

Character Education for Improving the Ethics of Elementary School Students: A Qualitative Study at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok

Pendidikan Karakter dalam Meningkatkan Etika Siswa Sekolah Dasar: Studi Kualitatif di SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok

¹Durotul Qoyimah,²Endang Sulistyowati

¹²Islamic Religious Education, Faculty, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta

e-mail: 24204012008@student.uin-suka.ac.id

Abstract: *Students' ethical behavior remains a concern in Indonesian elementary schools, where dishonesty, indiscipline, and a lack of respect for teachers and peers continue to emerge. This study aimed to explore how character education is implemented to improve students' ethics at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed. Nine participants, comprising three homeroom teachers of Grades 4, 5, and 6 and six students, were selected purposively. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, analyzed thematically, and checked through source and technique triangulation. The findings show that honesty, responsibility, respect, discipline, and politeness were consistently reinforced through two complementary routes: integration into classroom learning, such as assignments, homework, and group discussions, and habituation through daily school routines, such as classroom duties, flag ceremonies, greetings, and compliance with school rules. These values were manifested in observable behavior, including respecting peers, obeying rules, fulfilling responsibilities, and communicating politely. The study suggests that character education becomes meaningful when moral understanding is connected to repeated practice, teacher modeling, and a supportive school environment. However, the findings are limited to a single school with a small number of participants and do not establish a causal effect; broader and longitudinal studies are therefore recommended.*

Keywords: *character education, student ethics, elementary school, character values, ethical behavior*

Abstrak: *Perilaku etis siswa masih menjadi persoalan di sekolah dasar di Indonesia, antara lain tampak pada rendahnya kejujuran, kurangnya kedisiplinan, dan kurangnya rasa hormat kepada guru serta teman sebaya. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi implementasi pendidikan karakter dalam meningkatkan etika siswa di SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Sembilan partisipan, terdiri atas tiga wali kelas IV, V, dan VI serta enam siswa, dipilih secara purposif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi, dianalisis secara tematik, dan diperiksa melalui triangulasi sumber dan teknik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kejujuran, tanggung jawab, rasa hormat, disiplin, dan kesantunan diperkuat secara konsisten melalui dua jalur yang saling melengkapi, yaitu integrasi dalam pembelajaran di kelas, seperti penugasan, pekerjaan rumah, dan diskusi kelompok, serta pembiasaan dalam rutinitas sekolah, seperti piket kelas, upacara bendera, kebiasaan menyapa, dan kepatuhan terhadap tata tertib. Nilai-nilai tersebut tampak dalam perilaku yang dapat diamati, antara lain menghargai teman, menaati aturan, memenuhi tanggung jawab, dan berkomunikasi dengan santun. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa*

pendidikan karakter menjadi bermakna ketika pemahaman moral terhubung dengan praktik berulang, keteladanan guru, dan lingkungan sekolah yang mendukung. Namun, temuan ini terbatas pada satu sekolah dengan jumlah partisipan yang kecil dan tidak menunjukkan hubungan sebab-akibat sehingga penelitian yang lebih luas dan longitudinal perlu dilakukan.

Kata Kunci: pendidikan karakter, etika siswa, sekolah dasar, nilai karakter, perilaku etis

Introduction

Students' character and ethical behavior remain a significant challenge in Indonesian education. Throughout 2024, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) recorded 241 cases in the cluster of education, leisure, culture, and religion, and 85 of the cases it handled involved schools ([Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia, 2024](#)). These figures indicate that educational environments still face challenges in fostering safe, respectful, and responsible social interactions among students. Education should therefore not focus solely on academic achievement but should also give considerable attention to students' character and ethical behavior. Fundamentally, education aims to develop the potential of younger generations so that they can grow academically and non-academically and interact positively within their social environments ([Sudirman & Cahyani, 2024](#)). Character education is central to this goal and needs to be cultivated from an early age, particularly at the elementary school level ([Dewi et al., 2021](#)). When implemented from elementary school onward, character education is expected to foster positive habits, responsible attitudes, and the ability to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. It thus provides an important foundation for students' personal and ethical development in preparation for their future lives ([Setiadi & Rondli, 2024](#)).

