

Designing Ethics Education for Secondary Students: A Comparative Study between Indonesia and China

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Abstract: This study examines how ethics education for secondary students is designed and implemented across contrasting socio-cultural and policy contexts and develops a context-sensitive yet transferable design model through a comparative analysis of Indonesia and China. Addressing the limited cross-national research on ethics education design, the study employs a qualitative comparative case study involving four secondary schools in East Java and Bali (Indonesia) and Qingdao and Chongqing (China). Data were collected through online in-depth interviews with principals and teachers, virtual classroom observations, and analyses of curriculum and policy documents. The data were analyzed thematically and across cases to identify convergences and divergences in principles, pedagogical practices, and institutional orientations. The findings indicate that ethics education in Indonesia is primarily grounded in religious values and local wisdom traditions that emphasize moral character, communal harmony, and spiritual responsibility, whereas in China it is structured within civic-moral education frameworks closely aligned with national policies, highlighting discipline, social order, and collective responsibility. Despite these differing normative foundations, both systems demonstrate pedagogical convergence through dialogic learning, reflective discussions, and experiential approaches, such as life-based and project-based activities, which foster students' empathy, social responsibility, and self-discipline. The novelty of this study lies in the development of an integrative ethics education design model that bridges religiously grounded and state-driven moral frameworks while remaining adaptable across contexts. The study contributes theoretically by conceptualizing ethics education as a design-oriented process that connects local moral grounding, reflexive pedagogy, and cross-boundary learning experiences. Practically, it offers actionable guidance for policymakers, curriculum designers, and teachers seeking culturally responsive yet globally relevant approaches to ethics education.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana desain dan implementasi pendidikan etika bagi siswa sekolah menengah dibentuk oleh perbedaan konteks sosio-kultural dan kebijakan, serta mengembangkan model desain yang peka konteks namun tetap adaptif melalui studi komparatif antara Indonesia dan China. Untuk menjawab keterbatasan penelitian lintas negara mengenai desain pendidikan etika, penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi kasus komparatif



kualitatif pada empat sekolah menengah di Jawa Timur dan Bali (Indonesia) serta Qingdao dan Chongqing (China). Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam daring dengan kepala sekolah dan guru, observasi kelas virtual, serta analisis dokumen kurikulum dan kebijakan, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik dan lintas kasus untuk mengidentifikasi persamaan dan perbedaan prinsip, praktik pedagogis, dan orientasi institusional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan etika di Indonesia berakar pada nilai-nilai religius dan kearifan lokal yang menekankan pembentukan karakter, harmoni komunal, dan tanggung jawab spiritual, sedangkan di China terstruktur dalam kerangka pendidikan moral-kewargaan yang selaras dengan kebijakan negara, dengan penekanan pada disiplin, keteraturan sosial, dan tanggung jawab kolektif. Meskipun memiliki landasan normatif yang berbeda, kedua sistem menunjukkan konvergensi pedagogis melalui pembelajaran dialogis, refleksi kritis, serta pendekatan berbasis pengalaman seperti proyek dan aktivitas kehidupan nyata yang efektif menumbuhkan empati, tanggung jawab sosial, dan kedisiplinan diri siswa. Kebaruan penelitian ini terletak pada pengembangan model desain pendidikan etika yang integratif, yang menjembatani pendekatan religius dan berbasis negara serta adaptif di berbagai konteks. Secara teoretis, studi ini merekonseptualisasi pendidikan etika sebagai proses desain yang menghubungkan landasan moral lokal, pedagogi reflektif, dan pengalaman lintas batas. Secara praktis, hasil penelitian memberikan panduan aplikatif bagi pembuat kebijakan, perancang kurikulum, dan guru dalam mengembangkan pendidikan etika yang responsif terhadap budaya sekaligus relevan secara global.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and intensified globalization has introduced new ethical challenges into the daily lives of secondary school students, particularly in how they navigate information, social relationships, and identity across both online and offline environments. Adolescents are increasingly exposed to moral dilemmas such as cyberbullying, misinformation, digital dishonesty, and declining social empathy, all of which influence their moral reasoning and behavior (Kusuma et al., 2021; Zhai et al., 2025; Schneider et al., 2021; Patricia Diane Mouboua et al., 2024). These developments have renewed the urgency of character and ethics education that not only regulates conduct but also cultivates students' capacities for critical moral judgment, empathy, and responsible participation in plural and democratic societies (Kristjánsson, 2018; Shi, L.; Chen, L.; Gong, 2023). Within this context, schools are increasingly expected to serve as strategic sites for shaping students' moral orientations in ways that respond simultaneously to local cultural values and global ethical demands (UNESCO, 2023).

