

**MORAL EDUCATION, ETHICAL REASONING AND CHARACTER FORMATION IN NIGERIAN  
SECONDARY EDUCATION**

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

**ABSTRACT**

This conceptual paper examines moral education, ethical reasoning and character formation in Nigerian secondary education 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 moral education beyond rule compliance, ethical reasoning and moral agency, role modelling, school ethos and hidden curriculum. 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 is not limited to the transmission of academic knowledge and intellectual skills; it also involves the development of values, attitudes and behaviours that enable learners to function responsibly within society. Moral education is concerned with helping learners understand ethical principles, distinguish acceptable from unacceptable conduct, develop a sense of responsibility and make appropriate moral decisions. Character development, on the other hand, reflects the gradual formation of qualities such as honesty, respect, self-discipline, responsibility, fairness, empathy and integrity. In the secondary school years, these qualities are particularly important because students are passing through a developmental period in which personal identity, social relationships and behavioural patterns are being established. The Nigerian education system recognises the broader purpose of schooling by emphasising good citizenship, self-reliance and the development of individuals who can participate effectively in society (Federal Ministry of Education [FME], 2020, 2022).

Moral education provides a structured avenue through which students can acquire and practise values that guide everyday behaviour. It goes beyond merely telling students what is right or wrong and should encourage them to understand moral principles, reason about ethical situations and translate values into responsible actions. Contemporary approaches to character education similarly emphasise the development and practice of virtues rather than the memorisation of moral rules. Research has shown that curriculum-based character interventions can improve students' understanding and practice of virtues, suggesting that schools can contribute meaningfully to students' character formation when moral values are deliberately incorporated into teaching and learning (Arthur et al., 2021). Character education can also create opportunities for students to exercise responsibility, cooperation, empathy and active participation in their school communities (Dobson & Dobson, 2021).

The importance of moral education becomes more pronounced in the Nigerian context, where concerns about students' misconduct, indiscipline and other forms of moral decadence continue to attract educational and social attention. Schools are expected to complement the moral influence of families and communities by providing environments in which students learn respect, honesty, responsibility, tolerance and responsible citizenship. Recent Nigerian literature indicates that moral and values education is incorporated into the secondary school curriculum, but its effectiveness may be constrained by inadequate implementation, limited teacher preparedness, curriculum pressures and weak collaboration between schools, families and communities (Adejumobi et al., 2025). Similarly, research on Nigerian schools has argued that moral instruction remains relevant to addressing deviant and unethical behaviours among students and that the gap between curriculum intentions and actual classroom practice requires attention (Agbanero, 2024).

Character development is therefore an important educational outcome because the behaviour of students within and beyond the school environment is partly shaped by the values they acquire and the opportunities they have to practise those values. A student who develops honesty, self-control, respect and responsibility is better positioned to relate constructively with teachers and peers, observe school rules and contribute positively to the wider community. Evidence from Nigerian secondary schools indicates that character education can promote moral values by encouraging ethical decision-making, empathy and the development of well-rounded individuals (Fayemi & Adediran, 2025). The relationship between schooling and students' social and moral development is also influenced by the nature of students' interactions within educational environments, making the school an important setting for deliberate character formation.

Within Rivers State, the issue of moral education and character development is particularly relevant to public secondary schools because these institutions serve students from diverse social, cultural and economic backgrounds. The school environment provides an important setting for transmitting shared values and developing behaviours that support peaceful coexistence, academic engagement and responsible citizenship. Evidence from Rivers State has highlighted the relevance of value education and character education in addressing maladjusted behaviour among students, with emphasis on values such as honesty, integrity and responsibility (LongJohn et al., n.d.). Recent Nigerian scholarship has also identified inadequate policy implementation, insufficient teacher preparation, corruption and discontinuity of programmes as challenges that may weaken character education in secondary schools (Odinaka, 2025).

Consequently, moral education and character development deserve systematic examination among public secondary school students in Rivers State, Nigeria. Although moral values are recognised as an important component of education, the existence of moral education within school programmes does not automatically guarantee that students will internalise and consistently demonstrate desirable character traits. The effectiveness of moral education may depend on how values are taught, modelled and reinforced through classroom instruction, school rules, teacher-student relationships and the general school climate. Examining moral education in relation to character development among public secondary school students in Rivers State can therefore provide evidence on the extent to which educational practices contribute to the formation of responsible, disciplined and morally grounded young people. Such evidence is relevant to teachers, school administrators, education authorities and other stakeholders seeking to strengthen the moral and character-building functions of secondary education.

