

The Promotion of Moral Development in Early Childhood Education: A Recent Systematic Review

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Abstract – This systematic literature review explores how moral development is cultivated in early childhood education, a pivotal stage for shaping ethical reasoning, social responsibility, and character formation. Despite growing academic interest, research on this topic remains fragmented across psychological, pedagogical, and sociocultural disciplines, hindering a comprehensive understanding of effective moral education practices. Guided by the PRISMA framework, a systematic search was conducted in the Scopus and Web of Science databases using Boolean operators and predefined inclusion criteria. The keywords “moral development” and “preschool” were applied, resulting in 39 peer-reviewed articles published within the past eight years. Critical analysis and synthesis of these studies revealed three dominant themes. The first theme, Psychological and Developmental Foundations of Moral Growth, emphasises the roles of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural factors framed by classical theories such as those of Piaget and Kohlberg. The second theme, Pedagogical and Institutional Practices in Moral Education, examines the contribution of teachers, curricula, and institutional culture in promoting moral learning through modelling, explicit teaching, and value-oriented classroom practices. The third theme, Cultural, Familial, and Societal Influences, highlights how home environments, cultural traditions, and community norms shape children’s moral reasoning and prosocial behaviour. Collectively, the findings affirm that moral development in early childhood is a multifaceted process requiring integrative approaches that combine individual, educational, and contextual dimensions. Future research should advance culturally responsive pedagogies, foster collaborative engagement between educators and families, and employ longitudinal designs to enhance moral education implementation in early learning settings.

Keywords – Early childhood education, Kohlberg, moral development, pedagogy, PRISMA

I. INTRODUCTION

Moral development in early childhood is increasingly recognized as a critical component of holistic education, forming the foundation for children’s ethical behaviour, social interaction, and sense of civic responsibility (Rasmini & Karta, 2021; Arda et al., 2022). Preschool education, which caters to children in their formative years, provides a vital platform for nurturing fundamental moral values such as honesty, empathy, fairness, and respect. During this sensitive developmental stage,

children begin to internalise societal norms and distinguish between right and wrong.

Educators, therefore, play a central role in shaping the moral landscape of young learners, not only through structured teaching but also by modelling appropriate behaviour and fostering positive classroom environments (Nashihin & Musbikhin, 2021). The emphasis on moral development in preschool settings reflects broader educational goals aimed at producing well-rounded individuals capable of making meaningful contributions to society. In a world increasingly marked by ethical dilemmas, social fragmentation and cultural pluralism, early moral education serves as a proactive strategy for promoting social harmony and ethical citizenship (Avilés Sedeño & Puig Rovira, 2023). Various educational theories and pedagogical models have been proposed to support moral development during early childhood. These include stage-based cognitive approaches, character education frameworks and value-based learning methodologies. Research has shown that integrating moral education into the preschool curriculum can significantly enhance children’s social competence and decision-making abilities (Hermawan & Kusniasari, 2023). Across different countries and educational systems, diverse strategies have been implemented to foster moral growth, including storytelling, cooperative learning, classroom discussions and role modelling.

In some contexts, moral development is integrated into spiritual or religious education, whereas in others, it is addressed as a secular domain within social-emotional learning (Saleh, 2022). Teachers are widely recognized as key agents in facilitating this process, often tailoring moral lessons to the unique needs of their students and the cultural contexts in which they teach. However, the success of these initiatives largely depends on educators’ understanding of moral development, the quality of their professional training and the availability of appropriate teaching resources (Asif et al., 2020).

Despite growing scholarly interest and increasing policy support, the field continues to face several limitations and unresolved issues. One key challenge lies in the lack of consensus on what constitutes moral development and how it should be assessed in early childhood (Chan, 2020; Scirocco et al., 2023). Furthermore, much of the existing discourse is dominated by western perspectives, often marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems and culturally grounded values (Kania et al., 2017). In many contexts, the lived experiences of preschool teachers including their insights, interpretations and challenges, remain underexplored, resulting in a persistent gap between policy intent and classroom practice (Datnow et al., 2023).

The increasing influence of digital technology, shifting family structures and the demands of multicultural

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classrooms have introduced new complexities in teaching morality to young children (Datnow et al., 2023).

