



Digital Literacy for Character Building: A Narrative Review on the Mediating Role of Elementary School Culture

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation creates a dual challenge for character education in elementary schools: harnessing the potential of technology while mitigating its risks. Digital literacy, initially instrumental, has now evolved into a socio-ethical competence (digital wisdom). However, its effectiveness in shaping character depends on the context of its implementation. This narrative review aims to analyze the role of school culture as a mediator in the relationship between digital literacy and students' character formation. A review of 10 articles (2016–2025) reveals that school culture functions as an active mediating space, not merely a passive context. Four key mediating mechanisms are identified: (1) norms and habituation, (2) tripartite collaboration, (3) structured policies, and (4) socio-emotional learning (SEL) climate. School culture acts as a selective filter and amplifier, determining the direction of digital literacy's dual impact. In conclusion, the success of integrating digital literacy for character is largely determined by the quality of school culture as a transformative medium that connects technical competence with the internalization of values.

Keywords: Digital Literacy, Character Education, School Culture, Elementary School.

1. Introduction

Digital transformation is fundamentally changing the landscape of life by positioning the digital space as a new, inseparable ecosystem from the social, cognitive, and affective interaction patterns of elementary school-aged children (Iman, 2022). The generation born and raised in this context, often called Generation Alpha, are true digital natives because, from a very early age, they have been exposed to devices, the internet, and various digital platforms that shape their ways of thinking, communicating, and learning (Ulviani, 2025). This technological exposure expands access to information, accelerates the learning process, and opens opportunities for developing creativity, collaboration, and digital literacy relevant to the demands of the 21st century. However, at the same time, this development brings serious consequences for character education in elementary schools, as the intensity of virtual interaction has the potential to reduce direct social experiences, empathy, self-discipline, and emotional management skills if not balanced with proper guidance. Therefore, character education in the era of digital transformation faces a dual challenge (Yuniarto & Yudha, 2021): leveraging technology as a means to strengthen moral and social values while minimizing the risk of character degradation due to unfocused digital use. Consequently, a systematic, adaptive pedagogical approach grounded in child development theory is necessary to ensure that technological advancement positively contributes to the character formation of elementary school students.

The phenomenon of value disruption presents a real challenge in cyberspace, alongside the increasingly massive penetration of digital technology into the lives of elementary school children, making them a group vulnerable to exposure to negative content, cyberbullying practices, hate speech, and information flows that are psychologically and developmentally inappropriate for their age (Rahmawati et

al., 2025). Technical competency in operating devices and accessing various digital platforms often develops faster than children's moral, emotional, and social maturity to evaluate, filter, and be accountable for the information they receive. This condition widens the gap between digital skills and digital wisdom, where children can use technology but lack adequate ethical awareness, empathy, and self-control (Salsabila et al., 2023). This disparity directly impacts online behavior, such as low communication ethics, weak sense of responsibility, and an increased risk of internalizing values that contradict educational goals (Padrini & Purnomo, 2025). In this context, traditional character education approaches that emphasize conventional habituation in the classroom become less adaptive in facing the fluid, fast, and boundless dynamics of the digital world. Therefore, a reconstruction of character education that is integrative, contextual, and responsive to the reality of cyberspace is needed to bridge the gap between technological proficiency and moral wisdom in elementary school students.

Digital literacy emerges as an answer to these challenges. This concept has evolved beyond mere technical proficiency. Digital literacy encompasses cognitive, social, and ethical dimensions of interacting with technology (Rany et al., 2025). Its implementation in elementary schools is often still instrumental and fragmented. Digital literacy programs typically focus solely on skill aspects. The integration of character values into such programs remains supplementary, not structured. School culture offers a promising mediational perspective. The organizational culture of a school consists of values, norms, rituals, and practices that are part of daily life. These elements have the potential to become active and contextual filters for digital values. Schools with a strong collaborative culture can transform digital literacy into a vehicle for character building. This mediational mechanism has not been extensively explored in prior research. Previous studies have tended to separate these three domains, resulting in a partial understanding of the complexity of education in the digital era. Research on digital literacy generally focuses on aspects of technical competency, access to devices, and operational skills in using technology, without deeply linking them to the formation of students' values, attitudes, and character. Studies on traditional character education more often emphasize moral habituation, exemplary models, and value internalization in conventional school environments but relatively seldom touch upon the context of the digital space as a new arena for children's value socialization and social interaction. Meanwhile, analyses of school culture are often positioned as standalone contextual variables and are rarely systematically linked to digital literacy or character as mediating variables that bridge the process of shaping student behavior. This separation of approaches creates a conceptual and empirical gap in understanding how the interaction between digital literacy, character education, and school culture can work synergistically in shaping the holistic development of students. Consequently, efforts to formulate holistic education in the digital era become less comprehensive, necessitating an integrative framework capable of uniting these three domains into one analytical model that is relevant, contextual, and responsive to contemporary educational challenges.

