



Models and Mechanisms of Moral and Character Education in Elementary Schools: A Systematic Review and Ecological-Pedagogical Synthesis

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Character education;
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model; Elementary schools;
Moral education; Values
education.

Abstract:

Moral and character education is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional process that extends beyond explicit value instruction to include reasoning, modelling, habituation, participation, and broader school-community environments. This systematic review synthesizes models of moral and character education in elementary schools and identifies their dominant pedagogical mechanisms. Following PRISMA 2020, 461 Scopus records were screened using predefined eligibility criteria, yielding 71 studies for synthesis. Descriptive quantitative analysis and qualitative thematic synthesis were conducted. Curriculum/Textbook-Integrated approaches were most prevalent (26.8%), followed by Narrative/Dialogic/Reflective models (22.5%); together they represented 49.3% of the corpus. Classroom-centred approaches accounted for 66.2%, while relational, school-cultural, and ecological models represented 23.9%. Only 32.4% of included studies had an explicitly evaluative orientation, indicating that the evidence base is stronger for describing models and mechanisms than for establishing comparative effectiveness.

Kata Kunci:

Pendidikan karakter;
Model ekologis-pedagogis;
Pendidikan moral;
Pendidikan nilai;
Sekolah dasar.

Abstrak

Pendidikan moral dan karakter merupakan proses multidimensional yang tidak hanya berfokus pada pengajaran nilai, tetapi juga mencakup penalaran, keteladanan, pembiasaan, partisipasi, serta lingkungan sekolah dan komunitas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mensintesis berbagai model pendidikan moral dan karakter di sekolah dasar serta mengidentifikasi mekanisme pedagogis yang mendasarinya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode systematic review dengan pedoman PRISMA 2020. Data penelitian diperoleh dari 461 artikel terindeks Scopus berdasarkan kriteria kelayakan, dengan 71 studi terpilih sebagai sumber analisis. Instrumen penelitian berupa lembar ekstraksi data yang dianalisis menggunakan analisis kuantitatif deskriptif dan sintesis tematik kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa model dominan adalah Curriculum/Textbook-Integrated (26,8%) dan Narrative/Dialogic/Reflective (22,5%). Sebanyak 66,2% penelitian berfokus pada pendekatan berbasis kelas, sementara mekanisme utama meliputi pengajaran, dialog, refleksi, keteladanan, pengalaman, pembiasaan, dan interaksi sosial. Penelitian lanjutan perlu mengembangkan desain komparatif, longitudinal, dan berbasis mekanisme untuk menguji efektivitas model pendidikan karakter.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Moral and character education occupies a fundamental position in elementary education because the early years of formal schooling constitute an important period in which children encounter, interpret, practice, and gradually internalize social and moral expectations. Schools do not merely transmit academic knowledge; they also structure children's experiences of responsibility, respect, helpfulness, empathy, citizenship, cultural belonging, and moral judgement through

curricula and everyday educational practices (Hakam, 2018; Zhang, 2022). Teacher behaviour and role modelling further influence how children interpret moral expectations in concrete interpersonal contexts (Osman, 2019), while dialogic approaches such as Philosophy for Children demonstrate that moral development can also be cultivated through inquiry, reasoning, and classroom interaction. These different approaches indicate that moral and character development cannot be reduced to the teaching of isolated virtues but involves cognitive, affective, behavioural, relational, and institutional dimensions (Jon, 2024; Wang, 2020).

The contemporary educational context, however, reveals a persistent gap between the formal aspiration to cultivate desirable character and the complex moral environments that children actually experience. Values promoted through official curricula may coexist with competing cultural, religious, political, and institutional expectations. Japanese moral education, for example, has historically incorporated patriotism and particular constructions of national identity (Anzai, 2015), while government-produced moral textbooks have also functioned as instruments for positioning children within specific political and moral orders (Anzai, 2024). Religious and ideological contexts similarly shape the normative content of moral education, as shown in studies of spirituality in Japan and Hindu nationalist schooling (Froerer, 2007; Nakayama, 2019). Moreover, values communicated explicitly through curricula may differ from those implicitly transmitted through routines, discipline, and school culture, indicating the significance of the hidden curriculum in character formation. These conditions create a practical tension because schools are expected to cultivate morally responsible students while operating within diverse and sometimes competing conceptions of desirable character (Çubukçu, 2012).

