STRUCTURED HABIT TRAINING AND GUIDANCE COUNSELING SUPPORT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT
Character education in early childhood settings is increasingly expected to be systematic and sustainable; however, schools often vary in how consistently they implement habit training and in how actively guidance and counseling services support character formation. This study aimed to compare the implementation of habit training in a general school and a character-based school, and to analyze the role of guidance and counseling (BK) in strengthening children's character development. Using a qualitative comparative design, data were collected through classroom and school observations, in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, counselors, and parents, and document analysis of habituation programs in two institutions (TK-TPQ Nurkatika as a general school; KB-TK Pilar Aksara as a character-based school). The findings indicate substantial differences between the two settings: the character-based school implemented integrated and consistent habituation routines supported by regular parent communication, modeling, periodic evaluation, and parenting activities, whereas the general school tended to apply habituation in a more generic manner without a structured program and with less optimal BK involvement. Consequently, children in the character-based school demonstrated more stable positive behavior that also carried over into the home environment. The study concludes that structured habit training aligned with targeted BK services meaningfully enhances the effectiveness of character building. Practically, schools may benefit from formalizing habituation programs, strengthening counselor participation, and institutionalizing school–home collaboration. Future research should involve broader samples, incorporate longitudinal or mixed-method designs, and examine implementation constraints that may affect comparability across schools.

Keywords: Character development; Comparative study; Guidance and counseling; Habit training; School-based character education.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, much research has focused on the premise that schools are not only knowledge-transmission institutions but also primary socialization settings where children acquire moral orientations, interpersonal competencies, and self-regulatory habits that shape lifelong functioning. This view aligns with the study's argument that education must cultivate moral values and positive character traits (e.g., honesty, responsibility, discipline, tolerance), not merely academic attainment. In early childhood education, this responsibility is especially consequential because routines and socio-emotional patterns are highly malleable; repeated experiences in stable contexts can become enduring behavioral scripts. Consistent with this, the study positions *habit training* (structured habituation) as a key mechanism for fostering independence, confidence, and adaptive functioning, while noting a practical concern that many children do not receive habit training in a structured and consistent manner. It also situates the urgency within contemporary pressures—technology, globalization, and information exposure—while parental time constraints may reduce attention to children's psychosocial needs, thereby increasing the salience of schools as stabilizing developmental environments. Despite the strong rationale for structured character education through habituation, it remains unclear why schools operating under similar mandates produce markedly different levels of consistency, integration, and sustainability in habit training. The study highlights a core problem: children's habituation is often uneven across school, home, and community settings, undermining the continuity required for internalization. Institutionally, it underscores a divergence between regular schools that tend to prioritize national-curriculum academic delivery and character-based schools that embed character formation across daily school life. A second unresolved issue concerns the role clarity and functional integration of guidance and counseling (BK): the study indicates that BK involvement is more

active and aligned with modeling, routine evaluation, and parenting activities in the character-based school, whereas in the general school BK is "not yet optimal" and habituation proceeds without a structured program.

The literature offers concrete directions for strengthening habit training as a character-development strategy. Habit-formation research emphasizes that behaviors become more automatic when repeatedly performed in stable contexts with consistent cues and reinforcement, implying that schools should design predictable routines (e.g., arrival procedures, self-care, cooperative tasks) and sustained adult modeling. Large reviews of school-based SEL further show that systematic programs can improve social-emotional skills, behavior, and academic indicators, reinforcing the feasibility of routinized, whole-school developmental programming. In parallel, meta-analytic work in character education indicates positive (often modest) effects that depend strongly on program features and implementation quality, suggesting that outcomes hinge on coherence and fidelity rather than moral messaging alone. Within this frame, BK can operate as a programmatic backbone—supporting personal-social development and stabilizing learning programs related to discipline and character—especially when linked to routine monitoring and parent communication. However, a focused research gap persists. Much of the strongest evidence on SEL, character education, and counseling effectiveness comes from broader K–12 contexts and does not always specify the mechanisms of habit training in early childhood settings, where routine formation is developmentally central. Moreover, comparative, context-rich evidence remains limited regarding how school type (general vs character-based) shapes (i) the structuring of habituation activities, (ii) the division of labor between teachers and BK/counselors, and (iii) the alignment between school and home routines needed for behavioral generalization. The study's empirical description directly signals this gap: the character-based school implements integrated, consistent habituation with modeling, routine evaluation, and parenting agendas, while the general school lacks a structured program and uses BK less optimally, yielding less stable transfer of positive behavior to the home setting.

