Character Education in Schools: A European Comparative Study of Teachers' and Parents' Attitudes in Response to Global Challenges - Preliminary Results

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Abstract

The contribution sheds light on the TEPACE project which explores the perspectives and attitudes of teachers and parents toward character education in schools across Europe. Specifically, the study compares results based on large datasets from Austria, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain ($N_{teachers}$=2.652; $N_{parents}$=7.918). The aim of the presentation is to provide the audience with partial descriptive and analytical findings on several research questions: which factors are most important to parents in their school choice decisions? Do teachers and parents consider character education to be important and relevant in school? Are there any significant differences between countries in terms of preferences for particular virtues within character education? Do the teachers and parents across these countries differ significantly in how important it is to them relative to academic achievement, that their pupils/children develop a good character? Which methods do teachers prefer in the delivery of character education?

The findings enhance our comprehension of teachers' and parents' views on character education and offer valuable insights to policymakers, school administrators, and education officials in Europe. By understanding the perspectives of these crucial educational stakeholders, tailored policies, school development programs, and resources can be developed more effectively.

The comparative analysis of teachers' and parents' perspectives across Europe offer insights that can inform and advance knowledge in these fields. By understanding how different cultural and societal contexts shape attitudes towards character education, we contribute to the ongoing dialogue on how insights from theory and practice can be integrated to address pressing global concerns. Moreover, the findings underscore the indispensable role of character education as a fundamental response to the challenges facing education today. Without a strong foundation in character development, future professionals and individuals will lack the integrity and moral fortitude necessary to effectively navigate and respond to these challenges, thus highlighting the critical importance of character education in shaping the future of education and society as a whole.

Introduction

The TEPACE-project

Over the past few years, character education has gained increasing popularity across Europe (Fernandez et al., 2024), spurring extensive research in various countries. Despite this growing interest, there remains a significant lack of empirical data on the perspectives of key stakeholders in the education system, particularly parents and teachers, regarding Character Education. Such studies have the potential to be of value to various stakeholders, including policymakers, higher education institutions, and school leaders at regional, national, and European levels, since they potentially provide valuable insights into the prevailing attitudes and perceptions of teachers and parents. This information will empower them to formulate evidence-based policies and initiatives that can enhance character education within their respective countries (Bernhard, 2024). To address this gap, the European Character Virtues Association (ECVA), in partnership with universities from 11

European countries, launched the TEPACE project (teachers´ and parents´ perspectives on character education in Europe). This initiative aims to evaluate and compare parents' and teachers' attitudes toward Character Education across Europe, providing insights to schools and policymakers on their expectations and aspirations for Character Education in schools.

The inspiration for the project emerged from a presentation at the ECVA conference in Madrid, where Roland Bernhard shared findings from two studies conducted under his supervision in Austria. These studies by Evelyn Kropfreiter (teachers' perspectives on Character Education) and Eva Müllauer (parents' perspectives) highlighted insights into stakeholder views in the Austrian context (Müllauer, 2022; Kropfreiter, Bernhard, & McDermott, 2024). The Austrian research was itself informed by foundational work led by Tom Harrison in Great Britain (Harrison et al., 2018). Following the presentation in Madrid, the idea for a European project emerged as the first major research initiative of the newly established European Character Virtues Association (ECVA). Nine countries signed on (Germany, Czech Republic, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain), agreeing to translate the questionnaires used in Austrian into their respective languages and collect data in their own contexts, with the aim of launching a large-scale comparative study. The project team comprises 37 researchers from 11 countries. First results have been presented at the ECVA conference in Rome 2024 (Bernhard, Fernandez, & Harrison, 2024). Regular online meetings are held to coordinate progress, while country leaders are responsible for overseeing their respective studies and submitting data to the leadership team for international analysis and comparison. Although each participating country follows its own research path, the collective effort focuses on creating a unified international dataset. For this paper, such data from seven countries have been included.

The need for comparative studies in character education

Despite the fact that character education has been a major topic of global scholarly debate for several decades, very intensively since the 1990s, a critically low number of international comparative studies in this area have been conducted to date. The scope of the more significant studies has largely been determined by country boundaries, and particularly in Anglophone countries, or in countries closely inspired by approaches developed in those countries (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Lickona & Davidson, 2005; Seligman et al., 2009; Arthur, Fullard, & O'Leary, 2022). Moreover, review studies struggle with diverse conceptualizations, ranging from a very broad conceptualization of character education, encompassing a variety of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs (Lerner et al, 2003; Durlak et al., 2011; CASEL, 2015) to a narrow understanding of character education as virtue education in the neo-Aristotelian vein (Carr, 2008; Kristjánsson, et al. 2015; Hábl, 2020). To date, no study has been conducted in the area of the teachers´ and parents´ perspectives on character education that has been carried out on an international scale with the two groups of stakeholders.

It is reasonable to hypothesize that, similar to countries where such studies have been undertaken (see for teachers Arthur et al., 2015; Beachum et al., 2013; 2023; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2018; for parents see Jubilee Centre, 2013; Müllauer, 2022; Schaps, Solomon, & Watson, 1986; and for both parents and teachers Drahmann et al., 2022; Harrison et al., 2018; Harrison et al., 2022; Fernández Espinosa & López González, 2024) both teachers and parents in Europe are supportive of school-based character education in other European countries (Surikova et al., 2020). Two first

publications within the TEPACE project regarding Austrian teachers within the mixed methods doctoral project of Evelyn Kropfreiter confirmed in a qualitative (Kropfreiter & Bernhard, in press) as well as in a quantitative study (Kropfreiter et al., 2024) that teachers value character education as essential but face challenges in its implementation in Austria. Key barriers include a lack of clear guidelines, training, and time. The findings highlight the need for institutional support, structured frameworks, and professional development to successfully integrate character education into the curriculum.

Current study

The explorative quantitative study is designed to compare teachers´ and parents´ attitudes across seven European countries: Austria, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain. Its first aim was to reveal the status of moral character building as one of the functions of school alongside its educational and socialisation functions from the perspective of parents. We examined differences between countries in the factors that lead parents to enrol their child(ren) in a particular school. These factors (mostly mutually influencing) may include family socioeconomic profile (Reay, 2004; Kosunen et al., 2016; OECD, 2019), parents´ subjective assessment of the school quality (Levin, 2002; Checchi & Jappelli, 2003; Hastings & Weinstein, 2008), formal school ratings (Greaves & Hussain, 2021), school location (Müller et al., 2008; Meyer & Kučerová, 2018), religious or moral instruction (Trivitt & Wolf, 2011), parents´ education level (Burgess et al., 2015), social network and talks with teachers and others (Bosetti, 2004), possibilities for extracurricular activities in school (Kelly & Scafidi, 2013; DiPerna & Catt, 2016) and others. We therefore ask what are the cross-country differences in the status of moral character as a factor in parental choice among all these arguments. Subsequently, we also ask about parents' expectations of what their child(ren) should get while at school as the parental involvement is significantly related to children's school outcomes (Englund et al., 2004). We compare parents´ expectations in several categories: from formal aspects of school achievement (good grades), pragmatic outcomes (good job, place at a good university), well-being (happiness, knowledge of how to live a healthy life), civic values (preparation to be a good citizen) to character traits (ability to be a good person, ability to develop positive relationships).

