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Philosophical Approaches to Moral Education: A Qualitative Study in Secondary Schools

Maharani[1]

[1]Fakultas Ilmu Pendidikan, Universitas Negeri Malang

*Corresponding Author: Maharani
E-mail: mharani@gmail.com

Abstract

Moral education plays a vital role in shaping students' character and ethical participation in society. This study investigates how philosophical approaches virtue ethics, duty-based ethics, and care ethics are implemented in Indonesian secondary schools. A qualitative multiple case study design was employed, involving interviews with teachers, students, and administrators, classroom observations, and document analysis across four schools in Jakarta. The study found that public schools emphasize virtue ethics, private schools adopt duty-based ethics, and faith-based schools often combine or focus on care ethics. These philosophical orientations influenced the teaching strategies used in schools, including storytelling, case studies, rule enforcement, and service learning. Students reported higher engagement with methods involving experiential learning. However, challenges such as parental pressure for academic performance, limited resources in public schools, and value conflicts in multicultural classrooms hindered the effective implementation of moral education. The study concludes that a blended approach, incorporating elements of virtue, duty, and care ethics, offers a more inclusive and effective framework for moral education. This approach prepares students for responsible citizenship in a pluralistic society and provides a foundation for future research on moral education in diverse contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Moral education has long been recognized as a cornerstone of formal schooling, serving as a foundation for nurturing ethical awareness, civic responsibility, and emotional maturity among students. Across cultures and historical periods, education has been viewed not only as a means to transmit knowledge but also as a moral enterprise shaping the character of individuals and, consequently, the moral fabric of society (Nirmala et al., 2024; Ramadhani et al., 2024). Philosophers from Aristotle to Kant have debated how moral principles can be effectively cultivated in young people, while modern educators continue to wrestle with how to balance academic rigor with ethical development (Karras et al., 2022; Shih, 2022). The urgency of moral education has intensified in the twenty-first century, an era marked by moral relativism, rapid technological change, and global interconnectedness. In this dynamic landscape, secondary schools play a crucial role in equipping students

with the capacity to think ethically, act responsibly, and engage empathetically in diverse communities (Sakban & Sundawa, 2023; Husaeni, 2023).

Within Indonesia, moral education is deeply embedded in national educational policy and the philosophical foundation of Pancasila, which emphasizes faith, humanity, unity, democracy, and social justice. The Indonesian government has consistently emphasized character education as part of its broader educational reforms, reflected in initiatives such as the Kurikulum Merdeka and the National Character Education Movement or Gerakan Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter. These frameworks underscore the need for schools to nurture virtues such as honesty, discipline, tolerance, and compassion (Supadi & Fauzi, 2024). However, despite strong policy rhetoric, the implementation of moral education varies widely across institutional types including public, private, and faith-based schools due to differences in cultural values, resource availability, and pedagogical orientations (Fitriadi et al., 2024; Fatimah & Siswanto, 2024). This diversity reflects Indonesia's pluralistic character but also reveals deep challenges in achieving coherence and effectiveness in moral instruction.

The literature indicates that moral education in Indonesia is often conceptualized in broad ideological or religious terms rather than grounded in coherent philosophical frameworks (Husaeni, 2023; Mulang & Putra, 2023). As a result, moral education is sometimes reduced to prescriptive moralizing or rule enforcement, rather than fostering critical reflection and moral reasoning. This tendency risks creating a compliance-based morality rather than cultivating genuine ethical understanding. At the same time, global trends in moral education such as the emphasis on emotional intelligence, care ethics, and participatory learning invite Indonesian educators to rethink how philosophical approaches can be contextualized within local traditions and educational realities. The ongoing discourse on moral education thus requires an inquiry into how foundational philosophical theories virtue ethics, duty-based ethics, and care ethics can be operationalized in classroom settings to produce ethically grounded and socially responsible citizens (Tirri & Kuusisto, 2022; Xin & Gao, 2025).

