

Global Dialogues in Humanities and Pedagogy

Developing a Character Education Program Based on Local Wisdom in Philippine Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the development and implementation of a character education program grounded in Philippine local wisdom within public school contexts. Recognizing the limitations of Western-centric character education models, this research investigates how indigenous Filipino values and cultural traditions can be systematically integrated into formal educational frameworks to foster holistic student development. Employing participatory action research methodology, the study engaged 45 teachers, 320 students, and community stakeholders across three public schools in diverse Philippine regions. The program incorporated core Filipino values including kapwa (shared identity), bayanihan (communal unity), pakikipagkapwa-tao (regard for others), and utang na loob (debt of gratitude) into curriculum design and pedagogical practices. Findings demonstrate significant improvements in students' prosocial behaviors, cultural identity formation, and ethical decision-making capabilities. Teachers reported enhanced cultural responsiveness and stronger community-school partnerships. However, challenges emerged regarding standardization versus contextualization and balancing traditional values with contemporary global citizenship competencies. This research contributes to decolonizing educational practices and offers a replicable framework for culturally-grounded character education in diverse educational settings.

INTRODUCTION

Character education has emerged as a critical educational priority worldwide as societies grapple with moral complexities, social fragmentation, and the need to cultivate ethical citizens capable of navigating increasingly diverse and interconnected global contexts. Lickona (1991) defined character education as the deliberate effort to help students understand, care about, and act upon core ethical values, emphasizing that effective character development requires comprehensive approaches integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Contemporary discourse increasingly recognizes that character education cannot be culturally neutral but must be grounded in the values, traditions, and wisdom of specific cultural communities to achieve authenticity and relevance. This recognition has particular significance in postcolonial contexts like the Philippines, where educational systems inherited colonial structures that often marginalized indigenous knowledge systems and local cultural values.

The Philippine educational landscape reflects complex historical legacies of Spanish colonization, American occupation, and globalization, creating tensions between imported educational models and indigenous cultural frameworks. Salazar (1999) articulated the concept of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Filipino Psychology), arguing that authentic understanding of Filipino behavior and values requires frameworks derived from indigenous perspectives rather than Western psychological theories. This perspective challenges educational systems to move beyond superficial multiculturalism toward deep integration of Filipino cultural wisdom into pedagogical foundations. The Department of Education's K-12 curriculum acknowledges the importance of *Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao* (Values Education), yet implementation often relies on generic character traits rather than culturally-specific value frameworks rooted in Philippine traditions and local wisdom.

Local wisdom, conceptualized as the accumulated knowledge, practices, and values developed by communities through generations of experience in specific environments, offers rich resources for character education (Muhsyanur et.al, 2025; Muhsyanur, 2020, 2023) Phongphit and Nantasawan (2002) demonstrated that local wisdom encompasses not merely traditional practices but sophisticated ethical frameworks addressing human relationships, environmental stewardship, and community well-being. In the Philippine context, local wisdom manifests in diverse forms including indigenous proverbs (salawikain), traditional governance systems (barangay councils), cultural ceremonies, oral histories, and practical knowledge transmitted intergenerationally. These wisdom traditions embody values such as pakikisama (getting along), hiya (propriety and shame), amor propio (self-esteem), and bahala na (fatalistic determination) that shape Filipino social interactions and ethical reasoning in ways distinct from Western individualistic frameworks.

The integration of local wisdom into formal character education programs addresses multiple educational imperatives simultaneously. Banks (2004) argued

that culturally responsive pedagogy enhances student engagement and learning outcomes by validating students' cultural identities and connecting classroom content to their lived experiences. For Filipino students, particularly those from indigenous communities and rural areas, character education grounded in familiar cultural contexts can enhance relevance and internalization compared to abstract universal principles. Furthermore, Noddings (2002) emphasized that moral education must cultivate caring relationships and community connections, objectives naturally aligned with Filipino communal values and relational orientations. By building character education on local wisdom foundations, schools can strengthen rather than undermine the cultural transmission processes that have historically occurred within families and communities.

Despite growing recognition of local wisdom's educational value, significant gaps exist in systematic frameworks for integrating indigenous knowledge into formal character education programs. Battiste (2002) identified persistent challenges in decolonizing education, including institutional resistance, teacher preparation inadequacies, and tensions between standardized curricula and culturally-specific content. In the Philippines, while individual teachers and schools may informally incorporate local values, comprehensive programs systematically integrating Filipino wisdom traditions into character education remain underdeveloped. This gap reflects broader challenges in educational systems worldwide regarding how to honor cultural diversity while maintaining educational coherence and addressing universal human rights principles that may sometimes conflict with traditional practices.

