

Character Education from Thomas Lickona's Perspective in Building Moral Intelligence in Primary Education

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the implementation of character education based on Thomas Lickona's perspective in building moral intelligence in primary education. The study addresses the gap between theoretical concepts of character education and their practical application in school settings. Using a qualitative case study approach conducted at SRITI Al-Qawwam, data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The findings show that character values such as discipline, responsibility, empathy, and respect are integrated into daily learning activities, school culture, and teacher-student interactions. Teachers act as role models while reinforcing values through habituation and reflective communication. However, challenges remain, including limited teacher competence in moral pedagogy, time constraints, and the influence of digital environments. This study contributes to strengthening the practical application of Lickona's framework in developing students' moral intelligence.

Keywords: *Character education, Thomas Lickona, moral intelligence, elementary school*

INTRODUCTION

21st-century education faces increasingly complex global challenges due to the acceleration of globalization, the digital revolution, and massive changes in social and cultural values. This transformation not only changes the way humans think and learn, but also shifts the moral orientation of modern society (Kamalov et al., 2023), states that the development of artificial intelligence and automation brings great opportunities for educational advancement, but on the other hand creates a threat to the character formation of the younger generation because it fosters instant culture and reduces ethical reflection on moral values. Meanwhile, Kazan (2022) reports that around 68% of countries have experienced a decline in moral and social engagement among teenagers, characterized by increasing intolerance, digital violence, and manipulative behavior in online spaces. These findings show that the main challenge of modern education is no longer limited to academic improvement, but how to balance intellectual intelligence and moral integrity.

Globally, the moral crisis among elementary school children is also becoming increasingly apparent. (Armitage, 2021) notes that one-third of elementary school children worldwide have experienced or committed *bullying*, and 42% have been exposed to verbal abuse at school. In Southeast Asia, (Anh et al., 2025) shows a decline in social empathy in 38% of students due to a lack of values education and increased exposure to digital media. Research Thomas et al. (2022) proves that low moral awareness and aggressive behavior in children are closely related to the weak implementation of character education in elementary schools. Therefore, character building based on ethical values and moral awareness is an important priority in global education reform.

Advances in digital technology have expanded the moral issues faced by the younger generation. Livingstone et al. (2023) found that unsupervised exposure to online media can increase the risk of antisocial behavior in children by up to 24%. Research by Barlett et al. (2018) also shows that excessive use of social media reduces empathy by 15% and increases aggressive tendencies by up to 21%. This condition confirms that the moral challenges of 21st-century children do not only originate from their social and family environments, but also from the digital world, which lacks ethical control. Therefore, a more systematic character education based on *moral intelligence* is needed so that students are able

to navigate values in an increasingly open and complex world.

In the Indonesian context, the issue of moral degradation is a serious concern. Data from the National Student Assessment shows an 18% increase in cases of disciplinary violations, academic dishonesty, and rude behavior in elementary schools during the 2019–2022 period (Habibah et al., 2022). Research from Karneli et al. (2023) reports a decline in student responsibility and discipline, while Angita & Witanto (2024) find that around 27% of elementary school students in Central Java have been involved in bullying. According to (Kusuma, 2019), This phenomenon is a reflection of the weakening of the nation's social ethics, marked by increasing intolerance and manipulative behavior. This fact shows that character education in Indonesia still faces major challenges in internalizing moral values into the actual behavior of students in the classroom.

In contrast, Malaysia shows more positive results in the implementation of moral education. Based on the report (Khokhar, 2024), as many as 87% of elementary schools have integrated Moral Education and Islamic Education into the national curriculum (KSSR). This program emphasizes the formation of moral values and personality in a balanced manner between the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. (Rahman & Ikhlas, 2022) found that 84% of elementary school students in Malaysia have a high level of obedience and respect for teachers, while (Rosli et al., 2022) emphasizes that this success cannot be separated from the implementation of the National Education Philosophy (FPK), which is oriented towards the formation of balanced individuals in terms of intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical aspects. Unlike Indonesia, which tends to place character education in a normative position, Malaysia has made it an integral part of the national education system.

Cross-country research further reinforces these findings by stating that the moral education system in Malaysia is more systematic and effective than in Indonesia. The *Moral Education and Islamic Religious Education* curricula are mandatory in all primary schools, involving schools, families, and communities in shaping students' morals. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, the implementation of character education is still ceremonial and has not been well integrated into learning. Many students understand moral values cognitively, but are unable to internalize them into real actions due to the weak role models of teachers and the influence of popular culture and digital media.

In addition, comparisons of academic achievement also show Malaysia's superiority. Based on the report (Maamin et al., 2021), Malaysia ranks 22nd in the world for science and 26th for mathematics, while Indonesia ranks 46th and 43rd. The results of the PISA (Safari & Khasanah, 2023) also show that Malaysian students' literacy and numeracy scores (419 and 423) are higher than those of Indonesia (379 and 382). This proves that the integration of moral values into the curriculum not only strengthens character but also contributes to improved academic achievement. Thus, the balance between intellectual and moral intelligence is the key to the success of Malaysia's education system in facing the challenges of the 21st century.