Following the funnel method, we ask parents as well as teachers about their preferences for particular virtues in character education, with items representing different categories of virtues - intellectual (curiosity, good judgement), social and moral (civility, compassion, honesty), civic (service), and performance virtues (confidence, resilience), based on theoretically anchored frameworks (Jubilee, 2022). Parents and teachers were also asked to what extent they considered character education in schools to be important in general and, more specifically, how important it is to them that their children/students develop good character as opposed to academic achievement. The dichotomous oppositional situating of these two key educational goals may seem inadequate, as there is a huge body of evidence for their mutual positive conditionality. Character education is associated with higher levels of educational outcomes (Benninga et al., 2003; Diggs & Akos, 2016; Jeynes, 2017; Earl & Arthur, 2019). However, the emphasis on testing and achieving high academic performance persists in real school life and it is considered to be one of the main obstacles to creating sufficient space for character education and reflection on moral values (Jeynes, 2006).

Additionally, Lapsley and Narvaez (2006) point out, there are some teachers who think that character instruction does not belong in the classroom. Finally, some doubts about the place of character education in school appear in scientific debate, too (Davis, 2003; Noddings & Brooks, 2016; Kristjánsson, 2021). The aforementioned arguments form the basis for the justification of the formulated research question. An important question, however, is not only how teachers or parents themselves perceive the position of character education vis-à-vis academic performance, but also how they perceive one another. The research question not only examines what parents prioritize for teachers—character building or good examination results—but also explores how teachers perceive parents' attitudes and priorities regarding these aspects, thereby shedding light on their mutual perspectives on one another. We hypothesize that self-perception score on this matter (how I as a teacher prefer character education) will be higher compared to those of the other cohort (how I see the parents´ of my students preferences), as there is a general tendency to perceive oneself more positively (Tappin & McKay, 2017), and this is even more true in the moral domain (Gebauer et al., 2013).

Method

Research organisation

Regular online meetings of all project partners were held between October 2023 and February 2024 to reach a common understanding and agreement on the final version of the objectives and measures of the study. All the national research teams were required to use the agreed code book and they were provided with a common research application (Qualtrics) and space to run national versions of the questionnaires and store the data to avoid some technical problems or misunderstanding about the structure and wording of the instruments. The first three authors of this study were responsible for managing the process and for developing the key formal elements of the study (ethical considerations, demographic items clarifications, informal consent formulation etc.). The data collection process started at different dates based on country-specific conditions (with the first one starting in February 2024) and ended differently for the same reasons (with the last one finishing in September 2024). The Austrian data was already collected in 2023, as described above.

Sample

The individual national teams could use sampling designs that were compatible with their endowments to select probabilistic samples from the target population. The data gathering was recommended to do in cooperation with school leaders to get data from coherent school teams, so that the included schools could get individual analytical reports useful for their development. The consecutive stratified sampling method was used. However, not all countries achieved norms for the representative national sampling, covering all country regions at NUTS level 2 (Eurostat, 2022), so that the results cannot be recognized as demographically representative and their characteristics don´t allow us to generalize our interpretations. However, sample sizes attained within several countries accommodates inferential analyses which may provide results approximating those of a representative sample.

Questionnaire responses, following removal of responses which failed to indicate consent or provide requisite questionnaire data (i.e., failed to respond beyond initial demographic items), were received from 2,652 teachers and 7,918 parents across participating countries (Austria, Czech Republic, United Kingdom, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain; see Figure). Responding teachers - the majority of whom were female (78%), aged between 35 and 64 years of age (83.1%), and possessed between 4 and 30 years of teaching experience in their school (68.1%) respectively - typically taught in either primary (33.7%) or lower secondary schools (38.8%) and most commonly taught subjects including mother languages (13.3%), mathematics (12.6%), second languages (11.3%), and sciences (11.1%). Parent respondents - the majority of whom were female (78.5%), between the ages of 35 and 54 years (79.6%), married (70%) or cohabiting (i.e., not registered; 11.7%), and had attained a highest education level of upper secondary (25.2%), short-cycle tertiary (24.6%),or master's level (or equivalent; 24.8%) respectively - typically had 2 (51.5%) or 3 (20.7%) children and most commonly indicated their child(ren) attended primary (33.9%), high (or upper secondary;23.9%), or middle (or lower secondary; 20.8%) schools.

Figure 1. *Density of (a) teacher and (b) parent questionnaire responses by country.*
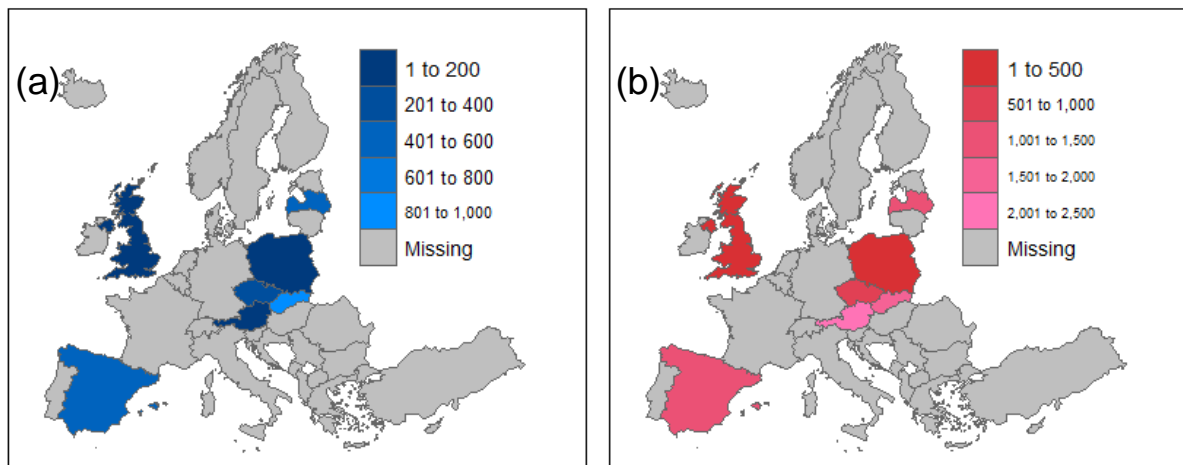
Instruments and translation

As noted above, measures were developed based on previous studies (Harrison et al., 2018; Bernhard, 2024; Kropfreiter, Bernhard, & McDermott, 2024) and adapted through discussions by all partners to allow for valid international comparisons of key descriptive findings. There were two forms created: parents´ and teachers´ version, with some categories and items worded in the same way to allow for the between group comparison. Parents´ version of the questionnaire included: a) aspects of the school choice (Quality of teaching, Inspection reports, Exam results, Comparative school rankings, Proximity of the school to the residence, Values a school encourages, School ethos and culture, Discipline, Information from other students or teachers, Views of other parents, Facilities, Extra-curricular clubs, Pre- and post-school clubs, and Other); b) parents' expectations of what they most like their child to gain from their time at school (Good grades, Happiness, Ability to be a good person, Ability to develop positive relationships, Good job, Place at a good university/good secondary school, Preparation to be a good citizen, Knowledge of how to live a healthy life); c) list of virtues as preferred for their children to be most important to cultivate (with short description of the concept meaning) (Civility, Compassion, Confidence, Curiosity, Good Judgement, Honesty, Resilience, Service), d) scales to determine the

importance of character education in school; e) scales to determine the importance of character education in school as opposed to academic achievement from three points of view (their own, their children view, their children's teachers view); f) dichotomous items with similar meaning to the previous ones in order to use the method of triangulation of findings; g) scale of parents' expectations about the degree of teacher responsibility for their children's character education; h) demographic items (country, region, their child school, gender, age, family status, number of children, education level, religion and religious practice).

