

Character Education in Civic Education: A Qualitative Study of Elementary School Teachers in Tulang Bawang and West Lampung, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Character education in Civic Education (PKn) at the elementary school level plays a strategic role in shaping students' moral identity. This study aims to examine the internalization of character values, identify habituating practices and teacher modeling, and analyze the effectiveness of character integration based on Kohlberg's moral development theory. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, data were collected through structured interviews with three elementary school teachers from different institutional contexts: a public school, a Merdeka Curriculum-based school, and an Islamic elementary school (madrasah ibtidaiyah). Data analysis followed the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana interactive model. The results indicate that core character values religiosity, honesty, discipline, and democratic attitudes have been identified and integrated into daily learning. However, most students remain at Kohlberg's conventional stage (Stage 3), with moral motivation still largely driven by external factors such as teacher authority and fear of punishment. Environmental barriers, including limited family support and uncritical social media consumption, significantly hinder deeper internalization. This study recommends contextual learning approaches, moral dilemma discussions, and a stronger school-family-community collaboration to promote post-conventional moral development.

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INTRODUCTION

Character education in Civic Education (PKn) is not merely supplementary content it constitutes the foundational pillar for shaping students into individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also morally grounded. At the elementary school level, this process is particularly critical, as children are in the formative stages of moral development. This imperative aligns with Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which posits that human morality evolves progressively from initial obedience driven by fear of punishment to autonomous ethical decision-making grounded in universal principles. In classroom practice, values such as honesty, responsibility, and discipline are consistently cultivated within PKn learning. One interviewed teacher noted that students already show signs of understanding honesty for instance, when a student finds an object in the classroom, they immediately report it to the teacher without being prompted. This reflects genuine internalization of character values through authentic school experiences. Research confirms that habituating positive behavior consistently accelerates the internalization of moral values among elementary school students (Hidayati et al., 2026), and PKn plays a strategic role in cultivating civic disposition through direct practice and teacher modeling (Noviana & Mubarak, 2025).

Despite the proliferation of character education strategies, their implementation in PKn remains fraught with real challenges. Interview findings reveal that while signs of tolerance and compromise are emerging, these values have not yet taken firm root in student's character. Most student's behavior remains heavily contingent on rules and the presence of the teacher as an authority figure indicating that they are still operating at Kohlberg's conventional level. Universal ethical principles remain the most difficult values to instill, and a clear gap persists between classroom understanding and everyday conduct. Research shows that most elementary students remain at the conventional stage, necessitating experience-based learning to elevate moral awareness (Sahra et al., 2025). Moreover, normative instructional approaches devoid of critical reflection produce only superficial compliance (Sadiyah et al., 2025).

This study identifies a persistent gap between character education theory and its actual classroom application particularly regarding honesty, discipline, and social values. This study also attempts to assess the degree to which character values are effectively internalized through the lens of Kohlberg's moral development theory, evaluating whether instructional approaches are appropriately calibrated to student's moral developmental stages. External factors including family conditions, peer environments, and school culture are also considered in this analysis. The research aims to: (1) identify character values being internalized in PKn moral development processes (2) describe habituating practices and teacher modeling and (3) analyze the effectiveness of character integration based on Kohlberg's theory and the environmental barriers that impede it.

METHOD

Research Approach and Type

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach, selected to gain deep understanding of how character education unfolds in elementary PKn classrooms specifically how moral values are embedded in daily learning life. Data collected are non-numerical, consisting of words, sentences, and situational descriptions that must be interpreted contextually. As Sujarweni (2020) affirms, qualitative research yields descriptive data derived from both direct speech and observable behavior. The descriptive method was selected to provide a systematic, factual, and accurate account of how character values are applied in elementary PKn learning, viewed through the lens of Kohlberg's moral development theory.

Researcher's Role

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument (human instrument). Direct researcher presence during interactions with informants is essential for grasping the full context, capturing nuances within each response, and clarifying ambiguities in real time. The researcher's role

encompasses designing structured interview guides, conducting field interviews, critically analyzing informant responses, and presenting research findings all to ensure authentic, field-grounded data.