Indonesia and China provide a compelling basis for comparative inquiry into ethics education because both educational systems prioritize values-based learning while relying on distinct normative and institutional foundations. In Indonesia,

ethics education is strongly grounded in religious teachings and local wisdom embedded in community traditions, cultural norms, and everyday school practices (Padmadewi & Artini, 2020; Suyadi et al., 2021; Ramendra, 2025). Moral learning is commonly integrated into religious subjects, character education programs, and school culture, which makes ethics education highly contextual and closely connected to students' lived experiences (Ratminingsih, NM, 2020; Parhan et al., 2023; Annisha, 2024). By contrast, ethics education in China is structured within civic and moral education frameworks that are closely aligned with national policies and ideological objectives. Moral formation in Chinese secondary schools emphasizes civic responsibility, social harmony, and discipline through standardized curricula and systematic policy implementation (Lee & Ho, 2005; Knapp, 2023). Although the two countries differ in their normative foundations, both face similar pressures to prepare young people for participation in increasingly diverse, digitally mediated, and globally interconnected societies.

Existing research on ethics, moral, and civic education in both Indonesia and China has largely focused on documenting curricular frameworks, policy orientations, and classroom practices within individual national contexts (Utami et al., 2019; Mańkowska, 2019; Fitzgerald et al., 2024). While these studies provide valuable descriptive insights, they rarely adopt a comparative perspective that systematically examines how socio-cultural, religious, and policy dimensions interact to shape the pedagogical design of ethics education across different systems (Kristjánsson, 2018; Izzah & Hanip, 2018). Furthermore, limited attention has been given to translating comparative findings into a coherent design framework that offers practical and theoretical guidance for educators. As a consequence, ethics education is often treated as a set of isolated practices rather than as an intentionally structured design process. This gap highlights the need for research that moves beyond national descriptions and develops transferable principles for designing ethics education that is both locally grounded and adaptable across contexts (Lee & Ho, 2005; UNESCO, 2023).

Responding to this need, the present study investigates the design of ethics education for secondary students in Indonesia and China from a design-oriented perspective. Rather than merely comparing outcomes or policies, the study examines how normative foundations, pedagogical approaches, and socio-cultural contexts interact to shape the organization of ethical learning in schools. Particular attention is given to the roles of Islamic education, local wisdom, and civic and moral frameworks in structuring students' moral development. Through this approach, the study seeks to move beyond descriptive comparison and to formulate a conceptual and practical model that can inform the systematic design of ethics education across diverse educational environments.

Conceptually, ethics education in secondary schools can be understood as a deliberate pedagogical process aimed at fostering students' moral reasoning, ethical awareness, and socially responsible behavior (Kristjánsson, 2018; Taplin et al., 2021). Contemporary perspectives emphasize that ethics education extends beyond rote moral instruction to include the development of moral judgment, perspective taking, and reflective practice. Ethical competence emerges through both cognitive and affective engagement with moral dilemmas, enabling students to articulate values and evaluate the consequences of their actions within varied social contexts

(Lilja et al., 2023). Within formal schooling, ethics education is implemented through integrated curricula in which subjects such as history, language, and religion create opportunities for ethical discourse, supported by co-curricular activities that reinforce moral conduct in everyday life (Franchak & Yu, 2022). This shift reflects a broader movement away from simple value transmission toward the cultivation of critical moral agency among students.

