

Ethics-Based Pedagogical Strategies for Character Formation in Elementary School Students

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive qualitative study examines how three elementary school teachers translate professional ethics into pedagogical practices associated with students' character-related behavior in Kertosono, Nganjuk, Indonesia. Data were collected through interviews with three teachers and nine students, one classroom observations at each of three public schools, and instructional documents. The analysis identified assessment of learning needs, differentiated support, collaborative and democratic activities, and assessment and feedback as reported strategies. Their emphases differed: the teacher at Kutorejo described ongoing monitoring and additional support; the teacher at Pandantoyo emphasized accessible language and contextual examples. Interview and observation findings were not always identical: during the observed lessons, both self-confidence indicators were rated as occasionally evident at Pandantoyo and Pelem 1, while several assessment and feedback indicators were also rated as occasionally evident at Pelem 1. Teachers reported challenges involving parent-school expectation. Conceptually, the study interprets the teachers' code of ethics as a guide to classroom decisions; practically, it identifies strategies and constraints; empirically, it compares evidence across three schools. The findings illustrate opportunities for character-related practice but do not establish causal or long-term changes in students' character.



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A. INTRODUCTION

Elementary education contributes to students' academic learning and character development (Abd Rahman et al., 2022; Lickona, 2019). Children at this stage learn to follow shared rules, take responsibility for tasks, interact with peers, and express their views. Character education therefore needs to be incorporated into everyday learning rather than confined to separate moral instruction. Integration into curricular activities can give students opportunities to practice values through meaningful tasks and social interaction (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2021).

Preliminary observations in Kertosono District, Nganjuk Regency, were conducted from 26 to 28 May 2025, followed by preliminary school visits from 28 May to 2 June 2025. At SDN Pelem 1, the researcher noted respectful teacher-student interaction and routine character-building activities, while the principal reported that teachers had not received specific training on the teachers' code of ethics. At SD Negeri 1 Kutorejo, the principal described the inclusion of ethical principles in supervision and evaluation, as well as teachers' participation in professional development. Information about implementation at SD Negeri 1 Pandantoyo remained incomplete at this preliminary stage because the teacher instrument had not yet been returned. These records indicated

variation in available information and professional support, rather than a measured difference in student character outcomes.

The preliminary records did not count or systematically describe specific student character problems. Nevertheless, they raised a practical issue for character education: the presence of ethical principles in school-level guidance does not by itself show how teachers enact them in daily classroom decisions. In particular, it remained necessary to examine how instruction gives students opportunities to practice discipline, responsibility, cooperation, politeness, honesty, and self-confidence. The study therefore focuses on the relationship between professional ethical commitments, teachers' pedagogical choices, and character-related behavior reported or observed during learning.

Pedagogical competence involves understanding learners' characteristics, designing and implementing instruction, assessing learning, and supporting students' development (Akbar, 2021; Bukit & Tarigan, 2022). The teachers' code of ethics adds a moral dimension by emphasizing professional integrity, fairness, and respect for students. From this perspective, assessment of learning needs, differentiated support, opportunities to participate in classroom decisions, and transparent feedback can be considered ways of enacting ethical commitments through teaching. Participatory character education likewise emphasizes students' opportunities to reason, make choices, and reflect on their behavior (Hart, 2022).

Previous studies have discussed the integration of character education into elementary curricula (Ciampa & Wolfe, 2021), teachers' pedagogical competence and character formation (Bukit & Tarigan, 2022), and participatory character education (Hart, 2022). This study offers three context-specific contributions. Conceptually, it examines the teachers' code of ethics as a guide to everyday pedagogical decision-making rather than only a set of professional rules. Practically, it identifies ways teachers describe and enact ethical commitments in instruction and assessment, together with reported barriers. Empirically, it compares interviews, one lesson observation at each school, and instructional documents across three public elementary schools in Kertosono District. These contributions concern the enactment and limits of pedagogical practices; they do not demonstrate causal effects on students' character.

