

Character Internalization Through Structured Habituation in Rural Indonesian Elementary Education

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Abstract: This study examines how structured habituation supports character internalization among elementary school students in a rural Indonesian school. Using a qualitative case-study design, the research was conducted at SDN 2 Suka Damai, East Lombok, Indonesia. Data were collected through three months of sustained participant observation, semi-structured interviews with the principal, six teachers, and twelve students, and analysis of school program documents. The data were analyzed through iterative coding, data condensation, thematic display, and interpretive verification. Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation, member checking, prolonged engagement, and an audit trail. The findings reveal three main patterns. First, the school implements a layered habituation architecture comprising daily routines, weekly collective activities, and incidental experiential programs that mutually reinforce value cultivation. Second, students' character internalization develops through three overlapping stages: externally regulated compliance, cognitive understanding of moral meaning, and identity-based integration of values. Third, teacher modeling functions as the central relational scaffold that connects repeated routines with deeper moral understanding. This study contributes a context-sensitive model of habituation-based character education by explaining how discipline, responsibility, and honesty are transformed from institutional rules into autonomous student dispositions. The findings offer practical implications for elementary schools seeking to move character education beyond moral instruction toward sustained school culture, teacher credibility, reflective dialogue, and everyday ethical practice.

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1. Introduction

Character education remains a major global concern because schools are increasingly expected to cultivate not only academic competence but also moral judgment, social responsibility, empathy, self-regulation, and civic commitment. International scholarship indicates that effective values education cannot be reduced to isolated moral lessons; rather, it requires a coherent school culture, repeated practice, meaningful relationships, and alignment between formal instruction and everyday experience (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Brown et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Lickona, 1991). This concern is especially relevant to elementary education because childhood

is a formative period in which habits, emotional regulation, peer interaction, and moral dispositions begin to stabilize through repeated participation in social routines (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Erikson, 1963).

Contemporary childhood also unfolds within a rapidly digitalized environment. Digital technology creates new possibilities for learning and connection, but it also raises concerns about attention, self-control, social comparison, empathy, and children's exposure to unfiltered content. Recent large-scale studies caution against simplistic claims about digital harm, yet they also show that children and adolescents require stronger social-emotional and moral support to navigate digital life responsibly (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Orben & Przybylski, 2019). In this context, character education is not merely a normative school agenda; it is a developmental necessity that helps students regulate conduct, evaluate consequences, and act responsibly across school, home, community, and digital environments.

In Indonesia, the Strengthening Character Education policy (Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter/PPK) positions values such as religiosity, nationalism, integrity, independence, and mutual cooperation as integral elements of school life rather than as separate curricular content (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017). Elementary schools are strategically important because young learners remain highly responsive to routines, teacher modeling, peer norms, and institutional culture. Nevertheless, implementation remains uneven. Many schools have formal character programs, yet students' behavior often depends heavily on teacher supervision and does not always develop into autonomous moral conduct. This gap highlights the need to understand not only what character programs schools implement but also how students internalize values through daily practice.

Habituation offers a promising approach because it works at the level of repeated action. Rooted in virtue ethics and supported by contemporary habit research, habituation assumes that stable moral dispositions are formed through repeated engagement in meaningful practices until desirable conduct becomes increasingly automatic, identity-related, and socially reinforced (Aristotle, 2009; Gardner et al., 2012; Wood & R nger, 2016). In elementary school settings, habituation may include greeting rituals, collective prayer, classroom duties, flag ceremonies, environmental care activities, community service, and reflective dialogue. However, repetition alone is insufficient. Without teacher modeling, moral explanation, emotional safety, and reflective meaning-making, routines may produce compliance without genuine internalization.

Despite extensive scholarship on character education, three important gaps remain. First, much international evidence has been generated in Western and urban contexts, while rural, Islamic-influenced Indonesian schools remain underrepresented. Second, many studies evaluate program effectiveness but provide limited qualitative explanation of the micro-processes through which students move from rule compliance to autonomous value enactment. Third, few studies examine how daily, weekly, and incidental habituation activities operate as a connected moral ecosystem. Addressing these gaps, this study investigates structured habituation at SDN 2 Suka Damai, a rural elementary school in East Lombok, Indonesia. The study asks: (1) How is the structured habituation program designed and implemented? (2) How do students internalize the values of discipline, responsibility, and honesty through the program? (3) What role do teachers play in transforming repeated routines into meaningful character development?

