

**Empathy-Based Character Education in the Religious Context:
A Systematic Review of Models, Challenges, and Outcomes (2019–2024)**

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Abstract

Character education in religious settings often emphasizes cognitive elements, such as doctrinal memorization and rule compliance, while affective aspects such as empathy and relational awareness remain underdeveloped. This study addresses a gap in the literature on integrating empathy into faith-based character education, particularly in Global South contexts. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA 2020 protocol, this review examined three databases: ERIC, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis. From an initial pool of 1,281 articles, 16 met the inclusion criteria. The findings suggest that empathy significantly reduces dogmatic attitudes, enhances prosocial empathy (Cohen's $d = 0.73$), and fosters interfaith engagement. Effective models include relationship-driven spiritual pedagogy, life-and-death narratives for moral reflection, and ethnopedagogical practices grounded in local values. Key challenges involve limited teacher training in affective competencies and rigid curricula. This study recommends implementing social-emotional teacher training and contextualized curricula to nurture learners who are not only religious but also reflective, inclusive, and morally grounded.

Keywords: character education, empathy, religious education, systematic literature review

Abstrak

Pendidikan karakter dalam pengaturan keagamaan sering menekankan elemen kognitif, seperti hafalan doktrin dan kepatuhan aturan, sementara aspek afektif seperti empati dan kesadaran relasional tetap terbelakang. Studi ini membahas kesenjangan dalam literatur tentang mengintegrasikan empati ke dalam pendidikan karakter berbasis iman, terutama dalam konteks Global South. Menggunakan Tinjauan Literatur Sistematis (SLR) yang dipandu oleh protokol PRISMA 2020, tinjauan ini meneliti tiga database: ERIC, SpringerLink, dan Taylor & Francis. Dari kumpulan awal 1.281 artikel, 16 memenuhi kriteria inklusi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa empati secara signifikan mengurangi sikap dogmatis, meningkatkan empati prososial (Cohen's $d = 0,73$), dan mendorong keterlibatan antaragama. Model yang efektif termasuk pedagogi spiritual yang digerakkan oleh hubungan, narasi hidup dan mati untuk refleksi moral, dan praktik etnopedagogis yang didasarkan pada nilai-nilai lokal. Tantangan utama melibatkan pelatihan guru yang terbatas dalam kompetensi afektif dan kurikulum yang kaku. Studi ini merekomendasikan penerapan pelatihan guru sosial-emosional dan kurikulum kontekstual untuk membina peserta didik yang tidak hanya religius tetapi juga reflektif, inklusif, dan berdasar moral.

Kata kunci: pendidikan karakter, empati, pendidikan agama, tinjauan literatur sistematis

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INTRODUCTION

Character education has emerged as a critical component in 21st-century education, particularly within faith-based schools that aim to cultivate not only academic competence but also students' spiritual and moral identities (Andrei, 2023; Kimanen, 2022). Despite this dual mission, many religious institutions still emphasize cognitive and doctrinal instruction focusing heavily on rule compliance and belief memorization—while the affective domain, such as empathy and emotional growth, remains underdeveloped (Oplatka & Hoffman, 2023). This imbalance raises significant concerns. Studies have shown that when educational systems neglect the emotional dimensions of learning, students may exhibit reduced empathy, emotional dysregulation, and even rigid or exclusionary worldviews (J. Wang, 2023). According to Kimanen (2022) empathy is not only a moral virtue but also a pedagogical tool essential for fostering justice, compassion, and human dignity in diverse religious classrooms. In pluralistic societies, failure to foster empathic understanding can fuel rising intolerance and identity conflict among youth (J. Wang, 2023). Moreover, several global frameworks have reinforced the urgency of embedding empathy in educational practice. The OECD's Social and Emotional Skills Survey (F. Wang & King, 2025) underscores that competencies such as empathy and social awareness are tightly linked to academic performance, well-being, and civic engagement. Similarly, the CASEL framework (2020) classifies empathy as a core domain of social awareness, necessary for fostering inclusive, values-driven learning environments.

In religious education specifically, empathy acts as a transformative bridge between spiritual belief and moral action. Across religious traditions *karuṇā* in Buddhism, *rahmah* in Islam, and *agape* in Christianity empathy functions as a moral imperative (Andrei, 2023; Megawati & Sulisworo, 2025). Yet, as shown by Manninen (2024), its systematic implementation within faith-based curricula remains rare, especially in the Global South where cultural and contextual diversity calls for more localized, reflective pedagogies. Despite growing evidence that narrative pedagogy, interfaith dialogue, and spiritual reflection can foster empathy and prosocial behavior (Kimanen, 2022; Megawati & Sulisworo, 2025), few studies have examined how these strategies are integrated into formal character education within religious contexts. This gap is particularly apparent in under-represented regions such as Southeast Asia and Africa, where indigenous spirituality and community dynamics offer rich but underutilized frameworks.

