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Character Building of Students: Private Secondary School Principals' Perceptions and Practices

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Abstract: *Principals play an important role in preparing self-reliant and benevolent students who become lifelong learners, contribute to their nation, and serve society as ethical citizens. Strong character based on desirable moral values can heighten our lives exceedingly. Whilst weak or poor character can have disastrous effects on us as humanity is going through the complexities of the 21st century at social, economic, and individual levels. This qualitative study used a semi-structured interview design to explore the perceptions and practices of principals from ten private schools of Lahore regarding students 'character building. This was done using a purposefully selected sample and a self-constructed semi-structured interview guide. The analysis of the data revealed that most of the principals considered the central purpose of education is to groom students' whole personalities according to the Islamic moral values considering them as the universally beneficial virtues. Research outcomes provided us with the information about principals' practices used in secondary schools from a conducive environment to the curriculum, helping in cultivating a community of virtue. This study's findings related to the formation of students' characters can be beneficial for society, policymakers, school administration, parents, teachers, and learners.*

Key Words: Character Building, Curricular and Co-curricular Activities, Secondary School Students, Principals

Introduction

Throughout history, education has been the instrument or means to form characters for the cultivation of compassionate and confident students who deliver in society as ethical citizens and make wise choices for a discerning/sophisticated life and flourishing society (Wren, 2014; Nucci, Narvaez, & Krettenauer, 2014). Our character shapes the quality of our life. It's all about how do we treat ourselves, others and how do we deal with the situation. Strong character based on truth and morality is an important factor in gaining success, peace, and happiness. All convictions and principles are derived from individuals, and nations are built upon those individuals (Arthurr, 2014). If these people are not groomed with strong characters and they are not able to carry out all activities of life in a required way, then those

nations' survival becomes endangered (Djailani, 2013; Arthurr, 2014; Manjorang, Sembiring, & Sitanggang, 2021).

Cultivation of moral values remained the main concern of schools from the very beginning (Arthurr, 2014). The mission of education has been to flourish the learners with both intellect and morality to exhibit the responsibility to be grounded, the courage to take the risk of trying new things, and honesty and respect for others (Arthurr, 2014). Many widely accepted statements regarding the goal of education are to make intellectual progress, to work for society and economic need, and to build up a socio-political system are inferior and, in some instances, opposing the broader humanistic objective (Bates, 2021).

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One basic goal of socialization is the moral development of young learners (Ahmadi, Rochmad, Lestari, & Harjunowibowo, 2021). Formal education has been the most important and traditional tool for character building. The majority of parents like to raise their children with various desirable and admirable traits so that their personalities are infused with active ethical circumferences—furthermore, many social work organizations, youth clubs. Educators, writers, curriculum experts, and religious leaders work to achieve this goal of children's character building.

However, nowadays, modern education in Pakistan has its main focus on students' academic and lesser on their holistic grooming in terms of their character and intellectual development. The frustration and disharmony in society might be due to the lack of moral upbringing of a young learner. The need of the time is to rediscover the significance of teaching character traits and to incorporate values, ethics, emotional maturity,

and a civic sense to deal with the increasing complexity of this rapidly changing scientific and highly technological world.

Despite all the agreement regarding the development of children's strong moral character, it is an astonishing fact that character education is famous but hesitant. Many institutes are afraid of being labeled as conservative if they are in favor of moral education. Many are sympathetic to the progressive trends at the cost of traditional education related to young learners' moral grooming. Many think that moral growth is a matter of cultivation of excellence rather than submission of obligation.

The research studies conducted in Pakistan's context explored the importance, need, and ways to integrate character building in the teaching-learning process. Searches in the local databases yielded the following studies regarding reflective teaching practice. A summary of these studies is presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Summary of Empirical Studies on Character Building in Pakistan

Author/s	Aim	Research Design	Sample	Major Findings
Khan (2014)	To know the role of Islamic studies in the character development of youth.	Critical analysis of Islamiyat textbooks Questionnaire	Islamiyat textbooks books School teachers	Contents are suitable and accurate to build the character of youth, and teachers are satisfied with these contents. But teachers were dissatisfied with the role of media and parents.
Asif, Guangming, Haider, Colomer, and Kayani (2020)	To assess the beliefs and practices of university teachers about ethical education in Pakistan and China	mixed-methods approach	University teachers in Pakistan and China	Pakistan's teachers having a conservative mentality, advocated for being loyal to the state's constitution, the final authority of divine laws, and a realization to serve society was the final goal of ethical education. Teachers from China were making claims to promote the political doctrine that emphasized collectivism in a socialist ideology,

Author/s	Aim	Research Design	Sample	Major Findings
				along with family and communal values.
Abbasi and Basit (2017)	To highlight many aspects regarding poor personality development and the environment of learning, including methods of evaluation and recommendations for its improvement in the Pakistani context.			The substandard quality of education played a significant role in the poor and incoherent personality development of students
Naseer and Muhammad (2019)	To explore teachers' lived experiences related to cultivating moral value among twenty-first-century college students.	Phenomenological methods	College teachers	The cultivation of truthfulness, respect, and modesty (Hayah) among college students is a challenge.
Fatima, Akhtarq, and Begum (2020)	To examine the impact of relationships between the principal and teachers on students' character development	Survey questionnaire Focus group discussion	Secondary school teachers	There is a positive impact on relationships between the principal and teachers on students' character development.

Purpose and Research Questions of the Study

It is evident from the above description that there is little research in the Pakistani context regarding how principals contribute to the development of children's strong moral character. Also, there is a dearth of research in the area of principals' practices concerning students' character-building. This study attempts to fill this gap.