Education and ethics are distinct components, yet both are essential for raising well-behaved children and cannot be separated in practice ([Lestari et al., 2024](#)). Ethics in education can be understood as part of a continuous educational process that runs alongside students' lives, so that character values are embedded in every learning activity to improve students' ethics ([Supiyardi et al., 2024](#)). The ethical values contained in learning need to be applied daily so that students become accustomed to them and can develop their talents and interests in balance with sound ethics. An educated person is reflected in daily conduct, particularly in polite speech and behavior. Ethics is therefore fundamental to education because it shapes the character of educated students ([Annur et al., 2021](#)). Umar Tirtarahardja argued that education aims to help students develop their potential and that it succeeds when educators understand and apply character education in ways that cultivate good ethics ([Kamaruddin et al., 2023](#)).

Character education reflects the behaviors, attitudes, and skills that students possess, and students with good character are able to demonstrate positive ethics in their daily lives ([Siregar et al., 2024](#)). Character education plays an important role in fostering students' ethics, reducing unethical behavior, and addressing crises in traditional values ([Santika, 2020](#)). It also prepares students to be sensitive to social problems, willing to help others, and able to interact in diverse societies; in doing so, it improves the quality of students' lives through strong ethics and benefits the nation more broadly ([Gultom et al., 2024](#)). As times change, student behavior has also changed, including the emergence of negative ethical tendencies. Character education is therefore essential for improving students' ethics and preventing misconduct, and it needs to be taught from an early age at the elementary school level ([Marpaung et al., 2023](#)). Through character education, students are expected to distinguish between good and bad behavior, develop positive ethics consistent with the values taught, and avoid negative behavior at school, in the community, and within the family ([Hazmi et al., 2024](#)).

Unethical behavior is still found in school environments. At SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok, several phenomena were identified, including low honesty in school activities, a lack of

discipline, and a lack of respect for teachers and peers. These phenomena suggest that character education for improving ethics has not been fully optimal and requires serious attention from various parties, especially educators, so that students internalize ethical values such as responsibility, honesty, mutual care, politeness, tolerance, and respect through character education that is systematically embedded in the learning process. Schools are expected to create environments that shape good, ethical, and positive behavior both inside and outside school through character education taught and modeled by educators. However, implementing character education involves challenges related to both educators and students. Not all educators serve as good role models, not all schools integrate character values into the learning process, and not all students are willing to change character traits that have already become embedded, particularly those formed in the family environment. Several factors may contribute to students' negative ethical behavior, including the influence of changing times, peers at school or elsewhere, overindulgent parenting, and weakening parental attention (Fajar et al., 2025). These problems provide the rationale for examining character education in improving the ethics of elementary school students.

Several previous studies are relevant to this problem. Rahman et al. (2023) found that social media strongly influences the formation of students' character, including their morals and ethics. Their study also showed that social media is closely intertwined with students' lives and is difficult to separate from them; it functions as a double-edged sword, because misuse may lead to moral and ethical decline, whereas appropriate use can expand students' social networks. Kamaruddin et al. (2023) reported that character education programs in schools can have a significant positive impact on the development of students' social and moral ethics. Effective implementation requires teacher commitment, parental support, and a supportive school environment, although obstacles remain, such as limited teacher training, low parental involvement, and excessive academic pressure. Furthermore, Nur et al. (2023) concluded that Islamic religious education contributes to the revitalization of character education by guiding and supervising the younger generation through the cultivation of religious values, faith and piety, knowledge, and good morals, so that young people can preserve Islamic traditions and values without falling behind in the current of globalization.