Teachers´ version of the questionnaire included: a) the list of virtues as preferred for their students to be most important to cultivate (see point c in the parents´ form); b) scales to determine the importance of character education in school (see d in the parents´ form); c) scales to determine the importance of character education in school as opposed to academic achievement from three points of view (their own, their students´ view, their students' parents view) (see e in the parents´ form); d) dichotomous items with similar meaning to the previous ones in order to use the method of triangulation of findings (see f in the parents´ form); e) questions focused on teachers´ trainings, their confidence, and their opinions on the most effective methods to deliver character education. Among demographic items figured country, region, gender, age, type of the school founder, grade level of the school at which the teachers were teaching, the school subject they were teaching, and the length of their professional experience.

The process of translating the measures for this research revealed several significant challenges. Foremost among these were differing preconceptions and associations with key concepts, particularly the term "virtue," across various countries. These differences stem from distinct socio-historical contexts. For instance, individuals from countries with historical experiences of totalitarian regimes, such as communism or fascism, often interpret and relate to the concept of virtue differently than those in countries without such historical burdens.

This variance in understanding posed challenges to ensuring the conceptual coherence of the research and maintaining cross-cultural validity. The term ·virtue· exemplified this issue, with interpretations ranging from non-problematic in some contexts (e.g., England) to highly problematic in others (e.g. Italy,). Similar challenges arose with other terms, such as "exam," "virtue," and "achievement," which carried varying connotations across different linguistic and cultural landscapes.

To address these challenges, a rigorous translation process was employed. This included a double independent translation approach, followed by a comparative review with a bilingual expert to resolve discrepancies and ensure accuracy. Additionally, the questionnaires were hosted on the Qualtrics platform, facilitating efficient distribution through multiple channels, including email and professional networks. This method not only streamlined the dissemination process but also ensured accessibility and consistency across diverse participant groups.

Ethical issues

There were two levels of ethical considerations. The first, common framework for data gathering and processing in terms of international cooperation was agreed across the

partners. The second, each country's representative institution has specified and incorporated its own additional ethical standards and principles. At the international level, four ethical principles had to be maintained: a) respect for persons (programming questionnaires so that questions can be skipped; including instructions reminding participants they are free to decline; answering questions providing a 'prefer not to answer' option); b) informed consent (with sufficient explanation of the objectives of the study, further work with the data, preservation of respondent anonymity, etc.); c) only needed information principle (collecting only such information which was evidently useful as part of data analysis, and which was at the least specific level possible); d) inclusivity (providing respondents with as much items as possible to answer questions to include all possibilities). Regional ethical frameworks then included different conditions for the form of individual school recognition (regarding the culture differences in how sensitive people are on the scale of the anonymization method), parents´ religious beliefs etc.

Process of analysis

Data obtained through respective parents´ and teachers´ questionnaires distributed throughout participating countries were standardised - in terms of format, variable naming convention, and response coding - and collated following completion of data collection. Resultant parent and teacher data sets were subsequently cleaned, involving removal of non-consenting responses and responses with insufficient questionnaire data (i.e., failed to respond beyond initial demographic items).

Subsequent analyses with respect to variables of interest investigated both differences across participating countries amongst teacher and parent responses respectively, and differences between teacher and parent responses. Due to the predominance of categorical, rank order, and Likert scale items utilised within the developed instrument, and consequent non-normality and heterogeneity of variances of item responses, non-parametric methods (e.g., Kruskal-Wallis, Friedman, and Mann-Whitney tests) are employed in the current analysis (Nahm, 2016). Notably, the present paper presents an initial, broadly indicative analysis of relationships of interest, failing to explicitly account for the effects of relevant covariates thereon - further, robust, multivariate analyses to this end will be undertaken and presented in forthcoming publications (see future directions).

Results

Factors Considered in Parental School Choice

Amongst aspects, or factors, considered in selecting schools for their child(ren) to attend, parents most commonly regarded the quality of teaching (80.6% of respondents), values espoused (63.6%), and facilities (37.7%) therein, alongside proximity of the school to their residence (35.5%), as important in informing this decision (see Figure). Conversely, inspection reports (4.2%), comparative school ranking (12.1%), and exam results (14.4%) were least commonly identified as important in informing school selection. A chi-square test of independence indicates a significant association between country and factors considered important in selecting schools ($X^2_{[65, 7312]}$ = 5569.9, p<.001), suggesting aspects regarded as important amongst parents in school selection differed between participating countries (see Figure). Notwithstanding such an association, quality of teaching appears consistently amongst those factors considered important by the greatest number of parents across all participating countries, only surpassed in Latvia by proximity of schools to residence.