The purpose of this study is to explore principals' perceptions and practices about the character building of students to groom them as responsible, cooperative, and successful members of society through the teaching-learning process in ten public and private secondary schools in Lahore.

Methods and Materials

The current study is a qualitative study using a semi-structured interview research design (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). An in-depth interview is a qualitative data collection method involving direct one-to-one involvement with individual participants, which can happen face to face or in some situations by telecommunication means (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Saldaña & Omasta, 2021). These semi-structured interviews were considered significant to unfold the opinions, values, experiences, and attitudes of the interviewees (Kvale, 1996; Fujii, 2017). In-depth interviews were beneficial to make participants comfortable to generate discreet and insightful answers by establishing rapport with the interviewee by providing the chance of probing questions for more detailed information and getting back to a specific question to produce a deep understanding of perceptions, attitudes, and experiences (Roulston, 2010; Roulston & Choi, 2018). The sufficient potential of insightfulness of a high-quality small number of participants increases the chances to uncover important findings in less time.

Research Sites, Sampling, and Participants

Criterion sampling technique (Patton, 2015) was used to select participants who have had a lived experience with the phenomenon to explore perceptions and practices adopted by the

principals of ten schools in Lahore (Pakistan). Criterion sampling includes those participants who meet some pre-decided benchmark of importance (Denieffe, 2020; Campbell et al., 2020; Berndt, 2020). It means that selection of samples has to be made according to a set criterion. For instance, the topic of research is to explore principals' perceptions and practices about the character-building of secondary school students. Following criteria were used to decide the inclusion of participants in this study: The participant was currently working as a principal, and the participant must have five years' experience in the principal ship.

Table 2. Demographic Information of the Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Academic Qualification	Experience
1	Female	35	MA Psychology, MPhil Education	Six years
2	Female	40	MA English, MPhil Education	Eight years
3	Female	36	MBA, MPhil Education	Five years
4	Male	35	MA Accounts, MPhil Education	Six years
5	Female	40	MA Political Science, MPhil Education	Five years
6	Female	38	MA Education, MPhil Education	Seven years
7	Male	42	MSc Mathematics, MPhil Education	Nine years
8	Male	35	MSc Chemistry, MPhil Education	Five years
9	Female	45	MA Education, MPhil Education	Ten years
10	Female	38	MBA, MPhil Education	Five years

Data Collection methods

The instrument used for this study was a semi-structured interview guide based on the conceptual framework of a literature review (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Saldaña & Omasta, 2021). In-depth individual interviews of ten principals were conducted at the participants' schools. The main type of data comes from two or three broad, open-ended questions regarding participants' experience with the concept, and the rest of the questions were to probe further to find out more in a deeper way (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). An audio recording method was used.

A sufficient number of possible questions based on the previous literature's scope were prepared for the planned interview (Flick, 2018a). Specifically, for this study, the interview guide's first organization was presented in a meeting of all authors (Flick, 2018b). After that, a few alterations in the interview guide were made to improve it further. Unnecessary and ambiguous questions were removed and amended to bring clarity. Furthermore, the order of questions was also changed to bring logical coherence. Moreover, the better version of the interview guide was achieved after piloting it with a friend having a critical approach.

The first author (SY) contacted the participants by making a phone call to schedule a meeting for an interview. Interviews were semi-structured in format, and participants were individually interviewed at a previously established location, which was their schools. Two digital audio recording devices were used to record the interviews. Furthermore, the interview guide was used to take notes whenever it was considered necessary. All interview recordings were transcribed and translated into the English language.

Data Analysis Methods

The first author (SY) used descriptive and pattern coding for analyzing interview data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). Descriptive coding was done by assigning labels to interview data. This helped summarize the passage in a word or short phrase, thus identifying the basic topic of the interview data. Descriptive coding of all interview transcripts provided an inventory of topics for indexing and categorizing data, and having assigned descriptive codes to data units, the first author clustered similar codes to create a smaller number of themes (Saldaña, 2021). The second author checked the analysis of interview data and found it rigorous. The themes that appeared after pattern coding of the interview data are described in the following sections.

Findings

Holistic Development of Students as a Primary Purpose of Education

When the first researcher interviewed the principals regarding the primary purpose of education, different principals had different perspectives, but most of them focused on developing students. They were inclined toward the holistic development of their students so that they could become an integral part of society. One of the participants said, "Primary purpose of education is to bring change in personality, change in living style, and change in a way that others would be able to distinguish between an illiterate and educated person" (Participant 1). She was also convinced with her organization's motto of "Pure and Drops, which means to provide pure practices by teachers and students should learn positive things gradually and steadily" (Participant 1). Yet another principal reported her belief that education is a source of students' empowerment to live well in this world and in the world hereafter. She explained that "to take part in that empowering process is the only inspiration for her to join the profession of teaching" (Participant 5). She said, "The most interesting and important job task of a teacher is to groom secondary school boys. I believe in preparing young learners for that success which is defined in Quran for righteous people" (Participant 5).

One of the participants said, "The primary purpose of education is to explore learners' potential and enable them to flourish through the enhancement of their strengths and by the management of weaknesses. The ultimate aim of education is to empower students to become good and successful citizens" (Participant 4). He said that "I consider the most important skill to impart in students through education is to equip their mind to distinguish between right and wrong for the purpose to live well and contribute in a society" (Participant 4). He said that for him, the most important purpose of education is personal development, but unfortunately, the social fabric and definition of success were changed, and the expectations of parents were changed.