Against this background, the study asks how teachers implement pedagogical strategies grounded in the teachers' code of ethics and how their practices and challenges differ across schools. The study aims to identify the strategies employed, examine the character-related behaviors reported or observed, and analyze the obstacles and differences in implementation across the three participating schools.

B. METHODS

This descriptive qualitative study was conducted at SD Negeri 1 Kutorejo, SD Negeri 1 Pandantoyo, and SDN Pelem 1 in Kertosono District, Nganjuk Regency, Indonesia. Preliminary visits occurred in May-June 2025; data collection for the main study took place between November 2025 and January 2026. Three teachers (GS, GJ, and GB) and none students from grades 3-5 were selected purposively. Teacher and student interviews, one classroom observation in grade 5 at each school, and relevant instructional documents were used as data sources. The observation sheets recorded whether specified behaviors were not evident (1), occasionally evident (2), frequently evident (3), or consistently evident (4) during the observed session. These ordinal ratings describe observed sessions and were not used to estimate changes in students' character.

Interview and observations records were organized by the study's three research foci: pedagogical strategies for character-oriented learning, challenges in applying the teachers' code of ethics and pedagogical competence, and the role of the code in classroom practice. Data were reduced displayed, and interpreted through conclusion drawing and verification; NVivo was used to assist organization and coding. Teacher accounts were compared with student interviews, observation sheets, and available documents. Interview interpretations were checked with informants as described in the thesis. To protect student privacy, the article uses participant codes rather than children's names. Cross-school interpretations were based on convergence and divergence among these sources, not on school rankings or causal estimates.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Across the three schools, teachers described assessing learning needs, adapting instruction, organizing collaborative and democratic activities, and assessing students' learning processes. These practices were not enacted identically, nor did a single observation at each school confirm every strategy reported in interviews. The analysis first describes common practices and then compares school-specific emphases, student accounts, observation ratings, and challenges faced by the teachers..

1. Diagnostic Assessment as a Foundation for Pedagogical Equity.

All three teachers implemented initial assessments to gain an understanding of students' abilities, learning needs, and learning styles. GS monitored students' development through ongoing daily assessments and direct observation of both academic and non-academic dimensions. GJ employed questioning activities, quizzes, pre-tests, and classroom observations to identify students' learning conditions and readiness. Meanwhile, GB utilized observation-based diagnostic assessments to determine students' abilities and learning style tendencies.

These practices illustrate how the teachers' code of ethics is enacted through the principle of pedagogical equity. Rather than perceiving students as a uniform group with similar abilities and needs, teachers acknowledge them as individuals possessing diverse characteristics, backgrounds, and learning needs. This approach enables teachers to provide learning opportunities that are responsive to student diversity and supportive of inclusive educational practices.

Shabani *et al* (2010) argue that teachers play an essential role in facilitating students' learning by providing guidance and scaffolding that are responsive to their individual needs. Such support enables learners to move from what they are able to accomplish independently to what they can achieve with the assistance of teachers or more knowledgeable others. Effective scaffolding requires teachers to understand students' prior knowledge, abilities, and learning needs. Consequently, diagnostic assessment should be viewed not merely as an administrative requirement but as an ethical responsibility that enables teachers to design learning experiences that are responsive to students' circumstances, needs, and interests. This finding is consistent with the concept of assessment for learning, which emphasizes that assessment should be used to identify students' needs and inform instructional decisions that support learning improvement (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

In terms of character development, diagnostic assessment enables teachers to provide support that is responsive to students' individual needs. Through this process, teachers can identify learners who require greater encouragement to strengthen their self-confidence, those who continue to need guidance and support, and those who are prepared to engage with more challenging tasks. Students' reports of attempting tasks

before seeking help describe opportunities to practice independence and responsibility; they do not establish that diagnostic assessment caused those behaviors. For example, SK at Kutorejo said they tried to complete tasks before asking for help, while SR at Pandantoyo acknowledged that they sometimes began tasks only after being reminded.

