



## Students' Understanding and Practice of Morality at EBC Bidau Masau Elementary School in Dili, Timor-Leste: A Qualitative Study

Alexandra de Araujo Tilman<sup>1\*</sup>, Manuela Monteiro Conceição<sup>2</sup>, Filomeno Amaral Bria<sup>3</sup>, Eduardo da Costa Guterres<sup>4</sup>, Teofilo Amaral Sarmiento<sup>5</sup>, Domingos Verdinal<sup>6</sup>

Faculdade de Educação e Humanidades, Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL)

**Corresponding Author:** Alexandra de Araujo Tilman

[alexandratilman28@gmail.com](mailto:alexandratilman28@gmail.com)

---

### ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords: Morality, Students, Phenomenology, Teachers' Roles, Parental Support, Religious Values*

*Received: 18, December*

*Revised: 19, January*

*Accepted: 28, February*

©2026 Tilman, Conceição, Bria, Guterres, Sarmiento, Verdinal: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

[International.](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore elementary school students' understanding and practices of morality, as well as the factors that influence them. The research method used was qualitative with a phenomenological approach. The research subjects consisted of 20 fourth- and fifth-grade students at Bidau Masaun Public Elementary School in Dili, Timor-Leste. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion-drawing techniques. The results indicate that most students understand morality as good behavior, such as helping friends and not lying; however, daily practices still reveal instances of mild bullying and a lack of empathy. Internal factors (empathy, personality, religious understanding) and external factors (the role of teachers, school rules, parental support) were found to influence moral development. This study underscores the importance of the roles of schools and families in shaping children's morality from an early age.

---

## **INTRODUCTION**

Morality is a fundamental aspect of elementary school-aged children's development, as they are currently transitioning from an egocentric mindset to a broader social understanding. According to Aditiya, Bawono, and Wibowo from Trunojoyo University of Madura (2021), the elementary school years are a critical period during which children begin to recognize and internalize moral values from their families, schools, and surrounding environments. Family communication, the social environment, and story-based teaching methods have been shown to influence children's moral development. Students begin to learn to distinguish between good and bad behavior, right and wrong, and start to understand the social values prevalent in their surroundings. This process is influenced not only by formal learning at school but also by interactions with peers, teachers, and family. However, in daily practice, phenomena are still frequently observed that indicate challenges in children's moral development, such as bullying, a lack of empathy toward peers facing difficulties, and low levels of social concern for the school environment. These phenomena reveal a gap between the moral understanding children possess and the actual behavior they exhibit. Based on these conditions, research questions arise regarding how students understand the concept of morality, how they practice it in daily interactions, and what factors influence this moral development. These questions form the research problem underlying this study. In line with this, this study aims to describe students' understanding of morality, identify forms of moral practice in daily school life, and explain the internal and external factors influencing the development of students' morality. By linking the research questions and objectives to the background, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of the state of morality among elementary school students, while also serving as a foundation for teachers and parents in designing more effective moral education strategies. Therefore, this study is important to explore in depth how students understand the concept of morality, how they practice it in daily interactions, and what factors influence this moral development. Morality is a fundamental aspect of elementary school-aged children's development, as they are in a transitional phase from egocentric thinking toward a broader social understanding.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Elementary school is a critical period when children begin to recognize and internalize moral values from their families, schools, and surrounding environments; thus, daily experiences significantly shape long-term character formation (Aditiya, Bawono, & Wibowo, 2021). In line with Kohlberg's theory of moral development, children aged 11-12 are generally still in the pre-conventional stage, where judgments of right and wrong are based on immediate consequences, though they are gradually shifting toward a more complex social understanding (Hasanah, 2020). This indicates that moral education in elementary school plays a strategic role in helping children navigate this transition positively. By understanding this, schools and parents can design more effective moral education strategies, ensuring that children not

only understand moral values theoretically but are also able to internalize them through concrete actions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methods used in this journal research are observation, interviews, and documentation.