This contrast also aligns with implementation science showing that fidelity, dosage, and organizational support substantially influence program outcomes. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to compare the implementation of habit training for children's character development in a general school and a character-based school, and to analyze how BK supports (or fails to support) these habituation processes across settings. The novelty lies in its comparative, mechanism-oriented analysis that treats early childhood habit training as a practical character-formation instrument while positioning BK as a potentially decisive program driver (planning, monitoring, evaluation, and school–home linkage), rather than a merely remedial service. The scope is intentionally bounded to two institutions (TK-TPQ Nurkatika and KB-TK Pilar Aksara) and uses qualitative methods—participatory observation, in-depth interviews with principals/teachers/counselors (and potentially parents), and document analysis—to prioritize process explanations over statistical generalization.

METHOD
Research Design and Approach
This study employed a qualitative research design using a comparative study approach to examine differences in the implementation of habit training and the role of guidance and counseling (BK) in supporting children's character development across two contrasting school types. The comparative qualitative approach was selected to generate an in-depth understanding of how policies, program structures, daily practices, and stakeholder involvement differ between a regular school and a character-based school, and how these differences shape observable character outcomes in children. In operational terms, the research was designed as a cross-case comparison: data were collected within each site and then compared to identify similarities and differences in habit training practices, BK involvement, and perceived impacts on students' character development.

Research Setting and Context
The research was conducted in two early-childhood education settings that represent distinct educational orientations. The first site, TK–TPQ Nurkatika, represents a regular school context that follows the national curriculum without a specifically structured character-development program. The second site, KB–TK Pilar Aksara, represents a character-based school that integrates moral and ethical principles into the curriculum

and daily school activities. Data collection was carried out over several months, covering preparation, field data collection (observations and interviews), and analysis to ensure the data reflected actual school practices and recurring events.

Table 1. Study sites and distinguishing characteristics

Site	School type	Program orientation (as described in the study)	Key implication for comparison
TK–TPQ Nurkatika	Regular school	Follows national curriculum; no specially structured character program	Habit training tends to be less formalized
KB–TK Pilar Aksara	Character-based school	Moral/ethical principles integrated into curriculum and daily routines	Habit training positioned as a structured character program

Population and Sample / Participants

The population of interest comprised stakeholders who are directly involved in habit training implementation and character development processes within the two schools. The study used purposive participant selection, prioritizing relevance to habit training practices and willingness to participate. Participants included: (1) BK teachers/counselors to understand the structure and contribution of BK services to habit training; (2) students to examine perceived and observed character impacts; (3) school principals to capture school-level policy and governance related to habituation programs; and (4) parents (optional) to explore transfer effects of school habituation into home routines.

Table 2. Participant groups and analytic contribution

Participant group	Primary role in analysis	Main information expected
BK teachers/counselors	Program implementation and student support	How BK supports habit training and character development
Students	Outcome perspective	Observable/experienced changes linked to habit training
Principals	Policy and governance	School rules, priorities, and institutional support for character habituation
Parents (optional)	Home-transfer perspective	Consistency of habituation outcomes at home and parent–school coordination

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

The data used for this study were collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary data included interviews with key stakeholders, direct observation of habit training practices, and documentation of BK-related activities supporting character formation. Secondary data included school policy documentation, curriculum materials emphasizing habit training, and relevant prior reports or studies used to support the comparative analysis. Three complementary qualitative techniques were used: Participant/field observation in both sites to examine how habituation is enacted in daily school life, focusing on (a) positive daily behaviors such as discipline, responsibility, and politeness; (b) the roles of teachers and counselors; and (c) interaction patterns among students, teachers, and the school environment. In-depth interviews with principals, classroom teachers, and other relevant parties to elicit perceptions and explanations of habit training and BK functions. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide to maintain consistency across informants while allowing deeper probing of emergent issues. Document analysis to examine formal and informal records related to habit training and character education, including habit training modules/guidelines, learning plans or BK programs related to character education, BK activity reports, and supporting photo/video documentation where available. The overall collection procedure followed a staged workflow: identifying target schools, scheduling an observation and interview period, and then collecting supporting documents for corroboration.

