

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF SCHOOL CURRICULUM IN SHAPING MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND BEHAVIOR AMONG THE MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM THE TEACHERS, PARENT AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVE IN SWAT VALLEY KP, PAKISTAN

Huma Shakir¹, Dr. Farooq Nawaz Khan^{*2}

¹PhD Scholar, Department of Education and Staff Training, University of Swat

^{*2}Associate Professor, Department of Education and Staff Training, University of Swat

^{*1}humashakir786@gmail.com, ^{*2}farooqlit76@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *

Dr. Farooq Nawaz Khan

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21410324>

Received	Accepted	Published
01 February 2026	17 March 2026	31 March 2026

ABSTRACT

While it is well recognised that character development is a key function of schooling, there is uncertainty regarding the extent to which school curricula support students' moral development and behaviour across the day-to-day teaching and learning context (Brown et al., 2023). The present qualitative study aimed at exploring the perceptions of teachers, parents and middle school students about the part of the school curricula in the process of moral development and behaviours in middle schools in Swat Valley of KPK, Pakistan. The study was conducted with 18 participants who were selected through purposive sampling: six students, six parents, and six teachers and adopted an interpretivist paradigm and a multiple case study design. Information was gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews in Pashto and Urdu media, translated into English during transcription and analysed by applying Braun and Clarke (2021) reflexive thematic analysis; findings were interpreted using Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory and Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development. The results indicated that teacher practices and school culture, in addition to the formal curriculum, had a strong impact on students' moral development in a way beyond what they perceived to be the impact of the formal curriculum, school environment had an important influence on students' values, attitudes and behaviour. The study contributes context-specific evidence from Swat Valley KP and offers practical recommendations for strengthening curriculum execution, teacher professional development, and character education initiatives within Pakistan's middle school education system.

Keywords: Character education; Moral development; formal curriculum; Hidden curriculum; Middle school; Qualitative study; Swat Valley; Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Traditional education could be considered as a system for academic knowledge transfer, but modern education systems are now looking for an ethical judgment, responsible behaviour, and social competence in addition to academic performance in the students (Brown et al., 2023).

This wider perspective on education has sparked international interest in character education as a clear goal of the school curriculum and not just a byproduct of schooling. In keeping with this change, variability is seen within the OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills in how schools, families and communities promote

students' social and emotional skills (OECD, 2024). Likewise, the policy framework of UNESCO highlights that the development of cognitions, social and emotional development and behaviour should be integrated and that character formation is considered as a core component of quality education and not an end in itself (UNESCO, 2024).

This study is based on two complimentary theories which explain how moral values and behaviour of students are being developed in the educational context. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory states that children learn behaviours, attitudes and moral values from significant models like their teachers, parents and peers, and that positive reinforcement influences and reinforces these behaviours. Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development, Students do not just learn moral behaviors from formal instruction, but they constantly watch teachers, parents, and peers, and infer from these interactions what moral behaviors to adopt. More recent studies have indicated, however, that observational learning is more complicated than suggested initially. Galanaki and Malafantis (2022) suggest that students' perception of the role model's behaviour is not the only factor influencing their identification with a role model; they also note that the status of the person, their interpersonal relationships, emotional attachment to the role model, and credibility of the interaction are all essential factors. However, presents how people gradually acquire the ability to think morally and make choices that are based on increasing moral principles, advancing from obedience-based decisions to gradually more principled understandings of justice and fairness. These theories can be integrated together into a holistic explanation for the development of moral behaviour and moral reasoning and are therefore especially useful for analysing curriculum-related influences on students' moral development.

An additional layer of this theory is the hidden curriculum, which is the values, norms and expectations that students pick up in the everyday life of the school but are not formally taught in the curriculum (Rossouw, 2023). School culture, disciplinary practices, teacher-student

relationships, and student relationships are continuous messages of acceptable behaviour that can reinforce or challenge the formal curriculum. The evidence from previous research shows that these implicit learning experiences have a greater impact on students' moral development than explicit teaching in the classroom since they are part of everyday school life (Sánchez & Barber, 2020). This is supported by evidence from Pakistan. The Single National Curriculum (SNC) has been introduced in Pakistan in three phases from 2021 to 2023, which places moral values, responsible citizenship, and comprehensive student development in the mainstream of education while ensuring the standardization of academic learning (Malik et al., 2023). The second phase of implementing this curriculum was in the middle school grades (Grades 6-8), where the government was dedicated to the inclusion of character education into the mainstream curriculum. Recent findings, however, indicate that it is difficult to make these policy aspirations a reality in the classroom.

Empirical analyses of the SNC have identified a number of challenges to its implementation. Studies by Jan et al (2023) found that some teachers were poorly supported professionally to implement the curriculum's pedagogical and values-based aspects well. In the same way, wider policy analysis shows that the moral and religious aspects of the curriculum is differently felt in the various socio-cultural, linguistic, and provincial contexts of Pakistan, thus questioning uniformity of the curriculum implementation at a national level (Niaz & Anand, 2024; Shaikh & Benedetti, 2024). Additionally, Malik et al. (2023) noted that the challenges faced by teachers in private schools were associated with the curriculum's alignment with the pedagogical methods used today; this might affect the interpretation and implementation of the goals of character education.

Despite the growing interest from scholars in curriculum reforms in Pakistan, studies conducted on the topic in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have paid greater attention to the access to education, participation in schools, implementation of curriculum reform policies, and recovery of

education after a conflict. There has been little research to explore the role of curriculum in the moral development and behaviour of students in this distinctive socio-cultural setting. Past research also tends to focus on a stakeholder group, such as teachers, rather than considering the interrelated experiences of parents and students. In addition, although middle school students are a vital time for moral, social, and emotional development, they are largely under-researched.

When considered collectively, the literature demonstrate a glaring empirical gap. However few studies have focused on the nature of teachers', parents', and middle school students' perception of the role played by the formal and informal curriculum in influencing students' moral development in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Filling this gap is especially significant in Swat Valley, where unique historical, cultural and social factors continue to influence educational experiences. The present study adds context specific evidence to the existing body of knowledge on the implementation of curriculum and character education in Pakistan by considering multiple stakeholders perspectives in this regard.