These studies show that character education has been examined from several perspectives, including the influence of social media on students' character, the contribution of school programs to students' ethics and morals, and the role of Islamic religious education in character formation. However, they have not specifically explored how character education is implemented through students' daily activities or how character values are reflected in their ethical behavior within a specific elementary school context. This gap provides the basis for the present study at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok. The novelty of this study lies in its contextual examination of character education through students' everyday school experiences, particularly the integration of honesty, responsibility, respect, discipline, and politeness into learning activities and their habituation through school routines and social interactions. Accordingly, this study aims to explore how character education is implemented to improve students' ethics at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok and to provide empirical insight into how character values are manifested in students' daily ethical behavior.

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore the implementation of character education in improving students' ethical behavior (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The study was conducted at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok over a four-month period from February to May. Nine participants were involved: three homeroom teachers of Grades 4, 5, and

6 and six students, two from each grade. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement in, and experience with, character education practices at the school.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted with the three homeroom teachers and six students to obtain information about the implementation of character education and its manifestation in students' daily ethical behavior (Yin, 2016). Observations were conducted during learning activities and students' daily interactions at school, focusing on behaviors related to honesty, responsibility, discipline, respect, and politeness. Documentation and field notes were used to complement the interview and observational data. A semi-structured interview guide served as the primary instrument, while observation sheets and field notes served as supporting instruments (Moleong, 2020).

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis involved several stages: familiarization with the interview transcripts, observation notes, and relevant documents; identification and coding of meaningful data; grouping of similar codes into categories; development and review of themes; and interpretation of the themes according to the research focus. Text analysis was also used to examine interview transcripts, field notes, and supporting documents in order to identify recurring expressions, meanings, and patterns related to character education and students' ethical behavior. The results of these analytical processes were then integrated to explain how character education was implemented and manifested in students' everyday behavior at school.

The credibility of the findings was established through source and technique triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from the students with that provided by the three homeroom teachers. Technique triangulation was carried out by cross-checking interview data with classroom and school observations as well as relevant documentation and field notes. Data were considered credible when consistent patterns were identified across participants and data collection techniques. When discrepancies emerged, the data were re-examined across the available sources to obtain a more contextual interpretation of the findings.

Results and Discussion

Character and Ethical Values in Students' Daily School Life

The findings indicate that character education at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok is reflected in the cultivation of ethical values in students' daily school life. Interviews with the homeroom teachers of Grades 4, 5, and 6 and with the student participants show that honesty, responsibility, respect, discipline, and politeness are the main values reinforced through learning activities and everyday interactions at school. These values were not merely introduced as theoretical concepts but were enacted in students' daily practices. Responsibility, for example, was developed through classroom duties, completion of assignments and homework, participation in flag ceremonies, and group discussions. Respect and politeness were reflected in students' interactions with teachers and peers, while discipline was reinforced through compliance with classroom and school rules. Observations further showed that students demonstrated ethical behavior by respecting their peers, obeying established rules, fulfilling their responsibilities, and communicating politely. These findings indicate that ethical values become meaningful when they are continuously practiced in students' everyday school experiences.

The manifestation of these values shows that ethics in the elementary school context is not limited to students' conceptual understanding of what is good or bad but is expressed in

concrete behavior. Ethics functions as a set of values and norms that guides individuals in determining appropriate behavior in their daily lives, which is why it cannot be separated from the educational process (Annur et al., 2021). This finding is also relevant to Al-Ghazali's conception of character, in which good morals are built from an early age and become embedded within the individual, so that appropriate behavior eventually emerges naturally through habituation (Kurniawan, 2018). In the context of this study, repeated practices such as completing responsibilities, obeying rules, respecting others, being honest, and communicating politely can therefore be understood as processes through which ethical values are gradually internalized into students' behavior.

The findings also demonstrate that the development of ethical behavior requires consistent reinforcement within the school environment. Character education involves not only knowledge of moral values but also awareness and concrete actions through which these values are practiced in everyday life (Gunawan, 2022). Teachers play a particularly important role because students encounter character values through both learning activities and daily interactions with educators. Teachers are expected not only to communicate character values but also to model positive behavior in their interactions with students and other members of the school community (Hariandi, Dwitama, et al., 2023). In this study, the repeated reinforcement of honesty, responsibility, respect, discipline, and politeness indicates that character formation is embedded in students' routine experiences rather than delivered exclusively through explicit moral instruction.