Table 3. Data collection matrix

Method	Instrument / evidence	Primary informants / sources	Main analytic output
Observation	Observation guide/notes	School routines and interactions	Descriptive patterns of habituation practices and stakeholder roles
Interviews	Semi-structured interview guide	Principals, teachers, BK, parents (optional)	Explanations of policy, implementation logic, perceived impacts
Document analysis	School documents (modules, plans, reports), photo/video evidence (if permitted)	Policies, curriculum, BK and habituation artifacts	Institutional evidence supporting cross-case comparison

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis used a qualitative interactive analysis model, implemented in phases that align with preparation, data collection, and analytic interpretation. The study specifies that analysis was conducted descriptively by identifying patterns emerging from observations, interviews, and documentation and then comparing the regular school and character-based school to determine similarities and differences in habit training implementation. Analytically, the comparative logic was applied as follows: Within-case analysis: organizing and summarizing each school's habit training practices, BK involvement, and supporting documents. Cross-case comparison: contrasting the two sites to identify differences in structure, consistency, stakeholder coordination, and perceived impacts.

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To strengthen trustworthiness, the study incorporated: Instrument preparation and a pilot study to support clarity and validity of the observation/interview prompts prior to full fieldwork. Method triangulation by combining observation, interviews, and document analysis so that interpretations are supported by multiple evidence streams rather than a single data source. Cross-case corroboration, where patterns identified in one site were checked against the other site to avoid overgeneralizing from a single context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Data sources and analytic logic

The findings of this study clearly show that data were compiled from multiple stakeholder perspectives—school leaders, teachers, BK personnel, and parents (where available)—and then examined comparatively to identify patterns of similarity and divergence across the two sites. This cross-case logic is essential in qualitative comparative work because it emphasizes "how" and "why" a practice functions differently under different organizational cultures and program architectures (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2018). In this study, the comparison focused on: (a) the structure of habit training, (b) the positioning and utilization of BK services, (c) the teacher role as moral model, (d) the school–family communication pattern, and (e) the observed/reported child character outcomes.

At the most general level, the study concludes that there was a significant difference between the two schools in both (1) the implementation quality of habit training and (2) the degree of BK involvement. The character-based school demonstrated a more integrated, consistent, and school-wide program supported by active teachers/counselors and routine communication with parents, whereas the general school tended to implement character habituation more informally without a clearly structured program and with BK not fully utilized. To make the cross-case evidence transparent, the main findings are organized below by theme.

Theme 1 — Program architecture: structured-integrated vs. general-informal habituation

A central finding concerns program design. In the character-based school, habit training was described as integrated into daily routines and school culture, functioning as a consistent "operating system" for moral development. This was not simply a set of occasional reminders; rather, it was positioned as a daily program

that benefits all children through repeated exposure to moral values. In contrast, the general school was characterized by habituation activities that were present but not organized into a specialized, structured character program, and thus depended more on ad hoc teacher practices and family initiative. Analytically, this difference is best understood as a contrast between high program coherence (character-based school) and low program coherence (general school). In implementation terms, coherence supports routines, shared expectations, and predictable reinforcement—conditions widely considered necessary for habit formation and character internalization (Lally et al., 2010; Ouellette & Wood, 1998; Wood & Neal, 2007).

