

ETHICS AND EDUCATION: RECLAIMING THE MORAL PURPOSE OF SCHOOLING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Dr. Donatus C. Ukulor (Rev.Fr.)
Department of Foundation and Arts Education
e.mail: donatus.ukulor@iaue.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper examines ethics and education: reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling in contemporary society through a critical, literature-based analysis. It addresses the central philosophical and social problem by clarifying key concepts, reviewing relevant theoretical perspectives, and organising the discussion around schooling as a moral practice, virtue, rules and moral judgement, care, relationships and dignity. The paper argues that the issue should not be understood through narrow causal or measurement language alone; it requires attention to values, institutions, professional judgement and the Nigerian context. The synthesis shows that durable educational and social outcomes depend on coherent relationships among ideas, practices and institutional conditions. Practical implications are developed for policy, professional practice and further scholarly debate. The paper concludes that a context-sensitive, ethically defensible and analytically integrated approach provides a stronger basis for action than isolated technical interventions.

INTRODUCTION

Education has traditionally been understood as more than the acquisition of knowledge and occupational skills. At its deepest level, schooling is concerned with the formation of persons who are capable of thinking critically, relating responsibly with others, making sound judgments and contributing meaningfully to the communities in which they live. Biesta (2020) argues that education has multiple purposes involving qualification, socialisation and subjectification, suggesting that the value of schooling cannot be adequately captured by examination results or economic productivity alone. Recent scholarship similarly maintains that questions concerning what students should become, what values they should acquire and what kind of society education should support are inseparable from the purposes of education itself (Coelho et al., 2025).

The ethical dimension of education has become particularly important in a period characterised by rapid technological change, social fragmentation, misinformation, inequality and declining confidence in public institutions. Schools are expected to prepare young people for increasingly complex social and economic environments while also helping them distinguish between responsible and irresponsible uses of knowledge. The expansion of artificial intelligence and digital technologies, for example, has intensified questions about academic integrity, responsibility, privacy, fairness and human judgment. Education therefore cannot reasonably remain concerned only with what learners know or can do; it must also address how they use knowledge and what principles guide their decisions. Webber (2022) argues that contemporary education should cultivate ethical integrity, enabling learners to respond to new circumstances while critically examining and refining their ethical commitments.

Despite this broader responsibility, contemporary schooling is frequently shaped by performance indicators, examination outcomes, employability, competitiveness and measurable academic achievement. These priorities are not inherently undesirable, since knowledge and competence remain essential purposes of education. The problem arises when they become so dominant that the moral and civic dimensions of schooling are treated as secondary. Biesta (2020) cautions against reducing education to the language of learning alone because such a

reduction can obscure fundamental questions about what learners should learn, why they should learn it and what kind of persons they are expected to become. Similarly, Peterson (2020) argues that character education should not be understood merely as an individual exercise in developing desirable traits but should also be connected to political and social life.

Moral and character education provide important foundations for restoring this wider understanding of schooling. Contemporary scholarship identifies qualities such as honesty, responsibility, justice, respect, compassion, self-control, integrity and practical wisdom as important dimensions of moral development. Hatchimonji et al. (2020), for instance, connect character development with *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, through which individuals learn to determine what is appropriate, why it is appropriate and how to act responsibly in particular circumstances. Pike et al. (2021) similarly found that curriculum-based character education can strengthen students' understanding of virtues, demonstrating that moral development can be deliberately supported through educational practice rather than left entirely to chance. McGrath et al. (2021) further show that character education encompasses a range of interconnected dimensions rather than a single universally agreed conception, reinforcing the need for thoughtful rather than superficial approaches to moral formation.

The moral purpose of schooling also extends beyond individual character to relationships and the creation of a just educational community. Ethics of care scholarship emphasises that education is fundamentally relational because learning takes place through interactions among teachers, students, families and wider communities. Bennett (2023) argues that care ethics requires educators to recognise and respond appropriately to the needs of learners, while Vallejos Silva and Cortés Rojas (2024) demonstrate the importance of teachers' caring practices to both learning and the social fabric of schools. Jackson (2025) further warns that schools may describe themselves as caring institutions while simultaneously reproducing practices centred on individualism, competition and meritocracy. These arguments suggest that moral education cannot be reduced to a lesson about good behaviour; it must be reflected in how schools organise authority, discipline, relationships, inclusion and participation.

The issue is especially significant within societies confronting persistent concerns about corruption, dishonesty, violence, intolerance and weakened civic responsibility. Nigerian scholarship has similarly identified moral and character development as an important responsibility of schooling. Aboluwodi and Akinsanoye (2019) argue that character education can promote virtues such as self-control, honesty, trustworthiness, tolerance and discipline among young people, while Uwaezuoke (2020) links ethics and moral education with the development of individuals who are capable of contributing responsibly to national development. More recent Nigerian evidence also suggests that character education can contribute to students' moral values by encouraging ethical decision-making, empathy and responsible conduct (Fayemi & Adediran, 2025).

However, reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling should not mean imposing a narrow or authoritarian conception of morality. Moral education must allow learners to reason, question, deliberate and participate in the formation of their ethical understanding. Conroy (2021) observes that moral education continues to confront questions about coherence and direction, particularly within societies experiencing political tensions, social divisions and rapid change. Likewise, recent work on participatory character education argues for approaches that recognise young people as active moral agents rather than passive recipients of predetermined virtues (Arthur et al., 2022). Ethical education should therefore cultivate both moral commitment and moral judgment, enabling learners to examine competing claims, recognise the dignity of others and make responsible choices in situations where simple rules may not provide adequate answers.