In socio-cultural contexts such as Indonesia, moral education is deeply infused with religious doctrines and local wisdom, which shape how ethical principles are interpreted and practiced in schools. Islamic education and community-based cultural values form the foundation of character education programs that emphasize virtues such as compassion, collective harmony, and spiritual responsibility (Parhan et al., 2023). Local wisdom embedded in indigenous traditions aligns moral norms with students' daily experiences and reinforces ethical learning through communal narratives and rituals. From this perspective, moral development is understood as situated within lived social practices rather than as an abstract or purely theoretical construct (Schneider et al., 2021).

Conversely, in China moral education is implemented through civic and moral frameworks that are closely aligned with national policies and ideological goals. Government policy documents emphasize collectivism, social harmony, and civic responsibility as central virtues that structure secondary school curricula (Lee & Ho, 2005; Shi, L.; Chen, L.; Gong, 2023). Traditional ethical teachings are integrated with state directives, positioning civic virtue and social order as key outcomes of schooling. Moral education therefore functions not only as classroom instruction but also as a coordinated national strategy aimed at cultivating socially cohesive citizens who internalize shared norms and expectations (Gavrilets & Richerson, 2017). These contrasting orientations demonstrate that ethics education is inherently shaped by socio-cultural and policy contexts.

Pedagogically, dialogic approaches are widely recognized as essential for developing students' moral understanding. Dialogic pedagogy emphasizes meaningful dialogue and deliberative interaction, enabling students to articulate perspectives, question assumptions, and negotiate moral meanings collaboratively (Mitra, 2018). Such learning environments promote empathy, critical thinking, and mutual respect, which are necessary for functioning in plural and democratic societies (Mercer & Howe, 2012). Research indicates that structured discussions, reflective writing, and inquiry-based learning strengthen students' moral agency and enhance their ability to apply ethical principles across diverse situations (Suarcaya, 2017; Sarifah & Rojabi, 2024).

Complementing dialogic strategies, experiential approaches such as life-based and project-based learning situate ethical reflection within authentic contexts. These approaches engage students with real-world problems and help bridge the gap between abstract moral principles and concrete behavior (Abitolkha et al., 2020; Satria et al., 2024). Activities such as community service, collaborative projects, and participatory school governance allow students to practice responsibility, empathy, and civic engagement in meaningful ways. When combined with dialogic interaction, experiential learning has been shown to enhance moral

reasoning and support sustained ethical development (Kristjánsson, 2018; Suyadi et al., 2021).

From a comparative education perspective, examining Indonesia and China together enables a deeper understanding of how ethics education is shaped simultaneously by cultural traditions and political structures (Crossley & Watson, 2003). Indonesia's pluralistic and religion-based orientation contrasts with China's policy-driven civic model, yet both systems reveal complementary insights into how moral learning can be organized and enacted. Cross-national comparison therefore makes it possible to identify both divergences and convergences in pedagogical practices and to formulate adaptable design principles that respect local identities while addressing shared global challenges. Such analysis provides a strong foundation for developing ethics education models that are context-sensitive, theoretically grounded, and practically applicable across diverse educational settings.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative comparative case study design to explore the design of ethics education within real-life educational contexts across different cultural and institutional settings. A qualitative case study is particularly suitable for investigating complex social and pedagogical phenomena because it allows researchers to examine processes, meanings, and contextual influences in depth rather than isolating variables (Miles, 2014; Patten, 2018). The comparative orientation enabled the systematic identification of similarities and differences in ethics education systems, pedagogical practices, and contextual factors between Indonesia and China while preserving the integrity and uniqueness of each case. Qualitative case comparisons are widely used in educational research to generate rich, contextualized insights and to support theory development grounded in empirical evidence (Harrison et al., 2017). Similar approaches have been adopted in studies of moral and character education to examine how values and pedagogies operate across national settings (Wang & Feng, 2023), making this design appropriate for the present investigation.

