



Sustaining Ethical School Culture: A Qualitative Inquiry into Character Formation Practices in Indonesian Primary Education

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine how character formation practices can be sustained within the everyday culture of primary schools, with a particular focus on the ways routines, teacher modeling, and school-wide norms shape students' ethical dispositions over time. Rather than treating character education as a series of isolated interventions, this study investigates how cultural elements of the school environment gradually cultivate students' moral awareness, social responsibility, and behavioral consistency. This inquiry responds to the need for deeper understanding of character education as a continuous and context-dependent process within Indonesian basic education.

Method: A qualitative phenomenological method was employed to capture the lived experiences of teachers and students. Data were collected through prolonged observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis, allowing the researcher to interpret meaning from naturally occurring practices without imposing predetermined assumptions. The analysis followed iterative coding and thematic interpretation to identify recurring patterns in how character values were conveyed, internalized, and reinforced.

Findings: The findings reveal that character formation becomes sustainable when ethical routines—such as daily greetings, communal clean-up activities, prayer habits, honesty practices, and respectful teacher–student interactions—are embedded into the school's cultural fabric. Teacher behavior emerged as a decisive influence, particularly when consistency between verbal instruction and real conduct was evident. Challenges were found in the form of inconsistent parental reinforcement and external social environments that occasionally contradicted school-based values.

Significance: The significance of this study lies in demonstrating that character sustainability depends on the coherence between school culture, instructional practices, and broader social contexts. These insights contribute to global discussions on character and sustainability by emphasizing that moral development is not merely programmatic but culturally situated and continuously negotiated.

INTRODUCTION

Character education has re-emerged as a central theme in global discussions on sustainable human development, particularly as schools confront complex cultural and ethical challenges in the digital age (Tusa et al., 2025; Waage, 2025). The urgency of this topic stems from increasing awareness that academic achievement alone is insufficient to prepare young learners for complex moral dilemmas they will encounter. Primary schools, as the earliest formal settings for socialization, play a decisive role in shaping children's ethical reasoning, empathy, and behavioral discipline. In many developing contexts, character formation is not complementary but foundational to sustaining cultural values and long-term social harmony (Tohari, 2025; Zhanbayev et al., 2023). The topic is academically significant because gaps often persist between formal policy expectations and the everyday practices that actually shape students' moral

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experiences in school. This makes the examination of daily routines, relational practices, and ethical norms in schools both relevant and pressing. In Indonesia, where school culture reflects broader societal expectations, character formation holds particular importance for community resilience. Therefore, examining how character formation is sustained within primary-school settings offers conceptual and practical contributions.

Recent scholarship underscores that children's moral development is deeply influenced by the ethical climate established by teachers, administrators, and peers. The sustainability of character values depends on routines consistently practiced, internalized, and emotionally meaningful rather than on isolated curricular interventions. This urgency intensifies as rapid socio-cultural shifts challenge the stability of traditional value transmission. Consequently, schools must become intentional moral spaces where ethical conduct is modeled through everyday interactions. However, achieving coherence between declared values and lived practices remains difficult in many educational systems. International research suggests that durable character outcomes require visible norms supported by teachers' authentic conduct, not mere verbal instruction. Understanding how such norms are constructed through daily practice therefore becomes a compelling research direction (Chiu, 2024; Følstad et al., 2021).

The urgency of this study is further reinforced by rising concerns about social fragmentation, misinformation, and declining interpersonal trust. In this landscape, character education functions as a stabilizing force that equips children with empathy, responsibility, and moral discernment. Primary education is uniquely positioned to shape these foundational dispositions before external influences become stronger and more contradictory. Investigating the cultural and relational contexts of character formation thus provides insights crucial for long-term educational reform. Sustained character development also contributes to broader sustainability goals by nurturing ethically grounded communities (Jordan, 2023, 2023). When schools fail to cultivate consistent moral habits, society risks reproducing cycles of conflict and moral disengagement. Therefore, a focused inquiry into how character is formed and sustained in school culture is not only academically relevant but socially necessary.

The rationale for this study rests on the recognition that character formation is a cultural and relational process rather than a discrete instructional activity. Although policies in many countries mandate character education, schools often struggle to translate these mandates into sustainable practices that shape long-term behavior (Muñoz-Losa et al., 2025). This study seeks to understand how school culture—expressed through routines, modeling, and shared expectations—creates an ethical environment in which children gradually internalize values. By documenting lived experiences rather than prescriptive frameworks, the research offers a nuanced perspective on how character practices emerge organically. This focus is particularly relevant where family reinforcement of moral values is inconsistent, making the school environment a compensatory ethical space. The study also reframes character formation as cultural sustainability, emphasizing the preservation of ethical habits over time rather than mere behavior correction. Through this lens, the research aims to contribute conceptually to global discussions on character education as a sustained cultural process.