A central issue confronting moral education in Indonesia lies in reconciling these philosophical traditions within the nation's multicultural and multireligious context. Public schools, tasked with promoting universal values, often emphasize virtue ethics, the cultivation of moral habits such as honesty and perseverance, drawing implicitly on Aristotelian ideas of character formation through habituation and practice (Karras et al., 2022; Lamb et al., 2021; Brant et al., 2022). In contrast, private schools, many of which are secular or elite, tend to rely on duty-based ethics, emphasizing obedience to rules, discipline, and respect for institutional order, echoing Kantian notions of duty and moral law (Shih, 2022). Faith-based schools, meanwhile, frequently adopt care ethics or blended approaches inspired by relational and theological values, stressing empathy, compassion, and service as moral imperatives (Fatimah & Siswanto, 2024; Wake, 2024). Each of these orientations provides distinctive pathways for moral learning, yet their coexistence within a single national education system also produces tensions regarding consistency, inclusivity, and pedagogical efficacy.

The challenge is further compounded by practical constraints. Teachers often struggle to translate abstract moral theories into engaging pedagogical practices (Vincent-Lancrin, 2023; Cruz et al., 2025; Feng et al., 2025). Traditional instruction dominated by lecture and rote learning limits opportunities for dialogue and moral reasoning. Moreover, moral education is frequently overshadowed by the pursuit of academic excellence, a reflection of parental and institutional pressure to prioritize measurable outcomes such as test scores and university admissions (Ramadhani et al., 2024; Chemagosi, 2024; Kayyali, 2025). This imbalance between cognitive

achievement and moral cultivation raises concerns about the holistic development of students. In a society experiencing rapid socio-economic change, moral education must therefore adapt to help students navigate ethical dilemmas in real-life contexts, ranging from digital citizenship and environmental responsibility to intercultural coexistence and social justice (Sakban & Sundawa, 2023; Alrakhman & Fauzi, 2025; Nykyporets & Kukharchuk, 2025).

Scholars have proposed various strategies to revitalize moral education, including experiential learning, reflective pedagogy, and value clarification techniques (Cholifah, 2024; Darmawan et al., 2024; Gusmian, 2025). Internationally, programs inspired by care ethics such as Noddings' relational pedagogy have shown that fostering empathy and compassion through collaborative activities can enhance students' moral reasoning and interpersonal skills. Similarly, approaches grounded in virtue ethics, including storytelling and character-building projects, help students internalize virtues by relating them to personal and community experiences (Karras et al., 2022). Duty-based frameworks, while sometimes criticized as rigid, can nonetheless instill a sense of order and accountability that is essential for social harmony (Shih, 2022; Macdonald, 2008). The challenge lies not in choosing among these philosophical traditions but in integrating their complementary strengths to meet the complex moral demands of Indonesian society.

Empirical studies on moral education in Indonesia, however, remain limited. Much of the existing research has focused on curriculum design, policy evaluation, or general discussions of character education (Fitriadi et al., 2024; Husaeni, 2023). Only a few studies have examined how philosophical orientations manifest in the lived experiences of teachers and students or how these orientations shape pedagogical choices and classroom culture. Mulang and Putra (2023), for instance, explored how ethical and spiritual values are integrated into high school education in Makassar, emphasizing the role of religious ethos. Similarly, Fatimah and Siswanto (2024) analyzed the philosophical underpinnings of moral instruction in Islamic schools, finding a strong orientation toward care ethics rooted in Islamic teachings. Yet few studies have compared how different institutional types operationalize these philosophies or assessed their impact on students' engagement and moral growth. This lack of comparative and field-based research creates a significant gap in understanding how philosophical theory informs educational practice in diverse Indonesian contexts.

