

Teacher Perspective on Student Character Building in Malaysian Public Primary Schools

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Abstract

Character building has become an essential agenda in Malaysian primary education, especially amid rising concerns over school bullying and declining interpersonal values. This qualitative study investigates how primary school teachers understand, implement, and experience challenges in fostering character development among students. Using a phenomenological design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve teachers from public primary schools in Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. Thematic analysis revealed three major findings. First, teachers conceptualize character building holistically, emphasizing moral reasoning, emotional regulation, empathy, responsibility, and social harmony. They view character formation as foundational to the aims of the National Education Philosophy and integral to nurturing balanced individuals. Second, teachers employ various pedagogical and relational strategies, including role modelling, value integration across subjects, co-curricular participation, reflective dialogue, and empathy-based discussions. These practices align with social learning theory and whole-school approaches to moral education. Third, teachers face significant constraints, including curriculum overload, limited parental reinforcement, insufficient training in character pedagogy, and lack of structured assessment tools. Although policy frameworks such as the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* and the 2025 MOE character-building initiative support values education, practical implementation remains inconsistent due to systemic pressures focused on academic performance. The study contributes to character education literature by foregrounding teacher experiences within Malaysia's multicultural context. It highlights the need for strengthened professional development, whole-school moral ecosystems, and collaborative home-school partnerships. The findings offer implications for policymakers, school leaders, and teacher educators seeking to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of character education in Malaysian primary schools.

Keywords: Character Building, Primary Education, Teacher Perspectives, Moral Values, Malaysia

Introduction

Recent news highlights the deeply worrying trend of bullying among primary school students in Malaysia. The urgent need for comprehensive prevention is underscored by recent, tragic events, including an October incident where a Standard One pupil was allegedly beaten during

recess (BERNAMA, 2025), and the widely reported death of a Year Four student in Senawang (Perimbanayagam, 2025). Indeed, the alarming magnitude of the crisis is clear: official statistics reveal over 7,600 bullying cases in Malaysian schools in 2024 with a significant 17 percent increase from 2023 (Ghazali, 2025). Notably, 1,992 of those cases were reported in primary schools alone (BERNAMA, 2025). Therefore, a holistic approach is thus crucial, focusing on early intervention and mental health support for both victims and perpetrators to ensure a safer learning environment (Ismail et al., 2021).

Thus, character building has become a central concern in contemporary education systems around the globe to address the issues of bullying (Ngiu et al., 2025; Supiadi, 2025). Beyond achieving cognitive or academic mastery, schools are expected to cultivate moral, emotional, and social competencies that prepare students to become responsible citizens (Durlak et al., 2011; Silke et al., 2024). The notion that “education without values is incomplete” has gained renewed relevance in the twenty-first century (Lewis, 2009), when technological advancement, digital communication, and social diversity expose children to multiple, and sometimes conflicting, moral frameworks (Haverson et al., 2025; OECD, 2025). Within this argument, this study believes that primary education is particularly crucial since early schooling represents a formative period (UNESCO, 2014) when habits, values, and interpersonal norms are still being shaped.

In Malaysia, the goal of nurturing individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced is enshrined in the National Education Philosophy (*Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan*) (MOE, 2025). This holistic philosophy underlines the development of values such as respect, integrity, and compassion as integral to national identity and civic harmony (Rosli et al., 2022). To operationalize these ideals, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has embedded moral and character elements across the curriculum (Al-Hudawi et al., 2014). Most prominently through Islamic Education for Muslim students (Fatah Yasin and Jani, 2019) and Moral Education for non-Muslim students (De Asildo et al., 2024). Moreover, character formation is supported through co-curricular activities, classroom routines, and the Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR) (MOE, 2013), which emphasizes “noble values” (*nilai murni*) across all subjects (Yusof et al., 2018; Norzihani et al., 2021).

Despite these policy commitments, teachers and experts have voiced concerns that character education remains inconsistently practiced in schools (Yuliani et al., 2024). Studies have reported that moral values are often treated as secondary to examination-oriented teaching (De Asildo et al., 2024), and teachers receive limited guidance on how to translate abstract virtues into practical classroom strategies (De Asildo et al., 2022). Not to mention, rapid social change including the influence of social media, family dynamics, and urbanization adds complexity to this challenge (Dewi et al., 2023). Consequently, the actual implementation of character-building initiatives depends heavily on the understanding, attitudes, and commitment of classroom teachers (Meliani and Sati, 2023).