Conceptually, moral and character education has developed from predominantly transmissive approaches toward increasingly diversified pedagogical models. Traditional approaches commonly emphasize textbooks, prescribed virtues, explicit instruction, and the internalization of socially sanctioned values, as illustrated by curriculum-based moral education in several national settings (Hakam, 2018; Zhang, 2022). More participatory approaches, however, increasingly emphasize moral reasoning, critical thinking, and reflective judgement. Philosophy for Children positions students as participants in moral inquiry rather than merely recipients of predetermined values (Jon, 2024), while competency-based moral lessons and critical-thinking practices encourage students to interpret and evaluate moral problems (Hång, 2019, 2020). Contextualized questioning similarly strengthens the dialogic dimension of moral discussion (Wong, 2021). Other approaches connect moral concepts to lived experience through performance tasks (Aktepe, 2015), culturally responsive curricula (Suswandari, 2017), and technology-mediated environments such as virtual reality. This development indicates a broader conceptual shift from value transmission alone toward moral formation involving knowledge, reasoning, experience, reflection, practice, relationships, and sociocultural context (Shim, 2023).

Despite this conceptual development, the existing evidence remains fragmented. Curriculum-oriented research commonly investigates textbooks, subject integration, and culturally specific educational content, including locally grounded character curricula and life-oriented moral textbooks (Haling, 2016; Tang, 2022). Dialogic research, by contrast, focuses on processes such as questioning, analogical reasoning, and reflective judgement (Miwa, 2012; Wong, 2021), whereas experiential approaches examine the development of values through participatory activities such as visual arts (Turan, 2023). Institutional studies add another layer by examining character formation through school culture and repeated organizational practices (Lee, 2009). Although these studies provide substantial knowledge about particular approaches, they often investigate models in relative isolation. Consequently, the literature offers less clarity regarding how different approaches can be systematically classified, which mechanisms they share, how these mechanisms differ, and which dimensions of moral development they principally address. The predominance of context-specific

and model-specific investigations also limits direct comparison of the effectiveness of alternative approaches across elementary-school settings.

Addressing this fragmentation, the present systematic review synthesizes 71 included studies by moving beyond individual program labels toward a structured analysis of model families and their underlying mechanisms of moral formation. Existing studies show that moral development may be embedded in curriculum and classroom instruction (Hakam, 2018; Zhang, 2022), facilitated through role modelling and relational processes (Osman, 2019), strengthened through school-wide cultural arrangements (Lee, 2009), or situated within wider community and social-capital structures (Dwiningrum, 2013; Feuerverger, 1995). Building on this diversity, the novelty of the present review lies in identifying how curricular, dialogic, experiential, relational, habitutive, religious, cultural, and ecological approaches can be organized within a common analytical structure. Rather than treating each named model as an isolated intervention, the review examines their convergence around recurring mechanisms including instruction, reasoning, reflection, modelling, participation, reinforcement, habituation, internalization, and social interaction. The study therefore reconceptualizes elementary moral and character education as an integrated ecological-pedagogical field, providing a basis for explaining both the heterogeneity of existing models and the deeper mechanisms connecting them across educational and sociocultural contexts.

B. METODE PENELITIAN METHODS

This study employed a systematic review design to identify, classify, and synthesize models of moral and character education in elementary and primary schools. The review followed the PRISMA 2020 reporting framework, while the search strategy was documented in accordance with PRISMA-S to enhance transparency and reproducibility (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021). The literature search was conducted in the Scopus database using the query: TITLE-ABS-KEY (("character education" OR "moral education" OR "values education" OR "ethical education") AND ("elementary school" OR "primary school" OR "grade school" OR "junior school")). The search retrieved 461 records, which were coded sequentially from 001 to 461 to ensure traceability throughout screening and analysis, as shown in Figure 1.

