Raising Honest Citizens: A Cross-Cultural Study of Moral Education in Primary Schools

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Abstract: This study aims to examine and compare the implementation of honesty character education in elementary schools across Indonesia, New Zealand, Finland, and Japan. Employing a qualitative comparative literature review method, the research investigates how honesty is conceptualized, integrated into curricula, delivered through pedagogical practices, and shaped by sociocultural contexts in each country. The findings reveal that Finland and Japan demonstrate a high level of systemic coherence, with Finland emphasizing a trust-based and student-centered learning environment, while Japan integrates honesty through structured moral education and cultural values. New Zealand fosters honesty through democratic teaching approaches and formative assessment practices. In contrast, Indonesia, despite policy support for honesty education, faces challenges in classroom consistency and parental involvement. The study concludes that teacher role modeling, student participation, and alignment between school and family play pivotal roles in reinforcing honesty. It recommends that Indonesia improve its honesty education through clearer curricular articulation, targeted teacher training, and stronger school-family collaboration. These findings have implications for enhancing character education practices and contribute to the global discourse on fostering ethical citizenship through education.

Keywords: honesty character, moral education, elementary school, comparative education

Introduction

Indonesia is currently facing a moral crisis marked by a decline in the value of honesty. This is evident in both macro-level corruption and micro-level behaviors such as academic cheating. Indonesia Corruption Watch reported that state losses due to corruption in 2021 amounted to IDR 62.93 trillion, mostly through budget misuse (ICW, 2022). Academic dishonesty has also become normalized; Agustin (2013) found that 95% of high school students admitted to cheating without ever being caught. These behaviors reflect how honesty has not been effectively instilled in the national character, starting from early education.

Honesty, in its simplest form, is the alignment between words, thoughts, and actions. It reflects sincerity, integrity, and moral clarity. Classical Islamic teachings (Albari, 2016) and contemporary character frameworks (Daruningsih, 2019), both emphasize honesty as a pillar of ethical conduct. Lickona also frames character education as a continuum of "knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good." Thus, honesty is not merely a moral suggestion, but a social and civic necessity.

Yet, despite its recognition in national policy—such as the 2013 Curriculum which integrates honesty into religious and civic education—honesty education in Indonesia is often implemented inconsistently. Teachers tend to focus on academic achievement rather than moral development (Sulastri

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& Simarmata, 2019), and parental involvement in shaping honest behavior is minimal. This is in stark contrast to other countries with more integrated character education systems.

Several studies have examined honesty education not only in Indonesia but also in New Zealand, Finland, and Japan (Poerwanti, 2013; Darmayanti, & Wibowo, 2014; ;Qodriyah & Wangid, 2015; Saputro & Soeharto 2015; Masnur, 2017). Those countries are widely recognized for cultivating citizens with high levels of integrity. In Finland, honesty is integrated into all learning through trust-based pedagogies and a curriculum promoting autonomy and equality (Daheri et al., 2022). Teachers, granted autonomy, use socio-constructivist and problem-based methods to model ethical behavior and foster honest collaboration (Richardson, 2013; Malinen, Väisänen & Savolainen, 2012; English et al, 2022). Students' strong interest in honesty highlights the value of addressing ethical issues in long-term education, supported by research-based, ethically grounded teacher training. (Alaoutinen et al., 2004; Salminen, 2013). In Japan, moral education (*doutoku*) is a regular subject focused on everyday moral reasoning and behavior, supported by cultural values like *makoto* (inner sincerity) and strong parental involvement in character formation (Ramli, 2014; Mulyadi, 2014). Schools teach values such as integrity, nationalism, and courtesy, while medical ethics courses in universities foster moral sensitivity (Suyitno et al, 2019; Akabayashi et al, 2004). Education aims for holistic development, promoting independence, public duty, and cultural integrity through approaches like ethnomathematics (Saito, 2019; Suyitno et al, 2020) . Meanwhile, New Zealand promotes honesty through democratic classrooms, focusing on civic integrity, formative assessment, and shared responsibility (Wood & Milligan, 2016). Centrally managed programs with accountability measures effectively support honest academic behavior (Sefcik et al, 2020). Ethics is taught across disciplines, with pharmacy and engineering courses using real-world applications to build ethical skills (Beshara et al, 2020; Reid, 2011). In primary schools, self-assessment fosters responsibility and honesty (Hill et al, 2017). The system also prioritizes cultural equity, supporting honest engagement among Māori and Pasifika students (Berryman & Eley, 2019; Wilson, 2016; Berryman & Eley, 2018).