These findings are also consistent with the author's empirical experience while teaching in Malaysian elementary schools. Direct observation shows that Malaysian students generally have good learning ethics, are polite, disciplined, and have a high level of respect for teachers and peers. They are accustomed to greeting others, listening attentively, and demonstrating a responsible attitude in learning activities. Academically, they also demonstrate consistent achievement and critical thinking skills, especially in literacy and science. The OECD report (Hermawan & Kusniasari, 2023) confirms that the integration of moral values in the curriculum has a positive effect on students' cognitive achievement and learning motivation.

This comparison shows Malaysia's excellence in developing a consistent, measurable education system based on religious values and local culture. Therefore, this study is important to examine in depth how the application of *Thomas Lickona's* perspective in character education in Malaysian primary schools contributes to the formation of students' *moral intelligence*. The results of this study are expected to provide strategic recommendations for Indonesia in strengthening the implementation of character education in elementary schools by emulating the best practices from Malaysia, which have been proven effective in comprehensively instilling moral values.

Despite the extensive discussion on moral issues and the importance of character education, there is still a gap between theoretical frameworks of character education and their practical implementation in school environments. Many studies focus on conceptual discussions, but limited research explores how Thomas Lickona's concepts—moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action—

are systematically applied in primary school settings.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze how character education from Thomas Lickona's perspective is implemented in primary schools and how it contributes to the development of students' moral intelligence. This research also seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the practical application of Lickona's framework in real educational contexts.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the application of Thomas Lickona's perspective on character education in building moral intelligence in primary schools. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the meaning, values, and practices of character education in a specific institutional context, namely SRITI Al-Qawwam, Malaysia. The participants in this study consisted of the school principal and six teachers who were directly involved in the teaching and character-building process. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, with criteria including teaching experience, involvement in character education practices, and willingness to participate in the research. The research setting is a religious-based primary school that emphasizes the integration of moral and Islamic values into daily learning activities. The data sources in this study are primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through interviews with relevant parties, including school principals and teachers. Secondary data were obtained from scientific journals, books, and other literature related to this study. Data collection techniques included observation, interviews, and documentation. Furthermore, in analyzing the data, the author used data triangulation, including triangulation of data sources, methods, and time to ensure the validity of findings. The data analysis process was conducted systematically through several stages: data reduction, data categorization, data interpretation, and verification, followed by drawing conclusions. This process aims to strengthen the credibility and rigor of the research findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A teacher in SRITI Al-Qawwam explained that instruction during Phase 1 is designed to enhance early and foundational literacy and numeracy. "However the future of a child in education can be decided by what it has gained from early childhood teaching, therefore reading and writing and excellence in number must start at an early age," said the teacher. This emphasis on literacy and numeracy is deemed an important foundation for readiness to learn at the next level and for more advanced cognitive processing during this time. There is no moral teacher as such, in its operation. According to the teachers in charge, the planting of morals is conducted indirectly by applying attitudes and behaviors that can lead students be able observing and understanding as learning occurs. The setting of positive examples by teachers is the most important, and consistent support pupils get in their sense-making process regarding moral values. This is the model where the teacher is a role model and values are inherited as part of a typical day instead of explicit moral instruction.

But the biggest problem faced by teachers is the lack of pupils possessing satisfactory skills in fundamentals, notably reading and writing. This inhibits how learning is able to spread, especially as such fundamental skills comprise a large foundation which students utilize to understand in subsequent phases. Some students have very little or no ability to read and write, so the learning process can only get better with both of these basic skills. In relation to responsibilities and problems, respondents stressed the value of patience. repeated counseling in dealing with student-related problems. Supporting student progress gradually and efficiently is deemed critical. Teachers also report that when further intervention is needed due to emerging issues, these are reported to the guidance and discipline teachers so that appropriate follow-up can be undertaken collaboratively.

Additionally, teachers believe that to acquire moral, ethical and virtue values along with academic capability. Teachers constantly lecture about not just educating the child, but also to develop the character and create a whole balanced kid.

Character Education from Lickona's Perspective in Malaysian Elementary Schools

The results of research and observation on character education from Thomas Lickona's perspective at SRITI Al-Qawwam, Malaysia, show that character building practices at this school have