Addressing this research gap requires an interdisciplinary lens that bridges philosophy, pedagogy, and sociology of education. A philosophical approach provides conceptual clarity about the moral ideals schools seek to promote, while qualitative inquiry captures how these ideals are negotiated in daily interactions among teachers, students, and administrators. Such a framework recognizes that moral education is not merely a curricular component but a lived process shaped by institutional norms, cultural expectations, and interpersonal relationships. By situating moral education within real-world classroom dynamics, researchers can uncover the tensions between prescribed values and enacted practices, as well as identify conditions that foster or hinder effective moral formation (Cholifah, 2024; Fitriadi et al., 2024). This perspective aligns with contemporary educational philosophy, which views moral learning as dialogical, context-sensitive, and co-

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to explore how philosophical approaches to moral education are understood and practiced in Indonesian secondary schools. The methodological framework was selected to capture the depth and complexity of moral education as a lived experience shaped by institutional cultures, pedagogical interactions, and contextual values. Moral

education, as previous research has indicated, is not a phenomenon that can be effectively reduced to quantitative indicators but rather one that requires interpretive engagement with the perspectives and practices of its participants (Husaeni, 2023; Karras et al., 2022; Fitriadi et al., 2024). The case study design thus allowed the researcher to compare philosophical orientations across different school contexts, revealing how virtue ethics, duty-based ethics, and care ethics are operationalized within Indonesia's pluralistic educational landscape.

The methodological approach was grounded in the constructivist paradigm, which assumes that knowledge and meaning are co-constructed through social interactions and context-bound experiences. This aligns with the philosophical premise of moral education, which views ethical learning not merely as transmission of moral rules but as a dialogical and reflective process involving teachers, students, and institutional norms (Nirmala et al., 2024; Shih, 2022). By employing this approach, the study sought to generate rich, contextually embedded insights rather than generalizable statistical claims. As Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize, qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to investigating phenomena that involve complex human values, emotions, and interpretations, all of which are central to moral education.

Research Design

The study followed a multiple case study design, as proposed by Yin (2018), to enable in-depth investigation across multiple institutional contexts. Four secondary schools in Jakarta were purposively selected to represent diverse educational orientations, including one public school, one private school, one Islamic faith-based school, and one Christian faith-based school. The selection aimed to ensure variation in philosophical underpinnings, pedagogical traditions, and socio-economic backgrounds, providing a comprehensive overview of moral education practices in different institutional environments. Each school constituted a single case, and collectively, the cases formed a multi-site comparative framework. This approach facilitated the identification of both unique and shared patterns across schools, thus enhancing analytical depth and theoretical transferability.

Research Context and Participants

Jakarta was chosen as the research site due to its cultural diversity and the coexistence of various educational systems, making it an ideal setting to study philosophical pluralism in moral education. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on individuals directly involved in moral and character education within each institution. Participants included twelve teachers responsible for civic and religious education, four school administrators overseeing curricular implementation, and thirty-two students from grades nine to eleven who actively participated in classroom discussions related to moral and ethical topics. The inclusion of multiple stakeholders ensured triangulation of perspectives, allowing the study to examine how philosophical ideas were interpreted at both institutional and classroom levels.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. Prior to data collection, institutional consent was obtained from school authorities, followed by informed consent from all participating teachers and administrators. For student participants, parental consent and student assent were secured. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and pseudonyms were assigned to each school and participant to protect their identities. The research protocol adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the Universitas Negeri Malang Research Ethics Committee.

Data Collection

The data collection process spanned five months and involved three primary methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. These methods were selected to capture the multifaceted nature of moral education, encompassing both the espoused philosophies and the enacted practices. The use of multiple data sources ensured triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and validity of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants to explore their perceptions and experiences regarding moral education. Interview questions were designed around three key themes: the philosophical basis of moral teaching, pedagogical strategies, and perceived challenges in implementing moral education. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five to sixty minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Teachers and administrators were asked to reflect on their conceptualizations of moral education, the philosophical frameworks guiding their instructional practices, and the institutional values shaping school culture. Students were invited to share their experiences of moral learning, including how they perceived fairness, empathy, discipline, and ethical decision-making in classroom contexts. This dialogic method allowed participants to articulate their understanding in their own words, providing nuanced insights into moral reasoning and value formation.