In response to these challenges, this article presents a systematic review of studies published between 2019 and 2024 on empathy-based approaches to character education in faith-based educational institutions. Using the PRISMA method and a thematic-reflective lens, this study seeks to connect the affective and spiritual domains in education through the following objectives 1) identify existing models and practices of empathy-based character education, 2) analyze barriers to implementing empathy in religious education, 3) evaluate the impact of empathetic strategies on student character development, and 4) propose pedagogical and policy recommendations for embedding empathy in 21st-century religious education.

METHOD

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) using the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). The aim was to explore how empathy is conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated in



faith-based character education using a transparent, replicable method. Relevant studies were identified through searches of three major academic databases: ERIC, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2024 and used a combination of keywords, including “spiritual education,” “character education,” “religious pedagogy,” and “empathy.” This initial process yielded 1,281 records: 271 from ERIC, 775 from SpringerLink, and 35 from Taylor & Francis. To ensure quality and relevance, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

1. Articles published between 2019 and 2024;
2. Indexed in Scopus (Q1–Q3);
3. Focused on character education in faith-based institutions;
4. Incorporated empathy-based elements in pedagogical design or practice;
5. Provided either empirical data, reflective insights, or conceptual synthesis;
6. Written in English;
7. Accessible in full-text.

Exclusions were made for studies that lacked direct reference to empathy, were situated exclusively in secular education, or were not fully available. After a three-step screening (title/abstract review, full-text eligibility check, and relevance validation), 16 articles were selected for inclusion. Figure 1 below illustrates the PRISMA flowchart describing each phase of the screening and selection process