The school environment also provides an important context for sustaining these ethical practices. A supportive school environment can strengthen positive social norms and encourage students to demonstrate appropriate behavior in their interactions with teachers and peers (Supriyana & Lestari, 2023). The findings at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok support this perspective, as ethical values were reinforced through classroom responsibilities, school rules, learning activities, and social interactions. The cultivation of students' ethics can therefore be understood as a continuous process involving the interaction of moral understanding, habituation, teacher reinforcement, and the school environment. This process enables character education to move beyond the transmission of moral knowledge toward ethical behavior that is observable in students' everyday school life.

Integration of Character Education into Learning Activities

The findings show that character education at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok is integrated into the learning process rather than positioned as a separate activity. According to the homeroom teachers of Grades 4, 5, and 6, character values are incorporated into learning activities and reinforced through students' academic responsibilities. Honesty, responsibility, and respect are among the values most consistently emphasized during learning. Their integration can be observed in activities such as completing assignments and homework and participating in group discussions. Through these activities, students are expected not only to complete academic tasks but also to take responsibility for their obligations and to behave appropriately when interacting with others. Classroom learning therefore serves as one of the main contexts in which character values are translated into students' everyday practices.

The integration of character values into classroom activities demonstrates that character education is closely connected with the instructional process. Character education involves the development of knowledge, awareness, and behavior and therefore needs to be incorporated into various educational components, including the curriculum and classroom learning (Gunawan, 2022). From this perspective, assignments and homework are not merely academic activities; they also provide opportunities for students to practice responsibility. Similarly, group discussions provide a social learning context in which students can practice respect,

cooperation, and appropriate communication. This supports the view that character education should enable students not only to recognize positive values but also to apply them in concrete situations.

Teachers have an important role in this integration because they organize learning activities and interact directly with students throughout the instructional process. Character formation is influenced by teachers' competence, planning, and efforts to introduce and strengthen ethical values through educational activities (Hidayati, 2022). Teachers also contribute to students' character development through the examples they set in everyday classroom interactions (Hariandi, Dwitama, et al., 2023). Reviews of values education similarly identify role modeling and interactional practices among the most effective strategies for fostering ethical and prosocial behavior in schools (Berkowitz, 2011). The findings of this study indicate that the role of teachers at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok extends beyond delivering academic content to creating learning situations in which students can practice honesty, responsibility, and respect.

The integration of character education into learning also shows that character development requires continuity between moral understanding and behavioral practice. Character education aims to help students know the good, value it, and act on it in their daily behavior (Lickona, 1991). This process can be strengthened when character values are consistently embedded in ordinary learning experiences rather than introduced only through occasional moral instruction. Activities such as completing assignments, fulfilling academic responsibilities, and participating in group discussions therefore function as practical contexts for strengthening students' ethical behavior. In this way, classroom learning at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok contributes simultaneously to academic development and the cultivation of character values.

Character Habituation through Daily School Activities

The findings indicate that character education at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok is also implemented through habituation in students' daily school activities. The interviews and observations show that students were accustomed to practicing ethical behavior through simple but repeated routines, including greeting others, speaking politely, being honest, carrying out classroom duties, participating in flag ceremonies, and complying with school rules. These activities give students opportunities to encounter and practice character values beyond formal academic instruction. Classroom duties require students to fulfill assigned responsibilities, while compliance with school rules reinforces discipline. Greetings and polite communication, in turn, provide a practical context for students to show respect in their interactions with teachers and peers. The repetition of these practices thus constitutes an important mechanism through which character values are reinforced in everyday school life.