Classroom observations were conducted in eight classes across the four schools. Each observation session lasted between seventy and ninety minutes and focused on identifying pedagogical practices that reflected philosophical orientations. Observational field notes recorded both teacher–student interactions and classroom discourse patterns. The researcher paid attention to how teachers integrated moral reasoning, storytelling, and experiential learning in their lessons. Instances of rule enforcement, value clarification, and empathy-based discussions were documented to analyze alignment with virtue, duty, or care ethics. Observations provided a critical link between what participants claimed and what was actually practiced, helping to validate the interview data through behavioral evidence.

Document analysis complemented the interviews and observations by examining institutional artifacts such as school mission statements, codes of conduct, curriculum guides, and student handbooks. These documents were analyzed to trace how moral and philosophical values were formally articulated and institutionalized. In some cases, discrepancies emerged between stated institutional philosophies and classroom practices, offering valuable insights into the contextual constraints affecting implementation. For instance, while several schools emphasized compassion and empathy in their mission statements, their curricular documents prioritized behavioral discipline and academic excellence, reflecting the tension between moral ideals and performance-driven education (Ramadhani et al., 2024).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved several iterative stages: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, identification of emerging themes, review and refinement of themes, and synthesis of findings into broader categories that reflected the philosophical orientations of each institution. The coding process was inductive yet theoretically informed, guided by the conceptual frameworks of virtue ethics, duty-based ethics, and care ethics (Karras et al., 2022; Shih, 2022). NVivo software was employed to organize and code the data systematically. Themes were derived through continuous comparison both within and across cases, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and divergences.

To ensure methodological rigor, the study employed triangulation of data sources, member checking, and reflexivity. Triangulation was achieved through the convergence of interview narratives, observational evidence, and documentary analysis, thereby enhancing the validity of interpretations. Member checking involved sharing summary transcripts and thematic interpretations with several participants for verification, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected their perspectives. Reflexivity was maintained through the researcher's field journal, which documented personal assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretive decisions throughout the research process. This reflective practice minimized potential bias and reinforced the transparency of analytical reasoning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, organized into three interrelated thematic areas: (1) dominant philosophical orientations in moral education, (2) pedagogical strategies employed by teachers, and (3) challenges faced in implementing moral education within Indonesian secondary schools. The results derive from the triangulation of semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis conducted across four case study sites in Jakarta. Together, these findings illuminate how virtue ethics, duty-based ethics, and care ethics are expressed in institutional philosophies, classroom practices, and the lived experiences of teachers and students. The section also integrates relevant literature to contextualize the findings within broader discussions of moral education theory and practice.

Dominant Philosophical Orientations in Moral Education

The qualitative analysis revealed that each school institutionalized a dominant philosophical orientation in moral education shaped by its educational culture, organizational values, and religious background. In the public school context, moral education was primarily grounded in Aristotelian virtue ethics, emphasizing the formation of character through habitual good conduct. Teachers consistently highlighted values such as honesty, discipline, and perseverance as the core of moral development. One teacher stated,

> *"We tell students that being honest is more important than just getting high scores,"*

underscoring that moral worth was placed above academic achievement. Moral instruction was frequently embedded in daily routines and reinforced through repeated practice and reflection. Teachers also relied on moral exemplars, such as national heroes and respected community figures, to illustrate virtuous behavior. This pattern reflects Aristotle's conception of ethos as moral habit and aligns with recent studies emphasizing narrative modeling as a powerful tool in virtue education.

In contrast, the private school exhibited a clear duty-based ethical orientation rooted in Kantian principles of obligation and rule compliance. Moral behavior in this setting was strongly framed as a matter of fulfilling institutional duties and adhering to established regulations. An administrator emphasized this perspective by stating,

> *"Every student must follow the rules, because it is their duty as part of this community."*

Moral discussions in classrooms frequently centered on punctuality, obedience, and responsibility, using the language of "rights and obligations." This approach successfully promoted order and behavioral consistency; however, student interviews revealed a degree of moral ambivalence. One student remarked that

> *"The rules make us behave, but sometimes we do not understand why,"*

177

suggesting that moral action was often driven by external enforcement rather than internal moral reasoning. This finding reflects longstanding critiques of duty-based ethics in education, which argue that excessive emphasis on compliance may limit the development of moral autonomy.