**Figure 2.** *Factors Considered in Parental School Choice*
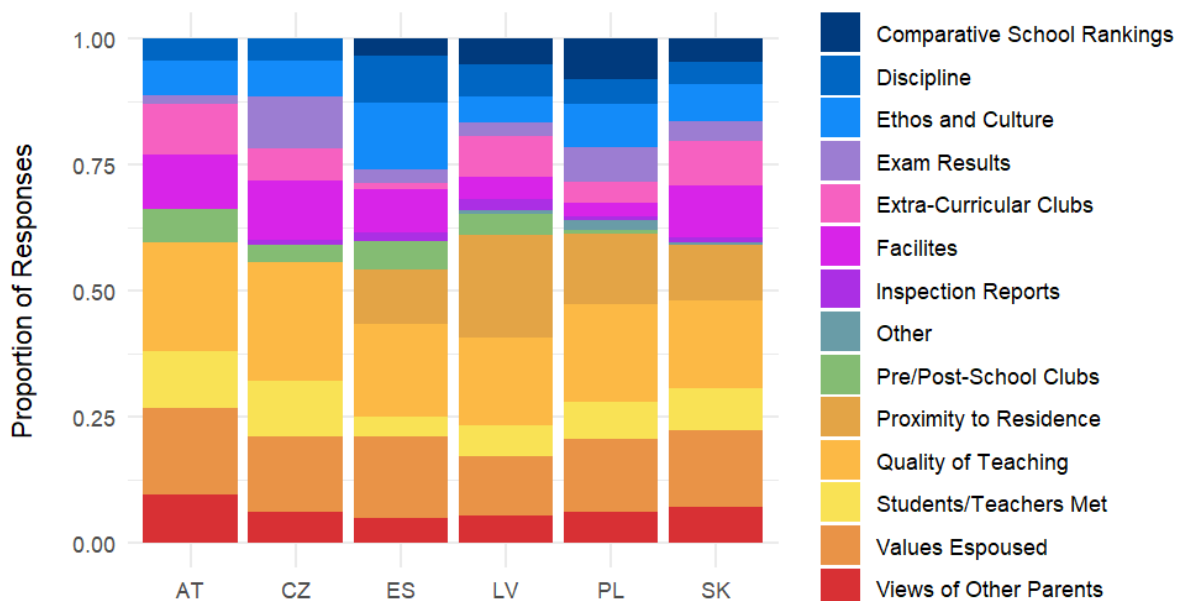
Character Virtues

Parents and teachers, results of a chi-square test of independence evince ($X^2_{[7,8105]}$ = 759.83, p < .001), differ in perspective regarding character virtues considered most important to cultivate amongst pupils - indeed, significant differences in parent and teacher propensity to identify character virtues as amongst those most important was observed across all character virtues presented with the exception of *compassion* ($X^2_{[1, 10336]}$ = 2.20, p = .14; see Figure 3). Whereas parents most commonly identified *confidence* (63.3%), *good judgement* (56.9%), and *honesty* (46.9%) as character virtues most important to cultivate amongst pupils, teachers expressed preference toward fostering *honesty* (50.7%), *civility* (48.5%), and *good judgement* (45.9%).

Figure 3. *Proportion of teacher and parent respondents ranking respective virtues as important to cultivate amongst pupils.*
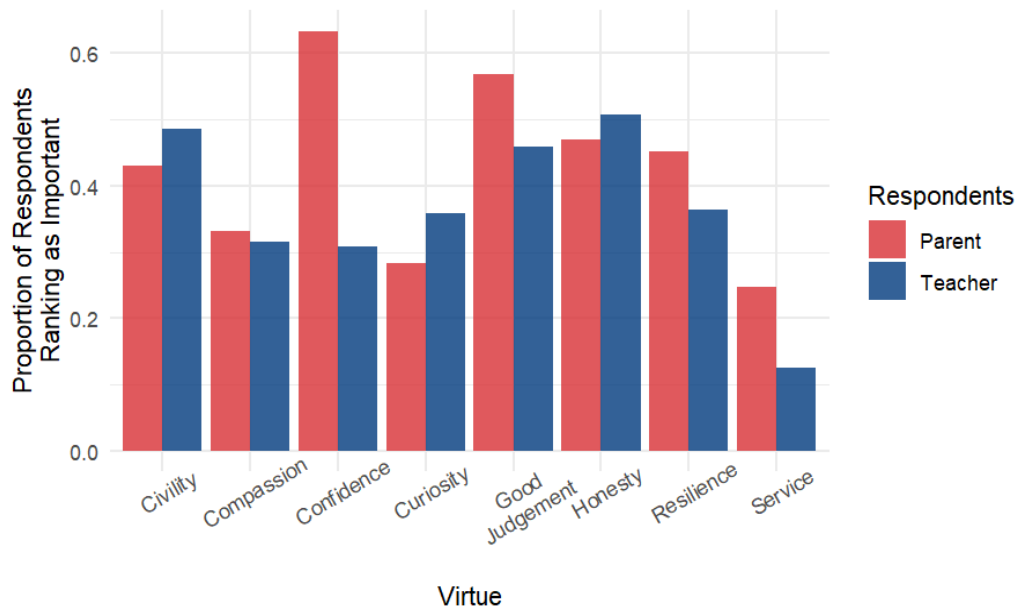
Moreover, results of chi-square tests demonstrate that character virtues considered as most important differed across participating countries amongst both parents ($X^2_{[42, 7311]} = 4031.9$, p < .001) and teachers ($X^2_{[42, 2651]} = 466.18$, p < .001) respectively (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. *Proportion of (a) teachers and (b) parents identifying virtues as important to cultivate amongst pupils by country.*
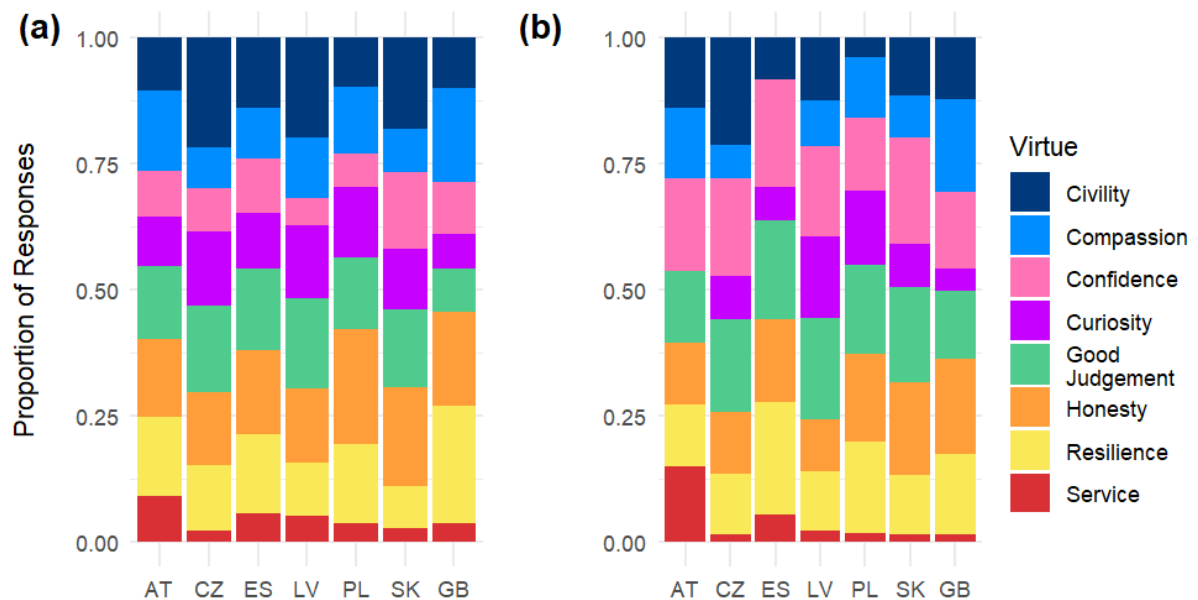
	Civility	Compassion	Confidence	Curiosity	Good Judgment	Honesty	Resilience	Service
AT	0.316	0.479	0.271	0.292	0.438	0.464	0.464	**0.276**
CZ	**0.651**	*0.239*	0.255	**0.431**	0.514	*0.427*	0.384	*0.067*
ES	0.402	0.283	0.309	0.313	0.458	0.475	0.445	0.160
LV	0.581	0.343	*0.157*	0.423	**0.518**	0.430	0.306	0.149
PL	*0.285*	0.384	0.199	0.404	0.417	**0.662**	0.457	0.106
SK	0.530	0.249	**0.445**	0.352	0.451	0.571	*0.248*	0.076
UK	0.307	**0.569**	0.314	*0.212*	*0.255*	0.569	**0.715**	0.109