Research on character education effectiveness demonstrates that program success depends significantly on contextual appropriateness and community involvement. Berkowitz and Bier (2005) conducted comprehensive reviews showing that character education programs produce measurable positive outcomes when they incorporate multiple implementation components including community partnerships, professional development, and integration across curriculum areas. However, most evaluated programs originated in Western contexts, raising questions about transferability to different cultural settings. The Philippine context, with its unique blend of indigenous, Hispanic, American, and Asian influences, requires character education approaches that acknowledge this cultural complexity while grounding programs in distinctly Filipino foundations that resonate with students' identities and communities' values.

The development of locally-grounded character education programs also responds to broader movements toward educational sovereignty and cultural preservation. Smith (1999) and Muhsyanur et al (2022) articulated how indigenous communities worldwide are reclaiming educational processes as sites of cultural revitalization and resistance to ongoing colonization. In the Philippines, where numerous indigenous groups maintain distinct cultural traditions despite centuries of external influences, schools represent crucial institutions for either perpetuating cultural erosion or supporting cultural continuity. Character education programs

based on local wisdom can serve multiple functions: transmitting cultural values to younger generations, validating indigenous knowledge systems within formal education, strengthening students' cultural identities, and demonstrating that Filipino traditions offer sophisticated ethical frameworks comparable to any global educational philosophy. These multifaceted benefits justify the effort required to develop culturally-grounded approaches despite implementation challenges.

METHOD

This research employed participatory action research methodology to develop and evaluate a character education program based on Philippine local wisdom. Following Reason and Bradbury's (2008) framework, participatory action research engages community members as co-researchers in cyclical processes of planning, action, observation, and reflection aimed at both knowledge generation and practical transformation. The study was conducted across three purposively selected public schools representing different Philippine regions and cultural contexts: an urban school in Metro Manila, a rural school in the Visayas region, and a school serving predominantly indigenous communities in Mindanao. Forty-five teachers participated as research collaborators, alongside 320 students across elementary and secondary levels. The participatory approach aligned with Filipino values of pakikipagkapwa-tao and bayanihan, ensuring that program development emerged from collaborative dialogue rather than externally imposed frameworks. Community stakeholders including parents, elders, and local leaders contributed cultural knowledge and values perspectives through focus group discussions and cultural mapping activities.

The research proceeded through four iterative cycles over eighteen months. Initial cycles focused on identifying core local wisdom elements through community consultations and reviewing indigenous literature, proverbs, and cultural practices specific to each school's context. Teachers participated in professional learning communities guided by Stringer's (2014) action research protocols, examining how identified values could be integrated into existing curriculum frameworks and developing culturally-grounded pedagogical approaches. Data collection employed mixed methods including classroom observations, student surveys measuring values internalization and behavioral changes, teacher reflective journals, focus group discussions, and cultural artifacts created by students. Quantitative instruments adapted from the Character Education Quality Standards developed by the Character Education Partnership (2010) measured program implementation fidelity and outcomes. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) systematic procedures, with particular attention to identifying culturally-specific meanings and practices that might be obscured by Western analytical frameworks. Validity was enhanced through member checking with community participants, triangulation across data sources, and ongoing critical reflection on researchers' positionality and potential biases. Ethical protocols included obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring cultural

sensitivity in research processes, and establishing mechanisms for communities to retain ownership of cultural knowledge shared during the research while benefiting from program outcomes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Core Values Framework and Cultural Integration

The participatory development process identified seven core Filipino values as foundational to the character education program, each rooted in local wisdom traditions and relevant across the diverse Philippine cultural contexts represented in the study. These values included kapwa (shared inner self), bayanihan (communal cooperation), pakikipagkapwa-tao (humaneness), utang na loob (reciprocal obligation), hiya (sense of propriety), amor propio (self-respect), and bahala na (determined risk-taking). Rather than treating these as isolated virtues, the program framework recognized their interconnectedness within Filipino relational psychology. Community elders emphasized that these values function systemically, with kapwa serving as the central concept from which others derive. This insight shaped the program's holistic approach, contrasting with Western character education models that often present discrete virtues like honesty, courage, and responsibility as separate traits.

The integration of these values into curriculum and pedagogy took multiple culturally-appropriate forms. Teachers developed lesson plans incorporating traditional stories, proverbs, and historical examples illustrating each value in action. For instance, the Bayanihan tradition of neighbors collectively carrying a house to a new location became a powerful metaphor for collaborative problem-solving and community responsibility. Students in the Mindanao school learned about indigenous conflict resolution practices called mamamaraan, which embody principles of restorative justice and communal harmony predating Western legal frameworks. Language arts curricula integrated analysis of salawikain (proverbs) that encode cultural wisdom, with students exploring how these aphorisms guide ethical decision-making. One frequently cited proverb, "Ang hindi lumingon sa pinanggalingan ay hindi makarating sa paroroonan" (Those who do not look back to where they came from will not reach their destination), became a touchstone for discussions about respecting heritage while pursuing progress.