This narrative review bridges these three key concepts. The review proposes a theoretical framework that positions school culture as a mediator. The mediational role of school culture is believed to optimize the impact of digital literacy on character formation. The focus on elementary schools is crucial because this age is a critical period for value formation. The review's findings are expected to provide an empirical foundation for developing educational models relevant to the times.

2. Methods

This article employs a narrative review method (Bisbey et al., 2021). This approach was chosen to provide a critical analysis and in-depth interpretation of existing literature on the relationship between digital literacy, school culture, and character building at the elementary school level. A narrative review allows for the synthesis of findings from various types of studies, including empirical research, conceptual reviews, and policy reports, to build a coherent theoretical argument without being constrained by strict systematic protocols. The Search Strategy was conducted in a staged and iterative manner to gather relevant literature. The primary search was carried out using academic databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, and Portal Garuda. A combination of Indonesian and English keywords was applied, namely: ("literasi digital" OR "digital literacy") AND ("sekolah dasar" OR "primary education"), ("pendidikan karakter" OR "character education") AND ("digital"), serta ("budaya sekolah" OR "school culture") AND ("mediasi" OR "peran"). The search was limited to publications within the last 10 years (2016–2025) to ensure contextual relevance, although seminal works and foundational classical theories are also included. A snowballing strategy was applied by examining the references from identified key articles (backward snowballing) and tracking articles that cite those works (forward snowballing). This process yielded a focused collection of literature within the elementary school context, with the primary inclusion criterion being studies that discuss at least two of the three core elements: digital literacy, character building, or school culture.

Data analysis and synthesis were conducted thematically and interpretively. After the literature was compiled, the author performed an in-depth reading and thematic extraction to identify emerging patterns, concepts, and relationships. Data from various sources were grouped into themes such as: conceptualizations of digital literacy in elementary schools, models of character building in digital spaces, relevant dimensions of school culture, and reported mediative mechanisms. The synthesis does not aim to perform a quantitative meta-analysis or a structured critical appraisal of each study's methodological quality, but rather to construct an analytical narrative that connects these findings. The goal of the synthesis is to construct theoretical propositions regarding how school culture functions as a mediator that transforms digital literacy competencies into internalized character values in elementary school students. This process resulted in a proposed conceptual framework and practical implications presented in the discussion section.

3. Findings and Discussions

3.1 Findings

A narrative review of 10 relevant articles yielded a number of critical findings and patterns that clarify the dynamic relationship between digital literacy, school culture, and the character formation of elementary school students. The synthesis of these findings is organized into four main themes as follows:

3.1.1 Conceptual Continuum of Digital Literacy: From Technical Skills to Social Ethics

The review confirms a paradigm shift in conceptualizing digital literacy, from mere technical-operational competence (digital skills) towards socio-ethical competence (digital wisdom). Recent articles (E. R. Dewi & Alam, 2020; Sugiarto & Farid, 2023; Suriani & Hadi, 2022; Utaminingsih et al., 2023; Yohana, 2020) consistently define digital literacy as a competency encompassing cognitive (analyzing, evaluating), social (communicating, collaborating), and ethical (being responsible, empathetic) dimensions in the digital environment. The concept of digital citizenship raised by Dewi et al. (D. A. Dewi et al., 2021) reinforces the

position of digital literacy as a vehicle for character formation, where students not only use technology but also understand the rights, responsibilities, and social impacts of its use. This finding establishes a crucial foundation that digital literacy interventions for character must extend beyond technical training and enter the realm of values and behavior.