In light of these challenges, there is a pressing need to broaden the scope of research to include diverse perspectives and methodologies that reflect the dynamic realities of early childhood education. This article argues for a more contextualized and practice-oriented approach to moral development in preschool settings. It also recommends future research to focus on teachers' lived experiences, the role of cultural and religious values and the impact of emerging societal trends on moral teaching. By adopting a more inclusive and grounded perspective, the field can progress toward more effective and sustainable practices for promoting moral development among preschool children.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Moral development in preschool education is a critical area of study, as early childhood represents a formative period for establishing foundational ethical principles and behaviours. Research indicates that preschool education significantly influences children's moral development through diverse strategies, learning environments and pedagogical models. Accordingly, this review synthesizes findings from multiple studies to examine how moral values are cultivated in preschool settings, the role of educators in this process and the effectiveness of various instructional approaches.

Strategies and Approaches in Moral Education

Early childhood educators employ diverse strategies to foster moral development, ranging from conflict resolution techniques to structured values education programs. One study highlights that teachers utilize both heteronomy and autonomy-promoting strategies to resolve conflicts among children, although autonomy-promoting strategies are employed less frequently (Engler & Westphal, 2024). Another study emphasizes the importance of integrating moral and ethical education into the curriculum, using stories and fairy tales to help children understand fundamental moral principles such as happiness, peace, cooperation and honesty (Zdanevych et al., 2020). Additionally, ethics education in early childhood is conceptualized as both an embedded process within the school's sociomoral environment and as a distinct component of ethics or social-emotional learning programs (Burroughs, 2018). This dual perspective underscores the need for methodological pluralism and collaborative teacher-researcher partnerships to develop effective ethics education practices.

Role of Educators and School Environment

Educators play a pivotal role in fostering moral development by modelling ethical behaviour and creating supportive learning environments. A systematic review indicates that effective values education (VE) programs typically incorporate explicit curriculum integration,

teacher role modelling and structured classroom activities (Lin et al., 2025). Professional development initiatives are essential for equipping teachers with the competencies required to implement VE effectively. Moreover, the physical school environment and classroom management practices are critical for promoting positive moral growth, with expert consensus emphasizing their significance (Masnan et al., 2024). Teachers' perceptions of ethical behaviour, levels of moral judgment and instructional attitudes significantly influence their effectiveness in moral education (Oktay et al., 2010). Furthermore, the relationship between educators' epistemic beliefs and their pedagogical practices for moral learning underscores the continuing need for sustained professional development (Lunn Brownlee et al., 2015).

Effective Teaching Methods and Challenges

Various instructional approaches are employed to enhance moral development in early childhood, including moral storytelling, instructional media, picture books and peer learning. The use of problematic or contradictory situations has been shown to effectively cultivate moral consciousness among preschoolers by engaging them in moral dilemmas and structured reflective activities (Chernokova & Gulyaeva, 2022; Shih, 2022). However, challenges persist in sequencing moral education due to the complex interplay between children's social and moral reasoning and their applications within real-life contexts (Nucci & Turiel, 2009). Additionally, the inadequacy of curriculum guidelines and the lack of consensus on values and character development in certain regions, such as Hong Kong, pose significant obstacles to systematic implementation. Despite these challenges, existing research indicates that preschool education should be made compulsory to strengthen children's understanding of moral and social norms (Seçer & Sari, 2007; Chan, 2020).

TABLE I: SUMMARY TABLE FOR EXISTING STUDY

Aspect	Key Findings
Strategies in Moral Education	Conflict resolution techniques, use of stories and fairy tales, ethics and social-emotional programs
Role of Educators	Importance of role modeling, professional development, school environment, classroom management
Teaching Methods	Moral storytelling, instructional media, picture books, peer learning, problematic contradictory situations
Challenges	Sequencing moral education, curriculum inadequacies, lack of consensus on values and character development

III. METHOD

Identification

In this study, the key steps of the systematic review process were employed to gather a

substantial body of relevant literature. The process began with the selection of keywords, followed by the identification of related terms using dictionaries, thesauri, encyclopaedias and prior research. All relevant terms were then consolidated and search strings were developed for use in the Web of Science and Scopus databases (see Table II). This initial phase of the systematic review yielded 1,767 publications related to the research topic from both databases.

