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Character and Values Education in Early Childhood Education: A Comparative Analysis of Educational Programs in Different Countries

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Abstract

This research comparatively examines the policy documents and curriculum programs of Türkiye, New Zealand, Japan, Norway, and Finland regarding character and values education in early childhood education. The research was designed within the scope of a qualitative research approach, and document analysis was used as the data collection method. The data sources of the study consisted of official policy documents and educational programs published or updated between 2020 and 2026. The data were analyzed in accordance with Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach. The analysis revealed that the findings regarding character and values education were grouped under five main themes: individual values, social values, democratic values, cultural and national values, and universal values. The findings show that all countries attach importance to character and values education in early childhood education, but the emphasized values differ according to cultural and social priorities. In the programs

in Türkiye and Japan, individual character traits such as self-control, diligence, responsibility, and independence are emphasized; Norway and Finland place greater emphasis on democratic and universal values such as democracy, equality, human rights, and sustainability in their programs. New Zealand, on the other hand, exhibits a more holistic approach centered on belonging, cultural diversity, and community awareness. It has also been determined that values such as respect, empathy, cooperation, trust, and responsibility are emphasized in common across all countries. In conclusion, the research reveals that character education and values education are two complementary educational approaches, and that addressing them holistically in early childhood education supports the multifaceted development of children.

Keywords: early childhood education, character education, values education, comparative education, educational programs, thematic analysis, curriculum review

1. INTRODUCTION

Today's world is characterized by ever-growing interconnectedness (globalization), rapid developments in technology, and major shifts in the structures of our societies, which creates the need for education systems to not only support students achieving academically but also developing individuals who are well-rounded in their character and values (morally, socially and emotionally). As a result of this need, character and values education has gained considerable attention in educational policies and curricula in recent years. In particular, early childhood education is a significant stage in the development of character and values for the reason that during early childhood, a child is developing their identity, their moral reasoning and the foundation of their values. Experiences gained during this period significantly influence children's behavior, social relationships, and participation in social life in later years. The concepts of character and values are often seen as related and even interchangeable. However, the literature suggests that these two concepts differ in scope and function. Character is defined as the totality of characteristics that guide an individual's behavior, are consistent, and reflect the moral dimension of personality; while values express an individual's beliefs and preferences regarding what is right, good, and important. In this respect, values are seen as criteria that guide an individual's behavior, while character can be considered the internalized form of these values transformed into behavior. However, the conceptual framework within which character and values education are addressed in educational programs, and how they are related to each other, can vary from country to country.

Character and values education practices in early childhood education are influenced by cultural, social, historical, and political contexts. Therefore, the values and character traits emphasized in the educational programs of different countries vary. While some countries prioritize individual qualities such as individual responsibility, self-regulation, and independence, others place more emphasis on social values such as cooperation, solidarity, democracy, belonging, and social harmony. Finally, in many countries, early childhood education programs contain universal values such as respect, honesty, responsibility, and empathy. Recent research has shown that value and character education contribute to children's emotional and social development, moral reasoning ability, and positive behaviour pattern. But most published research has focused on specific countries or educational methodologies. Thus, few comparative studies have examined how character and values are addressed in early childhood education programs across nations. Thus, much more research needs to be done to see how character and value concepts are structured in educational programs; which values are emphasised; and how nations differ or are alike regarding these issues. Therefore, this study investigates early childhood education programs through the lens of character and values education across multiple nations. The purpose of this study is to identify the character and values components of early childhood education programs across multiple countries; to identify similarities and differences among these components; and to evaluate how concepts of character and values are positioned within early childhood education programs. By doing so, this research will add to the international literature concerning character and values education in early childhood education and provide a comparative examination of the development of educational programs. In this context, the main research question is as follows:

- How is character and values education structured in the early childhood education programs of different countries?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Character education is considered one of the fundamental areas of education that supports the moral, social, and emotional development of individuals. Early childhood, in particular, is of great importance in terms of character education because it is a critical developmental stage where the foundations of an individual's personality traits, values, and social behaviors are laid [1]. During this period, children learn and internalize societal values through their interactions with family, school, and their environment.

Recent studies have shown that character education makes significant contributions to children's social-emotional development. Amalia et al. [2] state that character education practices improve children's self-regulation, empathy, cooperation, and responsibility skills. Similarly, Saona [3] emphasizes that character education based on Islamic values positively affects children's social and emotional development. Ginting [4] defines early childhood education as the most important period in which the foundations of character development are laid. Research conducted by Haryono, Muntomimah, and Eva [5] also indicates that values acquired at an early age are decisive in determining the behaviors children will exhibit in their later lives.