Table 1. *Teachers' preferences of virtues in school by country, here represented as the proportion of teachers within a country identifying virtues as important to cultivate amongst students*
Note. *Figures in bold represent the greatest and smallest (italic) proportion of teachers selecting each virtue as important across countries*

|	Civility	Compassion	Confidence	Curiosity	Good Judgment	Honesty	Resilience	Service
AT	**0.634**	**0.634**	**0.824**	0.000	0.650	0.555	0.547	**0.681**
CZ	0.573	0.178	0.522	0.232	0.494	0.331	*0.323*	*0.041*
ES	0.229	*0.000*	0.577	0.186	0.531	0.452	**0.602**	0.150
LV	0.364	0.262	0.521	**0.469**	0.581	*0.300*	0.342	0.066
PL	*0.114*	0.351	*0.427*	0.432	0.519	0.508	0.530	0.054
SK	0.337	0.249	**0.619**	0.253	0.557	0.537	0.347	0.047
UK	0.357	0.541	0.447	*0.132*	*0.392*	**0.554**	0.471	*0.041*

Table 2. *Parents´ preferences of virtues in school by country, here represented as the proportion of parents within a country identifying virtues as important to cultivate amongst their children*
Note. *Figures in bold represent the greatest and smallest (italic) proportion of teachers selecting each virtue as important across countries.*

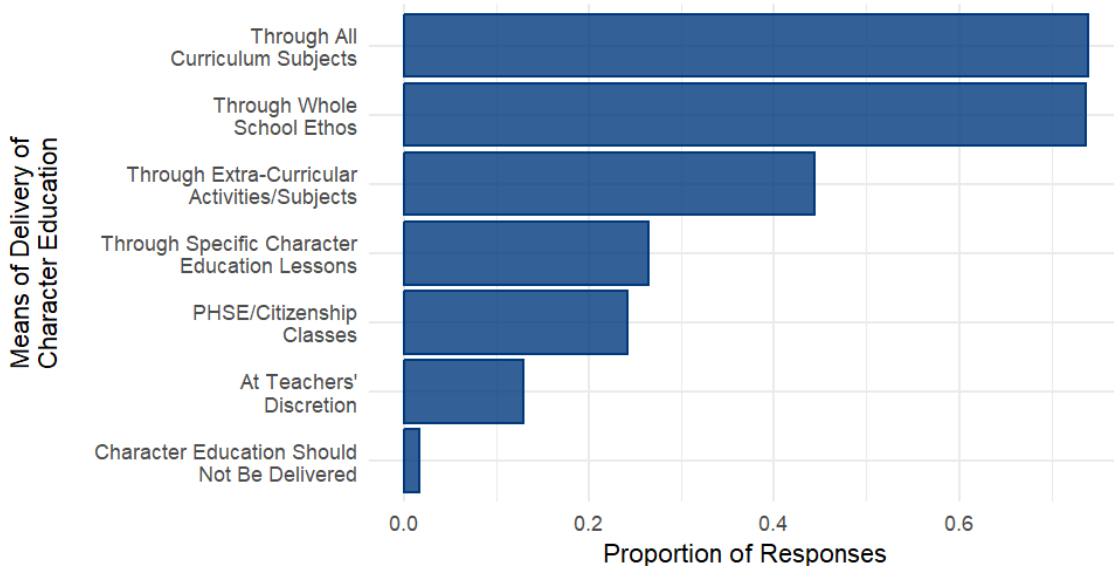## Delivery of Character Education in School

Parents and teachers, results of a Mann-Whitney U test indicate (U = 5999372, p = .53), demonstrated a comparable, firm belief in the importance of character education in schools, with the majority of both sets of participants indicating strong agreement (on a five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree) with statements to this effect. Whilst perceived importance of character education in schools differed across participating countries amongst both parents ($X^2_{[4, 5096]}$ = 177.91, p<.001) and teachers ($X^2_{[4, 2322]}$ = 48.71, p<.001), within each participating country the majority of respondents nonetheless expressed strong agreement with statements concerning the importance of character education in schools (see Figure 5). Parents typically considered it to be a teacher's role to encourage good morals and values in students (68.7%). A majority of parents (74.2%) agreed that character education ought to be included in the school curriculum, asserting that schools should publish a statement of the core character traits which they aim to develop in students (70.5%).

Figure 5. *Mean teacher and parent ratings of importance of character education in schools by country*
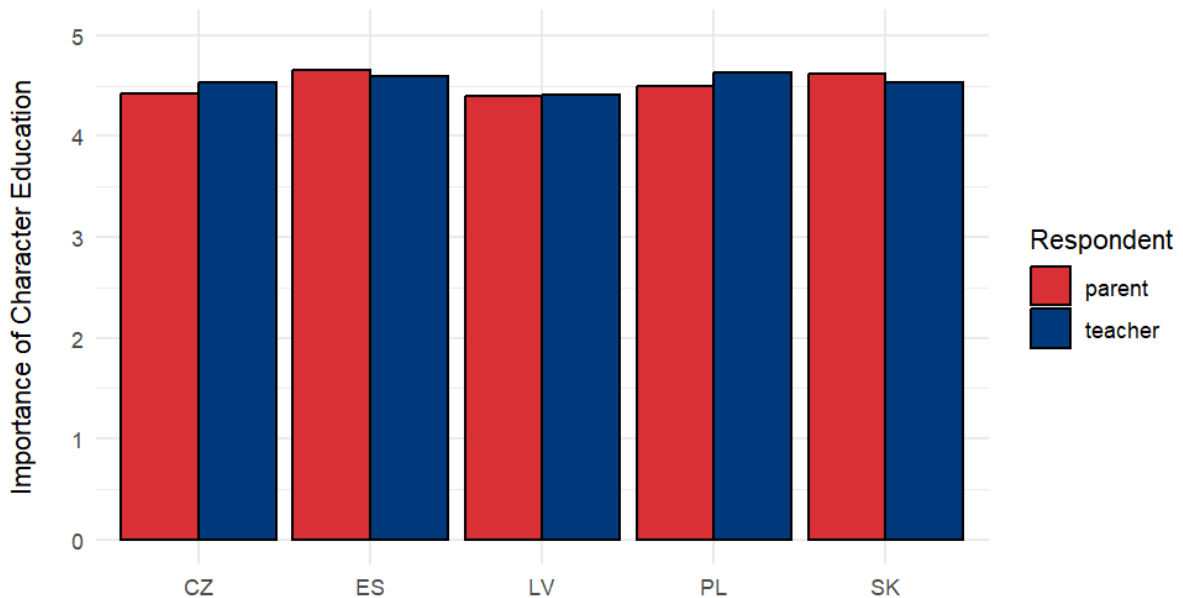
Regarding means through which character education may be most effectively delivered, teachers most commonly identified delivery through all curriculum subjects (76.3%), whole school ethos (69.3%), and extra-curricular activities or subjects (46.7%; see Figure 6). A considerable majority of teachers (78.8%) expressed slight or strong confidence in their capacity to deliver character education.