In this qualitative study in the secondary schools of Karachi, it was found that apart from formal lessons, the routines, discipline and peer culture of the school played a significant role in the shaping of the moral outlook of the students (Al-Mujahid & Hussain, 2025). These are all theoretical viewpoints that point to the interaction between formal curriculum, teacher modelling, peer relationships, and the culture of the school as having a significant impact on students' moral development, and thus serve as the conceptual base for the present study.

The moral values, responsible citizenship, and ethical behavior of the students are identified as essential learning outcomes in the national curriculum frameworks like Single National Curriculum (SNC) in Pakistan. There is, however, little empirical research that provides insight into the lived and enacted experiences of these aims in the middle school classroom. Previous research indicates that teachers are not well equipped for values education and there is variation in the

implementation of curriculum (Jan et al., 2023). Furthermore, research internationally suggests that the moral development of students is not just determined by what is taught in the formal curriculum but by many interacting factors such as teacher practice, peer relationships, family environment and the hidden curriculum (Killen & Smetana, 2013). So, knowing the curriculum by the outcome of the policy alone is not enough to describe students' moral development.

To fill this gap, this study examined the perceptions of teachers, parents and middle school students on the impact of the formal and hidden curriculum on moral development and behavioral patterns of students in middle schools of Swat Valley, KPK. These perspectives of the stakeholders give contextually-grounded evidence which can help to shape the curriculum, teacher training and future character education programs in the Pakistani education system.

The conclusion of this study is that moral character has been a growing concern in the modern education systems and the importance of it is now gaining recognition in the international education systems (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2024). Meanwhile, studies show that the effectiveness of character education relies on the content of the formal curriculum as well as teacher behaviours, interrelationships among the students, school climate, and the hidden curriculum as it affects the ways students learn and understand moral values.

This review is also a confirmation that Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory and Kohlberg's (1984) moral development theory can complement to explain students' moral development. Bandura provides an explanation of how behaviours and values are learnt and acquired by observing and modelling others while Kohlberg provides an explanation of how students have the ability to interpret and justify their behaviours through moral reasoning. These theories, when combined with the concept of the hidden curriculum, provide a complete picture of the complex interaction among curriculum, school experiences and students' moral development.

Although there has been significant research internationally and nationally, there are still some

areas of major interest that are missing. First, there are relatively few qualitative studies that have specifically targeted middle school students. Secondly, few studies have included the voices of teachers, parents and students simultaneously. Third, there is limited evidence from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, and specifically from the Swat Valley, that the educational context varies from those described in much of the literature on education and development in urban settings. These gaps are the basis of the present study that brings together formal curriculum, hidden curriculum, teacher modelling and moral reasoning in one analytical framework and takes into consideration the viewpoints of various parties. The study provides context-specific evidence to the body of literature in Pakistan related to curriculum, moral development and character education in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. What is teachers', parents', and students' view of the middle school curriculum's contribution to student moral development and behavior?
2. What are the ways in which teachers see teacher modelling affecting student moral development and student behaviour according to Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory?
3. How is the hidden curriculum, including school culture, disciplinary practices, and peer interactions, perceived to impact student moral development, in addition to the formal curriculum?
4. How do parents feel about school-based moral education and family-based moral socialization?
5. What is the relationship between middle school experiences and students' morals and behavior?
6. Teachers, parents, and students believe what are the obstacles in the way of the middle school curriculum being effective in developing moral development?
7. What are the recommendations made by teachers, parents and students for improving the moral and character building aspects of the middle school curriculum in Swat Valley?

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is integrated and consists of three theories namely, Social Learning Theory of Bandura (1977), Kohlberg's theory of moral development (1984) and hidden curriculum. These theories are used to explain the role of school experiences in students' moral development and behaviour. Instead of considering these theories separately, there is a complementary perspective to the study that each of the theories accounts for a unique component of the moral learning process in middle school environments.

Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory states that students learn behaviours, attitudes and values from observing, mimicking, and reinforcing. Teachers, parents, and peers are also powerful role models who can send more powerful messages of moral expectations to one another than formal instruction can within a school. Peer relations in middle school years gain more importance as students look for acceptance, belonging and social recognition, with observational learning being a key factor (Killen & Smetana, 2013). Therefore, students' moral behaviours are not just influenced by what they are taught, but are also influenced by what they often see in their school environment.

Bandura's theory of learning behaviours explains how behaviours are learnt whereas Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development explains how students are able to reason about moral issues. Students develop from an early stage of obedience to rules, to a more socially informed and principled evaluation of fairness, justice and responsibility in their judgments. This developmental shift is particularly salient in middle school, as students are faced with the challenge of testing authority, examining other viewpoints, and making more independent moral choices (Killen & Smetana, 2013). Bandura's and Kohlberg's theories can be combined and form a complete explanation for how moral behaviour is acquired and moral reasoning processes are used in making moral decisions.