Studies on educational culture highlight the strong influence of institutional norms on teachers' and students' ethical development. Vorobyeva & Levan, (2018) show that preschool organizational culture shapes teachers' responses to ethical dilemmas, reinforcing the idea that moral climates are collectively constructed rather than individually determined. Their findings emphasize that ethical sensitivity grows from shared norms embedded in daily professional

practice. Likewise, Oturgasheva, (2018) demonstrates how children engage with texts as spaces of meaning, indicating that early learning environments influence moral imagination and interpretive habits. These insights suggest that character is formed through cultural exposure and sustained interaction rather than isolated instructional episodes. Together, these works highlight the need to understand character formation within the broader cultural ecology of schools. This understanding aligns with recent trends that view moral learning as embedded in everyday interactions, not separate from them.

Research on teacher competencies and school development further strengthens this perspective. Usman et al., (2020) emphasize that competency development among prospective elementary teachers requires structured knowledge management systems, which in turn improve teachers' readiness to cultivate students' ethical dispositions. Their findings highlight the need for institutional support that enables reflective, value-driven teaching practice. Complementing this, Saltan et al., (2025) identify modern trends in educational research that stress holistic and culturally grounded approaches for addressing contemporary challenges. These studies collectively indicate that character education must be contextually adapted and supported by coherent school culture to achieve sustainable outcomes. They also reveal that character formation functions as both cultural practice and developmental process, requiring alignment between institutional structures, teacher behavior, and student engagement.

Despite growing interest in ethical school culture, few studies explore how character formation is sustained within the everyday routines of primary schools. Much of the existing research focuses on preschool settings, teacher competencies, or theoretical analyses of cultural systems, leaving limited empirical evidence on how daily school culture shapes long-term moral dispositions. Moreover, little is known about how students internalize character practices through repeated routines and relational interactions. Inconsistencies between school expectations and home or community environments also receive insufficient scholarly attention. This creates a gap in understanding the dynamic interaction between institutional norms, teacher modeling, and children's lived experiences. Furthermore, the influence of cultural coherence—how well school practices align with students' social contexts—remains underexplored. These gaps highlight the need for a focused, context-sensitive examination of character sustainability in primary-school environments.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how ethical school culture contributes to the sustainability of character formation among primary-school students. The study explores how routines, teacher modeling, and relational norms interact to shape enduring moral dispositions. It seeks to determine the extent to which character practices emerge through exposure, participation, and reflection. The inquiry includes an examination of contextual factors that facilitate or impede the internalization of character values. The study also considers how students interpret and respond to ethical expectations embedded in their school environment. In addition, the research aims to identify the influence of teacher behavior on children's ethical awareness beyond formal instructional activities. Ultimately, the goal is to provide a grounded conceptual understanding of sustainable character formation within school culture. Through this approach, the study aims to contribute meaningfully to international discourse on character and sustainability.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore how character formation is sustained within the ethical culture of Indonesian primary schools. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to capture the lived experiences of teachers and students as they interpret and practice ethical values in daily school life. This design aligns with contemporary research emphasizing that character development must be understood as a cultural and relational process rather than a discrete instructional program, as highlighted by (Atkinson et al., 2025; Kim & Saplan, 2024). The study focused on naturalistic observations and in-depth reflections to ensure that findings emerged from authentic school routines. Such an approach enabled the identification of subtle practices that shape students' moral dispositions over time. The design also ensured that interpretations were grounded in participants' subjective meanings rather than predetermined conceptual categories. Consistent with qualitative inquiry, the study prioritized depth of insight over generalizability while maintaining rigorous interpretive procedures. Hence, this design provided a rich framework for examining the sustainability of ethical school culture within real educational contexts.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of classroom teachers and students from a primary school known for its active character education initiatives. Teachers were selected based on their direct involvement in daily routines and their experience in implementing school-wide ethical practices. Students were included to capture how character norms were understood, interpreted, and enacted from a learner's perspective. The selection of participants followed purposive sampling techniques commonly recommended in qualitative education studies, such as those used by (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Dahal et al., 2024). This sampling strategy ensured that those most familiar with character formation processes were represented in the data. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from teachers as well as guardians of student participants. Diversity in teaching experience and student backgrounds was considered to reflect the natural variation within school culture. This composition allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how character practices are sustained across roles and interactions within the school community.