Besides, character building in the Malaysian context is not a new discourse (Donesia et al., 2023); however, it continues to evolve alongside educational reforms. Early initiatives emphasized moral instruction and religious compliance (Mahanani et al., 2022), whereas more recent frameworks advocate experiential learning, civic participation, and socio-emotional competencies (Hafizi et al., 2024). The Education Blueprint 2013–2025 (MOE,

2013) renewed focus on values-based education as one of its key aspirations in 2027 school curriculum, encouraging schools to instill ethics and spirituality as foundational pillars of student outcomes (Lee et al., 2025). In 2025, for example, the MOE announced a mandatory 60-minute weekly slot for character-building activities in all primary and secondary schools (Jeevita, 2025) as demonstrating national education recognition that require structured time and pedagogical innovation (MOE, 2013; Mukhtar et al., 2025).

However, implementing these ideals at the classroom level is far from straightforward. Teachers operate within a highly regulated curriculum that prioritizes standardized testing and academic benchmarks (Tong Hock et al., 2022). Many primary school teachers must balance extensive teaching loads, administrative duties, and co-curriculum responsibilities (Che Ani et al., 2025). Within these constraints, allocating time and creative energy for character-building initiatives can be difficult. Moreover, not all teachers have received formal training in character pedagogy, which encompasses psychological development, moral reasoning, and reflective teaching techniques (Dinham et al., 2020). The interplay between school culture and family environment also affects outcomes: values reinforced at school may be contradicted or unsupported at home (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2014).

Scholars such as Lickona (1996) and Berkowitz et al. (2020) emphasize that character education succeeds when it is systemic integrated into all aspects of school life, including teaching practices, disciplinary systems, and relationships among teachers and students. Yet in Malaysia, empirical studies that explore how teachers themselves interpret and implement these principles remain scarce, particularly at the primary school level (Muhammad Hafizi et al., 2024). Much of the available research has examined moral or Islamic education curriculum, rather than the broader culture of character building across subjects (Mahanani et al., 2022). Moreover, typical quantitative surveys frequently prevail, exposing gaps in the knowledge of teacher real-life experiences, attitudes, and strategies for instilling character education in primary school students.

Considering this shortcoming, a qualitative approach that emphasizes teachers' perspectives is critical. Teachers are ethical representatives as well as role models in the classroom, and their ideas and behaviors influence whether character education is carried out on an everyday basis. Understanding their views sheds light on the micro-level reality associated with what character-building implies for the students, how they integrate it into classes, the challenges they confront, and how they navigate institutional limits. Such knowledge might help policymakers along with teacher training institutions develop professional development programs that meet real-world teaching demands. Thus, this study aims to explore how Malaysian primary school teachers understand and implement character building in their schools and what factors facilitate or hinder these efforts. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do primary school teachers conceptualize "character building" in the context of their teaching and school environment?
- What strategies and activities do teachers employ to foster students' character?
- What challenges do they encounter, and what recommendations do they propose to enhance character development initiatives?

This study contributes both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it extends the discourse on character education by providing grounded insights from Malaysian teachers within a perspective underrepresented in current ocean of literature. Practically, the findings can inform professional development, curriculum planning, and school policies aligned with national reforms such as the MOE's 60-minute character-building programme. The study further adds to current literature by positioning Malaysia within the larger discussion between moral and values for character education in diverse nations, wherein combining elements of ethics, culture, as well as pedagogy brings advantages as well as disadvantages.

By studying teachers' real-life experiences, this study reveals educators as crucial stakeholders in the moral and value for character building development of Malaysian primary school students. Teachers' views provide light not only on how policies are implemented at the foundational level, but on how character education could be changed from a formal curriculum requirement to an actual, daily practice that forms the values in future generations.

Literature Review

Concept and Theoretical Foundation of Character Building

Character building refers to the process of shaping a person's moral, ethical, and social identity through the cultivation of positive values and habits (Lickona, 1996; Berkowitz et al., 2020). It aims to develop individuals who possess virtues such as honesty, empathy, respect, and responsibility for values of character education that enable them to function effectively in society. According to Watts et al. (2021), character education integrates cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components: knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good. Within schools, these components are embedded through curricular content, teacher-student relationships, discipline structures, and co-curricular experiences (Agboola and Tsai, 2012; Yulita and Rahman, 2023).

Historically, several theoretical models have informed on the understanding of character building in education. Kohlberg's (1981) stages of moral development emphasize the progression of moral reasoning from obedience to abstract ethical principles. Bandura's social learning theory underscores the importance of modeling and observation in students internalizing moral behaviors by observing significant adults, particularly teachers (Bandura and NIMH, 1986). Lickona (1996) further proposed the comprehensive school model of character education, advocating a holistic approach where moral values are not taught as isolated lessons but woven into every aspect of school life. Collectively, these theories highlight that character formation is not only about cognitive instruction (Salgado et al., 2025) but also involves the affective domain and social interactions within the school environment (Fepriyanti and Roqib, 2024).