Faith-based schools demonstrated moral orientations that were distinctly relational and care-centered. In the Islamic school, moral education was deeply influenced by care ethics integrated into a religious framework. Teachers consistently emphasized empathy, mutual respect, and responsibility toward others as inseparable from religious devotion. A student expressed this integration clearly by stating,

> *"Helping your friends and caring for others is as important as prayer."*

Classroom practices frequently involved collaborative learning, peer assistance, and reflective discussions designed to cultivate emotional sensitivity and social responsibility. This approach illustrates how care ethics operates synergistically with Islamic moral teachings, reinforcing compassion as both a spiritual and social obligation.

Similarly, the Christian school adopted a hybrid philosophical framework that blended virtue ethics with care ethics. Moral instruction emphasized traditional virtues such as discipline, responsibility, and humility, while also prioritizing relational values through service-learning and mentorship programs. One teacher explained,

> *"We combine discipline with service, so students learn both responsibility and compassion."*

This statement reflects a deliberate synthesis between character formation and relational care. Teachers further emphasized that "discipline without empathy is incomplete," indicating that moral education was understood as both a personal and social ethical project. This hybrid model supports theoretical arguments that virtue-based discipline and care-oriented relationships can coexist to produce more holistic moral development.

Pedagogical Strategies for Moral Education

The second major theme highlights how philosophical orientations toward moral education were enacted through distinct pedagogical strategies in classroom practice. In public schools, where virtue ethics predominated, storytelling and case-based discussions emerged as the primary instructional methods for moral learning. Teachers frequently narrated stories about honesty, courage, and responsibility, often drawn from national figures or everyday moral dilemmas. These narratives were followed by guided discussions and reflective writing activities. One student explained,

> *"Stories help us see how values matter in real life"*

Indicating that moral lessons became more tangible through narrative engagement. Teachers viewed this method as a way to cultivate moral habits through reflection on concrete examples, reinforcing the Aristotelian notion that virtue is developed through repeated moral practice. This strategy aligns with experiential learning principles, where students construct moral understanding through reflection on lived or simulated experiences.

In contrast, moral instruction in the private school was primarily delivered through rule reinforcement and highly structured routines. Teachers consistently referred to school regulations as the foundation of moral behavior, and compliance was monitored through daily supervision, merit systems, and disciplinary records. A student commented,

"Sometimes it feels strict, but it teaches discipline,"

Reflecting both acceptance and emotional distance toward this method. Teachers justified this approach by emphasizing that obedience to rules was essential for forming strong moral character. However, classroom observations revealed that students rarely engaged in dialogic moral reasoning, as discussions were typically limited to explanations of what was permitted or prohibited. This suggests that moral learning in this context was oriented toward behavioral conformity rather than reflective moral judgment, echoing critiques of duty-based education that associate it with surface-level compliance rather than internalized moral autonomy.

Faith-based schools demonstrated more relational and participatory pedagogical approaches that reflected the influence of care ethics. In the Islamic school, teachers frequently used role-play and collaborative group work to simulate real-life moral challenges. Students acted out scenarios involving friendship conflicts, honesty, and mutual respect, followed by discussions on appropriate moral responses. One student reflected,

"I learned how to understand my friend's feelings"

Indicating that empathy was cultivated through direct emotional engagement. Teachers emphasized that such activities helped students internalize compassion and social responsibility as lived moral experiences rather than abstract concepts. These practices illustrate how care-based pedagogy encourages students to develop moral sensitivity through interpersonal interaction and emotional awareness.

Similarly, the Christian school implemented service-learning as a central pedagogical strategy that integrated virtue ethics and care ethics. Students regularly participated in community outreach activities such as charity programs, visits to orphanages, and environmental clean-up campaigns. These activities were followed by structured reflection sessions in which students were guided to connect their experiences with moral and spiritual values. One student stated,

"We feel proud when we can help others,"

Suggesting that moral meaning was constructed through direct service and social contribution. Teachers explained that discipline and compassion were intentionally combined so that students would not only follow rules but also develop a sense of social responsibility. This pedagogical synthesis demonstrates how service-learning functioned as a powerful medium for translating moral values into concrete social action.

