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Teaching Strategies for Shaping Children's Character: A study using the Nominal Group Technique

Nur Adillah Ramly[1], Abdul Halim Masnan[2*], Azizah Awang[2,] Nani Menon[1]
*Corresponding Author

[1] National Child Development Research Centre, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak Malaysia, [2] Human Development, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak Malaysia.

adillah.ramly@gmail.com, abdul.halim@fpm.upsi.edu.my, nanimenon107@gmail.com, aziey2143@gmail.com
Tel: 60122741715

Abstract
This article draws on the insights of seven early childhood professionals to develop teaching strategies for shaping children's character. Despite the growing emphasis on character education, there remains a lack of validated, evidence-based strategies for achieving this goal in early childhood. This study employs the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) to develop and validate strategies through expert consensus, with seven expert-endorsed approaches receiving acceptance ratings between 90.48% and 100%. The research supports Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), promoting inclusive, equitable quality education. Nevertheless, future studies should engage moral education experts to refine these strategies further.

Keywords: Character Education; moral education; Nominal Group Technique; teaching strategies

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1.0 Introduction
Character education in early childhood is increasingly recognized as essential for fostering values, behaviors, and long-term positive contributions to society. Early childhood education faces numerous challenges, including a lack of evidence-based strategies to shape children's character effectively. In the Malaysian context, despite character education being a key component of the National Preschool Standard Curriculum (KSPK), its practical implementation remains inconsistent (Saari et al., 2022; Zakaria et al., 2023).

The research suggests that a lack of professional development and practical research-based resources leaves many early childhood educators struggling to implement character education effectively. For example, those studies have revealed that despite experts' and organizations' support for moral and character education, teachers tend to be reluctant or unsure about the practice without specific, legislated models and support from the curriculum framework (Stronge, 2018). Moreover, the diverse nature of teacher training programs has contributed to disparities in teacher competency, leading to discrepancies in the quality of character education provided across different educational settings (Mustapha et al., 2022). The need for organized plans and teacher professional growth programs to remedy these obstructions is evident   because of these factors. There is a gap we need to fill: a clearly articulated and validated set of strategies that educators can use to tackle   this important element of early learning.

Thus, in Malaysia, the advancement of character education is consistent with the goals of national education as well as global initiatives, including Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education. As such, continued research and collaboration with moral education experts are needed to refine and contextualize these strategies in different educational contexts in Malaysia (Mohamed & Hao, 2024).

This remains a work in progress, as the pursuit of inclusive and equitable quality education forms part of Sustainable Development Goal 4; however, these strategies continue to evolve. Therefore, it will be important to engage moral education experts in future research to better validate and contextualize these approaches to a range of educational settings (UNESCO, 2021).

Thus, the current study attempts to reach expert agreements about the evidence-based strategies for implementing character education in early childhood, focused on contributing to the achievement of SDG 4 regarding inclusive and equitable quality education.

Research Objectives:
- Develop evidence-based teaching strategies for character education in preschool settings.
- Validate the effectiveness of these strategies using expert consensus through the Nominal Group Technique (NGT).
- Contribute to strengthening inclusive and equitable quality education aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4).

2.0 Literature Review

It's widely accepted that one of the best methods for character education is modeling positive behavior — teachers actively demonstrating the values they hope to teach. Such an approach is based on social learning theory, which posits that learning occurs not only from the direct experience of reinforcement and punishment but also through observation and imitation (Bandura, 1977). Children, especially at a young age, are predisposed to imitate what is modeled for them by trustworthy adults they view as role models. Seeing kindness, fairness, or patience consistently from a teacher, for instance, gives children things to model. This strategy is especially effective because it is implicit and experiential, allowing children to see values in action instead of just hearing about them.

Although character education has been well-researched, little has been done with strategies specifically for preschool education. Existing literature has not emphasized participatory methods (like NGT) as a means to reach consensus on effective approaches for developing moral education in early childhood (Mustapha et al., 2022).