Global Perspectives on Character Education

Globally, character education has gained prominence as part of efforts to address social fragmentation, bullying, and ethical dilemmas in schools (Watts et al., 2021). In the United States and Europe, initiatives such as the Character Counts! Framework (Mucinskas et al., 2025) and the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) (Winklera et al., 2024) movement have emphasized moral competencies alongside academic skills. Studies have demonstrated that

systematic character education can improve students' prosocial behavior, academic motivation, and classroom climate (Berkowitz et al., 2020).

In Asian contexts, character education often intersects with cultural and religious traditions (Manzon and Lee, 2023). In Japan, moral education (*dōtoku kyōiku*) has long been institutionalized, emphasizing respect, harmony, and diligence as national virtues (Bamkin, 2019). South Korea's curriculum integrates "moral personality" with civic education to foster collective responsibility and respect for elders (Han et al., 2017). Similarly, Indonesia's "*Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter*" (Strengthening Character Education) policy promotes five core values involving religiosity, nationalism, independence, mutual cooperation, and integrity (Mahanani et al., 2022). These initiatives highlight a shared Asian emphasis on collectivism and moral harmony while adapting to modern educational demands.

Despite contextual differences, a common thread in global research is the centrality of teachers (Rao et al., 2024). Studies consistently show that teacher beliefs, attitudes, and moral agency determine whether character education thrives or remains superficial (Li and Ma, 2025). Teachers who model integrity, empathy, and respect create a classroom culture that reinforces these values (Feliza, 2025). Conversely, when teachers view moral instruction as external to academic goals, character education risks becoming fragmented or tokenistic (Atmazaki et al., 2020).

Character Education in Malaysia

Malaysia's education philosophy and policies have long promoted moral and spiritual development as essential educational goals. The *Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan* (National Education Philosophy) emphasizes balanced development of intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual (MOE, 2025). Within the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR), character building is embedded through cross-curriculum elements known as *nilai murni* (noble values), such as honesty, trust, responsibility, love, kindness, cooperation, tolerance, respect, high morals, discipline, identity, love for the country and respect for the environment (Yusof et al., 2018; Norzihani et al., 2021). These are reinforced through Islamic Education and Moral Education subjects, depending on students' religious backgrounds (MOE, 2013).

Research within the Malaysian context, however, indicates uneven implementation. According to Tengku Kasim and Abdurajak (2018), novice Islamic education teachers often struggle to integrate moral values into lessons due to limited pedagogical training. Similarly, Adams and Tan (2022) found that teachers perceived a lack of explicit guidance and assessment mechanisms for evaluating students' moral growth. In practice, many schools rely on disciplinary systems or co-curriculum activities to instill character rather than structured pedagogical approaches (Saba, 2023).

At the policy level, the Education Blueprint 2013–2025 calls for nurturing students with "ethics and spirituality" as one of its six key aspirations (MOE, 2013). Yet empirical evaluations have shown that teachers' understanding of holistic character education remains fragmented, with emphasis still placed on academic performance and examination results (Donesia et al., 2023). As Malaysia transitions toward a competency-based and value-oriented curriculum, understanding how teachers interpret and operationalize these reforms becomes increasingly important (Ramanan et al., 2024).

Teachers as Moral Agents and Role Models

Teachers play a dual role as both instructors and moral exemplars. As Lickona (1996) observed, “*Character education is best caught, not taught.*” The daily interactions between teachers and students provide opportunities for modelling virtues such as fairness, patience, and respect. Bandura’s (1986) concept of observational learning underscores how students imitate behaviors that are rewarded or admired. Thus, the teacher’s demeanor, language, and disciplinary style significantly influence the moral tone of the classroom (Feliza, 2025).

Empirical studies across Southeast Asia confirm this relational dimension. A qualitative study in Indonesia by Yuliani et al. (2020) argue that students internalized moral values more effectively when teachers consistently modelled expected behaviors and integrated moral discussions into ordinary classroom routines. Similarly, Malaysian research by Rosli et al. (2022) demonstrated that the “active role of teachers” in embedding character education through storytelling, discussion, and reflection enhanced students’ moral comprehension and empathy.

However, teacher effectiveness in character education depends on their moral competency and pedagogical content knowledge. According to Hassan and Zainal (2021), many Malaysian teachers have strong moral intentions but lack structured training in moral psychology or socio-emotional development. Pre-service teacher education programmes often focus on subject mastery, leaving little room for character pedagogy (Dinham et al., 2022). This deficit contributes to inconsistencies in classroom implementation and varying interpretations of what constitutes “character building.”

Challenges in Implementing Character Education

Despite policy support, several challenges hinder the effective practice of character building in Malaysian schools. Curriculum overload remains the most frequently cited challenge (Dewi et al., 2023). Teachers are pressured to meet academic targets and administrative deadlines, leaving limited time for value-based activities (Li and Ma, 2025). Character education, although encouraged, is often perceived as an “add-on” rather than an integral part of teaching (Donesia et al., 2023).