### **Statement of the Conceptual Problem**

Despite the emphasis placed on education as an instrument for developing responsible and morally upright citizens, concerns about students' character and behavioural conduct remain evident in secondary schools. Behaviours such as dishonesty, disobedience, disrespect for teachers and peers, examination malpractice, bullying, truancy and other forms of indiscipline can undermine the objectives of secondary education and negatively affect the school environment. The persistence of such behaviours suggests that academic instruction alone may not be sufficient to develop desirable character among students. Although moral education is expected to provide students with knowledge of values, ethical reasoning and appropriate standards of conduct, there is concern that moral principles taught in schools may not always translate into consistent behavioural practices. This creates a need to examine the role of moral education in shaping the character of secondary school students.

The problem is particularly important in public secondary schools in Rivers State, where students are expected to develop qualities such as honesty, responsibility, respect, self-discipline, tolerance and integrity. However, the extent to which moral education contributes to these aspects of character development among students remains a matter requiring empirical investigation. Where moral education is inadequately taught, poorly implemented or disconnected from students' everyday experiences, its potential to influence character formation may be limited. Consequently, there is a need to determine whether moral education is associated with the character development of public secondary school students in Rivers State. The absence of sufficient empirical evidence on this relationship constitutes the problem that this study seeks to address.

### **Aim and Objectives**

The aim of the paper is to critically examine moral education, ethical reasoning and character formation in Nigerian secondary education and clarify its implications for education, society and professional practice in Nigeria.

1. To analyse moral education beyond rule compliance in relation to the central argument of the paper.
2. To analyse ethical reasoning and moral agency in relation to the central argument of the paper.
3. To analyse role modelling, school ethos and hidden curriculum in relation to the central argument of the paper.
4. To analyse home-school-community reinforcement in relation to the central argument of the paper.
5. To analyse digital citizenship and contemporary moral challenges in relation to the central argument of the paper.

### **Conceptual Clarification and Literature Review**

Moral education refers to the deliberate process through which learners acquire knowledge, values, attitudes and dispositions that enable them to distinguish between right and wrong and conduct themselves responsibly. In the secondary school context, it involves more than the teaching of moral rules because students are expected to understand the reasons underlying ethical conduct and apply such understanding to real-life situations. Character development represents the broader outcome of this process, reflected in qualities such as honesty, responsibility, self-discipline, respect, empathy, fairness and integrity. Recent literature indicates that moral and values education remains an important component of Nigerian secondary education because schools are expected to contribute to the formation of responsible and socially competent citizens. Adejumobi et al. (2025) observed that moral and values education is incorporated into Nigerian secondary school curricula, although its effectiveness depends considerably on how it is implemented in practice. Similarly, Qadeer et al. (2024) noted that character development at the secondary level requires coordinated attention to curriculum, teachers and school culture because adolescents are undergoing important social and moral development.

Ethical reasoning constitutes an important dimension of moral education because it enables students to examine situations involving competing values and make considered judgements about appropriate conduct. Rather than simply accepting rules because they are imposed by adults, ethical reasoning encourages learners to consider principles such as fairness, responsibility, consequences, rights and respect for others. This is particularly important during adolescence, when students increasingly encounter complex social situations requiring independent judgement. Agbanero (2024) argued that moral instruction in Nigerian secondary schools needs to move beyond the mere transmission of behavioural rules and incorporate moral theories that help students understand the ethical principles underlying their actions. Evidence from secondary-school research also suggests that students' moral judgements can be associated with the nature of their moral education programmes and the broader ethos of their schools (Walker & Moulin-Stozek, 2021). Thus, ethical reasoning provides a cognitive foundation through which moral education may contribute to character development.

