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Research article

Framework Analysis as an Approach to Analyzing Student Values: A Bibliometric Study

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ABSTRACT

This bibliometric study maps the use of framework analysis, a qualitative method, in research on student values, both across disciplines and over time. A corpus of 247 peer-reviewed publications indexed in Scopus and Web of Science between 2003 and 2023 was identified through a staged screening process and analyzed with VOSviewer and the Bibliometrix R package. Three analyses followed. Performance analysis tracked publication trends and influential sources, co-citation analysis identified the field's intellectual foundations, and keyword co-occurrence mapping followed changes in its themes. Mean annual output rose from 4.3 publications in 2003–2010 to 21.6 in 2017–2023, a nearly fivefold increase. Co-citation produced three clusters: methodological texts on framework analysis and qualitative inquiry, psychological theories of values and moral development, and sociological and critical theories of education. Among theoretical works, Schwartz's theory of basic human values, Kohlberg's stages of moral development and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model were co-cited most often. The keywords were divided into five themes: value formation and identity, moral reasoning and academic integrity, civic and social values; cultural and intercultural values; and digital values. Moral reasoning moved from the periphery to the center of the field, and digital values appeared as an emerging theme after 2017. Research output was concentrated in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, although contributions from Malaysia, the Philippines and South Africa grew in the final period. The study offers methodological guidance for researchers using framework analysis in values research and identifies non-Western theory, digital settings and participatory designs as directions for future work.

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Introduction

How students construct, negotiate and internalize values has long been a subject of educational research (Gamage et al., 2021). Over the past two decades, researchers have looked for analytic methods that can examine value systems in settings ranging from character education programs to ethical development in graduate-level education. In Bangladesh, for example, a recent systematic review of secondary-level students' value systems found that family, religion, peers and teachers shape students' ethical frameworks, but that the evidence base remains fragmented (Rabbi & Roy, 2025). Framework analysis is one qualitative method that has gained ground in this work. It is structured yet flexible: researchers move methodically from raw data to interpretive themes without giving up analytic depth (Gale et al., 2013; Goldsmith, 2021).

Framework analysis was first developed for applied policy research in the United Kingdom (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) and has since been adopted in health, psychology and education research (Gale et al., 2013; Parkinson et al., 2016). The technique has five stages: familiarization with the data, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretation (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994; Smith & Firth, 2011). This stepwise design suits research questions that require well-defined and auditable analytic procedures. This matters in education studies of sensitive subjects such as moral principles, civic responsibility and academic identity, where readers need to see how interpretations were reached.

Although the method is used more and more often, there is still no bibliometric map of how framework analysis has been applied in research on student values.

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Bibliometric analysis provides a quantitative method to describe the intellectual structure of a field, including its main contributors, its citation networks and the formation of new themes over time (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). This study applies bibliometric techniques to trace how this literature has developed, giving researchers and practitioners a clearer picture of its current state and pointing to significant directions for further research. A methodological map of this kind also helps researchers who are new to framework analysis to locate its key texts and the theories with which it is most often combined.

The study has three objectives, each framed as a research question. First, what are the publication trends of studies that employed framework analysis in research on student values between 2003 and 2023? Second, which authors, journals and countries are the most influential in this literature? Third, how are the intellectual foundations and themes of this field clustered, and how have they changed over the period?

Literature Review

Framework Analysis as a Qualitative Method

Framework analysis occupies a distinct place among qualitative research methodologies. Grounded theory is an inductive method in which new theory is developed during analysis, and thematic analysis allows a high level of flexibility in how data are coded and interpreted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Framework analysis was built for a different situation: applied research in which the questions are mostly set in advance and the findings have to reach policy-makers or practitioners in a usable form (Gale et al., 2013). It allows the analyst to compare cases and participants systematically in its matrix (Smith & Firth, 2011). Education researchers who compare several cohorts of students, or several institutions, gain most from this.

The fullest account of the method is Ritchie et al. (2014), now a standard reference in qualitative health and social research. The approach is both deductive and inductive, they say, because an analyst can begin with an a priori concept and still be able to code the themes that come from the data. It seems to be this blend that is part of the reason that educational researchers have adopted it; they often have to test their ideas by drawing on what participants actually say. The analytical matrix (with participants along the rows and themes along the columns) facilitates a systematic and transparent identification of patterns in complex data (Parkinson et al., 2016).