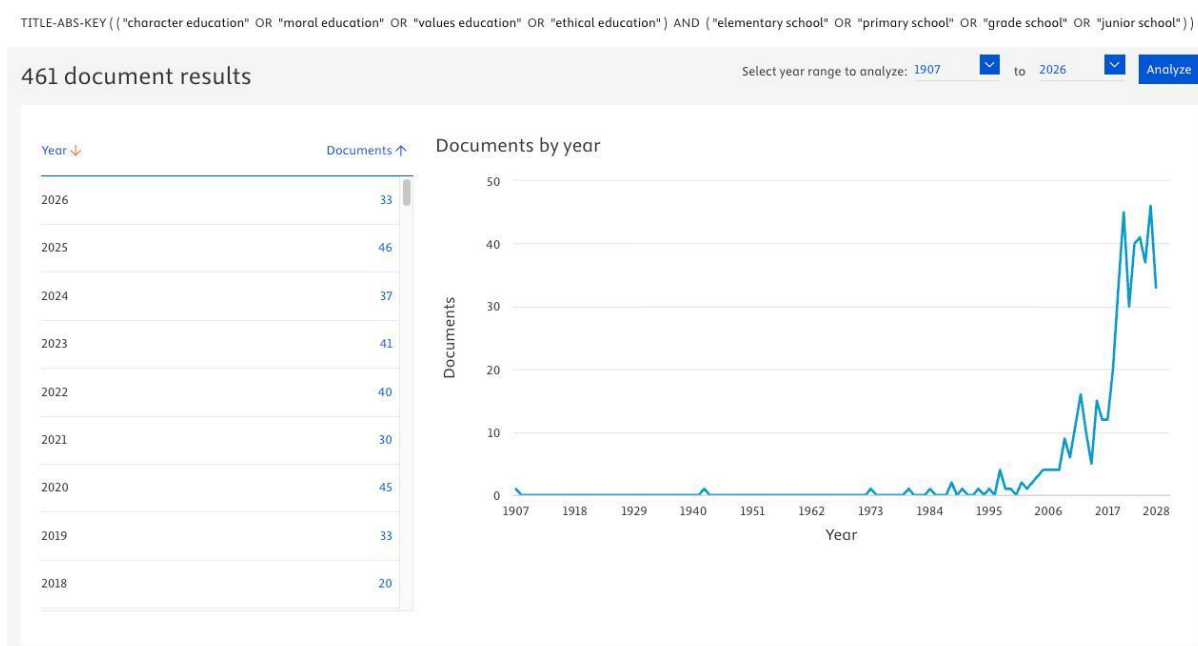


Figure 1. Distribution of Scopus-Indexed Publications on Moral and Character Education in Elementary Schools.

Studies were included when they simultaneously addressed moral, character, values, ethical, or virtue education; involved elementary or primary-school contexts; and described, developed, implemented, or evaluated an identifiable educational model, framework, curriculum, intervention, pedagogy, strategy, or school-wide practice. Eligible approaches included curriculum integration, direct moral instruction, narrative and dialogic learning, experiential learning, role modelling, habituation, school culture, religious or spiritual education, family-school collaboration, community-based education, and technology-mediated approaches with an explicit moral or character-development purpose. Studies were excluded when moral or character education was not substantively addressed, the educational level was outside primary education, character was only measured without an educational process, the study was purely correlational, adjacent educational topics lacked explicit moral relevance, or no identifiable educational practice was reported.

Screening used a binary Include/Exclude decision. Of the 461 records screened, 390 (84.6%) were excluded and 71 (15.4%) were retained in the analytical corpus. Exclusion reasons included insufficient or unavailable abstract information ($n = 360$), absence of a substantive model or practice of character education ($n = 9$), adjacent citizenship or religious education without an explicit moral-character relationship ($n = 6$), measurement of character without an educational process ($n = 4$), lack of substantive moral or character focus ($n = 4$), perception-only studies without identifiable educational practice ($n = 4$), and non-elementary contexts ($n = 3$). The reasons summed exactly to the 390 excluded records. Because 360 exclusions (92.3% of all exclusions) resulted from insufficient information rather than demonstrated substantive irrelevance, this limitation was retained explicitly in interpreting the selection process.

