

Cleanliness culture as hidden curriculum: An empirical study of character internalisation in primary education

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Abstract: *This study examines the culture of cleanliness before class as a mechanism of the hidden curriculum in the internalization of character among elementary school students. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through observations of 210 students in grades 1–6, lasting 20–30 minutes per session before instruction from February to May 2023, in-depth interviews with 17 students and 5 teachers, and documentation of school practices. Interview participants were purposively selected based on active involvement in hygiene practices, representation of grade levels, and direct roles in managing school activities. The research findings indicate that the internalisation of values does not occur through formal instruction but rather through repeated practice that directly shapes moral experiences. Three main dimensions were identified: behavioural habituation that creates patterns of discipline, teacher modelling that provides moral legitimacy, and school structures that maintain the consistency of practices. The interaction of these three forms an implicit learning ecosystem where values exist as lived actions, not merely as taught concepts. These findings also reveal that without reflection, such practices risk fostering mechanical compliance. The novelty of this research lies in the conceptualization of the “Embodied Hidden Curriculum,” which positions daily practices as the primary locus of character formation, thereby shifting the orientation of character education from an instructional approach toward a praxis directly experienced within school life.*

Keywords: *Character education; cleanliness culture; embodied hidden curriculum; habituation; school culture*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji budaya bersih sebelum pembelajaran sebagai mekanisme hidden curriculum dalam internalisasi karakter siswa sekolah dasar. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif studi kasus, data diperoleh melalui observasi terhadap 210 siswa kelas 1–6, dengan durasi 20–30 menit pada setiap sesi sebelum pembelajaran selama periode Februari–Mei 2023, wawancara mendalam dengan 17 siswa dan 5 guru, serta dokumentasi praktik sekolah. Partisipan wawancara dipilih secara purposif berdasarkan keterlibatan aktif dalam praktik kebersihan, representasi jenjang kelas, dan peran langsung dalam pengelolaan kegiatan sekolah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa internalisasi nilai tidak berlangsung melalui instruksi formal, melainkan melalui praktik berulang yang membentuk pengalaman moral secara langsung. Tiga dimensi utama teridentifikasi: habituasi perilaku yang menciptakan pola disiplin, keteladanan guru yang memberikan legitimasi moral, dan struktur sekolah yang menjaga konsistensi praktik. Interaksi ketiganya membentuk ekosistem pembelajaran implisit di mana nilai hadir sebagai tindakan yang dijalani, bukan sekadar konsep yang diajarkan. Temuan ini juga mengungkap bahwa tanpa refleksi, praktik berpotensi menghasilkan kepatuhan yang bersifat mekanis. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada konstruksi konsep Embodied Hidden Curriculum yang memposisikan praktik keseharian sebagai lokus utama pembentukan karakter, sekaligus menggeser orientasi pendidikan karakter dari pendekatan instruksional menuju praktik yang dialami secara langsung dalam kehidupan sekolah.

Kata Kunci: pendidikan karakter; budaya bersih; Embodied hidden curriculum; habituasi, budaya sekolah

Introduction

The evolving global educational landscape is moving toward an increasing emphasis on the integration of cognitive competencies and character qualities (Firdaus et al., 2019; Jose, 2021; Kaniewska & Klimski, 2017). Within this framework, education is no longer understood merely as a process of knowledge transfer, but rather as a space for the holistic development of the individual, encompassing moral, social, and affective dimensions (Taufikin, 2021; Wall, 2021). The OECD report (2021) emphasizes that social-emotional competencies are a crucial foundation for navigating the complexities of the 21st century (Tuomi, 2022; Wang et al., 2019). Nevertheless, educational practices in many contexts still exhibit a strong tendency toward instruction-centred, cognition-focused approaches. At the same time, the dimensions of daily experiences that actually shape character are often sidelined. This tension creates a gap between what is taught and what students actually experience in the school environment.