been systematically integrated into the learning process, school activities, and social interaction patterns between teachers and students. Character education is not viewed as a separate subject, but rather as the spirit of all educational activities. Teachers at SRITI Al-Qawwam apply learning strategies that emphasize the instillation of moral values through contextual approaches and reflective activities. Based on the interview results, teachers consistently relate Islamic moral values to real situations faced by students, so that students learn to understand the meaning of values through their own experiences. These findings are in line with the views of (Arumugam et al., 2023), which emphasize that value reflection in learning encourages the development of moral awareness and social empathy among elementary school students. In addition to classroom learning, school culture plays an important role in shaping student character. Every activity at SRITI Al-Qawwam from morning activities and communal prayers to interactions outside the classroom is geared toward fostering a religious atmosphere and high discipline. Field observations show that values such as responsibility, respect, and cooperation are repeatedly instilled in the context of daily activities. (Shiddiq et al., 2024), mention that a school culture that is consistent with moral values has a direct effect on the formation of children's *moral intelligence*. Field observations also found that teacher role modeling is the most dominant element in the successful implementation of character education. Teachers at SRITI Al-Qawwam serve as moral figures who consistently demonstrate polite, honest, and noble behavior, thus becoming real examples for students. According to (Choy et al., 2017) teacher role modeling has a significant influence on the formation of students' moral identity, because teachers' behavior becomes a "mirror of values" for children in elementary school.

Based on the explanation above, the author will present more details related to moral intelligence using Thomas Lickona's perspective as an analytical tool in this study. The results show that the character education approach in Malaysia is in line with Thomas Lickona's concept of *character education*, which emphasizes the importance of instilling goodness through knowledge, feelings, and moral actions. This can be explained as follows :

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Implementing Lickona's Character Perspective Teachers' Understanding and Competence in Moral Theory Remain Limited

Most teachers involved in this study claimed to understand the importance of character education, but did not fully master Thomas Lickona's theoretical approach, especially in translating the concepts of *moral knowing*, *moral feeling*, and *moral action* into daily lesson plans (RPH). Field observations at SRITI Al-Qawwam showed that teachers with an Islamic education background tended to be better able to understand the relationship between moral and spiritual values, while general subject teachers emphasized aspects of discipline and responsibility. A study by (Ismail, 2012) reinforced these findings, noting that teachers who received training in the integration of Islamic values were more effective at instilling moral values through religious reflection and value dialogues.

Challenges in Character Evaluation and Assessment

Character assessment still relies on daily observations and behavioral records, without standard instruments that can objectively map students' moral progress. Field research results also show that teachers experience time pressure in conducting character evaluations. Because the main focus of the curriculum is still on academic achievement, moral observation activities are often carried out informally and are not documented. A study by Che Mohd Zain and Hassan (2020) shows that teachers who face high academic pressure tend to neglect non-cognitive assessments such as empathy and social responsibility.

Cultural Challenges and the Influence of the Digital World

In addition to internal factors, teachers also face external challenges in the form of social media and global cultural influences that affect children's moral behavior. Based on the interview results, teachers observed an increase in individualistic, consumptive behavior, and imitation of popular lifestyles among students who already have access. Teachers at SRITI Al-Qawwam strive to integrate digital moral education through classroom discussions on social media ethics and Islamic values literacy in the context of technology.

Supporting and Hindering Factors in Strengthening Character Education: Thomas Lickona's Perspective

Supporting Factors for Character Strengthening

Factors that support the strengthening of character education in schools show that the success of character education does not only depend on the efforts of teachers, but also requires support from various parties, including schools, parents, and the community. Based on the results of research conducted at SRITI Al-Qawwam, Malaysia, it was found that there are three main factors that have the most influence on the success of character education from Thomas Lickona's perspective, namely: teacher role modeling and commitment, support from the school, and support from the surrounding community.

Teachers' Exemplary Behavior and Commitment

Based on interviews with teachers at SRITI Al-Qawwam, it was found that teacher role modeling is the most powerful factor in supporting character building. Teachers strive to be role models in every behavior, whether in speech, dress, or social interaction. Four weeks of observation data showed the consistency of teachers in demonstrating positive behaviors such as greeting students before starting lessons, appreciating students' honesty, and reprimanding them politely. Similarly, (Ag-Ahmad et al., 2022) confirmed that *teacher moral integrity* is the main driver of moral values in Malaysian elementary schools.

Support from the School

The results show that the school is strongly committed to creating a moral and religious climate that supports character building among students. The principal plays an active role in ensuring that all school activities contain moral values. Programs such as "Tazkirah Pagi" and "Jumaat Akhlak" are part of the weekly routine at SRITI Al-Qawwam. These activities not only accustom children to behave politely and disciplined, but also reinforce character values in the context of everyday life. The school culture that prioritizes moral and religious values strengthens students' *moral intelligence*, because students learn through habits and social norms that are consistently applied in school life (Ramadhan, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Character education based on Thomas Lickona's perspective plays a significant role in developing students' moral intelligence through the integration of moral values into daily learning activities, school culture, and teacher role modeling. The findings demonstrate that the components of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action can be effectively implemented through habituation, reflective learning, and consistent interpersonal interactions. However, several challenges remain, including limited teacher competence in moral pedagogy, lack of continuity of character education at home, and the influence of digital environments. Therefore, strengthening character education requires continuous collaboration between schools, families, and communities, as well as improved teacher training in moral education. This study provides important implications for educational practice and policy, particularly in developing more systematic, integrated, and sustainable character education models in primary schools.

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