Data extraction covered bibliographic information, country and educational context, study design, participants, grade level, model or approach, theoretical basis, actors, components, pedagogical strategies, values targeted, educational media, implementation characteristics, mechanisms of change, outcomes, effectiveness, facilitators, barriers, and principal findings. Missing information was recorded as "Not reported", and methodological quality was recorded as "Not assessed" when formal appraisal had not yet been completed. The extracted approaches were normalized into 10 analytical model families: Curriculum/Textbook-Integrated, Narrative/Dialogic/Reflective, Experiential/Participatory, Collaborative/Ecological, Habituation/School-Culture, Role-Modelling/Relational, Religious/Spiritual-Moral, Direct Moral/Values Instruction, Teacher Development/System Improvement, and Meta/Comparative Framework.

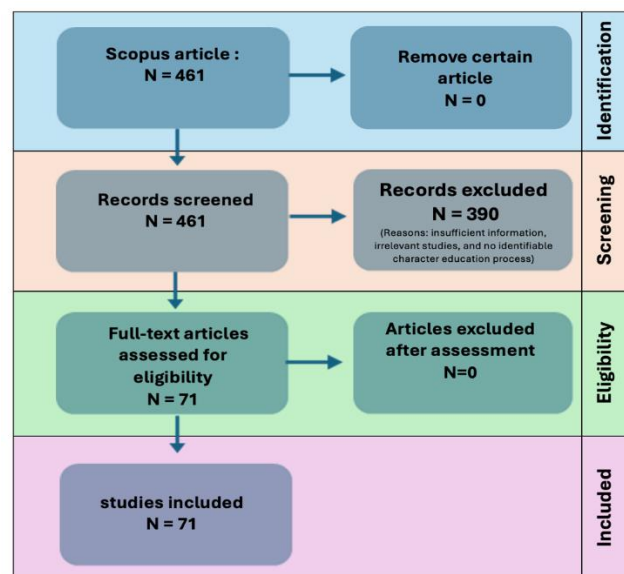


Figure 2. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion process of studies on moral and character education in elementary schools.

Given the substantial heterogeneity in educational models, study designs, contexts, and outcomes, meta-analysis was not undertaken. Instead, the review combined descriptive quantitative synthesis with qualitative thematic synthesis. Frequencies and percentages were calculated using the 71 included studies as the denominator and were interpreted as the distribution of the literature rather than pooled measures of intervention effectiveness. Qualitative synthesis examined recurrent mechanisms including instruction, dialogue, reflection, modelling, participation, reinforcement, habituation, internalization, and environmental structuring. Higher-order themes were developed through thematic synthesis to identify similarities and differences across models, actors, mechanisms, contexts, and character-related outcomes (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Methodological quality should ultimately be assessed using design-appropriate critical-appraisal tools, such as those provided by the Joanna Briggs Institute, because the corpus contains heterogeneous study designs. However, formal quality appraisal had not been completed for all included studies at the present stage; consequently, study quality was not used to rank model effectiveness or exclude studies from the current synthesis (Joanna Briggs Institute, n.d.). The PRISMA flow therefore comprised 461 records identified and screened, 390 records excluded, and 71 studies retained for synthesis, corresponding to an overall inclusion rate of 15.4% (Page et al., 2021).