This study draws on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which emphasizes learning through observation and modeling. The choice of NGT is justified by its systematic approach to gathering expert consensus while minimizing researcher bias (Harvey & Holmes, 2012). Additionally, storytelling and role-play strategies are grounded in narrative psychology and social-emotional learning principles (Bruner, 2003; Iftach & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023).

Research has consistently highlighted the neurological basis of this learning mechanism. Mirror neurons, first discovered by Rizzolatti et al. (1996), provide a biological explanation for how children learn through observation. These neurons activate both when an individual performs an action and when they observe the same action performed by another, suggesting a neurological foundation for social learning theory. Moreover, studies show that modeling is compelling when you include verbal explanations; by sharing the rationale behind the behavior, children can soak up underlying values more and build deeper muscle memory to ensure that they will do the right thing in the right situation (Marantz, 1988). Educational psychologists maintain that this is about more than modelling and engaging children in exploring moral reasoning and ethical behavior.

Character education is most effective when engaging and developmentally appropriate tools are used. **Storytelling** is one such approach, offering immersive narratives that introduce children to moral lessons, virtuous characters, and the consequences of actions. For example, stories about honesty can help children understand the value of truthfulness. Research shows that storytelling captures attention and emotions, helping children connect with characters and absorb moral lessons (Murphy, 2024). Narrative psychology highlights that stories allow children to explore moral challenges safely and vicariously, fostering critical thinking and moral reasoning. Active participation, such as discussing characters' choices or proposing alternative endings, further enhances engagement and understanding (Bruner, 2003).

Role-play enables children to practice social and moral behaviors by exploring perspectives, developing empathy, and solving problems collaboratively. This approach fosters emotional intelligence and equips children with advanced social skills (Iftach & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023).

Positive reinforcement encourages desirable behaviors like kindness and responsibility through rewards and praise. While effective, over-reliance on external rewards can weaken intrinsic motivation. Balancing external recognition with reflection promotes genuine internalization of values (Deci & Ryan, 2013).

Evidence-based strategies, such as the Nominal Group Technique (NGT), help identify and validate effective practices by fostering expert consensus. This ensures character education strategies are both practical and research-backed (Wilson, 2018).

Recent studies by Saari et al. (2022) and Mohamed and Hao (2024) have emphasized the importance of moral education and its relevance in Malaysian early childhood education, further supporting the significance of this research.

One challenge in holistic character education programs is weak teacher training and inconsistent implementation. This highlights the need for ongoing professional development and institutional support to fully realize the social and emotional potential of character education in early childhood settings (Stronge, 2018). Preventive approaches are more beneficial than punitive ones but require trained educators, proper facilities, and sufficient resources such as time, training, and funding.

As moral education evolves, a balance between traditional and modern methods is crucial for effective programs. By integrating modeling, storytelling, role-playing, and thoughtful positive reinforcement, educators can create a supportive environment for ethical

growth. The aim goes beyond teaching specific behaviors—it involves fostering empathy, critical thinking, and independent moral reasoning in children.

3.0 Methodology
The NGT method is the primary research methodology used in this study. Seven experts in early childhood education participated in the study. Correspondingly, researchers conduct NGT sessions online using Google Meet since it is still not practical to convene experts in person at one time. The session lasted for two hours. Experts convened to gather ideas and solutions based on expert opinion, and the NGT approach was employed in a brainstorming session to gather ideas and solutions. Using the NGT approach, the researcher performed a specific computation at the end of the session to produce results that addressed the study's objectives.

The study applied NGT to achieve expert consensus among seven early childhood education specialists. Experts were selected based on their professional experience and contributions to character education research (Mustapha et al., 2022). The session conducted online via Google Meet, lasted two hours and involved structured steps, including idea generation, clarification, and ranking.

NGT was chosen for its structured methodology, which includes generating ideas, sharing them without discussion, clarifying and grouping concepts, and voting to determine priorities. This method ensures that the final strategies are both evidence-based and reflective of expert consensus (Harvey & Holmes, 2012).