2. Differentiated Instruction and the Contextualization of Learning Materials

Another pedagogical strategy was evident in teachers' efforts to align instructional content with curriculum requirements while remaining responsive to students' learning needs. GS provided enrichment activities for learners who mastered the material more quickly and offered targeted support for those experiencing learning difficulties. GJ adapted instructional content based on expected learning outcomes and diagnostic assessment results, including the provision of prerequisite knowledge before introducing core subject matter. Meanwhile, GB employed simplified language, contextualized learning materials through real-life examples, and utilized concrete learning resources to enhance students' conceptual understanding.

The implementation of differentiated instruction reflects teachers' professional integrity and ethical commitment in enacting the curriculum (Nurhasanah et al., 2024). Rather than concentrating solely on covering curriculum content, teachers endeavor to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to access and comprehend learning experiences. In this regard, the teachers' code of ethics contributes to the enhancement of pedagogical quality by encouraging educators to adapt instructional approaches and learning challenges to learners' individual capabilities. Instead of imposing rigid and standardized expectations, teachers provide differentiated support that enables every student to progress and develop according to their potential. The importance of implementing differentiated instruction is further supported by the findings of D'Intino & Wang (2021), who argue that teachers need to demonstrate professional readiness to design inclusive educational practices that effectively address the diverse learning needs of students. This perspective is also supported by Tomlinson (2014), who argues that differentiated instruction enables teachers to respond effectively to students' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles.

Contextual learning approaches have been shown to enhance students' understanding of character values (Septiadevana et al., 2024). By linking instructional content to authentic situations encountered in everyday life, students are encouraged not only to comprehend academic concepts but also to recognize the connection between knowledge and responsible behavior. Contextualized teaching can create opportunities to discuss and practice character-related values, but the present study did not measure whether students internalized these values over time.

Table 1. Ethical Code-Based Pedagogical Strategies and Emerging Character Values

Strategy	Teachers' Practices	Emerging Character Values
Diagnostic Assessment	Observation, questioning, quizzes, pre-tests, and learning style assessment.	Self-confidence, responsibility, and independence.
Differentiated Instruction	Enrichment activities, individualized support, prerequisite materials, simplified language, and concrete learning media.	Fairness, responsibility, and academic integrity.
Collaborative Learning	Group discussions, project-based activities, educational games, and classroom deliberation.	Cooperation, tolerance, communication skills, and politeness.
Authentic Assessment	Portfolios, projects, observations, performance-based tasks, and constructive feedback.	Honesty, discipline, responsibility, and self-confidence.

3. Collaborative Learning and Democratic Classroom Practices.

The three teachers employed a range of instructional approaches, including classroom discussions, collaborative group work, project-based learning, the use of digital media and video resources, educational games, and outdoor learning activities where feasible. These learning experiences were intentionally designed to promote active student engagement, allowing learners not only to acquire knowledge from teachers but also to experience and internalize character values through meaningful social interaction. Within this process, students developed the ability to listen respectfully to their peers' perspectives, resolve differences through deliberation and democratic decision-making, provide mutual support, and assume responsibility for collective tasks. Collaborative learning reflects a social constructivist perspective in which knowledge is developed through interaction and shared problem solving among learners (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

The findings further reveal that democratic classroom practices constitute a key feature of the learning process. Teachers provide students with opportunities to express their views, elect group leaders, establish classroom norms, and participate in reflective activities at the conclusion of lessons. Such practices are closely aligned with the objectives of character education, as they encourage students to make informed decisions, recognize the consequences of their actions, and respect rules that are collectively negotiated and agreed upon. Furthermore, democratic classrooms that enable students to build social relationships, develop autonomy, and cultivate democratic competencies support the findings of Collins et al (2019), who highlight the crucial role of teachers in creating and sustaining democratic spaces within educational settings. The importance of democratic participation in education has long been emphasized by (Angell, 1991), who viewed schools as social environments where students learn democratic values through active participation and shared decision-making.

Students described participating in group work, assisting peers, and discussing differences in opinion, but their accounts were not uniformly positive. SS at Pandantoyo reported feeling shy about asking questions, although they did ask when a task was difficult. SAR at Pelem 1 reported rarely answering questions and sometimes waiting to be reminded before beginning a tasks; this interview form contains an inconsistent year and should not be assigned an exact date in the article until checked. Such accounts indicate that opportunities for participation coexisted with differing levels of confidence and independence among students.

