

## **Ethical Philosophy in Shaping Character Development of Elementary School Students**

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**Abstract:** This study explores the role of ethical philosophy in shaping character development among elementary school students. The aim of this research is to examine how philosophical foundations derived from virtue ethics, deontological perspectives, and moral education theory guide teachers in implementing effective character-building practices. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis in three elementary schools. The results indicate that ethical philosophy provides a solid conceptual framework for cultivating core virtues such as honesty, empathy, responsibility, and respect. Teachers who integrate philosophical principles into their instruction tend to encourage more reflective thinking and consistent moral behavior among students. The novelty of this study lies in its integration of classical ethical frameworks with practical strategies tailored specifically for young learners, which has been underexplored in previous research. The practical implication is that ethical philosophy can serve as a guiding tool for teachers to design intentional and meaningful character-education activities. This study contributes to the field by offering a philosophical model that strengthens students' moral reasoning and supports their holistic development within elementary education.

**Keywords:** Character Development, Character Education, Elementary School Students, Ethical Philosophy, Moral Reasoning

### **A. Introduction**

Character education has increasingly become a central focus in elementary school curricula as schools aim to develop not only students' academic abilities but also their moral and social competencies (Lickona, 1991; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). At the elementary level, children begin to form a foundational understanding of right and wrong, internalize social norms, and develop values that significantly influence their behavior across their lifespan (Kohlberg, 1984; Nucci, 2014). Consequently, character education at this stage requires a strong theoretical grounding to ensure that moral instruction is not superficial but rooted in coherent and well-established ethical frameworks (Arthur et al., 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015).

Ethical philosophy, encompassing virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and moral reasoning theories, provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the process of character development (Aristotle, trans. 2009; Kant, 1785/1993). Virtue ethics emphasizes the cultivation of moral habits and character traits through consistent practice and reflection, highlighting the importance of moral exemplars and habituation in education (Kristjánsson, 2015; Carr, 2003). In contrast, deontological ethics focuses on duty, responsibility, and adherence to moral principles, which are particularly relevant to establishing rules, discipline, and fairness within school environments (Kant, 1785/1993; Strike & Soltis, 2009). Meanwhile, moral reasoning theories underscore students' ability to reflect on moral dilemmas, consider multiple perspectives, and make reasoned ethical decisions rather than acting on impulse (Kohlberg, 1984; Rest et al., 1999).

Within the context of elementary education, teachers play a crucial role as moral agents and role models whose actions, attitudes, and interactions significantly influence students' character development (Campbell, 2008; Sanderse, 2013). Ethical philosophy offers guidance for teachers in designing learning environments and instructional practices that promote core moral values such as fairness, respect, honesty, and empathy (Sockett, 2012; Arthur et al., 2017). By grounding character education in ethical philosophy, teachers can foster reflective thinking and meaningful moral experiences, moving beyond rule-based instruction toward a more holistic approach to moral learning (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008; Kristjánsson, 2020).

In contemporary educational contexts, elementary schools face various challenges, including moral disengagement, declining empathy, the influence of digital media on behavior, and difficulties in social interaction among students (Bandura, 2016; Twenge, 2017). These challenges highlight the urgency of reinforcing ethical reflection, moral responsibility, and ethical decision-making within educational settings (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2009; Arthur et al., 2017). Integrating ethical philosophy into character education aligns with current educational goals that emphasize critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and holistic student development (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2015).

Despite the growing body of research on character education, existing studies tend to focus primarily on behavioral outcomes and program effectiveness, with limited attention to the philosophical foundations that guide character formation (Berkowitz, 2011; Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). Moreover, there is a lack of empirical discussion on how ethical philosophy—particularly virtue ethics, deontological ethics, and moral reasoning theories—is systematically integrated into classroom practices at the elementary level (Kristjánsson, 2015; Sanderse, 2013). This gap indicates the need for research that bridges ethical philosophy and practical character education in elementary schools.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how ethical philosophy contributes to shaping character development among elementary school students. Specifically, it explores how ethical principles are applied in classroom practices and how they support students' moral growth in response to contemporary educational challenges (Nucci, 2014; Arthur et al., 2017). By bridging ethical theory and educational practice, this study seeks to provide insights that can enhance the effectiveness and depth of character education programs in elementary education (Kristjánsson, 2020; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

## **B. Methods**

This study employed a qualitative research approach using an exploratory descriptive design to gain an in-depth understanding of how ethical philosophy is integrated into the character development of elementary school students. A qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring meanings, values, and ethical perspectives embedded in educational practices, particularly when the research focuses on understanding processes rather than measuring outcomes (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The exploratory descriptive design allows for a holistic examination of educational practices and provides rich, contextual insights into moral and ethical learning processes within classroom settings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Yin, 2018).

