

Interactive Ethics Education as an Initial Approach to Character Development Among Elementary School Students

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ABSTRACT

Character formation in elementary school requires ethical learning that is concrete, contextual, and reinforced over time. Preliminary observations at Budi Luhur Elementary School, Cimahi, identified a need to reinforce politeness, discipline, responsibility, environmental care, and respect for teachers and peers. This community service activity aimed to improve third-grade students' understanding of ethics and evaluate immediate changes in knowledge after an interactive educational session. The program was conducted on April 16, 2026, with 31 students using a pre-test, everyday-life scenarios, interactive presentation, discussion, question-and-answer activities, educational games, and a post-test. Paired analysis included 27 students with complete numeric data; four records were excluded because they were incomplete or non-numeric. The mean score increased from 41.85 to 43.70 out of 50, but the Wilcoxon signed-rank test did not show a statistically significant change ($W = 15$, $p = 0.166$). Seven students improved, 17 remained unchanged, and three declined. Process observations showed active participation, but engagement was not treated as evidence of effectiveness or character change. The activity is best interpreted as an initial educational program; sustained habituation, teacher modeling, parental involvement, repeated sessions, and follow-up evaluation with a more sensitive instrument are recommended.

Keywords: ethics; character education; elementary students; interactive education; community service

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INTRODUCTION

Primary education is responsible not only for developing literacy and numeracy but also for shaping how students understand themselves, other people, rules, and social responsibility. Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 20 of 2003 positions character development and national civilization as integral components of national education goals (Republic of Indonesia, 2003). This direction was strengthened through the policy on Strengthening Character Education, which emphasizes the balanced development of moral, emotional, intellectual, and physical dimensions through collaboration among schools, families, and communities (President of the Republic of Indonesia, 2017). The latest graduate competency standards for primary education also identify faith and piety, citizenship, critical reasoning, creativity, collaboration, independence, health, and communication as key dimensions translated into ethical conduct, responsibility, care for others, clean and healthy living, and ethically appropriate communication (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025).

Ethics in elementary school children can be understood as the judgments and habits that help children distinguish appropriate from inappropriate actions, anticipate consequences, and choose responses that respect others. At school age, children's interactions expand from the family to the classroom, peer groups, school activities, and digital environments. Situations such as waiting for one's turn, listening to others, caring for shared property, completing assignments, telling the truth, apologizing,

rejecting bullying, maintaining cleanliness, and using media responsibly provide concrete contexts for learning ethics. Character formation therefore requires more than definitions or advice; it requires examples, practice, feedback, and consistency across environments.

Lickona's framework conceptualizes character as the interrelationship of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action (Lickona, 1991). This framework is relevant because students need to understand moral reasons, develop concern for others, and practice appropriate responses in real situations. Social learning theory further explains that behavior is learned through observation of models, social consequences, and reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). The modelling provided by teachers, parents, and peers is therefore central to internalization. An ecological perspective on development adds that children's behavioral change is influenced by reciprocal relationships across contexts, particularly between family and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Together, these frameworks indicate that a single educational session should be positioned as an initial stimulus within a broader ecosystem of sustained habituation.

Empirical evidence supports structured school-based programs while also requiring caution in interpreting their effects. A follow-up meta-analysis showed that school-based social and emotional interventions can produce benefits that persist after programs end, although effect sizes depend on implementation quality and context (Taylor et al., 2017). Another systematic review found positive effects on academic achievement, but outcomes varied across studies (Corcoran et al., 2018). A contemporary meta-analysis of universal social and emotional learning programs reported substantial heterogeneity and emphasized the importance of program, participant, and implementation characteristics (Cipriano et al., 2023). A recent review of students in grades 1-12 again found that academic effects tend to be small, suggesting that evaluation should not rely solely on test scores but should also consider engagement, social skills, and behavioral practice (Ha et al., 2025).

In character education, practices integrated into the curriculum and school routines are more promising than stand-alone moral messages. A review of school-based moral education emphasized strategies embedded in students' everyday experiences rather than isolated program packages (Meindl et al., 2018). Research on character curricula also indicates that understanding and practicing virtues requires planned and repeated learning experiences (Pike et al., 2021). In the Indonesian context, research involving teachers has shown that character values are commonly internalized through habituation, integration, and modelling (Hidayat et al., 2022). The development of a character education model using traditional games and the Socratic method in elementary schools also demonstrates the relevance of participatory activities that encourage students to analyze values arising from play experiences (Hafina et al., 2022).

