

DEVELOPING A COMPASSIONATE SCHOOL CURRICULUM: A REVIEW OF LOVE-CENTERED CHARACTER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze the concepts, implementation strategies, benefits, and challenges of developing a compassion-based school curriculum as an integrative approach in character education. The research uses a literature review method, examining scientific articles published in 2021–2026 obtained from Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. Literature was selected based on its relationship with character education, empathy, compassion, responsibility, social-emotional learning, caring pedagogy, and school culture. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, with stages including coding, theme grouping, comparison of findings, and conceptual synthesis. The results of the study show that a compassion-based curriculum needs to be built through the integration of three main dimensions, namely empathy as the ability to understand the experiences and perspectives of others, compassion as motivation to respond to difficulties prosocially, and responsibility as a commitment to act ethically and consider the consequences of actions. These three dimensions need to be applied through learning objectives, cross-subject materials, teacher examples, collaborative and reflective learning, authentic assessments, restorative practices, and a safe and inclusive school culture. The novelty of the study lies in the formulation of a conceptual architecture that integrates the goals, content, pedagogy, assessment, and culture of the school into a holistic, applied, and inclusive character education framework. Its implementation has the potential to improve social-emotional competence, prosocial behavior, sense of belonging to school, welfare, and student learning engagement. However, its implementation still faces limitations, including teacher training challenges, program fragmentation, variations across cultural contexts, uneven institutional support, and difficulties in measuring character development. This study emphasizes that a compassion-based curriculum must be developed systematically, contextually, and sustainably to cultivate students who excel academically as well as who are empathic, caring, fair, and responsible.

Keywords: compassion-based curriculum; character education; empathy; compassion; responsibility; social-emotional learning

Introduction

The transformation of education in the 21st century has encouraged schools to strengthen students' academic abilities, digital literacy, creativity, and competitiveness. However, an overly dominant orientation toward academic achievement has not always been balanced by the development of the ability to understand others' feelings, build healthy social relationships, and act responsibly. Schools still face various relational problems, such as bullying, social exclusion, conflicts between students, a low sense of belonging to the school, and a weak concern for different groups. These conditions show that education is not only about producing cognitively intelligent learners but also about forming individuals who are able to manage emotions, empathize, show concern, and make responsible decisions. Meta-analytical evidence suggests that social and emotional learning contributes to students' social-emotional competence, positive behavior, well-being, and academic achievement (Cipriano et al., 2023; Fernández-Martín et al., 2021).

In this context, the development of a *compassionate school curriculum* based on compassion is a relevant approach in strengthening character education. A curriculum centered on compassion does not place love simply as an emotional expression, but as an ethical and pedagogical principle embodied through empathy, compassion, respect for human dignity, prosocial action, and social responsibility. Empathy allows learners to understand the experiences and perspectives of others, while compassion encourages them to respond really to the difficulties experienced by others. Meanwhile, responsibility directs learners to consider the moral consequences of each decision. Teacher empathy has also been shown to be related to students' sense of belonging to school and learning achievement, while compassion-based school interventions can improve children's altruistic attitudes, social integration, and affective responses (Cai et al., 2023; Kappelmayer et al., 2023; Silke et al., 2024).

Although character education and social-emotional learning are gaining attention, there is a significant gap between recognition of the importance of emotional competence and its place in the school curriculum. An analysis of 422 curriculum documents in Germany, for example, showed that about 40% of the curricula studied did not clearly include the strengthening of emotional competence, while the aspect of empathy was not evenly integrated across subjects and levels of education (Grund & Holst, 2023). Research on teachers' views on character education also shows that teachers consider character development important. However, its implementation still faces obstacles in the form of training limitations, lack of structural support, the influence of the family environment, and unclear strategies for integrating character values into learning practices (Fernández-Espinosa et al., 2025). Thus, there is a discrepancy between humanist educational idealism and curriculum practices that still tend to be fragmented.

The research problem is the lack of a curriculum framework that comprehensively connects character education to empathy, compassion, and responsibility throughout the learning process. Various schools have implemented character education programs, social-

emotional learning, anti-bullying education, civic education, *mindfulness*, and habituation of prosocial behavior. However, these programs are often implemented as additional activities, short-term projects, tutorial materials, or interventions that are separate from the core subjects. Meta-analyses of social-emotional learning interventions showed positive results. However, the success rate was influenced by the quality of implementation, teacher readiness, program duration, student characteristics, and school environment support (Cipriano et al., 2023). Interventions that last a short period also require strengthening their duration and further evaluation to sustain social-emotional changes (Hassani, 2024).