In recent scholarly developments, the focus on character education has shifted from a normative approach toward an experiential, practice-based approach. Berkowitz (2022) and Hermanto et al. (2024) demonstrate that the effectiveness of character education is largely determined by students' engagement in repeated real-world practices. Wood et al. (2022) reinforce that habits are formed through repetition within a stable context, while Nucci (2015; 2014) and Gill & Thomson (2020) emphasize the importance of moral experiences in fostering ethical awareness. On the other hand, Sanderse (2020) and Burnyeat (2023) underscore that habituation is a crucial foundation in moral development; without reflection, it risks fostering superficial compliance. In the context of the hidden curriculum, Mejía (2023), Margolis (2020), and Giroux (2018) demonstrate that social and moral values are more frequently shaped through daily practices than through the formal curriculum. Meanwhile, studies by Reaves et al. (2018) and the OECD (2021) confirm that school culture and climate significantly influence student behaviour. In general, these studies indicate that daily practices play a crucial role, yet they have not been extensively explored at the micro level.

However, empirical studies examining everyday school practices as concrete mechanisms of the hidden curriculum in shaping students' character remain limited. Little is known about how routine activities, especially those considered trivial, such as hygiene practices before class, serve as vehicles for moral internalization. Previous research has not sufficiently integrated habituation theory, the hidden curriculum, and school culture within a single empirical framework, particularly in the context of elementary education in Indonesia. Furthermore, most studies still frame character education within programmatic or policy frameworks, thereby failing to explore the practical dimensions embedded in students' daily lives. This gap leads to a partial understanding, in which values are presented as concepts to be taught rather than as lived experiences.

Given this gap, this study aims to conduct an in-depth examination of how pre-class cleanliness practices function as a hidden curriculum mechanism in the internalisation of character among elementary school students. Specifically, this study addresses the following questions: How do cleanliness practices shape students' discipline, responsibility, and social awareness? What roles do teachers' exemplary behaviour and school structures play in reinforcing these processes? This study employs

a qualitative case study design to capture the dynamics of meaning in real-world contexts. Theoretically, this study contributes to integrating habituation theory, character education, and the hidden curriculum within a cohesive analytical framework. Practically, this study offers a new direction in designing school culture based on daily practices. Socially, this study provides a foundation for the development of more contextual and sustainable character education.

Based on this gap, this study aims to conduct an in-depth examination of how pre-class hygiene practices function as a mechanism of the hidden curriculum in the internalization of character among elementary school students. Specifically, this study addresses the following questions: How do hygiene practices shape students' discipline, responsibility, and social concern? What role do teachers' exemplary behaviour and school structures play in reinforcing this process? This study employs a qualitative case study design to capture the dynamics of meaning within the real-life context of school life.

The novelty of this study lies in its empirical focus on everyday practices at the micro-level as the primary locus of character formation. This aspect has often been overlooked in previous studies, which have tended to emphasize programmatic and policy-based approaches. This study integrates theories of habituation, character education, and the hidden curriculum into a single operational framework grounded in real-world experience. Furthermore, this study introduces the concept of the Embodied Hidden Curriculum, which positions routine practices not as peripheral activities, but as the primary mechanism through which moral values are brought to life and internalized. Practically, this study offers a new direction in the design of school culture grounded in everyday practices. Socially, this study provides a foundation for the development of a more contextual and sustainable character education.

Method

This study employs a qualitative design with a case study approach to explore in depth the practice of cleanliness culture as a hidden curriculum in the formation of students' character (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; de Vries, 2020). Epistemologically, this study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm that views social reality as a construction of meaning formed through daily experiences and interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 2014). The case study approach was chosen because it allows for contextual exploration of practices that are latent, repetitive, and rich in symbolic meaning. The study was conducted at SD SDH02D Central Java, an elementary school that consistently integrates a culture of cleanliness into its pre-learning routines.

The research data included 210 students who were directly observed, 17 students and 5 teachers who were interviewed in depth, and institutional documents as supporting data. The interviews used a semi-structured format to maintain a balance between the consistency of questions and the flexibility of exploration. This approach allowed the researcher to delve deeper into experiences and the construction of meaning, in line with the interpretive paradigm employed. The main questions were directed at three domains: (1) students' and teachers' experiences in hygiene practices, (2) the perceived meanings and values of these practices, and (3) the role of teacher modelling and school structures in shaping and sustaining these practices. Interviews

were conducted face-to-face within the school environment in a conducive atmosphere, lasting 20–40 minutes, and recorded with participants' consent. For students, questions were adapted to their language development level to facilitate the expression of experiences, while for teachers, the focus was on reflective dimensions and pedagogical experiences. All interview data were transcribed verbatim to maintain the accuracy of the analysis. Observations focused on moments before instruction to capture practices in their natural state, while documentation was used to strengthen empirical evidence and provide context for the ongoing practices (Knott et al., 2022; Morgan, 2022; Walsh, 2020).

