

## THE PLACE OF SOCIAL AND MORAL VALUES IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM FROM THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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### Abstract

This study examines how social and moral principles are included into the Republic of Moldova’s high school curriculum and offers methods for doing so successfully. The study finds the global trend of emphasizing character education to promote proactive citizenship through secondary analysis of previous studies. The Education Code of Moldova delineates social and moral norms that correspond with Western educational frameworks, such those in the United States, Germany, and the Netherlands, which serve as standards for Moldova’s educational system. However, there are also obstacles in the way of properly putting these ideals into practice, such as a lack of pedagogical topic understanding and parental and school administrator support for teachers to act as role models. The study offers a number of solutions to these obstacles, such as small group exercises, class discussions, and problem-centered learning. Furthermore, their inclusion in the curriculum can be strengthened by incorporating moral and social ideals into certain courses like drama, social studies, and music. The study comes to the conclusion that although incorporating moral and social values into Moldova’s educational system is important, specific tactics and increased assistance for teachers are required to get past current barriers and guarantee that the values are successfully taught to pupils.

**Keywords:** Character Development, Education Strategies, Proactive Citizenship, Problem Based Learning, Social Responsibility.



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### INTRODUCTION

Social and moral values are considered a way for human beings and a community to lead a better life, as well as an inalienable element of their educational system. These values inform the decision-making process as they help an individual to differentiate between the right and the wrong and choose what behaviour or action better fits into a particular situation. An understanding of the importance of social and moral values encourages taking a deeper look into how these values can be integrated into the high school curriculum to lay the foundation for the nation’s sustainable future. Debbarma (2022) stressed that the word “value” is of Latin origin and initially referred to strength and

health. The original meaning was eventually transformed and now the notion of values refers to something that is effective and adequate. Gayen (2023) expanded on this definition by emphasizing that values are internalized cognitive frameworks that guide people in making decisions across various contexts and situations. This researcher also argued that these decisions are based on a deeply instilled sense of moral standards, personal priorities, and the ability to recognize patterns in life. These explanations offer a foundation for understanding the multifaceted nature of values, which is important for considering their place in education.

The significance of values implies that they might take a range of forms, including social and moral values that are considered further in this research. Social values are shaped by social change, institutions, and cultural traditions (Vieyt, 2022; Marito, Danso & Watada, 2024; Rinaldi & Hema, 2024; Susana & Nwanya, 2024). These values, therefore, might differ across contexts, as internal and external factors influencing their emergence and evolution can be unique to each area. This distinction highlights the importance of considering national and cultural contexts when studying the integration of social and moral values into curricula, particularly in countries like the Republic of Moldova. As for moral values, they are rooted in morality, which Wong (2019) explained as a grounded approach to benefit and harm. A nuanced definition of morality was suggested by Sinnott-Armstrong (2023), to whom, morality involves concerns with how to treat other human beings, as well as the judgments, emotions, and actions arising from these concerns. De Villiers (2023) noted that despite differences in how social and moral values have evolved, both sets of values remain flexible and adaptable, allowing them to meet the needs of particular communities and fit into specific situations. This adaptability is significant for the educational system, as it facilitates the integration of these values into national curricula. The significance of social and moral values in the national education system can be hardly underestimated and requires an in-depth study (Mokliak & Tarelko, 2023; Abdaoui et al., 2024; Farikhah & Mahbubah, 2024; Syam et al., 2024; Jarnawi et al., 2025; Siddique, Nahar & Mahmood, 2025). Abdollahi (2023) stressed that moral training and education contribute to developing human resources which are seen as the most valuable and reliable capital any nation has. Similar suggestion was made by Thomas (2023) who described values as “the backbone of life” and argued that they are in control of an individual’s “total development”. Dutt (2023) examined norms and values through a sociological lens and discovered their effect on human conduct. This study is relevant to our research as it shows how social values influence individual behaviour and decision-making, which is essential for understanding how these values can be integrated into education.

Although the process of learning social and moral values begins at an early age in family, school plays a considerable role in the entire process (Fakhroni & Puotier, 2023; Fitriah, Akorede & Agyei, 2023; Spytka, 2023; Sulthon et al., 2024). Unar et al. (2024) underlined that effective curriculum design focuses on intentional skill-building activities, like respectful cooperation, while trained teachers act as role models in these activities. This study was chosen because it highlights how structured, intentional teaching strategies can foster social and moral development in students, which is central to the aim of integrating these values into the curriculum. The experts, however, stressed that instilling social and moral values in curriculum might be a daunting task, especially when educators are unaware of methods and tools that can be used to accomplish this goal. This challenge is particularly relevant to our research, as it points to the need for professional development and support for teachers to effectively incorporate these values. In turn, Hukubun et al. (2024) drew attention to a repertoire of pedagogical strategies that are effective in integrating social and moral values into curriculum and instilling them in students.