The central argument of this paper is therefore that schooling should be understood as an ethical as well as intellectual enterprise. Academic knowledge, scientific competence, technological literacy and employability remain legitimate educational purposes, but they should operate within a broader conception of human flourishing, responsible citizenship and ethical agency. Education that produces highly skilled individuals without developing their capacity to use those skills responsibly risks separating intelligence from wisdom. Reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling consequently requires attention to curriculum, pedagogy, teacher conduct, school leadership, relationships, institutional culture and students' opportunities to exercise moral judgment. The task is not to return education to an idealised past, but to reconsider what schooling ought to accomplish in a society where knowledge and technological power increasingly carry significant ethical consequences.

Aim and Objectives of the Paper

The aim of this theoretical/opinion paper is to critically examine the ethical and moral purpose of schooling and argue for the reclamation of moral education as a central dimension of contemporary educational practice.

The paper seeks to:

- examine the concept of ethics and the moral purpose of education;
- analyse theoretical perspectives that explain the role of schooling in moral and character development;
- examine the changing purposes of schooling and the factors that have weakened its moral orientation;
- discuss the role of schools, teachers and educational practices in developing ethical character and responsible citizenship;
- examine contemporary ethical challenges that make moral education increasingly important;
- and
- propose ways of reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling within contemporary education.

Conceptualising Ethics and the Moral Purpose of Education

Ethics refers broadly to the systematic consideration of what ought to be regarded as right or wrong, good or harmful, just or unjust in human conduct. In education, ethics concerns not only the behaviour of learners but also the purposes, relationships, responsibilities and values that shape educational practice. It asks fundamental questions about what schools should value, what teachers owe their students, how learners should relate to one another, and what kind of person education ought to help an individual become. This makes ethics inseparable from the purpose of education because every educational system implicitly makes judgments about what knowledge is worth transmitting, which behaviours are desirable and what forms of human development should be encouraged. Biesta (2020), in his discussion of qualification, socialisation and subjectification, demonstrates why educational purposes cannot be reduced to learning outcomes alone. Education simultaneously equips individuals with knowledge and skills, introduces them into existing social and cultural practices, and supports their development as autonomous subjects capable of acting in the world.

Moral education refers to the deliberate and indirect processes through which learners develop moral understanding, values, dispositions and capacities for ethical judgment. It involves more than teaching students a prescribed list of virtues or rules. Effective moral education enables learners to understand moral concepts, reason about competing values, recognise the consequences of their actions and develop dispositions that support responsible conduct. McGrath et al. (2021) demonstrate that contemporary character education

encompasses diverse understandings of virtues and character, while Pike et al. (2021) provide empirical evidence that curriculum-based character education can improve students' understanding of virtues such as wisdom, integrity, self-control, justice and love. Their findings are important because they demonstrate that moral development can be intentionally supported through curriculum and pedagogy rather than being left entirely to informal socialisation.

The moral purpose of schooling extends this argument from individual moral development to the wider social function of education. A morally purposeful school seeks not merely to produce academically successful learners but persons capable of exercising judgment, accepting responsibility, respecting others and contributing to the common good. Such an understanding recognises that students will eventually occupy roles as workers, parents, professionals, citizens and community members, and that competence in these roles requires more than technical knowledge. Contemporary character education scholarship increasingly emphasises this relationship between individual virtue and collective flourishing. Kristjánsson et al. (2021), for example, argue that virtue education should be reconsidered in relation to collective action and the common good rather than treating virtues simply as private characteristics possessed by individuals.

This distinction becomes clearer when education is considered as both transmission and formation. Education as transmission is concerned with passing knowledge, information, concepts, skills, traditions and intellectual tools from one generation to another. This function is indispensable because individuals cannot participate meaningfully in society without acquiring language, disciplinary knowledge, cultural understanding and practical competencies. Yet education as formation asks a deeper question: what happens to the learner through the educational process? The concern shifts from what students know to how they think, what they value, how they treat others and how they exercise freedom and responsibility. Biesta's (2020) conception of subjectification is particularly relevant because it challenges educational thinking that treats students merely as recipients of predetermined learning outcomes. Education involves becoming a person capable of responsible action rather than simply accumulating measurable competencies.

The distinction is particularly significant in an era in which schools can increasingly measure educational performance through examinations, grades, competencies and digital learning data. Measurement can reveal important information about learning, but what is measurable is not necessarily identical to what is educationally valuable. Integrity, compassion, practical wisdom, courage, responsibility and the ability to recognise another person's dignity are difficult to reduce to conventional achievement scores. Smith (2022) consequently argues that the contested nature of virtues should not be treated as a reason to remove them from education; rather, their contestability makes discussion and deliberation about what constitutes a good person an important part of education itself.

The moral purpose of education therefore requires a balance between intellectual formation and moral formation. Schools should develop knowledgeable and competent individuals, but knowledge without ethical judgment can be used constructively or destructively. The ethical question is consequently not whether academic achievement, scientific knowledge, technological competence or employability matter. They clearly do. The deeper question is what these capacities are ultimately for and what kind of person is being prepared to use them. From this perspective, the moral purpose of schooling is not an alternative to academic excellence but the framework within which academic excellence acquires human and social meaning.

Theoretical Foundations of Moral Education
Aristotle's Virtue Ethics

Aristotle's virtue ethics provides one of the most influential philosophical foundations for understanding education as the formation of character. Although Aristotle's original formulation predates contemporary educational scholarship, its relevance remains evident in recent work on character education. The central idea is that moral excellence involves developing stable dispositions to think, feel and act well. Virtues are not simply pieces of information that can be memorised. They develop through practice, habituation, reflection, appropriate examples and the gradual cultivation of practical wisdom. Contemporary research drawing explicitly on the Aristotelian tradition identifies habituation, reflection, engagement with moral exemplars, dialogue and moral reminders among strategies that can support character development (Lamb et al., 2021).

The educational significance of this perspective is substantial. If virtue is developed through repeated practice, then schools become important moral environments because students continually encounter opportunities to practise honesty, responsibility, fairness, courage, cooperation and self-control. The behaviour of teachers and school leaders also becomes significant because students learn from examples as well as formal instruction. Little (2021) similarly argues that virtue education involves a sequence through which learners move from imitation and habituation toward increasingly sophisticated reasoning and practical judgment.