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019) through iterative stages that included data reduction, open coding, thematic categorization, and interpretation. During the open coding stage, raw data from interview transcripts and observation notes were broken down into units of meaning, then assigned initial codes such as “automatic habits,” “unprompted initiative,” “teacher modelling,” and “reinforcement through rules.” These codes were subsequently grouped into more conceptual themes, such as habituation, modelling, and school structure. The analysis proceeded cyclically, with continuous comparison between empirical data and the theoretical framework, thereby enabling increasingly sharp and contextualised interpretations.

Data validity was ensured through triangulation of techniques and sources, as well as member checking by involving participants to confirm the alignment of interpretations with their experiences (Santos et al., 2020). Additionally, verification was conducted through peer debriefing, in which fellow researchers reviewed coding and categorisation results to minimise subjective bias. The entire research process was conducted in accordance with ethical principles, including maintaining participants' confidentiality and obtaining consent before data collection. Although this study focuses on a single context, the depth of the resulting analysis allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how everyday practices function as effective mechanisms in character formation.

Results and Discussion

Results

Based on the results of the thematic analysis, the empirical data obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation were systematically coded into three intertwined main thematic categories. The coding process revealed that hygiene practices do not exist as isolated activities but rather form a relational pattern involving repetitive actions, the exemplary behaviour of actors, and systemic support. Habituation emerges as a stabilizing foundation for behaviour through repetition within a consistent context. Teachers' exemplary behaviour reinforces the normative dimension by embodying values through concrete actions that can be emulated. Meanwhile, the school structure functions as an institutional framework that maintains the continuity of practices while transforming them into a collective culture. These three categories do not operate in isolation but form an operational moral ecosystem, where values are not explicitly taught but are brought to life through ongoing daily practices.

Table 1. Core Thematic Findings of the Embodied Hidden Curriculum

No.	Thematic Category	Coding Labels (Open Codes)	Description of Findings	Analytical Meaning
1	Behavioral Habituation	Automatic habits; actions without instruction; repetitive routines; discipline	Cleanliness practices are carried out consistently before lessons and have become habitual, performed without direct teacher instruction.	Habituation serves as the primary mechanism for stabilising behavioural patterns; however, without reflective engagement, it risks mechanical compliance.
2	Teacher Modeling	Teacher exemplification; direct involvement; motivation through example; moral legitimacy	Teachers actively participate in cleanliness practices, reinforcing imitation and providing moral legitimacy to students' actions.	Modelling serves as a normative bridge that connects values to practice, deepening internalisation through moral resonance.
3	School Structure	Duty schedules; cleanliness rules; routine monitoring; institutionalisation of practice	The school system provides an organised framework through rules, schedules, and supervision that ensures the consistency of cleanliness practices.	Structure operates as a systemic enabler, sustaining practices over time and transforming repeated actions into a collective culture.

Source: thematic analysis from primary data by the researcher

Habituation as a Core Mechanism of Value Internalisation

The first finding indicates that the culture of cleanliness operates primarily through habituation. Activities such as sweeping, tidying desks, and disposing of trash are performed routinely before classes begin. These practices are not treated as additional tasks but as an inherent part of school life. In field observations, students exhibited relatively stable behavioural patterns, even without direct teacher instruction. This suggests that these actions have become internalised habits.

The findings in Table 2 show that habituation serves as the primary mechanism in shaping stable hygiene behaviours among students. Student statements such as "if it's not clean, we don't start studying" indicate a shift in the meaning of cleanliness from a mere technical activity to a normative prerequisite for academic activities. This is reinforced by the expression "it's routine, so it's automatic," signifying that cleaning actions have shifted to the level of behavioural automation. Observational data showing students cleaning the classroom without instruction, as well as the consistency of duty

rosters in school records, indicate that this practice has institutionalized as a collective pattern. Thus, habituation not only shapes individual actions but also creates a social order that is internalized in daily school life.