The study was conducted in four secondary schools located in two regions in Indonesia and two regions in China. East Java and Bali were selected to represent distinct cultural and religious landscapes that shape approaches to ethics and character education, with East Java reflecting plural urban contexts and Bali representing a Hindu-majority community with strong local traditions (Sumardjoko, 2018). In China, Qingdao, a coastal city in Shandong Province, and Chongqing, a major urban municipality, were chosen to capture variations in regional policy implementation and school culture within the national civic and moral education framework (Cheng, 2019). Two schools were selected in each country through purposive sampling based on their active implementation of ethics-related subjects and the presence of teachers directly responsible for moral, religious, or civic education. This sampling strategy ensured that participants possessed relevant knowledge and experience regarding the design and implementation of ethics education.

Participants consisted of four school principals and eight teachers who were directly involved in designing, supervising, or delivering ethics-related instruction. Their roles enabled them to provide insights into both institutional policy orientation and classroom-level practices. All participating institutions and individuals were anonymized to protect confidentiality. Pseudonyms and role-based codes were used, with identifiers indicating participants' positions and national contexts, such as Principal-ID1 or Teacher-CN1. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and ethical considerations regarding privacy and voluntary participation were strictly observed throughout the study.

Data collection was conducted over a three-month period from July to September 2025 using multiple qualitative techniques to enable methodological triangulation. Online in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted via videoconferencing platforms to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and reflections on ethics education (Wakelin et al., 2024). Interviews were audio and video recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. When necessary, transcripts were translated into English and carefully reviewed to preserve the original meaning. In addition, non-participant classroom observations were carried out to document teacher–student interactions, instructional strategies, and the integration of moral content during lessons. Eight lessons ranging from forty-five to ninety minutes were observed using structured observation protocols. Curriculum and policy documents, including syllabi, teaching materials, and school guidelines, were also collected and analyzed to provide contextual and institutional evidence regarding the formal design of ethics education. Follow-up communication by email was conducted to clarify interpretations and confirm the accuracy of the data.

Data analysis followed a thematic and comparative procedure aimed at identifying patterns, divergences, and contextual nuances in ethics education design across cases. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded both inductively to capture emerging themes and deductively based on concepts derived from ethics education literature. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify core categories related to pedagogical approaches, value orientations, and contextual influences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were then organized into broader themes through iterative comparison and constant refinement. Subsequently, cross-case analysis was undertaken using comparative matrices to examine convergences and divergences between Indonesian and Chinese contexts. This systematic process enabled the development of a context-sensitive and transferable design framework for ethics education (Ishtiaq, 2019).

The trustworthiness of the study was addressed through strategies consistent with qualitative research standards. Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of interviews, observations, and document analysis, as well as member checking in which participants reviewed preliminary interpretations to confirm accuracy. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of research sites, participants, and socio-cultural settings to allow readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts. Dependability was enhanced through the maintenance of an audit trail documenting methodological decisions, coding procedures, and analytic memos, alongside regular peer debriefing within the research team to ensure consistency and transparency in interpretation (Shi, L.; Chen, L.; Gong, 2023).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Addressing the first research question, this section analyzes the core ethical principles and pedagogical approaches that shape the design of ethics education in secondary schools in Indonesia and China. The analysis draws on curriculum structures, classroom practices, and teachers' instructional strategies to explain how ethical learning is organized and enacted within each national context. Rather than merely describing practices, the findings highlight how normative foundations, institutional orientations, and pedagogical processes interact to produce distinct yet partially convergent models of ethics education.