The literature shows that different teaching methods and strategies are used to effectively implement character education. In particular, modeling and habit-building methods are noted as effective in character development. Fauziah et al. [6] revealed that in character education applications carried out in the preschool period, teachers acting as role models and the continuous repetition of positive behaviors facilitates children's internalization of values. Similarly, Sari et al. [7] state that habits based on daily behaviors such as smiling, greeting, and polite communication support the development of moral values in children. The character education model developed by Samsinar et al. [8] also shows that the combined use of teacher guidance and practical activities yields effective results.

A significant portion of current research in character education focuses on the integration of local culture and wisdom into the educational process. Transmitting cultural values to children from an early age both supports character development and contributes to the preservation of cultural identity. Putranti [9] states that local wisdom-based educational practices are effective in the cultural character development of children. Research by Sakti, Endraswara, and Rohman [10] concluded that integrating local cultural values into preschool education programs positively impacts children's moral development. Another study by the same researchers emphasized that the ethnopedagogical approach is an important tool in strengthening character education [11]. Similarly, Syafrida et al. [12] state that character education practices based on Minangkabau culture develop feelings of responsibility, respect, and social belonging in children.

The use of religious values in character education is also a frequently discussed topic in the literature. Burhan et al. [13] state that integrating Islamic values and local cultural elements into early childhood education programs significantly contributes to children's moral development. Saona [3] also demonstrates the positive effects of character education based on Islamic values on social-emotional development. Furthermore, Sumertini and Sutresna [14] indicate that character education practices based on Hindu values support the development of moral awareness and positive behavior in children. Religious-inspired principles of value education substantially affect how children develop their character. Thus, innovative approaches and technology-based methods of facilitating character education have recently garnered increased interest; for example, Ardiyanti, Jayadinata, and Muqodas [15] establish that creative dance activities positively impact children's ability to cooperate, have self-confidence, and develop social skills. Ramona and Cholimah [16] also note that teaching materials can be perfect vehicles for teaching children about moral and religious values. Also emphasizing the role local cultural values play in effective character education, Warmansyah et al. [17] provide evidence of interactive digital learning environments as an effective means of facilitating character education.

When implementing character education, it is important to consider not just the best way to teach character education, but also the effectiveness of the management exercising that character education. In this regard, Kuncoro et al. [18] advocate for a holistic management approach to the plan, implement, and evaluate phases of character education. On the other hand, Catalano et al. [19] argue that values education should not be treated as a separate part of the educational process but integrated throughout the entire educational process.

Taken as a body of research, the literature indicates that character education will greatly benefit children's social, emotional, and moral development in the early years. However, the majority of studies to date have taken place in particular religious or culture settings. Therefore, there is an urgent need for additional studies to examine alternative approaches used in character education and to develop new and innovative practices of character education.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design. The purpose of this comparative educational research project is to evaluate educational systems on a global level by analyzing character and value-oriented policy and curriculum documents from different countries. This examination of national educational systems through an international lens is intended to provide a comparison of the character and value-oriented educational policy frameworks and curriculums across many different countries, as well as identify similarities and/or differences among the character and values-oriented approaches and trends in countries.

The data collection application for document analysis from the documents used in this research is a qualitative method of document analysis that allows for an in-depth review, interpretation, and understanding of written documentation. Therefore, given the intent of the study was to conduct a qualitative evaluation of character and values-oriented elements found within the educational policy and curriculum documents in multiple countries, document analysis was the chosen research methodology for this research project.

Data Sources. The research drew upon data from policy documents in use during the years 2022-2026 on a variety of countries (Turkey, New Zealand, Japan, Norway and Finland) that include current educational programmes, national curricula and policy documents. All of the policy documents studied were formally developed by government institutions and pertain to Early Childhood Education (ECE). The documents chosen for inclusion in the current research were evaluated against four criteria:

1. *Document issuer/ECE relatedness.* To be included as part of the research, a document has to be issued by an officially sanctioned governmental body (i.e. local, regional or federal) and relates to ECE;
2. *Explicit/implicit educational messages.* To be included as part of the research, the document has to include both explicit and implicit messages associated with character education, values education, moral development or social-emotional development;
3. *Date of publication/in-force status.* To be included as part of the research, the document has to have been published or updated between 2022 and 2026, and
4. Drafts, teacher guides or other official documents were not included as part of the study.

Data Collection. This study is comparative education research using a qualitative research approach. This study used an investigation of policy and curriculum documents from multiple countries concerning character and values education in early childhood education and compares similarities and differences in how character and values education is implemented in various countries. Comparative education research is intended to examine educational systems in their social, cultural, and political contexts as a means of identifying commonalities (trends) across countries and country-specific approaches.