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The synthesis of 71 included studies demonstrates that moral and character education in elementary schools is characterized by substantial diversity in educational approaches but a recognizable pattern in how moral development is organized. The identified approaches were consolidated into 10 primary model families. Curriculum/Textbook-Integrated approaches were the most prevalent ($n = 19$; 26.8%), followed by Narrative/Dialogic/Reflective approaches ($n = 16$; 22.5%), Experiential/Participatory approaches ($n = 8$; 11.3%), Collaborative/Ecological approaches ($n = 7$; 9.9%), and Habituation/School-Culture approaches ($n = 6$; 8.5%). Role-Modelling/Relational, Religious/Spiritual-Moral, and Direct Moral/Values Instruction each accounted for 4 studies (5.6%), while Teacher Development/System Improvement accounted for 2 studies (2.8%) and Meta/Comparative Frameworks for 1 study (1.4%). Importantly, the two largest model families alone represented 35 of 71 studies (49.3%), indicating that almost half of the literature conceptualized moral formation either through formal curricular structures or through narrative, dialogic, and reflective pedagogies.

Table 1. Distribution of Moral and Character Education Model Families

Model family	n	%
Curriculum/Textbook-Integrated	19	26.8
Narrative/Dialogic/Reflective	16	22.5
Experiential/Participatory	8	11.3
Collaborative/Ecological	7	9.9
Habituation/School-Culture	6	8.5
Role-Modelling/Relational	4	5.6
Religious/Spiritual-Moral	4	5.6
Direct Moral/Values Instruction	4	5.6
Teacher Development/System Improvement	2	2.8
Meta/Comparative Framework	1	1.4
Total	71	100.0

The predominance of Curriculum/Textbook-Integrated approaches shows that formal curriculum remains the most common institutional vehicle for moral and character education. Values are embedded within social studies, dedicated moral-education subjects, textbooks, culturally grounded curricula, and other instructional materials. Values within elementary social-studies textbooks

illustrate how moral objectives can be integrated into formal learning outcomes (Kiliç, 2012), while studies of Chinese *Morality and Law* textbooks demonstrate attempts to connect moral content with children's perspectives and everyday social experience (Tang, 2022; Zhang, 2022). Japanese elementary moral education likewise illustrates how moral learning can occupy a formal yet broader position within the taught curriculum (Bamkin, 2020). At the same time, locally grounded models based on Betawi values and Bugis *Siri* demonstrate that curriculum integration may also serve as a mechanism for translating cultural knowledge into character education (Haling, 2016; Suswandari, 2017). The prevalence of these studies suggests that curriculum provides continuity and institutional legitimacy to moral education, but it does not imply that the moral content embedded within curricula is universal.

Indeed, curricular moral education consistently reflects particular normative and sociocultural contexts. Japanese moral readers have been associated with constructions of patriotism and national belonging (Anzai, 2015), while historical government-produced textbooks reveal how moral education can position children within specific political and ideological orders (Anzai, 2024). Representations of the Asia-Pacific War in contemporary moral textbooks further illustrate how educational materials participate in the construction of collective memory and national identity (Spremborg, 2021). Similar contextual embeddedness appears in religious education, including Japanese spirituality, Hindu nationalist moral education, integrated Islamic schooling, and Islamic ethical elements within Uzbek public education (Abdugafurova, 2018; Froerer, 2007; Nakayama, 2019; Priatna, 2020). These findings indicate that character education should not be treated as a normatively neutral technology. What constitutes desirable character depends partly on which values institutions authorize, how those values are interpreted, and what conception of the moral person or citizen education seeks to cultivate.

The second-largest family, Narrative/Dialogic/Reflective approaches ($n = 16$; 22.5%), reflects a different pedagogical orientation. Rather than primarily organizing moral content, these approaches emphasize how students interpret, question, discuss, and reason about moral issues. Stories can provide contexts in which values become narratively meaningful (Rubio, 2023), while analogical reasoning enables children to connect moral concepts with unfamiliar situations (Miwa, 2012). Moral dilemmas similarly create situations in which students must consider competing moral claims rather than reproduce a predetermined response (Rybash, 1980). Contextualized questioning extends this process by requiring children to provide reasons and interpret moral situations rather than merely answer whether conduct is right or wrong (Wong, 2021). Together, these approaches position moral education as an interpretive and reflective process, not merely as the transfer of prescribed values.