Table 2. Thematic Findings of Behavioural Habituation

Data Source	Quote / Finding	Frequency	Interpretation
Grade 2 Student	"If it's not clean yet, we don't start learning."	High	Cleanliness becomes a prerequisite for academic activity
Grade 5 Student	"It's already a habit, so it feels automatic."	High	Internalisation occurs through repetition
Teacher 1	"The students no longer need to be told."	Medium	Habits foster independence
Observation	Students clean the classroom without instruction	High	Spontaneous behaviour indicates habituation
Documentation	Daily duty schedules are consistently implemented	High	Structure reinforces repetition

Source: primary data analysis by researcher

However, these findings also reveal a critical aspect that cannot be overlooked. Although hygiene behaviours have been consistently established, some students' responses indicate that these actions are carried out within mechanical routines. The emphasis on habits without an exploration of meaning suggests that the internalization of values has not yet fully reached a reflective level. In this context, habituation is indeed effective as an initial foundation for character building, but it risks producing procedural compliance if not accompanied by an adequate process of reflection. Therefore, the practice of a clean culture needs to be enriched with space for meaning so that the values formed live not only in actions but also in consciousness.

Teachers' Exemplary Behaviour as Moral Legitimacy

The second finding reveals that teachers' role is not merely that of supervisors, but rather that of key actors who provide moral legitimacy to cleanliness practices. Teachers are directly involved in these activities, whether by cleaning the classroom or setting an example through simple behaviours such as picking up trash. Their presence in these practices creates a moral resonance that reinforces the significance of these actions for students.

The findings in Table 3 indicate that teachers' exemplary behaviour serves as a key mechanism linking values to concrete practices. Student statements such as "The teacher also helps with cleaning" indicate that the teacher's presence in direct action reinforces imitation rather than mere compliance. This is reinforced by the response, "if the teacher joins in, it boosts our spirits," which shows that the teacher's involvement is not merely symbolic but also increases student motivation. From the teachers' perspective, reflective awareness is evident in the statement "we must set an example

first,” which affirms the teacher’s position as a moral model rather than merely a behaviour director. Observational and documentary data—such as teachers picking up trash without instruction and collective involvement in activities—demonstrate that the value of cleanliness is tangibly displayed through actions, not merely conveyed verbally.

Table 3. Thematic Findings of Teacher Modelling

Data Source	Quote / Finding	Frequency	Interpretation
Grade 4 Student	“The teacher also joins in cleaning.”	High	Modelling strengthens imitation
Grade 6 Student	“When the teacher participates, we feel motivated.”	Medium	Motivation increases through example
Teacher 3	“We have to set the example first.”	High	Awareness of the role as a model
Observation	The teacher picks up trash without instruction	Medium	Spontaneous practice reflects internalised values
Documentation	Photos of joint teacher–student activities	High	Visual evidence of collective engagement

Source: primary data analysis by researcher

However, the effectiveness of modelling is not automatic; rather, it depends heavily on the consistency and integrity of the teacher’s daily behaviour. Sporadic modelling risks losing its influence and may even create a dissonance between the norms taught and the practices demonstrated. In this context, modelling serves as a moral bridge that will remain sturdy only if maintained continuously. Therefore, the teacher’s role does not end with momentary participation but demands sustained practice that aligns words with actions. When this consistency is maintained, modelling not only shapes student behaviour but also builds a more authentic and deeply rooted legitimacy for values.

School Structures as Systemic Enablers

The third finding indicates that well-organized school structures strongly support the sustainability of a clean environment. Duty rosters, hygiene rules, and monitoring systems serve as a framework that ensures consistency in practices. These structures are not rigid but adapt to classroom dynamics and student needs.

The findings in Table 4 confirm that the school structure serves as a systemic foundation that maintains the regularity and sustainability of cleanliness practices. The existence of a clear duty roster, as described by the teacher, indicates that hygiene practices are not merely spontaneous but are structured and planned. This is reinforced by students’ statements that “every day someone is on duty,” indicating an equitable distribution of responsibilities that is internalised in daily routines. Observational data regarding routine supervision and documentation of written hygiene rules indicate that the value of cleanliness has been formalized within the school system. Thus, hygiene

practices do not rely solely on individual awareness but are also supported by consistent institutional mechanisms.

