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Character Education: Themes and Researches. An Academic Literature Review

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Character Education: Themes and Researches. An academic Literature Review

*Chiara Pattaro**

Abstract: Character education is both a rooted and developing discipline. Even though there is no consensual definition, it can be widely described as a school-based process to promote personal development in youth, through the development of virtue, moral values, and moral agency. Starting from the growing interest about this theme in recent years, this article aims at using the “character education” analysis category to conduct an exploratory research on the main tendencies in the international literature, defining which are the main topics, exploring the way these topics develop in terms of theory and empirical research and analyzing how they relate to each other. In view of this goal, titles and abstracts of 261 articles published in 145 peer-reviewed academic journals over the period 2005-2014 were selected from Education Source, ERIC, Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection and SocINDEX databases. Articles’ titles and abstract were analyzed through the T-Lab software, using different content analysis techniques. Although many ambivalences and ambiguities affect the meaning attributed to the character education, some key trends emerge from this literature review and the considered studies seem to agree that character education can play an important role in the construction of children and adolescents’ identity and can be a distinctive intervention for youth education and socialization.

Keywords: character education, socialization, education, citizenship education

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Introduction: defining the domain of character education

Character education is both an old and new, in a sense a rooted and developing, discipline (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; 2014; Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009).

It is as old as the concern for the socialization of young people.

Indeed, all societies have always wondered (particularly through philosophy, developmental psychology, pedagogy and sociology of education) on the ways to invest in the socialization of the younger generation in order to ensure social progress and their own survival. The concern to provide a sort of ethical compass for young people is shared - even though in different ways and with different forms - from all formal and informal actors, that deal, for various reasons, with the socialization processes (firstly, family and formal educational institutions such as school) (Maccarini, 2003; Besozzi, 2006; Lapsley & Navarez, 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; 2014).

However, it is mainly in the past two centuries that a real emphasis on positive socialization of youth has widely spread (deMause, 1974). In particular, with reforms such as mandatory education, the recognition of children's rights, and the growth of the scientific studies on the childhood's themes, this attention has been further promoted in the last half century, with an especial development in recent decades (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007).

In the current transition, education tends to become "personalizing education". That is, it deepens its educational intentionality, representing a "constructive" education of personality traits considered important. A strong interest in the "non-cognitive" - covering dimensions such as citizenship, sociability, emotions, creativity, and more - appears. Also the idea of flourishing emerges, meaning the ability of people to be resilient to the social and personal dynamics, developing long-term life plans and maintaining lasting commitments to ideal and not individualist concerns. It involves the ability to articulate a particular sense of well-being, development and self-fulfillment, that goes beyond the alternatives of utilitarian and expressive thought (Maccarini, 2014).

All these elements testify to a tendency of our society to develop a new and more complex educational agenda, in which the attention to the person and his education is again the key element for local, national and global

educational social actors. In this “new” background, therefore the social sciences show increasing attention to character (and citizenship) education.

Of course, this focus is expressed in very different meanings and aspects, sometimes still to be explored - from the critical strands to the attempts of a new institutionalization - so that the character education category can be described as “part of a semantic minefield” (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007, p. 30).

Terminology indeed gets complicated by historical changes, political affiliations and public connotations (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007), and the issues surrounding character education are riven by rivalries so much that the terms of reference seem sometimes to work like code words, that betray certain ideological and political commitments (Lapsley & Navarez, 2006).

Nevertheless, a literature trying to fill the conceptual and ideological gap, or at least to deal with it in a direct way, has emerged in recent years (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006).

As character education (as, more broadly, education) refers to a comprehensive field of study, this literature consists of both theoretical and research-based works that offer an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing from the disciplines of education, psychology, pedagogy, philosophy and sociology.

Mapping the character education field study

Starting from the views discussed in the introduction about the new and growing interest in the field of character education - characterized however by a large presence of several approaches and definitions - the aim of this article is to use the “character education” analysis category to conduct an exploratory research on the main tendencies in the international literature.

What are the main topics within this scientific domain?

How do these topics relate to each other?

How has this scientific domain developed in terms of theory and empirical research?

What are the different perspectives and research methods?

To answer these questions, titles and abstracts of articles published over the period 2005-2014 were selected through the platform EbscoHost,

choosing the databases Education Source, ERIC, Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection and SocINDEX¹.

The articles in which the keyword “character education” recurred in the title or abstract, published in academic peer reviewed journals and in English language, were taken into consideration.

In total, 261 articles published in 145 peer-reviewed academic journals were selected.