Value inculcation is another important component of moral education and refers to the deliberate process of helping students internalise desirable values and translate them into consistent patterns of behaviour. Values such as honesty, respect, tolerance, responsibility, justice, cooperation and integrity become meaningful when learners are given opportunities to understand, discuss and practise them in everyday school situations. Fayemi and Adediran (2025), in their study of secondary school students in Ogun State, found that character education contributes to the promotion of moral values by exposing students to virtues, ethical decision-making and empathy. Their findings further indicated that integrating character education into curriculum and school activities can support students' moral development, although effective implementation requires adequate teacher preparation. This suggests that value inculcation should not be treated as an isolated classroom activity but as an ongoing process reinforced through teaching, school rules, interpersonal relationships and students' participation in school activities.

The role of teachers and the school environment is particularly significant in the inculcation of values and development of character. Students learn not only from formal lessons but also from the behaviours demonstrated by teachers and other adults within the school. Teachers who consistently demonstrate honesty, fairness, respect, responsibility and professional commitment provide practical examples

through which students can observe and internalise desirable conduct. Recent Nigerian scholarship similarly emphasises that teachers have an important role in transmitting societal values because their ethical conduct can influence students' attitudes and behaviour (Egwurugwu & Tagbo, 2026). Character education literature further identifies educators as role models, mentors and facilitators who can create opportunities for students to reflect on values and practise ethical behaviour. Therefore, the effectiveness of value inculcation may depend partly on whether the values taught to students are consistently reflected in the behaviour and practices of the school community.

Empirical evidence from Nigeria provides support for the relevance of moral education to students' character formation, while also revealing challenges in implementation. Osemwengie (2024), for example, examined moral education as an approach to reducing deviance and improving discipline among secondary school students in Delta State. The study involved principals, vice-principals, teachers and students from public senior secondary schools and focused on the capacity of moral education to address behavioural problems. Similarly, Adejumobi et al. (2025) reviewed moral and values education in Nigerian secondary schools and identified implementation and pedagogical challenges that can weaken its contribution to character formation. Odinaka (2025) also observed that character education in Nigerian secondary schools faces challenges arising from competing educational priorities and the way character and virtue are conceptualised within contemporary schooling. These studies collectively suggest that the presence of moral education within the curriculum does not automatically guarantee desirable character outcomes; what matters is how effectively ethical reasoning and values are taught, modelled and reinforced.

The literature therefore establishes a conceptual connection between moral education and character development, particularly through students' ability to reason ethically and internalise desirable values. Ethical reasoning can help students understand why particular behaviours are morally appropriate, while value inculcation can facilitate the internalisation and practical expression of those principles. However, much of the recent Nigerian literature has addressed moral education broadly, character education generally, or contexts outside Rivers State. There remains a need for empirical evidence specifically examining how ethical reasoning and value inculcation relate to character development among students in public secondary schools in Rivers State. This gap provides the basis for the present study, which focuses specifically on these two dimensions of moral education and their relationship with character development among public secondary school students in the State.

### **Theoretical and Philosophical Foundations**

#### **Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development**

The Theory of Moral Development proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg is the most relevant theory to this study. Kohlberg first formulated the theory in his doctoral research in 1958 and substantially presented the stage theory in 1969, building on Jean Piaget's cognitive-developmental approach. The theory proposes that moral development occurs progressively through three levels and six stages, as individuals move from externally controlled morality to increasingly principled moral reasoning. The core assumption is that moral development is primarily a cognitive process in which individuals actively reason about moral dilemmas and gradually develop more complex ways of judging what is right and wrong. The three levels are pre-conventional morality, conventional morality and post-conventional morality. The theory assumes that individuals generally progress through the stages sequentially and that exposure to moral dilemmas, perspective-taking and cognitive conflict can stimulate advancement in moral reasoning.

Kohlberg's theory has nevertheless been criticised for placing excessive emphasis on justice-oriented reasoning, while giving insufficient attention to care, relationships, emotions and the influence of culture. Gilligan particularly challenged the theory's tendency to treat care-based moral reasoning as less developed than abstract justice reasoning, while cross-cultural research has questioned the extent to which Kohlberg's higher stages can be regarded as universally applicable. Despite these criticisms, the theory is highly relevant to the present study because ethical reasoning, one of the study's dimensions of moral education, directly corresponds with Kohlberg's central concern with the development of moral judgement. The theory also provides a useful basis for understanding value inculcation, since students are expected to progress from merely obeying externally imposed rules toward understanding and

internalising moral principles. Thus, Kohlberg's theory provides the study with a suitable framework for explaining how moral education may contribute to the development of desirable character among public secondary school students in Rivers State.