Despite the growing literature on honesty education, there is a lack of focused cross-national comparison that looks specifically at how honesty is taught, modeled, and internalized in schools. Previous studies tend to treat honesty as one of many values rather than as a central construct. This presents a significant research gap. This study seeks to fill that gap by conducting a comparative analysis of honesty character education in elementary schools across four national contexts: Indonesia, New Zealand, Finland, and Japan. The objective is to identify how honesty is defined, embedded in policy and practice, taught in classrooms, and reinforced by school and family cultures. From this, we aim to draw insights that can inform efforts to strengthen the implementation of honesty education in Indonesia.

This research contributes to Indonesian education by providing empirically grounded insights that can inform more culturally sensitive and pedagogically effective approaches to honesty education. By learning from comparative models, the study offers actionable recommendations for strengthening character education in Indonesia—especially in building a generation rooted in moral responsibility and civic integrity.

Methods

This research employed a qualitative approach with a comparative literature review design. The study focused on examining the implementation of honesty character education in elementary schools across four countries: Indonesia, New Zealand, Finland, and Japan. A literature review was selected as the primary method due to its appropriateness for synthesizing diverse educational practices and identifying cross-cultural patterns.

Data Sources

Data for this study were drawn from secondary sources including peer-reviewed journal articles, national education policy documents, curriculum frameworks, government and institutional reports, books, educational websites, and publicly available educational videos. These multimedia sources, particularly YouTube channels and interviews with educators or school communities, were used to capture nuanced cultural practices that might not be documented in academic publications.

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Search Strategy

Literature was retrieved using academic databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Keywords included combinations of: "honesty education," "character education," "elementary school," "moral education," "Indonesia," "Finland," "Japan," and "New Zealand." Searches were conducted in both English and Bahasa Indonesia to ensure comprehensive coverage.

Inclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they:

Focused on honesty or moral/character education in elementary school settings.

Provided country-specific data on educational policy, curriculum design, or teaching practices.

Were published within the last 20 years.

Were available in full text and offered conceptual, empirical, or policy-based insights.

Data Sorting and Screening

After collection, literature was carefully read and screened manually by the researchers based on relevance to the research focus. Sources were categorized according to their contextual alignment (e.g., national implementation, classroom strategies, parental involvement) and methodological rigor. The selection process prioritized clarity, validity, and potential for comparative insight.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis with a cross-case comparison framework. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), the analysis involved data reduction (highlighting relevant excerpts), data display (organizing findings into comparative tables), and drawing conclusions (identifying similarities, differences, and contextual influences). Particular attention was paid to how honesty is defined, operationalized, and reinforced across different systems.

Trustworthiness

To ensure validity, the study applied triangulation of sources, check-and-recheck verification, and peer debriefing techniques. Interpretations were cross-checked with original policy documents and theoretical frameworks to ensure consistency and credibility of findings.

Results and Discussion

Result

The comparative analysis conducted in this study highlights several notable and clearly distinguishable patterns in the implementation of honesty character education across the four countries examined: Indonesia, New Zealand, Finland, and Japan. These observed patterns have been systematically categorized based on key behavioral and moral elements that form the conceptual foundation of honesty as a character trait. Specifically, the analysis focuses on five core elements of honesty character: the practice of telling the truth, refraining from cheating, the habit of keeping promises, the demonstration of responsibility and trustworthiness, and finally, the role of teachers in modeling honest behavior. Each of these elements reflects a different dimension of honesty and is approached in unique ways within the respective educational systems and cultural contexts of the countries involved.

Telling the Truth

In the Indonesian context, the principle of telling the truth is typically emphasized through formal lessons in religious and civic education. Truth-telling is taught as a moral virtue and is usually reinforced through a combination of direct reprimands when students are caught lying, and indirect methods such as storytelling, daily moral reminders, and verbal affirmations delivered by teachers. These strategies often rely on religious teachings or cultural proverbs that highlight the consequences of dishonesty (Aningsih et al., 2022). However, the reinforcement is often corrective rather than preventive.