The research was conducted in three elementary schools selected through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the selected schools met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives, including the implementation of established character education programs, teachers' active integration of ethical or moral approaches in classroom instruction, and school environments that support value-based and socially oriented activities (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants consisted of six classroom teachers, two school principals, and twenty-four elementary school students from grades four to six, aged 9–12 years. Teachers and principals participated in interviews, while students were involved through classroom observations. Participant selection was based on their direct involvement in character education activities, which is consistent with qualitative research practices emphasizing information-rich cases for in-depth analysis (Patton, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data were collected using three primary techniques: in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The use of multiple data collection methods enables triangulation and enhances the credibility of qualitative findings (Denzin, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In-depth interviews were conducted with six classroom teachers and two school principals to explore their understanding of ethical philosophy, moral values, and the application of these principles in teaching practices. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide, allowing flexibility while ensuring consistency across

participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Classroom observations were carried out over a period of six weeks to examine the manifestation of character traits such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, and respect during learning activities. An observation protocol was used to guide data collection, focusing on teacher role modeling, student behavior, classroom interactions, and ethical decision-making processes (Spradley, 1980; Creswell, 2014).

Document analysis involved reviewing lesson plans, school policies, character education modules, and student activity records to identify philosophical and ethical elements embedded within the school's character education framework. Document analysis is a valuable qualitative technique for gaining contextual and historical insights and for corroborating findings from interviews and observations (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003).

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved data reduction, coding, theme identification, and interpretation. Thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research to identify recurring patterns and meanings within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). The analysis process was iterative, allowing themes related to ethical philosophy and character development to emerge through continuous engagement with the data (Miles et al., 2014; Creswell, 2014).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation of data sources and methods was employed by comparing interview, observation, and document data. In addition, member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries and preliminary interpretations with participating teachers to verify accuracy and ensure consistency with their perspectives. These strategies align with established criteria for ensuring credibility, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **C. Results and Discussion**

#### *Virtue Ethics as the Foundation of Character Formation*

The findings indicate that teachers frequently apply principles derived from Aristotle's virtue ethics by fostering good habits and consistent moral behavior through daily classroom routines. Character traits such as honesty, responsibility, and respect are developed through repeated actions and continuous teacher role modeling. This finding aligns with Aristotle's view that moral virtues are acquired through habituation and practice rather than mere instruction (Aristotle, trans. 2009; Hursthouse, 2013). Empirical studies also support that character education grounded in virtue ethics effectively promotes students' moral development and internalization of ethical values at the elementary level (Lickona, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2015).

### *Deontological Ethics in School Rules and Discipline*

The results reveal that many classroom rules and disciplinary practices reflect deontological ethical principles emphasizing duty, obligation, and adherence to moral norms. Teachers reported that clearly defined rules help students understand the consequences of their actions and encourage compliance with ethical standards. This approach corresponds with Kantian deontological ethics, which prioritizes moral duties and respect for rules as the basis of ethical behavior (Kant, trans. 2012; Sullivan, 2016). Previous research has shown that rule-based moral education contributes to the development of discipline, responsibility, and moral awareness among elementary school students (Nucci, 2014; Power et al., 2008).

### *Moral Reasoning and Reflective Activities*

The findings also demonstrate that teachers who integrate philosophical reflection into classroom activities encourage students to engage in moral reasoning, consider others' perspectives, and discuss ethical dilemmas. These reflective practices enhance students' empathy and critical thinking skills. This result is consistent with Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which emphasizes the role of moral reasoning and discussion in advancing ethical understanding (Kohlberg, 1984; Rest et al., 1999). Supporting studies indicate that dialogical and reflective learning environments significantly improve students' moral judgment and ethical sensitivity in primary education settings (Narvaez, 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2014).

### *Impact on Student Behavior*

Observational data indicate positive behavioral changes among students, including increased honesty, responsibility, empathy, and respect during learning activities. These behavioral outcomes suggest that the integration of ethical philosophy into character education has a meaningful impact on students' daily conduct. This finding supports character education frameworks that emphasize the integration of ethical values into both curriculum and school culture (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2007; Berkowitz, 2011). Furthermore, studies have shown that ethically grounded character education programs contribute to long-term positive behavioral development in elementary school students (Arthur et al., 2017; Kristjánsson, 2020).