At the moment, sufficient information has been accumulated about integrating social and moral values in a school curriculum. However, little attention has been given to specific national education contexts, such as Moldavian. As the country strives for integration into the western philosophical and cultural space, it aspires to make social and moral values an indispensable part of its high school curriculum. This study analyses what has already been done in terms of integrating social and moral values into the high school curriculum of the Republic of Moldova, detects any potential deficiencies, and suggests strategies to fill existing gaps. The purpose of this study is to explore the role and integration of social and moral values in the secondary school curriculum in the Republic of Moldova, and to propose effective methodologies for incorporating these values into educational practices and teaching.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

In Western countries, including the Republic of Moldova, education is seen as essential for sustainable national development. This concept is outlined in the Education Development Strategy (Government Decision No. 944..., 2014), which emphasizes the role of education in developing human capital and shaping national consciousness. The strategy reflects Moldova's commitment to aligning with Western philosophical paradigms, particularly focusing on integrating social and moral values into the national education system.

Abdollahi (2023) stressed the importance of embedding ethical and moral values at all stages of education, arguing that these values are crucial for the holistic development of students. Pătroc (2019) further noted that many students fail to understand or apply these values, which can lead to moral dilemmas, especially in contexts where ethical decision-making is required. In addition, Budak and Şişman (2024) observed that the increasing use of digital technologies in education, including tools like ChatGPT, poses new challenges related to academic integrity and intellectual property. They argued that the rapid integration of technology necessitates a greater focus on instilling social and moral values to help students navigate these complex issues. Zheng and Stewart (2024) also explored how the digital age influences students' engagement with moral values, pointing out that the ease of access to information and technology can blur the lines between right and wrong. Their research suggests that educational systems must adapt to these changes by strengthening the teaching of values to ensure that students can make ethical decisions in an increasingly digital world.

At this point, little is known about how to address arising dilemmas, since knowledge about integrating social and moral values into the Republic of Moldova's education system is scarce. On one hand, Florea and Gheorghiu (2022) stressed the Republic of Moldova's commitment to become an integral part of the western philosophical context as stated in the "Education for Democracy in the Republic of Moldova" report. The state's aspiration to adopt western values is also articulated in other government-approved initiatives, including Media Literacy Promotion in Moldova (Fridez and Kalniņa-Lukaševica, 2024). The mentioned initiatives confirm that the country acknowledges the significance of social and moral values for its sustainable development and seeks to adopt them at all levels of its educational system.

On the other hand, little is known about the Republic of Moldova's progress in integrating social and moral values into its high school curriculum. Relevant information might be obtained from the Romanian context where considerable research has been done to assess how the elements of social and moral education are adopted at different tiers of the educational system. Petcu-Nicola and Opris (2023) assessed a set of curriculum documents for preschool education in Romania (2000-2022) and concluded that moral education was not addressed in preschool education as a distinct subject in the analysed context. Furthermore, attempts to teach social and moral values as part of interdisciplinary training efforts were insufficient to instil these values into young learners. This finding resonated with the research of Pătroc (2019) who examined the introduction of mandatory courses on academic integrity and deontology in Romanian universities. The researcher reported the low effectiveness of this strategy in terms of enhancing students' responsibility for their social and moral choices. The cited studies allow to assume that failure to integrate social and moral values into school curriculum can corrupt the entire educational system.

The detected threat cannot be ignored considering the connection between an adherence to universal social and moral values and academic performance, as reported in the studies by Chafi and Mahdi (2023), Maharani and Wati (2023). This assumption was also confirmed by Karimov et al. (2024) who assessed Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores in seven post-Soviet countries. Based on comparative data analysis, the researchers discovered a statistically significant correlation between ethical education, PISA scores, and economic development. This discovery is significant for the Republic of Moldova that is now at the crossroads, according to report of the European Commission (2023). As stated in the document, the Republic of Moldova has been undergoing a continuous modernization of its education and training since the adoption of the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova (2014). This modernization has facilitated the country's alignment with EU policy and practice. However, Moldavian students' outcomes are lagging behind the European average, which implies that much remains to be done to integrate the country into the western philosophical and educational space. In particular, the country is to reconsider its current approach to integrating social and moral values into its school curriculum.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

The research aims were accomplished through secondary analysis of data retrieved from such scientific databases as JSTOR, CORE, Scopus, Science Direct, and EBSCO. The search across these databases was conducted by the following keywords and phrases: “social values”, “moral values”, “integration”, “education”, “educational system”, “teaching and learning strategies”, “high school”, “curriculum”, “development”, “strategies”, “Republic of Moldova”. The search was further narrowed down by applying inclusion criteria of recency, relevance, reliability, and credibility. In addition to the mentioned criteria, only full-text sources were eligible for further analysis.