Assessment limitations also constrain progress. There is no standardized framework for evaluating character outcomes. Teachers rely on informal observations or anecdotal evidence to gauge moral development, which lacks consistency and accountability (Hassan and Zainal, 2021).

Home-school disconnection further complicates efforts. As Malaysia’s family structures diversify and parents face economic pressures, moral reinforcement at home can be inconsistent. Teachers often report that behaviors nurtured in school are not sustained in domestic environments (Norzihani et al., 2021).

Finally, training gaps persist. Many in-service teachers express uncertainty about effective strategies for moral integration, reflective dialogue, and behavior management that support values education (Ramanan et al., 2024). Without clear pedagogical frameworks, character building risks being confined to moral slogans or short-term campaigns rather than sustained practice.

Research Gap

Although several studies have addressed character education policies and curriculum, fewer have concentrated on teacher perspectives in Malaysian primary schools. Most of the empirical research is centered on quantitative research or policy analysis instead of qualitative studies from teacher experience. As a result, little is known concerning how teachers approach character building, which strategies teachers implement along with the way they deal with systemic problems. Addressing such perspectives is critical since teachers are the major link between practice and policy. This study fills these gaps through in-depth interviews with twelve primary school teachers from Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. It seeks to record their daily interactions, teaching methods, along with contextual limitations. By emphasizing teacher perspectives, the study fosters a deeper comprehension of character building in Malaysian school.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore primary school teachers lived experiences and perceptions regarding character building among students in Malaysian schools. Phenomenology allows researchers to gain insight into participants' subjective meanings, beliefs, and values by focusing on how they make sense of their everyday teaching practices (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This design was selected since character building is a deeply personal and context-dependent phenomenon that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measurement. Through semi-structured in-depth interviews, the study sought to uncover (Morris, 2015) how teachers conceptualize "character building," the methods they employ to cultivate moral and social values, and the challenges they face in implementing related programs. The emphasis was on richness of data (Creswell, 2002), detailed descriptions rather than generalization (Creswell, 2013), enabling the development of thematic insights grounded in participants' narratives (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Research Location

The study was conducted in two Malaysian states Selangor and Negeri Sembilan which both known for their diverse socio-cultural school environments and consistent implementation of the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR). These states were selected to represent a balance between urban and semi-urban schooling contexts. The schools involved were national (*Sekolah Kebangsaan*) public schools with mixed ethnic and religious student populations, reflecting Malaysia's multicultural educational landscape. Further, character education activities in these schools were embedded through moral instruction, classroom management, and co-curriculum participation such as uniformed bodies, clubs and societies, and sports and games (MOE, 2013). This environment provided a rich setting for exploring how teachers interpret and practice character development amid competing academic priorities.

Participants

A total of twelve (12) primary school teachers were selected to participate in the study. Purposive sampling was used to ensure participants had relevant experience and were able to articulate insights on character education (Creswell, 2002). The diversity of participants

ensured a range of perspectives across gender, subject areas, and teaching contexts (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The inclusion criteria were:

A minimum of five years of teaching experience,
Current involvement in moral, Islamic, or value-based instruction, and
Representation across various subject specializations and school locations.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Participant	Gender	State	Years of Experience	Subject Area
Teacher A	Female	Selangor	10	Moral Education
Teacher B	Male	Selangor	8	Bahasa Melayu
Teacher C	Female	Negeri Sembilan	12	Islamic Education
Teacher D	Male	Negeri Sembilan	15	English
Teacher E	Female	Selangor	7	Science
Teacher F	Female	Negeri Sembilan	9	Mathematics
Teacher G	Female	Selangor	14	Moral Education
Teacher H	Male	Negeri Sembilan	11	Physical Education
Teacher I	Female	Selangor	6	Geography
Teacher J	Male	Negeri Sembilan	13	Islamic Education
Teacher K	Female	Selangor	16	Art & Co-curriculum
Teacher L	Male	Negeri Sembilan	9	History

Note: No real name is used to preserve confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data was collected over a two-month period between October and November 2025 using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each participant engaged in a one-on-one interview lasting approximately 45 - 60 minutes, conducted in either Malay or English, depending on the participant's preference. The interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol consisted of five main sections:

- Teachers' understanding of "character building."
- Teaching practices and classroom strategies for value inculcation.
- Perceived effectiveness of school programmes and policies.
- Challenges faced in fostering moral development.
- Recommendations for improving character education.

Sample guiding questions included:

- "How do you personally define character building in your classroom context?"
- "Can you describe specific activities or methods you use to promote moral values among students?"
- "What challenges do you face in balancing character education with academic requirements?"

