

The Influence of External Factors on the Formation of Students' Character in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT: Character formation is an important aspect of individual development, particularly within the context of education. Good character contributes to the development of individuals who possess noble morals, demonstrate responsibility, and are capable of contributing positively to society. However, character formation does not depend solely on internal factors within the individual but is also influenced by various external factors originating from the social environment. This article aims to discuss the external factors that influence students' character formation, including the roles of family, school, peers, community, mass media, and technology. This study employs a literature review approach by examining various academic sources related to character formation in education. The findings indicate that a positive social environment plays an important role in shaping students' values, attitudes, and behaviour. Therefore, cooperation among families, schools, and communities is essential to ensure that students' character formation can be implemented comprehensively and effectively.

KEYWORDS: character formation, external factors, education, student character

1. INTRODUCTION

Character formation is an important component of the education system because it is closely related to the development of an individual's personality and moral values. Education is not only intended to impart knowledge but also to develop students' personality and moral character so that they can become responsible members of society.

In the context of modern education, character formation has received increasing attention due to the emergence of various social challenges, such as disciplinary problems, the influence of social media, and changes in societal values. This indicates that character formation cannot rely solely on educational institutions; rather, it requires support from various external factors that influence students' lives.

External factors refer to environmental influences that affect the development of an individual's attitudes and behaviour. Among the external factors frequently discussed in educational research are family, school, peers, community, and mass media. These factors play an important role in shaping the values and norms practised by students in their daily lives.

Character formation is one of the main objectives of education systems worldwide. In the context of Islamic education, character development is not limited to intellectual aspects but also emphasises moral, ethical, and spiritual development. Islamic education aims to produce individuals who are balanced in terms of physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual development.

Nevertheless, the process of students' character formation does not occur solely within the classroom. It is influenced by various external factors that play an important role in the development of students' personalities. Factors such as family, peers, the school environment, and the influence of media and technology are elements that affect the formation of students' values and behaviour.

In today's digital era, challenges to students' character formation have become increasingly complex. Access to information technology and social media provides students with opportunities to be exposed to various external influences that may either be consistent with or contrary to Islamic educational values. Therefore, examining the external factors that influence students' character formation is important to ensure that educational efforts can be implemented in a more holistic and effective manner.

Therefore, this article aims to discuss in detail the external factors that influence students' character formation and their importance within the education system.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Concept of Character

Character refers to the moral qualities, values, and attitudes that shape an individual's personality. It encompasses aspects such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, empathy, and integrity. In the context of education, character formation aims to produce students who are not only academically successful but also possess good moral character.

According to Lickona (1991), character education involves systematic efforts to help individuals understand, internalise, and practise moral values in their daily lives.

2.2 Theories of Character Formation

Several theories explain the process of individual character formation. One of these is the Social Learning Theory proposed by Bandura, which states that individuals learn behaviour through observation and imitation of people around them.

In addition, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains that individual development is influenced by various environmental systems, such as family, school, and community.

These theories demonstrate that environmental factors play an important role in shaping an individual's character.

Character formation is a continuous process influenced by various internal and external factors. Character is not formed naturally but develops through life experiences, social interactions, education, cultural values, and environmental influences. In education, several theories have been proposed to explain how an individual's character is formed and strengthened. Among the theories frequently used as a foundation for research on character formation are Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

2.2.1 Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, introduced by Albert Bandura (1977, 1986), explains that individuals learn behaviours through observational learning, modelling, and reinforcement. According to Bandura, learning does not occur solely through direct experience; individuals can also learn new behaviours by observing the actions, attitudes, and consequences experienced by others.



Figure 1: Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Bandura identified four main processes involved in observational learning:

- 1. Attention** – Individuals must pay attention to the behaviour of the observed model. Models who possess credibility, status, skills, or close relationships with individuals are more likely to attract attention.
- 2. Retention** – Observed behaviour is stored in memory in the form of images or symbols so that it can be remembered and used in the future.
- 3. Reproduction** – Individuals attempt to reproduce the behaviour that they have learned based on their physical, cognitive, and emotional abilities.
- 4. Motivation** – Individuals are motivated to practise a particular behaviour when they perceive that the behaviour leads to rewards or recognition, whereas behaviour that results in punishment tends to be avoided.