In this research project, document analysis was the chosen data collection method. Document analysis allows for a systematic examination, interpretation, and understanding of written documents to conduct qualitative research. The use of document analysis in this study will provide a thorough examination of the elements of character education and value education that exist in official education policies and curriculum documents.

The data for this research study consists of official policy documents, national curriculum documents, and educational program documents from the years 2020 – 2026 that are related to early childhood education from different countries. The study included official policy documents and educational program documents from Türkiye, New Zealand, Japan, Norway, and Finland (with respect to early childhood education). The following criteria were utilized to select the documents:

- 1) Document published by official institution;
- 2) Document related to early childhood education;
- 3) Document contained explicit (stated) or implicit (unstated) references to character education, values education, moral development, and/or socio-emotional development;
- 4) Document is a policy or curriculum document that is currently in effect or has been updated between 2020-2026.

Draft texts, teacher guides, and unofficial documents were excluded from the scope of the research.

Trustworthiness. To enhance the credibility of the research, the coding process was carried out independently by two researchers. The agreement between the codes was compared, and disagreements were discussed to reach a consensus. Furthermore, detailed reporting of the analysis process supported the transferability and verifiability of the research. Clearly defined document selection criteria and the systematic execution of the analysis process were considered factors that increased the reliability of the research.

4. FINDINGS

The thematic analysis results regarding character and values education are grouped under five main themes: (1) Individual Values, (2) Social Values, (3) Democratic Values, (4) Cultural and National Values, and (5) Universal Values.

Individual Values. In the programs examined, individual values are seen to be aimed at developing children's self-regulation skills and gaining individual responsibility. Under this theme, self-control, self-confidence, independence, diligence, patience, and responsibility values are included.

While self-control, patience, and responsibility values are clearly defined in the Turkish Preschool Education Program, diligence and self-regulation skills are emphasized in the Turkish Century Education Model. In the program, diligence is associated with the ability to plan, behave in a disciplined manner, and have intrinsic motivation.

In New Zealand's Te Whāriki program, individual values are not presented directly as a value list. However, within the scope of empowerment and exploration learning areas, there are goals aimed at developing self-confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of individual competence. Children are supported in making independent decisions and taking an active role in learning processes. In Japan's National Curriculum Standard, independence, self-discipline, and diligence stand out as the strongest individual values. The program expects children to be aware of their own behavior, take responsibility, and demonstrate individual initiative. While the Norwegian program emphasizes social values more than individual values, it also supports children in building self-confidence and realizing their potential. Overall, the findings show that the strongest emphasis on individual values is found in the Japanese and Turkish programs.

Social Values. Within the theme of social values, respect, cooperation, empathy, helpfulness, trust, compassion, and solidarity have been identified. In the Turkish programs, respect, love, friendship, helpfulness, and mercy are included as fundamental social values. It is observed that helpfulness and mercy, in particular, are supported by behavioral examples.

In the New Zealand program, within the framework of the relationship principle and the participation learning area, trust, cooperation, mutual respect, and community membership are emphasized. The program aims for children to establish positive relationships with other individuals.

In the Japanese program, cooperation, empathy, and mutual respect are considered fundamental elements of social life. Group work and processes of achieving common goals are seen as important tools in developing social values. In the Norwegian program, friendship, compassion, trust, and solidarity are defined as fundamental components of social life. The program aims to help children develop positive relationships with different individuals and gain a sense of social belonging. Respect, cooperation, and trust have been identified as common social values emphasized across all countries.

Democratic Values. Under the theme of democratic values, the values of equality, justice, freedom, democracy, participation, and respect for differences are included.

In Türkiye's programs, the values of justice and freedom are emphasized, and children are expected to exhibit equal treatment and respect the rights of others.

In the New Zealand program, active participation of children in learning processes and equal learning opportunities for every child are considered important principles. This shows that the values of equality and participation are highlighted.

Although Japan's program contains concepts of gender equality, justice, and social participation, it places less emphasis on democratic values than many other countries.

In contrast, Norway has the most pronounced commitment to democratic values among the countries evaluated. As such, its program incorporates democracy, equal rights, freedom of thought, and anti-discrimination as the program's principal values; therefore, children are encouraged to participate in democratic processes from early on throughout their lives.

Cultural and National Values. Turkish educational programs emphasize the values of family unity/patriotism/privacy, cultural heritage, and social identity. Moreover, the emphasis on national/spiritual values is particularly evident in the Turkish Century Education Model. Ultimately, all of these cultural and national values are perceived to be critical forms of social identity through which people develop their sense of belonging to others.