As part of the research process, the study examined the essence of social and moral values integrated into the curriculum of Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States and reflected in such documents as National Code of Conduct for German Universities Regarding International Students (2009), Netherlands Education System (Suryani et al., 2023), and Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany 2019/2020 (2019). The data for comparative analysis was also retrieved from reputable online resources, including “What makes German education system so good?” (2023), work by Li and Su (2023) and Problem based learning (2024). The evidence accumulated in the selected countries might assist the Republic of Moldova’s efforts of integrating social and moral values into the high school curriculum. The distilled values were further compared to the values articulated in the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova (2014), Government Decision No. 944 “Education Development Strategy 2014-2020 ‘Education-2020’” (2014), and Final Report by Florea and Gheorghiu (2022). The comparative analysis helped to identify social and moral values which stay relevant across educational contexts.

An awareness of universal social and moral values guided a detailed comparative analysis of their integration into high school curricula across different countries. This analysis focused on a set of western countries, aiming to identify the benefits of embedding these values and uncovering challenges to their effective incorporation within national education systems. To achieve this, the study carefully examined secondary data to pinpoint specific barriers, including insufficient pedagogical content knowledge, lack of educational resources, and resistance from key stakeholders, such as educators and parents. The contextual factors unique to the Republic of Moldova were also considered, such as socio-cultural attitudes, historical influences, and the structure of the current education system. This comprehensive approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of the challenges in implementing social and moral values in Moldova. In response to the identified barriers, the study proposed practical strategies, such as designing targeted teacher training programs, increasing funding for resources, and fostering stakeholder collaboration through participatory decision-making. These strategies were crafted to address the unique challenges of the Moldovan educational context while aligning with effective practices observed in international settings.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

*Social and moral values in contemporary education system*

As adherence to social and moral values brings positive changes to society, it is essential to teach these values at different levels, including high school. The comparative analysis of studies, including Abdollahi (2023), Hafizi and Wiyono (2023), and Ziane (2023) detected the connection between moral education as a part of contemporary education system and social change. This connection is explored by examining the concept of social change, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Social change as a product of moral education

No.	Characteristic of social change	Comment(s)
1	Presence of an actor	A change is triggered by a proactive individual, institution, or community with the ability to influence society. A proactive individual, trained to understand right and wrong, strives to transform society, aiming to make it a better place for everyone. However, the effect of their actions may not always align with the expected outcome.
2	Goal-oriented	A change begins with clearly articulated goals and objectives, which typically offer insights into the tools and approaches that could bring about the expected transformation. An actor driving this change

No.	Characteristic of social change	Comment(s)
3	Based on planning	demonstrates critical-thinking skills, understands what an effectively functioning society looks like, and is equipped with the tools and methods to bridge the gap between theory and practice in creating such a society. Change involves a series of steps that bring one closer to the expected goal. When planning this change, the actor conducts a stakeholder analysis to ensure that the transformation process is beneficial for everyone, or at least for most of those involved.
4	Uncertain outcomes	Although social change requires preliminary planning, the precise outcomes are not guaranteed, as the actor has little to no control over external factors and unforeseen events. However, the actor is aware of potential challenges, including ethical dilemmas, and is prepared to address them effectively.
5	Process connected to its goal	There is an inextricable connection between a specific goal and the process, where the goal informs the process, yet it can be amended as the process unfolds. The actor has a clear vision and understands how to achieve it while maximizing benefits for the greatest number of people.
6	Independent of surrounding circumstances	An actor begins the change process without being overly focused on external circumstances, considering them only if they interfere with the specific goal of the transformation. The actor remains flexible, adapting to an ever-changing environment while staying committed to achieving the transformation goal.
7	Intentional change with unintended consequences	An actor begins the transformation process with a specific intention in mind, but has little or no control over the consequences, some of which may extend beyond the initial goals. Despite this, the actor learns to navigate an uncertain environment ethically and with social responsibility.

Based on the provided data, it is possible to assume that contemporary education system, which is rooted in social and moral values, makes individuals prepared to drive transformations for the benefit of their community and society. A closer look into the connection between the educational system and social change provides insights into the strategies to integrate social and ethical values into contemporary teaching and learning.

Hafizi and Wiyono (2023) and Järvinieniemi (2022) asserted that the outlined connection between moral education and social change is observed through the prism of character formation. One of the key social aspects, a school introduces students to common social and moral values and encourages learners to adhere to these values. In particular, the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova (2014) emphasizes that the national education system operates in line with such principles as unity, integrity, accountability, support, promotion, and other. These social and moral principles are in place to raise a new generation of citizens who are prepared to start changes to support sustainable national development. Secondary analysis of research studies proved that teaching social and moral values as a part of character formation has become an inalienable element of the educational system in the Republic of Moldova. This finding is, in particular, based on the study of Repida (2018) who interviewed a group (N=55) of 2nd and 3rd year students to see whether the state educational system supports character formation of modern learners.