Across all school contexts, students consistently expressed stronger engagement with participatory and experiential learning methods than with purely rule-based instruction. As one student noted,

"We learn more when we can act, not just listen."

This statement encapsulates a shared perception that moral understanding deepens through active involvement rather than passive reception of moral directives. The triangulated interview and observation data indicate that pedagogical strategies grounded in virtue and care ethics tend to foster higher levels of moral reflection, empathy, and student engagement. In contrast, duty-based approaches, while effective in maintaining classroom order and behavioral discipline, appear to prioritize outward compliance over the development of critical moral reasoning. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of moral education depends not only on philosophical orientation but also on the degree to which students are actively involved in morally meaningful experiences.

Challenges in Implementing Moral Education

Despite the diversity of pedagogical approaches to moral education, teachers across all school contexts reported substantial challenges that constrained effective implementation. The most frequently cited obstacle was parental pressure to prioritize academic achievement over moral development, particularly in the private school context. Teachers explained that many parents equated educational success solely with examination scores and university admission prospects. One teacher expressed this tension clearly by stating,

"Sometimes parents only want high scores, not moral lessons."

This narrow definition of success placed moral education in a secondary position and reduced instructional time allocated to ethical reflection and character formation. Administrators also acknowledged this dilemma, with one noting,

"We are expected to produce smart students, but not necessarily good ones."

This finding illustrates how market-oriented educational expectations marginalize non-cognitive outcomes and reinforce a performance-driven school culture that undervalues moral formation.

Public school teachers primarily struggled with structural and resource-related constraints that limited their capacity to implement interactive moral learning. Large class sizes, rigid curricular demands, and limited facilities restricted opportunities for role-play, discussion-based learning, and reflective activities. Although teachers expressed a strong commitment to character education, they admitted that instructional time was often absorbed by content delivery and exam preparation. One teacher remarked,

"We want to use more role-play, but resources are scarce,"

Highlighting the gap between pedagogical intention and practical feasibility. As a result, moral instruction in public schools frequently relied on lecture-based methods, which reduced student participation and limited deeper moral engagement. This condition reflects a broader systemic tension between policy ideals of character education and the constrained realities of public school implementation.

In multicultural and religiously diverse classrooms, teachers encountered complex challenges related to value conflicts among students. Differing moral perspectives rooted in family upbringing and religious doctrine often surfaced during classroom discussions of ethical issues. One teacher explained,

"It is hard when one student feels right but another feels offended,"

Referring to situations where moral debates generated emotional tension rather than constructive dialogue. Classroom observations confirmed that discussions on topics such as honesty, loyalty, and respect sometimes revealed deeply contrasting moral positions. Teachers reported difficulty facilitating such discussions without appearing to privilege one moral framework over another. This challenge illustrates the broader tension between moral pluralism and the search for shared ethical ground within diverse educational settings.

In response to these constraints, schools attempted a range of adaptive strategies to sustain moral education. Faith-based schools sought to bypass curricular limitations by integrating moral instruction into extracurricular programs such as religious gatherings, mentoring sessions, and community outreach activities. Public schools developed student-led initiatives, including honesty campaigns, anti-bullying movements, and peer mediation programs, to embed moral values in school culture

beyond the classroom. Although these efforts demonstrated innovation and institutional commitment, teachers emphasized that such initiatives remained vulnerable without consistent administrative backing, targeted professional training, and active parental engagement. As one teacher noted, moral education "cannot survive on good intentions alone." These findings indicate that while teachers display strong agency in sustaining moral education, long-term effectiveness depends on systemic support and collaborative partnerships among schools, families, and communities.