Another principal professed that the primary purpose of education is to create adults who have the ability to implement their knowledge in the fast-paced world. He stated,

Being principal for the last five years, I am working hard to provide contemporary education according to the teachings of Islam as I consider this the best tool to train young learners for financial independence and the creation of a harmonious society. (Participant 7)

Another school principal had a different perspective on the purpose of education. For her, "it was to be good parents and human beings to formulate a good society and to provide financial support for her family" (Participant 2). On the other hand, a participant stated,

The basic purpose of education is to impart knowledge and skills, but my priority is to infuse moral values within learners to enable them to be productive, supportive, and respectful members of society. I focus on the personality grooming of learners as good human beings and Muslims rather than to enable them to get maximum marks to become good professionals and moneymakers. (Participant 6)

They all believed that the purpose of education is to assist learners in developing the skills, to acquire knowledge, and the dispositions of traits that would help them to be responsible, contributing members of their community, which means to be a good companion, to be a good colleague, to be able to work and to make a positive contribution to the well-being of the community.

Character Building is Essential

Most principals were of the view that it is very important to assist students to build their character in a positive way as strong characters based on morality and truth make it possible to get peace, success, and happiness in life. A participant claimed, "Character building must be part and parcel of education. It is easy to inculcate moral values in learners' minds during their schooling. People say that children learn from home, but I say that children change the minds of their parents if schools provide training for strong moral values" (Participant 5).

However, participants lamented that not much attention is being paid towards character building in our education system. In addition, they acknowledged that a well-groomed child in school could have the ability to change the mind of parents and, eventually the society. A participant stated that "our problem is that we don't pay attention to an individual and hope to find a noble

society" (Participant 1). She talked about her practice of making students responsible for taking care of their surroundings on their own rather than considering this the job of genitors. She explained, "the practice of showing respect and care for others is the source of getting peace and happiness which enables anyone to be successful" (Participant 1).

By emphasizing the importance of young learners' character building, participants explained that equipping students with the ability to choose the right path according to Islamic teachings and values along with modern education could help them to be successful. For example, she stated, "We should not forget to educate our children according to Islamic teachings along with the latest technological advancements" (Participant 6). She illuminated the importance of assistance by school and teachers for the character building of students at a young age as they are lacked good decision-making ability, whereas the brightness of evil and temptations has the power to draw them away from right and desirable action. She advocated her point by arguing that acquainting them with the latest technology was the requirement for advancement in today's world, but without proper guidance and monitoring, they could be diverted towards negative things.

It's quite true that learners, by the time they begin their school, have already formulated many personality characteristics, but according to 'A Neo-Aristotelian model for moral development, it does not block the adjustment of a negatively built moral trait in early childhood. Due to the peer and teacher interaction and the nature of moral education, children could progress smoothly through a course of habituated goodness. A student, while spending approximately 900 hours yearly in the school, learns many lessons which are informally delivered. He or she seamlessly learns to socialize and resolve conflicts. Mostly, children learn these lessons by chance or due to the personal nature and priorities of a teacher or staff member who interacts with learners. Intentional character-building systematizes these lessons, which helps students to develop an ethical compass. One participant stated,

Character building is the most important element for me to provide awareness about right and wrong to develop a desirable character of

young learners. The enactment of good character and conduct plays a vital role in assimilating improved stuff in life. (Participant 5)

Another principal stated that character assimilates attributes like truthfulness, initiative, courage, and tolerance, and a person equipped with these characteristics finds acknowledgement from others even though the social fabric of society has totally changed. He said: "Good character is the foundation of a remarkable identity and source of eternal peace and happiness" (Participant 7). According to him, human flourishing was the generally acknowledged goal in the world that needs the procurement and expansion of moral, intellectual, and civic virtues and excellence required to perform in diverse domains. According to him, character-building facilitates the acquisition and heartening of virtues, which help them to reach their fullest potential. He added, "Being Muslims, we have the treasure of universally accepted virtues, and Allah has installed that software of evil and virtue inside every human being which is needed to be explored and managed in a desirable way" (Participant 7).

The principles of character education are the same as in ancient times, and in many ways, they are persistent with traditional theories about education, but at the same time, many contemporary educators grasp this model but are not trying to retake the past. They are just working to create an environment that enables students to deal with the challenges of a complex and fast-changing world. During the interview, a principal said, for him, character building is the most important element for various outcomes in a learner's future life. He said,

Students of secondary school have a high tendency to incline towards unhealthy persuasions, which could be avoided if they have developed resilience through character education. Having a desirable character is the tool to boost educational achievement and attainment of mental satisfaction and positive, healthy behavior. (Participant 8)

He viewed character building as a foundation on which a student's whole life is entrenched. He said that people having good character have been notably successful, like Thomas Edison, who transformed the world with his invention, or Abraham Lincoln, who conquered the hearts. He argued,

People who changed the world positively were men of character. In my opinion, a character is a supernatural power that distinguishes one from another. The character decides our achievements and failures, and everyone has the potential and ability to strengthen and develop his/her character. (Participant 8)

Another principal stated that at the present time, it is very much important to pay attention to the character-building of learners. According to her, the quality of life depends upon someone's character. She acknowledged that all chaos in society is due to the breakdown in the healthy moral growth of youth, which is continuously rising up. She stated, "Character building must be done before secondary school starts because due to other physical and academic challenges, it becomes difficult to work on character building on the weak foundation in the shape of wrong behaviors" (Participant 3). She advised working on character building during the time of junior schooling. She stated, "School's role of character building is less effective at this stage" (Participant 3).

School Condition, Facilities, and Daily Routine

Enough opportunities to get training as character builders are provided to most of the principals. The different principals had different experiences in their schools with the administration and staff. One of the principals stated that school conditions and facilities are essential for better character building of students at the secondary level as they go through many difficult situations due to the time of puberty. She stated, "Learners face many challenges in terms of immense biological changes and their approach to relate to the real world. Our administrators have provided us with all the facilities, including purpose-built building and arrangement of psychologist" (Participant 3).