These references are mainly American, but there is a growing development (even if more limited compared to the American one) in Europe, Canada, Asia and Middle East. Although character education under various names has existed for centuries in the U.S, Europe and elsewhere, it has had indeed a renaissance and has become increasingly popular in current educational policies and practices in many countries since 90’s - particularly in the United States, where the study tradition is recognized as an inescapable point of reference in this field.

Titles and abstracts of selected articles were analyzed through the T-Lab software², using a content analysis³ methodology consisting of techniques that quantitatively classify the qualitative information contained in spoken or written materials (Krippendorff, 2004). This is a sort of compromise between statistical synthesis, hermeneutics of the text,

¹ Coverage in Education Source spans all levels of education from early childhood to higher education.

ERIC is considered to be the primary database for education literature; it provides access to information from journals included in the Current Index of Journals in Education and Resources in Education Index.

Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection provides extensive coverage for a broad range of subjects in the fields of psychology.

SocINDEX offers comprehensive coverage of sociology, encompassing all sub-disciplines and closely related areas of study.

² T-Lab software is an all-in-one set of linguistic, statistical and graphical tools for content analysis and texts mining. It uses a kind of text-driven automatic approach which allows meaningful patterns of words and theme to emerge (Lancia, 2014). As previous research shows (see also Waltman, van Eck & Noyons, 2010; Assefa & Rorissa, 2013; Pattaro & Setiffi, 2014; Pattaro, 2015), T-Lab is an appropriate tool for studies such as this one.

³ Considering Author's affiliation, in a total of 261 references, 186 come from U.S.; 22 from Europe; 18 from Canada; 16 from Asia; 13 from Middle East; 2 from Africa and 1 from Australia. The remaining three references were not classified, as they had affiliations from more than a Country or geographic area.

researcher's sensitivity and deepening of the context, in order to achieve an optimal use of the available information (Nigris, 2003; Tuzzi, 2003)⁴.

Coherently with the described methodological approach, at first, a *word associations analysis* was performed, in order to interpret the keyword "character education" in the semantic context in which it was produced. This TLab tool measures the intensity of the association between co-occurring (i.e. simultaneously present in the same sentence or paragraph) pairs of words (lexical units). The selection of associated words is presented both in a table with the cosine indices of association and in a radial plot, where the selected lemma is placed in the centre and the associated words are distributed around it, each proportionally far as its association degree (Lancia, 2004)⁵.

Afterwards, the articles' titles and abstracts were analyzed using the *Thematic analysis of elementary contexts*. This T-Lab tool performs a bottom-up clustering which highlights emerging themes, providing a representation of the corpus' contents through a few significant thematic clusters. Clusters consist of a set of elementary contexts (i.e. sentences or paragraphs) characterized by the same patterns of keywords and correspond therefore to relatively homogeneous topics.

As this analysis is limited to the studies published in English in peer-reviewed academic journals present in the selected databases, it does not consist in a comprehensive representation of the whole field of study. Therefore, we think that this exploratory research may provide useful information about the key trends and the more relevant research questions from various points of view.

⁴ The imported texts consisted of 261 titles and abstracts (corpus), with a size of 39208 words (word tokens). The corpus is therefore a medium sized one (Tuzzi, 2003). There were 5182 word types, and 2404 hapax (words occurring only once). The ratio of word types/word tokens is 13.2%, and the ratio of hapax/word types is 46,3%. The used language is therefore rather specific, but within a corpus that can be considered analyzable by a statistical approach (for the methodological criteria, see Tuzzi, 2003; Bolasco, 2004).

For each text (corresponding to a single title and abstract) were associated classification variables: year of publication, journal where it was published, Author's Affiliation Country. The analysis was performed on 780 selected words, with a minimum threshold of 5 occurrences indicated by T-Lab.

⁵ The association between co-occurring pairs of lexical units (e.g. words) is computed through the use of cosine coefficient. The coefficient's maximum value is 1, the minimum value is 0 (Lancia, 2004)

Character education is...

