RSMC Method: Cultivating Characters in Early Childhood

Shofi Massika, Syafrimen Syafri*, Agus Jatmiko, Nurul Setiana, Nova Erlina Yaumas
Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Intan Lampung,
Bandar Lampung, 35131, Indonesia

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Abstract: In the school-based education system, educators often prioritize cognitive development over students' emotional development. It is crucial to instill good character in children from a young age as it influences them well into adulthood. Research indicates that the RSMC method is effective for nurturing early childhood character traits. This study examines the application of the RSMC method in Kindergarten, using a single case design with a holistic approach. Data collection methods included observation, interviews with an experienced educator, and documentation of lesson plans and curriculum structures. The Milles and Huberman interactive model was employed for data analysis, involving descriptive data collection, data reduction, and data presentation to draw conclusions. The findings suggest that the RSMC approach, comprising Scheduled Routine Activities (R), Unscheduled Spontaneous Activities (S), Modelling and Giving Examples (M), and Environmental Conditioning (C), effectively fosters character development in daily activities. This method can assess changes in students' behavior resulting from specific stimuli and responses. Therefore, the RSMC method developed in this study offers a viable option for early childhood character cultivation. Further research should explore the long-term effectiveness of different positive bias methods for character education in early childhood.

INTRODUCTION

Character cultivation can benefit both learners and the society in which they live, demonstrating that instilling character in learners not only enhances their well-being but also prevents symptoms of depression, stress, and problem behaviors. Teachers play an essential role in shaping their students’ personalities (Lickona, 2022; Siprus, 2021). Furthermore, in character cultivation, teachers serve as learning designers, managers, implementers, directors, and assessors (Ardin & Syafri, 2021; Yuliawati, 2021). Character cultivation in early childhood refers to nurturing and developing positive character, values, and social-emotional skills, such as honesty, empathy, independence, patience, and other positive behaviors (Ishak et al., 2014; Lee, 2013).

Instilling good character in early childhood is crucial because, according to some researchers, children with good character not only exhibit moral values but also achieve academic success. Instilling character in children will affect their social behavior, as they are more easily accepted by their surroundings. Furthermore, children with good character will experience better emotional and spiritual development, allowing them to regulate their feelings more effectively.
Character cultivation in children takes time. Therefore, early childhood educators must be patient and use appropriate methods. Educators, serving as role models for children, must also set a good example (Lailatus Shoimah & Sulthoni, 2018; Putu & Nilasari, 2021). Character can also be developed through habituation methods used daily in the school setting during the learning process. Technology-related habituation strategies can also be introduced to develop character, ensuring children do not misuse technology (Chalim & Rabiah, 2023; Watini, 2020).

Research suggests that the application of habituation methods is effective in instilling children’s character (Rodrigues et al., 2021; Regina and Rosa 2020; Bartnik et al., 2016; Pustikasari, 2020). Educators can train good habits in children from an early age, making the habituation method a key point in character development. Habituation is strongly tied to modifying the situation during the learning process; essentially, it involves familiarizing children with actions that have positive values (Kerr, 2011; Mulyadi, 2020).

The habituation method in forming morals is a highly effective approach in developing good character in individuals, especially in children and teenagers. This process involves ongoing efforts to form positive habits and strengthen the individual’s awareness of deeply held moral and spiritual values. There are studies relating to instilling character by applying the habituation method from various countries. For example, in Poland, experience in treating tinnitus and/or hyperacusis patients using the habituation method has shown that the impact of duration on treatment efficiency requires more time (Bartnik et al., 2016). In England, Kerr (2011) discusses how habituation in virtue is designed to provide children with frequent opportunities to experience virtue in developing respect. In Indonesia, Attamimi (2020) explains that the habituation method produces efficient outcomes; nevertheless, it takes a long time to implement, so it must be done regularly.

Good character values should be instilled in students by creating a school environment that supports the development of ethics and responsibility as a model, so that they can apply them in their lives properly, especially in the family, school, community, and state. This allows them to make a positive contribution to their environment (Rindrayani, 2020). Each feature must be developed appropriately and follow the stages of the children’s age development because students still do not grasp what is good and what is evil. Understanding early childhood development seeks to assist youngsters in reaching their full potential. Childhood is the "golden age" of human life, during which the foundations of personality are formed for their lives as adults (Muzaki & Hajar, 2021; Syafril et al., 2021).

