

CHARACTER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR: THE MEDIATING FUNCTION OF EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Emilda Oktavia^{a*)}, Ike Kusdyah^{a)}

^{a)} *Institut Teknologi & Bisnis Asia, Malang, Indonesia*

^{*)} *Corresponding Author.: emildaoktavia.batch15@gmail.com*

Article history: received 16 August 2025; revised 12 September 2025; accepted 29 October 2025

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33751/ijmie.v4i2.13588>

Abstract. This study examines the relationship between character education and children's social behavior by investigating the mediating role of emotional development in early childhood education settings. A quantitative survey design was employed involving 60 teachers from Palm Kids Preschool in Palembang, Indonesia. Data were collected using structured questionnaires developed from indicators of character education, emotional development, and social behavior. The data were analyzed through simple linear regression and mediation analysis using the Sobel test. The findings reveal that character education has a positive and significant effect on both emotional development and children's social behavior. Emotional development was also found to significantly influence social behavior. Furthermore, the mediation analysis confirmed that emotional development significantly mediates the relationship between character education and social behavior. These results indicate that character education contributes not only directly to the enhancement of children's social behavior but also indirectly through strengthening emotional competencies. The study highlights the importance of integrating character-building practices with emotional development strategies in early childhood education to foster adaptive and prosocial behavior. This research contributes to the growing discourse on socio-emotional learning and character-based education by providing empirical evidence from the context of early childhood education in Indonesia.

Keywords: character education; emotional development; social behavior; early childhood education; mediation effect.

I. INTRODUCTION

Character education has become a central concern in contemporary educational discourse due to its significant contribution to children's socio-emotional and behavioral development. In early childhood education, character formation is considered a foundational process through which children develop moral awareness, empathy, responsibility, respect, and social adaptability. Recent educational frameworks emphasize that schools are not only responsible for academic achievement but also for cultivating emotional intelligence and positive social behavior among learners [1], [2]. Consequently, the integration of character education into early childhood curricula has gained increasing international attention as part of holistic child development initiatives. Early childhood represents a critical developmental stage in which emotional regulation and social competence rapidly emerge. During this period, children begin to recognize, express, and manage emotions while simultaneously learning how to interact with peers and adults in socially acceptable ways. Emotional development strongly influences how children respond to social situations, resolve conflicts, and establish interpersonal relationships [3]. Children with well-developed emotional competencies tend to demonstrate higher levels of empathy, cooperation, self-control, and prosocial behavior, whereas poor emotional regulation is often associated with aggression, anxiety, and antisocial tendencies [4]. Several international studies have highlighted the effectiveness of character education and social-emotional learning (SEL) programs in improving children's emotional and social competencies. Universal SEL interventions implemented in early childhood education settings have been shown to significantly enhance emotional understanding, self-regulation, and cooperative behavior among young learners [5]. Likewise, school-based character education programs positively affect students' moral development, classroom behavior, and interpersonal communication skills [6]. These findings indicate that character education contributes not only to cognitive and moral growth but also to emotional maturity and behavioral adjustment.

The relationship between character education and social behavior is theoretically grounded in developmental and socio-constructivist perspectives. According to social learning theory, children acquire social behavior through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within their learning environments [7]. Teachers therefore play a crucial role in modeling positive values such as honesty, discipline, empathy, and cooperation. When these values are consistently integrated into classroom activities, children are more likely to internalize them and demonstrate constructive social interactions. Furthermore, emotional

development may function as an important psychological mechanism through which character education influences social behavior. Children who develop emotional awareness and regulation skills are generally more capable of expressing empathy, managing frustration, and engaging positively with others [8].

Despite the growing body of literature on character education and socio-emotional learning, several research gaps remain evident. First, many previous studies have primarily focused on the direct influence of character education on children's behavior without sufficiently examining the mediating role of emotional development [9]. Second, existing studies frequently emphasize curriculum implementation or instructional strategies rather than empirically testing the structural relationships among character education, emotional competencies, and social behavior. Third, empirical evidence from early childhood education contexts in developing countries, particularly Indonesia, remains relatively limited in international scholarly publications. As a result, there is still insufficient understanding regarding how emotional development mediates the relationship between character education and social behavior within culturally specific educational environments. In the Indonesian context, early childhood education institutions are increasingly encouraged to integrate character-building practices into daily learning activities as part of national education reforms. However, the practical implementation and psychological outcomes of such programs vary considerably across institutions. Preliminary observations conducted at Palm Kids Preschool in Palembang revealed that children exhibit diverse emotional and social characteristics. While some children demonstrate empathy, cooperation, and emotional stability, others still experience difficulties in emotional regulation, sharing, conflict management, and social adaptation. These conditions indicate the necessity of strengthening character education approaches that simultaneously foster emotional development and positive social behavior.