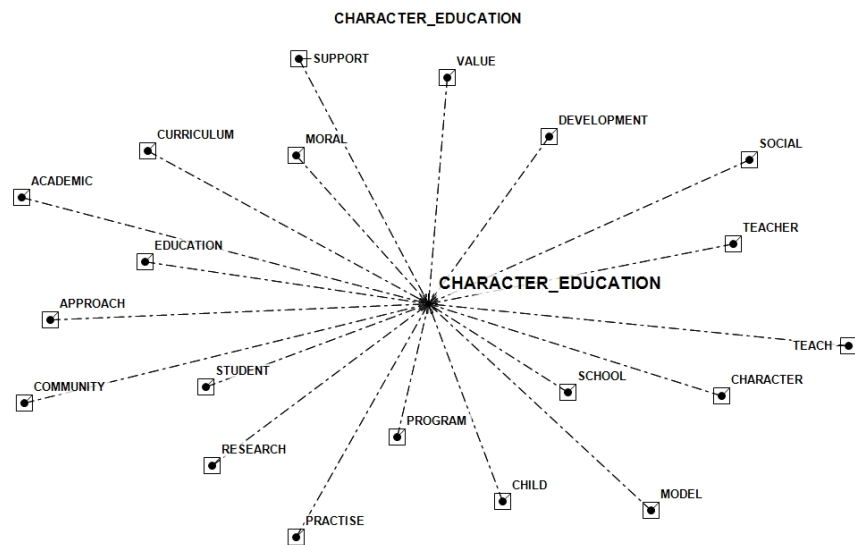
As stated above, firstly, a *word association analysis* was carried out, to assess how co-occurrence relationships determine the local meaning of the target word “*character education*” (the keywords most associated with character education are displayed in Fig. 1 and Tab. 1).

In order to understand the word association analysis, we have to keep in mind that the more two words co-occur, the closer they are in the dimensional space.

In addition, T-lab enables to recover all the elementary contexts (paragraphs or sentences) in which the two associated items are present, allowing to analyze the words in their frame of reference.

The semantic field organized around “character education” shows some particularly relevant themes.

Figure 1. “Character education” and its association



Associations with *school*, *student*, *child*, *education*, *approach* and *model* highlight a particular attention of the international literature towards the context, subjects and definition of character education.

An overview emerges in which different approaches provide different interpretations on such definitions, particularly in the used language and in the borders of what they enclose and exclude. However, the central focuses of these definitions, overlap considerably among the related approaches (e.g., character, moral, citizenship and civic education, social emotional learning, etc.) (Berkowitz & Hoppe, 2009). Such approaches share the idea of an inextricable union of person and context, which is expressed by the reciprocal interaction among the dispositions, interests, and potentialities of the person and the changing contexts of learning, development, and socialization (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006). Even though there is no consensual definition of character education and - given the broad net that character education casts - no definition is able to satisfy all concerned parties (Berkowitz, 1997), however, it is possible to define roughly some distinctive characteristics, containing the field of study. Character education therefore can be widely defined, according to Berkowitz & Hoope (2009, p. 132) “the deliberate attempt to promote the development of virtue, moral values, and moral agency in youth” within educational settings, especially in schools (Berkowitz & Hope, 2009, p. 132).

Table 1. Cosine's coefficient of Word associations for "Character education": first twenty lemmas

<i>Lemma</i>	<i>Cos</i>	<i>Occ</i>	<i>Co-Occ</i>	<i>Chi²</i>
School	0,372	366	163	0,002
Program	0,328	163	96	15,998
Student	0,295	291	115	3,796
Education	0,27	194	86	0,001
Moral	0,267	175	81	0,282
Development	0,245	138	66	0,724
Teacher	0,244	166	72	0,09
Character	0,234	228	81	9,105
Child	0,219	88	47	3,095
Research	0,218	104	51	0,975
Approach	0,208	89	45	1,459
Curriculum	0,202	99	46	0,179
Value	0,196	151	55	4,512
Social	0,192	105	45	0,118
Teach	0,185	94	41	0,028
Model	0,183	62	33	2,044
Practise	0,18	76	36	0,281
Community	0,179	65	33	1,115
Academic	0,176	63	32	1,087
Support	0,174	57	30	1,626

The association with *character* refers to further attention, widely present in the articles; this association, more than others, also highlights the ambiguity and the slippery slope of character education. Indeed, defining character is not a straightforward matter. In a broad sense, habits, traits, and virtues are three interdependent and mutually implicative concepts that are foundational to most traditional accounts of moral character (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006).

However, more often the international literature does not focus on the character definition, but rather on the fact that, although character elements are similar, character education applications and individual attitudes and behaviors are influenced by the different socio-cultural contexts and economic and religious beliefs, which effect character education curricula regarding societal behaviors (see e.g. Lee, 2013; Ugurlu, 2014). In this sense, different approaches emerge, ranging from the idea of character education as a tool to develop the personal potentiality, in view of a positive development linked to greater wellbeing (see e.g. Holtzapple, 2011; Lee, 2013), to a meaning of character education as an instrument to preventing negative behaviors (see e.g. Battistich, 2008) or, even, to preserve the cultural heritage and the moral values of a society (see e.g. Goswami & Garg, 2011).