For example, a participant reported, "We are facilitated to get the time and financial help for our professional growth as a promoter of good and strong character" (Participant 3). She said that they had a purpose-built building with a big ground to provide convenience for boys and girls according to their different requirements. Another principal had a different experience, and she complained about the negligence of the government and directors regarding the procedure of students' character building in terms of specific educational goals and policies. She described that: "schools' condition, facilities and proper training for the cultivation of higher goal of good character traits are hard to achieve without government's support" (Participant 2).

One participant complained about facilities and resources by saying that she used to avail of her staff's capabilities for the settlement of behavioral issues and character-related activities within very limited facilities and resources. Furthermore, she herself worked hard to provide character education assistance to her staff and secondary school students. She advocated the importance of school conditions and facilities needed for good character development, but her school was deficient in this regard. She said, "I explore the potential of my staff and guide them to use different strategies to fix students' faulty behavior" (Participant 9).

Another principal had a very different opinion. According to him, school conditions and facilities had no contribution to building the character of learners. He argued that extended facilities just spoiled children. He said, "It all depends on how a teacher builds his rapport and relationship with students and how he/she works to inculcate virtues in learners and what hidden messages we convey by providing them with maximum facilities" (Participant 8). He argued that when our teacher went into students' room to teach them, they considered him as their employee and consequently less influential. According to him, due to the absence of deep-rooted respect for teachers, the task of character building in schools is near to impossible.

One principal stated that school conditions and facilities have an intense impact on the process of building the characters of young learners. School conditions and facilities affect the provision of having capable staff. Furthermore, students' motivation, learning, and progress are also related to that environment. He said that they have very few facilities for students' healthy moral upbringing. "We face extreme difficulty to help children with complex psychological needs of adolescents" (Participant 7). He argued that the cultivation of valuable moral skills like teamwork, effective communication, and positive and respectful interaction with others was difficult in overcrowded rooms and smaller grounds.

A principal during the interview talked about her occasional rounds and observations of teachers and students during classes, leisure periods, and breaks while having fewer facilities. She stated that they let them play freely and watch them from a distance for the diagnosis of their issues and remedies. She stated the importance of young learners' self-respect by helping them in a confidential way. She narrated, "I take care of their self-respect. Although we don't have any facility for professional counsellors/psychologists, I myself perform this task while taking care of confidentiality. We ourselves do counselling with privacy and confidentiality" (Participant 6).

Regarding daily school routine, principals stated that they used to greet their students in the morning at the front gate, where the principal, along with his/her staff, welcome each and every individual. During assembly, they recited holy verses from the Quran with its translation and one moral message. A participant reported,

Every day each class has a club period that is fixed for the practical execution of any moral trait in the classroom setting. Other than this period, we also demonstrate this practice during the break by different class groups on different days. We have the arrangements of congregational prayer in school to cultivate morality, discipline, and brotherhood. (Participant 5)

Another participant talked about her daily routine that she would start the day with morning prayer, and after that, classes get started. She used to observe two classes every day for forty minutes. During that observation, she claimed to observe for manners of teacher and students mainly. During break time, she used to take round and watch for the behavior of students.

Teachers play a Significant Role in Character-Building

Most principals believed that the role of the teacher becomes very important due to the main aim of the teacher to build students' character through academics; therefore, a teacher should not only be responsible for teaching textbooks but should aim to meet students' expectations for which education should not be restricted to just deliver the lectures as it is another name for intellectual growth. A teacher should influence the students to respect people, irrespective of their socio-economic status.

While interviewing about the role of teachers in character building of students, one of the participants emphasized that teachers need to be knowledgeable, modest, and ethically strong to be a model and to be able to deal with diverse needs of school children for their character building. According to her: "role modelling is the most effective way to inculcate higher moral values in secondary school students." (Participant One). She inspired her staff to portray themselves as a strong and positive role model by practicing higher moral values. She stated,

Students spent many active hours of the day in school, so the positively influential character of teachers can play an effective role in the character-building process. Suppose teachers demonstrate respect towards each other and towards students. Children can learn to be respectful, and after that, teachers can nurture any trait they want. (Participant 1)

In addition, a principal said, "A strong nerve, highly intelligent, knowledgeable and character-wise illuminating teachers can build good character of learners" (Participant, 2). One participant explained that teachers were more important for character building as they were more in contact with students. She stated that: "only highly motivated and strong character teachers by choice can bring desirable changes in students' behavior" (Participant 6). She stated that the best role of a teacher to build the character of a student is to be a role model. She claimed that "due to the flaws of our education system, we are deficient in having good and strong character teachers" (Participant 6). She stated that they are in big trouble to groom those teachers as good character-builders.

One of the participants said that he wanted to see his teachers as the role model of good characters who were modern in the sense of being open-minded, not just to glitter in their appearances. He considered those teachers to be successful for students' personality development who were equipped with inner strengths to deal with contemporary challenges. He stated, "We need teachers who have the ability to think beyond their personal interests and have a passion for building a nation of character" (Participant 8). He highlighted the importance of integrity and diligence of teachers towards their goal of students' grooming. Furthermore, he highlighted

the importance of informal teaching for character development, which happens through the demonstration of teachers' behavior in action as students spent a time of 6-7 active hours in a day for thirteen years.

Another principal explained the importance of the teacher to develop the character of students for getting unending peace, serenity, betterment for humanity, and settlement of political and religious conflicts. He said, "Teachers are the central pillars of a progressive and sound community; they build students' character via the route of academics" (Participant 7).