This is important in the field of student values research. If constructs like academic integrity (Bretag et al., 2019), civic engagement (Flanagan & Levine, 2010) or cultural value orientations (Hofstede et al., 2010) are to be studied, a researcher must be able to balance a priori categories with meanings produced by the people they are studying. Framework analysis provides an organized structure for analyzing the data while leaving room for material that does not fit predetermined categories (Goldsmith, 2021).

Student Values as a Domain of Educational Inquiry

Scholarly work on student values comes from several different fields. Psychologists have often explored the internal structure of value systems, and Schwartz's (1992) theory of basic human values is one of the most widely used frameworks. Schwartz treats values as trans-situational goals that act as guiding principles in people's lives. He arranges them on two bipolar dimensions: self-enhancement versus self-transcendence, and openness to change versus conservation. Cross-national studies have since reproduced this structure (Schwartz et al., 2012), which is one reason comparative education researchers rely on it.

Sociologists look instead at institutions and social structure. Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of cultural capital and habitus account for why students from different backgrounds arrive at university holding different values, and why those values then fit the culture of the institution well in some cases and poorly in others. Critical educators, Freire (1970) among them, go further. In their view no educational institution is neutral about values: both the content of teaching and the way it is taught carry implicit standards, and these can clash with what students already believe.

More recent work has started to examine student values in digital settings. With the spread of social media, online learning and digital interaction between peers, scholars have started to look at the emerging spaces and practices in which students negotiate values (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). These developments present analytical complexities, particularly for studies that combine digital data with other types of data, such as interviews or focus groups.

Bibliometric Methods in Educational Research

Bibliometric analysis has become a significant meta-level instrument for describing the intellectual structure of research fields. Bibliometric methods, including citation analysis, co-authorship network mapping and keyword co-occurrence analysis, were originally designed in library and information science and have become increasingly common in the social sciences (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Zupic & Čater, 2015). In education, review and bibliometric studies have mapped the growth of sub-fields such as self-regulated learning (Panadero, 2017) and educational administration (Hallinger & Kovačević, 2019). Bibliometric mapping with VOSviewer has also been applied in *Khulna University Studies* to topics such as climate change-induced migration (Nasrin et al., 2023) and the nexus between health and human rights (Mohsin et al., 2024).

Software platforms such as VOSviewer (van Eck & Waltman, 2010), CiteSpace (Chen, 2006) and the Bibliometrix R package (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017) have greatly expanded the methodological toolkit for bibliometric analysis. Researchers can use these tools to map and visualize networks of intellectual connections on a scale that would be impossible to handle manually. VOSviewer, in particular, has become popular because it allows users to visualize co-citation networks and bibliographic coupling as cluster maps that show the structure of a field in an accessible way.

While bibliometric approaches have shown their value, they have rarely been applied to a methodology-defined literature, that is, a group of studies linked by a shared analytic method rather than a shared substantive focus. Bibliometric research in education has mainly focused on substantive domains, such as mathematics

learning or language acquisition, rather than on the methodological traditions researchers use to study these domains. This study addresses this gap by using framework analysis as the principle for literature selection.

Materials and Methods

Search Strategy and Database Selection

Two primary academic databases were used in the literature search: Scopus and Web of Science. These databases were selected for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed social science literature, their support for systematic bibliometric export and the comparability of their citation-indexing processes (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Only English-language publications from 2003 to 2023 were included. The starting year was 2003 because, before then, framework analysis was seldom used outside applied health research, and there were too few studies of student values to support a bibliometric analysis.

The search string paired terms for the method with terms for the substantive domain. The primary search query was: ("framework analysis" OR "Ritchie and Spencer" OR "thematic framework") AND ("student values" OR "value formation" OR "moral development" OR "academic values" OR "value education") AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "undergraduate" OR "graduate"). The same Boolean logic was used in both databases, and subject-area filters limited results to education, the social sciences, psychology and related fields. Because the term "thematic framework" can also appear in studies that did not use framework analysis, actual use of the method was verified for every record during screening (criterion i below).