The next research gap concerns the nature of the literature, which remains spread across several fields of study. Character education research focuses more on character conceptualization, measurement, intervariable relationships, impacts, implementation, and character development. At the same time, social-emotional learning studies emphasize the effectiveness of programs on students' intrapersonal and interpersonal abilities (Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025). Research on compassion generally evaluates specific interventions but has not examined how compassion can be used as a principle for curriculum organization, pedagogy, assessment, school culture, and teacher-student relations. *The Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning* program shows potential to improve the prosocial skills of elementary school students, but the results remain preliminary and require testing across more diverse cultures, ages, and educational systems (Frazier et al., 2025). Thus, there has not been a synthesis that specifically formulates the architecture of the character education curriculum centered on affection.

The novelty or *incremental newness* of this study lies in the effort to unite the literature on character education, social-emotional learning, teacher empathy, compassion pedagogy, and the development of prosocial behavior into the framework of *love-centered character education*. The framework defines empathy as the ability to understand others' feelings and viewpoints, compassion as the motivation to reduce others' difficulties, and responsibility as a commitment to act ethically and to account for the consequences of actions. This study not only discusses character values as content to be taught but also examines how these values are translated into learning objectives, pedagogical strategies, teacher examples, reflective activities, collaborative learning, social services, authentic assessments, and school culture. Thus, the contribution of this study is integrative, as it connects the dimensions of values, competencies, actions, relationships, and the educational environment within a single curriculum framework.

This study is of high urgency because schools need a character education model that can respond to the increasing complexity of social relationships, the diversity of identities, the development of digital interactions, academic competition, and students' psychological well-being needs. Character education that is only delivered through moral advice or memorization of risky values does not result in behavior change if it is not supported by learning experience, example, reflection, and a consistent school culture. Therefore, the article entitled "Developing a Compassionate School Curriculum: A Review

of Love-Centered Character Education" aims to analyze the development of concepts, empirical evidence, implementation strategies, challenges, and principles for developing a compassionate school curriculum. The results of the study are expected to provide a conceptual basis for schools, teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers in systematically integrating empathy, compassion, and responsibility into learning and school life.

Research Methods

This study uses a *library research* method and a systematic literature review to identify, analyze, and synthesize studies on the development of a *love-centered character education* school curriculum. Literature searches were conducted through Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar databases using a combination of keywords, namely "*compassionate school curriculum*," "*love-centered education*," "*character education*," "*empathy in education*," "*compassion-based learning*," "*social-emotional learning*," and "*responsibility in school curriculum*." The literature is limited to English and Indonesian journal articles published in the period 2021–2026, so that the study reflects the development of research in the last five years. The process of searching for and selecting articles follows the principles of transparency and traceability in systematic reviews, including the stages of identification, screening, eligibility checks, and the determination of relevant articles (Page et al., 2021; Paul et al., 2021).

The research inclusion criteria include articles that discuss character education, empathy, compassion, responsibility, social-emotional learning, care-based pedagogy, and the integration of these values in the curriculum and school culture. Meanwhile, duplicate articles, publications that did not undergo peer review, writings that were not available in full text, and research that was not directly related to the context of school education were excluded from the study. The selected articles were analyzed using thematic content analysis techniques through coding, thematic grouping, comparison of findings, and conceptual synthesis. The main themes analyzed include the conceptual foundation of the compassion-based curriculum, pedagogical strategies, the roles of teachers and students, students' learning experiences, character assessments, school culture, supporting factors, implementation barriers, and the impact of these on character development. The results of the synthesis are then used to formulate a conceptual framework for school curriculum development that systematically integrates empathy, compassion, and responsibility in goals, content, processes, assessments, and learning environments.

Results and Discussion

Results

The results of the literature synthesis show that the compassion-based school curriculum is an integrative approach that brings together character education, social-emotional learning, moral education, and care-based pedagogy. In this approach, compassion is understood not only as a positive feeling towards others but also as an

educational orientation that develops self-awareness, the ability to understand others' perspectives, sensitivity to social difficulties, and the willingness to take responsible action. Empirical studies of character education over the past few years have identified six main discussion groups: character conceptualization, measurement validation, intervariable relationships, program impact, implementation, and character development. However, the relationship between empathy, compassion, responsibility, and the structure of the school curriculum is still not widely discussed as a single conceptual unit. Thus, *love-centered character education* can be positioned as a new development that links the formation of personal virtue with social-emotional competence and ethical action in school life (Cipriano et al., 2023; Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025).