In Indonesian secondary schools, ethics education is closely linked to religious values and to the state's formal recognition of six official religions, namely Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Moral formation is primarily institutionalized through the subject *Pendidikan Agama dan Budi Pekerti*, which functions as the main vehicle for character and ethical instruction across religious groups. Within this subject, moral concepts such as *Akhlaq*, honesty, compassion, and social responsibility are emphasized as core learning outcomes. The multi-faith structure of the curriculum shapes the moral language, rituals, and expectations embedded in everyday school life, indicating that ethics education operates not only at the cognitive level but also through habitual practice. This integration of religion and daily routines was explicitly articulated by a principal who stated, *"Ethics education in our school cannot be separated from religious teaching. Moral values such as honesty, discipline, and responsibility are always connected to religious principles and practiced through daily routines, not only explained in class"* (Principal-ID1, East Java). This account suggests that ethical learning is embedded in lived experience rather than delivered solely through formal instruction.

Findings from East Java and Bali demonstrate how this national framework is interpreted through different local cultures. In East Java, ethics education is strongly influenced by Islamic educational traditions and pesantren-oriented school cultures. Qur'anic teachings, prophetic examples, and Sufi-inspired morality are used to cultivate discipline, respect, and social responsibility. These influences extend beyond explicitly Islamic institutions and shape broader school norms. In Bali, ethics education is informed primarily by Hindu teachings and Balinese cultural practices. Concepts such as *Tri Kaya Parisudha* are translated into classroom discussions and ceremonial activities to encourage consistency between thoughts, words, and actions. A teacher explained this translation of religious concepts into pedagogy, stating, *"In Bali, ethical values are taught through Hindu concepts like Tri Kaya Parisudha. Students learn that good thoughts, words, and actions must be consistent, and this is applied in classroom discussions and school ceremonies"* (Teacher-ID2, Bali). These findings indicate that religious traditions function as practical pedagogical resources that structure everyday ethical behavior.

Across both provinces, teachers incorporate local wisdom such as *Gotong royong*, communal harmony, and respect for elders into dialogic and reflective learning activities. Strategies including moral case discussions, storytelling,

reflective journals, and community service projects allow students to enact values in concrete situations. This pattern demonstrates that ethics education in Indonesia operates as an integrated design that combines religious instruction, cultural practices, and experiential learning. At the same time, the data reveal tensions in implementing predominantly religion-based approaches within socially diverse environments, suggesting the need for adaptive and inclusive pedagogies.

Table 1. Ethics Education Design in Indonesia Secondary Schools

Dimension	Key Characteristics
Normative foundations	Based on six official religions: Islam, Christianity (Protestant), Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism.
Core subject	<i>"Pendidikan Agama dan Budi Pekerti"</i> as the main carrier of moral and character education in all secondary schools.
Central moral values	<i>Akhlaq</i> , honesty, compassion, discipline, social responsibility, and interreligious respect as stated learning goals.
Provincial patterns	East Java: strong Islamic and pesantren influence; Bali: Hindu-based ethics and Balinese cultural traditions.
Role of local wisdom	<i>Gotong royong</i> , respect for elders, and communal harmony used to contextualize and reinforce religious ethics.
Pedagogical approaches	Dialogic discussion, moral case analysis, storytelling, reflective journals, and value-oriented classroom dialogue.
Experiential activities	Community service, social projects, and school rituals that translate ethical teachings into daily practice.
Policy orientation	Integrates religious-local values with state-driven character and civic education objectives in the national curriculum

Table 1 demonstrates that ethics education in Indonesian secondary schools is organized as a culturally embedded system that integrates religious, communal, and institutional dimensions into a unified moral framework.

In contrast, ethics education in Chinese secondary schools is structured primarily within a civic and moral education framework aligned with national policies and ideological objectives. Although several religions are officially recognized, moral education is predominantly delivered through state-regulated subjects such as *Morality and the Rule of Law* and *Ideology and Politics*, which connect individual character formation to social stability and national cohesion. Teachers consistently described their practice as closely following national curriculum guidelines. One teacher explained, *"Moral education is part of the national curriculum, so we follow clear guidelines. In class, we focus on helping students understand their responsibilities as members of society and the importance of discipline and cooperation"* (Teacher-CN1, Qingdao). This statement indicates a more standardized and policy-driven orientation compared to the locally differentiated Indonesian model.