A principal said a loyal, sincere, and worth imitating teacher could play a better role for students' character formulation. She highlighted the importance of diligence and good practices demonstrated by teachers to inculcate healthy character traits. She said, "our behavior is contagious; we cannot hope to see good practices by students if we are lazy and do not practice good deeds" (Participant 9). She said that teachers must play their role in developing the basic potential of young learners to improve human civilization for the sake of humanity by bridging the gaps and differences.

Teachers' Professional Development Regarding Character Building is Necessary

Valid and skillful professional development, which includes practice, coaching, and feedback, is the source to provide support for the character development process. Professional development programs encourage and engage teachers to learn new skills to use with their students and assist in their professional growth. The concept of organizing schools as learning communities to systematically share teachers' expertise and experiences is gaining popularity.

When asked the principal about the professional development of teacher, a principal said, "According to my point of view, it requires a lot of knowledge and versatile strategies to enable students to distinguish between right and wrong when the social environment is unsupportive due to inequality, injustice, increasing greed and individualism (Participant 2). She described that "teachers themselves need assistance to gain emotional stability, integrity, and diligence through professional development training to be a character educator" (Participant 2).

One participant described the essentiality of the professional development of teachers as character educators by explaining the complexity of the task: "Development of belief and imparting knowledge is an easy assignment but to prepare young people to perform good deeds in a challenging situation against temptation and peer pressure is the actual virtue that required inner strength and training to be cultivated in learners" (Participant 5). She said that the cultivation of this integrity and diligence required special training. She complained that they were deficient in proper training and education in this regard. She stated that she herself learned many things from the consequences of her appropriate/inappropriate actions. She stated the importance of knowledge and training for better action plans to guide young students of the secondary school during this rapidly changing era. Another principal stated,

Professional development of teachers as character educators is important but, in my organization, we do not get time and resources to obtain any training, but I myself try to seek any opportunity at my own expense and guide my staff to groom learners as strong, positive, and good citizens. (Participant 6)

She declared it essential to groom teachers. She had prepared 20 points Performa to monitor the teacher's behavior when they were in contact with students. She said, "During observation, I keep a record of all things done properly or needed betterment" (Participant 6). She emphasized the importance of the professional development of teachers as character educators.

However, during the interview, one of the participants said, "More important than professional development is teachers' inner calls, qualities, standards and their own characters to groom their students. "Teachers need to personify that character which they want to create in their students" (Participant 8). According to him, professional development could only enhance their effectiveness if teachers were intrinsically inspired and motivated for positive, productive, and desirable grooming of children. He advocated that only those teachers could enhance their skills with professional development who had the inner urge.

One principal said that teacher's role is constantly changing and getting more difficult as they had to deal with diverse students, integrate them into the mainstream and to use communication and information technologies for effective teaching, and to work on the involvement of parents for healthy moral upbringing. He complained that, sadly, they did not have high profile 'trained teachers by choice' in their schools. He said: "Most of our teachers are those who could not succeed in any other profession" (Participant 7). According to him, even highly trained teachers also need to get opportunities for continuous professional development to combat the complexity of a rapidly changing world. Another stated that teachers needed to have a passion for character education. He said, "We need to develop special pedagogy for character building as it is not easy to prepare someone to resist against the temptation of temporary enjoyment but damaging practices" (Participant, 4). He said that being more in contact with children rather than principals, they need in-service professional development training to be a character educator.

One of the principals considered professional development training as a central element for each level of management from teacher to principal and director to accomplish the goal of character building of secondary school students due to the complexity of that phase of an adolescent. She said, "We cannot continue with old patterns in this every day changing world" (Participant 10). She also complained that due to the parents' mindset and social ethos, teachers' job has become more difficult by saying that "in our times if we ever complain against teachers, our parents used to emphasize for unconditional respect and obedience towards teachers, but now parents come for teacher's accountability even if a teacher stared them or spoke little louder" (Participant, 10). Therefore, all levels of management need to be sensitized to the core concepts related to character building and the hurdles associated with practices. She declared that the whole syllabi of education are totally changed now due to the usage of foreign books with less emphasis on character building, which has made professional development vital for teachers to get better outcomes.

Activities, Games, and Sports are useful for Developing Students' Character

Most principals were of the view that character education entails a complete curriculum developed to instruct children about important traits required to build good character. It is an intentional attempt to create a noble character and to cultivate vital virtues that are beneficial for a single person and for society as well. It requires keen and systematic planning for success, and it includes guiding students to get the ability to make wise decisions inappropriate manner while facing difficult situations. In an interview, a principal explained,

Just lectures and advice cannot make a big difference in preparing students to stand solidly on principles and demonstrate diligence to achieve their ethical goals, but the arrangement of certain activities, games, and sports is necessary for inculcating those required ethical values in their unconscious minds to make them equipped with positive traits and civic sense for lifelong learning. (Participant 9)

One of the participants emphasized the necessary execution of ethical beliefs by teaching the Quran and the arrangement of *Namaz* separately for boys and girls to cultivate modesty, discipline, and punctuality. She told me about an extra period used to teach moral values through different strategies. She told about the organization of different activities related to special occasions and according to those specific days and festivals like *Rabiulawal, Muharramulharam, Eiduladha*, and Independence Day by assigning a particular topic for week-long demonstration, like helping others and sharing with the less privileged fellows. She also stated about specific character activities, debate competitions, physical games, and sports day to cultivate respect, teamwork, and cooperation. She added, "We have a pre-planned curriculum and a weekly schedule of activities for the infusion of particular moral values" (Participant 5). Another participant had arranged speeches, debates, and sports days to inculcate respect, teamwork, coordination, and cooperation. Furthermore, she stated, "We organize different science and art exhibitions to provide them with a platform for collective efforts" (Participant 2).