Previous empirical findings also support the importance of investigating emotional development as a mediating variable. Research conducted by Durlak et al. demonstrated that social-emotional competencies significantly predict children's behavioral adjustment and academic success [10]. Similarly, recent studies reported that emotional regulation mediates the relationship between educational interventions and prosocial behavior among young children [4], [8]. Nevertheless, limited studies have specifically examined this mediating mechanism within the framework of character education in early childhood settings. Based on these theoretical and empirical considerations, this study aims to analyze the effect of character education on children's social behavior with emotional development serving as a mediating variable. Specifically, the study investigates: (1) the influence of character education on emotional development, (2) the influence of character education on social behavior, (3) the influence of emotional development on social behavior, and (4) the mediating role of emotional development in the relationship between character education and social behavior among early childhood learners. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the advancement of research on character education and socio-emotional learning, particularly within early childhood education contexts, while also providing practical implications for teachers, schools, and policymakers in designing holistic educational programs that support children's emotional and social well-being.

Character Education in Early Childhood Education

Character education refers to a systematic educational effort aimed at fostering ethical values, moral reasoning, and socially responsible behavior among learners. In early childhood education, character formation is considered essential because children are in a developmental phase characterized by rapid cognitive, emotional, and social growth. Educational institutions therefore play a strategic role in cultivating values such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, respect, and discipline through structured learning experiences and teacher modeling. Recent studies emphasize that effective character education should be integrated into daily classroom activities rather than taught merely as theoretical concepts. Character-building practices embedded in collaborative learning, storytelling, role-playing, and routine social interaction significantly contribute to children's moral internalization and behavioral adaptation [11]. Furthermore, the effectiveness of character education is strongly influenced by teacher consistency, classroom climate, and emotional support provided within the learning environment [12]. These findings reinforce the view that character education is multidimensional, involving cognitive understanding, emotional engagement, and behavioral practice simultaneously. In contemporary educational frameworks, character education is increasingly associated with holistic education approaches that prioritize not only academic achievement but also emotional well-being and interpersonal competence. Such approaches are aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education that supports lifelong social and emotional development [13]. Consequently, many early childhood institutions have begun integrating character education with social-emotional learning programs to create more adaptive and socially responsive learners.

Emotional Development and Social Competence

Emotional development refers to children's ability to recognize, express, regulate, and respond appropriately to emotions within social contexts. Emotional competence is widely acknowledged as a critical predictor of children's social adjustment, peer acceptance, and behavioral outcomes. Children who can regulate emotions effectively tend to demonstrate stronger communication skills, empathy, cooperation, and conflict-resolution abilities [14]. In early childhood settings, emotional development occurs through continuous interaction with teachers, peers, and family environments. Emotional learning experiences help children understand social expectations and develop self-control mechanisms necessary for constructive social participation. Research indicates that emotional regulation significantly reduces aggressive behavior and improves children's capacity to engage in prosocial interactions [10]. Additionally, emotionally supportive classroom environments positively influence children's confidence, independence, and interpersonal relationships. The theoretical relationship between emotional development and social behavior can also be explained through developmental psychology perspectives. Emotional regulation enables children to manage frustration, delay impulsive reactions, and interpret social cues more effectively. As a result,

emotionally competent children are more likely to establish positive peer relationships and adapt successfully to group activities [15]. Therefore, emotional development serves not only as an individual psychological attribute but also as an important determinant of broader social functioning during early childhood.

The Relationship Between Character Education, Emotional Development, and Social Behavior