Interactive media can help sustain attention and facilitate engagement, but activities must remain directed toward learning objectives. A meta-analysis of gamification reported small-to-moderate effects on cognitive, motivational, and behavioral outcomes, with variation influenced by instructional design (Sailer & Homner, 2020). In moral education for elementary school students, virtual reality-based experiences were reported to improve moral sensitivity but did not automatically enhance more complex moral judgment (Shim, 2023). These findings support the use of games, scenarios, and discussion as entry points, while repeated reflection and reinforcement remain necessary.

The team's preliminary observations at Budi Luhur Elementary School, Cimahi,

identified several behaviors requiring reinforcement, including attention during learning, consistency in politeness, care for cleanliness, and responsibility for assignments. These findings were used to map program needs rather than to label students. The school provided the setting, teacher support, and contextual knowledge of classroom routines, while the higher education team provided materials, media, facilitators, and evaluation. This combination of local resources enabled the program to use examples closely related to the everyday experiences of third-grade students.

The practical gap underlying the activity was the need for ethics education that children could easily understand and that could also be evaluated proportionately. Brief programs risk interpreting an immediate increase in mean scores as evidence of character change, even though data completeness, individual patterns of change, instrument sensitivity, and continuity of habituation must also be considered. The activity therefore combined education based on everyday situations, discussion, question-and-answer activities, educational games, and paired pre-test and post-test evaluation, with interpretation limited to immediate changes in knowledge.

This activity aimed to improve third-grade students' understanding of ethics and to evaluate immediate changes in knowledge scores and observed participation following interactive education. Knowledge was treated as the quantitative outcome, whereas participation during discussion and games was treated as a process observation rather than a measure of character change.

METHODS

The activity used a community service approach with a one-group pre-test and post-test evaluation. This design was selected to provide direct education to students while obtaining an initial description of changes in knowledge in a real classroom context. Without a comparison group, the design cannot support strong causal conclusions; therefore, the findings are positioned as an initial evaluation of feasibility, acceptability, and the direction of change after the program. The activity was conducted on Thursday, April 16, 2026, at Budi Luhur Elementary School, Cimahi.

The target participants were all third-grade students scheduled by the school, totaling 31 students. The class was selected through coordination and joint needs identification with the school. The school provided the venue, coordinated participants, accompanied the activity, helped maintain classroom conditions, and provided implementation feedback. Faculty members and students prepared the materials, media, evaluation, group facilitation, and documentation.

Table 1. Stages and components of program implementation

Stage	Main components
Preparation	Observation, needs identification, coordination, development of materials and media, preparation of evaluation, and allocation of responsibilities.
Implementation	Opening, pre-test, interactive education, discussion, question-and-answer activities, educational games, and post-test.
Evaluation	Completeness checks, paired-score analysis, participation observation, and reflection on limitations.
Follow-up	Classroom habituation, modelling, parent communication, repeat evaluation, and instrument improvement.

Source: Reconstructed from the activity implementation report, 2026.

The preparation stage included preliminary observation, identification of behaviors requiring reinforcement, coordination of time and place, development of educational materials, preparation of presentation media and evaluation sheets, and allocation of team responsibilities. The content covered the meaning and importance of ethics; examples of ethical and unethical behavior; politeness toward teachers and peers; discipline; responsibility for assignments; care for cleanliness; cooperation; and an introduction to wise technology use. Team roles included activity coordinator, presenter, moderator, student facilitator, documentation officer, and logistics support.

Implementation began with an opening session and a pre-test to describe baseline knowledge. Education was then delivered through an interactive presentation using examples familiar to students. The presenter introduced simple situations, such as what to do when a teacher is speaking, when students find litter, borrow a friend's belongings, or make a mistake. Students were asked to choose a response, explain their reasoning, and consider the consequences of their choices. The activity continued with discussion, question-and-answer activities, educational games, and a post-test at the end of the session.

Process evaluation was conducted by observing attendance, engagement, willingness to answer, and students' responses during discussion and games. Outcome evaluation used documented pre-test and post-test scores ranging from 0 to 50. The source documentation did not provide complete information on the number of items, the instrument blueprint, validity, or reliability; therefore, the scores were treated as an internal program indicator of knowledge rather than a standardized measure of character. Interpretation was limited to immediate post-activity knowledge and was not used to claim long-term behavioral change.