4. Authentic Assessment as a Means of Reinforcing Honesty

The teachers described using different assessment practices. GS reported portfolios, projects, quizzes, performance tasks, and explanations of assessment decisions; GJ reported observation, portfolios, interviews, and written tests; and GB reported formative assessment based on students' work. The observation at Pelem 1, however, rated the visibility of authentic assessment and constructive feedback as 2 (occasionally evident) in that lesson. Therefore, the interviews establish teachers' reported approaches but do not show that every approach was consistently visible during the observed class.

Authentic assessment plays a critical role because character values cannot be adequately captured through written examinations alone. Authentic assessment is designed to evaluate students' ability to apply knowledge and skills in meaningful contexts rather than merely recalling information, thereby providing a more comprehensive representation of learning (Wiggins, 1998). Attributes such as discipline, responsibility, cooperation, politeness, and self-confidence become evident through students' participation and behavior during the learning process. By assessing students on the basis of authentic evidence derived from both their performance and conduct, teachers reinforce the understanding that honesty and genuine effort are more valuable than the pursuit of high scores alone. Consequently, assessment functions not only as a tool for measuring learning outcomes but also as an important mechanism for fostering students' moral development. Within the context of elementary education, the implementation of authentic assessment highlights the need for teachers to demonstrate consistency across all stages of the assessment process, including planning, instructional implementation, and the reporting of learning outcomes (Kadir & Hasri, 2021).

Constructive feedback from teachers further enhances students' learning motivation. Instead of perceiving learning difficulties as deficiencies, teachers encourage students to make independent efforts before receiving assistance. Such an approach promotes the development of resilience, perseverance, and self-confidence, while empowering students to take greater responsibility for their own learning.

Effective feedback plays a crucial role in improving learning outcomes because it helps students understand their current performance, identify areas for improvement, and regulate their own learning processes (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

1. Strategi Pembelajaran dalam Implementasi Kompetensi Pedagogik pada Pembentukan Karakter Peserta Didik di Sekolah Dasar - Coding

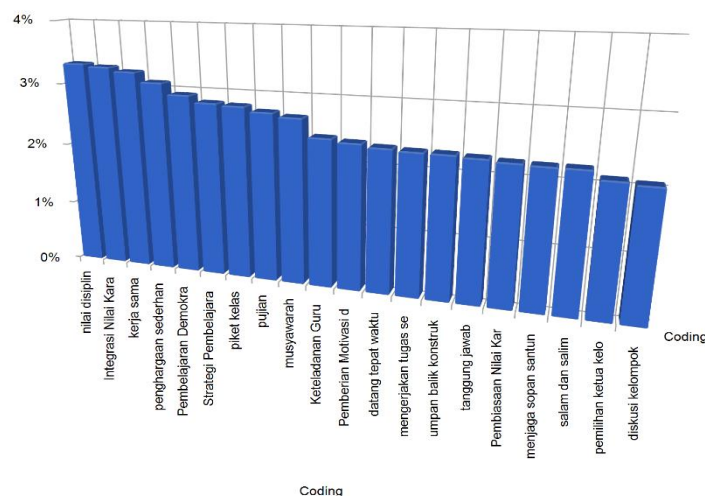


Figure 1. Relative frequency of coded themes related to character-oriented pedagogical strategies

The figure summarizes the distribution of coded material in this qualitative dataset. Coding frequency does not represent the prevalence or effectiveness of a strategy, differences between schools, or changes in students' character.

5. A Conceptual Model of Pedagogical Strategies Grounded in the Teachers' Code of Ethics

The findings suggest that pedagogical strategies grounded in the teachers' code of ethics may be conceptualized as a sequential process: teachers' code of ethics → understanding students' needs → the design of differentiated and collaborative learning experiences → authentic assessment → character internalization. In this conceptual model, the teachers' code of ethics functions as a moral foundation that guides educational practice, whereas pedagogical competence serves as the mechanism through which ethical principles are translated into instructional actions. The sequence is an interpretive framework for describing the practices reported in this study, not a tested causal pathway or evidence of long-term character internalization.