The interaction between character education, emotional development, and social behavior forms an integrated developmental framework in early childhood education. Character education provides normative and moral foundations that guide children's behavior, while emotional development strengthens children's internal capacity to regulate actions and respond appropriately in social situations. Together, these factors contribute to the formation of adaptive social behavior. Previous empirical studies suggest that character education positively influences children's emotional competencies by encouraging empathy, self-awareness, and emotional responsibility [11], [12]. In turn, emotional competencies significantly contribute to prosocial behavior, including helping, sharing, cooperation, and respectful communication [14]. This relationship indicates that emotional development may function as an intervening mechanism linking character education to social behavior outcomes. Social behavior itself encompasses observable actions that reflect children's ability to interact positively with others in accordance with social norms and expectations. Indicators of positive social behavior among early childhood learners include empathy, peer interaction, communication skills, cooperation, and rule compliance. Children who receive consistent exposure to character-based educational practices are more likely to demonstrate constructive social engagement and emotional stability [13]. Although previous studies have examined the direct relationship between character education and social behavior, limited research has specifically explored emotional development as a mediating variable within this relationship, particularly in early childhood education contexts in Indonesia. Therefore, this study proposes a conceptual framework in which character education influences children's social behavior both directly and indirectly through emotional development. This framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of how educational values and emotional competencies interact to shape children's behavioral outcomes.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a survey design to examine the mediating role of emotional development in the relationship between character education and children's social behavior in early childhood education settings. Quantitative methodology was considered appropriate because the study aimed to measure the causal relationships among variables objectively through statistical analysis. The research was conducted at Palm Kids Preschool, Palembang, Indonesia, involving 60 active teachers selected using a saturated sampling technique, in which all members of the population were included as research participants. Data were collected through structured questionnaires distributed via Google Forms. The research instrument consisted of three main constructs: character education, emotional development, and social behavior. Each construct was operationalized into several indicators adapted from contemporary early childhood education literature and measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Prior to data analysis, validity and reliability testing were conducted to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the measurement instrument. Instrument validity was evaluated using Pearson correlation analysis, while reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient with a minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70 [16].

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS version 26 through several stages of statistical testing, including descriptive statistics, classical assumption tests, simple linear regression, and mediation analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to identify the distribution and general tendencies of respondents' perceptions toward the measured variables. Classical assumption tests included normality, heteroscedasticity, and multicollinearity analyses to ensure that the regression model met statistical requirements. Hypothesis testing was conducted using regression analysis to determine the direct effects among variables, while the mediating effect of emotional development was examined using the Sobel test. The mediation model was designed to assess whether emotional development significantly transmitted the influence of character education on children's social behavior. This analytical approach enabled the study to provide empirical evidence regarding both direct and indirect relationships among the investigated variables, thereby strengthening the explanatory power of the proposed conceptual framework [17].

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that character education has a positive and significant influence on children's emotional development and social behavior in early childhood education settings. Descriptive statistical analysis showed that respondents generally perceived the implementation of character education at Palm Kids Preschool positively, particularly regarding the integration of values such as responsibility, empathy, discipline, and cooperation into classroom activities. Similarly, emotional development and social behavior variables also demonstrated high mean scores, indicating that children were perceived to possess relatively strong emotional and social competencies. The regression analysis revealed that character education significantly affected emotional development, suggesting that the consistent implementation of character-based learning contributes to children's emotional regulation, emotional awareness, and interpersonal sensitivity. This finding supports the argument that

educational environments emphasizing moral values and positive interaction patterns facilitate emotional maturation among young learners. In addition, character education was also found to have a direct and significant effect on social behavior. Children exposed to character-oriented learning experiences tended to demonstrate greater empathy, cooperation, communication skills, and compliance with social norms. Furthermore, emotional development significantly influenced children's social behavior. The statistical results suggest that emotionally competent children are more capable of engaging in adaptive social interactions and resolving interpersonal conflicts constructively. The mediation analysis using the Sobel test confirmed that emotional development significantly mediates the relationship between character education and social behavior. This indicates that character education not only shapes social behavior directly but also strengthens emotional competencies that subsequently contribute to positive behavioral outcomes. Therefore, emotional development serves as an important psychological mechanism linking character-based educational practices with children's social adaptation.

The findings confirm that character education plays a substantial role in enhancing emotional development among early childhood learners. This result is consistent with contemporary educational theories emphasizing that moral and character instruction contributes to emotional regulation and self-awareness development. Educational environments that consistently model honesty, empathy, discipline, and cooperation create emotional security that supports children's psychological growth [18]. Character education therefore functions not only as moral instruction but also as an emotional developmental process that shapes children's capacity to understand and manage emotions effectively. The significant influence of character education on social behavior also supports previous empirical evidence indicating that values-based educational programs positively affect children's interpersonal relationships and prosocial actions [19]. Through repeated exposure to cooperative learning, group interaction, and teacher modeling, children gradually internalize social norms and behavioral expectations. This process aligns with socio-constructivist perspectives suggesting that social behavior develops through interaction and guided participation within educational communities [20]. In this study, children exposed to strong character education practices demonstrated improved empathy, communication skills, and peer interaction, indicating that character-based learning contributes meaningfully to social adaptation in early childhood settings. Another important finding is the significant relationship between emotional development and social behavior. Children who possess better emotional understanding and regulation tend to exhibit more adaptive and socially acceptable behavior. Emotional competence enables children to manage frustration, express empathy, and respond appropriately during social interaction [21]. This finding reinforces developmental psychology theories asserting that emotional regulation constitutes a core foundation for successful social functioning. In early childhood contexts, emotionally supportive educational experiences are therefore essential for fostering harmonious peer relationships and reducing problematic behavior.