In brief, this association reflects the complexity and the ambivalence, but also the potential that characterizes not only the character education itself, but also the fact that it is inside the relationship between education / socialization / society (Maccarini, 2003; Besozzi, 2006).

The emphasis on the social impact of character education appears also in the association with *social*, where social is related to the competences to be acquired (see e.g. Cheung & Lee, 2010), but also to the relationship between social and cognitive aspects in child's development (social skills, social justice, social responsibility) (see e.g. Bajovic, Rizzo & Engemann, 2009; Christou, 2013; Hyungsook, 2014). In this association emerges the core of the character education as a socialization process means.

Still within this framework, the associations of character education with keywords *development*, *moral* and *values* even more specifically highlight the interest of the international literature on the outcomes of character education. These outcomes refer to a complex set of psychological and social characteristics that motivate and enable the child to function as a moral agent (Berkowitz, 1997), i.e., to be socially and personally

responsible, ethical and self-managed (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). Also the developmental outcomes have been defined in several ways, but, although the nomenclature may vary, the underlying virtues are repeated through the literature.

The values most frequently mentioned in representing the intended outcomes of the character education are personal, relationship and community virtues. The conversations between personal and societal values are particularly taken into consideration (see e.g. Sim & Low, 2012). Often universal values (see e.g. Ugurlu, 2014) and positive and prosocial values (see e.g. Kirkland & McCorquodale, 2007; Beachum et al., 2013) - such as honesty, kindness, generosity, tolerance, loyalty, dedication, integrity, courage, freedom, citizenship, respect for diversity, perseverance, empathy and self-motivation (see e.g. Was, Woltz & Drew, 2006; Linter, 2011) - are cited.

The association character education and academic shows clearly how the international literature carefully looks at the relationship between this educational approach and academic achievement. The focus, in this case, is in the way in which schools are implementing such approach to improve school climate and student time on task and, consequently, achievement (see e.g. Chambers, Hylan & Schreiber, 2006). It is a different way to pursuing success, connected to a positive character development among children, counterbalancing the materialistic, competitive and selfish trends tending to define academic success (Lee, 2013) and prioritizing not only academic learning, but also social, emotional, and ethical competencies (Cohen, 2006).

The interest in the outcome of the character education refers then to a specific attention to the school curriculum, to the description of character education's programs and to the assessment of their effectiveness (associations with *curriculum* and *program*).

A further (and consequent) focus of interest of the international literature deals with protagonists of character education: the teachers (associations with *teacher* and *teach*). In this case, teachers' experiences, perceptions and thoughts about character education (see e.g. Beachum, 2005; Romanowski, 2005; Beachum et al., 2013), responsibility to be role models (see e.g. Sanderse, 2013) and sense of efficacy (see e.g. Demirel, 2009; Ledford, 2011) are investigated, as well as their education and the way to prepare teachers to become character educators (see e.g. Nucci et

al., 2005; Revell. & Arthur, 2007; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2008). From a more pedagogical perspective, the articles also look at teaching methods and strategies (see e.g. Brannon, 2008; Stiff-Williams, 2010).

A final consideration derives from the word association between character education and the keywords *research* and *practice*. This association refers to the presence in the international literature of articles describing empirical research on one hand and professional practices on the other.

Given the diversity of the involved disciplines and the applied methods, at the moment, the word associations analysis allows us only to report a strong and specific interest on these areas, over which the cluster analysis will allow further deepening.

Themes and issues about character education: cluster analysis

In the next step of the analysis, a *Thematic analysis of elementary contexts* has been performed. This T-Lab tool enables to build a representation of the contents of articles' titles and abstracts through a few significant clusters. Each cluster consists of a set of relatively homogeneous text fragments and it is described through the words and the associated variables most characterizing the fragments of which it is composed.

