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KI HADJAR DEWANTARA'S MORAL VALUES AND CONTEMPORARY CHARACTER EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Character education remains central to educational reform, yet prior discussions of Ki Hadjar Dewantara often restate his ideas without critically connecting them to contemporary moral education. This qualitative literature review examines the relevance of Dewantara's concept of budi pekerti to current character education. Literature was identified through Google Scholar, ERIC, DOAJ, and publisher databases using Indonesian and English keywords related to Ki Hadjar Dewantara, moral education, values education, character education, digital citizenship, and multicultural education. The review covered peer-reviewed publications from 2019–2025 and included Dewantara's foundational educational work. Sources were selected for conceptual relevance, methodological clarity, and contribution to educational practice. Fifteen substantive sources were synthesized through reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: integrated moral development through thought, feeling, will, and action; moral formation through example, habituation, dialogue, and learner agency; the Tri-Center partnership among family, school, and community; and the extension of budi pekerti to digital citizenship, multicultural inclusion, and twenty-first-century competencies. The review's novelty lies in interpreting Dewantara's philosophy as a dynamic framework that combines local moral foundations with critical, democratic, and digitally responsible character education. Practically, the findings support curriculum integration, teacher modelling, participatory learning, and coordinated school-family-community programmes. The review concludes that Dewantara's philosophy remains relevant when implemented reflectively rather than as moral indoctrination.

Keywords: character education, Ki Hadjar Dewantara, literature review, moral education, values education

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INTRODUCTION

Character education is expected to develop not only students' knowledge but also their moral judgement, emotional dispositions, habits, and social responsibility. This need has become more urgent as globalization and digital communication expose learners to competing values, misinformation, online hostility, and increasingly complex social relationships. In Indonesia, concerns about moral and character crises have long been associated with rapid social and cultural change (Budiarto, 2020). International research similarly shows that schools and families often value honesty, responsibility, respect, care, and fairness, but face challenges in translating these values into consistent practice and adult role modelling (Birhan et al., 2021).

Ki Hadjar Dewantara's philosophy offers a culturally grounded response to these concerns. His concept of budi pekerti integrates thought, feeling, will, and action, while education is understood as guidance that enables learners to develop freedom, dignity, and social usefulness (Dewantara, 2011). The leadership trilogy—Ing Ngarsa Sung Tuladha, Ing Madya Mangun Karsa, and Tut Wuri Handayani—positions educators as moral examples, learning partners, and supporters of student autonomy. The Tri-Center of Education further locates character formation within the interaction of family, school, and community (Asa, 2019; Kurnia et al., 2023).

Recent Indonesian studies confirm the continuing relevance of these ideas to independent learning, digital-era schooling, and character development (Ainia, 2020; Fahmi, 2024; Suryana & Muhtar, 2022). However, much of this literature remains descriptive and tends to list Dewantara's concepts without critically examining their relationship to current international debates. Contemporary character education distinguishes values from virtues, stresses the importance of teacher preparation, and increasingly connects moral formation with citizenship, critical reflection, and cultural responsiveness (Fernández Espinosa & López González, 2024; Fiala, 2024; Lu, 2025). Digital citizenship research also indicates that personal values and critical dispositions jointly shape responsible participation in online environments (Assante et al., 2022).

A further gap concerns analytical synthesis. Recent reviews have identified methodological weaknesses in character education research and called for clearer concepts, stronger evidence, and more context-sensitive studies (Kristjánsson et al., 2025; Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025). Existing discussions of Dewantara rarely integrate his moral philosophy with the challenges of digital citizenship, multicultural education, and twenty-first-century competencies. Consequently, the unresolved question is not simply whether Dewantara remains relevant, but how his philosophy can be interpreted critically and operationally for contemporary education.

This review therefore aims to: (1) identify the core moral and pedagogical principles of Dewantara's budi pekerti; (2) synthesize their relationship with contemporary character, moral, and values education; and (3) formulate implications for curriculum, teaching

practice, and educational policy. The review contributes a conceptual framework that connects Indonesian educational philosophy with international scholarship while preserving the cultural distinctiveness of Dewantara's ideas.