Simultaneously, field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues, tone, and contextual observations, providing depth to the textual data (Bailey, 2006).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which involves six phases: familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme naming, and report production. Transcripts were first read multiple times to gain familiarity with the data. Codes were then generated inductively to capture meaningful patterns related to teachers' conceptualizations and experiences of character education. Coding and theme development were facilitated using NVivo 14 software, which enabled systematic categorization of excerpts (Bazeley, 2007). Themes were refined through iterative analysis, with constant comparison across transcripts to ensure conceptual clarity and internal consistency. Three major themes and several subthemes emerged from the data (see Table 2).

Table 2

Emergent Themes

Main Theme	Subthemes	Description
1. Understanding of Character Building	Moral awareness, holistic growth, empathy cultivation	Teachers conceptualize character building as moral and emotional maturity beyond academic achievement.
2. Implementation Strategies	Role modeling, classroom dialogue, co-curriculum activities	Teachers employ both explicit (lesson-based) and implicit (behavioral modelling) approaches.
3. Challenges and Constraints	Curriculum overload, parental influence, lack of training	Structural and contextual barriers limit consistent practice.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility and dependability, several measures were employed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985):

Triangulation: Data was validated through multiple sources such as interview transcripts, field notes, and school documentation on character programmes.

Member Checking: Participants reviewed their transcripts and key interpretations to confirm accuracy (Kratwohl, 2009).

Peer Debriefing: Two education experts reviewed the coding structure to enhance analytical reliability (Given, 2008).

Thick Description: Detailed contextual information was included to allow readers to assess transferability to other educational settings (Creswell, 2002).

Audit Trail: Records of coding decisions and thematic development were maintained throughout the process for confirmability (Merriam, 2009).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the City University of Malaysia and the respective State Education Departments prior to data collection. All participants were informed of the research purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and measures taken to ensure confidentiality. Written consent was obtained from all twelve teachers. Pseudonyms were used in reporting findings, and identifiable details of schools were omitted to preserve anonymity. The study also conducted in alignment with the Declaration of Helsinki and the Ethical Research Guidelines for Educational Studies (BERA, 2018) (Costley, 2018). Audio

recordings and transcripts were securely stored in encrypted files accessible only to the research team.

Researcher Reflexivity

As the principal investigator, the researcher acknowledges a background as an academic within the Malaysian higher education system, which may influence interpretation. Reflexive journaling was maintained to document assumptions, biases, and evolving understanding throughout the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). This critical self-awareness helped ensure that findings remained grounded in participants' perspectives rather than study preconceptions (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis revealed three overarching themes representing how primary school teachers in Malaysia conceptualize and enact character building:

Holistic Understanding of Character Formation,
Pedagogical and Relational Strategies for Value Transmission, and
Structural and Contextual Challenges in Implementation.

Holistic Understanding of Character Formation

Most teachers articulated a broad and holistic conception of character building that extended beyond moral compliance to encompass emotional regulation, social responsibility, and personal discipline. Teachers generally viewed character education as the foundation of lifelong learning and civic responsibility, reflecting Malaysia's National Education Philosophy (*Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan*) emphasis on balanced development.

"To me, character building means teaching children to be insan yang seimbang - a person who has moral values, self-control, and empathy. It's not only about saying what is right or wrong but also understanding why we should behave that way." (Teacher C, Islamic Education, Negeri Sembilan)

"When my students learn Science, I remind them that honesty and teamwork are also part of the learning. Being clever is useless if you cannot respect others." (Teacher E, Science, Selangor)

Teachers described character building as a process of moral internalization, not mere instruction. This understanding aligns with Lickona's (1991) model of moral knowing, feeling, and action, emphasizing the integration of cognition and emotion in moral development. Similarly, Narvaez and Lapsley (2008) argue that effective character education involves nurturing moral identity, not simply teaching moral facts.

Several participants also framed character development as an Islamic and cultural responsibility, grounded in Malaysia's multicultural ethos. Teachers perceived schools as custodians of moral order in a rapidly modernizing society.

"Many parents are busy working, so sometimes the school becomes the main place for children to learn manners, respect, and faith. We continue what the family cannot finish." (Teacher J, Islamic Education, Negeri Sembilan)

This finding resonates with Chin and Lee (2022), who found that Malaysian teachers perceive character education as a shared moral duty between school and family. Teachers' moral perspectives were thus both personal and professional, reflecting a sense of moral agency described by Arthur et al. (2017) as the "teacher as moral exemplar."

Pedagogical and Relational Strategies for Value Transmission

Teachers consistently emphasized the relational dimension of character building such as modeling desired behaviors, fostering empathy, and guiding students through reflective dialogue. Rather than formal "moral lessons," most teachers practiced implicit character education, embedding values within daily interactions.