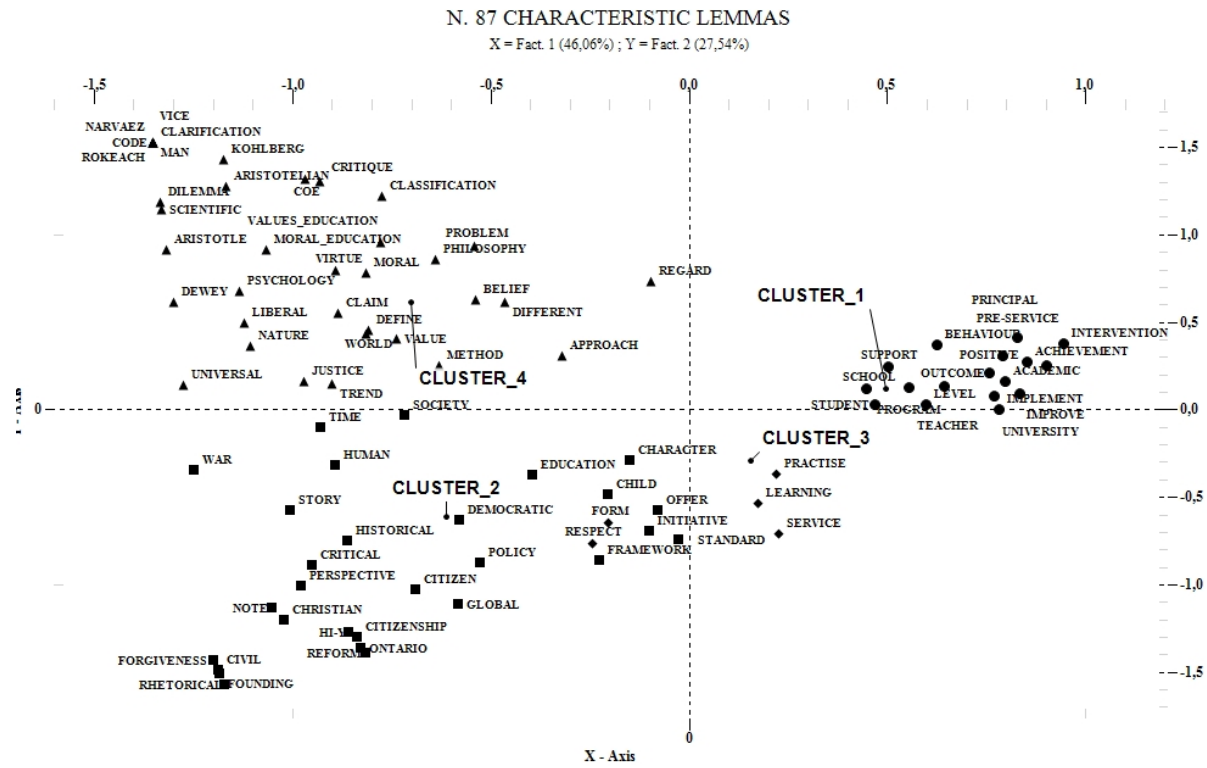
From the analysis, four clusters were identified (Fig. 2).

Based on the relationship between elementary contexts of the cluster and the whole of elementary contexts in the textual corpus, each cluster has a different weight in percentage terms.

We identified the words with the highest Chi-square value for each cluster and the principal elementary context containing those words, in order to interpret each theme emerging from the statistical results. Then, we assigned a label to each cluster.

A first overall consideration concerns the fact that the cluster analysis confirms and reinforces the findings of the words associations analysis, classifying some of the highlighted key issues in distinct thematic units and deepening them.

Figure 2. "Character education": clusters and lemmas



Cluster 1. Research in character education: does it work?

Cluster 1 is the one with the highest percentage of elementary contexts (38,42%).

It is primarily composed of keywords referring to empirical researches aimed at assessing the effectiveness of character education's programs (Tab. 2).

Table 2. Cluster 1 - Research in character education: does it work?

Lemmas & Variables	Chi ²
School	151,096
Program	98,703
Teacher	78,474
Behaviour	69,126
Achievement	53,820
Student	51,974
Academic	51,063
Positive	41,580
Support	33,428
Intervention	31,550
Outcome	27,232
Pre-Service	26,982
Principal	26,809
Prevention	21,938
Improve	21,764
Rev_057	20,359
Control	20,223
Receive	20,093
Level	18,652
Urban	18,348

Members: 444 elementary contexts (e.c.) out of a total of 1156 classified, equivalent to 38.41%.

These studies use very different research methods, ranging from quasi-experimental studies to case studies (not directly comparable to each other), but they provide many complex, but closely linked considerations about character education effectiveness, particularly highlighting the following:

- school goals and activities associated with character education programs seem to be associated with academic achievement (Benninga, Berkowitz & Kuehen, 2006);
- specialized programs of character education are variously associated to a decrease of the potential for children's problem behavior and to an increase of students' social competence and prosocial behaviors (Miller, Kraus & Veltkamp, 2005; Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006;

- Parker, Nelson & Burns, 2010; Holtzapple et al., 2011);
- school wide social-emotional and character education programs enhance school quality and facilitate whole school change, improving student well-being and learning (Snyder et al., 2012).