TABLE II: THE SEARCH STRING

Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ((ethical OR moral) AND development AND (early childhood OR preschool)) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2024) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2025)) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOC") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "PSYC") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ARTS")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English"))
WoS	Date of Access: July 2025 Refine results for ((ethical OR moral) AND development AND (early childhood OR preschool)) (Topic) and 2025 or 2024 or 2023 (Publication Years) and Article (Document Types) and English (Languages) and Psychology or Social Sciences Other Topics or Education Educational Research (Research Areas) and 2025 or 2024 or 2023 (Publication Years) and Article (Document Types) and English (Languages) and Psychology or Education Educational Research or Social Sciences Other Topics (Research Areas) and Education Educational Research or Psychology (Research Areas) and Psychology (Research Areas)
	Date of Access: July 2025

Screening

During the initial phases of the systematic review, an exhaustive and meticulous evaluation was conducted to determine the relevance and alignment of each potential publication with the overarching research questions on moral development among preschool-aged children in early childhood education settings. A critical component of this phase involved the rigorous identification and removal of duplicate records to ensure that the dataset comprised unique and non-redundant entries.

The preliminary pool of literature underwent a stringent screening process, resulting in the exclusion of 1,666 publications that did not meet the predetermined criteria. This refinement narrowed the corpus to 101 scholarly articles deemed suitable for further examination. Each remaining article was then assessed in depth against a comprehensive set of inclusion and exclusion criteria explicitly outlined in Table 3 of the methodological framework.

The selection process was deliberately structured to prioritize primary sources that provide substantive and practice-oriented contributions to the field of moral development in early childhood education. The resulting corpus comprised a broad spectrum of scholarly

materials, including peer-reviewed journal articles, meta-analyses, scholarly books, and conference proceedings, thereby ensuring a robust and representative overview of the prevailing research landscape.

To uphold methodological rigour and ensure the synthesis reflects current scholarly discourse, the review was confined to English-language publications released in 2024 and 2025. This two-year timeframe was intentionally selected to capture the latest empirical and theoretical advancements in moral development research, given the rapid evolution of early childhood education in recent years. Establishing this temporal and linguistic boundary enhanced the consistency of the dataset while ensuring that the review remained closely aligned with contemporary debates and emerging trends within the field.

At this stage, an additional 11 publications were removed due to duplication, resulting in 90 records retained for core analysis. This rigorous and systematic process was intended to uphold the integrity, comprehensiveness and reproducibility of the review, ensuring that the final selection accurately reflects the current state of evidence on moral development in preschool contexts.

TABLE III: THE SELECTION CRITERION IS SEARCHING

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	English	Non-English
Time line	2024-2025	< 2024
Literature type	Journal (Article)	Conference, Book, Review
Publication Stage	Final	In Press
Subject	Social science, psychology, arts and humanities	Besides Social science, psychology and arts and humanities

Eligibility

In the third step of the systematic review process, commonly referred to as the eligibility phase, a total of 90 scholarly articles and research papers were initially selected for comprehensive review. During this critical stage, each article’s title, abstract and core content were meticulously reviewed to determine whether it met the predetermined inclusion criteria and aligned with the specific research objectives of the study. This rigorous screening process was essential to ensure the relevance, credibility and overall quality of the selected literature.

As a result of this detailed evaluation, 51 articles were excluded from further consideration. The exclusions were primarily due to factors such as being outside the relevant academic field, having titles that were not closely related to the research topic, containing abstracts that did not sufficiently address the study’s objectives, or lacking accessible full texts required for in-depth analysis. Consequently, this rigorous screening process yielded 39

articles that met all inclusion criteria and were deemed suitable for the next phase of the review, which involved a detailed analysis and synthesis of their findings.

Data Abstraction and Analysis

An integrative analysis was employed as one of the assessment strategies in this study to examine and synthesise various research designs within qualitative methods. The purpose of this approach was to identify relevant themes and their corresponding subthemes. The data collection phase served as the initial step in developing these themes. As illustrated in Figure 2, the authors systematically analysed a compilation of 39 publications to extract statements or materials pertinent to the current study's focus areas. Subsequently, the authors evaluated recent empirical studies related to moral development in preschool education. The methodologies and research findings of these studies were thoroughly reviewed. The authors then collaborated with co-authors to construct themes grounded in the available evidence and aligned with the context of this study. A reflective log was maintained throughout the data analysis process to document analyses, perspectives, questions and other insights relevant to data interpretation.