The contribution of this study is threefold. Theoretically, it develops a three-stage model of character internalization that integrates habit formation, self-determination, and social cognitive perspectives. Empirically, it provides a context-rich account of character formation in a rural Indonesian elementary school. Practically, it offers school leaders and teachers a structured framework for strengthening character education through coherent routines, reflective dialogue, and credible adult modeling.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Character Education and Social-Emotional Learning

Character education refers to intentional educational efforts to cultivate moral knowledge, moral emotion, moral action, and prosocial dispositions. Lickona (1991) conceptualizes character as the integration of knowing

the good, desiring the good, and doing the good. This conception resonates with social-emotional learning (SEL), which emphasizes self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that well-implemented school-based SEL programs improve students' social-emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Similarly, meta-analytic studies on character education report positive associations with student achievement, prosocial behavior, and behavioral outcomes (Brown et al., 2023; Jeynes, 2019).

The implication for elementary schools is clear: character education is most effective when values are embedded in a comprehensive school ecology. Effective programs are not limited to classroom explanation; they include consistent routines, adult exemplars, student participation, family involvement, and a climate in which values are practiced, discussed, and reinforced. Research on moral and social development also indicates that guided classroom discussion can strengthen students' capacity to reason about moral, social-conventional, and personal issues (Nucci et al., 2015). This ecological orientation is particularly relevant for rural schools where school culture, religious norms, community expectations, and teacher-student relationships are closely interwoven.

2.2 Habituation, Moral Internalization, and Self-Regulation

Habituation is grounded in the idea that repeated practice can form stable dispositions. In Aristotelian virtue ethics, moral excellence is not acquired through knowledge alone but through repeated virtuous action until it becomes part of one's character (Aristotle, 2009). Contemporary habit psychology similarly explains that behavior becomes habitual when repeated actions are consistently linked to contextual cues and meaningful reinforcement (Gardner et al., 2012; Wood & Rünger, 2016). In school contexts, greeting teachers, arriving on time, completing class duties, praying together, and caring for the environment become powerful moral practices when they are repeated consistently and interpreted as meaningful acts.

Moral internalization, however, requires more than behavioral repetition. Self-determination theory explains that externally regulated behavior may gradually become identified and integrated when individuals understand its value and experience it as congruent with the self (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This means that the transition from obedience to internalized character depends on reflective dialogue, autonomy-supportive guidance, and relational trust. Students may initially follow rules because they are instructed to do so, but they can later understand why honesty matters, why responsibility supports collective life, and why discipline protects learning time.

2.3 Teacher Modeling and School Moral Culture

Teachers are central to character education because children learn moral conduct not only through verbal instruction but also through the observation of credible adult models. Bandura's (1986, 2001) social cognitive theory emphasizes that children acquire behavior, standards, and self-regulatory patterns by attending to models who are consistent, respected, and emotionally significant. The ethics of care advanced by Noddings (2002) further suggests that values are most convincingly learned within relationships characterized by trust, responsiveness, and genuine concern.

In elementary education, teacher modeling becomes a form of implicit curriculum. Students observe whether teachers arrive on time, speak respectfully, keep promises, admit mistakes, care for shared spaces, and treat every student fairly. When adult behavior aligns with institutional values, school rules gain moral credibility. When adult conduct contradicts stated values, character education risks becoming merely rhetorical. Therefore, the success of habituation depends on a school-wide moral culture in which teachers embody, explain, and reinforce the values that students are expected to practice.

2.4 Conceptual Orientation

This study is guided by an integrative conceptual orientation. Structured habituation provides repeated behavioral practice; teacher modeling provides visible moral exemplars; reflective dialogue provides cognitive meaning-making; and school culture provides social reinforcement. Together, these four elements are expected to

support a developmental movement from compliance to understanding and then to internalization. Within this framework, discipline, responsibility, and honesty are not treated as isolated traits but as socially practiced values that emerge through repeated participation in the daily moral life of the school.

3. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative case-study design. A case study was appropriate because the research sought to understand a bounded educational phenomenon in depth: the implementation and meaning of structured habituation within the real-life context of one elementary school (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The qualitative design enabled the researcher to examine not only the program structure but also the interactions, routines, interpretations, and everyday practices through which character values were transmitted and internalized.