Table 4. Thematic Findings of School Structure

Data Source	Quote / Finding	Frequency	Interpretation
Teacher 2	“There is a clear duty roster.”	High	Structure creates order
Grade 3 Student	“Every day, someone is assigned.”	High	Distribution of responsibility
Observation	Monitoring is conducted regularly	Medium	Control maintains consistency
Documentation	Written cleanliness rules are available	High	Formalisation of values
Principal	“This is part of the school culture.”	High	Institutionalisation of practice

Source: primary data analysis by researcher

Furthermore, the principal’s statement that this practice is “part of the school culture” indicates that cleanliness has undergone institutionalization—that is, a shift from a technical activity to a collective identity. In this context, the school structure serves as a binding force that integrates habitual practices and exemplary behaviour into a sustainable system. Without a clear structure, individual practices risk fragmentation and loss of consistency. Therefore, a culture of cleanliness exists not only in daily actions but also in the design of the system that regulates, monitors, and reinforces these values. It is this structure that ensures these practices do not remain mere fleeting habits but evolve into a stable and enduring culture.

Overall, the findings suggest that a culture of cleanliness functions as a moral ecosystem comprising habituation, modelling, and structure. These three elements form a mutually reinforcing cycle: habituation creates patterns, modelling provides meaning, and structure ensures sustainability. In this context, values are not explicitly taught but are experienced firsthand.

These findings confirm that simple practices can serve as an effective medium for learning when supported by a consistent system. However, without adequate reflection, there is a risk that such practices will only result in compliance without understanding. Therefore, integrating practice and reflection is key to optimizing the functioning of a culture of cleanliness as a hidden curriculum.

In summary, these findings can be distilled into three main points: First, habituation is the primary mechanism in shaping disciplined and responsible behaviour. Second, teachers’ exemplary behaviour reinforces moral legitimacy and fosters a more authentic internalization of values. Third, the school structure ensures the sustainability of these practices through an organized system. These three findings indicate that a culture of cleanliness is not merely a routine activity but a complex and effective pedagogical mechanism in shaping students’ character.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a consistent yet often overlooked pattern in the discourse on character education: values do not primarily grow from what is taught, but rather from what is repeatedly practised in daily life. The culture of cleanliness before learning reveals three interrelated components: habituation, teacher modelling, and institutional structure, which together shape the field of students' moral experiences. These findings not only demonstrate that practice plays a role but further affirm that practice is the primary medium for the internalization of values.

An interpretation of these findings yields a key insight: the internalisation of character in elementary school is embodied and situational. Discipline does not exist as an abstract concept, but as a rhythm of repeated actions. Responsibility is not taught as a norm, but experienced as direct involvement in maintaining a shared space. Even social concern emerges from structured collective interactions. Thus, character in this study is not formed through the transfer of knowledge but through a continuous process of enactment.

Theoretically, these findings can be explained by integrating several key frameworks. Lickona (2009, 2013) positions moral action as the pinnacle of character education; however, this study suggests that moral action serves as a starting point rather than an endpoint. In this context, the theory of habit formation by Gardner (2022) becomes relevant, as repetition within a stable context has been shown to foster behavioural automation. Meanwhile, Berkowitz (2022) asserts that practice-based interventions are more effective than purely cognitive approaches. Sanderse's (2020) perspective deepens the analysis by emphasizing habituation as the foundation of morality. However, this study adds a critical dimension by highlighting the risk of "moral minimalism" when reflection is absent.

Within the framework of the hidden curriculum, these findings both reinforce and expand upon the ideas of Giangrande et al. (2019) and Giroux (2018). Whereas the hidden curriculum was previously understood as a latent structure that shapes values, this study demonstrates that this structure operates through concrete micro-practices. While Margolis (2020) emphasises the institutional dimension, this study reveals that the institutionalisation of values occurs precisely through simple, repeated activities. Thus, the hidden curriculum is no longer understood as an abstract concept, but as a living network of actions.

Compared to previous studies, this research occupies a relatively unique position. The OECD (2021) emphasize the importance of the school climate in shaping student behaviour, but their focus is at the macro level. Studies by Hermanto et al. (2024) and Purwanto et al. (2021) demonstrate the contribution of hygiene practices to character, but have not deeply integrated theoretical dimensions. This study bridges these two approaches by presenting a micro-level analysis grounded in empirical data while remaining connected to a broader theoretical framework. At this juncture, the study not only confirms but also corrects the tendency of previous studies to overemphasize formal programs.