Aristotelian virtue ethics also strengthens the argument that moral education should concern the whole person rather than isolated acts. A student who avoids cheating only because punishment is likely has behaved differently from a student who understands academic honesty as part of personal integrity. The first response may demonstrate compliance, while the second reflects character. The educational objective should therefore be the development of persons who increasingly possess the practical wisdom to identify what is right and act accordingly, even when external supervision is absent. Walker (2022) demonstrates the continuing relevance of neo-Aristotelian approaches alongside neo-Kohlbergian perspectives in contemporary attempts to cultivate character and moral judgment.

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

Kohlberg's theory provides a different but complementary foundation by placing moral reasoning and cognitive development at the centre of moral education. The theory proposes that individuals develop their capacity for moral reasoning through progressively more sophisticated ways of understanding rules, social expectations, justice and ethical principles. Its educational importance lies in the idea that moral development can be stimulated when learners encounter situations that challenge their existing ways of reasoning and require them to consider alternative perspectives.

The continuing influence of Kohlberg's tradition is visible in contemporary scholarship on moral judgment. Walker (2022), for instance, examines neo-Kohlbergian and neo-Aristotelian approaches as complementary resources for cultivating character and moral judgment among young people. This perspective shifts attention away from simply telling students what is right and encourages educational practices involving moral dilemmas, dialogue, justification, perspective-taking and reasoned disagreement. Students are thus encouraged to become participants in moral reasoning rather than passive recipients of rules.

The strength of the Kohlbergian perspective for the present argument is that it protects moral education from becoming mere indoctrination. If students are expected to become responsible citizens, they must be capable of reasoning about difficult situations where values conflict. At the same time, moral reasoning alone is insufficient. A person may know what is morally appropriate and still fail to act accordingly. This limitation creates an important connection with virtue ethics, which emphasises the development of dispositions and practical

habits, and with the ethics of care, which emphasises relationships and responsiveness to others.

Noddings' Ethics of Care

Noddings' ethics of care introduces a relational dimension that is particularly important to schooling. Rather than understanding morality primarily through abstract principles, care ethics emphasises attentiveness to particular people, relationships, needs and responsibilities. Contemporary scholarship continues to draw on Noddings' conception of care as relational and situated, emphasising that ethical action is closely connected to recognising and responding appropriately to others (Rasmussen & Smith, 2019).

The relevance of care ethics to education is especially clear because schooling is inherently relational. Teachers do not simply deliver curriculum content; they interact with students who have different experiences, abilities, vulnerabilities and aspirations. A caring educational environment therefore requires attentiveness, dialogue, trust and respect. Recent research applying care ethics to global citizenship education found that care can support dialogue, empathy, creativity and concern for social justice, while highlighting the importance of care across teachers, classrooms and the wider educational system (de Arriba Rivas & Ibáñez Ruiz del Portal, 2023).

Noddings' perspective consequently expands the moral purpose of schooling beyond the question, "What rules should students follow?" to the equally important question, "How should people respond to one another?" This is crucial because responsible citizenship involves relationships with people whose experiences and interests may differ from one's own. Care, empathy and attentiveness can therefore complement justice-oriented moral reasoning and virtue-based character development. Together, Aristotle, Kohlberg and Noddings provide three interconnected foundations for the present paper: Aristotle emphasises character and practical wisdom, Kohlberg emphasises moral reasoning, and Noddings emphasises relationships and care. A morally purposeful education requires all three dimensions rather than treating any one as sufficient.

The Changing Purpose of Schooling in Contemporary Society

The purpose of schooling has expanded considerably in response to economic, technological and social transformations. Schools are increasingly expected to produce learners who can succeed in examinations, compete in labour markets, adapt to technological change, demonstrate employability skills and contribute to economic productivity. Employability has become particularly prominent as education systems respond to demands from employers for graduates possessing both disciplinary knowledge and transferable competencies. Research by Karanja et al. (2022), for example, shows that students' understanding of employability involves more than academic credentials and includes competencies needed for participation in the world of work. Such expectations are legitimate because education must prepare individuals for economic participation. The difficulty arises when preparation for employment becomes the dominant measure of educational success.

This development has contributed to an increasingly instrumental conception of education. In an instrumental model, schooling is valued primarily for the outcomes it produces, such as grades, qualifications, employment, productivity and economic competitiveness. Biesta (2020) challenges this reduction by distinguishing qualification from the broader purposes of socialisation and subjectification. Qualification matters because learners need knowledge and skills, but education also introduces individuals into social worlds and contributes to their formation as responsible subjects. When qualification becomes the overriding purpose,

questions about identity, responsibility, citizenship, moral judgment and human flourishing can become peripheral.

Examination performance provides another important example. Assessment is necessary for determining what students have learned and for identifying areas requiring support. However, high-stakes accountability can transform assessment from a tool for learning into an end in itself. Farvis and Hay (2020) found that high-stakes testing was associated with increased test preparation, curriculum narrowing, reduced teacher control and decreased opportunities for broader instructional practice. Their findings illustrate how schools can gradually organise teaching around what can be measured rather than around the full range of educational purposes. Similarly, Yiu (2020) demonstrates how high-stakes testing can create educational inequalities when schools and teachers respond to pressures to maximise measurable performance.

The dominance of measurable outcomes can therefore produce a paradox. Systems may become better at demonstrating whether students can answer particular questions while becoming less attentive to qualities that are difficult to measure. Creativity, moral courage, empathy, civic responsibility, curiosity and practical wisdom rarely appear adequately in conventional performance indicators. Au (2020) notes that high-stakes standardisation can push culturally diverse content and experiences out of the curriculum while narrowing what counts as legitimate educational knowledge. When this occurs, schooling risks becoming increasingly efficient at producing measurable outputs while becoming less capable of addressing the wider human purposes for which education exists.