This orientation is particularly visible in Philosophy for Children (P4C). Studies in Hong Kong and Taiwan demonstrate how philosophical classroom communities can foster moral inquiry, perspective-taking, collective reasoning, and reflective judgement (Jon, 2024; Wang, 2020). The earlier formulation of philosophical teaching as moral education further indicates that this dialogic orientation has a substantial intellectual history within the field (Sharp, 1984). Critical-thinking-based moral education in Vietnamese primary schools similarly emphasizes children's capacity to analyse moral situations and construct reasoned judgements (Hằng, 2019, 2020). The corpus therefore reveals a fundamental conceptual distinction between approaches emphasizing normative transmission and those emphasizing moral agency. The former generally begin with values selected by curricula, cultural traditions, or authorities and emphasize their transmission and internalization; the latter provide children with greater epistemic participation in evaluating reasons, interpreting dilemmas, and forming moral judgements.

However, the evidence does not support treating normative transmission and moral agency as mutually exclusive alternatives. Explicit moral content without reflection may encourage conformity without sufficiently developing judgement, while reflection without opportunities for enactment may

remain primarily cognitive. This problem becomes particularly visible in Experiential/Participatory approaches ($n = 8$; 11.3%), which connect moral understanding with action. Performance tasks have been used to cultivate love of nature and helpfulness (Aktepe, 2015; Tahiroğlu, 2013), while visual arts and multilingual songs provide participatory environments for values and diversity education (Sinaga, 2022; Turan, 2023). Character formation has also been explored through physical education, virtual reality, and educational films, extending moral learning into embodied and technology-mediated contexts (Brunsdon, 2025; Shim, 2023; Sudarwati, 2018). These approaches share an assumption that moral knowledge alone cannot guarantee moral behaviour; students also require opportunities to participate, choose, cooperate, experience consequences, and practise dispositions within meaningful situations.

Habituation/School-Culture approaches ($n = 6$; 8.5%) extend this argument from individual experience to repeated institutional practice. The hidden curriculum communicates moral expectations through school routines, relationships, rules, discipline, and everyday organizational arrangements (Çubukçu, 2012). Character-based school-culture projects similarly demonstrate that moral education can be structured across the whole school rather than confined to designated lessons (Lee, 2009), while Indonesian primary-school practices illustrate how values become embedded through recurrent institutional traditions (Hakam, 2018). These findings suggest that moral formation depends partly on whether values move from explicit propositions into repeated social practices. A school may formally teach respect or cooperation, but those values acquire practical credibility only when students repeatedly encounter them within teacher behaviour, disciplinary arrangements, peer relations, classroom routines, and institutional culture.

This institutional dimension is reinforced by Collaborative/Ecological models ($n = 7$; 9.9%) and Role-Modelling/Relational approaches ($n = 4$; 5.6%). Community-based moral education demonstrates that schools operate within wider networks of social relations and collective values rather than as isolated moral environments (Feuerverger, 1995). Social-capital approaches similarly emphasize relationships, trust, and collective resources as conditions that support character formation (Dwiningrum, 2013). At the interpersonal level, role models allow children to encounter values in observable behaviour rather than solely in abstract instruction (Osman, 2019). These findings broaden the unit of analysis from the student and classroom to include teachers, peers, families, communities, and institutional arrangements. Character development therefore appears to depend not only on what students are formally taught but also on the moral relationships and environments in which teaching occurs.