The results of the study also show that emotional competence has not consistently been included as a core part of the curriculum. Analysis of the curriculum documents shows that aspects of emotion recognition, emotion management, empathy, and relationship-building skills have not been distributed evenly across subjects and educational levels. These competencies are often assigned to specific subjects, counseling activities, or additional programs, so their implementation depends on the teacher's initiative and each school's policies. In fact, empathy and compassion are not enough to be developed through one subject, but need to be integrated into language, social sciences, religious education, art, science, extracurricular activities, and daily interactions. The findings show a need to transform emotional competence from supplemental material into cross-curricular principles that shape learning objectives, content, methods, assessments, and school culture (Fernández-Martín et al., 2021; Grund & Holst, 2023).

The first dominant dimension in a compassion-based curriculum is empathy. Empathy includes the ability to recognize emotional states, understand others' points of view, and respond appropriately to others' experiences. The results of the study show that teacher empathy occupies a strategic position because it serves as a real model for how students should treat others. Analysis of data from 506,317 15-year-old students across 75 countries and regions showed that teachers' empathy was positively associated with reading achievement, either directly or through increased students' sense of belonging at school. Sense of belonging mediates about 29% of the influence of teachers' empathy on reading achievement. The findings show that teachers' behaviors that listen, understand difficulties, appreciate differences, and provide support not only improve the quality of relationships but also create psychological conditions that support students' engagement and academic achievement (Cai et al., 2023).

The second dimension is compassion, which is sensitivity to one's own and others' difficulties, accompanied by a motivation to reduce them. Some school-based interventions suggest that compassion can be developed through structured learning activities. *The Social, Emotional, and Ethical Learning* program, conducted over 12 weeks with fourth- and fifth-graders, showed improvements in self-compassion, perspective-taking ability, empathic concern, intrinsic prosocial motivation, and academic goal setting. *The Me and the Us of Emotions* program, which combines classroom dynamics with

educational games, also demonstrates the feasibility of implementation and positive changes in empathy and feelings of calm. The findings confirm that compassion can be taught through mindfulness exercises, experiential reflection, emotional understanding, purposeful conversations, collaborative play, and activities that encourage learners to respond tangibly to the needs of others (Frazier et al., 2025; Xavier et al., 2023).

The third dimension is responsibility that functions to transform empathy and compassion into moral actions. Students can understand the feelings of others, but this understanding does not necessarily result in action if it is not accompanied by the ability to make decisions, consider consequences, and account for choices. Therefore, a compassion-based curriculum needs to include opportunities for students to resolve conflicts, work in groups, help community members, discuss moral dilemmas, and reflect on the impact of their actions. Meta-analyses of experiential learning programs show that hands-on experiences are more effective than non-experiential learning in improving adolescents' subjective empathy and well-being. Social-emotional learning programs also result in positive changes in skills, attitudes, prosocial behaviors, school functioning, and academic achievement. This shows that responsibility is more effectively formed through experience, habituation, reflection, and participation than through memorization of values or the delivery of moral advice alone (Chan et al., 2021; Cipriano et al., 2023).

Further results show that the effectiveness of a compassion-based curriculum is highly dependent on teacher pedagogy and school climate. Strategies widely found in the literature include collaborative learning, moral dilemma discussions, role-playing, reflective writing, *mindfulness*, character-driven stories, project-based learning, social service activities, and restorative practices. School interventions that teach compassion and empathy have been shown to strengthen students' social relationships and altruistic orientation. The social empathy activation program also shows that empathy can be extended from understanding individual experiences to awareness of group conditions, inequality, and societal problems. Therefore, a loving curriculum requires not only learning materials, but also supportive teacher-student relationships, a sense of security, fairness, opportunities to express opinions, and classroom norms that respect the dignity of every member of the school community (Kappelmayer et al., 2023; Silke et al., 2024).

Despite delivering promising results, the implementation of a compassion-based curriculum faces several obstacles. These obstacles include limited learning time, lack of teacher training, differences in student readiness, incompatibility of materials with cultural contexts, weak support from school leaders, and difficulties in validly measuring character changes. Teachers' perceptions of the PATHS program show that demographic backgrounds, initial social-emotional skill levels, teacher expectations, and learners' conditions can influence engagement and the benefits of interventions. These results show that universal programs do not always have the same impact on all students. In addition, the success of the intervention was influenced by the consistency of implementation, completeness of the material, duration, student involvement, and quality of support for teachers. Therefore, curriculum implementation needs to be accompanied

by needs assessment, contextual adaptation, ongoing training, implementation monitoring, and evaluation involving teachers, students, parents, and independent observers (Hamilton et al., 2025; Frazier et al., 2025).