Pedagogical approaches emphasized experiential learning aligned with Filipino cultural learning styles. The concept of pakikipag-kapwa informed collaborative learning structures where students worked in family-like groups, with older or more capable students supporting peers in ways mirroring traditional kuya (older brother) and ate (older sister) relationships. Service learning projects enacted bayanihan values through community improvement initiatives, with students organizing neighborhood clean-ups, assisting elderly community members, and contributing to local festivals. These activities transcended mere volunteerism by being framed within cultural narratives about reciprocal obligations and communal interdependence. Teachers reported that students demonstrated deeper engagement

with service projects when understood through utang na loob frameworks rather than abstract concepts of civic duty or community service hours.

However, the integration process revealed tensions between traditional values and contemporary educational objectives. Some teachers questioned whether values like hiya and bahala na, sometimes criticized as hindering individual assertiveness and planning, should be promoted in character education. These concerns sparked productive dialogues about distinguishing between authentic cultural values and colonial-era stereotypes or distortions of Filipino characteristics. Educators and community members ultimately reframed potentially problematic values, emphasizing that hiya cultivates social sensitivity and respect rather than paralyzing shame, while bahala na represents courageous faith and resilience rather than fatalistic passivity. This reframing process demonstrated how culturally-grounded character education requires ongoing critical reflection on cultural transmission to preserve wisdom while adapting to contemporary contexts and challenges that traditional communities never anticipated.

Implementation Outcomes and Student Development

Table 1. Pre-Post Program Assessment of Student Character Development Indicators

Character Indicator	Pre-Program Mean Score	Post-Program Mean Score	Change	Statistical Significance
Prosocial Behavior	3.2 (SD=0.8)	4.1 (SD=0.6)	+0.9	p < 0.001
Cultural Identity Strength	2.9 (SD=0.9)	4.3 (SD=0.7)	+1.4	p < 0.001
Ethical Decision-Making	3.4 (SD=0.7)	4.2 (SD=0.6)	+0.8	p < 0.001
Community Engagement	2.7 (SD=1.0)	4.0 (SD=0.8)	+1.3	p < 0.001
Respect for Elders/Authority	3.6 (SD=0.8)	4.4 (SD=0.5)	+0.8	p < 0.001

Note: Scores based on 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). N=320 students.

Quantitative assessment data demonstrated statistically significant improvements across all measured character development indicators following program implementation. The most substantial growth occurred in cultural identity strength, with students showing markedly increased pride in Filipino heritage and understanding of cultural values. Qualitative data provided deeper insights into these changes, with students articulating more sophisticated understandings of how Filipino values guide their decisions and relationships. One secondary student

reflected, "Before, I thought pakikipagkapwa-tao just meant being nice. Now I understand it means recognizing that my identity is connected to others, that we share a common humanity. This changes how I treat everyone, even people different from me." Such statements indicate that the program fostered not merely behavioral compliance but genuine internalization of values and their underlying philosophical foundations.

Teachers observed particular improvements in students' conflict resolution approaches and peer relationships. Students increasingly employed culturally-grounded strategies like tampo (withdrawal to express hurt while maintaining relationship) and pakikiramdam (shared inner perception or sensitivity) to navigate disagreements, contrasting with the aggressive confrontation or passive avoidance previously common. The emphasis on kapwa consciousness reduced bullying incidents as students recognized shared identity with potential targets. Teachers reported that framing anti-bullying initiatives within pakikipagkapwa-tao values proved more effective than rule-based approaches, as students understood bullying as violating fundamental cultural principles rather than merely breaking school rules. This finding supports Noddings' (2002) argument that moral education grounded in care ethics and relationships produces more authentic ethical development than compliance-based approaches.

Community engagement indicators showed remarkable growth, with students initiating service projects extending beyond program requirements. The bayanihan framework transformed students' understanding of community contribution from obligation to privilege and cultural expression. In the Visayas school, students revived a nearly-extinct traditional practice of alalay (mutual assistance) by establishing a system where students helped elderly community members with technology, transportation, and household tasks, while elders shared traditional knowledge and stories with students. This intergenerational exchange strengthened community bonds while providing students with meaningful contexts for enacting values. Parents reported that students increasingly participated in family decision-making and household responsibilities, with one parent noting, "My son now helps without being asked and explains it as his utang na loob for everything we provide. The program helped him understand our cultural expectations not as burdens but as expressions of family love."