In the analysed study, 45.5% of students expressed their “agreement”, while 27.3% demonstrated “total agreement” with the statement that their university has a generally accepted policy to support the development of the community’s moral behaviour. Furthermore, 41.9% of respondents asserted their “agreement”, while 40.0% of students revealed “total agreement” with the fact that established social norms of conduct at the faculty are appropriated by students and have become integral elements of their everyday life. Hence, the examined study revealed that national education institutions have succeeded in introducing their students to universally accepted social and moral values, as well as in encouraging learners to make these values part of their character formation process.



Further comparative analysis, that was rooted in the studies by Ramadhani et al., (2024), Syahputra and Shylviana (2024), and Zvereva (2023), helped to reveal several ways in which educators manage to accomplish the goal of character formation through integrating social and moral values into the educational process. The detected ways include providing information about social and moral values to adhere, making learners prepared to address challenges, and acting as a role model in an educational and other context. The identified ways suggest that strategies, which educators use to instil social and moral values in their students, might vary considerably depending on their type. Introducing students to information about social and moral values accepted in a particular community is seen as the least effective strategy because it does not provide learners with a strong motivation to adhere to specific rules of conduct (Mynbayeva et al., 2019; Anggraeni, Rassy & Sereesuchat, 2023; Duanaeva et al., 2023; Helida, Ching & Oyewo, 2023; Setiyani, Baharin, & Jesse, 2023). By providing purely theoretical data, educators fail to explain how adherence to particular social and moral values might benefit students and what short and long-term effects it can generate; hence, such data does not enhance intrinsic motivation as the driving force behind the awaited social change. Making students prepared to address challenges appears to be a more effective approach to integrating social and moral values into modern educational system. As actors of a change process, high school graduates might face a repertoire of ethical dilemmas and feel unmotivated to proceed with the generated transformations. Educators can help students overcome this hindrance by making them better prepared to addressing obstacles they might have on their way to implementing social changes. As students are involved in contingency planning and encouraged to stay flexible, they might feel more confident throughout the change process.

While the aforementioned strategies are common, they are less effective than observing a teacher who acts as a role model. This strategy means that educators' reactions and behaviours reflect their acceptance and adherence to the declared social and moral values. As students observe consistency between an educator's words and actions, they feel motivated to adapt specific values and eventually make them part of the daily routine.

### *Social and moral values across educational contexts*

Social and moral values that should be enshrined in the citizens of the Republic of Moldova are articulated in several documents, including the Education Code No. 152 dated July 17, 2014. Essential values are found in Chapter II of the document that introduces the mission, ideal, and fundamental principles of the nation's educational system. As stated in this chapter, the Republic of Moldova's educational ideal involves forming a personality with an initiative spirit who not only possesses certain knowledge but also demonstrates a repertoire of soft skills, including critical thinking, autonomy, and cooperativeness. This educational ideal is achieved by accomplishing the tasks referred to as the education's mission in the analysed document. The mentioned tasks are shown on the Figure 2.

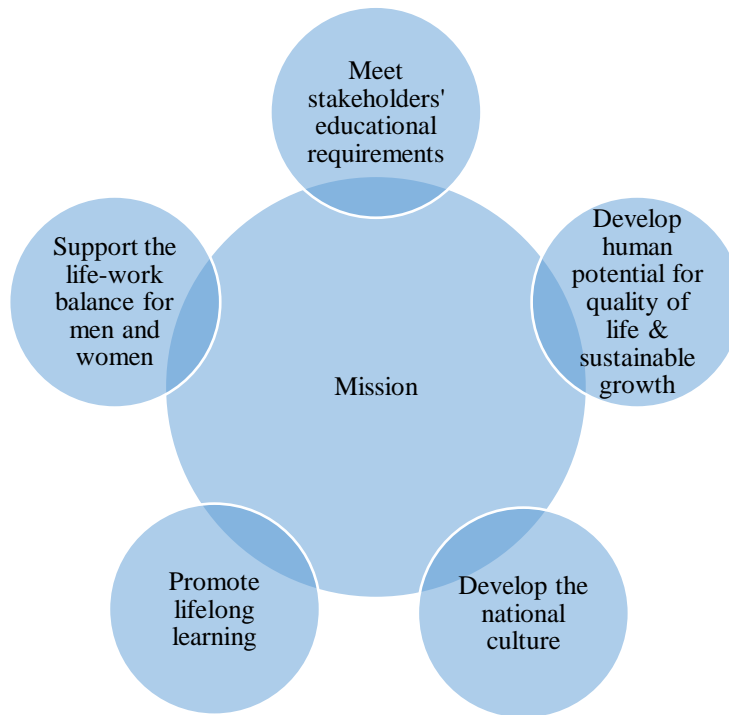


Figure 2. Mission of the education in the Republic of Moldova as stated in its Education Code

The chart suggests that the Republic of Moldova’s educational system is designed in a way to hone a range of hard and soft skills so to raise a generation of proactive citizens who can make a difference in the place where they belong. Achieving this ideal becomes possible due to integrating social and moral values into the national educational system. Based on the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova (2014), 17 values lay the foundation for the state’s education; and these values are reflected in the Table 2.

