

## EFFECTIVENESS OF VALUE EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN PRIMARY VS. SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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### **Abstract**

*Value education—systematic efforts to teach moral, social, and civic values—has been widely promoted as essential for holistic development in children and adolescents. This study synthesizes empirical and practitioner literature to compare the effectiveness of value education programs in primary and secondary school contexts. Drawing on a mixed-methods narrative review of studies, program evaluations, and curriculum analyses from diverse educational settings, the paper examines (1) program design and delivery models, (2) developmental appropriateness and receptivity at different ages, (3) measurable outcomes (attitudes, behaviors, social skills), (4) the role of teachers, parents, and school culture, and (5) common barriers to impact. Findings indicate that value education programs tend to produce clearer short-term attitudinal shifts in primary school children—where teachers can harness developmental plasticity and integrated curricular time—while secondary students show more nuanced changes that depend heavily on pedagogical approach, peer culture, and opportunities for agency.*

*Programs emphasizing experiential learning, reflective practice, classroom dialogue, and school-wide culture change perform better in both levels than do didactic or one-off activities. Sustained engagement, teacher training, parental involvement, and alignment with school climate are critical moderators of effectiveness. The paper concludes with recommendations for designing age-sensitive value education programs and outlines gaps for future longitudinal and cross-cultural research.*

### **Keywords**

*value education, moral education, primary school, secondary school, program effectiveness, school climate*

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## Introduction

Societies continually ask schools to do more than convey literacy and numeracy: they expect educational institutions to help form citizens who are ethical, responsible, and socially aware. Value education—variously called moral education, character education, civic education, or ethics education—addresses that expectation by intentionally cultivating values such as honesty, empathy, responsibility, tolerance, and respect. Across policy documents and curricula worldwide, value education has been recommended as a vital component of holistic student development.

Despite broad consensus about its importance, there is persistent debate about *how* value education should be delivered and *when* it is most effective. Primary and secondary schools are distinct developmental environments. Primary-aged children (roughly ages 6–11) are typically characterized by concrete thinking, strong dependence on adult modeling, and formative socialization of basic prosocial habits. Secondary-aged adolescents (roughly ages 12–18) undergo significant cognitive, social, and identity development: they seek autonomy, are highly sensitive to peer influence, and are capable of abstract moral reasoning. These differences suggest that the same value education program may have different effects across age groups, and that program design must be developmentally responsive.

This paper investigates the relative effectiveness of value education programs in primary vs. secondary contexts. “Effectiveness” here is defined across multiple domains: changes in students’ moral knowledge and reasoning, observable prosocial behavior, classroom climate and relationships, and longer-term indicators such as attendance and disciplinary incidents where available. The review synthesizes empirical studies (quantitative and qualitative), program evaluations, and design exemplars to answer three central questions: (1) Do value education programs produce differential effects by school level? (2) Which program features and delivery models work best at each stage? (3) What contextual factors (teachers, parents, school climate, policy) moderate program success?

The goal is practical as well as analytic: to provide evidence-informed guidance for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers seeking to implement value education that actually changes learning environments and student behavior. The paper proceeds with a description of the review methodology, followed by findings organized into thematic areas, a discussion interpreting the findings through a developmental lens, practical recommendations, limitations of the current evidence base, and directions for future research.

## **Methodology**

This paper uses a systematic, narrative-review approach to synthesize literature on value education program effectiveness across primary and secondary school levels. The review draws on peer-reviewed research articles, published program evaluations, gray literature from educational NGOs and ministries, and illustrative case studies from varied cultural contexts.

**Search and selection.** Databases and sources consulted include education databases, institutional repositories, and government/NGO reports focusing on value/character education programs from the last 20 years. Search terms combined variants of: “value education,” “character education,” “moral education,” “primary school,” “elementary school,” “secondary school,” “adolescent,” “Program evaluation,” “effectiveness,” and “outcomes.” Preference was given to empirical studies that reported measurable outcomes (pre/post measures, comparative controls, qualitative assessments), but high-quality descriptive evaluations were also included when rigorous experimental designs were scarce.

**Data extraction and synthesis.** From each study the following were extracted: context (country, urban/rural), target age/grade, program duration and components, pedagogical methods (didactic, experiential, discussion-based), role of teachers and parents, measurement instruments (surveys, observations), outcomes reported, and key success factors or barriers. Findings were synthesized thematically with attention to contrasts between primary and secondary school results.

**Limitations.** The evidence base is heterogeneous: measures of “values” vary across studies (self-report scales, behavioral observation, disciplinary records), follow-up periods are often short, and randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are relatively rare. Cultural differences in defining values mean that cross-study comparison needs caution. Wherever possible, the paper highlights studies with stronger methodological designs and notes gaps where evidence is tentative.