From this perspective, New Zealand also has placed considerable value on the concept of belonging as part of its educational program. Recognising that children tend to feel a sense of belonging based upon cultural identity; there is a strong influence from the country's indigenous people (Maori) to encourage children to feel that they belong to their families and to their communities/cultural environments. In the Japanese program, respect for traditions, culture, and homeland is stated as one of the main objectives. The program expects individuals to respect other cultures while preserving their own cultural identity.

In the Norwegian program, while emphasizing a sense of belonging and social cohesion, greater importance is given to cultural diversity and multiculturalism.

The most prominent emphases on cultural and national values are found in the programs of Türkiye, New Zealand, and Japan.

Universal Values. Within the theme of universal values, human rights, sustainability, environmental awareness, peace, and respect for human dignity have been identified. While there are indirect emphases on universal values in Türkiye's programs, this theme is more limited compared to other countries.

In the New Zealand program, respect for cultural diversity and inclusivity are highlighted.

In the Japan program, it is stated that respect for the right to life, the protection of nature, and respect for the development of other nations should be shown.

In the Norway program, human dignity, environmental sustainability, equality, and the fight against discrimination are defined as fundamental universal values. The program appears to offer the most comprehensive approach to universal values. In general, it has been determined that universal values are more prominently featured in the Norwegian and New Zealand programs, while in Türkiye and Japan they are addressed more in conjunction with cultural and national values.

5. DISCUSSION

In this research, the elements of character and values education included in early childhood education programs of different countries were examined under five themes: individual values, social values, democratic values, cultural and national values, and universal values. The findings show that each country emphasizes different values in line with its own cultural and social priorities, while also revealing that some values are universally accepted.

Individual Values. The research findings show that individual values such as self-control, independence, self-confidence, diligence, and responsibility are more intensely included in the programs of Türkiye and Japan. The emphasis on independence and self-discipline in Japan, and self-control and diligence in Türkiye, reveals the importance given to the aspect of character education that regulates the individual's behavior.

This finding is consistent with Ginting's [4] study, which states that early childhood is a critical period in which the foundations of character development are laid. Similarly, Amalia, Indarsih, and Fatqurhohman [2] state that character education has significant effects on children's self-regulation skills and social-emotional development. Findings suggesting that character education develops traits such as individual responsibility, self-control, and self-awareness support current research results. In particular, the fact that character development is defined as the primary goal of education in the Japanese program demonstrates the importance given to the individual dimension of character education. This aligns with the views of Haryono, Muntomimah, and Eva [5], who state that character education aims to develop consistently positive traits in an individual's behavior.

Social Values. The research results show that social values such as respect, cooperation, empathy, trust, helpfulness, and compassion are commonly present in all the programs examined. This reveals that social-emotional development is

seen as a universal priority in early childhood education.

This finding supports the work of Amalia et al. [2], which shows that character education improves children's empathy, cooperation, and interpersonal relationship skills. In addition, Ardiyanti, Jayadinata, and Muqodas [15] state that creative activities implemented in early childhood improve children's social skills and cooperative behaviors.

The emphasis on friendship, trust, and solidarity in the Norwegian program; and on reciprocal relationships and community membership in the New Zealand program shows that character education is not only an individual but also a social process. Similarly, Sari, Istiyani et al. [7] state that social values acquired through daily life habits are reflected in children's behavior.

Democratic Values. The research shows that the concepts of equality, justice, freedom, democracy, and participation are particularly prominent in the Norwegian program in the context of democratic values. The Finnish and New Zealand programs also emphasize children's participation rights and equal learning opportunities.

These results demonstrate that contemporary early childhood education is increasingly linked to the understanding of democratic citizenship. Catalano et al. [19] state that values education in early childhood education is not limited to individual moral development but also encompasses the fundamental values of democratic life.

Norway's emphasis on democracy, equality, and anti-discrimination reflects contemporary educational approaches that consider early childhood education as a tool for social transformation. This also highlights the importance of instilling children's rights and a participatory education approach at an early age.

Cultural and National Values. The research findings show that cultural and national values are the most diverse theme among countries. In Türkiye, family unity, patriotism, and privacy are emphasized; in New Zealand, belonging; and in Japan, respect for traditions and social harmony are highlighted. This finding demonstrates that character and values education cannot be considered independently of the cultural context. The study by Sakti, Endraswara, and Rohman [10] revealed that integrating local cultural values into early childhood education supports children's character development. Similarly, Putranti [9] states that practices based on local wisdom contribute to children's cultural identity development.