Table 2. Social and moral values of the Republic of Moldova’s education principles

No.	Principle	Description
1	Equity	Learning is publicly available, and access to it is carried out without discrimination
2	Quality	Educational practices comply with the reference standards and best national/international practices
3	Relevance	Educational activities are designed to meet personal and social-economic development needs
4	Learner-centeredness	Learners are active agents whose knowledge, experience, ideas etc. impact how they proceed new information
5	Freedom of thinking	Education system operates independently of political ideologies/doctrines and religious dogmas
6	Freedom of opinion	Every learner has the right to express their own opinion without fear of being penalized
7	Social inclusion	Access to learning is carried out across all population groups, including marginalized ones
8	Equality assurance	Access to education is equal and does not depend on learners’ age, gender, socioeconomic background or other factors
9	Guarantee of the rights	National minorities are guaranteed the right to maintain, develop, and express their identity
10	Unity and integrity	Members of the education community cooperate to achieve compliance with accepted social and moral values
11	Managerial and financial efficiency	Education system is effectively organized to ensure efficient allocation of available resources

12	Decentralization and institutional autonomy	Governance of an academic institution is internal to this institution
13	Public accountability	Institutions are accountable for their performance
14	Transparency	Academic institutions enter into an honest dialogue with the public because they have nothing to hide
15	Participation and accountability	Learning involves cooperation between academic institutions, parents, community, and other stakeholders
16	Support and promotion	Education personnel are supported and rewarded for their professional development
17	Secular education	Education is separated from religion

A comparative analysis of social and moral values in the Republic of Moldova’s education system and those in western countries identifies strategies for aligning Moldova with global standards. Sources such as “What makes the German education system so good?” (Explore EU, 2024), “The Netherlands Education System” (Suryani et al., 2023), and “The Social Impact of Education in the USA” (Li & Su, 2023) highlight key values typical of these systems, summarized in Table 3. Germany focuses on dual-study programs blending theory and practice, the Netherlands emphasizes freedom, equality, and flexibility, while the United States values high-quality education and equitable access. These distinctions provide Moldova with benchmarks to enhance its education policies. Table 3 serves as a comparative framework to evaluate Moldova’s education system and identify actionable insights. While Moldova shares certain universal values such as equity and quality, the table underscores areas where further development is needed, such as fostering collaboration, integrating practical skill development, and increasing educational investments. These distinctions provide critical benchmarks for Moldova to enhance its education policies and align with global best practices.

Table 3. Social and moral values of education systems in Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States

Country	Germany	The Netherlands	The USA
Education system values	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dual study programmes with focus on both theoretical and practical learning.</li> <li>Research and innovation opportunities for learners.</li> <li>Free public schools and universities and affordable tuition in private universities.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Freedom of expressing oneself in different ways.</li> <li>Equal treatment of any learner, regardless of their background.</li> <li>Solidarity and cooperation as an inalienable element of learning.</li> <li>Flexibility in providing opportunities for learners to adapt their learning experience to their needs.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High-quality education as a hallmark of a proactive society.</li> <li>Focus on skills making learners equipped to participate in civic and political life.</li> <li>Providing equal learning opportunities for students, regardless of their gender.</li> <li>Growing investment in education that is seen as a priority sector.</li> <li>Providing equal access to opportunities for all learners, regardless of their background</li> </ol>

Comparison of social and moral values integrated into the educational system of the Republic of Moldova and the systems of the selected countries revealed a repertoire of similarities, as well as some differences. These similarities and differences are shown in the Figure 3.



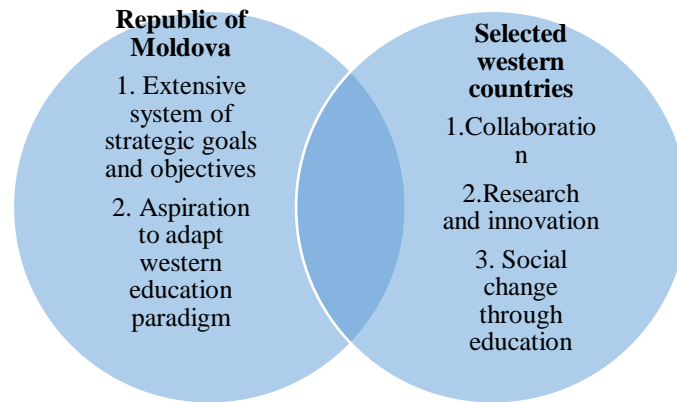


Figure 3. Comparing social and moral values of the education systems of the Republic of Moldova and western countries

