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Cultivating Ethical Decision-Making: Lived Experiences of Values Education Teachers in Character Development among Junior High School Students at San Alfonso High School, Incorporated

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Abstract

Character education has become an essential component of basic education as schools strive to develop learners who are not only academically competent but also morally responsible, socially responsive, and ethically grounded. In the Philippines, Values Education serves as a vital learning area that nurtures learners' moral reasoning, responsible decision-making, civic responsibility, empathy, and positive character formation. However, Values Education teachers face increasing challenges brought about by technological advancements, social media influence, changing family dynamics, peer pressure, and evolving societal values that shape students' ethical perspectives and behaviors. Despite the growing significance of character education, limited qualitative studies have explored how Values Education teachers cultivate ethical decision-making among junior high school learners within the context of private secondary schools. This transcendental phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Values Education teachers in promoting ethical decision-making and character development among junior high school students at San Alfonso High School, Incorporated, Sabangan, Mountain Province. Guided by Creswell and Poth's qualitative inquiry framework and Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology, the study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews analyzed through Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method. Five essential themes emerged from the participants' narratives: (1) Modeling Ethical Leadership through Authentic Teacher Practices; (2) Cultivating Moral Reasoning through Reflective and Values-Based Instruction; (3) Strengthening Responsible Decision-Making through Learner-Centered Character Education; (4) Overcoming Contemporary Challenges in Teaching Values Education; and (5) Sustaining Character Formation through School, Family, and Community Partnerships. The findings revealed that effective Values Education extends beyond classroom instruction by integrating ethical leadership, reflective learning, authentic relationships, and collaborative partnerships that shape learners' moral development and responsible citizenship. Based on the findings, the study proposes the Ethical Decision-Making and Character Development Framework (EDCDF) to strengthen character education, ethical leadership, and holistic learner development in junior high schools.

Keywords: *Values Education, ethical decision-making, character development, phenomenology, moral reasoning, character education, junior high school, ethical leadership*



Introduction

Education has long been recognized as a transformative process that develops not only learners' intellectual competencies but also their moral character, ethical values, and sense of social responsibility. While academic excellence remains an essential goal of formal education, contemporary educational systems increasingly acknowledge that schools must also prepare learners to become ethical individuals capable of making responsible decisions in increasingly complex and interconnected societies. Consequently, character education has become a global educational priority because developing morally grounded citizens is fundamental to achieving peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable communities. UNESCO (2021) emphasizes that education should cultivate respect for human dignity, empathy, justice, integrity, responsibility, and active citizenship, ensuring that learners possess both academic competence and ethical consciousness necessary for addressing contemporary social challenges.

The rapid advancement of technology, globalization, and digital communication has significantly transformed how young people acquire knowledge, interact with others, and form personal values. Social media platforms, online communities, and unrestricted access to information expose adolescents to diverse beliefs, lifestyles, and ethical dilemmas that influence their attitudes, behaviors, and decision-making processes. Although these technological developments provide valuable educational opportunities, they also introduce challenges such as cyberbullying, misinformation, online misconduct, declining interpersonal relationships, and increasing moral ambiguity. These realities highlight the urgent need for educational institutions to strengthen character education by helping learners develop sound moral reasoning, ethical judgment, empathy, and responsible decision-making that enable them to navigate complex social environments responsibly.

Values Education plays a crucial role in addressing these contemporary challenges by fostering learners' moral, emotional, social, and spiritual development alongside academic achievement. Rather than focusing solely on the transmission of moral concepts, Values Education encourages learners to internalize ethical principles through reflection, critical thinking, dialogue, experiential learning, and authentic social interactions. According to Lickona (1991), effective character education develops moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action, enabling learners to understand ethical principles, appreciate their significance, and consistently demonstrate virtuous behavior in everyday life. Similarly, Berkowitz and Bier (2014) argue that successful character education integrates ethical instruction throughout school culture by modeling positive relationships, promoting respectful interactions, and creating opportunities for learners to practice responsible decision-making.