### **Observation**

Observation is a data collection method that involves directly observing the research object, including behavior, activities, and environmental conditions. The aim is to obtain factual data that occurs in the field without relying on respondents' perceptions or memories. The type of observation chosen is participant observation, where the researcher is directly involved in the observed activities. Ultimately, it is hoped that the data obtained will be more objective, consistent with reality, and can capture details often missed in interviews.

### **Interviews**

Interviews are a data collection method conducted through direct question-and-answer sessions between the researcher and respondents. The goal is to obtain in-depth information, including respondents' opinions, experiences, and feelings. Structured interviews are also the type of interview chosen, where questions are prepared in advance by the researcher, similar to oral questionnaires. This ultimately allows for richer, more in-depth, and more contextual data collection.

Documentation is a data collection method that involves reviewing written documents, photographs, videos, archives, or notes relevant to the research. This aims to complement observation and interview data and provide written or visual evidence. The appropriate type of document to use in this research is personal documents, such as letters, diaries, and personal photographs. Through these personal documents, data is expected to be more stable, functional, and unaffected by the respondents' emotional states.

From the three methods above, a general conclusion can be drawn: this research employed three complementary data collection methods: participant observation, structured interviews, and personal documentation. Participant observation involves the researcher directly in the observed activities, ensuring that the data obtained is more objective and consistent with the reality on the ground. Structured interviews are conducted through questions and answers with respondents using a pre-compiled list of questions, resulting in more systematic, in-depth, and contextual information. Personal documentation is used to review documents in the form of letters, diaries, and personal photographs, which serve as written or visual evidence to strengthen the results of observations and interviews. By combining these three methods, this research is expected to produce comprehensive, valid, and verifiable data, so that it can support more accurate and comprehensive analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Understanding Morality**

Most students understand morality simply as "being kind to friends" and "not lying." This understanding indicates that elementary school children tend to associate morality with the social behavior they directly experience in everyday interactions. This aligns with the view that the school environment plays a crucial role in shaping children's moral behavior. According to Aisyah (2022), a conducive school environment, both through interactions with teachers and peers, can significantly influence the moral development of elementary school children. Therefore, students' understanding of morality is inseparable from the social experiences they gain at school, which directly shape basic concepts of right and wrong.

Furthermore, children's understanding of morality is also influenced by communication and guidance provided within the family environment. Astuti (2019) emphasized that parental communication plays a crucial role in shaping children's moral character, as through intense and positive communication, children can develop a deeper understanding of moral values. With synergy between the school environment and parental communication, children's understanding of morality is not limited to simple behaviors such as doing good and not lying, but can also develop into a more complex moral awareness. Therefore, students' thoughts about morality reflect the results of social interactions at school as well as the influence of communication within the family, which together form the foundation of their moral character.

Some students link their understanding of morality to religious teachings, for example, through the statement "you shouldn't steal because it's a sin." This indicates that their understanding of moral values stems not only from social interactions but also from the internalization of religious teachings, which emphasize the relationship between human behavior and spiritual consequences. Deti and Lestari (2021) emphasize that efforts to improve the moral development of elementary school children can be achieved by integrating religious values into learning, as religion provides a strong normative foundation for children in distinguishing between good and bad behavior. Thus, a religious-based understanding of morality is an important factor in shaping children's character from an early age.

Furthermore, moral learning strategies through stories and fairy tales also play a role in strengthening children's understanding of religious values. Gunawan and Putri (2021) explain that stories and fairy tales rich with moral messages can be effective media for instilling the values of honesty, kindness, and prohibitions against reprehensible behavior. When children hear stories that link bad behavior to sin or negative consequences, they more easily understand the connection between religious teachings and everyday morality. In this way, religion-based moral education is not merely abstract but also concrete through narratives that relate to children's experiences.