The comparative analysis demonstrated that the Republic of Moldova has achieved considerable progress in aligning social and moral values of its educational system with the values of other western countries' educational systems. Some core values that are seen across educational systems are quality, freedom, and equity, which means that similar to other western countries, the Republic of Moldova strives to create the learning space where everyone is empowered by equal opportunities and support which they receive, regardless of their background. One example illustrating the Republic of Moldova's aspiration for equality is enrollment of women into research and education in the area of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Robu (2020), Carstensen and Emmenegger (2023) asserted the country reported a growing representation of female students in the STEM area, which is associated with a plethora of benefits, including economic ones. In turn, the report of Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022) revealed the connection between equity and PISA results demonstrated by Moldavian students in 2022. The report, in particular, suggests that although Moldavian students' scores in mathematics, reading, and science are still somewhat below European average, the gap between the highest-scoring and the lowest-scoring students has narrowed down. This trend means that integrating equity values into the high school curriculum empowers students, improves their achievements, and addresses discrepancies that have been the national educational system's hallmark for decades.

However, the analysis also revealed values that are unique to the selected countries and adaptation of which might boost the high school curriculum of the Republic of Moldova. These unique values are the focus on collaboration as an integral part of the learning process; growing investment in research and innovation to engage and retain learners, create an extended academic network, and support social transformation processes; and viewing learning as a tool to raise a generation of proactive citizens ready to bring up social changes. The comparative analysis also suggests that the Republic of Moldova's high school curriculum might benefit greatly from adopting dual study programmes where gaining and honing practical skills is seen as important as acquiring theoretical knowledge.

*Strategies to integrate social and moral values into the high school curriculum of the Republic of Moldova*

A repertoire of strategies can be proposed to integrate social and moral values into the high school curriculum of the Republic of Moldova. Comparative analysis of primary research data, including Hukubun et al. (2024), Chung (2023), and Balong et al. (2024), revealed that while educators acknowledge the significance of moral education, they might lack awareness of how to adapt specific values to the high school curriculum. Furthermore, some educators with a more precise strategic vision might lack support from school administration in their efforts of putting social and moral values to the school curriculum.

Limited awareness of integrating specific values into school curriculum can be overcome through training educators on the essence of moral education and its role in character education (Kanybekovna et al., 2020; Zhumasheva et al., 2022; Astalini et al., 2023; Maiyena, Ayop, & Daud, 2023; Suratno, 2024). It is worth stressing that a new generation of learners has been raised in the digital world where they have unlimited access to information and actively interact on various social media platforms. While such interaction can be a valuable source of information, it also implies a

repertoire of challenges facing contemporary learners; for example, students might fail to analyse and evaluate incoming data to distinguish right from wrong. In turn, insufficient critical thinking skills make learners vulnerable to numerous threats, including bullying, participation in extremist groups, or suicide ideation. By using moral education as a tool, teachers take an active part in character formation of learners and make them immune to most threats they might face on their way to maturation and becoming actors of social change (Fadhila & Ale, 2023; Adylbek Kyzy et al., 2024; Spytyska, 2024; Wulandari, 2024).

The inspection of available data, including primary research studies and reports, suggests that educators have a repertoire of tools to make social and moral values an inseparable part of a school curriculum. Problem based learning (2024) is considered to be one of the most effective strategies in social and moral education. Problem-based instruction is an approach where students learn about a particular subject by collaborating to solve an open-ended problem. The essence of such learning is shown in the Figure 4.

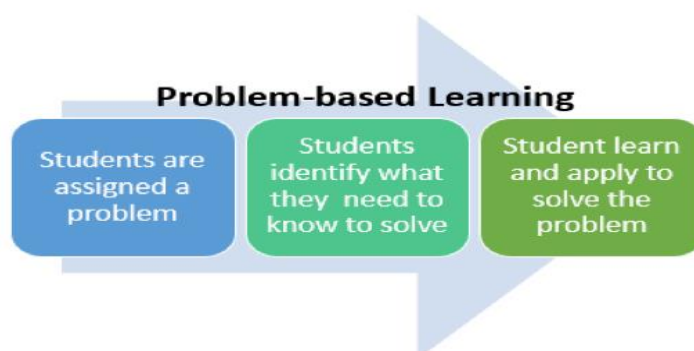


Figure 4. Steps of Problem-based learning (PBL) in character education

In contrast to traditional learning, where students are offered ready-made solutions, problem-based approach encourages learners to find their own approach to a particular issue. One example of PBL is asking students to learn in small groups to discuss what can be done to address social challenges like unemployment, poverty, or inequality. Students are encouraged to examine assigned problems from different angles, including social aspects of a specific problem and moral issues associated with it.