METHODS

Review Design

The study used a structured qualitative literature review. Transparent reporting was guided by PRISMA 2020 principles, although the review was interpretive rather than a meta-analysis (Page et al., 2021). The purpose was to identify, compare, and synthesize conceptual and empirical literature concerning Dewantara's moral philosophy and contemporary character education.

Search Strategy and Eligibility

The final search was conducted during manuscript revision using Google Scholar, ERIC, DOAJ, and publisher databases. Search strings combined the terms “Ki Hadjar Dewantara,” “budi pekerti,” “character education,” “moral education,” “values education,” “digital citizenship,” “multicultural education,” and “twenty-first-century competencies.” Indonesian and English variants were used. The principal publication period was 2019–2025 to prioritize recent research, while Dewantara's foundational educational work was retained as a primary conceptual source.

Sources were included when they: (1) were peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, or authoritative review papers; (2) directly addressed Dewantara, character education, moral education, values education, citizenship, or relevant contemporary educational challenges; (3) provided identifiable conceptual or empirical findings; and (4) were available in English or Indonesian. Duplicates, non-scholarly opinion pieces, inaccessible records, and publications without a clear relationship to the review questions were excluded. Fifteen substantive sources met the criteria and were used in the thematic synthesis.

Quality Appraisal and Analysis

Each source was appraised for relevance, peer-review status or institutional authority, methodological transparency, and conceptual contribution. The literature was then analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis involving familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, naming, and interpretive reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Codes included moral integration, freedom and responsibility, teacher example, habituation, learner agency, family-school-community collaboration, digital ethics, cultural plurality, citizenship, and twenty-first-century competence. Credibility was strengthened by comparing Indonesian interpretations of Dewantara with recent international studies and by retaining both convergent and critical perspectives.

RESULTS

Overview of the Literature

The selected literature consisted of Dewantara's foundational educational text, Indonesian conceptual and review studies, comparative character-education research, and recent international work on virtues, citizenship, digital ethics, and critical character education. The synthesis showed substantial agreement that character formation requires more than cognitive instruction. At the same time, international scholarship cautions against treating character education as the uncritical transmission of fixed behaviours. Table 1 summarizes the principal contributions of the key sources.

Table 1. *Thematic synthesis of key literature*

Source(s)	Context / approach	Main contribution	Relevance to this review
Dewantara (2011)	Foundational educational philosophy	Budi pekerti unites thought, feeling, will, and action; education guides freedom and social responsibility.	Provides the moral and anthropological foundation.
Asa (2019); Kurnia et al. (2023)	Indonesian philosophical literature reviews	Emphasize Tri-Center education, teacher example, cultural values, and holistic moral formation.	Clarifies Dewantara-specific concepts and local context.
Ainia (2020); Suryana & Muhtar (2022); Fahmi (2024)	Studies of independent learning and the digital era	Connect learner freedom, the Among system, leadership, and character education to contemporary schooling.	Shows practical continuity but limited critical synthesis.
Birhan et al. (2021); Mahanani et al. (2022)	Empirical and comparative school research	Character education depends on curriculum, role modelling, family participation, and contextual policy support.	Supports the Tri-Center and practice-based interpretation.
Assante et al. (2022)	Empirical digital-citizenship research	Personal values and critical dispositions contribute to responsible online participation.	Extends budi pekerti into digital ethics and critical literacy.
Fernández Espinosa & López González (2024)	International study of 160 schools	Distinguishes values from virtues and highlights teacher training and school context.	Strengthens conceptual clarity and implementation implications.
Fiala (2024); Lu (2025)	Philosophical studies of critical character and citizenship	Character education should be democratic, reflective, culturally responsive, and connected to civic virtue.	Prevents budi pekerti from becoming obedience or indoctrination.
Kristjánsson et al. (2025); Oldham & McLoughlin (2025)	Recent critical and scoping reviews	Call for conceptual flexibility, robust evidence, valid measures, and context-sensitive research.	Defines limitations and future empirical priorities.

Theme 1: Integrated Moral Development

The first theme defines budi pekerti as an integrated relationship among cognition, emotion, motivation, and conduct. Dewantara's emphasis on cipta, rasa, karsa, and action rejects the separation of academic intelligence from moral life (Dewantara, 2011). Responsibility, honesty, respect, care, tolerance, humility, and self-control are therefore not isolated rules but expressions of a balanced person. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary character education, which views virtue as involving moral understanding, motivation, judgement, and repeated action rather than simple knowledge of values (Fernández Espinosa & López González, 2024; Kristjánsson et al., 2025).