Character education is a deliberate effort to inculcate desirable character traits or qualities,

and certain physical activities by showing cooperation and obeying the rules of the game can be helpful to achieve the goal of character building. The habituation of obeying the rules in the game is assumed to be applied in other areas of life in a broader sense. Character education activities can be used to instil the value of responsibility through the process of acquainting students to help teachers in the preparation of learning tools. During the interview, a principal said, "We organize different types of sports and games to inculcate positive social traits in learners. We have an international-standard swimming pool to get students to relax and able to take care of their own selves and others" (Participant 3). She stated, "We arrange food-sharing activity to give them a chance to learn about the caring attitude towards their fellows and lower rank school staff" (Participant, 3). She said that the above-mentioned activity taught them to exhibit gratitude. A principal explained,

We don't have any planned programs or character education activities, but we just provide situational guidance. Whenever the need is diagnosed, we educate them with real-life events and a situation like adopting and demonstrating a caring attitude towards some fellow students who go through any type of loss or suffering. (Participant 8)

Furthermore, he stated about cultural and special days' celebrations with moral messages. While talking about physical sports and games, he said, "Physical sports and games are important for hormonal balance of secondary school students and demonstration of respect, cooperation and collaboration but unfortunately we have very small grounds" (Participant 8).

The principal of another school illuminated the significance of physical games and annual sports day for the cultivation of character as he considered coaches the most influential persons for this purpose. He stated about the celebrations on special occasions to inculcate patriotism, teamwork, respect and to teach the importance of sacrifice for Allah's will. They used to invite some knowledgeable speakers to give lectures regarding lessons and a demonstration of respect. He said that they did not have any other planned program or activities for character building.

Values Should be Incorporated in the Curriculum

The participants emphasized the need for the addition of moral values in the curriculum. A principal highlighted the importance of respect and honesty and the advancement of artistic values in the curriculum to create a good environment for happy learning. She emphasized increased creativity to find better ways to practice morality. She stated, "We need to advance artistic values along with the addition of moral values to create a pleasing environment for learning" (Participant 1). Another principal mentioned the addition of moral values in the curriculum, as there was a great vacuum. She explained, "We need to teach and train our young boys to respect and guard every woman as their own mother because as a society we are standing on the verge of chaos and about to ruin due to the increasing cases of harassment and rapes" (Participant 5). She stated that they needed to protect their young learners from being extremist about any ideology. She advocated for the teachings of the Islamic agenda related to feminism instead of the western one due to the provision of maximum rights and privileges for women in Islam. She explained the importance of respect and the concept of equality for every human being irrespective of class, nationality, and religion. She favored the inclusion of moral values in national policy to be included in the curriculum. She said that they needed to redesign their curriculum in relation to their own cultural values and heroes. She explained: "It becomes difficult for our children to relate the content of books with their real-life" (Participant, 5). She prioritized honesty to be cultivated in learners for inner motivation to do justice with their duties and responsibilities. She claimed that honesty is the key to get all other positive traits.

A principal narrated that their curriculum has nothing about moral values. She mentioned her 15 days program for character building during summer. At the end of that summer school, she used to distribute awards and acknowledgements in conjunction with the identification of shortcomings and recommended solutions for the future. She stated the inclusion of respect, responsibility, and truthfulness would be beneficial for young learners. She said, "If children could learn to respect other human beings just for the sake of humanity, that could be the source to achieve a peaceful and flourishing society"

(Participant 2). She also stressed truthfulness, honesty, and responsibility to complete their tasks and duties for taking care of others and their belongings.

One of the principals stated, "We have a complete syllabus to build students character which includes respect, responsibility, honesty, teamwork, courage, and discipline. I want to improve and advance moral and mental values" (Participant 3). Children learn about values primarily through everyday interaction with everyone in the school community. A principal said, "Our Islamic studies book has all the universal moral values which just needed to be delivered in an effective way to inculcate in students through habituation" (Participant, 8). For him, truthfulness is the basic virtue for the development of all other virtues to play a good and productive role in society as mature adults. He emphasized the inculcation of 'respect' as the most important virtue. He said, "If someone is disrespectful, he/she can never get good outcomes" (Participant 8).

Another participant highlighted the importance of courage and confidence. Furthermore, he said that moral values could be learned automatically through the enhancement of cognition. He said, "Advancement in mental abilities enables students to distinguish between right and wrong and to make wise choices" (Participant 7). He stated that to develop the basic potential for the improvement of human civilization is worth integrating into the curriculum, but due to their limitations in terms of time and financial budget, they could do very little in that regard. He also explained the demonstration of punctuality through offering *Namaz* during school hours.

One of the participants of the study talked about the addition of moral values in the curriculum by describing the importance of respect, tolerance, and equality. She described the significance of understanding and respecting the perspectives of other fellows. She said, "We need to protect our beliefs but not to hurt others' feelings" (Participant 9). She insisted, "We really need to design our curriculum with the reflection of our own culture and ideals because it helps to understand the content better and that real understanding is the valuable source of character-building" (Participant 10).