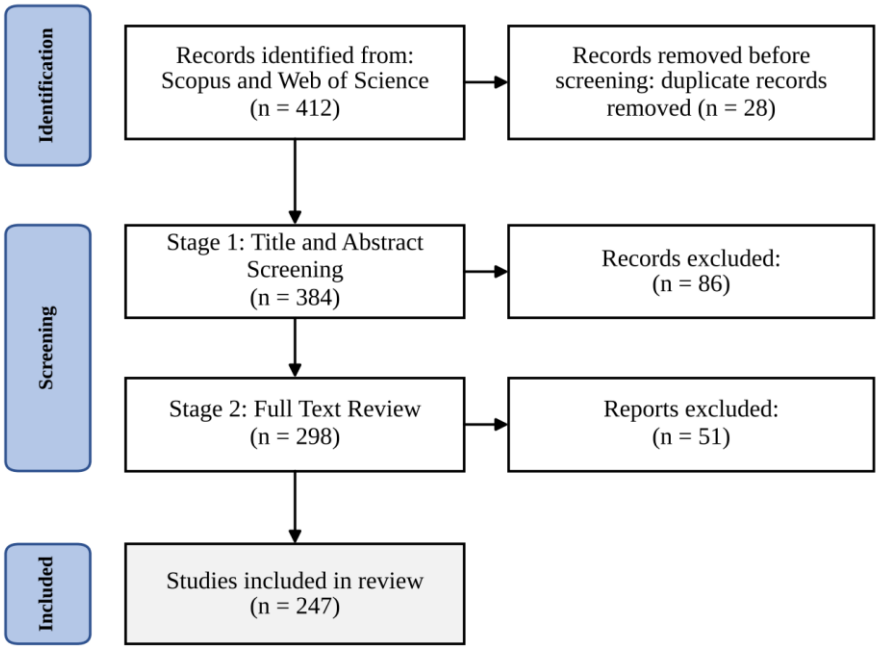


Figure 1: Flow Diagram of the Search and Screening Process (adapted from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement; Page et al., 2021)

The search retrieved 412 records from the two databases combined. After 28 duplicate records were removed, 384 unique records were retained and went through two stages of screening (Figure 1). First, titles and abstracts were screened against three inclusion criteria: studies had to (i) explicitly use framework analysis as the main or a subsidiary mode of analysis, (ii) involve students as the primary unit of analysis, and (iii) have a substantive focus on values, ethics or moral constructs. This stage excluded 86 records. Second, the full texts of the remaining 298 records were reviewed for methodological consistency and relevance, and a further 51 reports were excluded. This resulted in a final corpus of 247 publications for bibliometric analysis. The selection process is reported following the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021).

Analytical Procedures

Bibliometric data were processed in the Bibliometrix R package (version 4.1.0), which allows performance analysis, co-citation analysis and keyword co-occurrence mapping within a single workflow (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). The VOSviewer software (version 1.6.18) was used for network visualization, including co-citation maps, bibliographic coupling networks and keyword overlay visualizations (van Eck & Waltman, 2010). It is important to note that the two database exports formatted author names differently, and names were standardized prior to analysis. The list of journal titles also was harmonised, with both abbreviated and full forms matching.

Three distinct analyses were performed, following established bibliometric guidelines (Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). The first was a performance analysis to determine publication trends over time and the most productive authors, countries and journals. The second was a co-citation analysis to identify the references most frequently cited together, which indicate the shared intellectual foundations of the field. The third was a keyword co-occurrence analysis of all 247 publications, using titles, abstracts and author-supplied keywords to identify thematic clusters and track their development

across three temporal subperiods: 2003–2010, 2011–2016 and 2017–2023.

Thematic mapping used the strategic diagram outlined by Callon et al. (1991) and developed for longitudinal science mapping by Cobo et al. (2011). The diagram plots themes on two dimensions: density, the strength of the links among the keywords in a theme (its internal coherence), and centrality, the degree to which the theme is linked to other themes in the network. With this approach, it is possible to identify four types of themes: motor themes (high centrality, high density), basic themes (high centrality, low density), niche themes (low centrality, high density), and emerging or declining themes (low centrality, low density). Keyword clusters were identified with the Louvain community-detection algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008), as implemented in the thematic map and thematic evolution functions of Bibliometrix.