### **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** **Moral education beyond rule compliance**

Moral education should not be reduced to memorising school rules or rewarding outward conformity. Its deeper purpose is to develop the learner's capacity to recognise moral questions, deliberate about competing values, justify choices and accept responsibility for consequences. In secondary education, this requires movement from authoritarian moral instruction towards guided ethical reasoning. Students need opportunities to examine dilemmas drawn from school life, family expectations, digital behaviour, peer relations, civic responsibilities and public integrity. When moral education encourages explanation rather than mere obedience, learners can internalise principles and apply them in unfamiliar situations.

In analytical terms, moral education beyond rule compliance 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.

### **Ethical reasoning and moral agency**

Ethical reasoning is central to character formation because character is expressed through repeated judgement and action. A student may know that honesty is desirable yet still face pressure to cheat, conceal wrongdoing or participate in online harassment. Moral agency develops when learners can identify the values at stake, consider the interests and dignity of others, anticipate consequences and choose a defensible course of action. Classroom dialogue, reflective writing and case analysis can make such reasoning visible and teachable.

In analytical terms, ethical reasoning and moral agency 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.

### **Role modelling, school ethos and hidden curriculum**

The credibility of moral education depends heavily on the ethical climate of the school. Formal lessons on fairness are weakened when students observe favouritism, humiliation, arbitrary discipline or examination malpractice. Teachers and school leaders therefore function as moral exemplars through everyday decisions, language and treatment of students. The hidden curriculum of routines, sanctions, recognition and relationships can either reinforce or contradict the stated values of the school.

In analytical terms, role modelling, school ethos and hidden curriculum 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.

### **Home-school-community reinforcement**

Character formation occurs across overlapping social environments. Schools cannot assume sole responsibility for values when family practices, religious communities, peer groups, entertainment cultures and social media also shape moral identity. Productive moral education requires communication between school, home and community around broad principles such as dignity, responsibility, honesty, respect, care and civic obligation while allowing legitimate cultural and religious diversity.

In analytical terms, home-school-community reinforcement 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.

### **Digital citizenship and contemporary moral challenges**

Digital life expands the moral domain of secondary education. Questions of privacy, misinformation, cyberbullying, plagiarism, artificial intelligence, anonymous speech and digital reputation require ethical judgement. Moral education should therefore include digital citizenship as a practical extension of character formation. Students need to understand that online conduct has real social consequences and that technological capability does not remove responsibility.

In analytical terms, digital citizenship and contemporary moral challenges 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.

### **Critical Synthesis of the Source Literature**

The finding is also consistent with Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development, which proposes that individuals develop progressively more sophisticated ways of reasoning about moral issues. From this perspective, students who are exposed to opportunities for ethical reflection and reasoning can move beyond simple obedience to externally imposed rules toward a more thoughtful understanding of moral principles. The documented association found in the present study suggests that ethical reasoning may provide the cognitive foundation upon which desirable character traits are developed and expressed. This finding is also related to Fayemi and Adediran (2025), who reported that character education can promote moral values among secondary school students through ethical decision-making and related activities. The agreement between these findings indicates that moral education is more likely to contribute to character development when students are encouraged not only to know moral rules but also to understand and reason through the values behind those rules.

The finding further supports the view that character development is not produced solely through academic instruction but is shaped by the values that students repeatedly encounter and practise. When schools consistently communicate desirable values through classroom instruction, teacher behaviour, school rules and interpersonal relationships, students are more likely to internalise those values and demonstrate them in their conduct. This interpretation agrees with Osemwengie (2024), who identified moral education as an important approach to addressing deviant behaviour and promoting discipline among secondary school students. The finding also supports Odinaka (2025), who argued that character education remains important in Nigerian secondary schools despite challenges associated with its implementation. The present study therefore demonstrates that value inculcation is significantly associated with students' character development and highlights the importance of making moral values a consistent part of students' educational experiences.