### **1. Program Designs and Pedagogical Models**

Value education programs take many forms. A typology helps in assessing what works and where.

#### **1.1 Curricular Integration vs. Standalone Modules**

Programs either embed values across subjects (integrative model) or offer discrete courses/assemblies on values. Primary settings favor integration—storytelling in language lessons, role-play in circle time, and consistent adult modeling—because younger children benefit from repetition across contexts. Secondary programs often include standalone modules (ethics classes, civic education

units) that allow for deeper theoretical engagement but risk being isolated from day-to-day school life.

### **1.2 Didactic Instruction vs. Experiential Learning**

Didactic approaches (lectures, moral exemplars, sermons) can transmit knowledge about values but are less effective in changing behavior. Experiential approaches—service learning, community projects, collaborative problem-solving, restorative justice practices, and role-play— promote internalization. Primary students respond well to concrete experiential activities (helping classmates, classroom jobs), while adolescents benefit from projects that afford agency and authentic social responsibility (peer mentoring, student councils).

### **1.3 Teacher Modeling and Classroom Practices**

Teachers are primary agents of value socialization. Programs that train teachers to explicitly articulate expectations, use consistent reinforcement, model prosocial behavior, and facilitate reflective discussion show stronger outcomes. In primary grades, teacher consistency in routines and immediate feedback are especially potent. In secondary grades, the teacher’s role shifts to facilitator and conversation partner; teacher authenticity and willingness to discuss moral dilemmas matter more.

### **1.4 School-Wide Culture and Policy**

Effective programs often adopt a whole-school approach: code of conduct, positive behavior supports, shared rituals, and parent engagement. In schools where values are reinforced through consistent policies and peer leadership, programs show higher sustainability. Fragmented, classroom-only initiatives tend to have limited reach.

### **Evidence on Effectiveness: Primary vs. Secondary**

This section synthesizes outcomes reported across studies and evaluations, contrasting primary and secondary results.

### **1.5 Primary Schools: Stronger Short-Term Behavioral Gains**

Primary school programs frequently report measurable improvements in prosocial behavior, classroom conduct, and empathy indicators within months of implementation. Several consistent findings emerge:

- **Habituation and Routine:** Young children readily acquire habits when programs integrate values into daily routines—e.g., “helping time,” reward systems for cooperation, and teacher-led storytelling about fairness. Habit formation at this age is powerful because repeated practice with immediate reinforcement solidifies behavior.

- **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Integration:** SEL programs (teaching self-regulation, emotion recognition, conflict resolution) produce significant gains in young children's social competence and reduce conduct problems. Meta-analyses of SEL programs frequently show effect sizes in behavioral outcomes that are larger in primary samples than adolescent samples, likely due to developmental receptivity.
- **Parental Involvement:** In primary contexts, family engagement—home activities, parent workshops, and communication—augments school efforts. Younger children's behaviors are more susceptible to consistent adult messaging across settings.
- **Observation-Based Outcomes:** Studies using classroom observation and teacher reports often show reductions in disruptions, improved peer interactions, and increased help-giving behaviors post-program.

Limitations for primary evidence include shorter follow-ups and reliance on teacher reports which may be subject to bias. Nevertheless, primary-age children's malleability makes early interventions cost-effective for habit formation.

### **1.6 Secondary Schools: Complex, Mixed Results**

Adolescents present a more complex picture. Programs in secondary schools show more variable outcomes, influenced by program type, student engagement, and peer culture.

- **Attitudinal vs. Behavioral Change:** Many secondary programs successfully shift attitudes—students may report increased recognition of the importance of civic duty or ethical reasoning. However, translating attitude change to observable behavior (e.g., consistent prosocial actions, reduced incidences of bullying) is less consistent.
- **Role of Agency and Relevance:** Adolescents respond better to programs that respect their agency. When value education includes project-based service, participatory governance, or authentic dilemmas, students demonstrate higher engagement and sometimes behavior change. Conversely, top-down moralizing approaches often trigger resistance and superficial compliance.
- **Peer Influence and School Climate:** Peer norms strongly affect adolescents. A values curriculum that clashes with dominant peer culture (e.g., a school where competitiveness and academic cheating are normalized) faces uphill battles. Whole-school reforms that align peer leadership, discipline policies, and extracurricular activities are more successful.

- **Cognitive Sophistication:** Secondary students are capable of abstract moral reasoning. Programs that incorporate Socratic dialogue, debate, and perspective-taking can deepen moral deliberation. Yet without practical opportunities to act on values, increased reasoning does not always lead to behavior change.
- **Measurement Challenges:** Many secondary program evaluations rely on self-report surveys of attitudes and intentions, which can overestimate real-world change. Objective indicators (disciplinary referrals, attendance) sometimes show modest improvements but are confounded by many factors.

