support collaboration, clarify roles, and make CE a coherent and daily part of school life – contributing to the flourishing of students and the broader educational community.

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7. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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9. NOTES

¹ The Community of Madrid (Comunidad de Madrid) is one of Spain's 17 autonomous regions. It encompasses the city of Madrid (the national capital) and 179 surrounding municipalities, covering both densely populated metropolitan areas and smaller towns. The regional government holds authority over education, meaning that findings reflect the perspectives of schools and families across this broader regional context rather than the city of Madrid alone.

² In the Community of Madrid during the 2023–2024 academic year, there were 109,072 teachers in total, of whom 79,585 were women. This corresponds to 73% of the total teaching staff in the region. Source: Directorate General of Bilingualism and Quality of Education, Ministry of Education, Science and Universities of the Community of Madrid.

³ Although the Spanish curriculum does not explicitly employ the term 'character education,' the subject *Educación en Valores Cívicos y Éticos* (introduced by

LOMLOE, (2020) addresses related aims such as ethical reflection, democratic coexistence, and civic responsibility. It can therefore be seen as partly overlapping with international discussions on character and virtue education, while not fully equivalent.

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