At a higher level of synthesis, classroom-centred approaches accounted for 47 of 71 studies (66.2%), encompassing Curriculum/Textbook-Integrated, Narrative/Dialogic/Reflective, Experiential/Participatory, and Direct Moral/Values Instruction models. By contrast, Collaborative/Ecological, Habituation/School-Culture, and Role-Modelling/Relational approaches collectively accounted for 17 studies (23.9%), while Religious/Spiritual-Moral, Teacher Development/System Improvement, and Meta/Comparative approaches represented the remaining 7 studies (9.9%). The distribution confirms the dominance of classroom pedagogy but simultaneously demonstrates that almost one quarter of the corpus primarily conceptualizes moral formation as a relational, institutional, or ecological process, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Higher-Order Organization of Moral and Character Education

Higher-order architecture	Model families	n	%	Dominant mechanisms
Classroom-centred pedagogical	Curriculum/Textbook-Integrated; Narrative/Dialogic/Reflective; Experiential/Participatory; Moral/Values Instruction Direct	47	66.2	Instruction, dialogue, reasoning, reflection, experience, participation
Relational-institutional-ecological	Collaborative/Ecological; Habituation/School-Culture; Modelling/Relational Role-	17	23.9	Modelling, interaction, reinforcement, habituation, environmental structuring
Normative/systemic	Religious/Spiritual-Moral; Development/System Improvement; Meta/Comparative Framework Teacher	7	9.9	Normative framing, institutional capacity, systemic orientation
Total	10 model families	71	100.0	—

The literature nevertheless provides substantially stronger evidence regarding the existence and mechanisms of educational models than regarding their comparative effectiveness. Only 23 of 71 studies (32.4%) had an explicitly evaluative orientation, whereas 48 studies (67.6%) were predominantly descriptive, conceptual, historical, developmental, interpretive, or implementation-focused. The distribution of evaluative work was also uneven. Habituation/School-Culture approaches contained 4 evaluative studies among 6 studies (66.7%), while Experiential/Participatory approaches contained 5 among 8 studies (62.5%). In comparison, only 5 of 19 Curriculum/Textbook-Integrated studies (26.3%) and 4 of 16 Narrative/Dialogic/Reflective studies (25.0%) had an explicitly evaluative orientation. Therefore, numerical prevalence cannot be interpreted as evidence of effectiveness: Curriculum/Textbook-Integrated models are the most frequently represented approaches, but the corpus does not demonstrate that they are the most effective, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Evaluative Orientation Across Model Families

Model family	Total studies	Evaluative studies	Evaluative proportion (%)
Habituation/School-Culture	6	4	66.7
Experiential/Participatory	8	5	62.5
Collaborative/Ecological	7	2	28.6
Curriculum/Textbook-Integrated	19	5	26.3
Narrative/Dialogic/Reflective	16	4	25.0
Role-Modelling/Relational	4	1	25.0
Religious/Spiritual-Moral	4	1	25.0
Direct Moral/Values Instruction	4	1	25.0
Teacher Development/System Improvement	2	0	0.0
Meta/Comparative Framework	1	0	0.0
Total	71	23	32.4

A further important finding concerns the relationship between conceptual fragmentation and pedagogical convergence. The 71 included studies contained 68 distinct model or approach labels, and 65 studies (91.5%) used an exact designation that appeared only once in the corpus. This high terminological diversity might initially suggest a highly fragmented research field. Yet the mechanisms underlying these models were considerably more stable. Curriculum-oriented models repeatedly relied on explicit instruction and exposure to values; narrative and dialogic approaches relied on questioning, reasoning, perspective-taking, and reflection; experiential models emphasized participation and practice; relational models emphasized observation and modelling; habituation models emphasized repetition, reinforcement, and routinization; and ecological approaches

emphasized social interaction and environmental consistency. The evidence therefore reveals model-level heterogeneity but mechanism-level convergence.

This distinction has major implications for how the field should classify and compare educational approaches. Two programs may have different local names while relying on essentially similar combinations of instruction, modelling, reflection, and habituation. Conversely, interventions sharing the broad label “values education” may operate through fundamentally different mechanisms if one emphasizes direct instruction and another emphasizes philosophical dialogue. Classification based only on program names therefore obscures theoretically important similarities and differences. A more productive analytical framework should distinguish at least four dimensions: educational structure, pedagogical strategy, mechanism of moral formation, and normative orientation.