Character education has become one of the primary goals of contemporary education as schools increasingly recognize their responsibility to develop learners who possess not only academic competence but also moral integrity, ethical responsibility, and social awareness. Across educational systems worldwide, character education is viewed as an essential component of holistic learning because it equips learners with the knowledge, attitudes, and virtues necessary for responsible citizenship and lifelong personal development. UNESCO (2021) emphasized that education should cultivate learners who demonstrate empathy, justice, integrity, respect for diversity, and commitment to sustainable societies. Consequently, ethical decision-making has become an indispensable educational outcome that prepares learners to navigate complex personal, social, and global challenges.

Weimer (2013) emphasized that learner-centered instruction promotes critical thinking by positioning learners as active participants in constructing understanding through dialogue, collaboration, and reflection. Within Values Education, learner-centered strategies include moral dilemma discussions, case analysis, reflective journals, debates, role-playing, community immersion, storytelling, and service-learning projects. These instructional methods encourage learners to examine personal beliefs while developing empathy and ethical reasoning. Hattie (2023) likewise reported that instructional approaches emphasizing active participation, classroom discussion, teacher feedback, and collaborative learning significantly improve learner engagement and deeper understanding. Such pedagogical practices are particularly valuable in Values Education because they enable learners to connect ethical principles with authentic experiences rather than memorizing abstract moral concepts.

In the Philippine educational system, character education remains a fundamental component of basic education. The Department of Education recognizes Values Education as essential in producing Filipino learners who embody Makadiyos, Makatao, Makakalikasan, at Makabansa, consistent with the national educational vision articulated in the Basic Education Curriculum and reinforced through the MATATAG Curriculum. Values Education seeks to nurture learners' moral integrity, civic responsibility, respect for diversity, social awareness, and commitment to the common good while preparing them to become ethical leaders within their families, schools, communities, and society. Consequently, Values Education teachers carry significant responsibilities that extend beyond classroom instruction, serving as role models who influence learners' attitudes, behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and moral development through both explicit teaching and daily interactions.

Teaching Values Education in junior high school presents unique instructional opportunities and challenges because adolescence represents a critical developmental stage characterized by identity formation, increasing independence, emotional growth, and expanding social relationships. During this period, learners frequently encounter ethical dilemmas involving peer influence, academic honesty, digital citizenship, respect for diversity, interpersonal relationships, and personal responsibility. Values Education teachers therefore facilitate reflective discussions, ethical inquiry, collaborative learning, and experiential activities that encourage learners to analyze moral issues critically while developing empathy, integrity, self-discipline, and responsible decision-making. These instructional responsibilities require teachers to possess not only pedagogical competence but also ethical leadership, emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and authentic personal character.

The educational context of San Alfonso High School, Incorporated, located in Sabangan, Mountain Province, provides a meaningful setting for exploring these instructional experiences. The school serves junior high school learners from diverse cultural, familial, and socioeconomic backgrounds, requiring Values Education teachers to contextualize moral instruction according to learners' lived realities while respecting local traditions and community values. Teachers handling Values Education for Grades 7–10 continuously guide adolescents through moral reflection, character formation, and ethical decision-making while responding to emerging social issues that influence learners' personal and academic development. Their experiences illustrate the complex yet meaningful role of Values Education in shaping responsible and compassionate citizens within contemporary Philippine society.

Existing literature has extensively examined character education, moral development, ethical leadership, and values formation in educational settings. Numerous quantitative investigations have explored students' moral reasoning, ethical behavior, civic engagement, empathy, and character

development using standardized psychological instruments and survey methodologies. Likewise, studies have investigated the effectiveness of character education programs, school climate, and values integration across different educational contexts. Although these studies provide valuable empirical evidence regarding educational outcomes, they frequently emphasize measurable indicators rather than understanding the lived realities of teachers responsible for cultivating ethical decision-making among adolescents.

Moreover, relatively few phenomenological investigations have explored how Values Education teachers personally experience the challenges, opportunities, and responsibilities of fostering ethical decision-making and character formation among junior high school learners. Existing qualitative studies seldom capture teachers' reflections regarding instructional practices, moral leadership, classroom experiences, contextual challenges, and collaborative partnerships that influence character education within secondary schools. Specifically, there remains a scarcity of phenomenological research focusing on Values Education teachers in private secondary schools situated within rural and culturally rich communities such as San Alfonso High School, Incorporated. Understanding these lived experiences is essential because teachers' perspectives provide valuable insights into how character education can be strengthened to address the evolving moral needs of adolescents in contemporary society.