Theme 2: Example, Habituation, Dialogue, and Learner Agency

The second theme concerns the process of moral formation. Indonesian studies emphasize exemplary conduct, positive habituation, the Among system, and the educator's leadership trilogy (Ainia, 2020; Kurnia et al., 2023; Suryana & Muhtar, 2022). International evidence also identifies role modelling and repeated practice as important, while noting that adults do not always demonstrate the values they teach (Birhan et al., 2021). The synthesis indicates that habituation is necessary but insufficient. Fiala (2024) warns that character programmes can become conformist when students are not invited to question whose values are promoted. Dewantara's idea of guided freedom provides a basis for combining modelling and habit with dialogue, reflection, choice, and moral reasoning.

Theme 3: The Tri-Center as a Character-Education Ecosystem

The third theme is the partnership among family, school, and community. Dewantara's Tri-Center concept positions character formation as a shared social responsibility rather than a programme confined to classroom lessons (Asa, 2019). Empirical and comparative research likewise indicates that character education is more credible when curriculum, adult behaviour, school culture, and family expectations are aligned (Birhan et al., 2021; Mahanani et al., 2022). The Tri-Center can therefore be interpreted as an educational ecosystem in which values are experienced consistently across formal learning, family relationships, peer interaction, and community participation.

Theme 4: Contemporary Relevance

The fourth theme extends budi pekerti to current educational challenges. In digital citizenship, honesty relates to information integrity, responsibility to safe and ethical technology use, respect to online communication, and care to protection from harassment and exclusion. Assante et al. (2022) show that values and critical dispositions jointly support responsible digital participation, suggesting that digital competence without moral orientation is incomplete. In multicultural education, tolerance and respect must be accompanied by critical attention to whose culture and virtues are represented. Critical character education therefore requires democratic dialogue and cultural responsiveness

(Fiala, 2024). Citizenship and character education can also be mutually supportive when personal virtue is connected with participation in the common good (Lu, 2025). Finally, the integration of thought, feeling, will, and action provides an ethical orientation for critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication rather than treating twenty-first-century skills as value-neutral competencies.

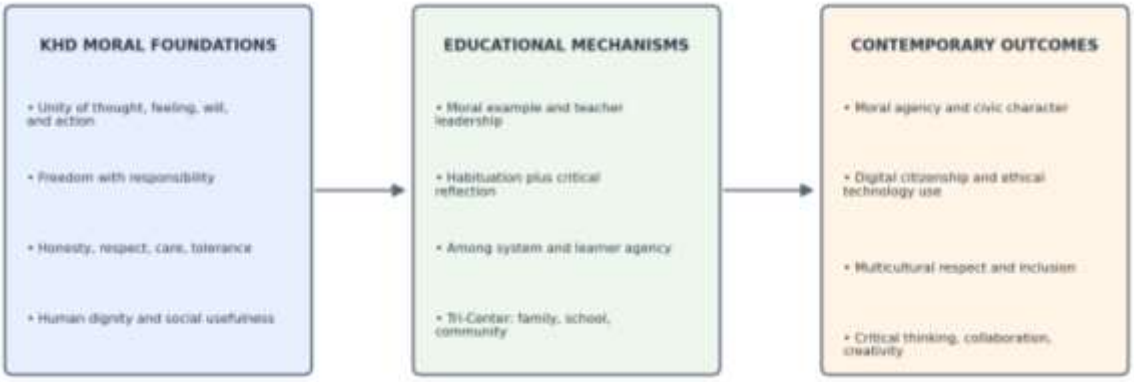


Figure 1. *Conceptual synthesis of Dewantara's moral values for contemporary character education.*

DISCUSSION

The review demonstrates that Dewantara's contribution is broader than a list of desirable traits. His philosophy provides an integrated account of the moral person, a relational pedagogy, and a social ecology of education. This combination differentiates budi pekerti from character programmes that merely display values on classroom walls or reward compliant behaviour. The concept becomes scientifically useful when its components are interpreted as connected mechanisms: moral knowledge and feeling support intention; intention is strengthened through example, practice, and reflection; and sustained behaviour depends on consistent environments.

