

Key Aspects of the Training, Education and Needs of Primary School Teachers for the Implementation of Moral and Character Education

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Abstract:

Introduction: The new curriculum in Slovakia highlights the importance of moral and character education. School principals and teachers are actively exploring how to incorporate it into their school practice.

Methods: The study investigates teacher preparation and their views on current conditions for implementing character education. Data were collected via an online questionnaire from 342 primary school teachers across Slovakia.

Results: Only 17% of respondents received training in the subject, and 39.8% rated the conditions for its implementation as insufficient.

Discussion: Teachers generally consider both their training and implementation conditions inadequate, indicating a need for improvement.

Limitations: The sample is not representative and lacks balanced regional and gender distribution.

Conclusions: Successful implementation of character education requires high-quality teacher training and supportive and favourable school-level conditions.

Key words: education, teacher needs, moral education, character education, primary school.

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Introduction

There is no doubt that Moral Education and Character Education should be an integral part of school education because the development of moral and ethical values in children has a major impact on their future personal, social and civic life. The school as an institution plays an indispensable role in this process - it is one of the main environments in which the attitudes, behaviour and values of children and adolescents are shaped. Character education has gained significant importance in educational systems worldwide, with many countries strengthening its implementation (Zurqoni et al., 2018). In Slovakia, too, the introduction of character education into the new curriculum is currently raising awareness of this topic (State Educational Programme, 2023). Many teachers value character education and consider it essential to student development (Lucas, 2009; Aghni et al., 2020). Teachers express a sense of personal responsibility for providing character education, often relying on their background and experience (Lucas, 2009). They play a crucial role in promoting character education, but they face challenges in its implementation and often lack proper training.

In this paper, we focus on the presentation of the results of research in Slovakia, which was aimed at examining the preparation of teachers, their previous and current education in the field of moral education and character education. We were also interested in primary school teachers' perceptions of the current conditions for implementing moral education in school. Right at the outset, we consider it important to emphasize that we do not present the terms moral education and character education as synonymous. Several authors agree that the two concepts are based on different philosophical and psychological theories (Davis, 2003; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008; Lapsley & Yeager, 2013; Liu, 2014; Walker & Thoma, 2017). However, due to the limited space in the paper we will not present in depth the distinction of these concepts, but for quicker orientation we are inclined to the view that moral education focuses on moral reasoning and character education emphasizing virtues. Moral education primarily focuses on developing ethical reasoning and decision-making skills. It often follows Kohlbergian principles, emphasizing classroom-based instruction to enhance moral judgment (Davis, 2003). This approach aims to teach students how to think critically about ethical issues and make moral decisions based on principles and values. Moral education tends to be more cognitive and abstract, focusing on moral reasoning and ethical dilemmas. Character education, on the other hand, takes a broader approach, aiming to cultivate specific virtues and positive character traits both inside and outside the classroom (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Davis, 2003). It emphasises the development of good behaviour and habits, often through direct instruction, modelling, and practice.

In our research, we were interested in the general question of whether Slovak teachers have received adequate training in moral and character education and how they impose the conditions for their application.

1 Education and barriers to the implementation of moral and character education

Teacher training in moral and character education is crucial because the quality of their implementation in practice depends to a large extent on the preparedness of educators. However, we still know little about how actual practices in teacher education programmes prepare student teachers for moral education (Willemse et al., 2008). Some prominent authors in the field agree that there exists only limited training of pre-service teachers in character education (Berkowitz & Grych, 2000; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). Many teacher education programmes do not adequately prepare future educators to address moral and character development in their classrooms. Revell and Arthur (2007, pp. 84-85) emphasised the importance of training student teachers in moral education. In their study, they found that while some student teachers reported that moral education was part of their teacher education programme, others were not aware of input in this area, had never discussed moral education as part of their course or in school and had not had the opportunity to observe or discuss practice in schools. In other studies, teachers have also confirmed that they lack training and resources in this area, which can be seen as a barrier to the effective implementation of moral and character education (Putri et al., 2020; Lestari & Pratolo, 2019). However, there is a disconnect between the perceived importance of character education and its formal inclusion in teacher education programmes. Despite the importance of character education, opportunities for student teachers to develop skills in moral development are uneven and dependent on their course and teaching placement school (Revell & Arthur, 2007). To improve this situation, schools should follow guiding principles when planning character education initiatives, including defining core ethical values, developing a comprehensive approach, and creating a caring school community (Lickona, 1996). Interestingly, while many educators enter the profession for values-laden reasons, formal training in moral character education is notably absent from licensure and accreditation standards (Lapsley & Woodbury, 2016). This contradiction highlights the need for teacher education programmes to explicitly address character education.