Data Sources

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on the criterion of direct PKn teaching experience at the elementary level. Primary data were drawn from three teachers representing distinct perspectives, enabling source triangulation: (1) Informant I a Grade 4 teacher at SD Negeri 1 Siderejo, Tulang Bawang Regency, with 20 years of teaching experience (2) Informant II a Grade 5 teacher implementing a facilitator-based approach under the Merdeka Curriculum and (3) Informant III a Grade 2 teacher at MI Al Irsad Darrussalam, West Lampung. Secondary data were gathered from academic journals, reference books, and scholarly articles on character education and Kohlberg's moral development theory.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection was conducted through structured interviews. Twelve questions were prepared, covering aspects of character education and Kohlberg's moral stages including student participation, honesty internalization patterns, teacher modeling, use of moral dilemma methods, measurement of moral maturity, consistency of character application, and the gap between classroom understanding and daily practice. This technique was employed to enable consistent cross-informant comparison. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a comfortable setting, with responses documented for data verification.

Data Analysis Technique and Validity

Data analysis followed the interactive and iterative model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, comprising three stages: (1) Data Reduction informant responses were sorted and grouped into three primary dimensions: identified character values, teacher habituating practices and modeling, and environmental barriers (2) Data Display information was arranged as descriptive narratives and comparative analyses across the three informant and (3) Conclusion Drawing/Verification the researcher identified patterns and causal relationships, then verified initial conclusions against the literature and field evidence. To ensure data credibility, source triangulation was applied by cross-checking responses from all three informants whose institutional backgrounds, teaching levels, and curriculum orientations differ substantially. Convergent response patterns across these diverse contexts were treated as valid and representative findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identification of Character Values in the PKn Moral Internalization Process

Recognizing the character values that emerge through moral internalization in PKn is the essential first step in shaping student's holistic character. The values taught in PKn learning are not limited to the cognitive domain they encompass affective and psychomotor dimensions, all of which are integrated into student's daily lives. Field implementation reveals that values such as responsibility, honesty, discipline, and social concern are the priorities cultivated through learning processes. Teachers play a highly strategic role from designing learning activities and building classroom interaction to assessing student's attitudinal development. This internalization process cannot happen overnight it requires consistent, sustained practice. As articulated in the literature, "character education aims to develop student's ability to distinguish right from wrong and to enact goodness in everyday life" (Prima Rias Wana et al., 2023). This underscores that character education must be delivered in a structured manner to become an intrinsic part of students' identities. PKn thus serves not merely as an abstract classroom concept, but as a genuine foundation for shaping moral character and cultivating integrity and responsibility in students as future citizens (Prima Rias Wana et al., 2023).

Character values can also be identified and developed through contextual and participatory learning approaches such as the Project Citizen model, which encourages students to actively address real-world social issues. Through this approach, values including cooperation, democracy, responsibility, and environmental care can be directly observed and collectively cultivated. Notably,

the identification of values does not rest solely with teachers; it also emerges from student's self-reflection and group dynamics that foster moral awareness. This demonstrates that character values grow from lived experience, not from rote memorization. Research shows that character value internalization occurs through diverse methods such as providing recognition, instilling time-management habits, and using attitude journals as tools to monitor student's moral development (Rahma Sartika & Zulyan, 2023). This affirms that awareness of character education's importance is not sufficient on its own indicators are needed as instruments to periodically measure student's attitudinal progress. PKN functions as an effective vehicle for embedding moral values into real life in alignment with student's daily activities, enabling those values to truly take root and endure (Uyun et al., 2023).

Additionally, identifying character values in PKN can be pursued through efforts to reinforce Pancasila values as the foundation of national character. Values including religiosity, humanity, unity, democracy, and social justice can serve as primary benchmarks for assessing the depth of moral internalization among students. This process unfolds not only through classroom learning, but also through the cultivation of attitudes and behaviors in everyday life. A recent study confirms that PKN is indeed the primary vehicle for systematic and sustained internalization of Pancasila values (Azka et al., 2025). This underscores PKN's highly strategic role in shaping national character through moral education. Therefore, the establishment of character values in PKN must be approached comprehensively considering cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions so as to produce a generation that is not only intellectually capable, but also morally grounded and principled (Anugrah & Rahmat, 2024).