In the context of character formation, teachers, parents, school leaders, peers, and community figures act as models who influence the development of individuals' values, attitudes, and behaviour. For example, a teacher who consistently demonstrates honesty, discipline, responsibility, and respect for others becomes a role model for students. Students do not only receive formal instruction but also learn these values by observing their teacher's behaviour in everyday situations.

Furthermore, technological developments and social media have expanded the sources of models observed by individuals. Media figures, digital content creators, celebrities, and influencers can also influence the character formation of younger generations. Therefore, selecting positive role models is an important aspect of ensuring positive character development.

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2.2.2 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

The Ecological Systems Theory introduced by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994) explains that individual development is influenced by interactions between individuals and various interconnected layers of the environment. According to this theory, character formation does not depend solely on individual factors but is also influenced by family, school, community, government policies, and social changes. Bronfenbrenner divided the environment into five main systems:

i. Microsystem

The microsystem refers to the environment closest to the individual and has a direct influence on character formation. Major components of the microsystem include family, school, peers, and the local community. Daily interactions with parents, teachers, and friends play an important role in developing values such as respect, responsibility, discipline, empathy, and integrity.

ii. Mesosystem

The mesosystem refers to the relationships between two or more microsystems. For example, cooperation between parents and schools in monitoring students' academic and character development can strengthen positive character formation. Conversely, conflict or poor communication between the family and school may negatively affect students' development.

iii. Exosystem

The exosystem involves environments that do not directly involve the individual but nevertheless influence their life. For example, parents' workload, workplace organisational policies, community facilities, mass media, and community support can influence the family environment, which ultimately affects children's character formation.

iv. Macrosystem

The macrosystem encompasses culture, religion, customs, ideologies, societal values, the education system, and national policies. In the Malaysian context, the values contained in the Rukun Negara, the National Education Philosophy, religious principles, and cultural values serve as important foundations for developing individuals who are balanced intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

v. Chronosystem

The chronosystem refers to changes that occur throughout an individual's life and broader social changes that influence character development. For example, the development of digital technology, the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in family structures, and transformations in the education system have altered the ways in which individuals learn, interact, and develop their personal values.

3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BANDURA'S SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY AND BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY IN CHARACTER FORMATION

Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory complement one another in explaining character formation. Bandura emphasises that individuals develop character through observing significant role models, whereas Bronfenbrenner explains that these models exist within various environmental systems that continuously influence individual development.

The Social Learning Theory proposed by Bandura (1977, 1986) and the Ecological Systems Theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994) are two theoretical frameworks that complement each other in explaining the process of individual character formation. Although the two theories were developed from different perspectives, both share the assumption that character formation is neither a process that occurs naturally nor one determined entirely by genetic factors. Instead, character develops through dynamic interactions between individuals and their social environments throughout the developmental process. Therefore, integrating these two theories provides a more comprehensive conceptual foundation for understanding how values, attitudes, and behaviours are formed, strengthened, and maintained across different contexts of life.

Bandura (1977, 1986) emphasised that character formation occurs through observational learning, whereby individuals acquire knowledge, values, and behaviours by observing the actions of significant models such as parents, teachers, peers, and community leaders. This process involves four main mechanisms: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Observed behaviour is more likely to be imitated when the model possesses credibility, authority, or a close relationship with the individual. Furthermore, behaviour that receives social rewards or recognition tends to be repeated, whereas behaviour that receives punishment or social rejection is more likely to be avoided. From this perspective, character formation occurs through cognitive and social processes involving observation, interpretation, and imitation of behaviour considered appropriate within a particular community.

However, Social Learning Theory does not explain in sufficient depth how broader environments shape an individual's opportunities to be exposed to particular models. This gap is addressed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979, 1994), which emphasises that character formation is influenced by interactions between individuals and various interconnected layers of environmental systems. According to this theory, individuals exist within an ecological network consisting of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each system performs a different function while interacting with the others in determining the social experiences that shape an individual's character.

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From a conceptual perspective, the integration of these two theories demonstrates that Social Learning Theory explains the **mechanisms** through which character is formed, whereas Ecological Systems Theory explains the **contexts** that enable these mechanisms to occur. Bandura addresses the question of how individuals learn behaviour through observation and imitation, while Bronfenbrenner explains why individuals are exposed to different models based on the social and cultural systems surrounding them. Therefore, the two theories are not contradictory but rather complementary in explaining character formation holistically.