The research was conducted at SDN 2 Suka Damai, a public elementary school in Jerowaru Subdistrict, East Lombok Regency, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. The school was selected purposively for three reasons. First, it had implemented a structured character habituation program since 2018. Second, it represents a rural, Islamic-influenced community context in Eastern Indonesia. Third, the school provided institutional access for observation, interviews, and document review. At the time of the study, the school served 146 students across six grade levels and employed twelve teachers. Its institutional vision emphasizes excellence, skills, cleanliness, faith, and piety, indicating that character formation is positioned as a central educational mission.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in the character education program. They consisted of the school principal, six teachers, and twelve students from Grades III, IV, and V. The teacher participants represented diverse instructional roles, including homeroom teachers, an Islamic religious education teacher, a physical education teacher, and a lower-grade teacher. Student participants were selected to represent varied levels of observed participation in habituation activities so that the analysis could capture different stages of value internalization. For ethical reasons, student names were anonymized in the reporting of findings.

Data were collected from August to October 2025 through three complementary techniques. First, sustained participant observation was conducted to document daily routines, weekly activities, incidental programs, teacher-student interactions, and spontaneous student behavior. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, teachers, and students to explore their experiences, interpretations, and perceived changes in character-related behavior. Third, institutional documents, including school work programs, activity reports, attendance records, and observation notes, were reviewed to contextualize and triangulate the field findings.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The analysis involved open coding to identify recurring incidents, axial coding to connect codes into categories, and selective coding to integrate categories into the central explanatory model of character internalization (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2021). Trustworthiness was strengthened through data source triangulation, member checking with key participants, prolonged engagement over three months, and an audit trail documenting coding decisions and interpretive shifts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, school permission was obtained, and student data were anonymized in the manuscript. Interview excerpts were used selectively to illustrate themes without exposing sensitive personal information. The researcher also maintained a reflexive stance by comparing interview claims with observational and documentary evidence to reduce overreliance on single-source interpretations.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Result

4.1.1 Architecture of the Structured Habituation Program

The findings show that SDN 2 Suka Damai implements a structured habituation program through three interrelated layers: daily routines, weekly collective activities, and incidental experiential programs. These layers

are not separate activities; rather, they form a developmental architecture in which repeated micro-routines create behavioral familiarity, weekly collective activities strengthen social and spiritual values, and incidental programs test values in wider social contexts. Table 1 summarizes the structure, targeted values, and developmental functions of the program.

Table 1. Structure of the Habituation Program at SDN 2 Suka Damai

Program layer	Core activities	Values targeted	Developmental function
Daily routines	3S program (greeting, smiling, acknowledging); collective prayer; rotating class duties; national anthem; opening and closing prayers	Courtesy, discipline, responsibility, religiosity, nationalism	Behavioral repetition and formation of positive micro-habits
Weekly collective activities	Monday flag ceremony; Clean Friday; Religious Friday; Qur'anic recitation and moral reflection; Saturday morning exercise	Leadership, patriotism, cooperation, environmental awareness, spirituality, tolerance	Social, civic, and spiritual reinforcement
Incidental experiential programs	National and religious commemorations; community service; educational visits to museums and historical sites	Empathy, social sensitivity, national identity, cultural responsibility, honesty	Application and testing of values in authentic social contexts

4.1.2 Daily, Weekly, and Incidental Habituation Activities

Daily routines constitute the most pervasive layer of the program because students encounter them every school day. The 3S program at the school entrance establishes respectful interaction from the moment students arrive. Collective prayer before and after lessons creates a spiritual frame for learning, while rotating classroom duties translate responsibility into concrete action. The national anthem anchors civic identity within the daily rhythm of schooling. According to the principal, the purpose of these practices is to form personality through repeated positive routines rather than through verbal reminders alone.

Weekly activities extend character formation into collective and civic experiences. The Monday flag ceremony provides a structured space for discipline, leadership, patriotism, and public responsibility. Clean Friday mobilizes students and teachers in environmental care and mutual cooperation. Religious Friday combines Qur'anic recitation, moral talks, and congregational practice, while non-Muslim students are given equally meaningful responsibilities, such as organizing the school mini-library. This inclusive arrangement indicates that religious habituation is implemented not merely as ritual practice but also as social responsibility and respect for diversity.