Theme 2 — BK positioning: proactive diagnostic-planning vs. underutilization

The second key finding concerns how BK was positioned and enacted. In the character-based school, interview evidence indicates that BK practices were not merely reactive; BK began by identifying daily-life problems experienced by children that could be supported through habit training, followed by planning the habit-training responses that would be applied. This indicates a needs-informed guidance function: BK helps translate child developmental needs into concrete routine-based interventions. In the general school, by contrast, BK was reported as not consistently maximized within character habituation processes. The practical implication is straightforward: when BK is peripheral, habit training risks becoming a set of "good intentions" rather than a systematically supported developmental program. This aligns with school counseling literature showing stronger outcomes when counseling services are integrated into school improvement and preventive frameworks rather than treated as separate add-on activities (Whiston et al., 2011; Carey & Dimmitt, 2012).

Theme 3 — Teacher moral modeling and the "walk the talk" cultural mechanism

A third finding is the salience of teacher behavior as a moral model. The character-based school explicitly operated through a principle described as "walk the talk", meaning teachers internalize and understand the moral philosophy first, and then mediate children fairly, because the teacher constitutes the child's immediate "atmosphere" at school. The general school, on the other hand, was described as treating moral values more as something "internal" rather than fully embedded within a structured curriculum or school-wide system. From an analytic standpoint, this difference matters because repeated observation of adult modeling is a known pathway through which children acquire social and moral behaviors, especially in early childhood when learning is highly imitative and context-bound (Bandura, 1977; Sanderse, 2013). In other words, in the character-based case, modeling is not incidental; it is a designed mechanism.

Theme 4 — School–family alignment: routine communication and parenting agenda vs. limited program linkage

The findings also show a sharp contrast in the school–home partnership dimension. Parents in the character-based school reported strong support for consistent habit training because they received routine communication from teachers/counselors about children's character development, reinforced by a monthly parenting agenda intended to align parenting patterns at school and at home. Parents further reported observing positive changes after participation in the routine program. Conversely, in the general school, parents reported that the school did not have a specific character-building program through habit training; habituation tended to occur more independently without specific direction from the school. This finding is consistent with extensive international evidence that sustained parental involvement and school–family alignment are associated with improved socio-behavioral and academic outcomes, particularly when involvement is structured and relational rather than merely informational (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2012; Wilder, 2014).

Theme 5 — Reported child outcomes: stability and transfer to home vs. less consistent carryover

The study's results further indicate that the character-based school was associated with more stable positive behavior development that carried over into the home environment. This is a critical outcome marker because "transfer" suggests not only compliance in school but internalization beyond the immediate institutional setting—an important criterion in character education effectiveness. In the general school case, character habituation existed but lacked an explicit structured mechanism that would predictably support carryover. A reasonable analytic interpretation is that inconsistent reinforcement across contexts (school

vs. home) undermines automaticity and stability, whereas aligned routines increase the likelihood that pro-social actions become habitual (Lally et al., 2010; Verplanken & Orbell, 2003; Wood & Neal, 2007).

Theme 6 — Implementation constraints and field challenges

Finally, the study identifies practical constraints that potentially affected implementation and observation intensity, including limited time access due to school schedules, incomplete parent participation in interviews, variation in program implementation, technical constraints in documentation, and external disruptions (e.g., weather or sudden school activities). These constraints are typical in school-based qualitative work and should be treated not as weaknesses to dismiss the findings, but as boundary conditions for interpreting transferability.

Table 4. Cross-case comparison of habit training and BK roles (synthesized from findings)

Analytical Dimension	TK-TPQ Nurkatika (General school)	KB-TK Pilar Aksara (Character-based school)
Habit training structure	General habituation; less formal structure; relies on teacher/parent initiative	Integrated daily program; consistent routines; explicit program logic
BK involvement	Not consistently optimized; less central to program	Proactive and planned; begins with identifying child daily issues and designing habit-training responses
Teacher moral modeling	Moral values less embedded as system	"Walk the talk" culture; teachers act as deliberate moral models
Parent engagement	Limited formal alignment program	Routine communication + monthly parenting agenda for school–home alignment
Reported child outcomes	Less evidence of stable transfer	More stable positive behavior; carryover to home reported
Constraints	Scheduling, variation, limited structured program	Still faces field constraints, but program provides stronger scaffolding