Technological transformation introduces another layer to this changing educational purpose. Digital technologies, artificial intelligence and data-driven educational systems offer significant opportunities for improving access, personalisation and efficiency, but they also introduce ethical questions concerning privacy, fairness, academic integrity, surveillance, bias and human agency. Deng and Zhang (2023) argue that the application of information technology to education creates ethical challenges that conventional technological-pedagogical frameworks do not sufficiently address, leading them to incorporate ethical knowledge explicitly into teachers' technological competence. This reinforces the argument that technological literacy without ethical literacy is inadequate for contemporary education.

Competition has also become increasingly embedded in educational thinking. Competition can motivate achievement and encourage high standards, but excessive competition may alter how students understand success and their relationships with others. When grades, rankings, institutional reputation and employment prospects become dominant concerns, education can encourage students to view peers primarily as competitors rather than members of a shared learning community. The moral implications are significant because schooling simultaneously teaches through its institutional structures. A school that repeatedly rewards only individual performance may communicate a different conception of social life from one that also values cooperation, service, fairness and collective responsibility.

The concern, therefore, is not that examinations, employability, technology, productivity or measurable outcomes are inherently incompatible with ethical education. Rather, the problem occurs when these objectives become ends rather than means. A well-educated person should be capable of passing examinations, securing employment, using technology and contributing productively to the economy. But such capacities should be joined to the ability to ask whether one's actions are fair, whether one's knowledge is being used responsibly and whether one's success contributes to or undermines the wellbeing of others. Recent character education research reinforces this broader conception by demonstrating that curriculum can deliberately develop understanding of virtues alongside academic learning (Pike et al., 2021).

The changing purpose of schooling therefore strengthens rather than weakens the case for reclaiming its moral purpose. The more powerful knowledge, technology and professional competence become, the greater the consequences of using them without ethical judgment. Contemporary schooling should consequently resist the false choice between academic excellence and moral formation. The more defensible position is that schools should pursue intellectual excellence through and alongside the development of responsible persons, because the ultimate value of knowledge depends partly on the purposes to which human beings put it.

The School as a Moral Community

A school is not merely a physical location where curriculum content is delivered. It is a social and moral community in which students continually encounter expectations about how people should behave, how authority should be exercised and how individuals should relate to one another. Consequently, schools teach values through both their formal curriculum and their institutional practices. Rules concerning honesty, punctuality, respect, responsibility and acceptable conduct communicate moral expectations, while disciplinary procedures reveal how the institution understands justice, fairness and accountability. Biesta (2020) argues that education inevitably performs a socialising function because learners are introduced into particular social practices and ways of living together. The moral character of schooling is therefore communicated even when moral education is not explicitly included in a lesson.

Relationships within the school constitute one of the most important channels of moral formation. Students observe how teachers treat them, how teachers respond to mistakes, how administrators handle disagreements and whether differences among students are respected. A school that consistently demonstrates fairness, dignity and inclusion communicates that these values are important, whereas one characterised by humiliation, favouritism or arbitrary authority may communicate contradictory moral lessons. This is consistent with the ethics of care, which understands education as fundamentally relational and places attentiveness, responsiveness and respect at the centre of educational relationships (Bennett, 2023). Care in this sense is not simply being pleasant to students. It involves taking learners seriously, recognising their needs and creating conditions in which they can participate meaningfully in the educational community.

School rules and disciplinary practices are similarly significant. Discipline inevitably involves moral judgments because it determines which behaviours are considered acceptable and how violations are addressed. A punitive system that relies primarily on fear may produce outward compliance without necessarily developing moral responsibility. Conversely, approaches that combine clear expectations with explanation, dialogue and opportunities for restoration can help students understand why particular behaviours are harmful and why accountability matters. Recent character education scholarship supports the view that moral development involves both understanding virtues and practising them in concrete situations (Pike et al., 2021). Discipline can therefore become an educational process when it helps students develop self-regulation and responsibility rather than merely ensuring obedience.

Leadership also gives the school its moral direction. School leaders establish priorities, allocate resources, respond to misconduct and determine whether institutional decisions are guided by consistency and fairness. Their conduct becomes an implicit curriculum through which students and teachers learn what the institution actually values. A school that publicly celebrates integrity while tolerating dishonesty among those in authority teaches a lesson more powerful than any formal lesson on ethics. Character education therefore requires coherence between the values an institution claims to uphold and the values demonstrated through its practices. McGrath et al. (2021) emphasise the multidimensional nature of character education, while

Peterson (2020) stresses that character formation cannot be separated from the social and political environments in which individuals develop.

Teachers occupy an especially important position as moral exemplars because students encounter them repeatedly and can observe their conduct over extended periods. Teachers demonstrate moral values through punctuality, fairness in assessment, respect for students, honesty in communication, willingness to admit mistakes and consistency in applying rules. Their influence does not depend entirely on explicitly teaching moral concepts. Students can learn from what teachers repeatedly do, tolerate, reward and condemn. This supports the Aristotelian understanding of character formation, in which virtues develop through repeated practice and exposure to appropriate examples (Lamb et al., 2021). Teachers therefore contribute to moral education not only through what they teach but through who they are within the educational relationship.

The school as a moral community consequently requires institutional consistency. Curriculum, leadership, teacher conduct, student participation, discipline, assessment and relationships should communicate broadly compatible values. Inclusion is particularly important because students learn about justice and respect through their actual experience of belonging. When students are treated with dignity regardless of background, ability or social position, the school provides a practical demonstration of equality. When exclusion, discrimination or arbitrary treatment is normalised, the institution undermines its own moral claims. Reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling therefore requires schools to understand their entire culture as part of the educational process.