Incidental programs provide authentic contexts in which students encounter values beyond routine settings. National and religious commemorations strengthen historical and civic awareness, community service cultivates empathy and generosity, and educational visits connect classroom values with cultural heritage. One teacher reported that, during community service activities, students voluntarily contributed from their savings and began to experience giving as a meaningful social act. Such episodes show how incidental programs function as value-testing spaces where students apply previously rehearsed values in less predictable environments.

4.1.3 Three Stages of Character Internalization

The second major finding is that character transformation occurs through three overlapping stages: compliance, understanding, and internalization. These stages are sequential in a broad developmental sense, yet

students may move back and forth depending on the value, situation, peer influence, and teacher support involved. Figure 1 presents the model derived from the field data.

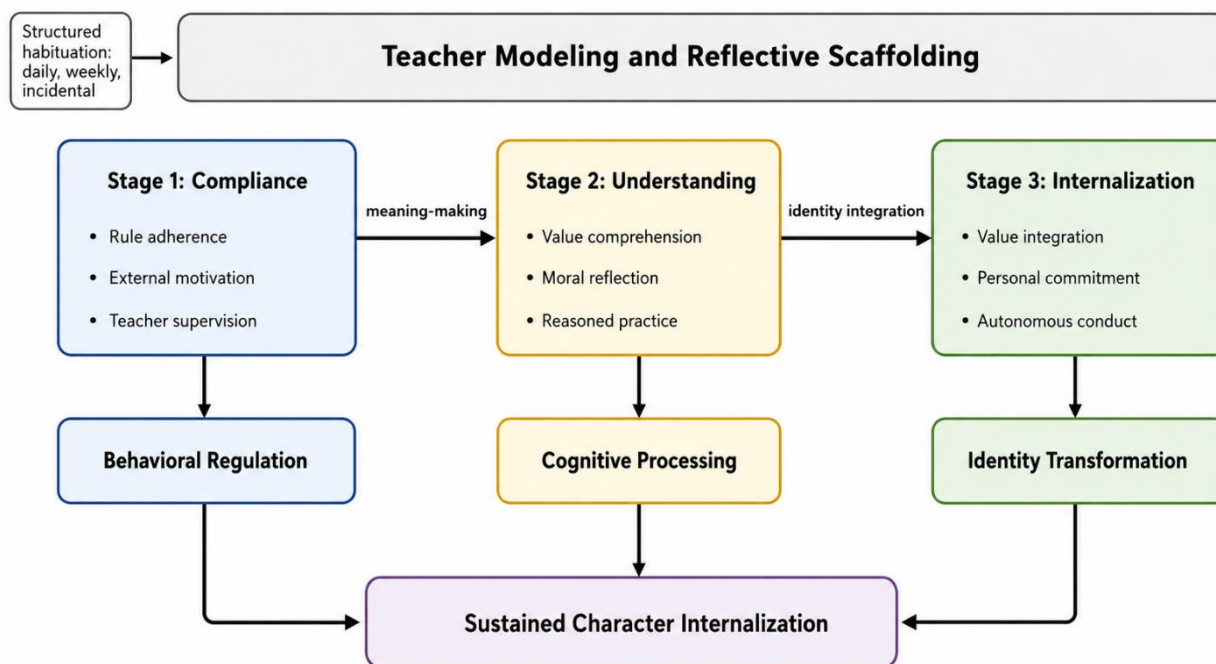


Figure 1. Three-Stage Character Internalization Model Developed From Field Research Data

Stage 1 is rule-based compliance. At this stage, students enact desired behaviors because they are required by school rules, monitored by teachers, or motivated by the avoidance of correction. For example, some students initially greeted teachers because greeting was a school rule rather than because they understood its moral meaning. Although this stage is externally regulated, it remains important because it establishes behavioral familiarity and shared expectations.

Stage 2 is cognitive understanding of value meaning. Students begin to connect repeated actions with reasons, consequences, and personal relevance. Teachers play a crucial role by explaining why orderliness supports learning, why honesty builds trust, and why responsibility protects the classroom community. A Grade V teacher explained that the school deliberately creates space for discussion so that students do not merely practice values but also understand why those values matter.