Furthermore, the moral development of elementary school children can be explained through Kohlberg's theory of moral development stages. Hasanah (2019) explains that in the early stages, children tend to understand morality based on external consequences, such as punishment or sin, before progressing

to more complex stages involving universal principles. The understanding of "not stealing because it's a sin" reflects the conventional morality stage, where children judge right and wrong based on prevailing social rules and religious teachings. Thus, the relationship between religious teachings, moral learning strategies, and moral development theory suggests that children's understanding of morality is the result of an integrated educational process involving the school environment, family, and spiritual values.

### **Moral Practice**

The behavior of helping each other demonstrated by students, such as helping a fallen friend, reflects the moral values that develop through daily social interactions. This attitude is part of a positive character that is important to develop from an early age, as it can strengthen solidarity and caring between individuals. Hidayat (2020) emphasized that the moral degradation of Indonesia's younger generation can be minimized by fostering caring and helping behaviors, so that children become accustomed to internalizing moral values in real actions. Thus, helping each other is not merely a habit, but also a concrete manifestation of the development of healthy moral character.

Furthermore, the behavior of helping friends demonstrated by students is inseparable from the influence of moral values education and teaching, both at school and at home. Irawan and Putri (2021) explain that consistent education and structured teaching of moral values have a significant influence on student behavior. When children are accustomed to being role models and guided to help others, this behavior becomes part of their personality. This demonstrates that the education and teaching of moral values serve as a foundation that strengthens positive social behavior, including mutual assistance.

Furthermore, mutual-help behavior can be explained through Kohlberg's theory of stages of moral development. According to Kohlberg (1995; 1997), children in the early stages of moral development tend to judge actions based on immediate consequences and prevailing social rules. Helping a fallen friend can be understood as a form of compliance with social norms that emphasize the importance of caring and solidarity. As development progresses, this behavior can develop into a higher moral awareness, where children help not only because of rules or customs, but also because of a deeper understanding of human values. Thus, mutual-help behavior is an important indicator of the moral development process in elementary school children.

Although students demonstrate positive behaviors such as helping each other, cases of mild bullying, such as name-calling or physical abuse, are still found. This behavior reflects a gap in the understanding and application of moral values that should be upheld in the school environment. Kurnia and Pratama (2021) emphasize that the storytelling method can be an effective strategy for improving elementary school children's understanding of moral values, because through stories, children can learn about the consequences of negative behaviors such as teasing and the importance of respecting others. Thus, the emergence of minor bullying cases demonstrates the need for a more

creative approach to moral education that addresses children's emotional aspects.

Furthermore, students' psychological and social development also influences the emergence of bullying behavior. Masganti (2010) explains that elementary school children are still in the developmental stage of identity discovery, and environmental influences significantly shape their behavior. Nurdyansyah (2018) adds that moral development based on "Islamic Math Character" can be one solution for consistently instilling moral values, as it integrates academic learning with religious values. Therefore, minor bullying cases, such as physical or family teasing, need to be addressed with a holistic approach, combining moral education, strengthening religious values, and creative learning methods to instill in children a sense of respect for others and avoid harmful behavior.

### **Influencing Factors**

Internal factors such as empathy, personality, and religious understanding play a crucial role in shaping children's morality. Empathy enables children to understand and feel the conditions of others, thus fostering caring and helpful behavior. Personality traits formed early in life also influence how children respond to moral situations in everyday life. Nurgiyantoro (2005) emphasized that a child's developmental stages, including the selection of literary reading materials, can help foster empathy and strengthen moral character. Thus, these internal factors serve as the primary foundation guiding children in distinguishing between good and bad behavior.

Furthermore, a child's religious understanding also strengthens the formation of moral character. Pratama and Rahman (2020) explain that communication between teachers and students plays a significant role in building moral character, especially when religious values are integrated into the learning process. Putri (2022) adds that implementing character-based learning in elementary schools can strengthen the internalization of moral values, so that children not only understand them cognitively but also internalize them emotionally and spiritually. Therefore, empathy, personality, and religious understanding, as internal factors, work synergistically to shape children's morality, making them more mature in facing social and spiritual challenges in their environment.