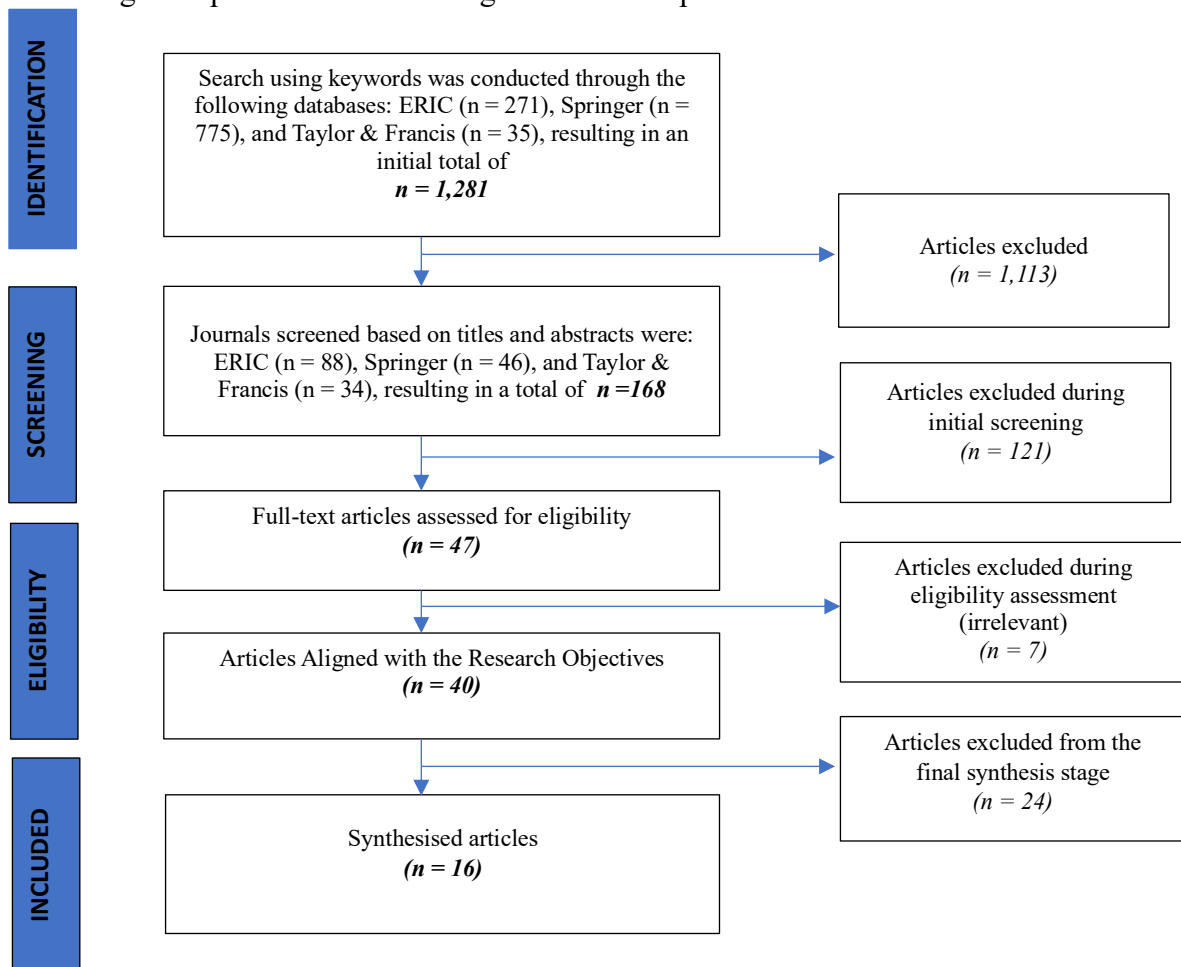


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Article Selection Process



The final dataset of 16 articles was analyzed using a thematic-reflective method. Each article was read thoroughly to identify recurring patterns, key concepts, and pedagogical insights. A synthesis table was created to map the authorship, publication year, title, findings, and thematic contributions of each paper. Four dominant themes emerged: 1) empathy-integrated instructional approaches, 2) teachers as moral and spiritual role models, 3) structural and cultural challenges in implementation, and 4) the impact of empathy on students' affective and moral growth. This review process offers a comprehensive understanding of how empathy contributes to character education in diverse religious contexts, highlighting both theoretical depth and practical application.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study systematically reviewed 16 peer-reviewed articles to examine how empathy-based approaches are implemented in character education within religious contexts, the challenges that hinder their effectiveness, and the outcomes achieved. The findings are grouped into four main themes based on the reviewer's guidance:

Practical Implementation of Empathy-Based Models in the Classroom

Several articles identified well-known pedagogical frameworks such as Buddhists Education (Lau & Tse, 2024) and Al-Ghazali's values-based model (Jenuri et al., 2025). However, the original manuscript lacked details on how these models are operationalized in the classroom. Upon deeper analysis, these approaches utilize specific teaching strategies:

Buddhist education integrates compassion, self-awareness, and moral reflection through contemplative practices, life journaling, and group discussion. Teachers lead guided sessions where students relate Buddhist values to personal and communal life, enhancing empathy through experiential learning.

The Al-Ghazali-based model combines intellectual, spiritual, and emotional development by engaging students in spiritual journaling, role-playing daily moral dilemmas, and guided reflections on the *nafs* (self), *qalb* (heart), *ruh* (soul), and *'aql* (intellect). A study reported a substantial learning gain ($N\text{-Gain} = 0.85$) in students' spiritual understanding. These examples show that empathy-based character education can be effectively translated into daily classroom interactions and yield measurable learning outcomes.

Root Causes of Implementation Challenges

Three studies identified major barriers, including inadequate teacher training, rigid curricula, and poor parental involvement. The reviewer noted that these challenges were previously described too generally. A closer reading reveals deeper systemic factors: Tadege et al. (2022) emphasized that teachers lacked confidence because the values curriculum was disconnected from local religious and cultural realities, exacerbated by limited institutional support.

Drew et al. (2024) showed that while many parents were interested in supporting Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), schools failed to communicate effectively due to assumptions about parental disinterest or logistical barriers. These findings suggest that structural issues such as policy gaps, inadequate funding, and weak affective training need to be addressed to mainstream empathy in religious character education.



Concrete Examples of School–Parent–Community Collaboration

Although collaboration with families and religious communities was identified as essential, the initial manuscript lacked examples of how this collaboration works in practice. One article provides a compelling case: Drew et al. (2024) described an SEL program that initially failed due to low parental engagement. When the school implemented co-design strategies, inviting parents to informal discussions and developing empathy modules together, both participation and outcomes improved significantly. This example demonstrates that collaboration must go beyond messaging; it requires intentional design, mutual respect, and shared responsibility among stakeholders.