In contrast, New Zealand's approach centers on the idea of cultivating open and democratic classroom environments. Here, truth-telling is promoted not as a rule to be followed but as an essential component of ethical dialogue and mutual respect. Teachers actively encourage students to express their thoughts openly, engage in honest discussions, and respectfully consider differing viewpoints. Through these practices, honesty becomes part of a larger framework of civic integrity and social participation (Wood & Milligan, 2016).

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In Finland, the emphasis is on preventive and reflective methods. Instead of waiting for dishonesty to occur, Finnish schools instill in students the habit of thinking about the outcomes of their actions. Students are taught to reflect on the potential consequences of lying and are guided to develop self-awareness about the importance of maintaining internal coherence between thought, speech, and behavior. This promotes internalized regulation rather than external punishment (Daheri et al., 2022).

Japan takes a culturally rooted approach by embedding the value of makoto, which refers to sincerity, inner truthfulness, and emotional integrity. In this context, telling the truth is not only a moral obligation but a personal and emotional commitment. It is considered a source of inner peace and a reflection of one's honor. Thus, truth-telling in Japan is framed as a deeply personal responsibility that is tied to cultural identity and collective harmony (Roesgaard, 2016).

Not Cheating

When it comes to the value of not cheating, Indonesian students are usually instructed to complete their assignments independently. However, this instruction is often given without adequate follow-up or consistent reinforcement. While the expectation exists in principle, mechanisms to support or monitor independent academic integrity are limited, and contextual pressures can override moral considerations (Hilmi & Habiby, 2023).

In New Zealand, efforts to prevent cheating are embedded structurally in the assessment system. The use of formative assessment practices that focus on learning processes rather than outcomes helps reduce the pressure to cheat. By emphasizing personal progress and growth over competitive results, the system fosters a learning culture where honesty is more sustainable (Wood & Milligan, 2016).

Finland, consistent with its trust-based pedagogical philosophy, grants students considerable autonomy in managing their work. This trust-based approach, in turn, has a strong correlation with lower instances of cheating. Students are trusted to act with integrity and are given responsibilities that encourage self-discipline and honesty (Daheri et al., 2022).

Japan takes a direct moral approach by integrating anti-cheating values into formal moral education. Lessons teach that cheating not only undermines one's moral character but also causes disruption to social harmony. Students are taught to consider how their dishonesty affects others, reinforcing the collective impact of individual actions (Mulyadi, 2014).

Keeping Promises

In the Indonesian educational context, the habit of keeping promises is usually reinforced through discipline-oriented activities. For example, students may be given restrictions on allowances or encouraged to follow structured routines, such as those practiced in scout organizations. These activities help create a culture of responsibility and promise-keeping through behavioral control and repetition (Aulia, 2016).

In New Zealand, the emphasis is placed on mutual agreements and restorative dialogue. Classrooms often develop shared rules and expectations that are co-created with students. When promises are broken, restorative practices encourage dialogue, reflection, and repair, allowing students to understand the relational value of keeping their word (Wood & Milligan, 2016)

In Finland, students are actively involved in planning school events, managing group projects, and sharing responsibilities. This participatory approach fosters a sense of commitment and accountability, where keeping promises becomes essential for group success and personal credibility (Daheri et al., 2022).

In Japan, the emphasis on promise-keeping is linked to values of self-discipline and is reinforced strongly within the family unit, particularly through maternal modeling. The concept of the kyouiku mama, or highly involved mother, plays a critical role in shaping children's understanding of consistency, dependability, and integrity in following through with commitments (Hinta, 2020) .

Responsibility and Trustworthiness

In Indonesian schools, responsibility is introduced through roles and tasks assigned to students in the classroom or extracurricular activities. For instance, students may take on duties such as serving as class librarians, leading flag ceremonies, or organizing group activities. These roles are intended to instill a sense of duty and reliability (Maryani et al., 2019).