PBL is gaining momentum in Western European countries where character education has become an integral part of the high school curriculum. The growing significance of problem-based education is due to the benefits it encapsulates as compared to traditional learning. One advantage to consider is that PBL becomes more meaningful, hence, motivating, for students who are actively engaged in constructing knowledge. In the high school context, students can be introduced to a range of relevant issues, including transformation of the educational system, gender inequality, poverty, or inadequate access to healthcare services. While students are working on these and related issues, they realize that their opinion and contribution matter, which might enhance their motivation to become proactive citizens. Furthermore, PBL equips students with skills they need to become such citizens; and some of these skills are critical thinking, cooperativeness, autonomy, and responsibility.

Classroom and small group discussions make another effective strategy to integrate social and moral values into the high school curriculum (Lashkova et al., 2018). The twofold purpose of such discussions is to introduce learners to specific social and/or moral issues and to engage them in discussing such issues. Classroom and small group discussions can become part of the PBL because they entail similar advantages (Matviienko, 2024). Unlike in traditional learning, students view classroom and small group discussions as an opportunity to examine a particular social or moral issue from different angles, which hones their critical-thinking skills (Wen et al., 2021; Farswan, 2023). Furthermore, learners are encouraged to stay open-minded and flexible because they are taught there are no right or wrong answers when addressing social or moral issues. As classroom and small group discussions are becoming increasingly popular in western education, students learn to express their opinions, respect each other, and cooperate to address arising social and moral issues.

In addition to strategies mentioned, educators can use academic disciplines as a context for instilling social and moral values in their students. Evidence accumulated by Chung (2023), Feng (2022) and Fiberianti et al. (2023) suggests that music, drama, and literature can act as platforms where

students are introduced to a specific value and explained how it is relevant to their own life. In particular, reading ancient texts like *The Odyssey*, *The Bible*, or *Magna Carta* encourages students delving deeper into values that have been in place for hundreds of years but have not lost their relevance to date. Furthermore, learners are encouraged to become the guardians of these values by making them part of their daily life. Therefore, Republic of Moldova acknowledges the significance of integrating social and moral values into the high school curriculum to raise a new generation of proactive citizens. Social and moral values articulated in Education Code of the Republic of Moldova (2014) compare to social and moral values promoted in western countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. However, the country still has a lot to do to facilitate the transition to PBL that is more effective than traditional learning in terms of instilling social and moral values.

The study findings are consistent with previous research indicating the significance of social and moral values in character education. This significance was, in particular, emphasized by Osman (2023) who described character education as the medium to provide students with skills they need for sustainable future. The expert further argued that such skills are connected with the global citizenship education that is considered a priority within UNESCO's SDG 4 – Quality Education framework. The idea was further elaborated by Khodjamkulov et al. (2020) and Balta (2023) who stressed that character education, which introduces students to such values as politeness, honesty, trustworthiness, and discipline, makes them prepared for harmonious development and cooperation in society. In the Republic of Moldova, which strives to become part of the western philosophical space, instilling social and moral values implies cooperation with international governmental and non-governmental organizations, including the Council of Europe Project, College of Europe, and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The research findings also confirmed the previously voiced idea that character education through instilling social and moral values has become part of educational philosophy in different countries. Similar to the Republic of Moldova, where these values are articulated in the Education Code (2014), other countries have also documented a repertoire of values that they strive to integrate into their school curriculum. One example was provided by Hasbiyallah et al. (2023) and Viyet (2022) who argued that social and moral values of the National Education System of Indonesia are documented in the Constitution of the Republic. Another example is Germany where social and moral values of the national education system are articulated in several documents, including Education System in the Federal Republic of Germany and the National Code of Conduct for German Universities Regarding International Students. These examples suggest that documenting social and moral values integrated into the national education system has become a common practice across countries. The detected strategy is becoming increasingly popular because distilled values shed light on integrating these ideals into the national school curriculum and making them an inalienable part of learners' routine.

The study has also proposed some strategies to integrate social and moral values into the high school curriculum that have proven effective in a range of contexts. For example, Barla and Yadav (2022) confirmed the significance of character education in the school curriculum of India. The experts argued that character education can pull the country out of stagnation by reintroducing learners to the values that once made the country prosperous and go under the "Gold Bird" name. Similar idea was proposed by Khathi et al. (2021) who examined the significance of social and moral values in the African education context. The experts suggested that character education could become a turning point in the development of the continent facing an array of problems, including economic stagnation, poverty, and inequality. In the Republic of Moldova, adopting social and moral values is seen a priority of the state educational system. However, evidence from similar educational contexts as reported in the studies of Pătroc (2019) and Petcu-Nicola and Opris (2023) reveals persistent theory-practice gap, which triggers a repertoire of challenges, including plagiarism and bullying. Hence, strategies are needed to bridge the existing gap and make social and moral values inalienable element of the state educational system. The effectiveness of some strategies introduced in this study are also confirmed in previously conducted research. For example, Puspa and Sundawa (2023) confirmed the positive effect of the PBL in teaching and learning social studies. The experts argued that the PBL reinforces the moral character of students by encouraging them to recognize, investigate, and cooperate to address problems facing their own country and other nations. PBL has become part of STEM education that, according to Robu (2020), is becoming increasingly popular in Moldova and promotes equity of the state educational system.