Individual data were checked to ensure matched pre-test and post-test pairs. Four records contained non-numeric or incomplete data and were excluded without imputation, leaving 27 complete numeric pairs for analysis. Descriptive statistics included the mean, median, range, and the number of students whose scores increased, remained unchanged, or decreased. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used because the sample was small and the score differences contained many ties and discrete values, making a non-parametric paired analysis appropriate. Statistical significance was set at 0.05.

Ethical considerations were addressed through coordination and permission from the school, teacher supervision, age-appropriate language, and the absence of procedures posing physical risk. Student identities are not presented in the manuscript, and reporting uses aggregated data. Pre-test and post-test results were not used to impose any academic consequences on students.

Program sustainability was conceptualized through recommendations for 5S habituation - senyum (smile), salam (greeting), sapa (friendly address), sopan (politeness), and santun (courtesy) - classroom agreements, brief reflection, positive behavior, school-parent communication, and repeat evaluation. These follow-up components were not all implemented on the day of the activity and are therefore presented as recommendations for program development. The program change framework is presented in Figure 1.

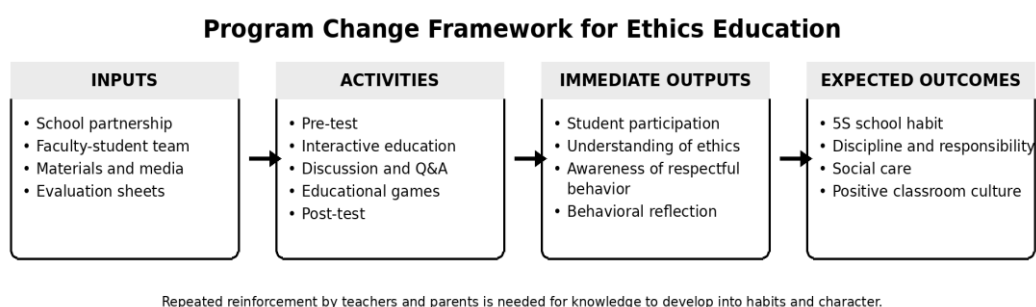


Figure 1. Program change framework for ethics education

Source: Developed by the authors, 2026.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The activity was implemented according to the main planned sequence: classroom preparation, opening, pre-test, education, discussion and question-and-answer activities, educational games, post-test, and closing. A total of 31 students participated. During the session, students showed interest in situational examples and games. Active responses were observed when students were asked to distinguish polite from impolite behavior, identify forms of responsibility, and provide examples of actions that maintain cleanliness. Such engagement is important because ethics education requires opportunities for students to explain their reasoning rather than merely repeat answers regarded as correct.

Collaboration between the school and the higher education institution supported implementation. Teachers helped manage the classroom and provided contextual information about students' routines, while the faculty-student team provided materials, media, varied activities, and evaluation. For nursing students, the interaction also provided experience in needs assessment, developmentally appropriate communication, group education, management of children's group dynamics, and collaboration with teachers as community partners.

Data checking showed that 27 of the 31 students had complete numeric score pairs, while four records were incomplete or non-numeric. Pair completeness was therefore 87.1%. The 12.9% data loss requires attention because, in a small sample, each record can influence the mean and the distribution of results. In future activities, facilitators should review evaluation sheets before collection and use consistent codes for absence or incomplete data.

Table 2. Completeness of evaluation data

Data status	n	%
Complete numeric pairs	27	87.1
Incomplete/non-numeric	4	12.9
Total participants	31	100

Source: Activity evaluation data, 2026.

Among the 27 complete pairs, the mean pre-test score was 41.85, and the mean post-test score was 43.70 out of a maximum of 50, yielding a mean difference of 1.85 points. The median was 40 for both the pre-test and post-test, with an interquartile range of 40-50. The minimum pre-test score was 30, and the minimum post-test score was 20, while the maximum for both was 50. Seven students (25.9%) improved, 17

students (63.0%) showed no change, and three students (11.1%) decreased.

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test yielded $W = 15$ and $p = 0.166$. Given the sample size and the instrument used, the quantitative evidence was insufficient to conclude that knowledge changed significantly. This finding does not mean that the activity had no process-related benefits, but it limits claims about outcomes. A more accurate interpretation is that there was a modest increase in the mean score and positive participant engagement, while score changes were not consistent across all students.