Instrument

The primary instruments used in this study were semi-structured interviews, extended classroom observations, and documentation reviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to articulate their perceptions of routines, ethical expectations, and teacher–student interactions while maintaining flexibility to explore emerging topics. Observations were conducted across various settings—morning routines, classroom instruction, break periods, and communal activities—to capture ethical behaviors as they naturally unfolded. This multimodal approach is consistent with qualitative best practices that emphasize triangulation to strengthen the credibility of interpretations, as noted (Serafini & Reid, 2023; Sommer, 2021). Documentation, including school guidelines and character education materials, supplemented interview and observational data by providing institutional context. Field notes were written immediately after each observation to preserve detail and minimize recall bias. All instruments were designed to reveal the cultural processes through which character formation is reinforced

daily. Collectively, these tools provided a holistic and trustworthy portrayal of the school’s ethical culture.

Data Analysis Plan

Data were analyzed using an iterative thematic analysis process to ensure that themes emerged inductively from participants’ lived experiences. The analysis began with open coding, in which transcripts and field notes were examined line by line to identify initial concepts. These codes were then grouped into broader categories that reflected recurring patterns across teacher and student narratives. This analytic process follows the interpretive logic commonly applied in phenomenological studies and aligns with the cultural analysis approach described by (Oluka, 2025; Watson, 2025). After refining categories, themes were constructed to represent the core dynamics of character sustainability within the school environment. Throughout analysis, constant comparison techniques were used to evaluate consistency across data sources such as interviews, observations, and documents. Analytic memos were created to track emerging insights and preserve the transparency of interpretive decisions. To enhance trustworthiness, findings were reviewed with selected participants for member validation. This systematic plan ensured that the resulting themes accurately reflected the lived realities of ethical school culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The analysis revealed that sustainable character formation emerged primarily through repeated ethical routines embedded in daily school life. Teachers consistently modeled behaviors such as respectful greetings, patient communication, and responsible classroom management, which students gradually internalized as shared norms. Observations showed that students began initiating prosocial behavior independently after several weeks, indicating that internalization had begun to occur. Interview data also confirmed that children associated these routines with feelings of belonging and emotional security in the school environment. Teachers emphasized that consistency, rather than intensity, was the key factor in fostering durable ethical habits. Documentation supported these findings by showing that the school’s written policies aligned with observed practices, suggesting a coherent ethical climate. Students expressed that they felt “guided” rather than “instructed,” which demonstrates the cultural rather than procedural nature of character transmission. Overall, the results show that ethical school culture functions as a sustained environment of learning rather than a formal program.

Table 1. Summary of Observed Character Formation Practices

Practice Type	Description of Behavior	Evidence from Field Notes
Daily Ethical Routines	Greetings, cleaning, communal activities	Observed consistently every morning
Teacher Modeling	Respectful communication and fair discipline	Repeated across classroom and non-classroom spaces
Peer Interaction Norms	Cooperative play, conflict mediation	Students increasingly initiated conflict resolution
Moral Reflection Moments	Short discussions after activities	Students referenced these during interviews

This table summarizes key character formation practices identified during field observations. The evidence shows that routines, modeling, peer norms, and reflection moments all contribute to sustaining an ethical school culture.

Discussion

The findings reinforce the argument that character formation is a culturally embedded process shaped through daily routines rather than through isolated instructional interventions. This aligns with the insights of Vorobyeva and Levan (2018), who argue that ethical sensitivity emerges from shared cultural norms within educational institutions. The consistency between teacher behavior and school expectations in this study reflects the relational coherence emphasized by Usman et al. (2024) in the context of teacher development. Similarly, Oturgasheva (2018) highlights the importance of early interpretive environments, supporting the idea that children internalize values through repeated exposure to meaning-rich experiences. The prominence of teacher modeling in shaping prosocial behaviors also echoes findings from broader cultural education research such as Saltan et al. (2025). The development of independent prosocial behavior among students further supports theories of intrinsic moral motivation, where values become internal regulatory mechanisms. The school environment thus functions not merely as a site of instruction but as a cultural microcosm that sustains ethical learning. These findings collectively suggest that sustainable character formation requires cultural coherence rather than programmatic intensity.