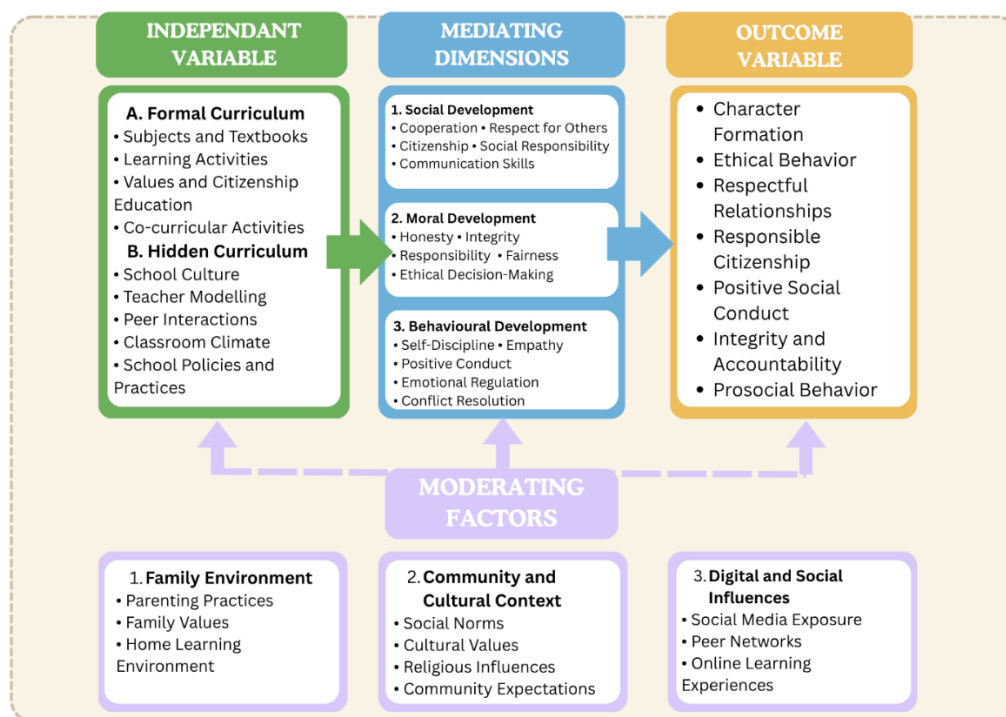
The idea of "Hidden curriculum" which clarifies how values are transmitted outside of the formal curriculum, support this academic curriculum,

The culture of the school, disciplinary policies, teacher-student relationships, classroom interactions and peer norms all have an ongoing impact on students' perception of acceptable behaviour (Rossouw, 2023). These are experiences that can build up—or sometimes challenge—the moral values that are formally taught in the classroom. Past studies indicate that the influence on students' moral development from the hidden curriculum is stronger than the effect of explicit moral lessons, as it is part of students' everyday learning experiences (Sánchez & Barber, 2020). The research evidence from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan also shows that students' moral development is influenced by the content of formal curriculum as well as the practices of the school which happen unconsciously and are referred to as the hidden curriculum (Al-Mujahid, Hussain, 2025).

The present study builds upon these views, defining moral development as an ongoing process of interaction between the formal curriculum, the hidden curriculum, teacher modelling, peer influence and students' developing moral reasoning. Opportunities for observation and reinforcement are found in teacher and peer

behaviours, and the interpretation of these behaviours is dependent on the level of moral reasoning that the student has reached at that time. These are not factors acting separately, but are interdependent and shape students' values, their attitudes, and their observable behaviour during their school experiences.

The conceptual framework thus sets the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum as two sources of moral learning that are interconnected. The formal curriculum content emphasizes the explicit teaching of ethical values and the development of responsible citizenship while the hidden curriculum influences student behaviour through the interactions that occur in daily life in the school. This process brings in a unique viewpoint for teachers, parents, and students. The teachers observe classroom interaction and teaching methods, the parents observe the children's behaviour outside school and the children describe first-hand experiences of the impact of school on them and their moral development. This integration helps to develop a holistic and proper perspective for curriculum's role in building character in the socio-cultural background of middle schools of Swat Valley.



Bandura (1977), Kohlberg (1984) and the HIDDEN CURRICULUM literature, developed by the researcher, were the basis for creating Figure 1.

Methodology

Research Paradigm

The research paradigm used in this study is the interpretivist paradigm, which holds the view that reality is socially constructed, and that meaning arises in the process of the construction of reality by the people involved in the process (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The study aimed to gain insight into the views of teachers, parents and middle school students regarding the role of the curriculum in the formation of moral behaviors and values, therefore interpretivist approach was deemed suitable. This approach did not assess pre-established behaviour, but it did allow for a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences in their socio-cultural context, as there are many ways to understand curriculum and moral development.

Research Design

A multiple case study design was used with each of the three participating middle schools as a case. This design was used because its implementation

allowed for a deep insight into the process of how the curriculum, the teachers' role acting as models, and the hidden curriculum influenced the moral development of the students in every school and how it can be compared across schools in Swat Valley. Triangulation of teachers' and parents' and students' perspectives of data collection in each case contributed to the credibility of the findings. A cross-case analysis also revealed patterns and differences in context, but was not based on the assumption that any given school was typical of the district.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher considered that their subjective interpretation and prior knowledge would inevitably be present in the process of interpreting the data, which is in line with the interpretivist paradigm (Braun and Clarke 2021). Throughout the research process, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to record assumptions, research decisions and interpretations that grew from the process, which was meant to improve reflexivity

and transparency. Contextual understanding was provided by being familiar with the educational context of Swat Valley, but at the same time it was subject to constant reflection to minimize its undue influence on the analysis.

Research Setting

This study was carried out in three schools of middle education level in Swat Valley, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa of Pakistan. Swat Valley offers a unique educational environment as schools have been established within a predominantly Pashtun speaking community, and are still recovering from periods of disruption during conflict. The area is also a suitable context for the study of the effect of curriculum on the moral development of students in a unique socio-cultural context as it is also responsible for implementing the Single National Curriculum in this area of Pakistan.

Population and Sampling

The study participants were three middle schools' (6th – 8th grade) students, parents and teachers.

Stakeholder Group	Number of Schools	Participants
Teachers/Administrators (≥3 years' experience)	3	6
Parents of middle school students	3	6
Students (aged 12–14)	3	6
Total	3	18

Inclusion Criteria

The participants were purposively selected because they had a direct work with the middle school students and were able to give rich and relevant information pertaining to the study objectives.

- Teachers: Currently serving as middle school (Grades 6-8) teachers in one of the participating schools with at least 2 years of teaching experience at the middle school level.
- Parents: One or more children in Grades 6-8 in a participating school and interested in talking about what they observe their child's moral development and behaviour are like.
- Students: Students currently enrolled in Grades 6-8, who can be interviewed, and who offer informed assent and parent/guardian consent.