Education, Character and Responsible Citizenship

Character refers to the relatively enduring moral qualities and dispositions that influence how individuals think, feel and act. Education contributes to character when it helps learners develop qualities such as integrity, empathy, responsibility, justice, respect, tolerance, courage and self-control. These qualities are important because knowledge alone does not determine how individuals use their capacities. A highly knowledgeable person can act responsibly or irresponsibly, just as technical competence can be directed towards social benefit or personal advantage. Character education consequently adds an ethical dimension to academic development by asking not simply whether students are capable of doing something but whether they are prepared to use their capabilities well. Webber (2022) identifies integrity as an important goal of character education because it connects moral understanding with consistency between one's values and conduct.

Integrity is particularly important because responsible citizenship depends upon trust. Democratic societies require individuals who can be trusted to respect rules, honour commitments, acknowledge wrongdoing and act honestly even when misconduct might provide personal advantage. Schools provide early environments in which these dispositions can be practised. Academic honesty, fair participation in group activities, responsible use of school resources and truthful communication are seemingly ordinary practices through which students learn broader principles of integrity. Moral education becomes more meaningful when students understand these practices as expressions of responsibility rather than simply as requirements imposed by authority.

Empathy and respect are equally important for citizenship in socially diverse communities. Democratic participation requires individuals to recognise that other people may hold different experiences, identities, interests and opinions. This does not require abandoning one's own convictions. Rather, it requires the capacity to listen, understand competing perspectives and disagree without treating disagreement as a justification for hostility. Care ethics is especially

useful here because it places relationships and attentiveness to others at the centre of moral life (Bennett, 2023). Schools can cultivate these dispositions through collaborative learning, dialogue, inclusive practices and opportunities for students to encounter perspectives different from their own.

Justice and responsibility connect personal character with the wider social order. Students need opportunities to understand why fairness matters, how unequal treatment affects individuals and communities, and why citizens have responsibilities towards people beyond their immediate interests. Kristjánsson et al. (2021) argue for understanding virtue education in relation to collective action and the common good, thereby moving character education beyond the development of isolated personal qualities. This perspective is particularly relevant to citizenship because responsible citizens must be prepared to contribute to institutions and communities rather than viewing social life solely through the lens of individual achievement.

Schools can also prepare students for democratic participation by creating opportunities to practise democracy. Student councils, classroom discussions, collaborative decision-making, debates, community service and participatory projects can provide practical experiences of listening, negotiation, accountability and collective responsibility. Such experiences allow learners to encounter the tensions that accompany democratic life, including disagreement between legitimate interests. Conroy (2021) argues that contemporary moral education must engage seriously with questions concerning its direction and coherence, particularly within complex and pluralistic societies. Democratic education therefore should not merely instruct students about citizenship; it should provide opportunities for them to experience responsible participation.

The connection between moral formation and social cohesion is consequently direct. Societies are more capable of managing disagreement peacefully when citizens possess habits of tolerance, respect, empathy and responsible participation. Conversely, where individuals are educated primarily to compete for personal advancement, social relationships may become increasingly instrumental. The moral purpose of schooling is therefore partly social: it prepares individuals to live with others under conditions of difference. Education should develop people who can pursue personal goals while recognising obligations to others and the wider community.

Ethical Challenges Facing Education Today

Education now operates within an environment of technological and social change that creates ethical challenges considerably different from those confronting earlier generations. Artificial intelligence, misinformation, digital surveillance, academic dishonesty, cyberbullying, inequality and commercial pressures are reshaping what it means to educate responsibly. These developments make the moral purpose of schooling more urgent because students are acquiring unprecedented access to information and technological tools without necessarily possessing the ethical judgment required to use them appropriately. The central educational challenge is therefore no longer simply access to knowledge. It is also the ability to evaluate information, recognise manipulation, protect human dignity and exercise responsible judgment.

Artificial intelligence presents one of the clearest examples. Generative AI can support learning, accessibility, research and creativity, but it also raises questions concerning plagiarism, authorship, academic integrity, privacy, bias and the appropriate boundary between assistance and substitution. Deng and Zhang (2023) argue that ethical knowledge needs to be incorporated into teachers' technological competence because technological capability alone does not adequately address the ethical consequences of educational technology. The implication is that schools should teach students not merely how to use AI tools but how to question their outputs,

verify information, recognise limitations and make responsible decisions about when and how such technologies should be used.

Misinformation presents a related challenge. Digital platforms have dramatically increased the speed with which information can be produced and distributed, while the distinction between reliable evidence, opinion, manipulation and fabricated content can be difficult for learners to recognise. This makes critical thinking an ethical as well as intellectual responsibility. A student who can locate information but cannot assess its credibility remains vulnerable to manipulation. Schools therefore have an obligation to cultivate intellectual virtues such as truthfulness, open-mindedness, intellectual humility and careful judgment. These capacities are increasingly important to responsible citizenship because democratic participation depends partly upon citizens being able to evaluate claims before accepting or disseminating them.

Academic dishonesty has also been transformed by digital technologies. Students can access extensive online materials and increasingly sophisticated AI systems capable of producing essays, solving problems and generating responses. The resulting problem cannot be addressed entirely through surveillance or punishment. It raises a deeper question about what students understand education to be. If schooling is viewed primarily as a means of obtaining grades and credentials, students may regard academic work as an obstacle to be circumvented. If education is understood as intellectual and moral formation, honesty becomes part of the purpose of learning itself. Webber (2022) and Pike et al. (2021) support the broader position that character development involves cultivating dispositions that guide behaviour rather than merely teaching external rules.

Inequality presents another major ethical challenge. Students do not enter schools with identical material resources, social support, technological access or educational opportunities. When educational systems treat outcomes as though they result entirely from individual effort, they risk obscuring structural differences that influence achievement. Yiu (2020), for example, demonstrates how high-stakes testing can interact with social inequality and produce unequal educational experiences. The ethical responsibility of schooling therefore includes attention to fairness and inclusion, ensuring that educational opportunity is not determined unnecessarily by circumstances beyond students' control.