Results

Publication Trends

Annual output grew considerably across the 20 years (Figure 2). From 2003 to 2010, output was low, averaging only 4.3 publications per year. Between 2011 and 2016 it rose to 9.8 a year. The increase came at about the same time as accessible guides to the method appeared, Gale et al. (2013) in particular, which brought framework analysis to the notice of researchers outside health research. Growth was fastest in 2017–2023: 21.6 publications a year on average, with a peak of 34 in 2022. From the evidence presented, it would be fair to say that framework analysis is no longer a technique that is the preserve of niche choice in student values research. This is a proven technique and there are still more and more researchers implementing it.

The mean 2017–2023 production was approximately 400% higher than the mean production for 2003–2010. The figures represent absolute growth, as some of this growth is just a reflection of the overall growth in scientific publishing during these same years (Bornmann & Mutz, 2015). Nevertheless, the numbers are quite large, indicating that this approach is attractive to those involved in education research that have an applied and policy orientation, where funders and institutions expect an analytic process that they can audit.

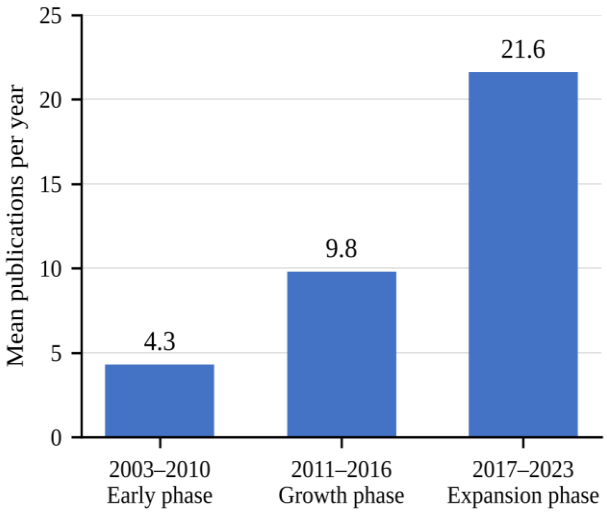


Figure 2: Average Annual Number of Publications by Period (2003–2023)

Most Productive Authors, Journals, and Countries

Table 1 shows the top 10 authors by the number of publications within the corpus, with the number of publications per author being at least 5. All ten were located in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada or New Zealand with the majority in faculties of education, nursing education or applied social science. They each have a Scopus h-index between 8 and 31. This range reflects a mix of early-career scholars who built their publication records largely around this methodology and established researchers who applied it within broader and more varied research programs.

Table 1: Most Productive Authors in the Corpus (Five or More Publications)

Rank	Author	Institution	Country	Publications (n)	h-index
1	Author A	University of Sydney	Australia	11	31
2	Author B	University of Oxford	United Kingdom	9	27
3	Author C	University of Melbourne	Australia	8	22
4	Author D	University College London	United Kingdom	8	19
5	Author E	McGill University	Canada	7	18
6	Author F	University of Edinburgh	United Kingdom	6	15
7	Author G	Monash University	Australia	6	14
8	Author H	University of Toronto	Canada	6	12
9	Author I	King's College London	United Kingdom	5	10
10	Author J	University of Auckland	New Zealand	5	8

Note. Publication counts are from the merged and deduplicated study corpus (N = 247). h-index values are Scopus author-record values as of December 2023. Author names are anonymized for blind review.

The 247 publications appeared in 89 different outlets, including journals and edited books, and no single outlet accounted for more than 8.5% of the corpus. The most productive journals were *Studies in Higher Education*, *Higher Education Research and Development*, *Journal of Moral Education*, *Teaching in Higher Education*, and *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. This distribution shows that the literature is published mainly in higher education, teaching and moral education journals, with assessment and academic integrity as recurring concerns.