Data Collection

The method of purposive sampling was used, which was aimed at the participants who had a direct experience of the implementation of the curriculum and students' moral development. The final sample comprised of 18 respondents (6 students, 6 parents and 6 teachers). Teachers were chosen to have at least three years of professional experience to get used to implementing the curriculum and students' behavioral development. The number of samples was deemed appropriate for a qualitative multiple case study as the study was not intended to generate statistical generalisations, but rather rich descriptive information from the cases studied that was contextual. Qualitative research can use small sample sizes, and with a clear focus on the problem, a narrow selection of participants, and a solid research theoretical framework, deep conclusions can be reached, as with the idea of information power (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The data was obtained by conducting semi-structured interviews with the teachers, parents, and students, using three interview guides that were designed individually for teachers, parents, and students (see Appendix 3: Interview Protocols). The topics of the interview were structured to facilitate comparison between the various participants and were also flexible to enable in-depth exploration of the individual experiences.

The interviews were in Pashto and Urdu. Interviews with teachers and parents were around 30-45 minutes in duration, and interviews with the students were 20-30 minutes.

The data collection process went through three phases. Permission was first sought from the participating schools and meetings were held with the school staff. Second, parents of eligible student

were asked to participate and provide informed consent and students then gave informed assent. Thirdly, interviews were arranged at convenient times and held in quiet, private areas of the school. Student interviews were conducted at supervised locations to ensure privacy and safety of students. Interviews were audio-recorded and were complemented by field notes on classroom interactions, school practices and routines, and disciplining behaviors, with participants' consent.

Translation and Transcription

All interviews were recorded in Pashto and urdu and later transcribed as and when they were conducted and translated in English by the researcher. Translated transcripts were verified with the original recordings to ensure the desired meaning of the participants and the translated contextually.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was given by the relevant institutional ethics committee. Consent was also given by the participating schools.

Informed consent was obtained in writing from all teachers and parents. Parent/guardian consent and student informed assent were received from student participants. All participants were free to withdraw and participation was voluntary.

Participant codes

TF1-TF3 (Female Teachers), TM1-TM3 (Male Teachers), PM1-PM3 (Mothers), PF1-PF3 (Fathers), SG1-SG3 (Girl Students), and SB1-SB3 (Boy Students) were used to ensure confidentiality. All research data were kept safely and school names were anonymized.

Interviews were carried out sensitively. Interviews were paused and/or ceased whenever any participant indicated discomfort and appropriate support was provided through the participating school.

Trustworthiness

The criteria of credibility by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used in establishing trustworthiness, which includes transferability, dependability, and

confirmability. Triangulation of the three stakeholder groups and three participating schools increased the credibility of the data. Rich descriptions of the research context and participants supported the transferability. An audit trail for coding decisions and theme development was maintained to bolster dependability. Confirmability was achieved by engaging in ongoing reflexive journaling in keeping with the reflexive thematic analysis model used by Braun and Clarke (2021).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, with reflexive thematic analysis approach principles (Braun & Clarke, 2021), was used to analyse the data. The stages involved in the analysis were: familiarisation with the data, deconstructing the data to derive initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally reporting. Coding was interpretive and theoretically grounded in the work of Bandura (Social Learning Theory), Kohlberg (Theory of moral development) and the hidden curriculum but was also open to emerging themes inductively.

Interviewing Protocols and Results

Interview Protocols

Three semi-structured interview guides were created for the teachers, parents, and middle school students. The interview guides were developed based on the study goals and theory including that of Bandura (1977) Social Learning Theory, Kohlberg (1984) theory of moral development and the hidden curriculum. Each of the participant groups was presented with core questions and follow-up probing questions were used when needed to clarify responses and elicit further description of participants' experiences.

Teacher's semi-structured interview guide

1. 1. So what are character development and development of character in the context of middle school education?
2. 2. How does the middle school curriculum contribute to students' moral development and behaviour?

3. 3. What are the most important subjects, activities, or classes in the school that help develop students' character?
 4. 4. Which moral values do pupils seem to acquire in school?
 5. 5. What is the impact of your own behaviour as a teacher on students' attitudes and behaviour?
 6. 6. What impact do school culture, discipline and peer relationships have on students' moral development?
 7. 7. What are some of your difficulties in fostering students' moral development?
 8. 8. What changes do you think could be made to enhance curriculum and character education?
- Probing questions were used such as: Can you explain more? Give an example? Why do you think that? In what ways did that affect behaviour?

Parents' Interview Guide (semi-structured)

9. 1. In addition to your child's academic success, what other qualities or values do you want him or her to acquire during school years?
10. 2. What does the school curriculum offer your child in the way of moral support?
11. 3. Do you notice any behavior differences in the students' due to school experiences?
12. 4. What values has your child acquired more from school than home?
13. 5. What are some similarities and differences between the values of the school and the family?
14. 6. Have teachers been role models for your child? Please explain.
15. 7. What are the barriers to schools in fostering pupils' moral development?
16. 8. What improvements would you recommend?

The probes were questions such as: Could you explain more? Can you give an example? Why do you think that? In what ways did that affect behaviour?

Semi-structured interview guide for students

17. 1. In addition to the academic subjects, what have been the key lessons you have gained from school?

18. 2. What subjects or activities have helped you to be a better or more responsible person? How?
 19. 3. What is your understanding of honesty, respect, responsibility and accountability?
 20. 4. What was an experience you had with a teacher that positively impacted your behaviour?
 21. 5. What have friends and classmates done to your behaviour or decisions?
 22. 6. What do you think school rules or routines have influenced your behaviour?
 23. 7. What changes do you want to propose to enhance the character building of students?
 24. 8. Have your values or behaviour been changed by anything else at school?
- Probing questions were used such as: could you explain it further? What could be an example? Why do you suppose there's such a thing? How did this impact behaviour?

Findings

Interviews produced six interrelated themes that involved the perceptions of teachers, parents, and middle school students regarding the role of the formal curriculum, the hidden curriculum, teacher modelling, and school experiences in relation to students' moral development and behaviour. Themes were constructed with the reflexive thematic analysis approach of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021) and are illustrated in the findings with the use of codes from the participants (TF, TM, PM, PF, SG, and SB), which have been anonymized.

Theme 1: Morals we learn through the school curriculum.