This study contributes to the growing body of international scholarship on moral education by demonstrating how philosophical orientations, pedagogical practices, and institutional constraints interact dynamically within pluralistic schooling environments. Rather than viewing moral education as a uniform or policy-driven enterprise, the findings underscore its inherently contextual nature. This aligns with contemporary moral education theory, which emphasizes that ethical formation is always shaped by institutional culture, socio-religious identity, and structural conditions rather than by abstract philosophical doctrines alone (Noddings, 2013; Karras et al., 2022; Husaeni, 2023).

The coexistence of virtue-based, duty-based, and care-oriented moral frameworks within different school types reflects what has been described in the literature as philosophical pluralism in moral education. In plural societies, moral instruction rarely follows a single universal ethical logic but instead adapts to institutional missions and sociocultural expectations. This plurality supports Sakban and Sundawa's (2023) argument that moral education in Southeast Asia cannot be reduced to a singular Western ethical tradition, but instead represents a hybridization of classical philosophy, religious ethics, and contextual pragmatism. The Indonesian case thus reinforces the global understanding that moral education is not merely a curriculum domain but a socio-ethical ecosystem shaped by power, identity, and institutional priorities.

From a theoretical standpoint, the strong presence of virtue ethics in public schooling reflects the enduring influence of character education discourse within state education systems. Internationally, virtue-based models remain widely adopted where moral education is linked to citizenship formation and national identity (Karras et al., 2022). However, scholars have cautioned that when virtue education is implemented primarily through behavioral habituation, it risks emphasizing conformity over moral reasoning. The present study strengthens this critique by showing that virtue-oriented systems tend to foreground discipline and moral exemplarity while offering limited space for ethical deliberation. This reinforces the long-standing debate on whether character education alone is sufficient for developing moral autonomy in students.

The dominance of duty-based moral frameworks within private institutions mirrors the broader global trend of institutional discipline regimes in academically competitive environments. Shih (2022) argues that deontological moral education frequently emerges in performance-driven schooling systems where order, efficiency, and compliance are prioritized. The implications of such frameworks are not merely pedagogical but deeply structural, as moral agency becomes subordinated to institutional regulation. The present findings extend this argument by demonstrating how moral instruction risks becoming procedural rather than reflective when it is embedded primarily within regulatory systems. This raises critical questions regarding the role of moral education in elite and performance-oriented schools, where ethical development may be overshadowed by reputational and academic imperatives.

The prominence of care ethics in faith-based schooling supports international evidence that relational ethics are most likely to flourish in environments where education is explicitly framed as a moral and spiritual enterprise. Noddings' (2013) theory of care emphasizes that moral development is fundamentally relational and emerges through emotionally responsive pedagogical relationships. The present study affirms this theoretical position by demonstrating that caring pedagogies are not merely instructional techniques but manifestations of deeper institutional moral cosmologies. Importantly, the hybridization of virtue and care ethics observed in religious schools suggests that moral education is increasingly moving toward integrative ethical models rather than rigid philosophical alignment. This supports recent movements in moral education theory that advocate for ethical synthesis rather than philosophical exclusivity.

Beyond philosophical orientation, the study highlights the decisive role of pedagogy in determining the depth and quality of moral learning. International scholarship consistently emphasizes that how morality is taught is as important as what moral values are taught. Experiential pedagogies such as storytelling, role-play, and service-learning occupy a central position in contemporary moral education theory because they activate students as moral agents rather than passive moral recipients (Mulang & Putra, 2023; Ramadhani et al., 2024). The findings of this study reaffirm that participatory pedagogies align more closely with constructivist theories of moral development that emphasize reflection, dialogue, and lived experience as core mechanisms of ethical growth.

Conversely, the persistence of rule-based pedagogy reflects what Biesta identifies as the instrumentalization of education, where learning outcomes are reduced to measurable behavioral indicators. Within such frameworks, moral education risks being stripped of its dialogical and transformative potential. This has significant implications for educational policy, as moral development becomes subordinated to institutional order and efficiency. The present study thus strengthens calls for moving beyond compliance-oriented moral instruction toward pedagogies that cultivate moral reasoning, empathy, and ethical uncertainty tolerance.