Observations from Qingdao and Chongqing show that this framework is enacted through structured lessons, clear behavioral rules, and collective activities designed to cultivate discipline and civic commitment. In Qingdao, school-wide routines emphasize order and collective honor, while in Chongqing patriotic education, volunteer programs, and themed civic initiatives connect moral learning to community participation. A principal described this institutional approach, stating, *“Ethics education here is not only taught in lessons but also through school rules and collective activities. Ceremonies and community service are important ways to cultivate students’ moral awareness”* (Principal-CN2, Chongqing). These findings suggest that moral socialization occurs through institutional structures and routines as much as through classroom teaching.

Table 2. Ethics Education Design in Chinese Secondary Schools

Dimension	Key Characteristics
Normative foundations	Based on six official religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism.
Moral foundations	Civic–moral education emphasizing collective values, social harmony, and civic responsibility
Ideological orientation	Ethics education framed as an integral component of citizenship education aligned with national ideology
Policy alignment	Strong alignment with state policies and national curricular standards
Curriculum regulation	National guidelines define moral learning outcomes, instructional content, and assessment criteria
Pedagogical approaches	Guided discussions on civic duties, use of moral exemplars, and teacher-directed instruction
Moral socialization	Collective learning activities, school routines, assemblies, and recognition of exemplary behavior
Targeted ethical outcomes	Discipline, civic responsibility, respect for authority, and commitment to collective goals

Table 2 indicates that ethics education in China is characterized by institutional coherence, where curriculum, pedagogy, and policy operate in close alignment to support systematic civic and moral formation.

Despite these contrasting normative foundations, the cross-case analysis reveals important pedagogical convergence. Both contexts employ dialogic teaching approaches that encourage discussion, reflection, and ethical reasoning, as well as experiential strategies that connect moral principles with everyday practice. Indonesian students engage in community-based projects rooted in local values, while Chinese students participate in group-based civic and service activities. Teachers in both settings emphasized that active participation enhances students’ moral understanding. As noted by one Indonesian teacher, *“Students understand ethical values better when they discuss real-life cases. Dialogue helps them reflect on their own behavior instead of just memorizing moral rules”* (Teacher-ID3, East Java).

Similarly, a Chinese teacher stated, “*Group discussions and projects allow students to practice moral values together. Through teamwork, they learn responsibility and respect for others*” (Teacher-CN3, Chongqing). These accounts suggest that dialogic and experiential practices function as shared mechanisms for translating moral knowledge into action.

Table 3. Converging Pedagogical Practices in Ethics Education across Indonesia and China

Pedagogical Dimension	Indonesia	China	Shared Pedagogical Features
Dialogic teaching	Dialogic discussions grounded in religious texts and local moral issues	Guided discussions focused on civic duties and moral scenarios	Encouragement of moral dialogue, reflection, and articulation of ethical perspectives
Experiential learning	Life-based and community-oriented projects linked to local values	Project-based and group activities related to civic responsibility and social service	Application of ethical principles through real-world experiences
Learning orientation	Contextual and community-based moral engagement	Collective and institutionally structured moral engagement	Bridging moral knowledge with moral action
Learning activities	Reflective journals, moral case discussions, community service	Group projects, moral exemplars, civic participation	Reflection, collaboration, and guided practice
Ethical competencies developed	Social responsibility, empathy, moral awareness	Discipline, social responsibility, civic commitment	Social responsibility, empathy, and self-discipline

As summarized in Table 3, ethics education in Indonesia and China converges at the pedagogical level despite differences in moral foundations and institutional structures. Dialogic and experiential approaches serve as common strategies for cultivating ethical competencies, indicating that distinct normative systems can generate comparable developmental outcomes. This convergence highlights the potential for cross-context transfer of effective ethics education design principles.