3.1 NGT Techniques Step
Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is a structured method for identifying a group's common perspectives on a topic. Harvey and Holmes (2012) initially described it as a "participation technique for social planning," involving exploratory research, citizen engagement, interdisciplinary specialists, and proposal assessment. Over time, NGT has been applied in various fields, including empirical social science research and education (Kennedy & Clinton, 2009; MacPhail, 2001). However, it is more commonly used in health studies within social science research.

NGT follows a systematic four-step process: (1) Independent idea generation in response to a prompt, (2) Round-robin sharing without discussion, (3) Clarifying and grouping related ideas, and (4) Voting to prioritize ideas. Sessions typically include 5–10 participants and last 1.5–2 hours (Harvey & Holmes, 2012). The researcher's role is primarily facilitative, reducing biases often seen in other methods that rely on the researcher's framing and coding (Lomax & McLeman, 1984).

The success of NGT depends on crafting a well-formulated stimulus question. Harvey and Holmes (2012) also compared NGT to the Fuzzy Delphi Method, highlighting its unique strengths in minimizing researcher influence and fostering group consensus.

3.2 Sampling
A group of seven skilled persons with a focus on early childhood education were included in the study. This amount is sufficient to guarantee that the sample used is specialized and does not require a significant amount. A small or large cohort can apply the NGT (Lomax & McLeman, 1984; Mustapha et al., 2022; Wiggins et al., 2020). Alternatively, depending on the specific needs of the research, it can be separated into smaller clusters to improve effective communication. According to Horton (1980), the ideal sample size is seven to ten people. However, Harvey and Holmes (2012) contended that the NGT procedure can be implemented with a sample size of 6 to 12.

4.0 Findings

Table 1. Overall Data Teaching Strategies for Shaping Children's Character

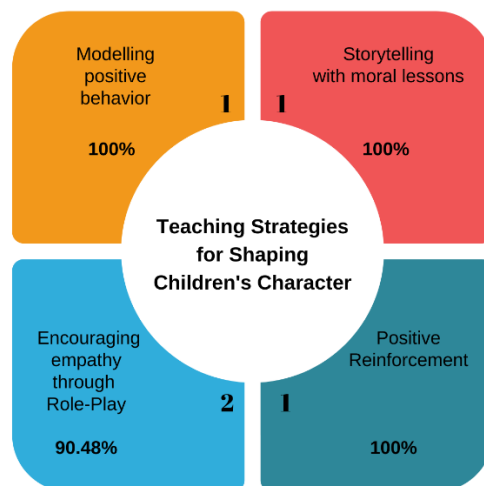| Items/Elements	Voter1	Voter2	Voter3	Voter4	Voter5	Voter6	Voter7	Total item score	Percentage	Rank Priority	Voter Consensus
Modeling positive behavior	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	21	100	1	Suitable
Storytelling with moral lessons	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	21	100	1	Suitable
Encouraging empathy through Role-Play	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	19	90.48	2	Suitable
Positive Reinforcement	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	21	100	1	Suitable

Fig. 1: Teaching Strategies for Shaping Children's Character Ranking

The data analysis reveals a strong consensus among the seven voters on the effectiveness of several character education strategies for early childhood. Three strategies, modeling positive behavior, storytelling with moral lessons, and positive reinforcement, received a perfect score of 21, with 100% agreement among all voters. This unanimous approval highlights these strategies as highly prioritized and suitable for fostering character development in young children. Moreover, the consistently high scores indicate that these strategies are considered essential components of an effective character education framework (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004).

In contrast, Encouraging Empathy through Role-Play received slightly lower ratings, with a total score of 19 and a consensus of 90.48%. Although still considered suitable, this element ranks second in priority compared to the other three strategies. The variation in ratings suggests that, while voters generally support its use, there is slightly less uniform agreement on its effectiveness compared to the other approaches. Overall, the data demonstrates that the voters strongly endorse all four strategies, emphasizing the top three (Tomz & Van Houweling, 2008).