Discussion

The findings of this study show that a compassion-based curriculum needs to be understood as an educational framework that works at three levels, namely intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic. At the intrapersonal level, students are guided to recognize emotions, develop self-awareness, manage responses, and treat themselves with love. At the interpersonal level, learners develop empathy, perspective taking, caring, cooperation, and conflict resolution skills. At the systemic level, learners are directed to understand the relationship between individual actions, social conditions, injustice, and shared well-being. Thus, love in education is not a sentimental concept or permissive treatment, but an ethical principle that combines attention, respect, justice, moral courage, and responsibility. The framework expands social-emotional learning by providing a moral basis that directs emotional competence to actions that benefit oneself, others, and the community (Silke et al., 2024; Frazier et al., 2025; Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025).

From a curriculum design perspective, the integration of empathy, compassion, and responsibility needs to be done through a combination of explicit learning, cross-subject integration, and strengthening school culture. Explicit learning can take the form of specialized sessions on emotional awareness, perspective taking, empathic communication, and ethical decision-making. Cross-subject integration can be carried out through character analysis in literature, the study of social justice in social sciences, environmental responsibility in science, or cooperative activities in physical education. Meanwhile, school culture needs to be strengthened through teacher examples, anti-bullying policies, restorative discipline, student forums, community services, and family involvement. The model is more comprehensive than an approach that makes character education a ceremonial activity or a list of values that is pasted in the classroom. Emotional and character competencies will develop when students experience these values consistently in the content of learning, social relations, policies, and school institutional practices (Grund & Holst, 2023; Fernández-Martín et al., 2021; Cai et al., 2023).

The discussion also shows that teachers are the main implementers as well as part of the compassion-based curriculum. It is not enough for teachers to have knowledge of empathy and character, but must be able to listen without judgment, manage their emotions, give fair responses, and create a safe space for students to make mistakes and correct their behavior. However, the demand to always show compassion can be a burden if it is not accompanied by teacher well-being, leadership support, planning time, and a professional learning community. Teacher training therefore needs to include conceptual understanding, reflective practice, conflict management, culturally responsive pedagogy, and the ability to adapt programs based on the needs of students. The findings on

differences in responses to interventions also remind that compassion should be realized through an inclusive approach, not through a uniform program that ignores students' social, cultural, linguistic, ability, and life experiences (Hamilton et al., 2025; Cai et al., 2023). The main contribution of this study is the formulation of a conceptual architecture of the *compassionate school curriculum* which includes five interrelated components, namely goals, content, pedagogy, assessment, and school culture. The goal is to form students who are self-aware, empathetic, caring, and responsible. Its content includes emotional literacy, social relationships, compassion, virtue, moral dilemmas, justice, and social responsibility. Her pedagogy emphasizes experience, dialogue, reflection, collaboration, example, and service. The assessment needs to use behavioral observations, reflection journals, portfolios, self-assessments, peer assessments, and teacher feedback, not just questionnaires. Meanwhile, school culture serves to ensure that the value of compassion is applied in leadership, rules, relationships, and decision-making. Further research needs to test the framework through longitudinal studies, cross-cultural experiments, impact evaluations on bullying and well-being, and analysis of the sustainability of character change after learners complete the program (Cipriano et al., 2023; Xavier et al., 2023; Frazier et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This study concludes that the development of *compassionate school curriculum* is a strategic approach to strengthen character education through the integration of empathy, compassion, and responsibility into the purpose, content, learning process, assessment, and school culture. Empathy plays a role in shaping students' ability to understand the feelings and perspectives of others, compassion encourages the emergence of caring and prosocial actions, while responsibility directs students to make ethical decisions and consider the consequences of their actions. The effectiveness of the curriculum is greatly influenced by teacher role models and competencies, the use of experiential and reflective learning, a safe and inclusive school climate, leadership support, and family and community involvement. Although various studies have shown a positive impact on social-emotional competence, prosocial behavior, school ownership, well-being, and learning outcomes, their implementation still faces obstacles in the form of limited teacher training, program fragmentation, differences in cultural contexts, and difficulty measuring character development. Therefore, a compassion-based curriculum needs to be developed as a cross-subject framework and school culture that is implemented consistently, contextually, and sustainably in order to be able to form students who are not only academically superior, but also empathetic, caring, fair, and responsible in social life.

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