Bullying, discrimination and exclusion further demonstrate why moral education cannot be separated from school culture. Students learn about dignity not simply by studying definitions of respect but by experiencing whether they are respected. A school that ignores bullying while teaching lessons about kindness creates a contradiction between formal curriculum and lived experience. Similarly, discriminatory treatment can undermine lessons about equality and justice. Care-oriented educational scholarship emphasises the importance of relationships, responsiveness and recognition of students' needs within educational settings (Vallejos Silva & Cortés Rojas, 2024). Ethical schooling therefore requires institutional practices that make respect and inclusion tangible.

These challenges collectively reveal the limitations of treating education primarily as the transmission of knowledge. Students require knowledge to navigate contemporary society, but they also require the ethical dispositions and reasoning capacities to determine how that knowledge should be used. Artificial intelligence requires responsibility, misinformation requires truth-seeking judgment, academic dishonesty requires integrity, inequality requires justice, and social conflict requires empathy and tolerance. The ethical challenges facing contemporary education consequently strengthen the argument that schooling must reclaim its moral purpose rather than allowing moral formation to remain an incidental outcome of academic instruction.

Reclaiming the Moral Purpose of Schooling: The Author's Position

The position advanced in this paper is that education should reclaim its moral purpose without abandoning its intellectual, economic and technological responsibilities. Academic excellence, employability, examination success and technological competence remain legitimate objectives of schooling because learners require knowledge and skills to participate meaningfully in contemporary society. However, these objectives should be understood as means rather than the ultimate ends of education. When academic performance becomes the dominant measure of educational success, the deeper question of what kind of person schooling is helping to produce can disappear. Biesta (2020) makes this distinction particularly important through the purposes of qualification, socialisation and subjectification. A genuinely educational system should therefore prepare learners to be knowledgeable and competent while also enabling them to become responsible subjects capable of exercising judgment and participating constructively in society.

Reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling requires a broader conception of educational success. A successful learner should not be defined solely by grades, qualifications or employment prospects but also by the capacity to act with integrity, recognise the dignity of others, accept responsibility and respond thoughtfully to difficult moral situations. Character education provides an important foundation for this position because it connects knowledge with dispositions for responsible action. Pike et al. (2021) demonstrate that character development can be deliberately incorporated into curriculum and assessed through students' understanding and practice of virtue. Similarly, Webber (2022) identifies integrity as a significant goal of character education because it involves consistency between moral convictions and conduct. Academic achievement therefore becomes more meaningful when it is accompanied by the moral capacity to use knowledge responsibly.

The paper further argues that moral education should not be reduced to teaching students a fixed collection of virtues. Contemporary societies are pluralistic, and students will encounter legitimate differences concerning values, beliefs and ways of understanding social problems. Moral education should consequently develop both ethical commitment and critical judgment. Kohlberg's emphasis on moral reasoning, Aristotle's emphasis on virtue and practical wisdom, and Noddings' emphasis on care provide complementary resources for this task. Students should learn to reason about competing moral claims, develop stable dispositions toward good conduct and recognise the needs and dignity of other people. Such an approach avoids both moral relativism and rigid moral indoctrination by treating learners as developing moral agents.

The moral purpose of schooling should also extend beyond individual character to the common good. Education prepares individuals to live with others, participate in institutions and contribute to communities. Kristjánsson et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of connecting virtue with collective action and the common good, while Peterson (2020) demonstrates that character education has unavoidable social and political dimensions. Schools should therefore cultivate qualities such as tolerance, justice, empathy, responsibility and civic courage alongside academic competence. The objective is not to produce identical personalities but citizens capable of participating responsibly in a diverse society.

Reclaiming the moral purpose also requires attention to the hidden curriculum of schooling. Students learn values from how teachers exercise authority, how leaders respond to wrongdoing, how discipline is administered, how resources are distributed and whether different students are treated fairly. A school cannot convincingly teach justice while practising arbitrary discipline, nor can it promote integrity while tolerating dishonesty among those in authority. The moral purpose of education must therefore be embedded within institutional culture. The school itself must become an environment in which the values it seeks to cultivate are visible in everyday practice.

The author therefore maintains that the future of education should not involve choosing between academic excellence and moral formation. The more defensible position is to place academic excellence within a broader conception of human development. Schools should produce people who can think rigorously, work competently, use technology intelligently and compete productively, but who can also ask whether their actions are right, fair and beneficial to others. In this sense, reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling is not a rejection of modern education. It is an attempt to ensure that the considerable intellectual and technological powers developed through education remain connected to human responsibility.

Implications for Teachers, School Leaders and Educational Policy

For teachers, reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling means recognising that every classroom is also a moral environment. Teachers influence students through their instructional choices, assessment practices, relationships and responses to misconduct. Moral development should therefore be integrated into ordinary teaching rather than confined to occasional lessons on moral instruction. Classroom discussion, collaborative learning, problem-solving, literature, history, civic education and even science and technology can provide opportunities for students to consider responsibility, evidence, fairness and the consequences of human decisions. Pike et al. (2021) demonstrate the potential for character development to be incorporated into curriculum rather than treated as an educational activity separate from academic learning.

Teacher education consequently needs to prepare teachers for their ethical responsibilities as well as their subject-matter responsibilities. Prospective teachers should develop an understanding of professional ethics, care, fairness, inclusion, moral reasoning and the ethical implications of educational technologies. They should also be encouraged to examine their own assumptions and practices because teachers cannot effectively model qualities that they do not take seriously themselves. Lamb et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of modelling, habituation, reflection and other practices in character development. Teacher preparation should therefore treat teachers as moral professionals whose conduct contributes directly to the ethical climate of schools.

For school leaders, the implication is that leadership should be understood partly as moral stewardship. Leaders establish institutional priorities and determine how values are translated into everyday decisions. They influence whether disciplinary procedures are fair, whether teachers are supported, whether students have meaningful participation and whether institutional policies protect dignity and inclusion. Ethical leadership should consequently involve transparency, consistency, accountability and respect for members of the school community. Leadership development programmes should address these dimensions rather than focusing exclusively on administration, performance indicators and resource management.