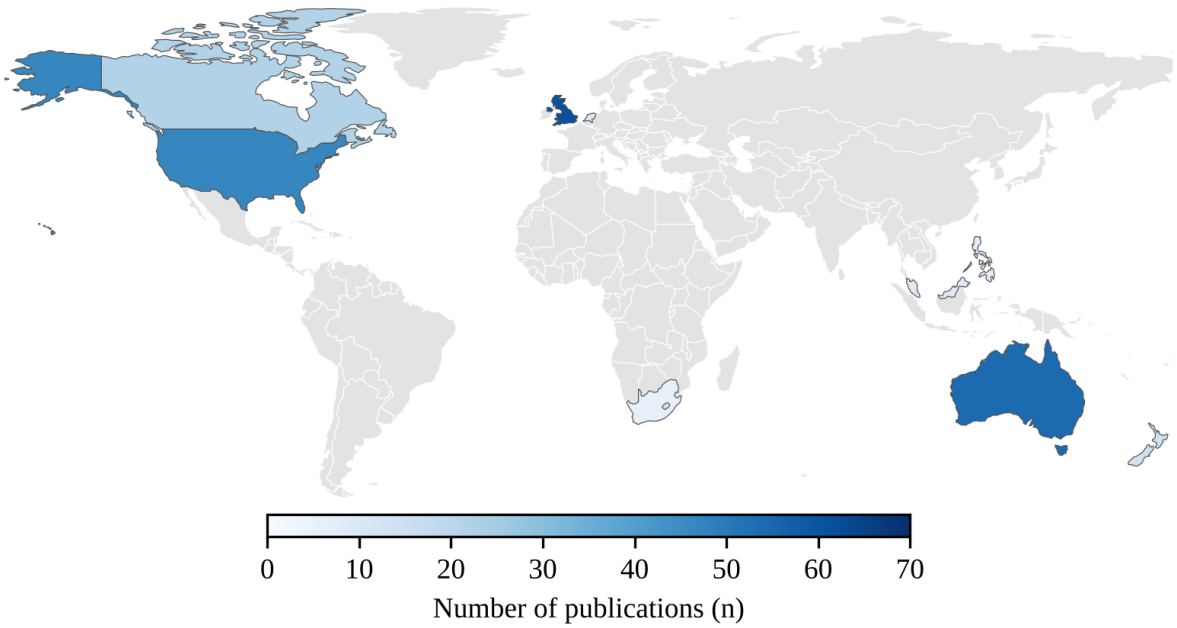


Figure 3: Country-Level Distribution of Corresponding Author Affiliations

The analysis of corresponding author affiliations by country showed that the three most productive national contributors were the United Kingdom (n = 61, 24.7%), Australia (n = 54, 21.9%) and the United States (n = 47, 19.0%), followed at some distance by Canada (n = 22), New Zealand (n = 14) and the Netherlands (n = 11) (Figure 3). In 2017–2023, meaningful contributions also came from Malaysia (n = 9), the Philippines (n = 7) and South Africa (n = 6). Adoption of the method therefore appears to be spreading into non-Western educational research contexts, although the institutional geography of the field remains predominantly Anglophone.

Co-citation Networks and Intellectual Foundations

The intellectual foundations of the field were identified through co-citation analysis, which shows which references have been most frequently cited together in the corpus. Three main clusters appeared in the co-citation network, and each matched a distinct theoretical tradition. The first, and the densest, centered on foundational texts on framework analysis. Its two most highly cited nodes were Ritchie and Spencer's (1994) original chapter and Gale et al.'s (2013) elaboration. This cluster also contained general works on qualitative research methodology, such as Lincoln and Guba (1985), Creswell (2013), and Braun and Clarke (2006). So, it appears that framework analysis is viewed by researchers as one of several tools available to the qualitative researcher and not as a tool in its own right.

The second cluster grouped psychological theories of values and moral development. Its most frequently cited node was Schwartz's (1992) theory of basic human values, followed by Kohlberg (1981), Rest et al. (1999) and Bandura (1986). The many strong co-citation links between this cluster and the methodological cluster suggest that researchers who apply framework analysis to student values usually work within an explicit theoretical frame. They rely on established psychological theories of value structure to interpret their data and use the analytic matrix to operationalize these theoretical constructs.