In the interviews, teachers, parents, and students, in general, agreed that the school's curriculum played a significant role in shaping students' moral character. Schools are seen to have a strong influence in inculcating values like honesty, respect, responsibility, co-operation and self-discipline amongst the participants. Academic subjects gave opportunities to talk about these values; however, participants repeatedly highlighted that the moral learning was enhanced as a result of the day-to-day learning that took place

in the classroom, teacher actions and involvement in school events.

Teachers reported that character development is not confined to one subject but is integrated in the teaching and learning process as part of their daily interactions with students. They thought that students learn values by watching the teacher's conduct and not just by only learning through formal learning.

As TF2 explained:

"Students watch our actions and behaviours closely and students start to learn to show honesty, fairness and respect as they observe these behaviours in the teachers." The parents too identified the role that the school played in the character building of their children. There were numerous positive behaviors reported following their children's transition to middle school, including respect for elders, responsibility and discipline.

One of the mothers (PM2) said:

"I have seen my child behave better – he is more respectful and responsible now and the school has made him good."

Students also expressed learning important life lessons other than in academics. Often they cited honesty, respect, friendship, responsibility and not to be a bully as values they had acquired through school.

For instance, SG1 said:

"School has helped me to tell the truth, and to avoid bullying and treating others with kindness."

Likewise, SB2 explained:

"We learn to help our friends, play together, and solve problems peaceably without fighting!"

A number of pupils also recognised areas and activities that have helped them to grow as individuals. The experiences that helped build confidence, communication skills, teamwork and responsible behaviours were described as Islamiat, debates, presentations, football, cultural programmes and English language activities. In general, students felt that character education was more strongly influenced by positive relationships, and experiential activities than by learning from books.

In general, there was a consensus among participants that moral development is a gradual process that is nurtured in the formal curriculum

and the broader school context. While they recognized the values taught on the curriculum, they always emphasized that the students learn these values best when they are seen and experienced in the classroom and by the teachers in meaningful activities in the school.

Theme 2: Teacher's role in shaping students' moral development

The result of the interviews showed that the teacher is one of the main figures in developing students' morals aside from teaching learning content. Teachers were regarded as important role models by participants from all three stakeholder groups because they were seen to have significant roles in molding student's characters through their behaviour, attitudes and interactions with students. Although many participants said that teachers were supportive, encouraging and caring, some pupils raised issues about the inconsistent behaviour of teachers, meaning that their behaviour could have a negative or a positive effect on moral learning.

Teachers recognised their responsibility to teach academic subjects, but also to help to shape the behaviour of students in their interactions throughout the day. They thought that by showing students the importance of being honest, fair, respectful and compassionate, students would be encouraged to learn to be the same.

One teacher (TM2) said:

"Students watch what we do; as we treat them with respect and fairness, they will follow suit with others."

Similarly, TF1 stated:

"We don't just have to finish the syllabus: Each encounter with students is a chance to shape their character."

Parents acknowledged teachers as significant people in their children's lives as well. Meanwhile, there were several who reported that positive relationships between teachers and their children had boosted their children's confidence, discipline and responsibility.

As PM1 commented:

"Children spend a considerable amount of time at school and teachers have a significant impact on their attitudes, behaviour and confidence."

Likewise, PF2 observed:

"The good teacher leaves a lasting impression: "Children remember what their teachers do more than what they say."

Positive and critical experiences were shared among students. Many appreciated and encouraged teachers who helped them participate, appreciate good behaviour and motivated them to improve. **SG2** explained:

"When our teachers praise us for doing something good, we feel their positive encouragement and then we try to be better students and better people."

Not everything, however, was good. Some students felt that discouraging behaviour from teachers lowered their confidence and impacted on their participation. One pupil (**SB3**) said:

Student saying, *"Sometimes teachers sometimes don't set a good example for students on how to behave and feel when they shout or treat students unfairly."*

In general, the participants agreed that teachers are one of the most important factors that affect moral development during the middle school years. Positive teacher behaviours were linked to greater confidence, responsibility, respect and motivation while negative behaviors were seen as demoralizing students and undermining the moral learning process. This study indicated that the character building of students is not only through the types of teaching that teachers give, but also through the interaction that teachers have with students in their daily teaching activities.

Theme 3: Learning Beyond the Classroom – The contribution of co-curricular and hidden curricular activities.

All stakeholder groups felt that students' moral and personal growth occurred outside the formal classroom setting. Teachers, parents and students repeatedly emphasized the critical role of co-curricular and extracurricular opportunities for fostering students' confidence, communication skills, teamwork, leadership and responsible behavior. Academic subjects offered students the opportunity to talk about moral values, while the practical experiences gave students the opportunity to use these values in everyday life.

Activities like debate, presentation, sports, cultural programs, and group projects helped the students learn how to cooperate, have self-confidence, and

respect others, teachers explained. They thought these experiences helped students to practice communication, problem solving, and leadership skills that textbooks were not able to provide.

As **TF3** explained:

"Activities teach students a lot of values and helps them to be more confident, to work with others and have sense of responsibility."

Similarly, **TM1** stated:

"Students have the opportunity to express themselves and interact with others in activities out of class, as well as learn qualities that may not be taught during regular lessons."

Parents also saw school activities as beneficial to character building. Several thought that their children's confidence and social behavior had been enhanced by their involvement in sports, debates and cultural events.

One **dad (PF3)** said:

"My child's level of confidence and comfort with others has increased since after school programs."

Practical learning experiences had a great impact on students' personal development and they strongly supported this. Several participants noted specific subjects/activities that had a positive impact on their behavior.

SG2 explained:

"I became more confident and able to express my ideas without fear by participating in debates."

Likewise, **SB3** shared:

"Football has given me teamwork skills and discipline, and presentations have boosted my confidence."

Islamiat is also an important subject for students to learn moral values, and a number of students also emphasized English, cultural activities, and classroom presentations as activities that fostered communication, cooperation, and personal responsibility. Some students echoed the opinion that they learned and applied positive values better through practical activities than through teaching in the classroom.

There was a general impression that co-curricular and extra-curriculum activities were an important supplement to the formal curriculum. These experiences offered opportunities to students for the application of moral values in real-life situations, for building interpersonal relationships, and for having confidence and

assuming responsibility for their personal and social development. The results indicate that character education is most effective when the teaching and learning of character takes place in meaningful practical and collaborative school activities.