The study also reveals important tensions between school-based ethical norms and external environments, highlighting a key area of concern in contemporary moral education. Vorobyeva and Levan (2018) note that cultural inconsistency can weaken ethical reinforcement among young learners, a pattern reflected in the mismatch between school values and home expectations reported by teachers. (Usman et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021) similarly suggest that teacher readiness alone cannot sustain character formation if broader social systems fail to reinforce the same values. The role of reflection moments documented in this study supports Oturgasheva's (2018) argument that interpretive dialogue strengthens value internalization by enabling children to articulate their moral reasoning. The strong influence of teacher conduct aligns with (Mohi Ud Din et al., 2025; Saltan et al., 2025), who emphasize that ethical leadership shapes sustainable educational cultures. Additional alignment with (Miglietta et al., 2024; Ochoa & Dela Cruz, 2025) can be seen in the way school norms negotiate broader cultural pluralisms affecting children's moral development. These findings also resonate with the concerns of (Roest et al., 2023), who highlights the role of representation and relational dynamics in shaping ethical perspectives. Overall, the discussion indicates that character sustainability depends on multilayered cultural alignment across school, family, and society.

Implications

The results of this study have significant implications for designing sustainable character education models in primary schools. First, the findings suggest that policymakers should shift from curriculum-based approaches toward school-culture approaches that emphasize consistent ethical modeling. Schools may benefit from investing in professional development that helps teachers cultivate ethical presence rather than relying on scripted value lessons. The evidence also underscores the need for stronger partnerships between schools and families to reduce cultural inconsistencies in value reinforcement. For curriculum designers, the findings highlight the importance of embedding moral reflection moments into everyday instruction rather than isolating them in special programs. The study further implies that sustainable character formation contributes to broader societal resilience by fostering empathy and responsibility in young learners. Educational leaders may also consider adopting routines, rituals, and symbolic practices

that strengthen shared values. Ultimately, the implications point to the need for holistic frameworks that integrate cultural, relational, and instructional elements of ethical development.

Limitations

This study is limited by its focus on a single primary school, which restricts the generalizability of findings across diverse educational contexts. The reliance on phenomenological methods, while rich in detail, limits the ability to quantify the impact of specific character practices on measurable outcomes. Participant perspectives may also be influenced by social desirability, particularly in interviews addressing moral behavior. Observations, though extensive, are inherently interpretive and shaped by researcher positionality. Additionally, the study does not examine longitudinal effects, making it difficult to determine whether character sustainability persists beyond the school year. External influences such as family dynamics and community culture were acknowledged but not systematically analyzed. The study would benefit from future comparative or mixed-methods designs that strengthen empirical robustness. Despite these limitations, the findings offer valuable insights into the cultural dynamics of character formation.

Suggestions

Future research should explore character sustainability across multiple schools to capture variation in cultural practices and institutional climates. Mixed-method approaches may help quantify the influence of specific routines or teacher behaviors on students' moral development. Studies involving parents and community members could illuminate external factors that shape the consistency of moral reinforcement. Researchers should also examine how digital environments interact with school-based ethical practices in contemporary childhood. Longitudinal designs would allow scholars to track whether internally formed values persist as children transition to higher grade levels. Comparative studies across cultural contexts could strengthen the global relevance of the findings. Schools are encouraged to integrate structured reflection opportunities within their daily routines to enhance students' ethical awareness. Ultimately, research and practice should work together to build culturally coherent ecosystems that support sustainable character formation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that sustainable character formation in primary schools emerges not from isolated instructional programs but from coherent ethical cultures shaped through daily routines, teacher modeling, and meaningful relational practices. The findings show that children internalize values most effectively when ethical expectations are embodied consistently across school environments rather than merely communicated through formal lessons. The emergence of independent prosocial behavior suggests that character development functions as an internal process strengthened by predictable and emotionally safe contexts. The tensions identified between school norms and external environments highlight the importance of cultural alignment for sustaining long-term ethical dispositions. These insights affirm that character education must be viewed as a cultural ecosystem rather than a pedagogical component, requiring collaboration among teachers, families, and communities. The study contributes conceptually by reframing character sustainability as an outcome of lived school culture shaped through repeated participation rather than behavioral compliance. Although limited to one school context, the research offers transferable principles for designing ethically grounded learning environments

in diverse settings. Overall, the study provides a meaningful foundation for advancing global discussions on character and sustainability within contemporary educational practice.

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