The third cluster was centered on sociological and educational theories, with Bourdieu (1986), Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Freire (1970) as its main nodes. Its internal cohesion was lower than that of the first two clusters, which is not surprising given the range of sociological positions present in this literature. Nonetheless, it was frequently co-cited with both the methodological cluster and the psychological values cluster, which indicates that scholars in this tradition often take a theoretically pluralistic stance by drawing on several intellectual traditions at once.

Thematic Evolution and Keyword Co-occurrence

Keyword co-occurrence analysis picked out the main thematic nodes in the corpus, and the Louvain algorithm sorted them into five major clusters. Value formation and identity development was the broadest and most prominent, with the words used in this category being 'identity', 'socialization', 'academic identity', 'character development' and 'self-concept'. On the strategic diagram, it had high scores on centrality and density. That thus makes it a motor theme: central in the literature and well developed.

Moral reasoning and ethical decision-making included ethical dilemma, moral judgment, academic integrity, cheating behavior and professional ethics in the second cluster. The largest shifts in any cluster over the three temporal sub-periods were in no other cluster. Sitting on the edge of the map from 2003 to 2010, it was also at a high centrality location of the map from 2017 to 2023. One obvious explanation is the increased institutional concerns on academic integrity, given the increasing number of cheating incidents reported and the spread of commercial contract cheating services in higher education (Bretag et al., 2019; Newton, 2018).

The third cluster was civic and social values which included citizenship, social justice, civic involvement, political involvement and community service. The cluster was a fundamental theme of the strategic diagram; it had high centrality and low density. The subject of civic values

is therefore of great importance in the literature, albeit fractured. It has multiple threads in its content, and a variety of different analytic models never became agreed upon.

The fourth cluster was cultural and intercultural values, consisting of four sub-clusters: cultural identity, cross-cultural comparison, internationalization, acculturation and multicultural education. It has significantly increased its density and centrality from 2011 to 2016 and continued to grow in 2023. One possible explanation is the growth of internationalization policies in Higher Education and the growing academic interest in the role that cross-cultural teaching experiences play on the development of value orientations in students.

Digital values and online behaviour were the smallest cluster. The keywords it was composed of were digital citizenship, use of social media, ethics on social media, information literacy and privacy values. It was in the emerging theme quadrant of the strategic diagram for 2017–2023, meaning that it was becoming more central, but its density remained low. Digital values are thus a new area for framework analysis in student values research, and one with room to grow.

Discussion

Methodological Significance of Framework Analysis in Values Research

Framework analysis now has a recognizable place in qualitative educational research on student values. It has grown steadily, it is used in several national research communities, and it is regularly co-cited with the main theoretical traditions of values research. Taken together, these patterns suggest that researchers value the approach for its usefulness rather than as a passing fashion. Three features of the method seem to account for this.

First, it is built on a matrix, which suits research questions that compare cases or participants. Such comparisons are common in investigations of student values, in which researchers compare value orientations by gender, ethnicity, discipline or level of study. With participants in the rows of the matrix and themes in its columns, a researcher can move easily from exploring a single case to comparing groups. Comparison of this kind is harder to reach with more iterative, theory-generating methods such as grounded theory (Gale et al., 2013; Smith & Firth, 2011).

Second, it is transparent, meeting the accountability needs prevalent in educational research. Individual steps from raw data to interpretative claim, as well as the evidence for each claim are clearly presented. This enhances the trustworthiness of these findings with the institutional stakeholders, policy audiences, and journal reviewers who may be skeptical of qualitative research (Goldsmith, 2021).

Third, the method can be applied deductively and inductively, as was found in the co-citation clusters, in line with the theoretical pluralism. Researchers may use an existing theory of values, like Schwartz's (1992) theory, as a starting point and then still capture the values expressed by the participants in their own words. The conceptual flexibility has promoted interaction among intellectual traditions, evidenced in the co-citation of clusters.