As a whole, the accounts reveal that participants saw character development as going beyond formal instruction in the classroom. Academic subjects were reported as providing important moral values, but consistently teachers, parents and students felt that practical experiences were better suited to students' internalisation and application of these moral values. Debates, sports, presentations, and cultural activities were not mentioned as simply extracurricular activities but as opportunities to build confidence, cooperation, leadership and responsibility, and respectful relationships. There was a consistency in these views across all three stakeholder groups, with participants viewing experiential learning as a valuable addition to the formal curriculum, a way for students to put their moral knowledge into practice in everyday life and social action.

Theme 4: School Culture and Peer Relationships in Shaping Moral Development focuses on how school culture and peer relationships shape moral development.

The results of the findings revealed that the participants perceived the influence of school culture and relationships with peers on students' moral development and behavior. The formal curriculum was designed to include moral values; however, participants felt that it was the students' daily encounters with teachers, fellow students and the school community that would foster a student's moral values. Consistently enforced discipline and supportive friendships and relationships were recognised as an essential aspect of students' positive attitudes and behaviour.

In the school context, students participate in a significant amount of peer interaction and teachers shared their views that the school is a critical space for fostering cooperation, empathy, and respect between students. They felt that a positive relationship in the classroom would result

in good behavior and that bad peer influence would cause conflict and bad behavior.

As **TM3** explained:

"They learn from each other every day; positive behaviour is embedded in the daily life of the school when respect and co-operation are promoted."

Similarly, **TF2** stated:

"Good classroom management provides opportunities for students to feel appreciated and to respect teachers and students."

Parents were also aware of how friendships and attitudes in the school impacted their children's behaviour. Some thought that positive peer relationships would make children more responsible and socially confident; that negative peer relationships would have a detrimental impact on behaviour.

PM3 observed:

"Children are very affected by the influence of friends in school, good friends give encouragement for positive behaviour, and immoral friends cause problems."

Students often spoke of their friendships and their daily lives in school in relation to their moral development. Often, students spoke about their friendships and what they experience in school on a day-to-day basis with regards to their moral development. Learning to cooperate, to help others, to solve a disagreement peacefully were described by many.

SG3 shared:

"I've learned that in school 'Friendship and respecting others are very important even if we disagree.'"

But some students also reported that they had also seen bad peer experiences. **SB1** explained:

"I learned not to trust anybody, even close friends, as they can let you down."

Similarly, **SB2** noted:

"Teachers promote discussion when conflicts occur rather than fighting."

Participants overall affirmed that students' development of moral values was not only nurtured through formal teaching, but it was also encouraged by the nature of the relationships they had within the school community. The perception of positive peer relationships, good teacher-student relationships, and a respectful school climate was seen as significant in fostering students' social responsibility, cooperation and

moral behaviour. Participants also acknowledged that negative peer influence and unhealthy relationships can negatively affect these positive outcomes and thus the need to establish a school culture that consistently communicates positive values.

Themes 5: Barriers to encouraging moral development through the curriculum.

Across the three stakeholder groups, participants listed the following challenges as factors which contributed to the limitations of the effectiveness of the curriculum in the promotion of students' moral development. Teachers, parents, and students recognized that the curriculum taught was important and had good moral content, but factors associated with the institution and classroom limited the actual impact. The most commonly cited obstacles were an over-crowded curriculum, limited opportunities for hands-on learning, too much academic stress and teaching strategies that led students to be passive participants.

Teachers reported that there was a lack of time to engage in activities that would help students' moral and personal development due to the need to cover the required syllabus. Opportunities to organize discussions, hands-on activities, or character-building programs were further decreased due to administrative responsibilities and assessment requirements.

As **TM2** explained:

"More time would be wanted for guiding students and discussing moral issues, however completing a syllabus and other school work may often leave little time in which to do this."

Similarly, **TF1** stated:

"Character development calls for ongoing interactions with students, but sometimes the demands for academic work constrict these interactions."

Parents also identified these barriers and felt that schools need to provide more opportunities for pupils to learn about and practice life skills as well as academic subjects.

One father (**PF2**) said:

"Character can't be taught in a book; students need more practical learning experiences."

Students voiced the highest concerns in relation to the teaching and learning experience. There were several who thought that learning in the class was largely by rote-learn and preparation for exams, and that there was less emphasis on things being done in practice.

SG2 suggested:

"The curriculum needs to be modified and more opportunities need to be provided for students to be involved in and learn from their experiences."

Other students mentioned issues of discipline.

SG3 stated:

"Relational humiliation is not to be used as a punishment, since it will impact students' confidence."

Similarly, **SB3** explained:

"Students should be pressured less, have more activities, be treated equally, and teachers should not bully students."

Overall, participants agreed that the curriculum helps to foster and teach positive moral values but faced some practical challenges that limit its potential to foster students' morals. There was a consensus from all stakeholder groups that a shift towards a more supportive and student-centred learning atmosphere, where more attention is paid to practical learning experiences, teacher-student relationships, and balanced academic expectations would improve the curriculum's ability to contribute to student's moral and behavioral development.

Theme 6 – Recommendations of Stakeholders on Strengthening Moral and Character Development

It was concluded that the middle school curriculum should be more effective in fostering students' moral development by providing more opportunities for hands-on learning experiences and a student-centered teaching style. They valued the moral values which were part of the curriculum but felt that better delivery of curriculum, classroom practice and school activities would be helpful to them in developing the moral values.

Teachers have suggested that there is more flexibility needed within the curriculum to enable increased opportunities for discussion, reflection and practical learning. They were convinced that

by easing the overburdened demands of the curriculum, teachers would have more time to work with students on their moral and personal growth.

As TF2 explained:

“Character development takes more than learning lessons, students should be given opportunities to discuss real-life scenarios and to be involved in activities that enable them to practice positive values.”

Similarly, TM1 stated:

“Moral development of students should be as important as academic performance and should be developed in schools.”

Parents also endorsed the importance of enhancing character education by better partnership between the schools and parents. A number of people believed that this was a joint responsibility and that schools could offer opportunities for learning about morality while parents could reinforce the values at home.