3.1.2 School Culture as an Active Vessel and Mediator

Analysis shows that school culture does not merely serve as a passive background, but rather functions as a contextual container and an active mediator that influences the effectiveness of digital literacy in shaping character. Several articles (Maulita et al., 2022; Yohana, 2020) explicitly position school culture as one of the three main foundations of Character Education Strengthening (Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter/PPK), alongside classroom and community foundations. Furthermore, the article by Rasdiana et al. (Rasdiana et al., 2024) provides strong quantitative empirical evidence for this mediating role; a positive school culture (supportive, collaborative, innovative) is proven to significantly enhance teachers' digital literacy, which ultimately improves their performance. Although the context focuses on teachers, this mediation framework provides a strong analogy for the student level: school culture can serve as a channel that either strengthens or weakens the transmission of values from digital literacy programs to the internalization of student character.

3.1.3 Mediative Mechanisms: Norms, Collaboration, and Policy

The review identified several specific mechanisms through which school culture mediates the digital literacy-character relationship:

- a. Collaborative Norms and Practices: A school culture that encourages collaboration among teachers-students, students-students, and schools-families creates a supportive ecosystem. Programs like the School Digital Literacy Movement (E. R. Dewi & Alam, 2020) or integration within thematic learning (D. A. Dewi et al., 2021) are successful when they become collective norms and practices, not incidental activities. This collaboration enables value modeling, ethical discussions, and joint reflection on digital content.
- b. Supportive Policies and Structures: Articles by Suriani & Hadi (Suriani & Hadi, 2022) and Rasdiana et al. (Rasdiana et al., 2024) emphasize the importance of structured school policies and adequate resources. These policies can include the integration of digital literacy into the curriculum, provision of facilities, allocation of dedicated time, or reward systems. These policies institutionalize digital literacy as part of the school's identity, thus promoting sustainable habituation.
- c. The Role of Teachers and the Socio-Emotional Climate: Teachers are key actors in shaping school culture. Research by Dewi & Alam (E. R. Dewi & Alam, 2020) and Anggraeni et al. (Anggraeni et al., 2025) shows that the teacher's role shifts from instructor to facilitator and model of digital ethics. Furthermore, the findings of Anggraeni et al. on the importance of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) suggest that a school climate that attends to students' social-emotional development is a critical cultural component. This climate functions as a "filter" and "reinforcer" that helps students manage the emotional impact of digital spaces and translate digital competencies into empathetic and responsible behavior.

3.1.4 Challenges and Dual Impacts of Implementation

The review also reveals a consistency in findings regarding the challenges and dual impact of digital literacy. The main challenges include: (a) disparities in facilities and access, (b) uneven teacher competency, (c) low understanding of

digital ethics, (d) minimal parental supervision, and (e) risks of addiction and concentration issues (D. A. Dewi et al., 2021; Maulita et al., 2022; Utaminingsih et al., 2023). On the other hand, nearly all studies acknowledge the dual impact of digital media. Anggraeni et al. (Anggraeni et al., 2025) document this clearly: uncontrolled use can weaken discipline and empathy, while structured use can instead enhance responsibility, learning independence, and value comprehension. A strong school culture acts as a determining factor that steers the impact towards a positive direction, by providing the necessary structure, guidelines, and socio-emotional support.

3.2 Discussions

The synthesis of findings from this narrative review not only confirms the existence of a complex relationship between digital literacy, school culture, and character formation, but more importantly, it reveals a dynamic framework in which school culture functions as a mediating space that actively transforms techno-cognitive competencies into moral-social dispositions. This discussion will examine these key findings in depth, connect them to relevant theoretical perspectives, and articulate propositions about the mediating mechanisms of school culture.

3.2.1 From Instrumental Literacy to Critical-Responsible Literacy: Conceptual Reconstruction as a Prerequisite for Mediation

Our understanding of digital literacy has been transformed. Initially this concept tended to be purely instrumental and skill based. Technology was seen as a neutral tool whose use could be learned like operating a machine. Character education and digital literacy ran parallel yet separate. One domain dealt with shaping conscience while the other trained technical skills. Their integration was additive like teaching how to create an engaging presentation while slipping in a message about honesty.