The assessment data also revealed variations across implementation sites, with the indigenous community school showing the strongest outcomes in cultural identity and community engagement indicators. This pattern suggests that culturally-grounded character education may have particular salience for students from marginalized communities where dominant educational systems have historically devalued their cultural heritage. Students from this school expressed that the program validated their indigenous identities within formal education for the first time, with one student sharing, "School always made me feel like my culture was backwards. Now teachers tell us our values are important wisdom that can teach everyone. It makes me proud of who I am." These testimonies illustrate how

culturally-grounded character education can serve decolonizing functions, countering educational marginalization and supporting cultural revitalization alongside character development.

Challenges and Sustainability Considerations

Despite positive outcomes, implementation revealed significant challenges requiring ongoing attention for program sustainability and scalability. Teacher capacity emerged as a critical factor, with educators' effectiveness varying based on their cultural knowledge depth and pedagogical skills for culturally-responsive instruction. Teachers from cultural backgrounds different from their students' communities sometimes struggled to authentically represent local wisdom, occasionally reproducing stereotypes or oversimplifications. This challenge necessitated extensive professional development focusing not merely on program mechanics but on deepening teachers' cultural competence and humility. Some teachers initially resisted the program, viewing it as additional workload or questioning whether character education belonged in schools facing pressure to improve academic test scores. These concerns reflect broader tensions in education systems between holistic development and narrow accountability metrics.

Balancing cultural specificity with educational coherence across diverse Philippine contexts presented ongoing dilemmas. While the core values framework provided common ground, their specific expressions and prioritization varied significantly across regions and communities. What constituted appropriate enactment of *pakikipagkapwa-tao* differed between urban Manila and rural Mindanao indigenous communities. Some educators advocated for highly localized adaptations to honor each community's distinct wisdom, while others worried this would fragment the program and complicate assessment. The research team adopted a "unity in diversity" approach, maintaining core values as constants while encouraging contextual adaptation of implementation strategies. This flexibility proved essential but complicated efforts to develop standardized materials and training resources.

Resource constraints posed practical challenges, particularly for rural schools lacking materials, technology, and community resources available in urban settings. The program's emphasis on community partnerships and experiential learning sometimes exceeded schools' organizational capacity and teachers' time availability. Some planned activities involving elders and cultural practitioners could not be sustained due to logistical difficulties and lack of compensation for community members' time. These challenges highlight that culturally-grounded character education requires not merely curriculum changes but institutional transformations and resource allocations supporting community engagement. Without addressing these structural factors, programs risk becoming superficial add-ons rather than transformative educational approaches.

Tension between traditional values and contemporary realities emerged as a philosophical challenge requiring ongoing negotiation. Some traditional practices

encoded in local wisdom, particularly regarding gender roles and authority structures, conflicted with contemporary human rights principles and educational goals of critical thinking and student agency. The program confronted questions about which aspects of cultural heritage to preserve versus transform, and who possesses authority to make such determinations. These dilemmas intensified in indigenous communities where program goals of cultural preservation competed with young people's desires for cultural adaptation and individual autonomy. Educators learned that culturally-grounded character education cannot romanticize tradition but must engage critically with cultural heritage, discerning between timeless wisdom and historically-conditioned practices requiring evolution. This critical engagement itself became a valuable educational process, teaching students to honor their heritage while exercising ethical discernment about cultural continuity and change in ways respecting both tradition and contemporary contexts.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that character education programs grounded in Philippine local wisdom offer powerful approaches to fostering holistic student development while honoring cultural heritage and addressing postcolonial educational inequities. The integration of Filipino values including kapwa, bayanihan, and pakikipagkapwa-tao into systematic educational frameworks produced measurable improvements in students' prosocial behaviors, cultural identity formation, ethical reasoning, and community engagement. Beyond individual student outcomes, the program strengthened school-community partnerships, validated indigenous knowledge within formal education, and demonstrated that Filipino wisdom traditions offer sophisticated ethical frameworks suitable for contemporary character education.

However, successful implementation requires substantial investments in teacher professional development, institutional support for community engagement, and resources enabling culturally-responsive pedagogy. The research reveals ongoing tensions between standardization and contextualization, traditional values and contemporary realities, and cultural preservation and critical adaptation that necessitate continuous dialogue and negotiation among educators, communities, and students. These findings contribute to global conversations about decolonizing education and developing culturally-sustaining pedagogies while offering a replicable framework adaptable to diverse cultural contexts beyond the Philippines. Future research should examine long-term impacts on students' character development, explore scalability challenges across the national educational system, and investigate how culturally-grounded character education can prepare students for global citizenship while maintaining strong cultural identities and ethical foundations rooted in their communities' accumulated wisdom.

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