DISCUSSION

Addressing the first research question, the findings indicate that ethics education in Indonesia and China is shaped by distinct normative foundations that influence both curriculum organization and pedagogical practice (Satria et al., 2024). In Indonesian secondary schools, ethics education is closely associated with religious traditions and the state’s recognition of six official religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Ethical formation is institutionalized primarily through the subject *Pendidikan Agama dan*

Budi Pekerti, which integrates religious doctrine with character education and everyday school routines. Moral concepts such as *Akhlaq*, honesty, compassion, and social responsibility are treated not merely as abstract knowledge but as lived values reinforced through rituals, habits, and communal activities. The multi-faith structure of schooling allows Islamic, Christian, Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian perspectives to shape the moral language and expectations of school life, reflecting the broader religious diversity of Indonesian society (Larson, 2024; Wahid, 2024; Suryani & Muslim, 2024). This configuration positions ethics education as a culturally embedded process in which moral learning emerges from students' participation in shared religious and community practices.

At the regional level, the Indonesian case demonstrates how national frameworks are interpreted through local traditions. In East Java, ethics education is strongly influenced by Islamic educational cultures and *pesantren* traditions that emphasize discipline, respect, and spiritual responsibility. In Bali, Hindu teachings and Balinese cultural norms inform ethical instruction through concepts such as *Tri Kaya Parisudha*, which encourage harmony between thought, speech, and action. Across both contexts, local wisdom practices such as *Gotong royong*, communal cooperation, and respect for elders are incorporated into classroom dialogue, storytelling, reflection, and community service (Ma'arif et al., 2022; Barrier, 2025). These findings suggest that ethics education in Indonesia operates as an integrated moral ecology in which religious beliefs, cultural values, and experiential learning reinforce one another. At the same time, the reliance on religion-based approaches within plural settings reveals ongoing tensions related to inclusivity and diversity, indicating the need for flexible and dialogic pedagogies.

In contrast, ethics education in Chinese secondary schools is structured primarily through civic and moral education frameworks aligned with state policies and national ideological objectives. Moral learning is embedded in subjects such as "Morality and the Rule of Law" and "Ideology and Politics," which explicitly connect individual character development to social stability, collective responsibility, and national cohesion (Tang, 2021; Shi et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2025). Rather than relying on localized religious traditions, the Chinese system emphasizes standardized curricula, institutional routines, and collective activities that socialize students into shared civic norms. School ceremonies, behavioral regulations, public recognition of exemplary conduct, and participation in community service function as systematic mechanisms for moral socialization (FAO, 2018). This alignment between curriculum, policy, and institutional practice reflects a centralized and policy-driven design in which ethics education is conceived as an instrument for citizenship formation and social order.

Although the Indonesian and Chinese systems differ significantly in their normative and institutional foundations, the comparative analysis reveals a notable convergence at the pedagogical level (Chávez Santos et al., 2025). Both contexts employ dialogic teaching strategies, reflective discussion, and experiential learning activities to translate ethical principles into practice. Students are encouraged to analyze moral dilemmas, participate in collaborative projects, and engage in real-life service activities that connect ethical knowledge with concrete behavior. This convergence indicates that effective ethics education depends less on the specific ideological source of values and more on how those values are enacted through

participatory and meaningful learning experiences. In both countries, moral competencies such as empathy, social responsibility, and self-discipline develop through interaction, practice, and reflection rather than through passive memorization of norms.

These findings challenge the common dichotomy that positions religiously grounded and state-driven moral education as fundamentally incompatible approaches. Instead, the evidence suggests that they represent alternative pathways toward similar educational outcomes. When supported by dialogic engagement and experiential practice, both models can foster comparable ethical dispositions among students (Mercer & Howe, 2012; Alghamdi & Malekan, 2020). Ethics education therefore emerges not simply as a process of moral transmission but as a process of moral formation shaped by the interaction between values, pedagogy, and everyday social practice. This interpretation aligns with contemporary perspectives in character and moral education that emphasize active meaning-making and student agency as central to ethical development.