New Zealand's approach encourages collective responsibility by engaging students in larger, community-oriented projects that often involve the whole school. These initiatives require collaboration,

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mutual trust, and shared goals, thereby strengthening both responsibility and trustworthiness among students (Wood & Milligan, 2016).

In Finland, students are entrusted with more individualized forms of responsibility. They may be tasked with managing their personal finances, making decisions regarding their academic paths, or participating in democratic decision-making processes within the school. This autonomy nurtures a strong sense of agency and moral responsibility (Daheri et al., 2022).

In Japan, responsibility is woven into the everyday fabric of student life. Students engage in regular chores, from cleaning classrooms to serving lunch, and are involved in classroom governance through voting and other participatory activities. These routines foster personal responsibility through habitual practice and moral reflection (Kaihari et al., 2023).

Teacher as Role Model

In all four countries, the role of teachers as moral exemplars and guides in honesty character education is universally acknowledged, though the strategies differ. In Indonesia, teachers model honesty explicitly through direct instruction, storytelling, and frequent references to religious narratives. Their role as moral authorities is often tied to cultural and spiritual values (Sulastri & Simarmata, 2019).

In New Zealand, teachers create classroom environments that support honesty by fostering openness, mutual respect, and psychological safety. Instead of directing students' behavior, they facilitate conditions under which honesty can flourish naturally (Wood & Milligan, 2016).

Finnish teachers act more as co-learners and mentors. They engage students in reflection, design learning activities that model integrity, and prioritize fairness and equality in interactions, thereby demonstrating honesty through both conduct and pedagogy (Daheri et al., 2022).

In Japan, the teacher occupies a central and respected position in moral education. Within the context of doutoku, teachers are viewed as moral figures who embody the values they teach. Their consistency, discipline, and integrity make them powerful role models in the eyes of students (Usriana & Ningrum, 2018). These comparative insights are synthesized and structured in the following table 1, which outlines the specific strategies and cultural interpretations associated with honesty character education in each of the four national contexts examined.

Table 1. Comparation Finding

Element	Indonesia	New Zealand	Finland	Japan
Telling the truth	Reprimand, moral instruction (Aningsih et al., 2022)	Open dialogue, civic discourse (Wood & Milligan, 2016)	Self-monitoring, reflection (Daheri et al., 2022)	Makoto, sincerity, cultural duty (Roesgaard, 2016)
Not cheating	Teacher-led reminders (Hilmi & Habiby, 2023)	Formative assessment reduces pressure (Wood & Milligan, 2016)	Freedom with responsibility (Daheri et al., 2022)	Moral lesson on dishonor of cheating (Mulyadi, 2014)
Keeping promises	Scout routines, pocket money rules (Aulia, 2016)	Class contracts (Wood & Milligan, 2016)	Shared planning (Daheri et al., 2022)	Discipline, kyouiku mama (Hinta, 2020)
Responsibility	Duty rotation, leadership (Maryani et al., 2019)	School-wide responsibility (Wood & Milligan, 2016)	Budgeting, democracy (Daheri et al., 2022)	Chores, public tasks (Kaihari et al., 2023)
Teacher modeling	Religious examples (Sulastri & Simarmata, 2019)	Facilitation, openness (Wood & Milligan, 2016)	Reflective teaching (Daheri et al., 2022)	Exemplary model in doutoku (Usriana & Ningrum, 2018)

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Discussion

The findings derived from this study indicate that, although honesty is universally acknowledged as a fundamental moral value essential to human development and social cohesion, the actual process of nurturing and cultivating this virtue within elementary education settings shows significant variation when examined across different national and cultural contexts. These variations are not random but can be meaningfully analyzed through three interrelated dimensions: the way honesty is integrated into the curriculum, the specific pedagogical strategies used in classrooms, and the broader sociocultural orientations that influence educational practices and value formation.

Curricular Integration

When examining how honesty is embedded within the official school curriculum, Japan emerges as a particularly notable example. It formalizes the teaching of honesty through doutoku, which is a designated subject specifically devoted to moral education. The presence of a dedicated space within the timetable and curriculum structure for teaching moral values such as honesty reflects a strong and deliberate commitment at the state level to instill ethical behavior as a core part of students' formal schooling experience (Mulyadi, 2014). This policy direction ensures that honesty is not left to chance or teacher discretion but is institutionalized across all schools.