Therefore, it is critical to employ the habituation method to cultivate character in early childhood so children can become accustomed to good character from an early age. This study aims to examine the use of the habituation method in instilling character in children at Aisyiyah 1 Labuhan Ratu Kindergarten, as well as the process of implementing the habituation method by educators. Based on the Scopus database for 1920-2023, the keyword "character development in early childhood" is generally presented in Figure 1.
According to Figure 1, research on character development in early childhood reached 366 documents from various countries throughout the world. There are several keywords related to early childhood character; however, based on the Scopus database analysis on February 8, 2023, at 14.50 WIB (Indonesian Western Time), the researchers discovered only one document related to cultivating character in early childhood (Rindrayani, 2020). Research on the formation of character in early childhood amounted to six documents (Regina & Rosa, 2020; Rosliana, 2020; Siprus, 2021; Rodrigues et al., 2021; Munawwarah & Yasbiati, 2020). Furthermore, research on character education in early childhood amounted to one document (Mulyadi, 2020).

Several studies on early childhood character development from 2015 to 2020 were found in various countries including the UK, Ireland, Australia, Canada, Italy, Taiwan, Spain, Singapore, and Norway. In the last four years (2020-2023), countries that have concentrated on conducting research on early childhood character development include Indonesia, Brazil, Finland, and Turkey, as shown in Figure 2.
Figure 2 depicts the mapping of the last four years of study on early childhood character development (Moreira et al., 1980; Santoso, 2018; Sevin & Sor, 2018; Watini, 2020). The study map above shows that there is still very little research on cultivating character in early childhood. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the implementation of the RSMC method in early childhood.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design with a single case design and a holistic single-unit analysis (Yona, 2006; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Sofaer, 2002). The holistic single-unit analysis refers to the phenomenon of character cultivation through the application of habituation methods in the school environment. The single case design involves extracting data from various sources in one location. This study took place in a Kindergarten, where students exhibit habits that reflect positive character in their daily activities at school. The purpose of this research design is to collect detailed and thorough data on the application of the habituation method in character cultivation (Abbott et al., 2018; Fossey et al., 2002; Busetto et al., 2020). Data was gathered through observation, interviews, and document analysis. The steps in this research are depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3. The Steps of Research (Syafirmen, 2010).

The steps began by observing the application of the habituation method carried out by two experienced educators from the beginning to the end of the learning process. One experienced educator was interviewed face-to-face at the interview stage. Furthermore, data was extracted through document analysis, including lesson plans, documents, and curriculum structure. Table 1 provides a full explanation of the sources, methods of data collection, and quantity of data sources. All data obtained during the research was then analyzed using the Analysis of Interactive Model by Milles & Hubberman (Nur’aini 2020; Rijali 2018; Yona 2006; Baxter and Jack 2008; Bastani et al. 2018).
RESULT AND DISCUSSION

According to the findings of the research, there are methods for instilling early childhood character based on four indicators in one method, referred to as the RSMC method: R = Routine Activities, S = Spontaneous Activities, M = Modelling, and C = Conditioning. Teachers employ indicators of early childhood character values’ developmental achievements to help them reach the objectives. The following is how teachers instill children’s character through teaching and learning activities both inside and outside the classroom:

Routine Activities/Habituation on a Scheduled Basis

The school’s routine activities include washing hands before entering the classroom and before eating, marching before entering class, reciting prayers, performing dhuha prayers, and giving alms. Students already exhibit beneficial characteristics in these activities, such as a religious attitude, notably while using the right hand and praying before beginning an activity. Students are extremely curious during the learning process. Although discipline has not been fully established in early childhood, they have applied some aspects of discipline before beginning activities outside and inside the classroom.

This finding is supported by previous research findings, which state that character cultivation should begin at a young age because character can emerge through habits that are repeated over time and require support from the surrounding environment, specifically in the form of good habituation (Ahsanulkhaq, 2019; Fatmah, 2018; Khalifatul Ulya, 2020; Putu & Nilasari, 2021). This finding is consistent with Mulyasa’s opinion that character cultivation must be familiarized and carried out regularly to become a habit and shape the desired character (Hidayat, 2016).

Spontaneous Activities or Unscheduled Habituation of Special Events

The school’s spontaneous activities include saying and replying to greetings, speaking respectfully to classmates and adults, and politely asking for help. Examples and habituation carried out daily include getting children used to leaving early to avoid being late, saying and answering greetings upon arrival at school, smiling, and shaking hands before beginning classroom activities, after learning activities, and when students return home from school. The teacher reinforces these actions at school and provides reminders if the child forgets. This creates good habits that can be implemented at home and in the surrounding area.