Responding to the third research question, the study conceptualizes ethics education as a design-oriented process that intentionally aligns contextual values, pedagogical mediation, and experiential opportunities (Kohler, 2015; Gosavi & Arora, 2022). The synthesis of findings leads to the development of a contextual yet cross-context adaptable model that integrates local moral grounding, reflexive pedagogy, and cross-boundary learning experiences. Grounding ethics education in students' cultural and religious environments enhances relevance and authenticity, while reflexive practices such as dialogue, inquiry, and critical reflection enable students to interpret and evaluate moral choices. Exposure to cross-boundary experiences further expands students' perspectives by introducing diverse viewpoints and ethical challenges beyond their immediate communities (Ahmad, 2025). Together, these elements support the development of flexible and transferable moral competencies suited to plural, digital, and global societies.

plays a more decisive role in shaping students' ethical competencies. By introducing a context-sensitive yet transferable ethics education design model that integrates local moral grounding, reflexive pedagogy, and cross-boundary learning experiences, this study advances a new conceptual lens for understanding how ethics education can be structured across culturally diverse settings (Ouyang et al., 2025).

Beyond its conceptual contribution, this study also provides important theoretical and practical implications for the broader field of ethics and character education. Theoretically, it extends existing scholarship by synthesizing comparative education, moral pedagogy, and design-based thinking into a coherent framework that links values, instructional strategies, and lived experiences (Maulidiah et al., 2023). Practically, it offers actionable guidance for policymakers, curriculum developers, and teachers by demonstrating how ethics education can remain culturally responsive while fostering competencies relevant to plural, digital, and global societies (Theeuwes et al., 2025). By bridging local specificity with cross-context adaptability, the study contributes a transferable foundation for future research and practice, supporting the development of ethics education models that are both contextually meaningful and internationally relevant.

CONCLUSION

This study examined and compared the design of ethics education for secondary students in Indonesia and China by analyzing how socio-cultural, religious, and policy contexts shape the organization of moral learning within schools. The findings reveal that the influence of contextual foundations on ethics education is more substantial than previously assumed. In Indonesia, ethics education is deeply rooted in religious traditions and local wisdom, while in China it is systematically structured through civic and moral education frameworks aligned with state policies. Although these foundations differ considerably, both systems demonstrate similar pedagogical patterns through dialogic interaction, experiential learning, and collective practice. These shared strategies were found to have a stronger impact on students' moral development than expected, fostering empathy, social responsibility, and self-discipline across contexts. This evidence challenges the common assumption that religiously grounded and state-driven approaches necessarily produce divergent outcomes and instead opens new discussions about the possibility of complementary pathways toward similar ethical competencies.

From a scientific perspective, this study contributes to the field of ethics and character education by extending prior research on moral education and questioning the view that ethical learning is determined primarily by ideological foundations alone. By integrating comparative evidence from two contrasting systems, the study introduces a design-oriented conceptualization of ethics education and proposes a flexible ethics education design model that links local moral grounding, reflexive pedagogy, and cross-boundary learning experiences. This model enriches scholarly debates by offering a new framework that connects normative values with pedagogical enactment and provides a transferable structure for analyzing and designing ethics education across cultural settings.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted with a relatively small sample and focused on specific case schools, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Variations related to participant diversity, including gender, age, and broader socio-demographic factors, were not examined in depth. In addition, the qualitative design emphasizes contextual interpretation rather than statistical representation. Future research should therefore involve larger and more diverse samples, incorporate additional cultural contexts, and employ longitudinal approaches to better understand students' ethical development over time. Further studies that foreground students' voices and explore ethics education in digital and global environments are also recommended to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how ethical competencies are formed in contemporary societies.

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