Figure 6. *Mean proportion of respondents across all countries selecting method of delivery of character education*
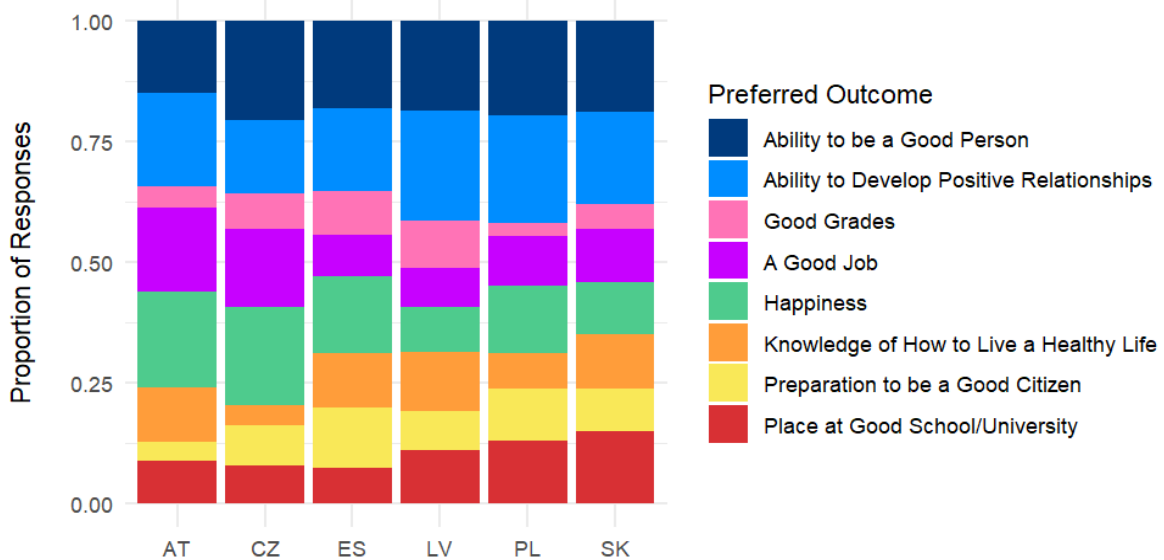

Impact of Character Education

Concerning preferred outcomes of schooling, whereas parents most commonly indicated a desire that schooling advance pupils' capacity to develop positive relationships (77.9%), ability to be a good person (72%), and contribute to pupils' general happiness (61%),

attainment of good grades (26.5%) and a place at a reputable secondary school or university (42.3%) were amongst those outcomes least commonly identified by parents. Although proportions of parents indicating preference for respective outcomes of schooling differed between participating countries (χ^2 [35, 7295] = 1789.1, p<.001), aforementioned observed preferences remained broadly consistent across countries with several noteworthy exceptions - parents exhibited preferences towards attainment of a good job in Czechia (50.8%) and Austria (69.3%), a place at a reputable university in Slovakia (65%), and knowledge of how to live a healthy life in Latvia (44.7%).

**Figure 7.** *Preferred outcomes of schooling from parents´ point of view.*

Results of a Mann-Whitney U test indicate that parents and teachers differ in the extent to which they believe a greater focus on character education in schools will negatively or positively affect pupils' attainment ($U = 6241805$, $p = .007$), with teachers exhibiting marginally greater likelihood to anticipate positive effects. Notwithstanding such a difference, however, the vast majority of both parents (87%) and teachers (91.6%) asserted a greater focus on character education in schools would positively affect pupils' attainment.

Importance of Character Development Relative to Academic Achievement

Considering the importance of development of a good character as opposed to academic achievement amongst pupils, a majority of teachers (53%) regarded development of a good character as being of greater importance relative to academic achievement to some extent. Whilst parents typically attributed equal importance to both development of a good character and academic achievement amongst pupils (49.8%), a considerable minority (40.9%). Nonetheless, results of a Mann-Whitney U test demonstrate that teachers favour development of good character, relative to academic achievement, to a greater extent than parents ($U = 5796887$, $p < .001$; see Figure 8).

Figure 8: *Distribution (i.e., density) of teacher and parent ratings of importance of pupils' development of good character relative to academic achievement. Respective respondent group means are indicated by dashed vertical lines.*
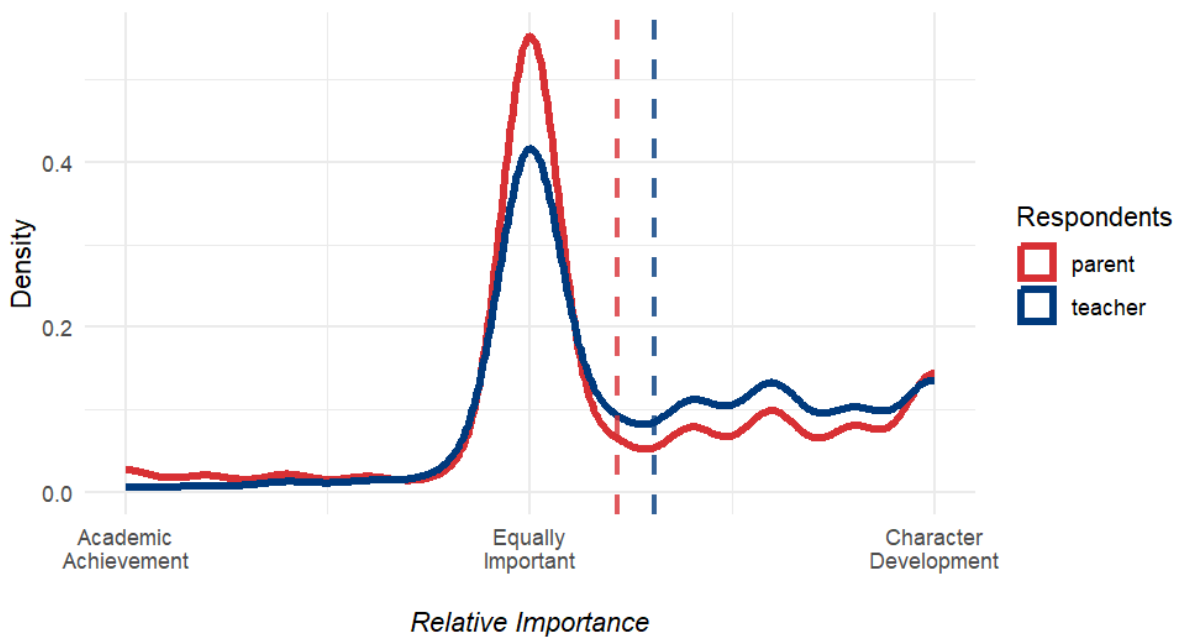
Although consistently regarding development of good character as being of greater importance relative to academic achievement across participating countries, the extent to which parents ($X^2_{[5, 5308]}$ = 343.52, p<.001) and teachers ($X^2_{[5, 2421]}$ = 60.51, p<.001) respectively did so differed between countries. In particular, Latvian parents and, to a less notable extent, teachers, whilst maintaining an inclination towards development of good character, expressed, on average, more moderate attitudes than those of their peers (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. *Mean teacher and parent ratings of importance of pupils' development of good character relative to academic achievement when indicating personal preference by country.*
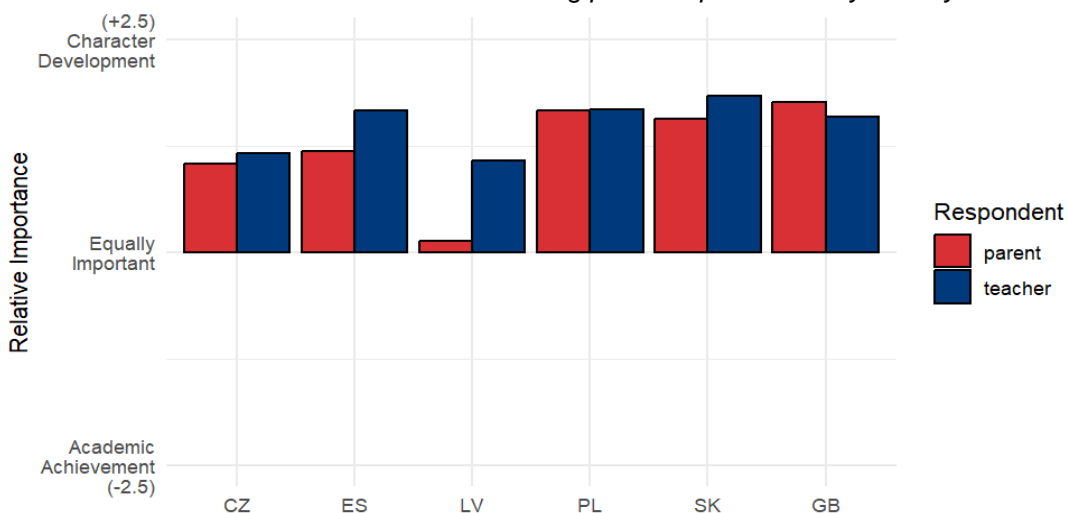
Note. *Respondents rated importance of pupils' development of good character relative to academic achievement on a scale ranging from -5 to 5, with 0 representing attribution of equal importance to character development and academic achievement.*