Role Modeling as Moral Pedagogy

All twelve participants underscored that teacher behavior is the most powerful form of instruction.

"Students observe everything we do. If I raise my voice too much or lose patience, they remember that. So, I always remind myself: teach with example first, advice second." (Teacher B, Bahasa Melayu, Selangor)

"Character education is not a separate subject. It is in how we talk, how we handle mistakes, and how we show respect to them." (Teacher D, English, Negeri Sembilan)

This approach aligns with Bandura's (1986) social learning theory, which highlights observational learning as central to moral formation. Teachers' awareness of their influence reinforces the concept of hidden curriculum such as the unspoken lessons students learn through daily school culture (Otieno and Daniel, 2023).

Integrating Values in Teaching and Co-Curricular Activities

Teachers described using a combination of explicit and implicit methods to instill moral values. Classroom discussions, storytelling, and group work were cited as opportunities to nurture virtues such as honesty, respect, and cooperation.

"During Moral lessons, I use short stories about friendship and responsibility. But even in Mathematics, I remind them about perseverance and fairness." (Teacher F, Mathematics, Negeri Sembilan)

"Our co-curriculum activities like Gotong-Royong or school camping are the best moments to see students showing their real character such teamwork, helping others, discipline." (Teacher K, Co-curriculum, Selangor)

This supports Berkowitz et al. (2020) argument that effective character education integrates values across all school contexts, not confined to moral instruction alone. Teachers' practices reflected the comprehensive school model proposed by Lickona (1992; 1996), where moral values permeate classroom climate, discipline, and extracurricular life.

Building Reflective Dialogue and Empathy

Several teachers highlighted the importance of student reflection and empathy-based dialogue. Rather than lecturing students about right and wrong, they encouraged discussion about real-life dilemmas.

“When there’s a conflict among students, I ask them, ‘How would you feel if it happened to you?’ Slowly, they learn to think from others’ perspective.” (Teacher I, Moral Education, Selangor)

“Sometimes we hold a short tazkirah session before class. It’s not about religion only — it’s about reminding them to be grateful, to respect teachers, to be humble.” (Teacher C, Islamic Education, Negeri Sembilan)

Such practices reflect the constructivist approach to moral education (Nucci and Narvaez, 2008), where students actively construct moral understanding through social interaction and reflection. Research by Supiadi (2025) in Indonesia similarly found that empathetic dialogue deepens moral internalization, especially among younger learners.

Structural and Contextual Challenges in Implementation

While teachers demonstrated commitment to moral education, they also identified significant barriers that constrained the consistent practice of character building. Three key challenges emerged: curriculum overload, lack of parental reinforcement, and limited professional support.

Curriculum Overload and Academic Pressure

All participants expressed frustration over limited instructional time for value-oriented activities. Teachers felt pressured by examination-oriented systems that prioritized measurable outcomes over moral growth.

“The timetable is too tight. We must finish the syllabus, prepare students for exams, and do reports. Sometimes there’s no time for moral discussion.” (Teacher L, History, Negeri Sembilan)

“We want to focus on values, but academic targets always come first. Even during assembly, announcements about results take more attention than values.” (Teacher H, Physical Education, Negeri Sembilan)

This reflects findings from Che Ani et al. (2025) and Dewi et al. (2023), who noted that curriculum and administrative pressures in Malaysian schools often marginalize character education. Despite official policy emphasis, implementation remains secondary to academic priorities which is a tension also observed in global research (Berkowitz et al., 2020).

Lack of Parental Reinforcement

Another recurring theme was the disconnect between school and home values. Teachers observed that many parents were unable or unwilling to reinforce moral guidance due to work commitments or differing value systems.

“At school we teach respect and discipline, but at home, parents sometimes undo it such they scold teachers, spoil children, or say ‘teacher is wrong.’ It confuses the students.” (Teacher A, Moral Education, Selangor)

“Character cannot grow only in school hours. Parents must continue it. But many are too busy or think moral teaching is the school’s job.” (Teacher G, Moral Education, Selangor)

This echoes De Asildo et al.’s (2020) finding that moral education in Malaysia often lacks continuity between home and school environments. As Lickona (1992;1996) emphasized, effective character education requires strong home–school partnerships, where parents and teachers share consistent moral messages.

Lack of Systematic Training and Guidance

Most teachers admitted that they received little formal training on how to teach or assess character development. Although familiar with *nilai murni* (noble values), they lacked structured frameworks or pedagogical strategies for moral instruction.

“We are told to integrate values in our lessons, but there is no clear method or guide. We just use our own experience.” (Teacher F, Mathematics, Negeri Sembilan)

“Even in teacher training, we learned about moral subjects, but not how to teach values effectively.” (Teacher D, English, Negeri Sembilan)

This gap is consistent with Tengku Kasim et al. (2018) and Hassan and Zainal (2021), who reported that many Malaysian teachers possess high moral awareness but insufficient pedagogical preparation for value education. International research also supports this concern, for instance, Arthur et al. (2017) observed that teachers worldwide often feel morally responsible yet pedagogically unprepared to lead value-based learning.