That dynamic has now shifted. Contemporary discourse directs digital literacy towards a more critical and responsible realm. Digital literacy is no longer just about the ability to consume or produce content in digital spaces. It demands an awareness of the social economic and even ideological positions that frame every piece of information. A deep understanding of the social consequences of every digital action becomes an inseparable part. Values like empathy integrity and responsibility are no longer additions but the very soul of digital competence itself. Technical proficiency without strong character loses its meaning. A person skilled at disseminating information but prone to spreading hatred or plagiarism cannot be called digitally literate.

This paradigm shift opens a wide space for the role of school culture. If digital literacy were merely a technical matter educational institutions would function only as infrastructure providers. When digital literacy is understood as a value laden social practice school culture becomes the ecosystem that determines meaning. Within it norms and interpretations of every digital action are formed debated and ultimately internalized. It is the school culture that determines whether collaboration is understood as equitable cooperation or merely sharing answers. It is from there that creativity derives its spirit whether as originality or just neat copying. Essentially school culture serves as the interpretive framework that connects technical competence with deeper social and moral meaning.

3.2.2 School Culture as an Active Mediator: From Context to Mechanism

This review concludes that school culture is no longer merely a background element, but an active mediator in the educational process. Empirical studies position school culture as the foundation for implementing Character Education Strengthening, while others prove its role as a mediator between school culture and teacher performance through digital literacy. The concept of Ecological Systems

Theory helps explain this mechanism. School culture functions within the mesosystem, bridging micro-level classroom experiences with society's macro-level values. It also operates within the exosystem through school policies and the macrosystem through shared, lived values. As a mediator, school culture influences the content, process, and motivation behind digital literacy practices. A school with a competitive-individualistic culture tends to design digital literacy learning to pursue personal achievements, such as the highest online quiz scores. In contrast, a school with a collaborative-communal culture prioritizes group-based project activities, peer review, and collective responsibility for digital work.

The impact on character formation also differs. The first approach can strengthen discipline and competitiveness but risks neglecting empathy and cooperation. The second approach is more inclined to develop social responsibility, empathy, and mutual respect. This mediation process is recursive and reciprocal. While school culture influences the implementation of digital literacy, well-designed digital literacy programs can also reshape school culture. Systematic implementation of a School Digital Literacy Movement has the potential to foster new norms regarding information transparency, a research culture, and communication ethics, ultimately transforming the school culture itself. A dynamic dialectical relationship emerges where school culture and digital literacy practices continually enrich and reshape each other.

3.2.3 Unpacking the Black Box: Specific Mechanisms of School Culture Mediation

This review successfully unpacks the black box of school culture mediation by detailing specific mechanisms that intertwine to form a mediatic ecology.

- a. **The Normative-Habituation Mechanism:** School culture operates through unwritten norms and routines that habituate. The School Literacy Movement demonstrates the power of habituation in conventional literacy. The same principle applies to digital literacy. When schools accustom students to always cite sources in digital assignments, verify facts before sharing information, or use polite language in online class forums, these norms gradually crystallize into character values such as honesty, responsibility, and respect. A strong school culture turns these habits into "the way we do things here," so the internalization of values occurs organically and contextually, not through abstract moral instruction.
- b. **The Collaborative-Participatory Mechanism:** Findings on the importance of tripartite collaboration among the school, family, and community reveal another key mechanism. This collaboration expands the space for school culture mediation beyond classroom walls. When parents are invited to supervise and mentor digital use at home in line with the values developed by the school, and when the community is involved in providing content or training, ecological alignment occurs. The character values intended to be built through digital literacy gain confirmation and reinforcement from the various environments in which students live. This prevents value dissonance that can disrupt internalization, for instance, when the school teaches honesty but in the cyberspace outside of school, students witness dishonest practices being rewarded instead.
- c. **The Policy-Structural Mechanism:** Formal and structured school policies are the legal framework that legitimizes and institutionalizes the normative and collaborative mechanisms. These policies can take the form of an integrated curriculum, budget allocation for teacher training, cyberbullying handling procedures, or an assessment system that values process and digital ethics. A school culture characterized by "adhocracy"—flexible and innovative—or "clan"—familial—is more supportive of

teachers' digital literacy development than a rigid "bureaucratic" culture. Policies born from a supportive and visionary culture are more effective in creating structures that enable the growth of character-driven digital literacy practices.