6. Originality and Contribution of the Study

The originality of this study does not stem from the argument that teachers contribute to character development, as this perspective has been extensively addressed in the literature on elementary education. Instead, the study contributes a more nuanced understanding of how the teachers' code of ethics is operationalized through pedagogical decision-making at the classroom level. The findings demonstrate that the code of ethics should not be viewed solely as a set of professional principles; rather, it is enacted through concrete pedagogical practices, including the use of diagnostic assessment, the provision of individualized support, the involvement of students in democratic classroom deliberations, and the transparent communication of assessment criteria and outcomes.

This perspective contributes to the advancement of character education research. Many character education initiatives fail to achieve their intended outcomes because character values are often reduced to slogans or formally incorporated into instructional documents without being meaningfully enacted in classroom practice. Effective character education requires sustained integration into school culture, classroom practices, and daily interactions rather than isolated moral instruction (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). The findings of this study suggest that character values become more meaningful and sustainable when they are embedded within students' lived learning experiences. Responsibility is cultivated not merely through verbal instruction but through collaborative tasks that require students to assume ownership of their work. Discipline develops not only through the enforcement of rules but also through teachers' role modeling of punctuality and the consistent management of classroom routines. Similarly, cooperation is fostered when learning activities are deliberately structured to encourage active engagement, respectful listening, and mutual support among learners. This finding is consistent with social cognitive theory, which emphasizes that learners acquire values and behaviors through observation and interaction with significant role models in their environment (Bandura, 1986).

The findings underscore that pedagogical strategies grounded in the teachers' code of ethics function as a critical link between moral commitments and instructional practice. This mediating role is particularly significant within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum, which provides teachers with substantial autonomy to design learning experiences that are responsive to students' needs and local contexts. However, such pedagogical autonomy is most effective when supported by a strong and consistent ethical foundation. Within the Indonesian educational context, elementary school

teachers perceive character education as a process of individual transformation influenced by interactions within the family, school, and wider social environment. Consequently, instructional strategies should be closely connected to students' lived experiences, enabling character values to be developed through meaningful engagement with real-life situations (Muhtar & Dallyono, 2020).

7. Cross-School Differences and Implementation Challenges

The three teachers reported a common commitment to adapting instruction, but emphasized different practices. At SD Negeri 1 Kutorejo, GS described daily monitoring, enrichment and additional support, group projects, and opportunities for students to lead or reflect on learning. At SD Negeri 1 Pandantoyo, GJ described comparing curriculum expectations with initial assessment, varying the depth of learning material, using concrete and digital media, and making classroom decisions through deliberation. At SDN Pelem 1, GB described simplifying language, using familiar examples and concrete materials, organizing group activities, and involving students in classroom rules. Thus, ethical commitments to responsiveness and respect were expressed through different pedagogical emphases rather than a single standard method.

The classroom observation records qualify this comparison. At Kutorejo on 26 November 2025 democratic classroom management and students' two self-confidence were each rated 4, while both discipline indicators were rated 3. At Pandantoyo on 12 January 2026, democratic classroom management was rated 4, but both student self-confidence indicators and the indicator for respecting peers' opinions and communicating well were rated 2. At Pelem 1 on 22 January 2026, teacher role modelling and recognition of differences in students' learning needs were rated 4, whereas the use of character-oriented teaching materials, authentic assessment, constructive feedback, and both discipline and self-confidence indicators were rated 2. In this four-point instrument, 2 means occasionally evident and 4 means consistently evident during that session. Since each school was observed once, these ratings describe observed lessons, not the quality of entire schools or changes in character over time.

Student interviews offer further context. At Kutorejo, SK described sometimes arriving late, while SI described having previously been sopekn about hurtfully by peers; both also described constructive classroom interactions. At Pandantoyo, SS said they felt shy about asking questions, and SR said they sometimes needed a prompt to begin an assignment, despite describing group deliberation and independent attempts on difficult tasks. At Pelem 1, SAR reported some times waiting for a reminder to start work and rarely answering questions; SG reported that project tasks were uncommon in their class. These examples show that reported teacher strategies and positive student accounts coexist with continuing challenges. The interviews took place during the main research period and must not be presented as preliminary observations from May-June 2025.