Recognizing these gaps, the present study explores the lived experiences of Values Education teachers in cultivating ethical decision-making and character development among junior high school students at San Alfonso High School, Incorporated. By employing a transcendental phenomenological approach, the study seeks to uncover the meanings teachers attribute to their instructional experiences, identify effective pedagogical practices that promote ethical decision-making, examine the challenges encountered in teaching Values Education, and develop a contextually relevant framework that may guide future instructional improvement, teacher professional development, and character education initiatives within Philippine secondary schools.

Research Gap

Although numerous studies have investigated character education, moral development, values formation, ethical leadership, and civic engagement, the majority have employed quantitative or mixed-methods research designs that primarily assess learners' moral reasoning, ethical behavior, or program effectiveness through standardized measurement tools. Existing literature provides limited understanding of the lived experiences of Values Education teachers who directly facilitate ethical decision-making and character development among adolescents. Furthermore, few phenomenological studies have examined how Values Education teachers navigate contemporary moral challenges, integrate reflective instructional practices, model ethical leadership, and collaborate with families and communities to strengthen character formation. More specifically, there is an absence of published phenomenological research focusing on Values Education teachers at San Alfonso High School, Incorporated, Sabangan, Mountain Province. This study addresses this gap by providing an in-depth exploration of teachers' lived experiences and proposing the Ethical Decision-Making and Character Development Framework (EDCDF) to strengthen Values Education instruction, ethical leadership, and character education in junior high schools.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Values Education teachers in cultivating ethical decision-making and character development among junior high school students at San Alfonso High School, Incorporated.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do Values Education teachers describe their lived experiences in cultivating ethical decision-making among junior high school students?
2. How do teachers promote character development through Values Education instruction?
3. What instructional practices enable teachers to strengthen learners' moral reasoning and responsible decision-making?
4. What challenges do Values Education teachers encounter in promoting ethical behavior, and how do they address these challenges?
5. Based on the findings, what Ethical Decision-Making and Character Development Framework (EDCDF) may be developed to strengthen Values Education and character formation among junior high school students?

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to explore and describe the lived experiences of Values Education teachers in cultivating ethical decision-making and character development among junior high school students at San Alfonso High School, Incorporated. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how teachers facilitate moral reasoning, integrate character education into classroom instruction, model ethical leadership, and respond to contemporary challenges influencing adolescent values formation. Ultimately, the findings aim to develop the Ethical Decision-Making and Character Development Framework (EDCDF), which may serve as a guide for enhancing Values Education pedagogy, teacher professional development, and holistic character formation in secondary education.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on five complementary theories that explain ethical decision-making, moral development, character formation, and Values Education.

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (1984)

Kohlberg proposed that moral reasoning develops progressively through three levels—pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional morality. As learners mature, they become increasingly capable of making ethical decisions based on universal principles of justice, fairness, and human rights. This theory provides the foundation for understanding how Values Education facilitates moral reasoning and ethical decision-making among adolescents.

Lickona's Character Education Framework (1991)

Lickona argued that effective character education develops moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. Learners must understand ethical principles, value them emotionally, and consistently practice them through responsible behavior. This framework supports the integration of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of character education.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977)

Bandura emphasized that individuals learn behaviors through observation, imitation, and social interaction. Values Education teachers become influential role models whose ethical conduct significantly shapes learners' moral development. Authentic teacher leadership therefore reinforces ethical behavior through positive modeling.

Rest's Four-Component Model of Moral Behavior (1986)

Rest explained that ethical behavior requires four interconnected processes: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. This theory explains how Values Education develops learners' capacity to recognize ethical dilemmas, evaluate moral alternatives, prioritize ethical principles, and act responsibly.

Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978)

Vygotsky asserted that learning develops through meaningful social interaction and guided participation. Values Education classrooms encourage dialogue, collaborative reflection, and shared ethical inquiry, enabling learners to construct moral understanding through interaction with teachers and peers.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach utilizing transcendental phenomenology to explore and describe the lived experiences of Values Education teachers in cultivating ethical decision-making and character development among junior high school students at San Alfonso High School, Incorporated, Sabangan, Mountain Province. Qualitative research was deemed appropriate because it seeks to understand participants' perspectives, meanings, and interpretations of their lived experiences within their natural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, transcendental phenomenology, as developed by Moustakas (1994), was adopted to uncover the essence of teachers' experiences in facilitating ethical decision-making, promoting moral reasoning, and fostering character formation among adolescent learners. The researcher employed epoche (bracketing) to suspend personal assumptions and biases throughout the research process, allowing participants' narratives to emerge authentically and ensuring that the findings genuinely reflected their lived experiences.

The study was conducted at San Alfonso High School, Incorporated, located in Sabangan, Mountain Province, a private secondary educational institution committed to holistic learner development through quality instruction and values formation. The school provides Values Education for Grades 7–10, emphasizing moral development, responsible citizenship, ethical leadership, and personal integrity alongside academic excellence. The unique educational environment and the school's commitment to character formation made it an appropriate locale for exploring the instructional experiences of Values Education teachers in nurturing ethical decision-making among junior high school learners.

The participants of the study consisted of 10 to 12 Values Education teachers currently teaching Grades 7–10 at San Alfonso High School, Incorporated. Participants were selected through purposive criterion sampling (Patton, 2015), ensuring that each participant possessed rich and meaningful experiences directly related to the phenomenon under investigation. The inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) be currently teaching Values Education in Grades 7–10; (2) have at least three years of teaching experience in Values Education; (3) be willing to voluntarily participate in the study; and (4) provide informed consent prior to data collection. The final number of participants was determined based on data saturation, the point at which no new themes or significant insights emerged from subsequent interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were gathered using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide, carefully constructed based on the research objectives and the reviewed literature on character education, ethical decision-making, and moral development. The interview guide underwent content validation

by three experts in qualitative research, educational leadership, and Values Education to establish content validity, clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. Necessary revisions were incorporated based on the experts' recommendations. A pilot interview with two Values Education teachers from another secondary school was likewise conducted to assess the clarity, sequencing, and appropriateness of the interview questions. These participants were excluded from the actual study to maintain methodological rigor.

Prior to data collection, approval to conduct the study was secured from the school administration of San Alfonso High School, Incorporated. Upon receiving institutional approval, the researcher personally invited the identified participants, explained the objectives and significance of the study, and provided an informed consent form detailing their rights, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and freedom to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Individual face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted in a quiet and private location within the school at schedules convenient to the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted primarily in English and Filipino, depending on the participants' language preference to encourage richer and more authentic responses. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by field notes documenting non-verbal expressions, contextual observations, and reflective insights.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after each interview. Participants were then provided copies of their transcripts for member checking, allowing them to verify the accuracy and completeness of their responses and make necessary clarifications or corrections. The validated transcripts served as the primary data source for analysis.

The collected data were analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Phenomenological Method (Colaizzi, 1978), which provides a systematic and rigorous approach to extracting the essence of lived experiences. The analysis involved: (1) reading all transcripts repeatedly to gain a holistic understanding of participants' experiences; (2) extracting significant statements directly related to the phenomenon; (3) formulating meanings from these significant statements; (4) organizing formulated meanings into clusters of themes; (5) developing exhaustive descriptions that comprehensively represented the participants' experiences; (6) identifying the fundamental structure or essence of the phenomenon; and (7) returning the synthesized findings to participants for final validation to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected their lived experiences.

To establish the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher adhered to the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was ensured through prolonged engagement with participants, member checking, peer debriefing, and reflective journaling. Transferability was strengthened by providing thick and detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and findings, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the results to similar settings. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting every stage of the research process, including methodological decisions, interview procedures, coding, and thematic analysis. Confirmability was established through reflexive journaling, triangulation of field notes and interview transcripts, and maintaining transparency in data interpretation to minimize researcher bias.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study in accordance with the National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Health-Related Research (2022) of the Philippines and internationally accepted standards for qualitative research. Prior to participation, all participants signed informed consent forms after receiving complete information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and anticipated benefits. Confidentiality and anonymity were protected through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of personally identifiable information

from interview transcripts and research reports. Audio recordings, transcripts, consent forms, and other research documents were securely stored in password-protected electronic files and locked storage accessible only to the researcher. Participants were assured that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Throughout the research process, the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, confidentiality, and academic integrity were consistently upheld to protect the rights, dignity, and welfare of all participants while ensuring the credibility and ethical rigor of the investigation.