Stage 3 is identity-based internalization. At this stage, values are enacted with reduced dependence on external supervision. Students begin to describe disciplined, responsible, or honest behavior as part of who they are or as something they personally believe to be right. For example, some students reported singing the national anthem seriously because they associated it with honoring national heroes, not merely because the teacher was watching. This shift indicates movement from external regulation toward integrated self-determination.

4.1.4 Internalization of Discipline, Responsibility, and Honesty

Discipline was cultivated through punctuality, orderly movement, prayer routines, national anthem practice, and classroom readiness. Observations indicated that many students arrived before the bell, prepared their learning materials without repeated reminders, and entered class in an orderly manner. A notable incident occurred when a late-arriving student voluntarily approached the duty teacher to explain the reason for the delay before entering

the classroom. This behavior suggests that discipline had begun to move from externally enforced obedience toward self-regulated conduct.

Responsibility was cultivated through authentic task delegation. Students were assigned classroom cleaning duties, leadership roles in prayer, and responsibilities in weekly activities. These tasks were not merely symbolic; they affected the shared learning environment. When students failed to carry out a duty, teachers used guided dialogue rather than immediate punishment, asking students to consider how their actions affected peers. This reflective response helped students understand responsibility as a contribution to collective well-being rather than as a burden imposed by adults.

Honesty was cultivated through psychological safety and integrity-based situations. Teachers encouraged students to admit mistakes, return found objects, and report academic tasks truthfully. Importantly, truth-telling was not treated as a reason for humiliation but as evidence of moral courage. This climate reduced students' fear of sanctions and made honesty a socially affirmed behavior. In this sense, the school cultivated honesty not only through moral instruction but also through an environment in which truthful behavior was possible, respected, and consistently reinforced.

4.1.5 The Central Role of Teachers

Across all stages of internalization, teacher modeling emerged as the strongest relational factor. Students repeatedly referred to teacher behavior when explaining their own character-related practices. Teachers who arrived on time, spoke respectfully, maintained classroom cleanliness, performed religious routines consistently, and responded calmly to mistakes became living examples of the values promoted by the program. This finding indicates that teacher behavior functions as an implicit curriculum through which students learn what the school genuinely values.

The data also show that teacher modeling must be combined with explanation and reinforcement. Routines became meaningful when teachers connected them with moral reasons; correction became educational when teachers helped students reflect on consequences; and praise became character-building when it affirmed effort, responsibility, and honesty rather than mere performance. Thus, teachers were not only implementers of a program but also interpreters of values, guardians of school culture, and mediators between external rules and internal moral commitment.

4.2 Discussion

The findings confirm that character education becomes stronger when it is embedded in the everyday ecology of school life. The three-layer architecture at SDN 2 Suka Damai reflects the principle that values must be repeatedly practiced, socially reinforced, and applied in authentic contexts. This is consistent with international evidence showing that comprehensive character education and SEL programs are more effective when they are school-wide, developmentally appropriate, and implemented by teachers within ordinary classroom and school routines (Brown et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). This study extends that literature by demonstrating how such principles operate in a rural Indonesian elementary school shaped by Islamic values, communal culture, and close teacher-student relationships.

The three-stage model offers a useful explanation of why some school character programs produce visible order without necessarily generating autonomous character. Compliance is necessary but incomplete. It provides behavioral structure, yet it remains vulnerable to disappearance when supervision is removed. The transition to understanding requires teachers to make the moral meaning of routines explicit. The final stage, internalization, occurs when students experience values as personally meaningful and consistent with their emerging identity. This progression aligns with self-determination theory, which explains how external regulation can become integrated into the self through meaning, autonomy support, and relational trust (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

The role of teacher modeling is especially important. The findings support social cognitive theory: children learn values by observing credible and emotionally significant adults (Bandura, 1986, 2001). In the case school, students did not primarily refer to policy documents when explaining their conduct; they referred to what teachers did. This reinforces the argument that teacher credibility is not an accessory to character education but one of its core mechanisms. A school may have well-designed routines, but if adults do not embody the values being promoted, habituation risks becoming mechanical and morally shallow.