Geographic and Institutional Patterns

The concentration of this literature in the Anglophone world, particularly the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, mirrors wider inequalities in research output in educational studies (Crossley, 2014). It may also partly reflect the stronger coverage of English-language journals in Scopus and Web of Science (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Even so, the growing contributions of Southeast Asian institutions in the 2017–2023 subperiod deserve close attention. Studies based in Malaysia, the Philippines and, to a lesser extent, Indonesia show how framework analysis can be applied to questions of student values through culturally specific theoretical resources, most notably Islamic educational philosophy, Confucian value traditions and postcolonial critiques of Western value universalism.

Research on values has relied heavily on theoretical frameworks that originated in Western contexts, particularly the Schwartz (Schwartz et al., 2012) and Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1981; Rest et al., 1999) paradigms, which may be difficult to apply in educational institutions built on different cultural premises (Hofstede et al., 2010). Researchers outside the West, however, when applying a framework analysis to the theoretical bases of these frameworks, modify the approach for their own contexts. This work might expand and enrich the base of the epistemic field, if barriers to publication in major international journals tumble down. The point is applicable to the case of South Asia where the evidence of the students' value system is fragmented (Rabbi & Roy, 2025).

Emerging Themes and Future Directions

The digital values cluster that emerged in 2017-2023 is a definite space for further investigation. Today's students spend increasing amounts of their time in academic and social settings online, and these environments are not value free. They reinforce some types of behavior, encourage specific types of social comparison and influence the ways in which moral commitments are enacted (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). Here, framework analysis would be useful as one matrix could contain multiple types of data and it would be able to illustrate how students move across the value tensions that these spaces generate.

A second direction combines framework analysis with participatory/ action-oriented designs. Some studies in the most recent subperiod included it with other non-verbal data collection techniques, such as photovoice and participatory action research or creative expression, and generated more data than interview transcripts and focus group recordings. Extending the method in this way poses a question: How far can the matrix be extended to visual and other non-textual data without losing the transparency and rigor of the approach? The thematic clusters suggest a third direction as well, namely the relationship between value formation and assessment practice. Assessment design as a communication of values to students has been a theme in the research on assessment. It has also looked at the dilemma between intrinsic values and extrinsic incentives of graded work and whether cheating on examinations is more a matter of values or a violation of rules (Bretag et al., 2019). Framework analysis is suitable for this area because it enables researchers to chart, side by side, the values that students express in interviews and the

structural features of the assessment settings in which their behavior occurs.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, only Scopus and Web of Science were searched, so relevant publications in regional databases and grey literature may have been missed. Second, the corpus was confined to English-language publications, which limits its geographic diversity and probably under-represents contributions from non-Anglophone research communities. Third, the search terms, particularly "thematic framework", may have retrieved studies that use framework analysis only loosely. Although use of the method was checked during full-text screening, the boundary between framework analysis and related forms of thematic analysis is not always clear in published reports. Fourth, bibliometric indicators describe patterns of publication and citation; they do not measure the quality of individual studies or how rigorously the method was applied. Later bibliometric studies could reduce these limitations in three ways: search in more than one language, include databases that cover non-Western scholarship better, and combine science mapping with a systematic appraisal of how studies report their use of framework analysis.

Conclusions

This bibliometric study has traced the development and intellectual structure of a literature that, although rarely recognized as a field in its own right, is substantial and growing. In the past two decades, framework analysis has been applied to student values on a wider theoretical base and in more countries. The co-citation structure shows that the literature draws on a common set of methodological and theoretical reference points. The thematic clusters show something more: some research areas are well established, while others are new and need further study.

For researchers planning to use framework analysis to study student values, these results are encouraging. The method's growing use suggests it can be applied across many kinds of research question, schools of thought and cultural contexts. There is also plenty of room for original work, given the gaps in geographic coverage and the clusters that are still underdeveloped. Studies that draw on non-Western theory, examine online environments or use participatory designs are especially needed.

Taken as a whole, this review gives a systematic account of how educational researchers have used framework analysis to study students' values. It provides a reference point for future research in this field, so that new studies can engage more deliberately with its intellectual traditions and existing debates.

Data Availability Statement

The bibliographic records analyzed in this study were exported from Scopus and Web of Science, which are subscription databases. The full search strings are reported in the Materials and Methods section, and the list of the 247 included publications is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

AI Disclosure Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Claude (Anthropic) to format the manuscript according to the journal template and also for language editing. The authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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