- d. The Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Mechanism provides a profound psychological dimension to the mediation mechanisms. Digital literacy, especially in social media spaces, is laden with emotional content. A school culture that integrates SEL creates a climate where students feel psychologically safe to express feelings, learn to manage frustration when facing negative content, and practice empathy towards others' feelings in the digital world. SEL functions as an affective foundation that allows cognitive digital literacy competencies to be translated into empathetic and responsible behavior. A school culture that neglects the socio-emotional dimension will only produce students who are digitally smart yet emotionally fragile, making them vulnerable to the negative impacts of the online world.

3.2.4 Navigating Dual Impacts: The Crucial Role of School Culture as Filter and Amplifier

Consistent findings regarding the dual impact of digital literacy, which can both build and erode character, affirm that digital literacy is fundamentally a double-edged sword. This is where the mediating role of school culture becomes critically important. School culture functions as a selective filtering and amplifying system. As a filter, a school culture with strong collective norms and oversight can reduce exposure to and minimize negative impacts. For instance, through clear acceptable use policies, proactive yet educative teacher supervision, and the cultivation of critical values, schools can screen out harmful content and prevent behaviors such as cyberbullying. As an amplifier, a positive school culture can strengthen and extend the positive impacts of digital literacy. Collaborative digital projects showcased to the community, reward systems for creative and ethical digital work, or integrating digital content to solve social problems in the local environment are ways in which school culture amplifies technology's constructive potential. Without a well-functioning school culture to serve as its mediator, digital literacy programs run a high risk of succumbing to their negative effects or yielding only superficial, meaningless technical skills that do not contribute to character formation. Therefore, the success of digital literacy for character building is highly dependent on the strength and quality of the school culture that serves as its medium.

3.2.5 Bridging the Gap: Toward a Holistic Mediation Model

While this review successfully maps out the relationships and various working mechanisms, it also highlights a significant research gap that remains wide open. The majority of existing studies tend to be partial. Many of these investigations focus on the implementation of specific programs, measuring impact, or analyzing the role of teachers in isolation. In contrast, research that specifically and methodologically rigorously examines the mediation process of school culture is still very limited. The core of this gap is the question of how, in empirical reality, the values embedded in a school's organizational culture are actually translated, disseminated, and ultimately lived out in every digital literacy activity. It is this process that ultimately shapes student cognition, influences affect, and forms character-driven behavior. A deep understanding of this process of transforming values into tangible practice is what still needs to be explored further. This framework should view school culture not as a monolithic variable, but as a dynamic constellation consisting of:

- a. Material Aspect: Policies, infrastructure, budgets.
- b. Practical Aspect: Rituals, routines, collaborative activities.
- c. Discursive Aspect: The language, narratives, and symbols used regarding technology and character.
- d. Relational Aspect: Patterns of relationships and interactions among all actors in the school.

4. Conclusion

This narrative review concludes that the character formation of elementary school students in the digital era is inseparable from the development of meaningful digital literacy, and the effectiveness of this relationship is profoundly mediated by school culture. Digital literacy has evolved from merely technical skills (digital skills) toward socio-ethical competencies inherently imbued with values (digital wisdom), such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and critical thinking. This conceptual transformation creates space for school culture to act not merely as a passive context, but as an active mediator that determines the direction and depth of value internalization. The review identifies four key mediatory mechanisms: (1) norms and habituation that crystallize ethical digital practices into character values; (2) tripartite collaboration (school, family, community) that creates ecological alignment and strengthens value internalization; (3) policies and structures that institutionalize character-oriented digital literacy; and (4) a socio-emotional climate (SEL) that functions as an affective foundation for managing the impact of the digital world. School culture functions as a selective filter and amplifier, capable of minimizing negative impacts while optimizing the positive effects of digital literacy on character. Therefore, the success of integrating digital literacy for character development is highly dependent on the quality and strength of school culture as a transformative medium. The implication is that the development of digital literacy programs must be accompanied by intentional and systematic efforts to build a school culture that is collaborative, supportive, critical, and value-oriented. This ensures that digital competencies can ultimately contribute to shaping a generation that is not only technologically proficient but also of noble character.

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