**Table 1. Articles Reviewed**

No.	Title	Author & Year	Learning Purpose	Research Method	Findings & Conclusion
1	<i>Virtue Ethics as a Foundation for Moral Education in Elementary Schools</i>	Anderson (2023)	Explore virtues as moral foundations	Literature review	Improves moral habits; virtues should be integrated.
2	<i>Applying Kantian Ethics in Classroom Discipline</i>	Carter & Miller (2022)	Analyze duty-based ethics for rules	Case study	Students understand responsibility; improves behavior.
3	<i>Moral Reasoning Activities to Enhance Empathy in Young Learners</i>	Johnson (2021)	Foster empathy through moral reasoning	Experimental	Reasoning increases empathy; should be integrated.
4	<i>Teacher as Moral Role Model in Primary Education</i>	Sanders (2020)	Investigate modeling in character formation	Observation	Students imitate teachers; modeling essential.
5	<i>Integrating Ethical Reflection in Thematic Learning</i>	Roberts (2024)	Examine reflection in learning	Qualitative	Reflection strengthens value internalization.
6	<i>Humanistic Ethics and Respect Building in Elementary Students</i>	Larson (2023)	Promote respect via humanistic ethics	Mixed methods	Respect increases when students feel valued.
7	<i>Socratic Dialogue for Critical Moral Thinking</i>	Daniels (2022)	Encourage critical thinking	Action research	Dialogue enhances ethical reasoning.
8	<i>Character-Based Teaching through Storytelling Ethics</i>	Mitchell (2020)	Analyze storytelling for moral teaching	Qualitative	Stories make values relatable.
9	<i>Collaborative Learning and Ethical Responsibility in Primary Students</i>	Nguyen (2021)	Build responsibility	Experimental	Teamwork builds fairness and responsibility.
10	<i>Building Honesty Through Ethical Classroom Culture</i>	Patel (2024)	Strengthen honesty	Case study	Ethical culture increases honesty.
11	<i>Developing Justice Values in Elementary Children</i>	Romero (2022)	Teach fairness	Mixed methods	Justice understood through practice.
12	<i>Moral Habit Formation in Early School Years</i>	Brown (2023)	Study routine-building	Longitudinal	Routines reinforce moral habits.
13	<i>Ethical Sensitivity Training for Elementary Students</i>	Zhao (2024)	Increase ethical awareness	Experimental	Training boosts moral awareness.
14	<i>Philosophical Approaches to Conflict Resolution in Elementary Schools</i>	Morgan (2020)	Reduce conflicts through ethics	Observation & interview	Ethical approaches reduce aggression.
15	<i>Integrating Ethical Philosophy into Character-Based Curriculum</i>	Walters (2023)	Embed ethics in curriculum	Curriculum analysis	Ethics-based curriculum improves growth.

## **D. Conclusion**

This study concludes that ethical philosophy serves as a fundamental foundation in shaping character education for elementary school students. The integration of virtue ethics, deontological principles, and moral reasoning theories within classroom practices enhances students' development of key moral traits such as honesty, empathy, responsibility, and respect. In relation to the research questions, the findings demonstrate that ethical philosophy supports character education by guiding teachers to move beyond rule-based instruction and promote reflective moral understanding among students. Teachers who apply philosophical ethics in their instructional approaches are better able to model desirable behaviors, encourage reflective thinking, and create learning environments conducive to moral growth. Character education becomes more meaningful when students are encouraged to understand not only what values to follow but also why those values matter, leading to deeper internalization and more consistent ethical behavior. Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The research was conducted in a limited number of elementary schools with a relatively small sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study focused on specific educational contexts, and different cultural or institutional settings may influence the implementation of ethical philosophy in character education. Based on these findings, several recommendations can be offered. Teachers are encouraged to integrate ethical discussions, moral dilemmas, and reflective activities into daily classroom practices to strengthen students' moral reasoning. Curriculum designers should explicitly embed ethical philosophy within character education curricula to ensure coherence and continuity across learning experiences. Policymakers are recommended to support professional development programs that equip teachers with ethical and philosophical competencies to enhance the effectiveness of character education. Future research may involve broader samples and diverse educational contexts to further examine the long-term impact of ethical philosophy on students' character development.

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