Assessment practices also require reconsideration. Conventional examinations remain useful for measuring particular forms of academic achievement, but they cannot capture the full range of educational purposes. Schools should therefore complement examinations with forms of assessment that allow students to demonstrate reflection, collaboration, ethical reasoning, problem-solving, creativity and responsible participation. This does not mean turning every virtue into a numerical score. Indeed, excessive measurement of character could undermine the very qualities education seeks to develop. The purpose should instead be to ensure that what schools value is not systematically excluded simply because it is more difficult to quantify.

Student relationships should similarly become an explicit concern of educational policy and practice. Bullying, discrimination, exclusion and humiliation are not merely behavioural problems; they are contradictions of the moral purpose of schooling. Schools should establish cultures in which students experience respect, fairness and belonging. The ethics of care is

particularly useful here because it emphasises attentiveness to students as persons and recognises the importance of relationships to educational development (Bennett, 2023). Caring schools should not abandon standards or accountability. Rather, they should combine high expectations with humane treatment and opportunities for restoration when students cause harm.

Educational policy has an especially important role because policy priorities shape what schools are encouraged to value. When accountability systems focus overwhelmingly on examination scores, rankings and measurable outcomes, schools naturally direct substantial energy towards those indicators. Policymakers should therefore adopt a broader conception of educational quality that recognises academic achievement alongside citizenship, wellbeing, inclusion, ethical development and school culture. Biesta (2020) provides a useful framework for this broader understanding because qualification, socialisation and subjectification represent interconnected rather than competing dimensions of education.

Finally, educational technology policy should incorporate explicit ethical considerations. The rapid development of artificial intelligence means that students and teachers require guidance concerning academic integrity, privacy, bias, misinformation, authorship and responsible use of digital tools. Deng and Zhang (2023) demonstrate the importance of integrating ethical knowledge into technological competence. Policies governing AI in education should consequently move beyond questions of access and efficiency to address the responsibilities associated with its use. This would ensure that technological innovation remains subordinate to educational and human purposes rather than becoming another end that schools pursue simply because it is available.

Statement of the Conceptual Problem

The central problem addressed in this paper is the gap between the importance commonly attached to ethics and education: reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling in contemporary society and the conceptual clarity required to translate that importance into defensible educational or social practice. Public discussion often treats the issue as self-evident, yet competing assumptions about values, responsibility, institutional roles and human development produce different practical conclusions. A conceptual analysis is therefore necessary to clarify the underlying ideas, identify tensions and develop implications suited to the Nigerian context.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the paper is to critically examine ethics and education: reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling in contemporary society and clarify its implications for education, society and professional practice in Nigeria.

1. To analyse schooling as a moral practice in relation to the central argument of the paper.
2. To analyse virtue, rules and moral judgement in relation to the central argument of the paper.
3. To analyse care, relationships and dignity in relation to the central argument of the paper.
4. To analyse academic integrity and artificial intelligence in relation to the central argument of the paper.
5. To analyse pluralism, inclusion and citizenship in relation to the central argument of the paper.

Conceptual Clarification and Literature Review Theoretical and Philosophical Foundations

The theoretical foundation is drawn from the major philosophical and social perspectives already reflected in the literature reviewed above. These perspectives are used interpretively:

their assumptions are compared with the practical demands of the Nigerian context, and their limitations are treated as part of the analysis rather than as reasons for adopting a single theory mechanically.

Conceptual Method

This paper adopts a conceptual, analytical and literature-based approach. It critically examines and synthesises the scholarly arguments, theoretical perspectives and policy-relevant ideas contained in the source literature. The analysis proceeds through conceptual clarification, comparison of competing perspectives, interpretation of their assumptions, and thematic synthesis of their educational and social implications. The central ideas are treated as concepts and normative problems rather than as variables to be statistically tested. No primary data, respondents, questionnaires, sampling procedures or inferential statistical tests are used in the paper; the conclusions are derived from reasoned engagement with the literature and the Nigerian context.

Thematic Analysis and Central Arguments

Schooling as a moral practice

Every school makes moral choices through what it teaches, rewards, tolerates and sanctions. Claims that schools can be value-neutral overlook the ethical consequences of discipline, assessment, inclusion, competition and authority. Reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling means making these normative dimensions explicit and open to reflection.

In analytical terms, schooling as a moral practice also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Virtue, rules and moral judgement

Ethical education needs more than rules. Virtue ethics draws attention to stable dispositions such as honesty, courage, justice and compassion, while approaches centred on moral reasoning emphasise the capacity to justify choices. Schools can combine these perspectives by linking habits of conduct with opportunities for ethical deliberation.

In analytical terms, virtue, rules and moral judgement also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Care, relationships and dignity

An ethics of care highlights attentiveness, responsiveness and the moral importance of relationships. Students learn about dignity partly through how adults treat them. Respectful teacher-student relationships, fair discipline and support for vulnerable learners are therefore elements of moral education, not merely conditions surrounding it.

In analytical terms, care, relationships and dignity also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle

can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Academic integrity and artificial intelligence

Generative AI has intensified questions about authorship, plagiarism, assistance and genuine learning. Ethical schooling should move beyond detection and punishment to explicit teaching about responsible tool use, attribution, intellectual honesty and the purposes of assessment.

In analytical terms, academic integrity and artificial intelligence also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Pluralism, inclusion and citizenship

Schools bring together learners with different identities and moral traditions. Ethical education must therefore distinguish shared civic principles from coercive moral uniformity. Respect for dignity, non-violence, fairness, truthfulness and democratic participation can provide common ground while allowing legitimate diversity.