In addition to quality training for teachers, other barriers to effective implementation of moral and character education may include problems with the use of appropriate strategies and methods in teaching. Willemse et al. (2008) state that the problem is the lack of sound empirical research on the effectiveness of strategies and teaching methods. This makes it difficult to adopt a well-

supported point of view concerning the moral aspects of teacher education, to develop hypotheses based upon that point of view and to test these hypotheses in practice. Teachers use a variety of strategies, such as integrating character values into lesson plans and using teachable moments (Lestari & Pratolo, 2019; Aghni et al., 2020). Despite these efforts, many teachers report that their implementation is not fully aligned with the intended educational goals (Putri et al., 2020). There is often a lack of integration of moral values within existing curricula, making it difficult to incorporate character education effectively (Kartika et al., 2025).

Another problem with the effective implementation of moral and character education is the emphasis on knowledge from different subjects. Teachers in general education schools all over Europe are facing the challenge of an overloaded school curriculum focused on knowledge and skills, a lack of time for understanding in depth and developing their own character (González et al., 2020). The pressure to cover academic subjects can lead to character education being treated as an afterthought rather than a core component of the curriculum (Ludemann, 2009).

Significant barriers include poor value systems of students influenced by external factors such as parenting and the media (Lucas, 2009). Implementing character education can also face challenges, such as varying definitions of character traits across cultures and the need for teacher training to effectively deliver these lessons (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006). Teachers need a solid understanding of what character education entails, including its goals, principles, and the specific values they are expected to teach. This foundational knowledge is crucial for effective delivery. Training should include how to integrate character education into existing curricula. Teachers should learn strategies for embedding discussions of ethics and values into subjects like literature, history, and social studies.

2 Method

We used a questionnaire of our own design, which focused on three areas. In addition to the area described in the article, we also explored teachers' moral attitudes and perceptions of academic dishonesty in our research, which we will discuss in other articles. Thus, one area was to determine how elementary school teachers perceive their previous training in moral education. We were also interested in primary school teachers' perceptions of the current conditions for implementing moral education in school.

The questionnaire was administered in 2023 online via MS Forms and was processed by IMB SPSS 30. The questionnaire was sent in March-June 2023 to 10 randomly selected school principals in each region (up to 80 primary schools in total) with a request to forward it to teachers. As there was a very poor turnout

even after several calls (only 123 teachers completed the questionnaire), practicing teachers were contacted in the fall of 2023 to participate in additional training for teachers. Data collection was carried out until the end of 2023. Teachers could voluntarily opt to complete the questionnaire. All data were anonymised and statistically processed in accordance with ethical rules.

2.1 Participants

The research respondents were 342 elementary school teachers from Slovakia (N=342; mean age=42 years, median 42, modus 31 years, Min=23 and Max=67, SD=10.08). The majority of teachers are female (89.8%) and come from all regions of Slovakia. Most teachers completed the questionnaire from the Bratislava region (21.8%), and the lowest response rate was recorded from the Trnava region (5.6%). Teachers teach in all types of schools: state (83.6%), private (5.3%) and religious (1.9%), as well as in small schools with up to 100 pupils and in large schools with more than 500 pupils. All types of town sizes were also represented, ranging from teachers from the capital city (13.8%) to teachers from small villages, which were the largest in the research sample (32.4%).