Finally, the authors compared the results to identify any inconsistencies in the theme development process. It is important to note that when disagreements arose between concepts, the authors engaged in collaborative discussions to resolve them. The generated themes were subsequently refined to ensure overall consistency. The authors collaborated to examine and compare findings, addressing any discrepancies that emerged during the thematic synthesis process through discussion until consensus was achieved. The final themes were further refined for internal coherence and clarity.

To strengthen the validity and reliability of these themes, the structure was evaluated by three experts, two in educational psychology and one in systematic literature review methodology. This expert review ensured that each theme and subtheme was relevant, conceptually meaningful and capable of capturing the complexities of moral development in preschool settings. Revisions were made based on expert feedback at the authors' discretion.

The research questions guiding this review were as follows:

1. How do specific cognitive and emotional developmental milestones during early childhood influence the emergence of moral reasoning and prosocial behaviour among preschool-aged children?
2. What pedagogical strategies and institutional policies are most effective in fostering moral values and ethical conduct among young learners in preschool settings?
3. In what ways do cultural norms, family structures, and community values shape the moral development of preschool children across diverse sociocultural contexts?

IV. FINDINGS

Psychological and Developmental Foundations of Moral Growth

Studies have confirmed that moral development in preschoolers is shaped by a combination of cognitive, emotional and relational factors. Cognitive abilities such as executive function and theory of mind contribute significantly to self-regulation and prosocial behaviour (Baker & Jambon, 2025; Söldner et al., 2024). Empathy and creativity have also been identified as strong predictors of prosocial tendencies (Gungordu et al., 2025). Emotional selectivity, particularly toward prosocial peers, reflects the emergence of early moral discrimination (Wang et al., 2024), whereas parent-child dynamics play a crucial role in shaping later moral identity (Kim & Kochanska, 2024).

Prosocial behaviours are reinforced through moral emotions, social proximity and parental modelling (Padilla-Walker et al., 2024; Zhao et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025). Children's moral reasoning develops from intent-based judgments to more complex considerations, such as prosocial lying (Margoni & Nava, 2024; Guo & Rochat, 2025). Furthermore, contextual studies underscore the roles of supportive families, multicultural curricula, sustainability practices and social categorisation in shaping moral evaluations (Audley et al., 2024; Cholimah et al., 2024; Geraci et al., 2024; Shih, 2024).

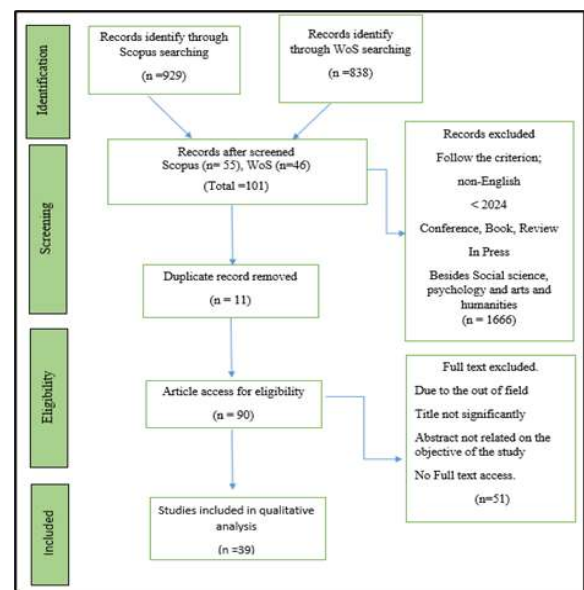


Figure 1. Flow diagram of the proposed searching study

Pedagogical and Institutional Practices

Research highlights curriculum-embedded strategies such as value-based textbooks, modelling and religious pedagogies as effective in shaping children's morality (Istiyani et al., 2024; Lestari et al., 2024; Marjani & Shamsudin, 2024). However, lesson plans often lack alignment between objectives and assessments (Rahardjo, 2024) and teacher preparedness remains inconsistent (Bedel et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2025). Institutional cultures

characterized by issues such as favouritism and disciplinary practices have been shown to either reinforce or hinder moral development (Sula et al., 2024), in contrast to collaborative, child-rights-based frameworks that promote ethical care (Brenne & Åmot, 2024; Lipponen et al., 2024). Moreover, teachers' demographic and professional attributes also influence children's empathy and moral reasoning (Pandya & Bhangaokar, 2024; Ul Hassan et al., 2024).