### **Nigerian Context and Practical Implications**

In Nigeria, the implications of moral education, ethical reasoning and character formation in Nigerian secondary education 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 moral education, ethical reasoning and character formation in Nigerian secondary education 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**

The study concludes that character development among public secondary school students cannot be separated from the quality of moral education provided within the school environment. Ethical reasoning enables students to understand the basis of appropriate conduct, while value inculcation supports the internalisation and practical expression of desirable values. Strengthening these dimensions of moral education can therefore contribute to the development of students who demonstrate honesty, responsibility, respect, self-discipline and integrity.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Teachers and school administrators should strengthen ethical reasoning activities by incorporating moral dilemmas, classroom discussions, reflective exercises and real-life ethical situations into teaching. This will provide students with opportunities to examine moral choices and develop sound judgement rather than merely memorising rules.

2. Public secondary schools should intensify value inculcation programmes by consistently reinforcing values such as honesty, respect, responsibility, tolerance, fairness and integrity through classroom instruction, teacher role modelling, school rules and co-curricular activities. Education authorities should also provide teachers with appropriate training to improve the effective teaching and reinforcement of these values.

### **REFERENCES**

- Adejumobi, G. O., Ogbuagu, E. D., & Asuquo, E. B. (2025). Moral education and student character formation in Nigerian secondary schools. *International Journal of Education, Management Sciences and Professional Studies*, 1(2), 653–666.
- Agbanero, I. (2024). A moral normative approach to issues of social vices in Nigerian schools. *INSTED: Interdisciplinary Studies in Education & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.34862/tce/2024/02/25/tlag-mu>

- Agbanero, I. (2024). A moral normative approach to issues of social vices in Nigerian schools. *INSTED: Interdisciplinary Studies in Education & Society*.
- Arthur, J., Kristjánsson, K., Harrison, T., Sanderse, W., & Wright, D. (2021). Character development through the curriculum: Teaching and assessing the understanding and practice of virtue. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 53(4).
- Dobson, J., & Dobson, T. (2021). Empowering student voice in a secondary school: Character education through project-based learning with students as teachers. *Teacher Development*, 25(2), 103–119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2020.1865442>
- Egwurugwu, D. C., & Tagbo, S. (2026). Teachers ethics for values education in the enforcement of education law in secondary schools in Nigeria. *Journal of Association of Educational Management and Policy Practitioners*.
- Fayemi, J. A., & Adediran, A. A. (2025). Impact of character education in promoting moral values among students of secondary schools in Ogun State. *Journal of Educational Review*, 15(1), 97–103.
- Federal Ministry of Education. (2020). National policy on education. Federal Republic of Nigeria.
- Federal Ministry of Education. (2022). Senior school education. Federal Republic of Nigeria.
- Gibbs, J. C. (2013). *Moral development and reality: Beyond the theories of Kohlberg, Hoffman, and Haidt* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Harvard University Press.
- Kohlberg, L. (1969). Stage and sequence: The cognitive-developmental approach to socialization. In D. A. Goslin (Ed.), *Handbook of socialization theory and research* (pp. 347–480). Rand McNally.
- Odekunle, O. A. (2016). Effects of civic skills training and value clarification training on moral reasoning among secondary school students in Ibadan metropolis, Nigeria [Doctoral dissertation, University of Ibadan]. University of Ibadan Institutional Repository.
- Odinaka, L. (2025). Possibilities and challenges of teaching character education in Nigeria's secondary schools. *International Journal of Library Science and Educational Research*, 8(8). <https://doi.org/10.70382/caijlser.v8i8.019>
- Osemwengie, B. (2024). Moral education: Antidote for deviance and effective management of discipline among secondary school students in Delta South Senatorial District, Nigeria. *African Social and Educational Journal*, 13(1), 119–130.
- Qadeer, A., Dinpuri, N., & Hussain, M. (2024). Fostering character building: A guide for secondary level learners. *International Journal of Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences*, 3(1), 484–491.
- Snarey, J. R. (1985). Cross-cultural universality of social-moral development: A critical review of Kohlbergian research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 97(2), 202–232. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.97.2.202>
- Walker, D. I., & Moulin-Stozek, D. (2021). A study of moral reasoning among secondary students in a public co-educational and private girls school in Mexico. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 51(7), 984–1002.