Habituation is particularly relevant to character education because moral values need to be practiced repeatedly before they become part of students' behavioral patterns. Al-Ghazali's thought on character education emphasizes that good morals should be cultivated from childhood through guidance and practice until they become part of the individual's disposition (Kurniawan, 2018). The findings of this study correspond with this perspective because character values at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok are reinforced not only through verbal instruction but also through repeated participation in school routines. Greeting others, speaking politely, completing classroom duties, and complying with rules can therefore be understood as practical forms of habituation through which ethical values are gradually internalized.

Consistency is another important element in this habituation process. Character formation requires continuous reinforcement from the environments in which children interact, particularly schools and families (Gunawan, 2022). Within the school context, routine activities

provide repeated opportunities for students to practice expected character values. Previous research has likewise identified the flag ceremony as a school routine through which discipline and other character values can be reinforced consistently (Hariandi, Melhana, et al., 2023). The findings at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok show a similar pattern, as participation in flag ceremonies was identified alongside other routine activities through which responsibility and discipline were practiced. Routine school activities can thus function not merely as administrative or ceremonial practices but also as contexts for character formation when ethical values are consistently reinforced through them.

The habituation process is also supported by the social environment in which students interact. A supportive school environment can strengthen positive social norms and encourage students to reproduce positive behavior in their everyday interactions (Supriyana & Lestari, 2023). In this study, practices such as greeting others, communicating politely, carrying out classroom duties, and obeying school rules show how the school environment provides concrete situations for students to practice ethical values. Character habituation is therefore strengthened when ethical expectations are incorporated into recurring school routines and social interactions. Consequently, the cultivation of character at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok can be understood as a continuous process in which repeated practices help bridge moral understanding and students' everyday ethical conduct.

Manifestation of Character Education in Students' Ethical Behavior

The findings indicate that the implementation of character education at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok is manifested in several forms of students' ethical behavior. According to the observations and the interviews with teachers and students, ethical behavior was particularly evident in students' respect for their peers, compliance with school and classroom rules, responsibility for assigned duties, and use of polite language in everyday interactions. These behaviors correspond to the character values consistently reinforced through learning activities and school routines. Responsibility, for example, was reflected in students' completion of assigned tasks and participation in classroom duties, while respect was manifested in their interactions with peers. Compliance with established rules reflected disciplined behavior, whereas polite communication represented the application of respect and courtesy in social interactions. These findings demonstrate that the character values promoted by the school can be identified in observable forms of students' everyday behavior.

The manifestation of these behaviors is important because character education is expected to move beyond students' knowledge of moral values toward the internalization and application of those values in everyday conduct. Character education is directed toward enabling students to understand, internalize, and practice character values so that they are manifested in daily behavior (Gunawan, 2022). The findings of this study correspond with this perspective because the values reinforced through learning and habituation were also reflected in students' interactions and responsibilities. In this context, respecting peers, fulfilling assigned responsibilities, complying with rules, and communicating politely can be interpreted as behavioral manifestations of the ethical values cultivated within the school environment.

The findings are also relevant to the emphasis on universal values in character education. Respect and responsibility are regarded as core values that schools can legitimately teach, because they underpin other virtues such as honesty and tolerance and enable individuals to interact constructively within their social environment (Lickona, 1991). In the present study, respect and responsibility were particularly visible in students' daily interactions and participation in school activities. This indicates that character education becomes meaningful when ethical values are translated into concrete social behavior rather than remaining at the level of moral knowledge. The development of ethical behavior therefore involves a connection between the

values communicated by teachers, the opportunities provided by school activities, and students' actual conduct.

Students' ethical behavior also cannot be separated from the role of teachers and the school environment in continuously reinforcing expected values. Teachers contribute to character development not only by providing instruction but also by demonstrating positive behavior in their everyday interactions with students (Hariandi, Dwitama, et al., 2023). At the same time, a supportive school environment can encourage students to adopt positive social norms and apply them in interactions with peers and other members of the school community (Supriyana & Lestari, 2023). The findings at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok indicate that these two dimensions operate together: teachers communicate and reinforce character values, while students are given recurring opportunities to practice them through learning activities, school routines, and social interactions.