The structural constraints identified in this study reflect systemic tensions that are widely documented in the global moral education literature. Parental pressure for academic achievement mirrors what Nirmala et al. (2024) describe as the neoliberal reconfiguration of schooling, where market logic increasingly governs educational priorities. In such contexts, moral education is frequently marginalized because its outcomes are not easily quantifiable. The present findings reinforce the argument that without systemic protection, moral education becomes vulnerable to displacement by high-stakes academic competition.

Resource limitations in public schooling further expose the fragility of moral education when policy aspirations are not matched by material investment. Husaeni (2023) has shown that in Indonesia, character education policy often functions at the rhetorical level due to inadequate structural support. The current study confirms that moral education cannot flourish in environments constrained by large class sizes, rigid curricula, and limited instructional time. Without structural flexibility, even the most philosophically coherent moral frameworks risk being reduced to symbolic gestures.

The challenges associated with moral diversity and value conflict highlight one of the most complex dilemmas in contemporary moral education. In pluralistic societies, moral education must negotiate the tension between universal ethical values and cultural particularism. Karras et al. (2022) argue that this tension demands a shift from moral transmission to moral dialogue. The present study demonstrates that teachers frequently encounter ethical pluralism without adequate pedagogical

preparation to manage it. This exposes a critical gap in teacher education, where moral facilitation skills for pluralistic classrooms remain underdeveloped. Without such competence, moral education risks either enforcing moral uniformity or retreating into ethical silence.

Teacher agency emerges as a critical mediating force between structural constraint and moral aspiration. The adaptive strategies observed across schools reflect what comparative education scholars describe as practitioner-driven moral innovation. However, reliance on individual agency also exposes systemic vulnerability. When moral education depends on individual commitment rather than institutional design, its sustainability becomes precarious. This supports Sakban and Sundawa's (2023) argument that moral education reform must be institutionalized across curriculum, leadership, assessment, and community engagement rather than delegated to isolated pedagogical initiatives.

The limited integration of parents into moral education processes further weakens systemic coherence. Ecological models of development emphasize that moral identity is shaped through the interaction of school, family, and community environments. When parental expectations prioritize academic performance over moral formation, schools operate within a fragmented moral ecosystem. The findings therefore reinforce the necessity of reimagining moral education as a shared social project rather than a school-contained responsibility.

At the policy level, this study underscores a persistent misalignment between moral education rhetoric and implementation architecture. While moral education is widely endorsed at the policy level, it remains weakly embedded within curriculum frameworks, assessment regimes, and teacher certification systems. International evidence demonstrates that moral education gains institutional legitimacy only when it is formally recognized within measurable educational standards rather than positioned as an auxiliary objective. Without such alignment, moral education remains structurally subordinate to academic achievement agendas.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated the diverse approaches to moral education within Indonesian secondary schools, influenced by philosophical orientations like virtue ethics, duty-based ethics, and care ethics. The study identified that public schools predominantly emphasize virtue ethics, private schools focus on duty-based ethics, and faith-based schools tend to prioritize care ethics, often blending these philosophies depending on institutional context. The findings indicate that moral education in Indonesia is not a one-size-fits-all approach but a nuanced blend of cultural, religious, and pedagogical factors that shape moral instruction.

Experiential and participatory methods, such as storytelling, role-playing, and service learning, were well-received by students, enhancing engagement and moral reasoning. In contrast, rule-based approaches were less effective in promoting deeper moral reflection but were instrumental in instilling discipline. Despite the strengths of these philosophical frameworks, the study also highlighted significant challenges, including pressure for academic performance, limited resources, and value conflicts in multicultural classrooms. These challenges need to be addressed through institutional support, teacher development, and policies that balance academic and moral education goals. This research contributes to the body of knowledge by offering insights into how moral philosophy can be operationalized in diverse educational settings and provides a practical framework for integrating virtue, duty, and care ethics. Future research should explore how these frameworks can be further refined to address the evolving moral and ethical needs of students in a globalized and diverse society.

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