The unanimous agreement on three of the four strategies—modeling positive behavior, storytelling with moral lessons, and positive reinforcement—highlights their foundational role in character education. These strategies are complementary, addressing different dimensions of moral development: observation (modeling), engagement (storytelling), and reinforcement (positive outcomes). Role-play is a fantastic approach but slightly less consensus, yet it offers interactive and experiential support for social-emotional growth, especially empathy.

The results of this study support previous theories and frameworks within the early childhood education field, including Bandura's social learning theory and Bruner's narrative psychology. The findings from this study highlight the importance of integrating evidence-based practice in teaching and addressing the gap by which character education strategies were being implemented in practical teaching, particularly in Malaysia. Using these validated methods, teachers can develop an integrated method to help young children grow ethically and morally.

5.0 DISCUSSION

Building the character of children is essential to early childhood education because it helps shape their social and emotional frameworks on which they will base their future experiences. Teachers, as part of the educational stakeholders, play a significant role in implementing effective strategies aimed at promoting positive character traits such as empathy, responsibility, and respect. These traits can be alluded to in the classroom in a variety of ways, some of which are shown to be more impactful than others. The below discussion addresses the main teaching strategies that work for building a child's character based on data from seven voters. These findings emphasize the importance of an integrated approach to character education. Positive behavior modeling and storytelling, for example, were unanimously approved, which so far indicated their overlap as the champions of teaching moral standards. Role-play, slightly lower, is also good for empathy building (Bandura, 1977; Iftach & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023).

The results of this study pinpoint four teaching strategies for shaping children's character based on the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) from seven experts. Among these, **modeling positive behavior,** for example, received a perfect score of 21 and had a 100% suitability rating among these. This method focuses on the teacher as a role model whose kindness, fairness, and responsibility become a model for children to follow. This aligns well with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which suggests children learn most effectively by observing and imitating others. When teachers practice good behavior consistently and are good examples for the children, they create a good foundation on which children internalize and apply good values in their daily lives.

Similarly, **storytelling with moral lessons** also received a perfect score of 21 and unanimous endorsement, tying with modeling positive behavior as one of the most effective strategies. Storytelling is a powerful tool that enables educators to convey complex moral concepts in an engaging and relatable manner. Through carefully crafted narratives, children are introduced to values such as honesty, compassion, and perseverance. This method resonates with Bruner's (2003) narrative psychology, which emphasizes the importance of stories in shaping moral and cognitive development. Storytelling not only captivates children's attention but also promotes critical

thinking and moral reasoning as they reflect on characters' actions and outcomes.

Encouraging empathy through role-play received slightly lower ratings, scoring 19 points with a 90.48% consensus. While highly regarded, its lower ranking suggests that role-play may be perceived as more resource-intensive or challenging to implement effectively compared to the other strategies. However, role-play remains a valuable approach for fostering empathy and emotional intelligence, as it allows children to step into others' perspectives and navigate diverse social scenarios. This experiential approach has been shown to build social-emotional skills in children, which is echoed in recent studies that highlight self-awareness as key to emotional development (Iftach & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023).

Finally, **positive reinforcement** received a perfect score of 21 and home rule for unanimous approval, just above modeling positive behavior and storytelling as a top strategy. A positive, constructive atmosphere is used in this approach, where you encourage and reward the behavior you want. Teachers can incentivize positive behaviors and the positive outcomes associated with rewarding students for acts of kindness, responsibility, and cooperation. Nonetheless, as mentioned by Deci and Ryan (2013), extrinsic rewards must be balanced with opportunities to develop intrinsic motivation in the long run to maintain an effective moral internalization.