In terms of experience, 7.2% of teachers were novice teachers, 19.9% of teachers had up to 5 years of experience, and 17.0% had more than 20 years of experience at the first level. Among teachers involved in secondary education, the largest proportion had teaching experience of up to five years (16.4%), followed by those with more than twenty years of experience (15.9%). In terms of teaching levels, 37.9% of respondents reported working at the primary level of primary education, 18.6% at the lower secondary level, and 34.2% indicated that they were also engaged at the upper secondary level.

A total of 9.3% of respondents did not specify the level at which they teach; however, their responses to other items suggest that they are employed at primary art schools. The respondents reported teaching across a wide range of subjects, including humanities, technical, and science subjects, as well as providing individualised instruction.

3 Research results

In the results, we focused on finding out how primary school teachers perceive their previous and current training in moral education. That is, as many as 90.1% of teachers think that the moral side of pupils should be developed in every subject. This view is disagreed with by 2.3% of teachers who think that the development of the moral side of the pupil should be carried out in the subjects that are designed for this purpose. In reality, 87.4% of teachers try to link the curriculum to the development of the moral side of pupils in their lessons, and 12.3% of teachers work with the moral side of pupils when the content of the

subject requires it. Only one teacher (0.03%) stated that he/she only focuses on the content of the subject in class and does not connect it to anything else. Based on these responses, it appears that teachers are working extensively with the moral side of students in the classroom. Based on these responses, it appears that teachers place considerable emphasis on the moral development of students in the classroom. That is why it is interesting to find that only 16.71% of the teachers had received training for the development of the moral side of the pupils, while 27.6% of them (4.69% overall) were dissatisfied with the training, as the training did not meet their expectations. Since this item correlates with the item asking about sufficient materials to support the teaching of moral education ($R=-0.297$, $p<0.001$), it can be assumed that the teachers' dissatisfaction with the training they received may be due to the lack of materials (Table 1).

Table 1

The relationship between training in moral education and the sufficiency of materials for the implementation of education

<u>Education or training</u>	<u>Learning materials</u>		<u>Total</u>
	<u>no</u>	<u>yes</u>	
Yes, and I was satisfied.	51%	49%	12.24%
Yes, but it didn't meet my expectations.	69%	31%	4.69%
No, but I'm interested.	87%	13%	73.10%
No, and I'm not interested.	83%	17%	9.97%
	82.7%	17.3%	100.00%

As it appears from the responses, primary school teachers perceive the current conditions for the implementation of moral education in schools as insufficient (43.9%). In contrast, 26% of the teachers consider the conditions to be sufficient, and 30.1% of the teachers stated that they did not know. Teachers further stated that they would need more effective material equipment (50.6%), available training (48.8%) and more support from parents (45.6%) to implement moral education. Teachers were least likely (11.7%) to require adequate facilities and better support from school management (15.8%) for effective implementation of moral education.

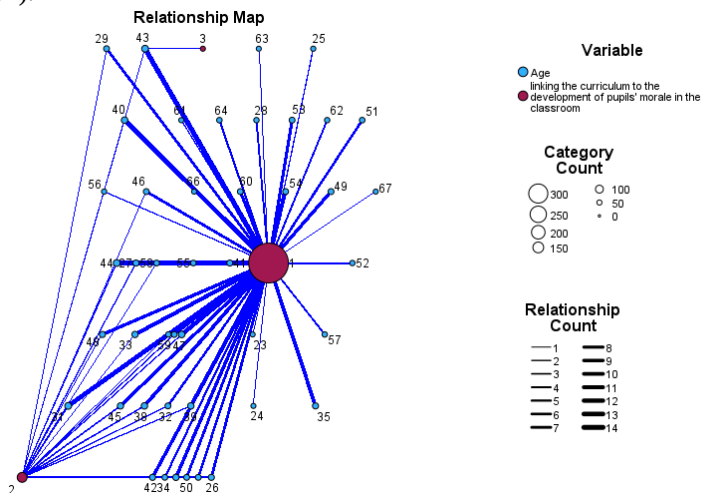
Analysis of demographic data shows that there are no differences among respondents in terms of educational attainment with respect to age, gender, school sponsor, region, or experience in education.