Discussion: Integrating Moral Purpose with Pedagogical Reality

The findings reveal a complex moral ecosystem where teachers balance personal conviction, pedagogical strategies, and systemic constraints. Teachers in this study demonstrated deep moral intentionality, consistent with Berkowitz’s et al. (2020) assertion that teacher character is a prerequisite for student character formation. However, institutional structures such as rigid curriculum, performance metrics, and limited training undermine sustained implementation (Dewi et al., 2023).

The data affirm Bandura’s (1986) principle of reciprocal determinism: teachers’ actions (personal factors), classroom interactions (behavior), and the school environment (context) continually influence one another. When moral purpose is supported institutionally through school ethos, leadership, and collaboration, teachers are more effective moral educators (Feliza, 2025).

This study also underscores the importance of contextualizing character education within Malaysia’s multicultural and multi-religious fabric. Teachers negotiated value systems across Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Indigenous backgrounds, aiming for inclusivity while preserving

moral clarity. This echoes Dinham's et al. (2020) argument that moral education in collectivist societies must balance shared cultural virtues with pluralistic respect.

Ultimately, the teachers' voices reveal that character education is not an "extra subject" but an atmosphere of learning. As Teacher B noted, moral formation occurs through "example first, advice second." This aligns with Lickona's (1996) view that "character is best caught, not taught."

Overall Synthesis

The core insight from this data is that teachers view character development holistically, encompassing moral, emotional, and civic formation, and they emphasize relational strategies like modeling, empathy, and reflective dialogue to achieve it. However, their efforts face structural challenges such as curriculum overload, weak parental cooperation, and limited guidance. Consequently, the implications suggest that educational policy should support integrated moral-academic development, teacher training should include socio-emotional pedagogy, and reform is needed to reduce academic pressure while enhancing moral frameworks within the school system.

Eventually, character building in Malaysian primary schools is alive but under strain. Teachers demonstrate genuine commitment and moral consciousness, yet systemic and contextual factors constrain sustained practice. Their reflections call for a whole-school and whole-community approach as one that bridges moral philosophy, pedagogy, and home reinforcement. The integration of explicit value instruction with lived moral practice represents the path forward. To achieve Malaysia's educational aspiration of producing "*insan seimbang dan harmonis*" (holistic and integrated manner), policymakers must reposition character education from the margins of the curriculum to its heart.

Conclusion and Implications

Summary of Key Findings

This qualitative study explored how Malaysian primary school teachers conceptualize and practice character building within the classroom and wider school environment. Through semi-structured interviews with twelve teachers across Johor and Negeri Sembilan, the study revealed three interrelated themes:

Teachers' holistic understanding of character formation encompassing moral, emotional, and civic dimensions.

Teachers' reliance on pedagogical and relational strategies such as role modelling, empathy dialogue, and co-curricular integration; and

The systemic and contextual challenges that hinder effective implementation, including curriculum overload, limited parental reinforcement, and insufficient teacher training.

Largely, the findings affirm that character education in Malaysian primary schools remains philosophically strong but practically constrained. Teachers recognize its importance and attempt to embody moral values in their teaching, but they operate within a system that prioritizes academic achievement and administrative compliance over value formation.

This study thus underscores the moral agency of teachers and their indispensable role as catalysts of character development. However, sustainable and effective character education requires a supportive ecosystem, one that aligns policy frameworks, teacher preparation, school culture, and family engagement.

Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to the theoretical discourse on character education by affirming several key principles:

Moral Development as a Holistic Process: The teachers' narratives support Lickona's (1992) triadic model such knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good. Character formation is not achieved through instruction alone but through a balance of cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement (Donesia et al., 2023). Teachers emphasized empathy and emotional growth alongside moral reasoning, consistent with Silke's et al. (2024) integrated moral identity theory.

The Teacher as Moral Exemplar: In line with Bandura's (1986) social learning theory, the study highlights that moral learning occurs primarily through observation and imitation. Teachers' conduct, tone, and fairness set implicit moral standards that students absorb daily (Feliza, 2025). The teacher's role thus extends beyond curriculum delivery to moral leadership, validating Hassan and Zainal's (2021) assertion that the ethical integrity of teachers is foundational to students' moral growth.

Reciprocal Determinism of Context and Behavior: The findings reinforce the dynamic interaction between personal agency, school environment, and systemic constraints. Teachers' moral intentions are shaped and at times limited by institutional expectations and cultural norms (Supiadi, 2025). This reciprocal process illustrates that effective character education requires coherence between teacher agency and institutional ethos (Chin and Lee, 2022), echoing Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory.