Practical Implications of Quantitative Findings

While the article highlighted a significant effect size (Cohen’s $d = 0.73$) from Kappelmayer et al. (2023), the practical implications of this result were previously underdeveloped. The study involved a structured intervention using compassion training, peer dialogues, and perspective-taking exercises that increased children’s empathy and social connectedness. To replicate these effects, schools can adopt weekly “empathy circles,” structured storytelling, or community service projects that encourage students to reflect on moral experiences. Factors like teacher commitment, supportive leadership, and contextual fit will influence whether such interventions succeed across different settings.

This synthesis reveals that empathy-based character education is most effective when rooted in contextually adapted pedagogies, supported by well-trained teachers, and strengthened through active collaboration with parents and religious communities. Moreover, when properly designed, empathy interventions yield not only cognitive and emotional development but also measurable gains in interpersonal relationships and spiritual maturity.

A detailed summary of the 16 reviewed articles, including authors, titles, findings, and thematic categories, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Summary of Reviewed Articles and Thematic Categorization

No.	Author(s) (Year)	Journal Title	Key Findings	Thematic Category
1.	(Birhan et al., 2021)	Teaching Character Education in Preprimary and Primary Schools	Parents prioritized honesty and responsibility, while teachers focused on respect and care; collaboration between parents and teachers is needed.	Implementation Challenges
2.	(Hastasari et al., 2022)	Communication Patterns of Islamic Boarding Schools	Character education is based on ustadz role modeling and two-way communication fostering empathy.	Models & Strategies



3.	(Sugiarti et al., 2022)	Parenting and Character in Adolescents	Parenting style had a weak impact, but schools and communities play a vital role in adolescent character development.	Implementation Challenges
4.	(Prayitno et al., 2022)	Prophetic Values in Indonesian Language Textbook	Prophetic values (honesty, cooperation, humility) enhance students' character and manners.	Models & Strategies
5.	(Sakti et al., 2024)	Ethnopedagogy in Preschool Character Education	Ethnopedagogy effectively instills local values and strengthens community involvement in early childhood character education.	Culturally-Based Model
6.	(Tadege et al., 2022)	Teachers' Views on Values Education in Ethiopia	Teachers lacked confidence due to misaligned curriculum and weak systemic support; value education reform is needed.	Implementation Challenges
7.	(Drew et al., 2024)	Parental Awareness of SEL in Schools	Parents showed interest in SEL, but poor school communication hindered involvement; collaboration improved with co-designed modules.	Implementation Challenges
8.	(Lau & Tse, 2024)	Buddhicised Education in Hong Kong Schools	Buddhist values were integrated into formal and informal curricula to enhance moral reflection and empathy.	Models & Strategies
9.	(Rouse & Hyde, 2024)	Spiritual Pedagogy in Early Years	Spiritual growth of children is fostered through reflective	Models & Strategies



			presence and emotionally grounded teacher–student relationships.	
10.	(Cho & Heinz, 2025)	Faith and Interreligious Engagement in Catholic Schools	Teachers used spiritual and interfaith values as pedagogical foundations even among non-religious teachers.	Models & Strategies
11.	(Phan et al., 2025)	Life and Death Education for Spiritual Growth	Life and death education rooted in Eastern philosophy supports spiritual growth and meaning-making.	Models & Strategies
12.	(Jenuri et al., 2025)	Al-Ghazali’s Model in Modern Islamic Education	Al-Ghazali’s framework significantly improved students’ spiritual understanding (N-Gain = 0.85).	Models & Strategies
13.	(Manninen, 2024b)	Spiritual Beliefs and Moral Virtues in Finland	Benevolence values (non-harm, kindness) are relevant in social education even without formal religious affiliation.	Moral-Based Education
14.	(Fraser-Pearce, 2022)	Spiritual Education as Relational Education	Ethics education in Norway emphasizes reflection on universal and interfaith values.	Moral-Based Education
15.	(Bollen, 2023)	Conceptualization of Inclusive Empathy	Inclusive empathy helps prevent bias and dogmatism in education.	Empathy-Based Education
16.	(Kappelmayer et al., 2023)	Empathy and Social Relationships in School Interventions	Compassion-based intervention produced a strong effect on empathy and social relationships (Cohen’s $d = 0.73$).	Empathy-Based Education



This systematic review of 16 scholarly articles confirms that empathy-infused character education in religious contexts does more than teach emotional skills—it serves as a transformational bridge between values, lived experience, and relational meaning. As noted in one of the reviewed studies, “Rather than relying on rules, moral education can be provided through reflective pedagogies, spiritual narratives, teacher role modeling, or culturally rooted practices such as ethnopedagogy”. These findings are also aligned with Lickona’s (1991) character education framework, which emphasizes that moral action must be preceded by moral feeling, with empathic concern as a key component.