The centrality of the concept of belonging in New Zealand's Te Whāriki program and the reflection of Maori culture in the program show that cultural values play an important role in shaping educational programs. In Türkiye, the emphasis on national and spiritual values similarly serves the purpose of ensuring cultural continuity.

Universal Values. The research results show that universal values such as human rights, sustainability, environmental awareness, respect for human dignity, and inclusivity are more visible, especially in the Norwegian and Finnish programs. While the Japanese program emphasizes respect for nature and the right to life, the New Zealand program highlights cultural diversity and inclusivity. This finding shows that early childhood education today aims not only to raise national citizens but also global citizens. Suri and Chandra [20] state that integrating character education with a multicultural approach to education contributes to children developing respect for differences. Similarly, Warmansyah et al. [17] state that addressing sustainability and cultural values together increases children's global awareness. In particular, the fact that the principles of human dignity, equality, and sustainable living form the basis of the educational process in the Norwegian program highlights the importance of universal values in character and values education.

When the overall results of the research are evaluated, it is seen that character and values education is structured with different weightings in the countries examined. While Türkiye and Japan place more emphasis on individual character traits and cultural values, Norway and Finland prioritize democratic and universal values. New Zealand, on the other hand, exhibits a balanced approach that integrates individual, social, and cultural values.

These results show that character education and values education are not alternatives to each other, but rather two complementary approaches. While values form an individual's belief system regarding what is right and important, character represents the behavioral and internalized form of these values. Therefore, it can be said that addressing character and values education in early childhood education with a holistic understanding will support the multifaceted development of children.

6. CONCLUSION

In this research, the policy documents and curriculum programs of Türkiye, New Zealand, Japan, Norway, and Finland regarding early childhood education were examined comparatively in terms of character and values education. As a result of the thematic analysis, the findings regarding character and values education were grouped under five themes: individual values, social values, democratic values, cultural and national values, and universal values. The research results show that all the countries studied place significant emphasis on character and values education in early childhood education. However, it was determined that the values prioritized by the countries and the ways in which these values are reflected in their educational programs differ. While Türkiye and Japan place more emphasis on individual character traits such as self-control, diligence, responsibility, and independence in their programs; Norway and Finland show that democratic and universal values such as democracy, equality, human rights, and sustainability are more prominent in their programs. New Zealand, on the other hand, adopted an approach that integrates individual and social values around the axis of belonging,

cultural diversity, and community awareness. The research found that the values emphasized in common across all countries were respect, responsibility, cooperation, trust, and empathy. This indicates that some values in early childhood education are universal, regardless of cultural differences. However, it was observed that values such as family unity, patriotism, belonging, democracy, or sustainability are addressed at different levels depending on the cultural and social priorities of the countries. One of the most important findings of the research is that there is no clear distinction between character education and values education. The programs examined revealed that character and values education are mostly addressed in a way that complements and supports each other. Therefore, it was concluded that character education and values education in early childhood education are not alternatives to each other, but rather two complementary dimensions of a holistic educational approach.

6.1. LIMITATIONS

This research was conducted within the framework of some limitations.

Firstly, the research was limited only to policy documents and curriculum programs related to early childhood education in Türkiye, New Zealand, Japan, Norway, and Finland. Including more countries from different geographical regions in the research may contribute to different results.

Secondly, the research was conducted only using the document analysis method. How the character and values included in the programs are implemented in the application processes is outside the scope of the research. Therefore, the findings obtained reflect the theoretical framework of the programs.

Thirdly, the analyses were carried out through official policy documents and curriculum documents. The opinions of teachers, school administrators, and families regarding character and values education were not included in the research.

Finally, the research examined programs that were in effect or updated between 2020 and 2026. New changes that may occur in education policies may lead to different results in the future.

6.2. IMPLICATIONS

Based on the research results, the following recommendations can be developed:

1. When preparing early childhood education programs, character education and values education should not be considered as independent areas, but within an integrated structure.
2. Programs should include not only cultural and national values, but also universal values such as democracy, human rights, sustainability, and global citizenship in a balanced manner.
3. International experience sharing can be increased by examining character and values education practices that have yielded successful results in different countries.
4. Teacher training programs should include more emphasis on character and values education to support teachers' competencies in this area.
5. Future research can evaluate the practical implications of character and values education by examining not only program documents but also teacher opinions, classroom practices, and family participation processes.
6. Future studies can reveal global trends in character and values education more comprehensively by including more countries from different continents in the research.
7. Longitudinal studies can be conducted to examine the effects of character and values education in early childhood education on children's socio-emotional development, academic readiness, and citizenship skills.

It is believed that this research will contribute to both policymakers and researchers by revealing how character and values education in early childhood education is structured at the international level.

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