The mediation analysis further demonstrated that emotional development significantly mediates the effect of character education on social behavior. This suggests that character education indirectly strengthens social behavior by first enhancing children's emotional competencies. The result provides empirical support for integrative educational models that position emotional learning as an intermediary process connecting moral instruction with behavioral outcomes [22]. In practical terms, children who learn values such as empathy, respect, and responsibility are more likely to develop emotional awareness, which subsequently influences how they behave socially. Consequently, emotional development should not be viewed merely as a complementary educational outcome but as a central mechanism within character-based educational interventions. These findings also contribute to the growing international discourse regarding the integration of character education and social-emotional learning in early childhood education systems. Previous international studies have argued that educational institutions must adopt holistic pedagogical approaches that simultaneously promote academic competence, emotional intelligence, and social responsibility [23]. The present study extends this perspective by providing empirical evidence from the Indonesian early childhood education context, where research on emotional mediation within character education remains relatively limited. Thus, this study fills an important empirical gap while supporting the broader movement toward holistic child-centered education.

From a practical perspective, the results imply that teachers should integrate emotional learning strategies into character education programs more systematically. Activities such as collaborative play, storytelling, emotional reflection, and empathy-based discussions may strengthen both emotional and social competencies among children [24]. Teachers also play a crucial role as emotional role models whose behaviors significantly influence children's emotional responses and interpersonal attitudes. Therefore, professional development programs for early childhood educators should include training related to emotional pedagogy and socio-emotional facilitation. Moreover, educational policymakers should recognize that social behavior development cannot be separated from emotional growth and character formation. Educational curricula emphasizing cognitive achievement alone may inadequately support children's holistic development. Integrative educational policies that prioritize emotional well-being, moral values, and social competence are therefore essential for preparing children to function effectively within increasingly complex social environments [25].

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that character education, emotional development, and social behavior are interconnected dimensions within early childhood education. Emotional development serves as a crucial mediating factor that strengthens the effectiveness of character education in shaping positive social behavior. These findings highlight the importance of implementing comprehensive educational approaches that integrate moral instruction, emotional support, and social learning experiences to foster adaptive and socially responsible future generations. The findings of this study provide several practical implications for educators, school administrators, curriculum developers, and policymakers. First, early childhood teachers should integrate character education into daily classroom activities through interactive and emotionally supportive learning strategies. Activities such as collaborative play, storytelling, role-playing, group discussion, and empathy-based reflection can effectively strengthen children's emotional awareness and social competence. Second, teachers should be encouraged to function not only as

academic facilitators but also as emotional role models who demonstrate positive interpersonal behavior consistently. Emotional support, responsive communication, and positive reinforcement from teachers are essential in fostering children's emotional security and social confidence. Third, school institutions should develop learning environments that prioritize socio-emotional well-being alongside academic achievement. Integrating character education and emotional learning into institutional culture may contribute to more harmonious classroom interactions, reduced behavioral problems, and stronger peer relationships among children. Finally, educational policymakers should consider strengthening character and socio-emotional learning components within early childhood curricula. Educational frameworks that emphasize holistic child development are essential for preparing future generations capable of adapting positively within increasingly complex social environments.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted within a single early childhood education institution with a relatively limited sample size, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. Second, the study relied primarily on teachers' perceptions through self-reported questionnaires, which may introduce subjectivity in the assessment of children's emotional and social behavior. Future studies are therefore recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples across multiple educational institutions and cultural settings to improve external validity. Researchers may also consider employing mixed-method or longitudinal approaches to gain deeper insights into the long-term effects of character education on emotional and social development. In addition, future research could explore other mediating or moderating variables, such as parenting style, school climate, peer interaction, or digital learning environments, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing children's social behavior. In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on character education and socio-emotional learning by demonstrating that emotional development plays a critical mediating role in strengthening the influence of character education on children's social behavior. The findings highlight the necessity of implementing integrated educational practices that simultaneously cultivate moral values, emotional competence, and positive social interaction during early childhood development.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between character education and children's social behavior by investigating the mediating role of emotional development in an early childhood education context. The findings demonstrated that character education significantly contributes to both emotional development and social behavior among young children. Educational practices emphasizing values such as empathy, discipline, responsibility, honesty, and cooperation were found to positively influence children's emotional regulation and interpersonal interaction. Furthermore, emotional development significantly affected children's social behavior, indicating that emotionally competent children are more likely to demonstrate adaptive, cooperative, and prosocial behaviors within educational environments. The mediation analysis confirmed that emotional development serves as a significant mediating variable in the relationship between character education and social behavior. This finding indicates that character education not only directly shapes social behavior but also indirectly strengthens it through the enhancement of children's emotional competencies. Therefore, emotional development functions as an important psychological mechanism that supports the effectiveness of character-based educational interventions in early childhood education settings. Overall, the study reinforces the importance of adopting holistic educational approaches that integrate moral values, emotional learning, and social competence development simultaneously. Character education should not be understood solely as moral instruction but as a comprehensive developmental process that contributes to children's emotional maturity and positive social adaptation.