In terms of differences between regions of Slovakia, only the difference in materials for moral education is significant ($R=0.113$, $p<0.05$). In Nitra (36.4%), Trnava (33.3%), Žilina (31%) and Trenčín (29.2%) regions, the participants had the most materials available for the implementation of moral education. Teachers

from the Prešov Region (3.7%) and the Košice Region (11.1%) reported the most lack of materials.

Female teachers are significantly less satisfied with the materials provided (46%) than their male colleagues (25%) ($R=0.177$, $p<0.01$), but no other significant gender differences were found with regard to the requirements and conditions for the inclusion of moral education in primary school education.

It seems that the issue of moral education is much more related to age than to gender (Figure 1). The older the respondents are, the more they spend time in the classroom linking the curriculum to the development of students' moral ($R=-0.143$; $p<0.01$), the more they have materials ($R=0.177$; $p<0.01$), and the less they need to improve the conditions ($R=-0.120$; $p<0.05$), do not need more time ($R=-0.129$; $p<0.05$), significantly less reported the need for adequate space ($R=-0.170$; $p<0.01$) and support from management ($R=-0.143$; $p<0.01$). Teachers also gain experience and practice with age. Teachers with more experience in secondary education at the primary level report significantly less need for adequate physical facilities ($R=-0.120$; $p<0.05$) and support from school management ($R=-0.135$; $p<0.05$). In turn, teachers who have experience other than first or second grade in primary school report a significantly higher need for parental support in implementing moral education in schools ($R=0.182$; $p<0.001$).



1. In my lessons, I try to link the curriculum to the development of pupils' moral side.; 2. I link the development of pupils' moral side to the curriculum only if the content of the curriculum requires it.; 3. I only focus on my subject.

Figure 1. The relationship between age and linking the curriculum to pupils' moral development.

4 Discussion

It seems that teachers generally evaluate their training for implementing moral and character education in schools as rather insufficient and in need of improvement. In our research, primary school teachers rated the conditions for implementing moral education in schools as insufficient (43.9%). They also said they needed more effective material resources (50.6%), accessible training (48.8%), and greater support from parents (45.6%) to better implement moral education. Similar findings regarding limitations in teacher training are also presented in studies by Berkowitz and Grych (2000) and Narvaez and Lapsley (2008). For example, the study of Willemse et al. (2008) suggests that teacher education programmes should provide more opportunities and time for teacher educators to reflect on their practices, particularly regarding moral aspects of teaching. Authors also write about the focus on teacher educators' professional development. In light of the pivotal role that teacher educators' attitudes and personality traits play in the process of moral education, the findings of the study underscore the need for teacher education programmes to cultivate specific professional attitudes systematically and to enhance educators' reflexive awareness of their own value orientations. Moreover, the study advocates for a more explicit and deliberately structured approach to moral education within teacher preparation curricula. The study indicates that current practices are largely implicit and unplanned. Making moral education more explicit in the curriculum and planning could improve its effectiveness.

Professional development and training are key for teachers to implement moral and character education successfully. This includes understanding the theoretical foundations (Bebeau, 1993). Ongoing support through workshops, seminars, and long-term mentoring is essential to help teachers develop the necessary skills and knowledge (Klingner, 2004; Zurqoni et al., 2018). Suggestions for improvement include making the hidden moral education curriculum explicit, mastering pedagogical strategies that target moral character directly, and providing school and university-based professional development programmes focused on moral curriculum development (Brunsdon & Layne, 2024; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). Additionally, improving teacher training workshops and providing financial support for character education implementation are identified as key areas for enhancement (Zurqoni et al., 2018).