The study also contributes to the literature on habit formation. Habit psychology emphasizes the importance of stable cues, repetition, and contextual reinforcement (Gardner et al., 2012; Wood & R  nger, 2016). The daily routines at SDN 2 Suka Damai provided stable cues for courteous greeting, prayer, discipline, and responsibility. However, the findings indicate that moral habit formation differs from neutral behavioral automation. Character habits require reflective meaning and ethical emotion. Without moral reflection, a routine may produce automatic behavior but not necessarily moral commitment. The school's use of dialogue, community service, and teacher modeling therefore helps bridge behavioral repetition and moral internalization.

The rural Indonesian context provides an additional theoretical insight. In this setting, religious practice, communal cooperation, national identity, and school discipline are not isolated domains; rather, they mutually reinforce one another. Clean Friday, Religious Friday, flag ceremonies, and community service operate as culturally embedded practices that connect personal character with collective life. This finding suggests that character education should not be imported as a standardized model detached from local culture. Instead, effective implementation requires translating universal values such as honesty, responsibility, and discipline into culturally meaningful school practices.

Practically, the findings imply that schools need to evaluate character education not only by the number of activities conducted but also by the depth of internalization achieved. Indicators should include whether students act responsibly without constant supervision, whether they can explain the moral meaning of routines, whether they show honesty in psychologically safe situations, and whether teachers model the values consistently. For school leaders, this requires monitoring systems that combine observation, reflective teacher meetings, student voice, and family feedback. For teachers, it requires professional development that strengthens ethical leadership, reflective dialogue, and consistency between instruction and personal conduct.

This study has several limitations. It was conducted in a single school and within a limited observation period; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized statistically. The qualitative design also relies on interpretive analysis, although triangulation and member checking were used to strengthen credibility. Future studies should examine similar habituation models across different regions, school types, religious contexts, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Longitudinal research is particularly needed to determine whether character values internalized in elementary school endure through adolescence and continue to influence behavior beyond the school environment.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that structured habituation can support character internalization when it is implemented as a coherent school culture rather than as a series of isolated activities. At SDN 2 Suka Damai, character development is organized through daily routines, weekly collective activities, and incidental experiential programs. Daily routines build behavioral familiarity; weekly activities strengthen social, civic, and spiritual reinforcement; and incidental programs provide authentic contexts in which students apply values beyond ordinary school routines.

The study also concludes that students' character transformation develops through three overlapping stages: compliance, understanding, and internalization. Students initially follow rules because of external expectations, then begin to understand the moral meaning of the values being practiced, and eventually enact values as part of

their emerging self-identity. Discipline, responsibility, and honesty become stronger when repeated practice is accompanied by teacher modeling, reflective explanation, affirmative reinforcement, and a safe moral climate.

The main contribution of this study is the development of a context-sensitive model of character internalization in a rural Indonesian elementary school. The model demonstrates that structured habituation is most effective when behavioral repetition, teacher credibility, moral reflection, and culturally meaningful school practices operate together. Character education, therefore, should not be understood simply as teaching students about values but as organizing school life so that values are repeatedly practiced, understood, and embodied.

6. Recommendation

School principals should develop clear operational guidelines for daily, weekly, and incidental habituation programs. These guidelines should define the targeted values, the roles of teachers and students, observation indicators, reflection mechanisms, and follow-up actions. Monitoring should be based on real behavioral evidence, not only administrative reports.

Teachers should strengthen their role as moral exemplars. Professional development should include ethical leadership, reflective classroom dialogue, restorative correction, child-sensitive communication, and strategies for building psychological safety. The success of character education depends heavily on consistency between what teachers teach and what they model.

Parents and community members should be involved more systematically so that school-based habits are reinforced at home and in community life. Parent meetings can include practical guidance on reinforcing honesty, responsibility, discipline, and respectful communication in daily family routines.

Future researchers should conduct longitudinal and comparative studies to test whether values formed through elementary school habituation remain stable across higher levels of education. Quantitative or mixed-method studies may also be used to develop instruments for measuring stages of character internalization and the quality of teacher modeling.

Data Availability

The qualitative data generated and analyzed during this study, including interview transcripts, observation notes, and school documents, are not publicly available because they contain potentially identifiable information about elementary school students, teachers, and school routines. Anonymized excerpts may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to school permission and ethical considerations.

Declaration of the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools were used only to support language refinement, grammar improvement, and manuscript formatting. All aspects of the research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, findings, and final scholarly responsibility remain entirely with the authors. The authors reviewed and verified all AI-assisted language outputs before submission.

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