Cultural, Familial, and Societal Influences

Children's moral development is profoundly shaped by cultural narratives, family practices and societal frameworks. Studies highlight children's agency and ethical positioning in education, challenging adult-centered paradigms (Land, 2024; Ruscoe, 2025; Zheng et al., 2025). Parenting practices rooted in indigenous traditions foster prosocial behaviour (Fairchild & Duncan, 2025). Family contexts further influence moral perceptions of aggression, prosociality and even technology use (Baker & Jensen, 2024; Lee & Jeun, 2024). At the societal level, community coalitions, leisure organizations and storytelling practices nurture civic values and social justice (Bitew & Sewagegn, 2024; Fan et al., 2024; Lazcano Quintana & Madariaga Ortuzar, 2024).

V. DISCUSSION

The findings affirm that moral development in early childhood is multidimensional, requiring the integration of cognitive, emotional and social competencies. Early education should therefore nurture executive function, empathy and creativity, as these capacities underpin prosocial behaviour. The relational context, particularly parenting, emerges as a powerful scaffold for moral identity formation. Culturally responsive and environmentally relevant approaches are also essential to prevent moral education from becoming narrow or context-blind.

Evidence suggests that effective moral education requires more than curriculum content; it demands intentional pedagogy, reflective teaching and institutional coherence. Weaknesses in lesson planning and teacher preparation indicate systemic gaps. Teacher education programs should therefore prioritize moral sensitivity and ethical reflection. Moreover, institutional cultures that value collaboration and children's rights foster sustainable ethical practices, underscoring the need for supportive structures that extend beyond individual teachers.

Children's moral development cannot be understood in isolation from their cultural and societal ecologies. Recognizing children's agency necessitates a shift from adult-dominant paradigms to participatory, child-centered approaches in moral education. Family practices, particularly those rooted in cultural traditions, are vital for cultivating prosocial behaviour and moral reasoning. Ultimately, broader societal structures, including policy frameworks, community initiatives and storytelling traditions, extend moral learning beyond the classroom,

positioning moral education as a collective social responsibility.

VI. CONCLUSION (OR LIMITATION OR SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER STUDIES)

This systematic literature review examined the promotion of moral development in preschool education by synthesizing 39 peer-reviewed articles published between 2024 and 2025. Guided by the PRISMA framework, the study applied rigorous inclusion criteria focusing on English-language articles indexed in SCOPUS and the Web of Science, with an emphasis on psychology, social sciences and the arts and humanities. The review addressed three central research questions concerning the cognitive-emotional foundations, pedagogical practices and sociocultural influences on children's moral growth. Key findings were organized into three themes: (1) psychological and developmental foundations, which revealed the importance of cognitive maturation, emotional regulation and prosocial behaviour in moral reasoning; (2) pedagogical and institutional practices, which highlighted the roles of teacher preparation, ethical school environments and value-based curricula; and (3) cultural, familial and societal influences, which underscored the significance of parenting practices, community norms and children's lived experiences.

The review contributes to the field by bridging disciplinary silos, synthesizing fragmented knowledge and proposing a multidimensional framework for understanding moral development in early childhood. Practical implications include the need for culturally responsive curricula, reflective teacher preparation and system-wide support for ethical pedagogy. Nevertheless, the review is limited by its narrow timeframe, database scope and language filter, which may have excluded non-English publications and earlier foundational works. Future research should employ longitudinal, intervention-based and cross-cultural designs to enhance both depth of insight and contextual relevance. Overall, this review underscores the value of systematic evidence synthesis in advancing theoretical understanding and informing practice, highlighting the importance of integrative and context-sensitive strategies to foster moral growth among preschool learners.

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