In addition, adequate resources are needed for effective implementation, including time for planning and understanding the innovation, appropriate equipment, and funding (Peers, 2003). Teachers need opportunities for hands-on experience and reflection. Successful implementation requires teachers to engage with change, modify their professional practice, and have successful experiences in implementing new approaches (Peers, 2003). Peer-to-peer informal discourse

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and reflective practice in clinical settings can enhance ethics education (Sullivan et al., 2020).

Addressing existing beliefs and potential barriers is crucial. Even with effective professional development, teachers may encounter technical, political, and cultural barriers to implementation (Johnson, 2006). Therefore, professional development efforts should aim to reveal and address existing beliefs and provide strategies to overcome these barriers.

To address this gap, teacher education strategies can be categorized into "minimalist" and "maximalist" approaches. The minimalist approach involves making the hidden moral education curriculum explicit, while the maximalist approach requires preservice teachers to master pedagogical strategies targeting moral character directly (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). For example, the Integrative Ethical Education model outlines five steps for moral character development: supportive climate, ethical skills, apprenticeship instruction, self-regulation, and adopting a developmental systems approach (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). Different example is The Character Education Partnership, which outlines 11 principles to guide schools in planning their character education initiatives, including addressing core ethical values, defining character, and developing the school as a caring community (Lickona, 1996).

Schools can implement character education through various strategies. These include creating a supportive climate, teaching ethical skills, providing apprenticeship instruction, fostering self-regulation, and adopting a developmental systems approach (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2008). Additionally, schools can employ a multi-disciplinary approach, as demonstrated by the pesantren model, which incorporates moral modeling, moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral habituation (Baharun, 2017).

The paper of Fajariah & Suryo (2019) suggests that character education should be implemented across all subjects and extracurricular activities to create a school atmosphere that fosters good student character. We agree with this opinion and therefore asked teachers in our research which lessons and topics should emphasize moral aspects. As many as 90.1% of teachers believe that it would be appropriate to develop the moral side of students in every subject. We consider this result to be positive, but we are unable to objectively assess the extent to which teachers are successfully implementing moral education in their teaching.

Conversely, some educators argue that responsibility for character education should lie primarily with parents and the community, suggesting that schools need not be the sole agents of moral development (Tuff, 2009). This perspective emphasizes the need for a collaborative approach to character education that extends beyond the classroom.

Conclusions

In conclusion, while moral and character education is recognized as essential, there is a need for more formal training and integration into teacher education programmes. Implementing effective moral and character education requires a combination of teacher preparation, school-based approaches, and collaboration between universities and schools (Parker et al., 2021; Xiaoman & Cilin, 2004). Future research should focus on providing and studying the impact of school and university-based professional development programmes on department-wide initiatives and moral curriculum development (Brunsdon & Layne, 2024). There is a need for innovative teacher training programmes in character education to address the challenges faced by teachers in developing students' personalities beyond just transferring knowledge (González et al., 2020). Effective implementation of moral and character education requires a comprehensive approach that includes robust professional development, administrative support, resources, hands-on experience, and strategies to address barriers. In conclusion, the effective implementation of moral and character education in schools requires a holistic approach that involves all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and administrators (Agboola & Tsai, 2012; Singh, 2019). This includes creating a caring classroom environment, incorporating moral discipline, teaching values through the curriculum, and promoting cooperative learning (Lickona, 1996). However, the success of these efforts depends on providing adequate training and opportunities for teachers to develop their skills in moral development (Revell & Arthur, 2007). In addition to high-quality education, it is necessary to improve the conditions for implementing moral and character education. When introducing a new curriculum in Slovakia, in which character education plays a significant role, it is necessary to develop high-quality methodological materials and improve the overall conditions in schools for implementing moral and character education. This multifaceted approach can help teachers develop the skills and confidence needed to implement moral and character education in their classrooms successfully.

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