This cluster does not represent of course a review of studies, nor take into account the criteria by which these studies have been conducted; however, some elements inside it make necessary to recall the most frequent considerations about the empirical research on character education.

It is indeed very difficult to answer to the frequent question: “Does character education work?”.

Even if there is wide literature and a growing and substantial body of research on the topic, there are also a large number of approaches to character education and a variety of educational initiatives. This complexity creates therefore an enormous challenge in addressing the questions (Berkowitz & Bier 2004; Was et al., 2006).

Although character education is not new, the extent of peer reviewed rigorous research regarding the effectiveness of character education programs is quite limited (Was et al., 2006). On the other hand, there are many studies about the outcomes of individual character education programs (Berkowitz, Battistich & Bier, 2008) and not many longitudinal studies of the enduring impact of character education (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007).

Moreover, many character education programs have been studied with inadequate research designs, or the reports have not been elaborated enough on the content and pedagogical strategies of the program methods, or, even, the described outcomes have been indirectly or poorly measured (Berkowitz & Bier 2004; 2007; Was et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, some comprehensive research-based analyses of “what works” in character education summarize a set of effective outcomes (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; 2007; Berkowitz, Battistich & Bier, 2008), coming to conclusions on the effectiveness similar to those contained in this first cluster:

- Character education can effectively promote character development: most programs that had scientific outcome research revealed significant impacts on student character development;
- character education impacts many aspects of character development:

a greater number of the programs evaluating academic outcomes showed significant academic results;

- character education tends to be a set of implementation strategies: there is clear evidence of significant effects on social-moral cognition, pro-social behavior and attitudes, problem-solving skills, and on reducing at risk behaviors (Berkowitz, Battistich & Bier, 2008, pp. 428-429).

However, there is also a convergence of opinion around the need to continue and implement research and inquiry in this area.

Cluster 2. Character education: religious, secular and citizenship approaches

The second cluster (which includes 20,24% of the analyzed elementary contexts) concerns the connections and disjunctions between character education and citizenship education. There is indeed emphasis on learning as process and participative experience, and also the relationship between religious character education and secular approaches emerges within the debates on pluralism (Tab. 3).

Character education, starting with a religious emphasis on moral development, eventually changed into more secular approaches, such as the values clarification model, performance approach, and social emotional learning approaches (Smith, 2013).

However, even within this evolution, today character education can develop in different forms.

In these clusters, essentially, three related themes emerge:

- the first one focuses on the ways Christian education can limit or stop the trend towards less character education; this approach also considers the strategies by which the trends toward increased secularization can be reversed (see e.g. Jeynes & Robinson, 2010);
- the second one relates to articles questioning (also using empirical studies) issues concerning how schools with a Christian ethos can legitimately provide comprehensive, rather than limited, approaches to moral and character education for secular students (see e.g. Pike, 2011);
- in more secular approaches, the interrelations and roles of character education and the education to citizenship (citizenship education, civic education) are explored and the cluster highlights the latest

trends of the relationship between these two areas (see e.g. Althof Berkowitz, 2006; Sim & Low, 2012).

This third theme is the most present in the cluster, and therefore it has to be worth considering.

Table 3. Cluster 2 - Character education: religious, secular and citizenship approaches

Lemmas & Variables	Chi ²
Citizenship	129,860
Christian	107,312
Education	97,658
Citizenship_Education	83,599
Perspective	76,060
Rev_054	68,502
Policy	67,944
Critical	65,730
Character	52,462
Citizen	47,713
Rev_114	40,190
Ontario	40,173
Reform	40,173
Child	39,950
Forgiveness	32,698
Story	29,630
Democratic	29,586
Civil	28,025
Rhetorical	28,025
Note	26,785

Members: 234 elementary contexts (e.c.) out of a total of 1156 classified, equivalent to 20,24%.

While also citizenship education (such as character education) can take many forms, “there is a growing trend across the world that it is based upon the concepts, processes and values of education for democratic citizenship [...] In broad terms, the task of citizenship education is to promote and encourage young people to play a bigger and more effective role in the democracies of their respective countries” (Sim & Low, 2012, p. 386).