One external factor influencing children's morality is the role of teachers as role models. Teachers function not only as instructors but also as models of moral behavior that students can emulate. Rosidah and Rusminati (2017) emphasize that storytelling can be an effective medium for developing character and national cultural values in elementary school students, because teachers, through stories, can instill moral values while also serving as real-life role models in everyday life. Rukiyah (2018) also adds that storytelling has significant benefits in shaping children's attitudes, as the moral messages conveyed by teachers can reinforce positive behaviors that are internalized by students.

In addition to the role of teachers, school rules also play a crucial role in shaping children's morality. Clear and consistent rules help children

understand the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Santoso and Kurniawati (2021) explain that moral learning in the school environment significantly influences students' social attitudes because it is through the rules implemented that children learn discipline, responsibility, and respect for others. Santrock (2003) emphasizes that the development of children and adolescents is strongly influenced by the school environment, so that the rules implemented serve as moral guidelines that shape their behavior. Thus, school rules are an important instrument in systematically instilling moral values.

Parental support is also an external factor that cannot be ignored in the formation of children's morality. Parents who actively provide guidance, role models, and positive communication will strengthen the moral values children acquire at school. Sari and Yusuf (2021) emphasize that the peer environment and family support have a significant impact on the moral behavior of elementary school children, so parental involvement is crucial in determining the direction of children's moral development. With the synergy between the role of teachers, school rules, and parental support, children will have a strong moral foundation to face social challenges in their environment.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research shows that students' understanding of morality is still at a basic level, where they associate morality with simple behaviors such as being kind to friends, not lying, and helping others. However, some students also begin to connect morality with religious teachings, such as the prohibition of stealing, which is considered a sin. This confirms that elementary school children's moral understanding is formed through a combination of daily social experiences, school habits, and the internalization of religious values they receive from their family and school environments.

Practically, children's morality is reflected in concrete behaviors, such as helping each other when friends are in trouble, showing empathy, and striving to obey applicable rules. However, negative behaviors such as mild bullying, such as physical teasing or teasing family members, are still found, indicating the need to strengthen moral education through creative strategies, teacher role models, and consistent communication from parents. These moral practices are important indicators that children are in the process of character formation, which requires ongoing support from their environment.

Internal and external factors have been shown to play a role in the development of children's morality. Internal factors include empathy, personality, and religious understanding, which form a child's moral foundation. Meanwhile, external factors include the role of teachers as role models, consistent school rules, and active parental support in guiding children. The synergy between these internal and external factors results in a more comprehensive moral education process, enabling children not only to cognitively understand moral values but also to practice them in real life. Thus, this study confirms that the formation of elementary school children's morality is the result of a complex interaction between understanding, practice, and complementary internal and external influences.

Based on the research findings on elementary school students' understanding and practice of morality, several recommendations are provided for those directly involved in children's moral development.

1. For Teachers

Teachers are expected to integrate moral education into every subject taught. Moral education is not limited to religious studies or civics, but can be instilled across various academic disciplines, emphasizing the values of honesty, responsibility, empathy, and social awareness. Furthermore, teachers need to be role models in their daily attitudes and behaviors, so that students can emulate and internalize moral values through direct experience.

2. For Schools

Schools are advised to design and implement habit-building programs that support the strengthening of children's morality, such as "Sharing Fridays" to foster social awareness, or "Caring Friends" to foster solidarity among students. These programs need to be implemented consistently to instill positive habits in students. Furthermore, schools must establish clear, consistent, and educational rules so that children become accustomed to understanding the boundaries of behavior that align with applicable moral values.

3. For Parents

Parents are expected to consistently set a moral example at home through positive communication and daily behavior. The honesty, empathy, and caring demonstrated by parents will serve as a direct example for children in developing moral character. Parents also need to collaborate with schools to ensure that the moral values taught in school are reinforced within the family environment, so that children receive a comprehensive, continuous, and consistent moral experience. With synergy between teachers, schools, and parents, it is hoped that the moral development of elementary school children can be more effective, comprehensive, and sustainable, resulting in a generation with strong character and noble morals.