In the context of education, the integration of these two theories implies that character development cannot be assigned solely to schools. Instead, it requires an ecological approach involving close cooperation among families, educational institutions, communities, policymakers, and society. Teachers function as professional role models who demonstrate positive values through their teaching practices and leadership, while parents reinforce these values within the family environment. At the same time, educational policies, school culture, the use of digital technology, and societal norms need to be aligned to create an environment conducive to positive character development. An approach that combines the mechanisms of social learning with the influence of ecological systems can contribute to more sustainable, comprehensive, and relevant character development in response to the challenges of twenty-first-century education.

In the educational context, effective character formation requires the involvement of all stakeholders, including families, schools, communities, and society. Teachers not only play a role in transmitting knowledge but also serve as role models for students through their daily behaviour and practices. At the same time, parents need to create a conducive family environment, while schools and communities should provide environments that support the development of positive values. This comprehensive approach can help produce individuals who are not only academically successful but also possess strong, ethical, and responsible character towards themselves, society, and the nation.

4. EXTERNAL FACTORS IN CHARACTER FORMATION

4.1 The Role of the Family

The family is the first social institution to influence individual development from childhood. Parents play an important role in shaping children's moral values, attitudes, and behaviour through education, guidance, and role modelling.

Positive parenting practices, such as providing attention, emotional support, and consistent discipline, can help develop good character in children. Conversely, a lack of attention or family conflict can negatively affect children's personality development.

Therefore, the role of parents is essential in ensuring that children grow up in a conducive environment characterised by positive moral values.

4.2 The Role of the School

Schools are formal educational institutions that play an important role in students' character formation. Teachers are not only responsible for delivering knowledge but also serve as role models for students.

Through teaching and learning activities, co-curricular programmes, and character development activities, schools can help develop values such as discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and mutual respect.

A positive school environment and good relationships between teachers and students can help create a conducive learning environment that supports students' character development.

4.3 The Influence of Peers

Peers are one of the factors that strongly influence students' social and emotional development, particularly during adolescence. Students tend to adjust their behaviour according to the peer groups to which they belong.

Peer influence can have positive effects, such as increasing learning motivation, developing self-confidence, and encouraging cooperation. However, peer influence can also lead to negative behaviours such as truancy, bullying, and disciplinary problems if not properly managed.

Therefore, it is important for students to be exposed to peers who demonstrate positive values and attitudes.

4.4 The Role of the Community

The community also plays an important role in students' character formation. Cultural values, social norms, and community activities can influence the way students think and behave.

A positive community environment, such as an active community, community-based programmes, and strong neighbourhood values, can help develop students' sense of responsibility and spirit of cooperation.

Conversely, an unhealthy social environment can negatively affect students' character development.

4.5 Mass Media and Technology

The development of information and communication technology has brought significant changes to people's lives. Social media, the internet, and television have become major sources of information for many students today.

Although technology provides many educational benefits, uncontrolled use can negatively affect students' character formation. For example, exposure to inappropriate content can influence their values and behaviour.

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Therefore, the use of media and technology needs to be monitored and guided by parents and teachers so that it can be utilised positively.

5. DISCUSSION

The discussion in this article demonstrates that students' character formation is influenced by various external factors that are interconnected. The family plays a fundamental role in developing moral values from the early stages of life, while schools reinforce these values through formal educational processes.

In addition, peer influence and the community also affect students' social development. In the digital era, mass media and technology have become important factors that require particular attention in students' character formation.

Therefore, character formation cannot be implemented by a single party alone. Instead, it requires cooperation among families, schools, and communities to create an environment that supports students' character development.

6. CONCLUSION

Character formation is a complex process influenced by various external factors. Family, peers, schools, media, and technology play important roles in shaping students' values and behaviour. Therefore, character formation efforts require cooperation among various stakeholders, including families, schools, and communities. An educational approach based on Islamic values can help produce a generation of students who are not only academically successful but also possess noble moral character.

To ensure positive character formation, all stakeholders need to work together to provide a conducive environment that supports character development. With support from various stakeholders, efforts to produce a generation that possesses noble character and responsibility can be realised.

Overall, students' character formation is a complex process influenced by various external factors. Family, school, peers, community, and mass media play important roles in shaping students' values, attitudes, and behaviour.

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