Why structured routines matter: habit formation and behavioral automaticity

The study's central contrast—structured-integrated vs. informal-general habituation—strongly aligns with habit science. Habits are more likely to form when behaviors are repeated consistently in stable contexts and reinforced with predictable cues (Lally et al., 2010; Ouellette & Wood, 1998; Wood & Neal, 2007). From this standpoint, the character-based school's routine-driven approach provides the ecological conditions for habit automatization: repeated moral actions become easier, faster, and less dependent on adult prompting. Conversely, when habituation is episodic or inconsistently structured, children may still "know" the rules but fail to enact them reliably—particularly in early childhood when executive functions are still developing (Diamond, 2013; Blair & Raver, 2015). The findings also resonate with "implementation intention" research: behavior is more reliably enacted when individuals have clear if–then patterns linking cues to action (Gollwitzer, 1999). While preschool children do not formulate sophisticated implementation intentions on their own, schools can functionally create "if–then routines" through daily scripts (e.g., greeting rituals, tidy-up routines, turn-taking norms), thereby externalizing self-regulation until it is internalized.

Teacher modeling as mechanism: social learning and moral apprenticeship

The "walk the talk" mechanism reported in the character-based school is consistent with international evidence that role modeling is one of the most powerful channels for moral and character learning. Social learning theory argues that children learn not only through reinforcement but through observing competent, valued models (Bandura, 1977). More recent moral education scholarship similarly emphasizes that modeling functions as a form of moral apprenticeship—children acquire not only behaviors but the emotional tone and fairness norms embedded in adult practice (Sanderse, 2013; Wentzel, 2002). This literature helps explain why the study observed stronger stability in the character-based case: when

modeling is systemic, children experience fewer contradictions between "what adults say" and "what adults do," improving credibility and internalization.

Whole-school character education: coherence, climate, and program fidelity

The study's findings are also consistent with evidence that character education is more effective when it is whole-school, integrated across routines, curriculum, and adult practices—rather than taught as isolated lessons (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). International school climate research similarly reports that consistent norms, relational trust, and safety predict student socio-moral outcomes (Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016). In this frame, the character-based school can be interpreted as having stronger "climate infrastructure" for character learning, while the general school's less structured approach risks diffusion—good practices may exist but are not systematized. Moreover, implementation science provides a direct explanation: program effects depend heavily on fidelity, dosage, quality of delivery, and participant responsiveness (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Domitrovich et al., 2008). The report's description of consistent routines, evaluation, and active staff involvement in the character-based school corresponds to higher likely fidelity conditions.

BK (school counseling) as preventive-developmental system, not only remedial service

The study's conclusion that structured and active counseling services are more effective for character development aligns with the international shift in school counseling from a remedial orientation to a preventive-developmental and comprehensive model. Evidence indicates that counseling programs produce better student outcomes when they are embedded into school systems, aligned with developmental needs, and linked with teacher practices and family engagement (Whiston et al., 2011; Carey & Dimmitt, 2012). In the character-based school, BK's practice of identifying daily-life issues and then designing habit-training responses resembles a preventive case-formulation approach—small behavioral risks are addressed early through routine supports rather than waiting for escalation.

School–family partnership: why "parenting alignment" predicts transfer to home

The reported home transfer of positive behavior in the character-based school is consistent with international meta-analytic findings that structured parental involvement is associated with improved student outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2012; Wilder, 2014). The mechanism is not simply "more parent presence," but consistency of expectations and reinforcement across contexts. When the school provides routine communication and parenting sessions, parents gain shared language and strategies to reinforce habits at home, reducing contextual mismatch and increasing stability—conditions strongly aligned with habit formation theory (Lally et al., 2010; Ouellette & Wood, 1998).