Notably, when tasked with presuming the importance of development of good character relative to academic achievement amongst pupils as perceived by their counterparts (i.e., parents inferring the views of teachers, and vice versa), both parents and teachers presumed the other favoured academic achievement relative to development of good character (see Figure 9). However, the degree to which teachers believed parents favoured academic achievement, relative to character development, surpassed that which parents presumed of teachers ($U = 7466684$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, when tasked with speculating as to pupils´ priorities, parents assumed pupils favoured development of good character whilst teachers assumed pupils favoured academic achievement ($U = 8122995$, $p < .001$).

Figure 10: *Mean teacher and parent ratings of importance of pupils' development of good character relative to academic achievement when indicating personal preference, as well as those presumed of their counterparts and pupils.*
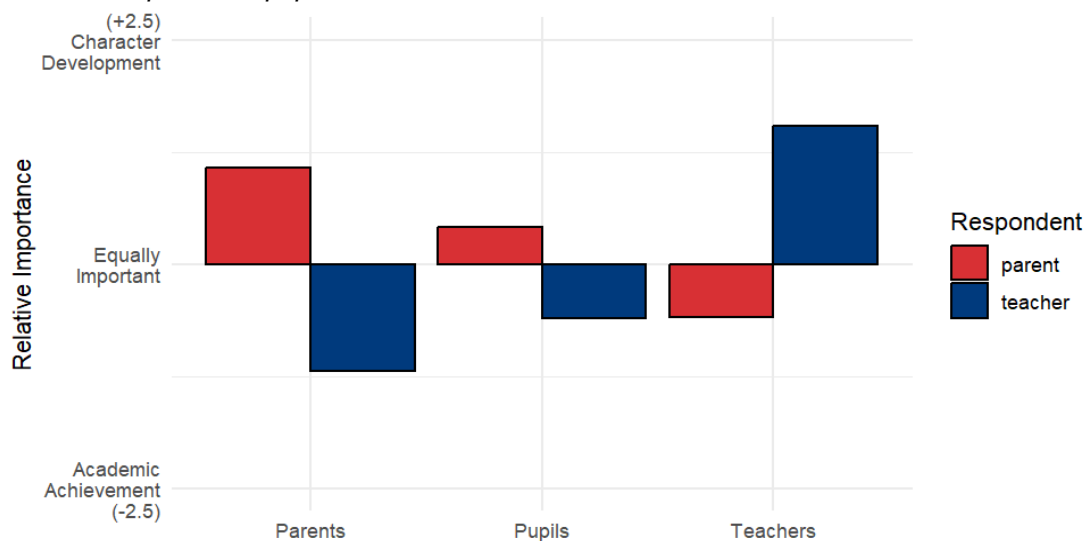
Note. *Respondents rated importance of pupils' development of good character relative to academic achievement on a scale ranging from -5 to 5, with 0 representing attribution of equal importance to character development and academic achievement.*

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the parents´ and teachers´ perspectives towards character education in schools in terms of international comparison.
The first focus of the study was the position of moral character among other factors in parents' choice of school for their child(ren). Quality of teaching and values espoused by school are far more significant factors compared to others (including proximity of residence to school), and at the same time this finding is robust across all countries. Although the quality of teaching (albeit differently conceptualized in different studies) is regularly seen as the most important argument in school choice (Schneider & Buckley, 2002), this study shows that school´s values, as perceived by parents, play a crucial role in their decision making, too. Although the concept of school´s values can be understood differently at individual level as well as at the level of the different countries´ cultures (see Schwartz, 2006), based on the following findings in this study (see below), it is reasonable to infer that the concept of values is associated here with the moral ethos of the school and moral virtues in leaders´ and

teachers´ behaviour. Study confirms previous findings that school ethos plays a significant role in parents´ decision making (Morris & Perry, 2019).

Naturally, open enrollment policies, empowering parents to choose schools for their children, differ substantially across countries. These differences are shaped by various factors, including legislation, cultural norms, economic conditions, societal values, and the perceived quality of education. In some countries, such as Latvia, the proximity of schools to residences is a key factor in parental decision-making, reflecting logistical or practical considerations. In contrast, in countries with relatively uniform educational quality or more flexible legislative frameworks, this factor holds less importance. Despite these variations, the quality of teaching consistently emerges as the most important factor influencing school choice across all countries. Furthermore, the emphasis on values espoused by schools underscores the universal importance of character education in parental decision-making.

Differences in perspectives on character virtues were notable between parents and teachers, as well as across countries. While both groups agreed on the importance of virtues like honesty and good judgment, their relative prioritization of other virtues varied significantly, with compassion being the only virtue perceived similarly by both groups. This divergence may reflect broader cultural and contextual differences in the interpretation and application of character virtues.

As noted above, the various categories of virtues are reflected in the list of items, which may correspond to certain value orientations identified in S. H. Schwartz's well-known study (2014). Schwartz's research, which also sampled teachers, suggests that Western European countries (including Austria and the UK) tend to emphasize values of intellectual and affective autonomy, while Eastern European countries (such as the Czech Republic, Latvia, and Slovakia) prioritize values of harmony. In contrast, Southern European countries (including Spain) lean towards egalitarian values.

Surprisingly, contrary to these assumptions, intellectual virtues like curiosity and good judgment ranked lowest among English and Austrian teachers in our study compared to the international sample, whereas harmony-related virtues like compassion and service had the lowest preferences among Czech and Slovak teachers. Interestingly, compassion was most preferred by English teachers, while service was favoured by Austrian teachers.