From in-depth interviews with the three informants, both commonalities and differences emerged enriching the overall picture of how character values are cultivated in PKN. Informant I (Grade 4 teacher, SD Negeri 1 Siderejo) emphasized that student's honesty has two sharply contrasting dimensions: very strong in real-life situations such as reporting a found object to the teacher yet still fragile in academic contexts, where cheating continues to occur. According to this informant, student's honesty motivation remains external, driven more by social recognition than by genuinely internalized values. Informant II (Grade 5, Merdeka Curriculum) added an insightful observation: students appear engaged during class, yet once they enter a different peer environment, they often forget the values just taught. Meanwhile, Informant III (Grade 2, MI Al Irsad Darrussalam) offered a perspective rooted in a far more religiously permeated madrasah context. There, religiosity serves as the foundation for all other character values every learning activity, from opening lessons with basmalah to practicing orderly queuing, is used as a medium for comprehensive character internalization.

Despite their different contexts and approaches, all three informants agreed that the character values most consistently surfacing in PKN are: (1) Religiosity expressed through communal prayer and the integration of divine values at the opening of every lesson (2) Honesty emerging as a fundamental value, strong in practical contexts but still a challenge in academic ones (3) Social values (empathy, tolerance, cooperation) arising spontaneously in student interactions, particularly during conflict resolution and communal activities and (4) Democracy and justice identified through equitable opportunity for all students to participate in class discussions.

Challenges and Strategies in Honesty and Social Value Cultivation

The development of honesty as a character value has emerged as a critical issue in education. Honesty functions not only as the ethical foundation of student formation, but also as the basis for constructive, balanced, and meaningful learning processes. Interview findings identified multiple root causes of student's low honesty levels stemming from both internal and external factors. Academic pressure, social interactions, insufficient supervision, and ineffective collaboration among schools, families, and communities all constitute significant barriers to character value internalization. Accordingly, planned and sustained efforts are required integrating honesty values into learning activities, establishing positive behavioral habits, applying relevant approaches, and reinforcing religious values in students' daily lives.

Data from the interviews indicate that the root cause of student's low honesty in academic contexts lies in externally driven motivation meaning that honesty has not yet genuinely grown from within. Students can be honest in everyday situations, but when under academic pressure, that consistency easily wavers. The primary challenge teachers face is limited capacity to monitor student behavior and the suboptimal integration of character assessment in the learning process. Compounding this is an evaluation system still focused on academic outcomes, which inadvertently incentivizes students to take shortcuts through dishonesty. Research confirms that character education for honesty can be achieved through systematically designed, sustained integration within the learning process (Nurbaya et al., 2022), and that consistently habituating positive behavior at school demonstrably shapes students' honesty character (Jadid & Widodo, 2023).

Differences between students' behavior inside and outside the classroom underscore that the social environment is a critical factor in cultivating character values. Students tend to conform to the norms prevailing among their peer groups consequently, when the environment does not support positive values, they are easily influenced by prevailing trends (Syarif, 2025). This indicates that school-taught values have not yet fully permeated student's self-awareness. The greatest challenge is the lack of synergy among schools, families, and communities parents are often not optimally engaged, meaning that values instilled at school receive no reinforcement at home (Hakim et al., 2023). Research affirms that character education can only succeed with solid collaboration among school, family, and community (Wuryandani et al., 2014). A contextual learning approach that connects values to student's real-life experiences, combined with more intensive communication with parents, is recommended. Teacher-facilitated self-reflection also deepens student's understanding and internalization of values (Suyadi, 2015).

In the madrasah context, religious values serve as the foundational pillar of student character formation clearly evident in how spiritual values are integrated into every learning activity, from lesson openings to daily routines such as lining up and congregational prayer. This environment functions as a key factor in robust character formation, since values are not only taught verbally but practiced daily (Muzedi & Zaironi, 2026). Yet challenges persist: maintaining consistent student behavior outside school, and ensuring students truly understand the meaning behind the values being taught rather than merely performing routines. Diversity in student's backgrounds also affects the depth of value absorption. Therefore, an approach that emphasizes not only habituation but also deep understanding is essential. Research confirms that religion-based character education is effective when its values are consistently integrated across all learning activities (Maulida et al., 2025).