Evaluation of Character Education Program through Briefing is Essential

Principals emphasized the evaluation of the Character Education Program was significant to recognize if teachers were executing the program with devotion. A principal stated, "I assess the performance of teachers and students during those activities, and at the end. I call a meeting to brief them about my findings and expectations regarding that program" (Participant 5). She also encouraged them to discuss their problems and requirements for that activity. According to her evaluation and briefing played an effective role in making any program successful. She asserted that the meetings were called daily at the beginning of the semester, then weekly, biweekly, and eventually monthly. She said, "Teachers are told to write down their problems and to discuss them in meeting to find better strategies for the cultivation of positive traits in learners." She added, "Teachers are told to find new approaches and plans of action they need to bridge the gap between teachers and principals" (Participant 5). She further stated that her teachers were trained to integrate moral values in every subject, with examples from natural phenomena from daily life. She emphasized more on the method of delivery. Another principal stated,

No goal is possible to achieve without evaluation through briefing and meeting. I got results by being the mentor of my teachers. During meetings, I usually diagnose their needs and provide them with necessary guidance after each evaluation of character activity. (Participant 3)

She said that she guided her teachers to supervise students during character education activities. Another participant stated that evaluation is essential at any level and for any activity or program. She said, "We call a meeting after 15 days to evaluate the delivery of content regarding character-building activities and the level of learning of students" (Participant 9). One of the principals of the secondary school highlighted the importance of evaluation of any character education program or planned activity. She said, "I used to explain my expectations regarding the weekly agenda of moral lessons and call occasional meetings to ask about their achievements and problems. I used to acknowledge and appreciate those who made a difference" (Participant 1).

However, a principal stated that although they did not have any programmed activities, he had told his staff about his priorities, standards, and expectations regarding the real purpose of education, which was the cultivation of good character. He explained,

I have given general instruction to my staff for the integration of ethical teachings any time anywhere. Every day at the end of the school day, we spend an hour to acknowledge their accomplishment or to find solutions for problems. (Participant 8)

Parental Involvement is Critical for Students' Character Building

Parents' involvement generally recognizes parents' behaviors at home and in school settings to contribute to their children's educational development. Measures of parental involvement typically combine the quality and regularity of communication with teachers and contribution to the school's activities and functions. Parent involvement connects two key areas in children's initial development, which are home and school settings. Within an ecological context, the home and school contexts are distinguished as self-governing microsystems, and parental involvement is recognized as a mesosystem, which consists of interconnection between key microsystems. Although each setting has the capacity to influence a child, in a partnership, it can offer a unique effect.

For instance, if parents are attuned to a teacher's instructional objectives, they may provide support for those learning goals at home. Likewise, in terms of social growth, parent's assistance may assist the progress of persistent punitive approaches across the school and home. Many pieces of evidence propose that these parenting involvements are associated with higher academic achievements in the early classes. A principal in an interview pointed out,

Although parental involvement makes it easy to build students' strong character, the society as a whole is, unfortunately, not supportive, but with their efforts and systematic hard work, they convinced parents to realize the importance of good and positive moral values. (Participant 1)

She stated that only the principal, teachers, and curriculum could not be more effective until parents and government, or society considers this goal of character-building worth achieving. She complained about the absence of negative involvement of parents and society's demands of just good grades irrespective of their conduct, to get in high ranked professional university regarding the outcome of schooling. She stated, "We try to cultivate unconditional respect for human beings without any discrimination of class or religious sector, but parents used to resist against that moral value of being respectful towards others for the sake of humanity only" (Participant 3).

Another school principal stated that during school hours, they taught and provided an environment to get them away from distracting factors and negative temptations, but at home, they indulged in all those things. She explained that parents do not have a concern with their children's characters. She said, "Unfortunately, today's parents do not think about the character building of their children. They just expect good grades in less fee structure from schools" (Participant 2).

The formation of a civilized society requires the elements of pluralism, tolerance, equality, justice, and a decent educational environment to produce contributing and peaceful future citizens. A principal pointed out: "In a child's life, there are three very important social places that become the center of their healthy moral grooming, the nature of family, the nature of the school, and the nature of youth movements" (Participant 9). She said that children do not get the opportunity to socialize due to the nuclear family system, which consists of parents and their children only. She said, "Parents remain busy to make both ends meet due to nuclear family and children spend most of their time on mobile phones/social media" (Participant 9). One participant emphasized that parents must realize that it is their joint responsibility to raise good human beings rather than good professionals only and further added, "Schools performance towards better character building of students will remain unsatisfactory without parents' positive contribution" (Participant 5). The contribution of parents is to provide security, attention, and affection in order to create good citizens in the future must be carried out for a positive impact to increase motivation for shaping good values from an early age.

A principal highlighted that the function of character building could be effectively done if

parents had laid the right foundation at home during the early years of a child. Also, he was of the view that parents pampering has turned their children into lazy persons who were not prepared to work hard with honesty and responsibility. He said, "Children are extravagantly privileged and considered school staff as their employees who are supposed to provide them with good grades" (Participant 8). According to him, societal ethos and requirements also created obstacles against the grooming of persons with higher moral values, inner beauty, and richness of character as "the mob's respect and paid more attention towards those who have more valuable properties regardless of their fair and unfair source" (Participant 7).

A principal highlighted the negligence of parental involvement and society's role in grooming students' character. She said, "Parents never ask about their children's healthy ethical development but abuse teachers and school managements for their grades. Society appreciates those who are richer and graduated from prestigious professional institutions rather than those who demonstrate better conduct" (Participant 6). Furthermore, she said that they lack the backing from parents for the reinforcement of moral teachings delivered in schools. She said that parents need to establish a friendly relationship with their children. Another principal highlighted the negligence of parents regarding the character building of children and emphasized that they need to realize their responsibility. He complained that: "parents think that their job is done after getting their children admitted in schools" (Participant 4). He argued that parents, schools, and society all together could play an effective role in the creation of people of character.