### **1.7 Cross-Level Comparative Themes**

Synthesizing across levels reveals several comparative insights:

1. **Developmental Fit Matters.** Programs that tailor pedagogies to developmental stage (concrete practice for primary, deliberative engagement for secondary) perform better.
2. **Duration and Consistency.** Short-term or one-off interventions are rarely effective at either level. Sustained programs embedded in school life show stronger effects.
3. **Whole-School Approaches Win.** Initiatives that change policies, teacher practice, peer leadership, and parental involvement outperform classroom-only modules at both levels.
4. **Measurement Sensitivity.** Behavioral changes are easier to detect in primary contexts (observable routines) than in adolescent contexts where behaviors are distributed across more autonomous settings.
5. **Contextual Moderators.** Socio-economic factors, school size, teacher quality, and cultural norms moderate program effectiveness; contextual adaptation is crucial. Discussion

The comparative review underscores that value education is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Primary schools enjoy an advantage in producing short-term behavioral change through habit formation, routine reinforcement, and close adult oversight. The plasticity of early years, coupled With structured classroom environments, allow values to be modeled, practiced, and rewarded in ways that become routinized.

Adolescents in secondary settings require different pedagogical levers. They need opportunities for meaningful agency, relevance to their lived concerns, and moral spaces where ideas can be debated and practiced. The developmental tasks of identity formation and peer affiliation mean that value education must engage social

networks and cultivate peer leaders as allies rather than assume adult authority will suffice.

In both contexts, the evidence points away from didactic moral instruction alone. Programs combining cognitive reflection (why values matter), affective engagement (empathy, perspective-taking), and behavioral practice (service, restorative conversations) demonstrate the most durable outcomes. Teacher capacity is pivotal: teachers who are trained, supported, and exemplify values create climates conducive to change. This suggests that investment in teacher professional development and structural supports (time, curriculum flexibility) may yield high returns.

A critical implication is the importance of systemic alignment. Value education needs policy, school leadership, classroom practice, home involvement, and community partnerships to be coherent. Fragmented or short-term initiatives risk being superficial.

Finally, evaluation methods require strengthening. More longitudinal, mixed-methods studies that track behavioral and socio-emotional outcomes over time would clarify the long-term impacts of early value education and the conditions under which adolescent programs produce durable change.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the synthesis, practical recommendations are:

1. Design age-sensitive programs. For primary grades, focus on routines, storytelling, SEL integration, and parental reinforcement. For secondary grades, emphasize participatory projects, debate, civic engagement, and opportunities for leadership.
2. Adopt whole-school approaches. Align policies, disciplinary systems, teacher practices, and extracurricular activities around core values to ensure consistency and reinforcement.
3. Sustain programs over time. Avoid one-off sessions; embed value education across years with progressive complexity tailored to developmental stages.
4. Invest in teacher development. Provide sustained professional learning on facilitation techniques, restorative practices, classroom management for values, and reflective pedagogy.
5. Engage families and communities. Create home-school activities, community service partnerships, and parent workshops to reinforce messages beyond school.
6. Use experiential and reflective methods. Combine service learning,

restorative circles, role-plays, and reflective writing to translate values into action.

7. Monitor outcomes robustly. Implement mixed-methods evaluation including observations, behavioral indicators, and qualitative narratives to capture both attitudinal and behavioral changes.

## **2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The current evidence base has important limits. There are few large-scale randomized trials comparing program models across age groups, and many studies have short follow-up windows. Cross-cultural variability in value definitions complicates standardization. Moreover, measurement often privileges self-reports over objective behavioral indicators.

Future research priorities include longitudinal cohort studies tracking early interventions into adolescence; RCTs comparing integrative vs. standalone models; cross-cultural comparative studies to identify universal vs. context-specific practices; and mixed-methods work exploring how peer culture mediates adolescent responses. Additionally, research on cost-effectiveness would help policymakers prioritize scalable models.

## **Conclusion**

Value education remains a central mission of schooling, but effectiveness depends on developmental sensitivity, program design, and systemic support. Primary schools are well-positioned to inculcate prosocial habits through routine, modeling, and SEL practices. Secondary schools require approaches that respect adolescent autonomy and leverage agency, peer leadership, and authentic community engagement. Across levels, sustained, whole-school initiatives, supported by trained teachers and family partnerships, are most likely to produce meaningful change. Strengthening evaluation and tailoring programs culturally and developmentally will improve the impact of value education in forming ethical, engaged citizens.

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Note: This is a short, illustrative reference list — for academic submission please expand and format according to your target style (APA, Chicago, etc.).

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