The reviewed articles consistently highlight the central role of teachers as moral and spiritual figures. Instructional models based on Islamic prophetic values (Prayitno et al., 2022), Buddhist-inspired reflection (Lau & Tse, 2024), and Al-Ghazali’s ethical-spiritual framework (Jenuri et al., 2025) present teachers not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as emotionally engaged mentors. This aligns with Noddings’ (2012) ethic of care, which emphasizes that genuine concern and relational presence are fundamental to authentic education rather than the delivery of abstract values in a detached manner.

Despite the promise of these models, their broad implementation remains challenging. Multiple studies (e.g., Tadege et al., 2022; Sugiarti et al., 2022) report that teachers are often insufficiently prepared in affective domains, curricula tend to be rigid and cognitively overloaded, and institutional support is frequently lacking. These barriers point to deeper systemic issues in addressing the emotional and spiritual dimensions of education. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the absence of relational support, referred to as “relatedness,” within learning environments weakens students’ intrinsic motivation to care, connect with others, and develop morally.

One of the most overlooked yet crucial findings of this review lies in the role of family and community in cultivating empathy and character. It’s striking how frequently the literature speaks of collaboration, yet rarely moves beyond theory. Drew et al. (2024), however, offer a rare exception. When schools worked side by side with parents to develop empathy-based modules, students not only participated more actively but also internalized the values more deeply. This insight closely aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979), which reminds us that children don’t grow in isolation; webs of relationships shape them. Empathy, too, reveals itself as more than a classroom tool it becomes a bridge across worldviews. Manninen’s (2024) findings are particularly compelling: even students without any religious affiliation embraced values like compassion and benevolence when immersed in empathy-rich environments. This kind of outcome aligns with Bennett’s vision of intercultural empathy, in which understanding the other is essential for living together in pluralistic societies (Bennett, 2004). Theoretically, empathy in religious education aligns with Davis’s (1996) idea of empathic concern, that inner pull that compels someone to help another, not out of duty but out of genuine care. When religious teachings are layered on top of this, empathy becomes more than a feeling it evolves into a moral compass, anchored in faith traditions. Narvaez (2006) adds to this by arguing that moral reasoning must weave together both head and heart. Without empathy, moral teachings risk becoming lifeless doctrine; with it, they transform into action.

Global frameworks well support these insights. The CASEL model (2020) places empathy at the core of social-emotional learning, a prerequisite for navigating conflicts, making ethical choices, and participating as engaged citizens. International bodies like UNESCO (2021) and the World Bank (2020) go further, positioning empathy and



emotional intelligence as survival skills in our increasingly diverse and complex world, particularly in under-resourced educational systems.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this systematic review substantiates the pivotal role of empathy-based character education, particularly when anchored within resonant religious and cultural frameworks, in fostering students' holistic moral development, relational competencies, and intercultural understanding. The findings posit that empathy is not an innate trait but a cultivated capacity, most effectively nurtured through pedagogies that synergistically integrate spiritual narratives, emotional presence, and authentic teacher exemplification, with models drawing from prophetic ethics and local wisdom proving especially transformative. However, the translational efficacy of these approaches is critically hampered by systemic impediments, including insufficient teacher training in affective pedagogy, curricular rigidity, and fragmented family-school collaboration. To address these barriers, a multi-tiered implementation strategy is imperative, requiring the deep integration of empathy-centric modules into national education policies, teacher preparation programs, and curriculum design. This can be exemplified by initiatives such as the proposed "Empathy Fellows" program, which would provide certified, specialized training in spiritual dialogue and socio-emotional learning. Furthermore, operationalizing empathy through daily school rituals such as reflection circles and service projects must be bolstered by top-down institutional consolidation from ministries and religious councils, formally embedding measurable empathy outcomes within national curricula, such as Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka* and *Profil Pelajar Pancasila*. Ultimately, while this review charts a clear path for empathy as a cornerstone of inclusive citizenship and social cohesion, it also reveals significant methodological limitations in the extant literature, underscoring the necessity for future research to transcend language biases and the dominance of qualitative studies by incorporating a more diverse corpus of regional and Global South perspectives to validate and enrich these findings globally.

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