One possible explanation is that these findings do not necessarily contradict Schwartz's study but may reflect a different interpretation of the question posed to teachers in our research: *"Which of these character virtues do you think are most important to cultivate in your pupils?"* This wording may have prompted teachers to identify virtues they perceive as needing more emphasis in their context. Further phenomenological and interpretative research would be valuable to explore this dynamic.

Above all, the findings indicate that both parents and teachers tend to overestimate the importance the other group places on academic attainment relative to character education. Nevertheless, both groups, on average, placed greater value on character education, highlighting its central role in shaping educational priorities. These findings highlight the importance of fostering stronger connections between parents and teachers in the context of character education. Research consistently shows that parental involvement plays a critical role in shaping student outcomes, not only in academics but also in personal and moral

development. For instance, Henderson and Mapp (2002) emphasize the profound impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement, advocating for collaborative partnerships to support holistic development. Similarly, Epstein's (1983) framework for family-school-person interactions underscores the importance of sustained parental engagement in fostering positive student outcomes over time.

Despite the shared belief in the importance of character education, the study reveals notable differences in the prioritization of specific virtues between parents and teachers, as well as variations in their confidence and strategies for delivering character education. Teachers' emphasis on integrating character education within the curriculum and school ethos could be strengthened by actively engaging parents as partners in this process. Research by Jordan, Orozco, and Averett (2001) highlights emerging issues in school-family-community connections, stressing the need for cohesive efforts to bridge these gaps.

By involving parents more effectively in character education initiatives, schools can ensure consistency in values and approaches, creating a supportive environment for students' moral and academic development. As Colker (n.d.) points out, family involvement is a key ingredient in children's success, emphasizing that parental participation can reinforce and extend the lessons learned at school. Building on this evidence, schools should prioritize collaborative frameworks that integrate parental perspectives and resources into character education programs, fostering a united approach to nurturing students' growth.

The delivery of character education also revealed shared values, with both parents and teachers strongly agreeing on its importance in schools. Teachers, however, expressed greater confidence in their ability to deliver character education and identified strategies such as embedding it within the curriculum, fostering a whole-school ethos, and leveraging extracurricular activities. While these findings are promising, they also point to potential areas for development, such as increasing parental engagement and ensuring consistency in character education approaches across schools and countries. Teachers' prioritization of the character education delivery strategies "through all curriculum subjects" and "whole school ethos" presents a threefold challenge: a) to engage in their own character development, understanding the impact of role modelling (Sanderse, 2013) and applying strategies for "character sought" (Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2022); b) to enhance their professional competence in integrating character concepts into individual school subjects, for example, by using strategies from the concept-based curriculum (Erickson, Lanning, and French, 2017); and c) to establish professional learning communities (Louis et al., 1996) within school grade levels, fostering meaningful cross-curricular connections aligned with the goals of character education.

Finally, the perceived impact of character education on students' academic attainment received broad support, with both parents and teachers believing that a focus on character education positively influences academic outcomes. However, differences emerged in the magnitude of these effects, with teachers generally expecting a larger impact than parents. This finding confirms a number of previous studies on the positive impact of character education on school performance (Caprara et al., 2000; Diggs & Akos, 2016; Jeynes, 2017; Earl & Arthur, 2019).

The results highlight significant cultural, social, and systemic differences in how parents and teachers perceive and prioritize various aspects of education, particularly in terms of school choice, character virtues, and the delivery and impact of character education.

Limitations

Despite the robust findings, several limitations must be acknowledged.

The study faced inherent challenges related to the culturally contingent phenomenology of key concepts. For example, interpretations of terms like "politeness" or "civility" varied significantly across countries, such as between English, Italian, and Slovak respondents. These conceptual differences complicate the process of achieving consistent understanding across diverse cultural contexts, potentially affecting the reliability of cross-country comparisons.

Differences in the scope and availability of demographic data were influenced by national policies. For instance, data distinguishing between public, private, and church-based schools were inconsistently reported, limiting the analysis of patterns specific to school types. Additionally, the demographic items collected varied across countries, creating further inconsistencies. Data collection occurred at different times and through varying methods across participating countries, which may have introduced biases or inconsistencies in participant responses. Differences in the forms used for data collection further complicated efforts to standardize data. e.g. the Austrian parents´ sample shows a high average in many virtues in the question on virtue preferences, because the method was used differently - Austrian respondents were not restricted in their choice of virtues (participants from all other countries had to choose a maximum of 3 virtues). So some data cannot be compared correctly.

Variations in personnel, institutional support, and financial capacity across national teams significantly impacted the study's implementation. While some teams benefited from institutional funding and resources, others had to rely on voluntary contributions or integrate their efforts into other projects. Cultural differences in willingness to volunteer exacerbated these disparities. In some cases, national teams faced challenges in securing funding or institutional support, leading to delays or reduced scope in data collection.

The participating organizations' positions within their respective national educational contexts influenced access to schools and sampling. Some organizations had strong connections with national authorities, facilitating smooth data collection, while others encountered obstacles due to lack of alignment with governmental priorities or administrative barriers. Sampling challenges varied significantly across countries, with some national teams experiencing difficulties in gaining access to a representative range of schools. This issue was particularly pronounced in contexts where educational institutions had limited autonomy or were influenced by restrictive policies.

Beyond cultural differences, translation challenges also emerged during the study, as certain key concepts could not be perfectly rendered across all languages. This affected the standardization of the instruments and potentially influenced participants' understanding of questionnaire items.

These limitations highlight the complexity of conducting cross-national research in education and underline the importance of addressing these issues in future studies. Efforts should focus on standardizing methodologies, ensuring adequate funding and institutional support,

and fostering collaboration across diverse cultural and educational contexts to enhance the robustness and generalizability of findings.

Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into the perceptions and priorities of parents and teachers regarding character education, school selection, and the interplay between character development and academic achievement across multiple countries. The findings underscore the universal significance of character education, with strong agreement across diverse contexts on its importance in schools. Both parents and teachers place a greater emphasis on character development than on academic attainment, challenging conventional narratives that prioritize academic metrics over holistic education.

The divergence in preferred character virtues between parents and teachers—except for a shared emphasis on compassion—reveals the nuanced and culturally embedded nature of these concepts. This underscores the importance of localized approaches to character education that respect and reflect cultural contexts while fostering shared values within school communities.

Moreover, the emphasis on teaching quality and the values espoused by schools as primary factors in parental school choice highlights the critical role of educators and school leaders in shaping the moral and academic ethos of educational institutions. These findings further demonstrate the need for professional development to enhance teachers' confidence and capacity to deliver character education effectively.

Despite these insights, the study also exposes the challenges inherent in cross-national research, particularly those related to cultural differences, translation issues, and resource constraints. These limitations call for a more integrated and well-supported approach in future research to ensure consistency, representativeness, and the robustness of findings across diverse educational systems.

Moving forward, it will be critical to address these challenges by fostering greater collaboration between researchers, educators, and policymakers. By aligning educational practices with cultural and institutional contexts, we can work toward a unified yet flexible framework for character education that empowers students to develop as individuals of good character while achieving academic excellence.

Acknowledgments

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