Finland adopts a more flexible yet equally consistent approach. Rather than assigning honesty education to a particular subject, character development—including honesty—is integrated across curricular areas as part of cross-curricular competencies. This method allows educators greater autonomy to weave values into various learning contexts, which may include language arts, social studies, or even mathematics, while still ensuring that these values remain a coherent part of overall student development (Daheri et al., 2022).

In New Zealand, honesty is interwoven into civic education and the broader democratic ethos that underpins classroom life. This means that honesty is not only a concept discussed during formal lessons but becomes part of the everyday interactions and decision-making processes in the school environment. The value of honesty is continuously reinforced through dialogue, group negotiation, and collaborative learning (Wood & Milligan, 2016).

By comparison, Indonesia also includes honesty within the formal scope of religious and civic education. However, the integration lacks structural consistency and nationwide coherence. While certain schools and teachers emphasize honesty, there is no uniformly applied mandate or clear national guideline that outlines how it should be taught, reinforced, or assessed across schools (Sulastri & Simarmata, 2019). This unevenness results in the potential marginalization of honesty education, especially in high-pressure academic environments where success is narrowly defined by performance on tests and examinations.

Such differences in curricular approaches affect not just what is taught, but also the seriousness with which honesty is treated within the education system. In systems where honesty is embedded systematically, as in Japan or Finland, the value is presented as essential, unavoidable, and deeply interwoven into students' educational journey. In contrast, the lack of curricular clarity in Indonesia renders honesty education vulnerable to being overshadowed by more immediately measurable academic goals.

Pedagogical Strategy and Student Agency

Pedagogical strategy—how values like honesty are taught in the classroom—emerges as a second critical factor in shaping character education outcomes. In both Finland and New Zealand, teaching approaches emphasize student agency, autonomy, collaborative inquiry, and the use of reflective dialogue. Teachers in these settings act not merely as instructors but as facilitators of ethical development, inviting students to take ownership of their learning and moral decision-making processes (Daheri et al., 2022; Wood & Milligan, 2016). This approach is aligned with constructivist educational theories, which posit that moral and ethical understanding is best developed through active participation in meaningful, real-world learning contexts.

In contrast, Japan employs a more structured and habituated pedagogical model. Repetition, consistency, and guided moral reflection are central to how values are internalized. Students are frequently engaged in school rituals, daily routines, and structured discussions led by teachers that reinforce core virtues such as sincerity and honesty. Through this methodical and immersive approach,

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honesty is not treated as an abstract concept but as a daily behavior that becomes embedded through repetition and lived experience (Mulyadi, 2014).

Indonesia does share some overlap with the Japanese approach in using routines such as classroom pickets or scout training to instill discipline and values. However, these strategies often function in isolation and are not embedded within a larger pedagogical framework. The tendency is to rely on verbal moral instruction, such as reminding students to be honest, without linking these messages to deeper cognitive or emotional engagement. Consequently, character education remains largely superficial and may not result in meaningful internalization of values.

All four countries do, however, converge on the recognition of teacher modeling as an essential component of honesty education. In Finland and Japan, this modeling is strongly supported by a coherent school culture and peer expectations. Teachers do not merely tell students to be honest—they demonstrate honesty in their actions, decision-making, and treatment of students. In Indonesia, while teachers may model honesty through direct instruction or storytelling, this modeling is sometimes undermined by conflicting institutional signals. For example, if a school emphasizes academic competition above all else, students may receive mixed messages about the real value of honesty (Sulastri & Simarmata, 2019).

Sociocultural Foundations and Family Involvement

The third lens, sociocultural orientation, addresses the deeper cultural narratives and family dynamics that shape how honesty is perceived and reinforced outside of formal schooling. In Japan, the cultural notion of makoto provides a rich ethical foundation for honesty, defining it not just as truth-telling or rule-following, but as a way of maintaining personal harmony and social equilibrium. Children are socialized to understand that being honest upholds collective dignity and mutual respect. Parents—especially mothers—play a central role in this process, guiding behavior through everyday interaction and constant reinforcement (Hinta, 2020).