Habituating Practices and Teacher Modeling

The process of character formation in schools is critically shaped by how teachers construct and implement moral learning strategies within the educational ecosystem. All three informants described character development practices that share the same core purpose but differ in approach and instruments. Informant I (Ibu Ninik, SD Negeri 1 Siderejo) applies highly structured habituation through daily routines the "3S Culture" (Salam, Sapa, Senyum / Greet, Greet, Smile) at the school gate, consistent classroom rule enforcement, and direct modeling through objectivity, punctuality, and polite speech. She also noted a revealing phenomenon: without teacher presence, students are easily manipulated into conflicts by peers, yet when the teacher is present, they are guided to forgive one another and reconcile. This indicates that student's moral motivation remains deeply dependent on the presence of an authority figure.

This conflict incident underscores that student's moral motivation is still predominantly contingent on teacher presence. Without a teacher, students are easily influenced by peers and cannot resolve conflicts independently sometimes making situations worse. This indicates that their character values remain in the early stages of internalization: compliance with external rules, not inner-directed awareness. The root cause is an underdeveloped autonomous moral consciousness, compounded by social environments that reinforce this dependence. Research affirms that character value

internalization requires conditioning, modeling, and reinforcement through direct experience (Ulum & Koesdyantho, 2019). Teachers should function not merely as monitors but as facilitators who help students understand the meaning behind each moral act. Creating a learning environment that provides space for independent decision-making is equally important (Yulianti & Rinaldi, 2025).

Informant II (Ibu Asmidayana, Grade 5, Merdeka Curriculum) applies a more dialogical and participatory approach, consistent with the spirit of the Merdeka Curriculum. She extensively uses group discussions, presentations, and experience-based projects to habituate students to communicate respectfully and honor others' opinions. She also actively makes gadget and social media issues the subject of collective moral reflection with her students. Informant III (Ibu Rohima, MI Al Irsad Darrussalam) integrates religious values into every aspect of learning, though she acknowledges that the moral dilemma method she has begun adopting has not yet been applied systematically across all classes.

Despite their different paths, all three informants converge on one point: teacher modeling is the most powerful instrument of character education. Students at the elementary level have a strong natural tendency to emulate their teacher's conduct. The primary issue in habituating practices is that character internalization remains overly dependent on teacher presence with many students still at the morality stage of consequence-orientation, being honest not out of awareness but out of fear of punishment (Rifki et al., 2021). This is because habituation strategies still rely heavily on direct instruction and supervision, without sufficiently engaging student's own moral reasoning. Teachers should not be viewed merely as overseers, but as facilitators who help students understand the deeper meaning of each moral choice. Research confirms that an active, creative, and consistent teacher who daily embodies positive values has far greater impact than any curriculum (Palunga & Marzuki, 2017). Modeling by teachers and parents leaves a more enduring impression than lectures alone; students who consistently witness their teacher's honesty and compassion naturally absorb these values, what is called the "hidden curriculum" (Mujais et al., 2023). To advance students beyond the conventional stage, teachers need to more systematically employ moral dilemma discussions and reflection across all grade levels (Hodriani et al., 2025).

Effectiveness of Character Integration Based on Kohlberg's Theory and Environmental Barriers

Viewed through the lens of Kohlberg's theory, character education calibrated to moral developmental stages demonstrably shapes students' ethical reasoning progressively. Kohlberg posits that morality develops through structured cognitive processes from the pre-conventional to the post-conventional stage. Accordingly, character value integration in learning can be tailored to each student's moral achievement level. Integration is successful when students not only understand moral values but can also apply them in daily social life (Hodriani et al., 2025). However, the effectiveness of character education is also strongly conditioned by environmental factors, particularly in today's digitally disruptive era. A dynamic social environment can influence student's social and moral patterns, preventing optimal value internalization. In this context, Kohlberg's theory must be adapted to address contemporary challenges such as social media influence that erodes traditional moral values (Munawarah et al., 2024). Character education must therefore consider approaches grounded in the concrete realities of students' environments (Azizah et al., 2024).