Overall, the results indicate that there is a relative agreement among expert raters that modeling good behavior, sharing stories with a moral lesson and positive reinforcement work. Together, these strategies meet different nodes of the character education framework — observation, engagement, and reinforcement. Role-play, with a slighter lower ranking, is also an indispensable tool for building empathy and social understanding. Combined, these approaches create a well-rounded approach to character education, lending valuable recommendations for teachers, lawmakers, and curriculum designers. The results particularly highlight the requirement for more studies, especially with a focus on the long-term effects of such strategies and also the real-world application hurdles encountered with role-play use in different educational contexts.

These findings emphasize the importance of integrating these approaches to promote successful character development. For instance, modeling positive behavior and storytelling were widely endorsed, signaling their critical role in teaching moral values. Role-play comes in rated slightly lower but is still quite effective from an empathy development standpoint (Bandura, 1977; Iftach & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2023). This study lends a framework for the practice of character education in the early childhood context, which can contribute to SDG 4 through the means of allowing inclusive and equitable quality education. This provides practical approaches for educators and policymakers, with a particular slant toward the Malaysian context (Saari et al., 2022).

Such insights are of practical significance to educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers. The consensus toward modeling, storytelling, and positive reinforcement supports prioritizing these strategies in teacher training programs and early childhood education policies. Also, the relative role significance indicates to investigate more on how role-play is integrated and makes working in a variety of classroom contexts. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to determine the extent to which these strategies have a lasting effect on children's character development.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

In summary, modeling positive behavior, moral tales that at least have the kind of stories that children love, and a positive reinforcement approach all surfaced as by far the most effective ways of helping children form their character, with unanimous support for each such pathway as the most appropriate one. These approaches function in real-world ways in the classroom — they help how teachers are promoting empathy, kindness, and responsibility to young children. Despite role-play ranking a little lower, it is still a great tool for empathy and emotional intelligence building. Altogether, these strategies make a powerful framework for character education in early childhood settings.

In light of these findings, it is suggested for educators to use a combination of these strategies to provide a comprehensive method of developing character. In order to develop strong moral foundations, modeling, narration, and reinforcement should be utilized consistently. More role-play for empathy and social understanding might also need to be emphasized. In the classroom, teachers should also consistently use positive reinforcement to promote and maintain appropriate behaviors. Professional development in character education strategies will ensure that educators can effectively and continuously implement these strategies, adapting them as necessary to the different needs of their students. Such efforts by teachers can play a vital role in the moral and emotional development of the younger generation.

The study's limitations include a small sample size and a short research duration, which may impact the generalizability of the findings. Future research should involve larger samples and longitudinal studies. Future studies should evaluate the application of these strategies in diverse educational settings and explore the role of professional development for educators in character education. This study contributes to SDG 4 by providing evidence-based strategies for character education. Key stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, and parents, stand to benefit from its findings.

Acknowledgements

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

Building on knowledge, theory, and practice, this paper contributes significantly to advancing SDG 4 — quality education for all and equitable access to learning. From a knowledge perspective, it enhances the field of character education by using the NGT to gather educators' insights on developing character in children. This method values diverse perspectives and joint contributions, emphasizing respect, leadership, and resilience as key to students' well-being and aligning with SDG 4's focus on sustainable development and responsible citizenship.

The theoretical contribution lies in introducing NGT within character education frameworks, highlighting participatory research approaches that build consensus among educators. The findings provide empirical support for theoretical models by identifying educator-prioritized strategies, enhancing our understanding of effective character education methods. This aligns with SDG 4's goals of preparing students as active and ethical community members.

Practically, the study offers educators a proven approach to implementing character education in classrooms. By identifying specific strategies through NGT, it provides a systematic method for fostering moral and ethical values in diverse settings. Collaboration with families and communities further extends character education beyond classrooms, promoting holistic development.

This research adds to the knowledge base by providing a practical framework for educators, supporting SDG 4's vision of inclusive, equitable, and sustainable education. By emphasizing character education, it helps prepare a generation equipped with integrity and resilience to address life's complexities and contribute to sustainable development.

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