The strongest convergence with international literature concerns holistic development and the importance of context. Fernández Espinosa and López González (2024) show that schools do not always distinguish clearly between values and virtues, even though the distinction affects implementation. Dewantara helps bridge this divide: values indicate what is considered worthy, while budi pekerti concerns the internalization and enactment of those values as stable moral dispositions. Similarly, Birhan et al. (2021) emphasize honesty, responsibility, care, and respect, but also identify weak adult modelling. Dewantara's leadership trilogy directly addresses this gap by requiring educators to embody, stimulate, and support moral growth.

A more complex issue is the relationship between habituation and autonomy. Habit can make ethical conduct consistent, but unreflective habit may encourage obedience rather than moral agency. Fiala's (2024) critical perspective is therefore important. Dewantara's educational freedom should not be understood as the absence of guidance; it

is guided independence that enables learners to evaluate consequences, respect others, and regulate themselves. Accordingly, classroom practice should combine routines with moral dilemmas, reflective discussion, collaborative projects, service learning, and opportunities for students to justify decisions.

The Tri-Center concept is also relevant to contemporary implementation. Schools cannot compensate alone for conflicting examples in families, peer groups, communities, and digital media. Character education requires shared language, coherent expectations, and opportunities for participation across settings. Curriculum developers should therefore embed moral values across subjects and school culture, while families and communities participate in project design, mentoring, and evaluation. Such collaboration reflects comparative evidence that policy alone does not guarantee character development unless it is supported by school practice and social relationships (Mahanani et al., 2022).

Digital transformation requires an explicit reinterpretation of budi pekerti. Online environments intensify ethical questions involving privacy, misinformation, cyberbullying, authorship, artificial intelligence, and respectful disagreement. The findings of Assante et al. (2022) suggest that values such as universal concern need to be combined with critical thinking. Thus, students should not only follow digital rules but also assess evidence, recognize manipulation, consider diverse perspectives, and accept responsibility for the social consequences of their online actions.

Multicultural education raises a similar requirement for critical interpretation. Dewantara's cultural grounding is a strength because character education becomes meaningful when connected to lived traditions. However, local values must not be used to silence minority identities or treat one cultural interpretation as universal. A contemporary application should preserve respect for local wisdom while encouraging dialogue, inclusion, and civic equality. This approach is consistent with critical character education and with the view that ethical and civic virtues can support one another (Fiala, 2024; Lu, 2025).

The review has practical implications. Teachers need professional learning that integrates moral example, discussion of ethical problems, participatory learning, and reflective assessment. Curriculum developers should map values to observable learning experiences rather than only to slogans or behavioural indicators. Policymakers should support school-family-community partnerships and include digital ethics and multicultural citizenship within character-education frameworks. Assessment should use multiple forms of evidence—reflection, observation, project participation, and student reasoning—because recent reviews warn that character education still lacks sufficient methodological and measurement quality (Oldham & McLoughlin, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Ki Hadjar Dewantara's budi pekerti remains relevant because it connects moral understanding, feeling, intention, conduct, learner freedom, educator responsibility, and the social environment of education. The review identifies four interrelated dimensions: integrated moral development; formation through example, habituation, dialogue, and agency; the Tri-Center partnership; and adaptation to digital citizenship, multicultural inclusion, and twenty-first-century competencies. The theoretical contribution of this review is a framework that interprets Dewantara not as a historical source of fixed moral rules but as a foundation for reflective, democratic, and context-sensitive character education.

For teachers, the framework supports ethical modelling, participatory learning, and consistent reflection on real moral problems. For curriculum developers and policymakers, it supports cross-curricular integration, school-family-community collaboration, digital ethics, and culturally responsive practice. The review is limited by its focused corpus, inclusion of only English- and Indonesian-language sources, and conceptual rather than empirical design. Future research should test the proposed framework through classroom observation, teacher and student interviews, longitudinal designs, and validated measures of moral reasoning, behaviour, digital citizenship, and school culture.

AI Declaration

The author acknowledges the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in supporting the preparation of this manuscript. The author remains fully responsible for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the research and its findings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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