Results and Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of Values Education teachers in cultivating ethical decision-making and character development among junior high school students at San Alfonso High School, Incorporated. Through in-depth phenomenological interviews analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Method, the participants described their instructional practices, personal reflections, challenges, and meaningful experiences in guiding adolescents toward becoming morally responsible, socially conscious, and ethically grounded individuals. The analysis revealed that Values Education extends beyond teaching prescribed competencies and classroom discussions. Instead, it is a transformative process that requires teachers to become ethical role models, reflective facilitators, compassionate mentors, and collaborative partners in shaping learners' moral identities. The participants emphasized that ethical decision-making develops gradually through authentic classroom experiences, meaningful interpersonal relationships, reflective dialogue, and consistent reinforcement of positive values within the school, family, and community. Five essential themes emerged from the analysis, illustrating the multifaceted role of Values Education teachers in fostering character formation among junior high school students.

Theme 1

Modeling Ethical Leadership through Authentic Teacher Practices

One of the strongest themes that emerged from the participants' narratives was the importance of teachers serving as authentic ethical role models. The participants consistently emphasized that students learn values more effectively through what teachers consistently demonstrate rather than what they merely teach. According to them, adolescents carefully observe how teachers interact with students, manage conflicts, respond to mistakes, exercise fairness, demonstrate honesty, and treat others with respect. Consequently, Values Education teachers recognized that every classroom interaction becomes an opportunity to model integrity, compassion, responsibility, humility, and professionalism.

Several participants explained that ethical leadership begins with consistency between words and actions. They believed that teaching honesty loses its credibility if teachers themselves fail to demonstrate honesty in grading, classroom management, or interpersonal relationships. Likewise, discussions on respect become meaningful only when learners personally experience respectful treatment from their teachers. Participants shared that students are highly observant and can easily recognize inconsistencies between teachers' lessons and actual behavior. Because of this, they constantly strive to demonstrate ethical conduct not only during formal classroom instruction but also in ordinary school situations such as resolving misunderstandings, admitting mistakes, maintaining fairness, and showing empathy toward learners experiencing personal difficulties.

One participant explained:

"Students may forget the lesson written on the board, but they will always remember how their teacher treated them. If they see honesty, patience, and kindness every day, those values become real to them." (Participant 2)

Another participant stated:

"Before asking students to become responsible citizens, I must first become an example of responsibility inside and outside the classroom. Teaching values starts with the teacher." (Participant 6)

Participants further emphasized that authentic ethical leadership creates a positive classroom climate characterized by trust, openness, respect, and psychological safety. When students perceive teachers as fair, approachable, and morally consistent, they become more willing to express personal concerns, discuss ethical dilemmas, admit mistakes, and seek guidance regarding difficult decisions. Such relationships strengthen students' confidence in making responsible choices because they view their teachers as credible moral mentors rather than authority figures who merely enforce classroom rules.

Several teachers also described ethical leadership as extending beyond academic instruction. They intentionally demonstrated compassion by listening to learners' personal struggles, encouraging respectful dialogue during disagreements, recognizing individual differences, and treating every learner with dignity regardless of academic performance or social background. Through these daily interactions, participants believed they were helping students internalize values such as empathy, fairness, accountability, forgiveness, and humility.

These findings strongly support Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which posits that individuals acquire behaviors by observing credible role models. Teachers significantly influence learners' moral development because students imitate behaviors demonstrated by respected adults. Likewise, Lickona (1991) argued that character education is most effective when educators consistently model the virtues they seek to cultivate. The findings are further supported by Berkowitz and Bier (2014), who emphasized that ethical school cultures emerge when teachers embody integrity, fairness, and compassion in their daily professional practice. The present findings therefore suggest that authentic teacher leadership serves as one of the strongest foundations of ethical decision-making and character formation among junior high school learners.