Table 3. Comparison of knowledge scores before and after education

Indicator	Pre-test	Post-test
Number of pairs	27	27
Mean	41.85	43.70
Median (IQR)	40 (40-50)	40 (40-50)
Minimum-maximum	30-50	20-50

Note: Mean difference = +1.85 points; Wilcoxon $W = 15$; $p = 0.166$. Source: Activity evaluation data, 2026.

Table 4. Distribution of score changes among 27 complete pairs

Change category	n	%
Increased	7	25.9
Unchanged	17	63.0
Decreased	3	11.1
Total	27	100

Source: Activity evaluation data, 2026.

The baseline Mean, which was already approximately 83.7% of the maximum score, suggests a possible ceiling effect. Many students had baseline scores of 40 or 50, leaving limited room for improvement. Scores also changed in relatively large increments, and most students showed no change. Because the instrument blueprint and psychometric quality were not documented, these results should be interpreted as an internal program evaluation. Future instruments should include more items with varying levels of difficulty, use concrete scenarios, and undergo content review and readability testing to improve sensitivity to changes in knowledge and reasoning.

Three students had lower post-test scores. This decline cannot be interpreted directly as loss of knowledge because post-test performance may be influenced by attention, fatigue, understanding of instructions, or response errors. The specific causes were not measured and therefore cannot be determined. Instead, this finding emphasizes the need for more orderly evaluation procedures, standardized instructions, adequate duration, and completeness checks without aiding with answers.

Student engagement during discussion and games was a strength of the implementation process, but it should not be equated with evidence of effectiveness or formally measured acceptability. Meta-analytic evidence on social and emotional programs shows that effects depend on content, participant characteristics, context, and implementation quality (Cipriano et al., 2023), while follow-up evidence emphasizes the importance of sustained implementation (Taylor et al., 2017). In this

activity, the 1.85-point increase and observed engagement are best interpreted as an initial direction of change rather than evidence that a single session changed character.

The distinction between knowledge and character can be explained using Lickona's framework. Moral knowledge may change more quickly, whereas moral feeling and moral action require repeated experience, opportunities for practice, and social consistency (Lickona, 1991). Because the evaluation used only an immediate knowledge test and process observation without a standardized rubric, the data cannot support conclusions about changes in moral action. This position is also consistent with reviews of school moral education recommending that character practices be embedded in experiences and routines rather than delivered only as short-term programs (Meindl et al., 2018).

Modelling is a key mechanism for extending the program's messages beyond the session. According to social learning theory, students observe the behavior of teachers, parents, and peers and the consequences associated with that behavior (Bandura, 1977). Research in Indonesia indicates that habituation, value integration, and modelling are widely used by teachers to internalize character education (Hidayat et al., 2022). Messages about politeness, responsibility, cleanliness, and respect for others therefore need to be consistent with the way adults communicate and enforce rules at school.

An ecological perspective on development explains why school-family partnerships are important. Children carry habits from home to school and vice versa; consistent messages across both settings increase the likelihood that habits will develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Meta-analytic evidence involving young children through third grade also indicates that parental involvement programs can provide academic and social-emotional benefits (Cosso et al., 2022). In future programs, family involvement can be kept simple through habituation cards, one target behavior per week, and reflective parent-child conversations without imposing complex assessment requirements.

An approach based on concrete examples and games is appropriate for third-grade students. A character education model using traditional games and the Socratic method demonstrates the value of activities that encourage children to analyze character within play experiences (Hafina et al., 2022). More broadly, a meta-analysis of gamification found positive effects on cognitive, motivational, and behavioral outcomes, although activity design remains important to success (Sailer & Homner, 2020). Games in an ethics program should therefore always be followed by reflective questions about reasons, consequences, and possible actions so that students remember more than the enjoyable elements.

The program can also be gradually expanded to digital ethics. Immersive experiences in moral education for elementary school students may improve moral sensitivity but do not automatically enhance more complex moral judgment (Shim, 2023). Digital scenarios can therefore be used to discuss respectful language, privacy, photo sharing, personal data use, content choices, and help-seeking, while discussion of reasons and consequences remains the core component.