Based on this synthesis, this study proposes a new theoretical framework called the "Embodied Hidden Curriculum Model." This model is grounded in the epistemological assumption that moral knowledge is not propositional but rather

practical. In other words, values are understood not as something known, but as something lived. Ontologically, this model views education as a network of practices that shape experience. Methodologically, this model relies on observing actions as the primary source of understanding.

This model consists of three interacting layers. First, the habituation layer, which functions as a mechanism for forming behavioural patterns through repetition. Second, the exemplary layer, which provides moral legitimacy and normative direction for actions. Third, the structural layer, which ensures sustainability through an organized system. The interaction among these three layers results in the internalization of implicit, stable, and contextual values. Visually, this model can be described as follows:

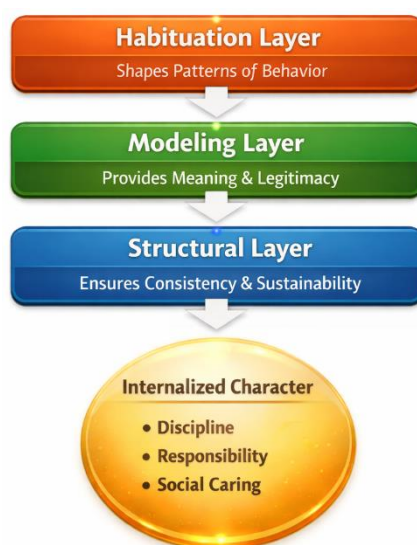


Figure 1. Embodied Hidden Curriculum Model

This model asserts that character is not formed through a single pathway, but through layered interactions between practices, figures, and systems. The model's primary contribution lies in its ability to explain how simple practices can produce complex moral effects.

The theoretical implication of this research is the need for a paradigm shift in character education, from an instruction-based approach to a practice-based approach. This study also reinforces the position of habituation theory within the discourse on moral education, while integrating it with the concepts of the hidden curriculum and school culture. Practically, these findings suggest that schools do not always need to design new programs to shape character. Instead, optimizing everyday practices can be a more effective and sustainable strategy.

However, this study has limitations. The focus on a single school context limits generalizability, although it allows for a deeper analysis. Additionally, the reflective dimension of students has not been explored in depth, so it remains unclear to what extent internalised values are cognitively recognised. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to examine the sustainability of effects and integrate quantitative methods to test relationships among variables. Ultimately, this study underscores a

simple yet fundamental truth: in education, it is often the small things that matter most. A culture of cleanliness, which may seem trivial, actually holds profound pedagogical power. It works quietly, yet shapes students tangibly.

Conclusion

This study confirms that the culture of cleanliness before learning is not merely a technical routine, but rather a pedagogical mechanism that operates latently yet effectively in shaping students' character. The main findings indicate that the internalization of values occurs through the interaction of three intertwined layers: habituation, which shapes patterns of behaviour; teachers' exemplary conduct, which provides moral legitimacy; and the school structure, which ensures the sustainability of the practice. From this synthesis emerges a new conceptual framework, the Embodied Hidden Curriculum Model, in which values are not taught as abstract concepts but brought to life through repeated, contextual, and meaningful practices. This model asserts that moral action is not merely the result of character education, but rather the primary entry point in the formation of stable values. Thus, this research shifts the orientation from an instructional approach toward a praxis-based approach rooted in direct experience.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching and strategic. Theoretically, this study enriches the discourse on character education by integrating the theories of habituation, the hidden curriculum, and school culture into a single operational framework. Practically, this study offers a new direction for educational design, in which daily routines are positioned as a core strategy rather than merely a supplement. However, this study also has limitations, particularly regarding its focus on a single location and the lack of in-depth exploration of students' reflective dimensions. Therefore, future research is recommended to test this model in more diverse contexts, develop a longitudinal approach, and integrate reflective dimensions to examine the depth of students' moral awareness. Overall, this study contributes to expanding the understanding of how the power of character education often lies in the small, daily practices students engage in. However, these practices have a significant formative impact on students' moral landscape.

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