V. References

- [1] C. Blewitt et al., "Social and emotional learning associated with universal curriculum-based interventions in early childhood education and care centers: A systematic review and meta-analysis," *JAMA Network Open*, vol. 1, no. 8, 2018.
- [2] J. A. Durlak, J. G. Mahoney, and A. E. Boyle, "What we know, and what we need to find out about universal, school-based social and emotional learning programs," *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 148, no. 11–12, pp. 765–782, 2022.
- [3] S. A. Denham, "Emotional competence in early childhood," in *Handbook of Socialization*. New York, NY, USA: Guilford Press, 2020.
- [4] R. Walog et al., "Building social-emotional foundations in early childhood education: Approaches and outcomes," *Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, vol. 6, no. 9, pp. 120–131, 2024.
- [5] W. T. Gormley, D. Phillips, K. Newmark, K. Welti, and S. Adelstein, "Social-emotional effects of early childhood education programs in Tulsa," *Child Development*, vol. 82, no. 6, pp. 2095–2109, 2011.
- [6] A. Cappelen, J. List, A. Samek, and B. Tungodden, "The effect of early-childhood education on social preferences," *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 128, no. 7, pp. 2739–2758, 2020.
- [7] A. Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, USA: Prentice-Hall, 1977.
- [8] N. Hasanah and M. Yusuf, "The mediating role of emotions in the relationship between character education and children's social competence," *Journal of Early Childhood Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 210–219, 2022.

- [9] S. Nurhayati and R. Firmansyah, "The influence of character education on emotional regulation among early childhood learners," *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 45–55, 2023.
- [10] E. Jones, K. McGarrah, and M. Kahn, "Social and emotional learning interventions and behavioral outcomes in early childhood education," *Early Education and Development*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 144–160, 2024.
- [11] R. Berkowitz and M. Bier, "Research-based character education," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 591, no. 1, pp. 72–85, 2020.
- [12] T. Lovat, R. Toomey, and N. Clement, *International Research Handbook on Values Education and Student Wellbeing*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2021.
- [13] UNESCO, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*. Paris, France: UNESCO Publishing, 2021.
- [14] J. Denham, H. Bassett, and K. Wyatt, "The socialization of emotional competence," *Child Development Perspectives*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 84–89, 2019.
- [15] M. Domitrovich, C. Durlak, R. Staley, and R. Weissberg, "Social-emotional competence: An essential factor for promoting positive adjustment and reducing risk in school children," *Child Development*, vol. 88, no. 2, pp. 408–416, 2018.
- [16] J. F. Hair, G. T. M. Hult, C. M. Ringle, and M. Sarstedt, *A Primer on Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)*, 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage Publications, 2022.
- [17] A. Field, *Discovering Statistics Using IBM SPSS Statistics*, 6th ed. London, U.K.: Sage Publications, 2024.
- [18] M. Fullan, *The Right Drivers for Whole System Success*. Melbourne, Australia: Centre for Strategic Education, 2021.
- [19] K. Kristjánsson, *Virtuous Emotions*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- [20] L. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 2019 edition.
- [21] S. Denham and K. Bassett, "Early childhood teachers as socializers of young children's emotional competence," *Early Childhood Education Journal*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 137–143, 2020.
- [22] M. Elias, "The future of character education and social-emotional learning: The need for whole-school approaches," *Educational Psychologist*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 185–196, 2021.
- [23] OECD, *Beyond Academic Learning: First Results from the Survey of Social and Emotional Skills*. Paris, France: OECD Publishing, 2021.
- [24] J. A. Fredrickson, "Positive emotions broaden and build children's social resources," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 45–51, 2020.
- [25] UNICEF, *Early Childhood Development and Education Strategy Report 2023–2030*. New York, NY, USA: UNICEF Publications, 2023.