In analytical terms, pluralism, inclusion and citizenship also requires attention to implementation. A sound position must specify who bears responsibility, what institutional conditions are necessary, how conflicting interests should be handled, and how the principle can be translated into ordinary educational or social practice. This prevents the concept from remaining a purely aspirational statement and makes it possible to evaluate whether policies and professional actions are consistent with the values they claim to advance.

Nigerian Context and Practical Implications

In Nigeria, the implications of ethics and education: reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling in contemporary society must be interpreted against institutional diversity, uneven resources, cultural and religious plurality, strong family and community influences, rapidly changing technology and persistent concerns about educational quality and public trust. A viable approach should therefore avoid importing a single model without adaptation. National and state policy can provide broad principles, but implementation must allow schools, universities, professional bodies and communities to respond to local conditions while remaining accountable to common standards of dignity, fairness, competence and responsibility.

For practice, the central requirement is alignment. Curriculum or policy statements should be supported by teacher or professional preparation, leadership behaviour, assessment and accountability systems, adequate resources, and channels for reflective feedback. Where formal messages and institutional behaviour contradict one another, the practical behaviour of the institution is likely to shape outcomes more strongly than the written policy.

Critical Issues, Limitations and Counterarguments

A conceptual position on ethics and education: reclaiming the moral purpose of schooling in contemporary society must acknowledge several cautions. First, values and principles can be interpreted differently across social groups, so conceptual clarity does not remove disagreement. Second, desirable principles may conflict in practice—for example autonomy and

accountability, community and individual rights, innovation and equity, or development and ecological protection. Third, institutional constraints can prevent well-designed ideas from being implemented consistently. These tensions support a balanced approach that makes assumptions explicit, protects legitimate pluralism and treats implementation capacity as part of the argument rather than an afterthought.

CONCLUSION

Education is more than the transmission of information, preparation for examinations or training for employment. These functions are important, but they represent only part of what schooling can accomplish. Education also introduces young people into social relationships, develops their capacity for judgment and helps shape the dispositions with which they approach other people and the wider society. Biesta's (2020) distinction between qualification, socialisation and subjectification captures this broader purpose by showing why educational success cannot be adequately defined through measurable achievement alone.

The moral purpose of schooling should therefore be reclaimed as a central dimension of contemporary education. Schools should develop knowledgeable and employable individuals, but they should also develop people who possess integrity, empathy, responsibility, justice, respect and the capacity to use knowledge wisely. This requires more than adding a separate moral education subject. It requires ethical consistency across curriculum, teaching, leadership, discipline, assessment, relationships, technology and educational policy. Aristotle's emphasis on virtue and practical wisdom, Kohlberg's emphasis on moral reasoning and Noddings' emphasis on care collectively demonstrate that moral formation involves character, judgment and relationships. In an increasingly technological and fragmented society, the ultimate test of education is not simply how much people know, but what they choose to do with what they know.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Curriculum authorities and schools should embed ethical formation across the curriculum rather than confining it to a single moral or civic education subject. Subject teaching should create deliberate opportunities for learners to consider integrity, responsibility, fairness, care, the consequences of knowledge, and the common good. This means that science, technology, literature, social studies, business, vocational education and other subjects should connect disciplinary knowledge with the ethical questions that arise from its use.
2. Teacher education institutions and education authorities should strengthen the ethical preparation of teachers. Pre-service and continuing professional development programmes should include professional ethics, care, inclusion, moral reasoning, fair assessment, responsible authority, academic integrity and the ethical use of digital technologies. Teachers should also be supported to reflect on how their own conduct, classroom relationships and disciplinary practices function as part of the moral curriculum experienced by students.
3. School leaders should treat the creation of an ethical school culture as a core leadership responsibility. Rules, discipline, staff conduct, resource allocation, student participation and responses to misconduct should consistently demonstrate dignity, fairness, transparency and accountability. Schools should periodically review whether the values stated in their policies are visible in everyday institutional behaviour, because contradictions between formal messages and actual practice can undermine moral education.
4. Educational assessment and accountability systems should be broadened so that examination performance does not become the sole definition of educational quality. Academic achievement should remain important, but schools should also create structured

opportunities for reflection, collaboration, ethical deliberation, service, problem-solving and responsible participation. These dimensions should be documented and discussed without reducing character to simplistic numerical scores or creating another high-stakes measurement regime.

5. Schools and education ministries should develop explicit policies for artificial intelligence, digital citizenship and academic integrity. Such policies should go beyond detecting or punishing misconduct and should teach learners how to use digital tools responsibly, acknowledge assistance appropriately, verify information, protect privacy, recognise bias and misinformation, and distinguish legitimate educational support from substitution for genuine learning. Teachers should receive practical guidance so that expectations are consistent across subjects and institutions.
6. Students should be given meaningful opportunities to practise moral agency and responsible citizenship within school life. Student councils, classroom dialogue, peer mediation, community service, collaborative decision-making and carefully structured debates can help learners practise listening, justification, tolerance, accountability and respect for legitimate disagreement. These opportunities should be designed in ways that protect pluralism and prevent moral education from becoming coercive or partisan.
7. Education policy in Nigeria should connect moral and character education with the institutional conditions required for implementation. Federal and state education authorities should provide broad standards on dignity, fairness, integrity, inclusion, professional responsibility and responsible technology use, while allowing schools to adapt implementation to local cultural, religious and community contexts. Policy statements should be supported by teacher preparation, leadership development, adequate resources, monitoring and channels for feedback so that moral education is not reduced to aspirational language.
8. Further research should examine how these recommendations operate in actual Nigerian educational settings. Empirical studies should investigate students', teachers', school leaders' and parents' experiences of moral education, the ethical climate of schools, the effects of AI and digital technologies on academic integrity, and the relationship between institutional practices and students' moral reasoning, character and civic participation. Comparative studies across school types, regions and educational levels would also help identify context-sensitive approaches that can strengthen the moral purpose of schooling without sacrificing academic excellence or legitimate diversity.

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