Importance of Findings

Across themes, one clear pattern emerges: structure produces consistency, and consistency produces stability. The character-based school shows a convergent system: integrated routines, proactive BK planning, deliberate teacher modeling, and parenting alignment reinforce one another. In systems terms, the program works not because of a single component, but because of mutual reinforcement across subsystems (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; though the present study's evidence is qualitative and localized). In contrast, the general school presents a more fragmented ecology: habituation exists, but without the same level of integration, BK centrality, or structured home linkage. This pattern is theoretically important because it supports the argument that character development is not "added" to schooling; rather, it is an emergent property of daily interactions, norms, and routines. The study thereby strengthens an applied synthesis between (a) habit theory (automaticity through repeated cues) and (b) character education (values enacted through lived practice). Although the study is qualitative, its logic implies an expectation: schools with more structured habit training and active BK integration will demonstrate stronger character outcomes. The findings support this expectation. In analytic terms, the evidence suggests that the "independent variable" is not school type per se, but the implementation quality and system integration that often—but not always—co-occur with character-based schooling. Several rival explanations should be considered to avoid over-attribution: Selection and compositional effects. Families choosing a character-based school may already prioritize moral development and routines at home. This could inflate observed

differences, especially those relying on parent reports. Teacher training and leadership capacity. The "walk the talk" culture may reflect stronger teacher selection/training and leadership enforcement rather than the program alone. Intensity of communication as the active ingredient. It is possible that routine parent communication and monthly parenting agendas are the primary drivers of home transfer, independent of other program components. Observation window constraints. Time access and scheduling limitations may have constrained the intensity of observation, potentially shaping what was captured as "routine." These alternatives do not negate the results; rather, they clarify that the most defensible claim is that a coherent, integrated system of habituation + BK + modeling + home linkage is associated with better reported stability, not that "character-based schools are always superior."

Contribution to theory and literature

The study contributes to the literature in three practical-theoretical ways: Operationalizing habit training as a school-wide moral technology. The findings illustrate how character values become actionable through routines, modeling, and structured reinforcement (Wood & Neal, 2007; Sanderse, 2013). Positioning BK as a routine-based preventive system. Rather than treating counseling as a service for "problem children," the study shows BK can function as a designer of developmental routines responsive to children's daily-life difficulties. Demonstrating a plausible pathway for home transfer. The evidence that behavior carries to home supports international claims that school–home alignment is a key mediator of sustained socio-moral change (Fan & Chen, 2001; Wilder, 2014).

Practical and policy implications

Based on the pattern of findings, several implications follow for schools and education systems: Design habit training as a coherent program, not a set of slogans. Schools should specify routines, cues, reinforcement practices, and evaluation cycles—so "character" is enacted daily and monitored periodically (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Domitrovich et al., 2008). Strengthen BK's role in early-childhood settings. BK should be empowered to conduct simple needs assessments, guide teachers in routine design, and provide parent-facing consultation—mirroring the proactive approach evident in the character-based case. Institutionalize school–family alignment mechanisms. Monthly parenting agendas and routine communication represent scalable strategies to reduce mismatch between school and home, thereby increasing the chance of stable behavioral transfer (Jeynes, 2012; Wilder, 2014). Invest in teacher modeling as a competency. The "walk the talk" principle implies the need for professional development focused on fairness, emotional regulation, consistent discipline, and moral language—because modeling is not automatic; it is a professional practice (Sanderse, 2013; Wentzel, 2002). Create realistic implementation supports. Because constraints such as time access and respondent limits exist, policy should include scheduling allowances, documentation protocols, and parent engagement strategies suited to local contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to compare habit training practices in a general school and a character-based school while examining how guidance and counseling (BK) contributes to children's character development. The core findings show that the character-based school applied habit training in an integrated and consistent manner—supported by active teacher–counselor involvement, routine communication with parents, modeling, evaluation, and parenting programs—whereas the general school relied more on unstructured habituation with less optimal BK engagement; this difference was associated with more stable positive behaviors among children in the character-based setting, including carry-over effects at home. These results contribute to educational theory and practice by reinforcing the importance of consistency and systemic support in character internalization and by positioning BK as a functional driver for designing, coordinating, and monitoring habit-training interventions across school–family contexts. For future research, studies should expand the number and diversity of sites and address practical constraints (e.g., limited observation time, respondent availability, and program variability) through designs that improve cross-school comparability and capture longer-term impacts.

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