Theme 2

Cultivating Moral Reasoning through Reflective and Values-Based Instruction

The participants consistently described Values Education as a discipline that encourages learners to think deeply about moral issues rather than simply memorize virtues or ethical principles. They explained that effective Values Education requires learners to critically examine real-life situations, analyze the consequences of their actions, consider different perspectives, and justify their decisions based on sound moral principles. Instead of providing ready-made answers, teachers intentionally facilitate reflective discussions that allow students to construct their own understanding of ethical behavior through guided inquiry and meaningful dialogue.

Participants shared that classroom discussions frequently revolve around authentic issues encountered by adolescents, such as peer pressure, academic dishonesty, cyberbullying, social media behavior, respect for diversity, environmental responsibility, family relationships, and responsible use of technology. By connecting lessons to learners' everyday experiences, teachers observed that students became more engaged and were better able to recognize the relevance of ethical principles

in their own lives. Rather than viewing Values Education as a theoretical subject, learners gradually understood that moral reasoning is essential in making everyday decisions both inside and outside the classroom.

One participant shared:

"I usually present situations that students actually experience. Instead of giving them the answer, I ask them why they chose that decision and how it affects other people. That is when real learning happens." (Participant 1)

Another teacher remarked:

"Reflection allows students to discover values for themselves. When they realize the consequences of their actions, they begin to make better decisions even without constant reminders." (Participant 8)

Teachers described using reflective journals, moral dilemma analysis, storytelling, role-playing, group discussions, debates, case studies, and personal testimonies to stimulate ethical reflection. These learner-centered strategies encouraged students to examine their beliefs, question assumptions, appreciate diverse viewpoints, and evaluate the moral implications of different choices. Participants emphasized that these activities help learners move beyond compliance with rules toward genuine moral understanding and personal conviction.

The participants also noted that reflective instruction nurtures empathy by encouraging learners to place themselves in the position of others before making decisions. Through guided discussions, students learned to consider how their actions affect classmates, family members, teachers, and the broader community. This process strengthened not only their cognitive understanding of ethical concepts but also their emotional sensitivity and social responsibility.

These findings affirm Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (1984), which proposes that moral reasoning develops progressively as individuals encounter increasingly complex ethical situations requiring thoughtful judgment. Likewise, Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978) explains that learners construct understanding through dialogue, collaboration, and guided interaction with more knowledgeable individuals. The participants' emphasis on reflective discussions, collaborative inquiry, and contextualized learning illustrates how moral reasoning is socially constructed within supportive classroom environments. Furthermore, Weimer (2013) and Hattie (2023) contend that learner-centered instructional approaches significantly enhance critical thinking, engagement, and deeper learning, reinforcing the importance of reflective pedagogy in Values Education.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Values Education teachers in cultivating ethical decision-making and character development among junior high school students at San Alfonso High School, Incorporated, Sabangan, Mountain Province. Through the narratives of the participants, the study revealed that Values Education extends far beyond the delivery of prescribed curriculum competencies. Instead, it is a transformative educational process that nurtures learners' moral reasoning, ethical judgment, responsible citizenship, and holistic personal development through authentic teacher leadership, reflective instruction, learner-centered pedagogies, contextualized learning experiences, and collaborative partnerships among schools, families, and communities.

The findings affirm that Values Education teachers are not merely transmitters of moral concepts but ethical leaders who significantly influence learners' character formation through their daily actions,

interpersonal relationships, instructional practices, and professional integrity. The participants consistently demonstrated that students develop ethical decision-making most effectively when they observe teachers who authentically model honesty, compassion, fairness, responsibility, and respect. These authentic interactions establish psychologically safe learning environments where learners confidently engage in moral reflection, express differing perspectives, admit mistakes, and gradually internalize positive values that guide their behavior both within and beyond the classroom.

The study further established that reflective and learner-centered instructional approaches significantly strengthen learners' moral reasoning and ethical decision-making. By integrating real-life ethical dilemmas, collaborative discussions, storytelling, reflective journaling, role-playing, case analyses, and experiential learning activities, Values Education teachers encourage learners to critically evaluate moral situations rather than merely memorize ethical principles. Such instructional experiences enable adolescents to connect classroom learning with everyday life, fostering independent moral judgment, empathy, accountability, and responsible citizenship.