In this framework, the studies present in this cluster consider that the shared goal of liberal democratic approach to character and citizenship education is to promote the development of citizens who are both pro-social and effective at participating in a liberal democratic society, and they both are based on certain key principles, such as empowerment, promotion of critical thinking and the development of moral communities in classrooms

and schools. Therefore, due to this overlap of goals and methods, in the present educational practice, there is a clear trend to combine or even integrate the two approaches (see e.g. Althof & Berkowitz, 2006).

Cluster 3. Character education in practice. How does character education work?

The theme of the third cluster (20,07% of elementary contexts) is highlighted by words such as *service*, *learning* and *practice* and highlights the attention of the international literature on effective practices in character education (Tab. 4).

Table 4. Cluster 3 - Character education in practice. How does character education work?

Lemmas & Variables	Chi ²
Learning	146,03
Service	52,404
Evaluation	52,250
Professional	43,789
Practise	41,223
Empath	34,813
Responsibility	34,477
Environment	33,777
Respect	32,540
Rev_018	26,213
Rev_003	24,883
Rev_004	22,467
Rev_029	22,467
Cbsc	22,467
Village	22,467
Form	22,255
Survey	21,272
Woman	21,220
Digital	20,982
Connect	20,876

Members: 232 elementary contexts (e.c.) out of a total of 1156 classified, equivalent to 20.07%.

A specific focus is clearly addressed on learning through service - service learning.

The term service learning in the United States indicates a widespread educational practice, combining learning goals (the acquisition of professional, methodological and social skills) and community service, in ways that enhance both student growth and the common good.

Although no consensus has been reached on how to define service learning - surveying the literature Furco (2003) claimed that there are over 200 different definitions - it is possible to point out some essential features shared by the experiences and experimentations.

Service learning is a teaching method combining the study inside the school, with the engagement with the local community. It is both an intellectual action - the theoretical study of a problem - and also a practical one, consisting of concrete activities of social service. With this method, the social service activities are not added, but integrate the academic curriculum. In other words, service learning is not a way to do alternative activities, but a different way of doing school.

For these reasons, service learning is often an important element of character education and the articles (not just American, but also European and Asian) referring to this cluster emphasize its centrality within the educational field on the character education.

The cluster particularly describes the researchers' interest in the theoretical roots of service learning and in its effectiveness; it also focuses on the link between service learning and character education - where service learning becomes "the vehicle for delivery of character development" (Shumer, Lam & Laabs, 2012, p. 430).

Moreover, as a further confirmation of the trend emerged in the second cluster, also this one highlights how character and citizenship/civic education are connected, through service learning, for developing democratic citizenship (see e.g. Shumer, Lam & Laabs, 2012; Hyungsook, 2014), enhancing civic engagement, social responsibility, and academic achievement (see e.g. Stott & Jackson, 2005; Billing & Jesse, 2008).

Although so far there have not been many empirical researches about the value of service learning (Hart, Matsuba & Atkins, 2008), this cluster has highlighted a growing trend - especially in recent years - considering opportunities offered by this method to contribute to youth development, socialization and education.

Cluster 4. Character education and moral issues: moral education and moral dimensions of teaching

Finally, the fourth cluster, which includes 21,28% of the total elementary contexts, comprises characteristic words referring to some different themes, all somehow related to moral issues in education (Tab. 5).

On one hand, there is a focus on the theoretical debate about moral education and its interconnections with character education; on the other, the issues dealing with the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching are present.

Table 5. Cluster 4- Character education and moral issues: moral education and moral dimensions of teaching

Lemmas & Variables	Chi ²
Moral	278,866
Value	143,47
Moral_Education	135,543
Virtue	73,346
Rev_019	56,947
Values_Education	48,516
Kohlberg	45,198
Rev_022	44,171
Psychology	34,412
Country_Middleeast	34,207
Rev_013	32,971
Rev_002	32,12
Problem	30,417
Rokeach	29,707
Vice	29,707
Aristotelian	28,43
Dilemma	28,43
Critique	28,069
Belief	27,332
Rev_077	25,6

Members: 246 elementary contexts (e.c.) out of a total of 1156 classified, equivalent to 21.28%.

Although there are also numerous references to articles from the US (traditionally the Country in which character education is born and developed) and from European countries, the most part of the texts in this cluster belongs to theoretical and empirical studies largely developed in the Middle East and Asian contexts,

These studies are often connected through the theoretical debate about the work of Lawrence Kohlberg, that led to a renewed interest about moral education in the '70s. Kohlberg's efforts - combining concepts from cognitive developmental psychology and Kantian moral philosophy with Durkheimian sociology and Roycean philosophy - formed indeed the starting point for all subsequent developmentally based approaches to moral education (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006).