## **REFERENCES**

- Aisyah, R. (2022). Pengaruh Lingkungan Sekolah Terhadap Perkembangan Moral Anak Sekolah Dasar. *Jurnal Pendidikan Karakter*.
- Astuti, D. (2019). Peran Komunikasi Orang Tua dalam Pembentukan Karakter Moral Anak. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan*.
- Deti, S., & Lestari, T. (2021). Upaya Meningkatkan Perkembangan Moral pada Anak Sekolah Dasar. *Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai*.
- Gunawan, A., & Putri, R. (2021). Strategi Pembelajaran Moral pada Anak Usia Dini melalui Cerita dan Dongeng. *Jurnal Pendidikan Anak*.
- Hasanah, E. (2019). Perkembangan Moral Siswa Sekolah Dasar Berdasarkan Teori Kohlberg. *JIPSINDO*.

- Hidayat, M. (2020). Degradasi Moral Generasi Muda di Indonesia. *Jurnal Sosial Humaniora*.
- Irawan, A., & Putri, M. (2021). Pengaruh Pembiasaan dan Pengajaran Nilai Moral Terhadap Perilaku Siswa. *Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar*.
- Kohlberg, Lawrence. (1997). Tahap-tahap Perkembangan Moral. Jakarta: Kanisius. Kohlberg, Lawrence, Tahap-Tahap Perkembangan Moral. (terj. John de Santo & Agus Cremers), Yogyakarta: Kanisius, (1995).
- Kurnia, I., & Pratama, D. (2021). Efektivitas Metode Dongeng Terhadap Peningkatan Pemahaman Nilai Moral pada Anak Sekolah Dasar. *Jurnal Pendidikan Karakter Indonesia*.
- Masganti, (2010), *Perkembangan Peserta Didik*, Medan: Perdana Publishing
- Nurdyansyah, N. (2018). *Peningkatan Moral Berbasis Islamic Math Character*. Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo.
- Nurgiyantoro, B. (2005). *Tahapan perkembangan anak dan pemilihan bacaan sastra anak*. Yogyakarta State University.
- Pratama, A., & Rahman, T. (2020). Pengaruh Komunikasi Guru dan Siswa dalam Membangun Karakter Moral. *Jurnal Pendidikan Karakter*.
- Putri, L. (2022). Implementasi Pembelajaran Berbasis Karakter di Sekolah Dasar. *Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan dan Pengajaran*.
- Rosidah, C. T., Rusminati, S. H. (2017). Mendongeng Sebagai Media Menumbuhkan Karakter dan Nilai Budaya Bangsa pada Siswa Sekolah Dasar. *Pigur: Jurnal Pendidikan Guru*.
- Rukiyah. (2018): *Dongeng, Mendongeng, dan Manfaatnya*.
- Santoso, F., & Kurniawati, S. (2021). Pengaruh Pembelajaran Moral di Lingkungan Sekolah terhadap Sikap Sosial Siswa. *Jurnal Pendidikan Moral Indonesia*.
- Santrock, J. W. (2003). *Adolescence (perkembangan remaja)*. Jakarta: Penerbit Erlangga. Sari, N., & Yusuf, D. (2021). Dampak Lingkungan Teman Sebaya Terhadap Perilaku Moral Anak Sekolah Dasar. *Jurnal Psikologi Pendidikan*.
- Sugiyono, 2009. *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif dan R&D*. Bandung: Alfabeta. Sugiyono. (2020). *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitaif dan Kombinasi (Mixed Methods)*. Bandung: ALFABETA.

Yusuf, H., & Rahman, M. (2021). Efektivitas Metode Dongeng dalam Pembelajaran Nilai Moral pada Anak. *Jurnal Psikologi dan Pendidikan Anak*.