PM1 observed:

“There is the need for a coordinated effort between schools and parents as children can learn values from both settings.”

Pupils gave special attention to making learning more practical and more interesting. Many recommended that more opportunities be provided for debates, sports, cultural programs, social service activities, and cooperative learning instead of just textbook learning. SG2 recommended:

“More practical activities should be provided since students learn better through hands-on activities than through reading books.”

Another person (SB3) commented:

“Equality of students, less academic pressure, more attention to activities to learn and build confidence.”

A number of pupils also suggested an improvement of the curriculum to reflect the needs of today's students, and adoption of more positive methods of discipline that foster self-assurance, self-esteem and respect.

In general, the participants agreed that it was not enough to change the curriculum content, but there was a need to enhance students' moral development. They felt that establishing a positive learning atmosphere, providing additional opportunities for students to learn through doing

and out-of-the-classroom activities, fostering respectful teacher-student relationships and strengthening the cooperative relationship between schools and families would make a significant contribution in the development of students' moral values and responsible behaviors.

Moral approach to curriculum, teaching and learning

The results of this study suggest that the participants believed that moral development happened when the formal curriculum met the real life behavior of the teacher, not when it met only the formal curriculum. While teachers, parents and students recognised that the curriculum of the middle school encouraged students to act with honesty, respect, responsibility and cooperation, they all highlighted that values would only be realised if they were modelled by teachers, in the learning environment and in the lives of students. This is why content of the curriculum is not enough to affect the moral development of students without the presence of positive teacher modelling and school climate that is in accordance with the curriculum values.

The results of this study are congruent with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory which suggests that people learn behaviours from significant role models. In the current study, teachers perceived themselves as role models whose behavior affects students' attitude and behavior, and parents perceived teachers as role models, whose attitudes and behaviors affect students' confidence, discipline, and interpersonal relationships. Students also said that encouraging behaviour by teachers boosted their motivation and confidence while discouraging or unfair treatment decreased their motivation and confidence. However, it was not universally positive as they experienced this modelling. While speaking about the example set by teachers, one student (SB3) noticed that sometimes teachers don't set a good example for us. If they shout at us or treat us badly, it makes us feel and behave badly. This account does not stand in opposition to Bandura's theory, but rather adds to it: there is not only a learning element to positive models, there is a learning element to negative models as well;

there is not only a learning element to inconsistent teacher behavior, there is a learning element to consistent teacher behavior, too. This result does not take teacher influence for granted as a positive influence, but indicates that the quality and consistency of the modelling is what matters to students' moral development.

This pattern also addresses the hidden curriculum that is being taught in these schools. As well as the expressed values that are stated in curriculum documents, students' values around honesty, fairness and respect are reinforced by the subtle, informal messages that are communicated to them in the way that they are treated by teachers day to day. Where the teacher's classroom behaviour is consistent with the explicitly stated values of the formal curriculum, there is a mutual reinforcement of the two, as in the case of SB3; where it is not, as in the case of SB3's account, the hidden curriculum can undermine the formal curriculum in spite of the stated values in the syllabus. This implies a greater influence of the curriculum as lived than written in the schools because the hidden curriculum is not taught but rather is a result of the norms of everyday school life (Rossouw, 2023).

The results also confirm the previous studies that emphasized the significance of teachers' behavior to character education. Brown et al. (2023) found that character education programmes are best when moral values are incorporated into the day-to-day teaching, and not to the extent of being taught as discrete lessons. Likewise, Diggs and Akos (2016) discovered that character education that is incorporated into the normal school routine is more effective at impacting behavioural and social development in students than character education delivered in isolation. In the current study, it was found that for the students of the middle schools of Swat Valley, the interactions of teachers with students in their daily lives, which may not reflect the morals being inculcated in the curriculum, are also significant in molding moral values.

Incorporating opportunities for discussion, reflection and ethical decision making is crucial for the development of students' moral reasoning, as indicated by the participants' responses in

relation to Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development. The values in the curriculum were appreciated by the participants, but the students repeatedly expressed the need to have more interactive and practical learning experiences rather than teacher-centred learning. They are finding that understanding of concepts is enhanced when students are required to respond to real life scenarios rather than relying on memorisation and/or prescribed textbooks. This finding lends credence to Kohlberg's notion that moral reasoning is a learning process that occurs when a person is actively involved in moral situations and experiences rather than when they passively accept moral rules.

One of the significant findings of this study is that the stakeholders are not considering curriculum, teacher modelling, and the hidden curriculum as distinct influences. Rather, they view moral development as a process that arises from the interaction of the content of the curriculum, explicit behaviours exhibited in the classroom, and the implicit or tacit norms of normal classroom life. This study is unique because it looks at the implementation of the curriculum, the influence of the teacher, and the relationship between the two in the context of the middle school in the Swat Valley, rather than considering them in isolation as in most previous studies. This combination has a practical implication: Programs in character education in this context are not likely to be effective by changing the curriculum alone, and should be supplemented by a well-designed teacher training program that focuses on consistency of teacher behavior, as students seem to notice when teachers do not behave consistently with their curriculum.

Limitations of the study

The findings of this study are subject to some limitations which should be taken into account. First, data collection was done in a purposive sample of 18 participants (6 teachers, 6 parents, 6 students) from the schools of Swat Valley, so the findings are only applicable to the group of people in the selected region and cannot be generalised to other regions, contexts or countries in Pakistan.

Secondly, interviews were held in Pashto and Urdu, which were then translated into English by the researcher. Translation by a single researcher without independent back-translation or verification by a second bilingual reviewer may lead to some distortion of the nuance of the original response by the participants.

Third, the study used the self-reported perceptions of the participants in the semi-structured interviews and not direct observation of classroom practices. The information provided by the participants regarding teacher modelling and how this was used in the curriculum may have been influenced by social desirability or by recall, and was not triangulated with data from classroom observations.

Fourth, the cross-sectional design was used to show participants' perspectives at one point in time and does not reflect changes in moral development or curriculum implementation over a school year or across grade levels.