In this framework, the relationship between character education and Kohlberg's moral education is discussed, highlighting strengths and weaknesses of the two approaches, and proposing solutions to help them to become more effective (see e.g. Liu, 2014).

Starting from this theoretical debate, but, above all, from the recognition of an interesting opportunity to compare how different societies approach moral and character education, another theme in this cluster provides insights from Turkey (Yiğittir & Öcal, 2010), China (Zhao, 2005) and Malaysia (Thambusamy & Elier, 2013), often making a comparison with Europe and America.

In some studies, character and moral education are used almost interchangeably, in some other, their similarities and differences are highlighted, in other ones, their overlap are emphasized. The main overlaps that seem to emerge from this cluster - as already noted Althof & Berkowitz (2006, p. 498) - especially concern that many educators incorporate moral character development into their character education models and that effective character education programs frequently target moral development and implement moral discussion at school.

Finally, a third focus of this cluster is on the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching, including the moral nature of teaching, the moral role of teachers, and especially the teacher education in moral or character education.

In order to have effective outcomes from moral and character education, studies classified in this cluster consider that an important point is the teacher education about these subjects (see.g. Campbell, 2008; Fenstermacher, Osguthorpe & Sanger, 2009; Yiğit & Tarman, 2013).

In approaching this topic, they seems to follow the two directions underlined by Swartz (2008): the one dealing with moral and character development of teachers, that would allow them to serve as models for their future students; the other one concerning knowledge and skills that enable teachers to "establish appropriate classroom structures, deliver direct content instruction, build relationships, and make pedagogical choices important to moral and character education for their future students" (p. 589).

Conclusion

The research question of this work was to identify the main trends in the international academic literature and to understand the most relevant issues pertaining this debate.

The analysis of academic references on these topics highlights a theoretical and research framework characterized by liveliness and heterogeneity in themes and perspectives.

Although many ambivalences and ambiguities - due to different theoretical frameworks and different definitions of character and values - affect the meaning attributed to the character education, some main features emerge from this literature review.

Character education seems to be “an umbrella term used to describe many aspects of teaching and learning for personal development” (Otten, 200, p. 2). Some areas under this umbrella may include development of moral reasoning, cognitive development, social and emotional learning, moral education, citizenship education, life skills education, caring community, risk behaviors prevention and still many others.

However, most perspectives in this review pays attention to personal and contextual factors of learning, development, and socialization, that are in dynamic interaction across the life course.

Moreover, international literature shows a marked interest in the outcome of the character education and in teaching methods and strategies to get them.

Although there is substantial variability in the nature of effective character education, a set of empirical inquiries aimed at assessing its outcomes highlights that character education approaches - when implemented rigorously and with a scientific foundation - can facilitate an effective learning process, can have a positive effect both on prosocial values and academic achievement and can reduce at-risk behavior.

However, there is also a strong debate about the necessity of more rigorous research (that is, at this time, quite limited) and a convergence of opinion around the need to implement empirical studies in this area.

A further specific interest is clearly addressed on effective practices in character education, aimed to connect students to the larger community, providing them with opportunities to engage in moral action. In this regard,

the academic works focus mainly on service learning as a major element of character education initiative.

Finally, an emphasis on learning as process and participative experience also emerges. It highlights a trend toward a holistic approach that connects the moral dimension of education to the social and civic realms of students' lives. In this framework, part of the analyzed literature seems to share (even if in different ways and with different degrees) the idea that to foster the development of moral citizens in democratic societies it is necessary to overlap and cut across the fields of character, moral and citizenship education.

Regardless of the different approaches and perspectives, the considered studies seem to agree that character education can play an important role in the construction of children and adolescents' identity and can be a relevant means for youth education and socialization. This kind of education, often related to the idea of flourishing, incorporates empowerment, debate and critical reflection about the existing society and the core virtues and values of civic life (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Maccarini, 2014).

As Berkowitz and Bier (2007) already stated, this review also shows that "we know much more empirically than is typically assumed in the literature; however, there is much more that we do not know than what we do know" (p. 43).

In this direction, it is highly indispensable to implement the research about character education using rigorous qualitative and quantitative methods - primarily aligning small studies with common designs, variables and measures, promoting studies that compare different programs and developing longitudinal research (Was, 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2007) - in order to face the many outstanding issues.

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