Taken together, the findings support an integrated ecological-pedagogical interpretation of moral and character education. Formal curricula organize moral content; narrative and dialogue support interpretation and reasoning; experiential activities provide opportunities for moral enactment; adults provide observable models; habituation and school culture stabilize repeated practices; and families and communities situate moral development within wider social environments. Evidence across curriculum-based, dialogic, school-cultural, relational, and community-oriented studies demonstrates that these mechanisms operate at different but interconnected levels (Feuerverger, 1995; Hakam, 2018; Jon, 2024; Lee, 2009; Osman, 2019; Zhang, 2022). The synthesis therefore does not identify one universally superior model. Rather, different approaches appear to address different dimensions of the same developmental problem.

This interpretation also clarifies why no individual mechanism is sufficient on its own. Curriculum can provide moral knowledge without necessarily producing moral action; dialogue can strengthen judgement without guaranteeing stable habits; experiential participation provides opportunities for enactment but still requires interpretation; role modelling provides behavioural examples but depends on relational credibility; and habituation may stabilize conduct while remaining normatively problematic if separated from reflection and moral agency. Moral and character education is therefore best conceptualized as a multi-component and context-dependent process in which cognitive, affective, behavioural, relational, institutional, and sociocultural mechanisms interact.

The principal contribution of this review lies in shifting the analytical focus from which named model is most prominent toward how different models work and which mechanisms they share. Future research should therefore examine which configurations of instruction, dialogue, reasoning, modelling, experience, reinforcement, habituation, and ecological support produce particular dimensions of moral development under specific educational conditions. Greater use of comparative and longitudinal research designs is needed, together with clearer reporting of implementation fidelity and differentiated outcomes. Moral reasoning, empathy, helpfulness, discipline, cultural identity, religious commitment, environmental responsibility, and autonomous judgement should not be treated as equivalent manifestations of a single undifferentiated construct. By organizing a fragmented literature around shared mechanisms, the present synthesis provides a basis for a more cumulative and theoretically integrated understanding of moral and character education in elementary schools.

D. CONCLUSION

This systematic review demonstrates that moral and character education in elementary schools is best understood as a heterogeneous but structurally coherent educational field rather than as a single standardized intervention. Across the 71 included studies, Curriculum/Textbook-Integrated approaches were the most frequently identified (26.8%), followed by Narrative/Dialogic/Reflective approaches (22.5%); together, these two model families accounted for 49.3% of the corpus, while classroom-centred approaches more broadly represented 66.2% of all included studies.

Collaborative/Ecological, Habituation/School-Culture, and Role-Modelling/Relational approaches collectively accounted for 23.9%, confirming that character formation extends beyond formal instruction to encompass interpersonal relationships, institutional culture, repeated practices, family involvement, and community environments. Despite substantial variation in model labels, the findings reveal considerable convergence in underlying educational mechanisms, including explicit instruction, dialogue, reasoning, reflection, modelling, experiential participation, reinforcement, habituation, internalization, and social interaction. This convergence supports an integrated ecological-pedagogical interpretation in which moral development emerges through interactions among normative content, pedagogical practices, student moral agency, adult modelling, school culture, and wider social environments.

Nevertheless, the available evidence remains stronger for identifying and explaining educational models than for establishing their comparative effectiveness. Only 23 of the 71 studies (32.4%) had an explicitly evaluative orientation, while the majority were descriptive, conceptual, developmental, historical, interpretive, or implementation-focused. Consequently, the predominance of a particular model should not be interpreted as evidence of superiority. The central theoretical distinction lies not merely among competing program labels, but between approaches emphasizing the transmission of established values and those fostering children's capacity for moral reasoning and judgement. Future research should therefore prioritize comparative and longitudinal designs, clearer specification of intervention mechanisms, more differentiated outcome measures, implementation fidelity, and contextual moderators, while examining which combinations of pedagogical, relational, institutional, and sociocultural mechanisms produce specific moral and character outcomes under particular educational conditions. This review thus provides a mechanism-oriented framework for organizing a fragmented literature and offers a foundation for more cumulative, context-sensitive, and theoretically integrated research on moral and character education in elementary schools.

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