The teachers identified different professional and pedagogical obstacles. GS distinguished between differences in parents' expectations and school rules, which she addressed by coordinating with parents through meetings or official messages, and varied student abilities, for which she reported giving extra attention to learners who needed help. GJ described a tension between rules concerning gratification and the customary expression of appreciation to teachers. Separately, he reported that additional school duties increased his workload; his account of prioritizing tasks and doing administrative work after lessons concerns sorkload, not a documented resolution of the gratification issue. GB identified differences in students' character as an ethical challenge and described consistent, individualized guidance and cooperation with parents as responses. He separately named varied avility and motivation as pedagogical challenges.

These interview findings show that ethics-based teaching involves negotiating relationships and institutional constraints alongside instructional decisions.

Together, the three cases support a context-sensitive interpretation of the teachers' code of ethics. It may guide teachers toward fair support, respectful participation, and honest assessment, but interview claims need to be considered alongside observations and students' differing experiences. This study identifies practices and obstacles; it cannot rank the schools or establish that any reported strategy caused character change.

8. Implications for Theory and Practice

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings contribute to a broader understanding of pedagogical competence as a multidimensional construct that encompasses a strong ethical and value-oriented foundation. Pedagogical competence extends beyond the mastery of technical instructional skills to include the capacity to make pedagogical decisions that are equitable, ethically informed, and directed toward students' holistic development. Consequently, pedagogical competence should be examined in close relation to teachers' professional ethics rather than as a purely technical domain of expertise. Furthermore, the findings reinforce the view that character development is fundamentally relational in nature. Interactions between teachers and students, peer relationships, and the integration of social-emotional learning strategies all play a crucial role in cultivating children's character strengths and positive developmental outcomes (Thomas et al., 2022; Cipriano et al., 2023)

Practically, the findings of this study may serve as a valuable reference for educators in the development of character-oriented instructional modules. Character values should not be confined to formal statements within the Pancasila Student Profile framework; rather, they need to be operationalized through observable and meaningful learning activities. For instance, the value of cooperation may be fostered through collaborative group discussions involving clearly assigned responsibilities, courage may be developed through short presentation activities, and sincerity may be cultivated through reflective learning practices and assessment processes that emphasize students' authentic work and learning experiences.

The findings of this study may provide valuable guidance for school principals in enhancing the effectiveness of academic supervision. Academic supervision should extend beyond the verification of instructional documentation and include direct observation of classroom practices, particularly regarding how teachers facilitate dialogic interactions, implement authentic assessment strategies, and integrate character values into daily learning activities. Supervisory practices that emphasize reflective inquiry and professional growth are more likely to promote meaningful improvements in teaching and learning than approaches that focus primarily on administrative requirements and procedural compliance.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study found that three teachers described assessing students' needs, adapting learning materials, providing opportunities for collaboration and deliberation, and using assessment and feedback to support classroom learning. Their emphases differed: Kutorejo highlighted monitoring and differentiated support, Pandantoyo highlighted curriculum adaption and deliberation, and Pelem 1 highlighted accessible, contextualized instruction. The observation sheets and student interviews qualified these accounts: several student confidence and discipline indicators were only occasionally evident in individual observed lessons, and some students described hesitation, delay, or limited experience with projects. These findings describe opportunities and constraints in

character-oriented teaching, not evidence that the strategies caused lasting character change.

The teachers' code of ethics can be understood as a guide to pedagogical decisions, but its implementation depends on practical circumstances. Teachers reported challenges concerning parental expectations, differences among learners, workload, and the boundary between appreciation and gratification. Schools may therefore support reflective supervision, responsive lesson planning, constructive communication with parents, and careful discussions of professional boundaries. Since the study involved three teachers, nine student, and one classroom observation per school, its findings are context-specific; further longitudinal or mixed-method research is needed to examine character development over time.

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