Lastly, given her own background of knowing the sociocultural setting in which the participants lived, it is possible that insider positionality played a part in the willingness of the participants to be open during interviews and in the researcher's interpretation of the data. In keeping with the reflexive approach of Braun and Clarke (2021), reflexive journaling was used throughout the research process to address this, but cannot be completely ruled out.

Significance for the study

This work yields several contributions to the research of curriculum, moral development and character education. Theoretically, it is an effort to fill a gap in the current literature by taking three perspectives – the Social Learning Theory of Bandura, the theory of moral development of Kohlberg, and the hidden curriculum – into the same qualitative lens, rather than looking at the content of the curriculum, the influence of teachers, and the informal school culture as three separate phenomena.

In an empirical context, the study offers context-specific evidence from an area of conflict, the Swat Valley, which is under researched in the research on curriculum and moral development in Pakistan

to broaden the geographical and cultural scope of the research.

In terms of method, the research provides a more comprehensive understanding of how various stakeholders view and experience moral development as it brings in the voices of teachers, parents, and students within one study, rather than in separate studies of a single group.

In actually the finding have direct on school management, teacher preparation and curriculum design. They indicate that whilst curriculum change on its own is not sufficient to support achievement of child-centered character education, additional investment is needed in teacher training to focus on consistency of conduct, teachable opportunities for student-centered conversation, and lessened administrative burdens to free up teachers' time to show the values that the curriculum aims to teach. The study, therefore, provides a theoretical contribution to the field of moral development as well as a practically informed list of considerations for the enhancement of character education in contexts of education that are similarly undervalued and in conflict.

Conclusion

The current study aimed to investigate the contribution of middle school curriculum to the moral development and behavior of students with the views of teachers, parents and students from the Swat Valley, Pakistan. The study was undertaken based on the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), the theory of moral development (Kohlberg, 1984), and the notion of the hidden curriculum, in order to gain a context-specific perspective of the impact of curriculum implementation, school culture and teacher practices on students' moral development.

The results indicated that moral development was not only influenced by the formal curriculum but also by the way in which the formal curriculum was applied in the actual school life. Important factors identified in this study were teacher-centred instructional practices, limited opportunities for dialogue, the teacher workload and the influence of the hidden curriculum on students' moral learning. The findings also

revealed that the expectations of the stakeholders were colliding: parents would expect a strong emphasis on character development from schools, whereas teachers would highlight the stress they felt to teach them that because of school requirements and administrative tasks. All three groups came to a common conclusion, however, that there are things needing to be improved beyond the scope of curriculum materials in order to strengthen moral and character education.

This study contributes to the existing literature on curriculum and character education research in Pakistan in a unique way by providing one of the most qualitative and multi-stakeholder perspectives of how curriculum, teacher practice, and the hidden curriculum are interrelated in shaping students' moral development in an under-researched region of Pakistan.

Overall, the findings indicate the need for curriculum reform that goes beyond the mere updating of curriculum content, but includes more effective teacher-centered pedagogies and strategies, a more positive school culture, less cumbersome administrative demands on teachers, and better involvement of families and schools. They are mutually reinforcing and none of them will have an impact in isolation: A curriculum can claim to teach the right values, but it will be the life of the classroom that determines whether students learn them or not. However, future studies with a larger and more representative sample and with classroom observation would better validate if these patterns are observed outside Swat Valley.

References

- Al-Mujahid, A., & Hussain, H. (2025). Exploring the hidden curriculum as a catalyst for moral development among secondary-level students in private schools of District East, Karachi. *Review Journal of Social Psychology & Social Works*, 3(2), 993–1002. <https://doi.org/10.71145/rjsp.v3i2.257>
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 13(2), 201–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1704846>
- Brown, M., McGrath, R. E., Bier, M. C., Johnson, K., & Berkowitz, M. W. (2023). A comprehensive meta-analysis of character education programs. *Journal of Moral Education*, 52(2), 119–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2022.2060196>
- Diggs, C. R., & Akos, P. (2016). The promise of character education in middle school: A meta-analysis. *Middle Grades Review*, 2(2), 1–19.
- Galanaki, E., & Malafantis, K. D. (2022). Albert Bandura's experiments on aggression modeling in children: A psychoanalytic critique. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 988877. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.988877>
- Jan, D., Kazimi, A. B., & Riaz, A. (2023). Challenges to the implementation of Single National Curriculum: A new tool for education reform. *Global Educational Studies Review*, 8(2), 136–147. [https://doi.org/10.31703/gesr.2023\(VII I-II\).13](https://doi.org/10.31703/gesr.2023(VII I-II).13)
- Killen, M., & Smetana, J. G. (Eds.). (2013). *Handbook of moral development* (2nd ed.). Psychology Press.
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). *The psychology of moral development: The nature and validity of moral stages*. Harper & Row.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.

- Malik, S. A., Ch, M. S., Batool, Z., & Mahmood, S. (2023). Challenges and opportunities in implementation of single national curriculum: A qualitative inquiry. *Journal of ISOSS*, 9(1), 85-98.
- Niaz, L., & Anand, K. (2024). Populist visions and the issue of exclusion: An exploration of educational policy reforms in India and Pakistan. In T. Saeed, R. Iyengar, M. A. Witenstein, & E. J. Byker (Eds.), *Exploring education and democratization in South Asia: Research, policy, and practice* (pp. 55-77). Springer International Publishing.
- OECD. (2024). *Nurturing social and emotional learning across the globe: Findings from the OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills 2024*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/32b647d0-en>
- Rossouw, N. (2023). A conceptual framework for uncovering the hidden curriculum. *Cogent Education*, 10(1), Article 2191409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2191409>
- Sánchez, B., & Barber, C. (2020). The hidden curriculum of adolescent development. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 35(4), 475-499. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558419883363>
- Shaikh, R., & Benedetti, C. (2024). Pluralism or uniformity: Case of (single) national curriculum of Pakistan. *International Journal of Educational Reform*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10567879241255322>
- UNESCO. (2024). *Mainstreaming social and emotional learning in education systems: Policy guide*. UNESCO & UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development. <https://doi.org/10.54675/ORWD6913>