In Finland, the culture of trust influences every level of the educational system. Students are trusted to manage their own behavior, even in unsupervised or informal settings. This trust fosters an internal motivation to be honest, as children grow up valuing responsibility as a social norm rather than fearing punishment for misbehavior. Teachers, parents, and students operate within a shared understanding that personal integrity matters (Daheri et al., 2022).

In New Zealand, honesty is framed within a participatory and democratic culture. The value is reinforced through fairness, respect for differing views, and joint decision-making. Students are encouraged to voice opinions honestly, help establish behavioral norms, and reflect on ethical choices as part of a group. This engagement builds a civic understanding of honesty as a tool for building just and inclusive communities (Wood & Milligan, 2016).

Indonesia, while rooted in cultural and religious traditions that uphold honesty, faces systemic barriers in translating these ideals into coordinated practices. Schools are often the primary agents of character education, with limited involvement from families. There is a noticeable gap in home-school collaboration, meaning students may receive inconsistent messages or insufficient reinforcement of honesty values in non-school environments. The lack of strong family-school partnerships weakens the continuity of moral education and often leaves the burden solely on teachers (Sulastri & Simarmata, 2019).

Implications for Indonesia

Drawing from these comparative insights, several practical implications emerge for enhancing honesty character education in the Indonesian context. First, curricular design must extend beyond symbolic inclusion. It should include specific, actionable frameworks that articulate what honesty looks like in practice, how it can be integrated across subjects, and how its development can be assessed in meaningful ways.

Second, teachers require both pedagogical and moral support. This includes professional development programs that go beyond content delivery and instead focus on building reflective and participatory classroom cultures. Teachers should be equipped to foster discussions around ethical dilemmas, support student decision-making, and create learning experiences that encourage honest behavior.

Third, stronger school-family partnerships are essential. Schools could initiate value-based programs that involve parents more directly, such as joint service projects, home-based activities aligned

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with school ethics, or parental workshops on character development. This alignment would help ensure consistency in value reinforcement between home and school.

Fourth, greater policy coherence is needed. If the broader education system continues to emphasize academic scores as the primary metric of success, then honesty education will struggle to gain traction. Assessment systems and school accountability measures should be redesigned to value not just cognitive outcomes but also social-emotional and ethical growth.

Ultimately, the goal is not to replicate foreign models wholesale, but to identify adaptable principles that resonate with Indonesia's own cultural identity. Japan illustrates the impact of daily moral habituation. Finland offers an example of trust-based learning that promotes internal motivation. New Zealand shows how democratic engagement can foster honesty as part of collective civic life. These models offer insights that, if thoughtfully adapted, could greatly enhance Indonesia's own efforts to cultivate honesty as a lived and sustainable value.

In conclusion, the success of honesty character education depends on more than curriculum content. It thrives in systems where values are not only taught but also consistently lived—through pedagogy, school culture, institutional policy, and active family engagement. For Indonesia to move forward, it must commit to a comprehensive, culturally responsive, and systematically supported approach that makes honesty a visible, habitual, and meaningful part of every child's educational journey.

Conclusion

This comparative study reveals that although honesty is recognized as a universal moral value, its practical implementation in elementary schools is deeply influenced by national policies, pedagogical traditions, and sociocultural norms. Finland and Japan demonstrate coherent systems where honesty is taught consistently through curricular integration, trust-based autonomy, or formal moral instruction. New Zealand integrates honesty through civic education and participatory classroom culture. In contrast, Indonesia, despite having policy-level commitments to character education, continues to struggle with fragmented implementation, minimal parental engagement, and an overemphasis on academic performance. These findings confirm that honesty cannot be developed through instruction alone; it must be cultivated through lived experience, reflective pedagogy, and aligned school-family collaboration. Schools that succeed in this endeavor integrate honesty as both a value and a practice—embedded in curriculum, modeled by educators, and supported by the community. In conclusion, honesty education thrives where character development is systematically planned, pedagogically supported, and culturally reinforced. This study contributes to the discourse on moral education by offering cross-cultural insights that Indonesia can adapt to strengthen its own character education system—making the formation of honest, responsible citizens not only a vision, but a reality.

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