Informant I (Ibu Ninik) acknowledged that character application at school runs well as long as teachers are present and reinforcing it, but at home, many parents work as farm laborers and lack the time to cultivate moral values with their children. She estimates her class's character effectiveness at roughly 65–70% but notes it is highly situational: strong with teacher supervision, weakening without it. Informant II (Ibu Asmidayana) highlighted the highly relevant contemporary challenge of uncontrolled social media and gadget use among the greatest barriers to student character formation. Content consumed outside school frequently contradicts classroom-taught values, creating genuine value confusion. She argues that character education can only be optimized through adequate digital literacy embedded in the curriculum, supplemented by active school-parent communication. Informant

III (Ibu Rohima) offered a distinct perspective: in the madrasah context, qualitative character internalization feels deeper due to the strong spiritual dimension students feel they remain under divine observation even when no teacher is present. Yet she acknowledged the same persistent challenge: the gap between the madrasah's conducive environment and students' home or social conditions remains the primary barrier, particularly for students whose parents are not actively reinforcing values at home.

All three informants concur that the majority of elementary students remain at Kohlberg's Level II Conventional Reasoning, specifically Stage 3 (Good Boy/Good Girl Orientation). Quantitatively, student participation in character values has reached 60–70%, but qualitatively has not yet attained post-conventional universal ethical principles since behavioral motivation is still predominantly driven by external factors such as school norms or fear of punishment. Environmental barriers include: constrained family economic conditions limiting value oversight at home a gap between the structured school environment and a more permissive home environment and the influence of social media and peer groups that are not always conducive to moral development.

The most salient barrier to character integration lies in insufficient support from families and the social environment. Many student's parents including farm laborers have limited time and energy to accompany their children's moral development. As a result, home supervision is minimal, and school-instilled values receive inadequate reinforcement (Muhayanah et al., 2023). The gap between the structured school environment and the more permissive home environment is substantial. At school, students accustom themselves to rules and discipline but outside, they face social realities not always aligned with those values, creating moral disorientation and uncertainty about behavioral standards. From Kohlberg's perspective, this occurs because students lack consistent social experiences to reinforce their moral reasoning (Wuryandani et al., 2014).

The influence of technology and unregulated social media constitutes another increasingly pressing challenge. In this digital era, students have broad access to diverse content both constructive and harmful. Without adequate digital literacy, they risk consuming content that contradicts school-taught values, generating value conflicts: on one side, formal school values on the other, informal social media values often more attractive and easily accessible (Yudi & Maryam, 2023). From Kohlberg's standpoint, this situation clearly impedes moral development, trapping students in patterns of personal gratification or peer pressure rather than higher-order moral reasoning (Zahra et al., 2024). Integrating digital literacy into the curriculum thus becomes essential.

The key to progress lies in strengthening the school-family-community collaboration. Schools need to develop learning strategies that not only address cognitive aspects but also foster moral reflection and real-life value application. Stronger communication between teachers and parents through parental mentoring programs or regular discussion forums ensures that school-instilled values receive consistent home support (Azahra et al., 2024). A religious-based approach, such as that applied in madrasahs, can also serve as a highly effective solution cultivating student's internal awareness that their behavior is guided by spiritual values, not merely external rules. Within Kohlberg's framework, this strategy can help students advance from the conventional toward the post-conventional stage, where they act on moral principles that have become genuinely their own. With genuine synergy across all stakeholders and a contextually relevant approach, character education is expected to be not only more effective in participation metrics, but deeper in actual internalization and more lasting in long-term impact (Aulia & Suwanto, 2023)..

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that PKn plays a highly strategic role in shaping student character, particularly at the elementary school level. Core character values religiosity, honesty, discipline, responsibility, tolerance, and democratic attitudes have been successfully identified and integrated into the learning process. However, the effectiveness of this value cultivation is contingent not only on content delivery in the classroom, but on consistent practice, teacher modeling, and a conducive school

environment. Kohlberg's moral development theory serves as a vital framework for understanding that students' moral growth proceeds in stages from pre-conventional to conventional, and ideally toward post-conventional. Instructional approaches must therefore be aligned with students' moral developmental stages to optimize and sustain value internalization.

A cross-informant comparison reveals shared core character values (religiosity, honesty, social values, democracy) but differing habituating approaches: structured (Informant I), dialogical-participatory (Informant II), and religiously integrative (Informant III). Quantitatively, character education in PKn has achieved a reasonable level of effectiveness with student participation reaching 60–70% but qualitatively remains suboptimal, as most students' moral motivation is still externally driven. The primary barriers originate outside the school, particularly from limited family-based value reinforcement caused by socioeconomic conditions. In conclusion, the success of character education cannot rest on schools alone it requires genuine, sustained synergy among teachers, parents, and the broader community.

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