The Principal is bound to execute the Director's Agenda

The principal in the interview regarding the director's agenda stated that the "vision and plans of the organization's director play an important role in getting this perspective of students' character building. They can provide us, with facilities of training, pedagogy, time, plus financial and academic resources to work on students' character" (Participant 1). According to her, nothing was possible without their vision, mission

and support. She tried to prove it with the argument, that "at my previous job I was totally unaware of all these character-related terms, activities, and goals" (Participant 1). She explained that due to the directors' focus on character building, she was able to gain enhanced knowledge, training, and achievements about students' grooming as positive and morally strong youth. She explained that: "In the previous organization, I was bound to work on directors' priorities which were to enable secondary school students just to get in prestigious institutes for professional education" (Participant 1).

One participant said that the director's plans set the direction of schools' practices. She stated, "Mostly directors focus on completing the syllabus and enabling students to get good marks and entry in well-reputed professional colleges and universities" (Participant 2). She explained that the directors of her organization work to produce maximum students with good grades only. Another principal said that their educational system was totally commercialized. He stated, although they were bound to accomplish the organizational mission through academic and other extra-curricular activities, they tried to avail of any opportunity of character building in their informal settings. He said,

We face the pressure of directors to complete the syllabus in due time to get better results for marketing purposes rather than invisible characters, which, though guarantee to establish a crime-free society and healthy, motivated citizens who feel pleasure to work in the greater interest of humanity. (Participant 8).

According to another principle, the crux of character could be influenced and shaped by directors, peers, parents, and organizations who provided active social experiences in and outside the schools. He said, "In the school, the principal is bound to execute director's agenda. We don't have time, resources, and authority to work for character building of students if it's not directors' priority and mission" (Participant 7).

It seems top leadership with a strong character is no more an optional extra, but the educational agenda of top leadership is the vital element to execute moral/intellectual training. Directors' considerations and priorities are

essential for the integration of moral values in the teaching-learning process.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study are in harmony with the previous studies with respect to the need, importance, and challenges for the implementation of character education. All principals were convinced to put primary focus on students' character building. Marini (2017) mentioned that the primary purpose of education is to graduate with desirable positive and academic accomplishments. Harned (1999) advocated that character-building could help to decrease the kinds of violent occurrences that are happening in schools today. Regarding principals' practices about character building in their schools revealed that most principals believed in the intentional planning of curricular and extra-curricular content and activities for character building during secondary school years. The intentional attempts to build character are significantly needed in today's society since young children find a lot of opportunities and hazards unknown to earlier generations.

Results of this research revealed the difficulties and challenges regarding the implementation of character education. Inappropriate conditions of living hinder the ethical or moral framework needed to develop good character. The lack of resources, time, and pressure on teachers to prepare learners for qualifying for the state exams also hinder the development of good character. In addition, confusion regarding the selection of 'whose values' to be considered for character building.

This qualitative study reinforces existing research regarding the importance and need for character building as a primary purpose of education but finds conflict for its implementation through intellectual development and academic processes. This research revealed that many schools and most teaching and learning practices are not favorable for the cultivation of good character traits in learners. Principals in Lahore confirmed the usage and effectiveness of planned and systematic curricular and extra-curricular content and activities by providing evidence of behavioral changes in students.

The study of principals' perceptions and practices about the character building of students in Lahore's secondary schools can be beneficial for society, policymakers, school administration, parents, teachers, and learners as well. Research outcomes provide us with information regarding the measures taken by principals for students' character building, which may help us to get awareness about the approach of principals related to the need and importance of character education. In addition, the findings of this research raise questions for policymakers to equip principals and teachers with the skills related to the integration of positive character-building activities in curricular and co-curricular activities. As a result, we may be able to get those society members who will be socially and academically strong enough to face the challenges of the 21st century. Classrooms may be converted into peaceful activity places filled with highly motivated, caring, respectful, and responsible learners. Teachers may feel enlightened to instruct those learners who have a conscious focus on their tasks with zest, courage, higher self-esteem, and moral values of being respectful to others and themselves. While being responsible, respectful, students may foster ego resiliency, stress management, and social and cognitive competency.

It is hoped that participants' detailed descriptions about the phenomena in this study will provide inspiration and guidance to combat the issues and challenges regarding the implementation of character education that will enhance the outcome of the teaching-learning process in the form of moral development, academic achievement, and overall performance in real-life situations to produce well-adjusted and beneficial members of society.

Implications of Research

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings of the current research study, the following recommendations for policy and practice are made:

This study has revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the participants in relation to perceptions and practices for the development of character among students.

This study pointed out the deficiency of resources, passionate staff, professional development of teachers, and availability of time regarding students' character formation in our education system. Therefore, it is recommended to pay attention to find alternatives.

Participating principals were convinced of the need and importance of character building at schools but hesitant about the execution of practical measures. Hence, this study proposes to bring awareness and assistance in this regard.

The research indicated that those principals were more inclined and creative to find ways for the cultivation of ethical traits who had their inner call to build a better society. Therefore, it is important to revisit the criteria of appointment for educational leadership.

This research illuminated the need to include character education in principals' training programs and qualifications.

Suggestions for Future Research

According to the findings and limitations of this study, the following venues for future research are suggested:

1. Many relevant areas remained unexposed as these areas were not intended to work on according to the main focus of this study. Therefore, it will be worth studying to uncover those areas by broadening the dimensions related to character-building practices and their effects. For example:

2. An ethnographic approach can help to unveil the effects of deliberate and planned character education on students' character development.

3. Experimental research can be helpful to examine the negative/positive influence of character-building activities and games on students' behavior and achievements.

4. Future studies can augment the knowledge of character-building practices and perception by doing comparative research between public and private schools.

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