Practical Implications for Education Stakeholders

For Teachers

Teachers must continue to view themselves as moral agents and facilitators of reflective learning, not mere transmitters of knowledge. The study suggests that everyday practices such tone of speech, fairness, patience, and empathy hold greater influence on student character than formal moral lessons.

Moreover, teachers should adopt reflective pedagogy, incorporating structured moral dialogues, scenario analysis, and group reflection. Encouraging students to discuss dilemmas ("*What would you do?*" or "*How would you feel?*") fosters critical moral reasoning and empathy, consistent with Dinham et al. (2020).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) within schools can further enhance teachers' moral pedagogical skills through peer sharing of strategies, classroom case studies, and mentorship among experienced educators.

For School Leaders

Principals and administrators play a decisive role in embedding moral values into the school's culture. Findings suggest that teachers' efforts often remain isolated without consistent institutional reinforcement. School leaders should therefore:

- Cultivate a whole-school ethos of character education, where shared values guide rules, discipline, and communication.
- Allocate dedicated time for value-based assemblies, service learning, or reflective classroom discussions.
- Recognize and reward moral exemplarity and not only academic excellence among teachers and students.
- Integrate moral values explicitly into co-curricular planning and community service projects.

Such steps reflect the whole-school approach advocated by Berkowitz et al. (2020), ensuring that character formation becomes a lived reality within school environments.

For Policy Makers

At the policy level, the findings call for a rebalancing of priorities within Malaysia's Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR). While the curriculum outlines *nilai murni* (noble values), implementation remains inconsistent due to academic pressures. To strengthen moral education nationwide, the Ministry of Education should:

- Integrate structured moral pedagogy modules into pre-service and in-service teacher training.
- Develop assessment frameworks that capture behavioral and socio-emotional growth, not merely cognitive achievement.
- Reduce curriculum overload by embedding moral objectives into existing subjects rather than treating them as supplementary.
- Foster home-school partnerships through parent workshops, collaborative campaigns, and moral reinforcement activities.

Policy must shift from viewing character education as a hidden curriculum to an explicitly measurable educational outcome, aligned with Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2013–2025 vision of nurturing "students with ethics and spirituality."

For Parents and Communities

The study revealed that moral education cannot succeed without consistent reinforcement at home. Teachers repeatedly highlighted parental disengagement as a barrier. Hence, schools should strengthen community engagement through parent-teacher character forums, family service projects, and regular moral value newsletters.

As Lickona (1996) emphasized, moral growth flourishes when families and schools transmit consistent messages of respect, responsibility, and care. Community institutions such as mosques, temples, NGOs might also collaborate with schools in organizing joint value-building initiatives that contextualize moral education within local culture.

Challenges and Limitations

While the study offers rich qualitative insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size (12 teachers), though adequate for phenomenological depth, limits generalizability to all Malaysian schools. Furthermore, participants were drawn from only two states, and their views may not represent teachers in East Malaysia or the rest of schools in peninsular Malaysia.

Another limitation is the self-reported nature of interview data. Teachers' descriptions may reflect aspirational ideals rather than actual classroom behavior. Future studies could triangulate findings with classroom observations or student perspectives to validate teacher-reported practices.

Directions for Future Research

This study opens several avenues for continued inquiry:

Comparative Studies Across Regions: Future research could explore differences in character education approaches between urban and rural schools or between Peninsular and East Malaysia. Such comparative analysis would reveal how local culture, resources, and community engagement shape moral pedagogy.

Mixed-Methods Approaches: Combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys could offer a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' beliefs, instructional frequency, and student outcomes.

Student and Parent Perspectives: Incorporating voices of students and parents could provide a holistic picture of value transmission within the triadic relationship of school, home, and community.

Intervention and Evaluation Studies: Pilot interventions (empathy-based modules or teacher character workshops) should be designed and evaluated using pre- and post-assessments to measure impact on student behavior and school culture.

Concluding Remark

Character education remains a moral compass and unifying mission of Malaysia's education system. The teachers in this study embody a quiet but profound form of moral leadership which guiding students not merely toward academic success but toward ethical maturity, compassion, and civic responsibility. Their reflections remind us of that education without character is incomplete, and character without practice is hollow. Indeed, as one participant eloquently concluded: *"We may not change every student's life, but every act of kindness, honesty, and patience in the classroom plants a seed. That seed grows into the kind of citizen our country needs"* (Teacher A, Moral Education, Selangor). In light of Malaysia's aspiration to cultivate a holistic and integrated manner which is balanced, moral, and responsible individuals, it is imperative that character education receives the same institutional priority as academic learning. Only through a collective commitment among teachers, schools, families, and policymakers can education truly shape the character of the next generation.

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