Chung (2023) emphasized the effectiveness of teaching and learning social and moral values in the context of music excerpts. The researchers interviewed 12 Hong Kong school principals and discovered that music education is an effective instrument for teaching ethics and morals. The described approach encourages learners to discuss social and moral dilemmas encountered in musical works and analyse the relevance of these dilemmas to their own life. As for Feng (2022), he stressed that drama can be effective in teaching social and moral values to students, which is consistent with this research's findings. The expert reported on the field study involving a group of 16 volunteer students assigned to "The Boat" drama workshop. Based on obtained data, the researcher argued that "drama can be seen to some extent to assist pupils in aspects of their empathetic attitudes, dialogic thinking abilities, and autonomous thinking capacities". Considering this, it is critical that drama becomes an element of the national education curriculum. To date, however, little is known about using music and drama studies to instil specific values in Moldavian students. Khathi et al. (2022) and Öztürk et al. (2022) stressed educators have difficulty instilling social and moral values if they do not receive adequate support from their students' parents. Insufficient support of teachers' efforts in acting as a role model was also reported by other experts, including Chung (2023). As for Pătroc (2019), Petcu-Nicola and Opris (2023), they pointed to inconsistent support, which might discourage educators in the Republic of Moldova to instil specific values in their students.

Hence, findings introduced in this study are consistent with data reported in previous research and confirm the significance of integrating social and moral values into the high school curriculum. These values are an inalienable part of character education, which is seen as a precondition for developing a highly effective and resilient community. Similar to other countries, the Republic of Moldova has declared a commitment to make character education a cornerstone of its state educational philosophy. However, accomplishing this goal presents challenges, such as insufficient pedagogical content knowledge, limited resources, and resistance from stakeholders, including educators and parents. Learning from western countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States can help the Republic of Moldova create a high school curriculum rooted in universal social and moral values. Incorporating approaches such as dual-study programs, collaborative learning, and equitable access to education could address these challenges and align Moldova's system with global best practices.

However, this study's reliance on secondary data imposes certain limitations, restricting the ability to capture Moldova's specific contextual challenges in depth. Furthermore, the analysis primarily draws on western education systems, leaving unexplored the potential benefits of incorporating insights from non-western contexts. Despite these limitations, the implications of the findings are significant. Successfully integrating these values can promote inclusivity, adaptability, and critical thinking, equipping students with skills to address societal challenges. To achieve this, targeted teacher training, resource optimization, and fostering stakeholder collaboration will be crucial. By addressing the outlined limitations and applying the proposed strategies, Moldova can advance its educational framework and strengthen its commitment to fostering proactive citizenship.

## CONCLUSION

Social and moral values are fundamental to modern education systems, providing a foundation for cultivating proactive, responsible citizens and supporting sustainable societal development. The Republic of Moldova has demonstrated its commitment to aligning its education system with western philosophical principles, including equity, quality, freedom of thought and opinion, and learner-centeredness. These values, embedded in Moldova's Education Code, are consistent with those found in advanced education systems, such as in Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. However, achieving full integration of these values into the high school curriculum is critical to fostering the desired social transformations and advancing the country's alignment with global standards. Several challenges persist, such as limited pedagogical content knowledge among educators, insufficient professional development, and a lack of parental and institutional support for teachers' efforts to act as role models. These barriers risk creating a gap between the values taught in schools and those practiced in daily life, potentially undermining students' moral and social development. Addressing these issues is essential to ensure consistent implementation of values across all levels of education. Strategies to address these challenges include Problem-Based Learning (PBL), which engages students in solving real-world ethical and social problems, and classroom or small group discussions that encourage critical thinking and collaboration. Additionally, integrating values education into subjects like social studies, music, drama, and literature provides students with practical contexts to explore and internalize these



principles. These methods have been effective in other educational contexts and hold significant potential for adaptation in Moldova. While this study highlights key insights into the integration of social and moral values, it acknowledges certain limitations. The comparative analysis predominantly focuses on western contexts, leaving the potential contributions of eastern educational frameworks unexplored. Moreover, further research is needed to assess the long-term effectiveness of the proposed strategies and their impact on students' ethical and social development. Moldova has made commendable progress in incorporating social and moral values into its education system, demonstrating its aspiration to align with international standards. By addressing existing barriers and leveraging proven educational strategies, the country can further strengthen its high school curriculum, ensuring it not only aligns with global principles but also serves as a catalyst for national development and social cohesion.

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### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

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