From an evaluation perspective, pre-test and post-test assessment is stronger than relying only on general impressions; however, character should ideally be assessed using multiple sources of data. Knowledge tests can be combined with behavioral observation rubrics, teacher notes, student reflection, and follow-up evaluation. Observable indicators may include greeting others, waiting for one's turn, completing assignments, maintaining cleanliness, asking permission, returning borrowed items,

helping peers, and using respectful language. Reassessment after four to six weeks would provide information on retention and the initial adoption of habits.

Program duration was a major limitation. To reduce content density and create more opportunities for practice, a follow-up program could be divided into four brief sessions: empathy and ethics; respectful communication; discipline, responsibility, and cleanliness; and digital ethics. Each session could follow a sequence of opening, story or scenario, activity, reflection, and habituation task. This repeated approach is more consistent with evidence that character education should be integrated with curriculum and routine (Pike et al., 2021).

Classroom agreements are a realistic follow-up strategy. Teachers and students can formulate three to five commitments using positive language, such as listening when others speak, using respectful words, maintaining cleanliness, completing responsibilities, and helping without mocking others. Reinforcement should be specific to behavior and its rationale rather than relying on labels such as 'good child.' In this way, students are guided to understand that ethical behavior supports safety, fairness, trust, and shared comfort.

This community service program can be developed into a cycle of needs assessment, co-design with partners, implementation, evaluation, reflection, and follow-up. The resources used are relatively simple - presentation media, evaluation sheets, stationery, and classroom supplies - making replication feasible. However, replication should be preceded by a needs assessment because school culture, problems, and resources may differ across partner settings. Core content can be retained, while examples, media, timing, and reinforcement strategies should be adapted.

Individual patterns of change illustrate why the Mean alone is insufficient. The seven students who improved suggest that some participants captured the main messages within a short period; the 17 students with unchanged scores may include both those with high baseline scores and those who needed additional explanation; and the three students with lower scores require cautious interpretation. Analysis by baseline score and the use of scenario-based questions would help distinguish memorization of ethical terminology from decision-making ability in everyday situations.

Table 5. Recommended program follow-up

Component	Recommended follow-up
Content	Empathy and ethics; respectful communication; discipline and responsibility; digital ethics.
Habituation	Classroom agreements, 5S habituation, weekly reflection, specific feedback, and teacher modelling.
Family	Habituation cards and reflective parent-child conversations.
Evaluation	Situational tests, observation rubrics, completeness checks, and reassessment after 4-6 weeks.
Partnership	Teacher training, school modules, follow-up visits, and joint reflection.

Source: Authors' recommendations based on program evaluation and literature.

Implementation quality should be monitored in future programs. Components that can be recorded include consistency between planned and delivered content, effective time for each activity, the proportion of students engaged, equitable opportunities to respond, teacher responses, and barriers arising from classroom conditions. Process

records can help distinguish whether limited outcomes are primarily related to intervention dose, the instrument, or implementation. This is important because meta-analytic heterogeneity in school-based program outcomes is closely related to context and implementation (Cipriano et al., 2023).

The activity had several limitations. First, there was no comparison group, so observed changes cannot be attributed with certainty to the intervention. Second, evaluation was conducted immediately after the activity and did not assess retention or behavioral change. Third, four records were incomplete and the instrument's psychometric quality was not documented. Fourth, the short duration and classroom conditions may have influenced implementation. Fifth, participation observations did not use standardized rubric. These limitations require proportionate interpretation of the findings.

The program had several strengths: it was based on school needs, involved partner participation, used an interactive approach, collected data before and after the activity, and provided community learning experience for students. The statistically non-significant result remains informative because it shows that character development should not be inferred from a small immediate score increase after one session. Observed engagement and practical feasibility provide a basis for program development, whereas evidence of impact requires a longer intervention, better instruments, and follow-up evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The interactive ethics education program at Budi Luhur Elementary School, Cimahi, involved 31 third-grade students and produced 27 analyzable pre-test and post-test pairs. The mean score increased from 41.85 to 43.70, but the change was not statistically significant ($W = 15$, $p = 0.166$); most students' scores remained unchanged, seven increased, and three decreased. The program can therefore be viewed as an initial educational activity that generated observed student engagement, but the available data do not demonstrate consistent knowledge change or character formation. Future implementation should use sequential sessions, habituation, teacher modeling, classroom agreements, parental involvement, more sensitive instruments, behavioral observation rubrics, and reassessment after four to six weeks.

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