Taken together, the findings indicate a connection between the implementation of character education and the manifestation of ethical behavior in students' daily school life. Character values such as responsibility, respect, discipline, honesty, and politeness are introduced and reinforced through classroom learning and habituation and are reflected in students' observable behavior. However, given the descriptive qualitative design of this study, these findings should be interpreted as evidence of how character education is implemented and manifested in students' behavior rather than as evidence of a causal effect. The study therefore highlights character education as an ongoing process in which moral understanding, repeated practice, teacher reinforcement, and the school environment interact to shape students' everyday ethical conduct.

Table 1. Summary of Character Education Findings from Interviews and Observations

Main Theme	Character Values	Evidence from Interviews	Evidence from Observations	Manifestation in Students' Behavior
Character values in daily school life	Honesty, responsibility, respect, discipline, politeness	Teachers reported that character values were consistently reinforced through learning and daily school activities	Character values were observed in students' interactions and participation in school activities	Respecting peers, fulfilling responsibilities, obeying rules, and communicating politely
Integration into learning	Honesty, responsibility, respect	Teachers indicated that character values were incorporated into learning activities	Students completed assignments/homework and participated in group discussions	Responsibility for academic tasks and respectful participation in learning
Habituation through school routines	Responsibility, discipline, respect, politeness	Teachers explained that character	Students participated in classroom duties, flag ceremonies, greetings, and school routines	Discipline, responsibility, and appropriate

		values were practiced through daily and routine activities		social interaction
Manifestation of ethical behavior	Respect, responsibility, discipline, politeness	Teachers identified character values as being reflected in students' everyday behavior	Students were observed respecting peers, complying with rules, carrying out responsibilities, and speaking politely	Observable ethical conduct in everyday school life

As summarized in Table 1, the interview and observational data reveal a consistent pattern. Character education at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok is implemented through the integration of character values into classroom learning and their habituation through routine school activities. Honesty, responsibility, respect, discipline, and politeness constitute the central values identified across these practices, and they are manifested in observable student behavior, including respecting peers, complying with school rules, fulfilling assigned responsibilities, and communicating politely. The convergence between interview and observational evidence strengthens the interpretation that character education in this school operates as a continuous process connecting moral understanding, classroom practice, school habituation, and everyday ethical behavior. Rather than demonstrating a causal change in students' behavior, the findings provide qualitative evidence of how character values are implemented and manifested in students' everyday school experiences.

Conclusion

This study concludes that character education at SD Negeri Maguwoharjo 1 Depok is implemented through the integration of moral values into classroom learning, school routines, and everyday social interactions, thereby answering the question of how character education is carried out to improve students' ethics. The development of students' ethics does not depend solely on explicit instruction about good and bad behavior; it depends on continuity between moral understanding and repeated opportunities to practice character values in authentic school situations. Honesty, responsibility, respect, discipline, and politeness become meaningful when they are embedded in academic responsibilities, classroom interactions, and habitual school practices, and they are reflected in students' respect for peers, compliance with rules, fulfillment of responsibilities, and polite communication. Theoretically, the study contributes to the understanding of elementary school character education by showing that the connection between learning, habituation, and the school social environment is central to the manifestation of ethical values in students' daily lives.

Practically, the findings imply that schools should strengthen the systematic integration of character values across classroom instruction and routine school activities, while teachers should consistently model these values and provide opportunities for students to practice and reflect on them in concrete situations, supported by closer collaboration with parents so that the values reinforced at school are sustained at home. However, this study is limited by its

descriptive qualitative design, its focus on a single elementary school, and its small number of participants (three homeroom teachers and six students); the findings are therefore context-specific, cannot establish a causal effect, and cannot be generalized directly to broader student populations. Future studies should involve more diverse schools and participants and may employ comparative, longitudinal, or mixed-method designs to examine how character values develop over time and how school- and family-based character education contributes to students' ethical development.

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