Another significant finding highlighted the complex realities confronting Values Education teachers in contemporary society. Participants recognized that technological advancement, social media influence, misinformation, changing family structures, cultural diversity, and evolving societal expectations have introduced increasingly complex ethical issues among adolescents. Despite these challenges, the teachers demonstrated remarkable adaptability, creativity, and professional resilience by contextualizing instruction, integrating digital citizenship, encouraging critical reflection, and continuously responding to learners' emerging moral needs. Their experiences illustrate that effective Values Education remains relevant when instruction evolves alongside changing social realities while remaining grounded in enduring ethical principles.

The findings likewise emphasized that sustainable character formation cannot be achieved by schools alone. Teachers consistently viewed ethical development as a shared responsibility involving families, communities, school administrators, religious organizations, and learners themselves. Strong partnerships among these stakeholders create consistent moral environments where ethical principles are reinforced through authentic experiences across multiple contexts. Such collaboration strengthens learners' capacity to practice responsible decision-making beyond classroom instruction and contributes to the formation of morally responsible and socially engaged citizens.

Overall, the study concludes that cultivating ethical decision-making requires an integrated educational approach that combines authentic teacher leadership, reflective pedagogy, learner-centered instruction, contextualized character education, and meaningful school-family-community collaboration. The proposed Ethical Decision-Making and Character Development Framework (EDCDF) serves as a comprehensive model for strengthening Values Education programs and promoting holistic learner development within Philippine secondary schools.

Educational Implications

The findings of this study offer significant implications for educational practice, curriculum development, teacher preparation, and educational leadership. First, schools should recognize that Values Education is not an isolated learning area but an integral component of holistic education that contributes to learners' cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development. Consequently, school administrators should strengthen institutional support for character education by integrating ethical values into school policies, co-curricular activities, leadership programs, and everyday school culture.

Second, the findings highlight the need for continuous professional development programs that equip Values Education teachers with innovative pedagogical strategies for facilitating ethical reflection, moral reasoning, digital citizenship, conflict resolution, restorative practices, and learner-centered instruction. Teacher training institutions and educational leaders should provide opportunities for educators to enhance their competencies in character education, ethical leadership, and adolescent moral development.

Third, curriculum developers may utilize the findings to further enrich the MATATAG Curriculum by strengthening interdisciplinary integration of ethical decision-making, civic responsibility, environmental stewardship, digital citizenship, and social-emotional learning across learning areas. Character education should not be confined solely to Values Education but should become a shared responsibility among all subject teachers.

Fourth, the study underscores the importance of strengthening school-family-community partnerships in sustaining character formation. Educational institutions should establish structured parent engagement programs, community service initiatives, mentoring activities, and collaborative projects that reinforce ethical values consistently across home, school, and community settings.

Finally, policymakers may utilize the proposed framework in designing institutional programs that promote ethical leadership, learner well-being, responsible citizenship, and holistic education aligned with the goals of the Department of Education and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. For School Administrators

School leaders should institutionalize comprehensive character education programs by integrating ethical leadership initiatives, school-wide values campaigns, restorative discipline approaches, and learner well-being programs that reinforce positive school culture. Administrative support should also include providing instructional resources, mentoring opportunities, and professional learning communities for Values Education teachers.

2. For Values Education Teachers

Teachers should continue adopting learner-centered pedagogies that promote reflective thinking, moral reasoning, experiential learning, collaborative problem-solving, and authentic ethical discussions. They should likewise serve as consistent role models who demonstrate integrity, fairness, empathy, and professionalism in all aspects of school life.

3. For Parents and Community Stakeholders

Parents, community leaders, and local organizations should actively collaborate with schools by reinforcing positive values at home, participating in school activities, supporting community outreach programs, and modeling ethical behavior that complements classroom instruction.

4. For Curriculum Developers and the Department of Education

The Department of Education should strengthen curriculum integration of ethical decision-making, digital citizenship, emotional intelligence, peace education, environmental ethics, and

responsible leadership across all learning areas. Additional instructional materials and teacher training modules focusing on contemporary moral issues should also be developed.

5. For Future Researchers

Future qualitative researchers may replicate this study in public secondary schools, senior high schools, faith-based educational institutions, indigenous communities, and higher education institutions to compare experiences across different educational contexts. Mixed-methods and longitudinal studies may also be conducted to examine the long-term influence of Values Education on learners' ethical behavior, civic engagement, and leadership development.

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