This finding is supported by prior research, which claims that establishing character spontaneously helps children grow accustomed to saying positive things like greetings, apologies, and expressions of gratitude to parents, teachers, and peers (Alifah et al., 2021; Ihansi et al., 2018; Pustikasari, 2020; Wiyani, 2020). Furthermore, by providing examples and familiarizing children with phrases like "please," "excuse me," and "sorry" when speaking, they will become accustomed to using them. For instance, if students ask the teacher for assistance in opening food wraps without saying...
"please," the teacher will promptly remind them (Pustikasari, 2020).

**Modeling and Giving Examples**

The school’s exemplary activities include habituation in the form of daily conduct such as arriving on time, conversing properly with peers and adults, providing assistance, and asking permission for what they desire. Exemplary activities are carried out to familiarize children with appropriate behavior and serve as role models. Exemplary teacher behavior influences good student behavior. Exemplary actions also set a good example for children in their learning growth because children will notice and repeat all of their behaviors, speech, and ask for appropriate permission.

As stated in prior research findings, the application of exemplary conduct is a key support for activities that reflect character values that can beimitated or replicated. Teachers impart or model to children attitudes, actions, and words that develop values as incentives for children’s learning, forming a view of appropriate behavior in everyday life (Afifah & Hanifunni’am, 2021; Khalifatul Ulya, 2020; Lailatul Machfiroh & Desyanty, 2019; Purwanti et al., 2020). Al-Ghazali claims that educating students by presenting examples, training, habituation, counsel, and recommendations is an educational instrument used to foster children’s personalities (Khalifatul Ulya, 2020).

**Environmental Conditioning**

The school’s environmental conditioning program comprises the construction of conditions that aid in implementing character education, such as body and clothing hygiene, orderly classes, garbage bins, and green courtyards with trees. Children are conditioned to tidiness and cleanliness in the surrounding environment through activities such as disposing of waste in its proper place and tidying up toys after use. Furthermore, the teacher urges the children to tidy up the items that have been used and provides reminders if the child forgets. This creates good habits in the child that can be implemented at home and in the surrounding environment.

This is supported by earlier studies suggesting that conditioning activities can be carried out to instill character using the setting and conditions at school as a support in the application of character cultivation (Cahyani & Raharjo, 2021; Dini, 2021). These actions are also related to the psychological theory of behaviorism, which claims that habits can be developed through conditioning or stimuli. The stimulus must be repeated for the intended reaction to appear (Lailatus Shoimah & Sulthoni, 2018).

Previous research found that character strengthening in early childhood was carried out by educators based on psychological approaches, such as emphasizing motivation, providing rewards in the form of praise, and giving gifts. Additionally, character strengthening was often based on teacher-centered examples. This research found character strengthening in a more complex form, namely a combination or interaction between psychological approaches, role modeling, and the reinforcement of spiritual aspects and various environmental aspects. Spiritual aspects include habituating children to read prayers before and after eating, performing Dhuha prayers, and giving alms. These spiritual acts direct individuals to be grateful and find inner peace and tranquility by connecting with God for the blessings received. Psychological aspects include maintaining cleanliness of the body, environment, and clothing. Keeping the body, environment, and clothing clean helps individuals to feel comfortable and confident in social interactions.
Based on the discussion of the research findings, it is possible to conclude that the kindergarten teachers did their best to implement excellent behavior for the development of children’s religious and moral values. Improvements can be noticed with habituation in character cultivation and developmental achievement indicators that are aligned with the age range of children, allowing them to develop optimally. Character cultivation should be practiced regularly to prepare children to enter higher education levels.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussions, the researchers conclude that the RSMC method in daily activities through routine activities, spontaneous activities, modeling, and environmental conditioning provided by the teacher continuously and repeatedly in every behavior is effective. Furthermore, teachers develop religious and moral principles in students’ character based on accomplishment indicators and values through everyday activities in the learning process. Children begin to demonstrate exceptionally strong development in character cultivation after developing character through habituation of positive conduct utilizing achievement indicators, such as tolerance, religious attitudes (praying before and after eating, Duha prayer), saying "please" when asking for help, saying "thank you" when given something, helping each other, and maintaining personal hygiene and the cleanliness of the surrounding environment.

REFERENCES


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