

Strategies for the Coordinated Development of Morality and Rule of Law Education and Character Cultivation in Primary Schools

Qixuan Lv

BDA New Town School of the High School Affiliated to Renmin University China, Beijing, China

Abstract: Morality and Rule of Law is the compulsory curriculum through which Chinese primary schools carry out ideological, moral and legal education, while character cultivation is the long-term outcome that gives the curriculum its practical meaning. In everyday school work the two are often treated as separate matters: the lesson delivers content, and character is expected to take shape somewhere else, in corridors, assemblies and family life. This paper examines how the 2022 curriculum standards and the 2024 revised unified textbook reframe that relationship, and identifies three problems that persist in schools, namely the gap between what is taught and what is practised, the fragmentation of implementation across subjects and activities, and the weakness of assessment for character outcomes. Drawing on research on moral education strategies, social and emotional learning, and school climate, the paper proposes four coordinated pathways organised around the five core competencies, situational teaching, home-school collaboration and teacher capacity. Two planning tools are provided: a mapping table linking each competency to a concrete cultivation task, and an implementation matrix that specifies activity, outcome and evidence for each school setting.

Keywords: Morality and Rule of Law; Character Cultivation; Primary School Education; Core Competencies; Curriculum Integration; Home-School Collaboration

1. Introduction

Primary schools in China teach Morality and Rule of Law as a unified compulsory subject, and the 2022 curriculum standards set out five core competencies for it: political identity, moral cultivation, rule-of-law awareness, sound personality and responsibility [1]. The revised unified textbook prepared under those standards

entered first grade in the autumn term of 2024 and is scheduled to replace the earlier edition across all grades within three years [2]. Both documents describe the subject as a carrier of values education rather than a body of knowledge to be recalled, and both place observable behaviour at the centre of what pupils are expected to achieve. Character cultivation, understood here as the relatively stable pattern of judgement, feeling and conduct that a pupil develops through repeated experience, is therefore not an additional item appended to the lesson but its intended result.

Classroom practice, however, rarely reflects that intention. Timetabled lessons are taught by specialist or class teachers who work through units; routines, assemblies and family life provide the experiences in which character actually forms; and the two spheres are planned by different people with different records. The separation has consequences. Pupils can recite the rules of courtesy and still push in the queue, and teachers who notice this tend to respond by adding more content rather than by arranging more practice. Research on moral education strategies points in a different direction, suggesting that teaching methods that invite pupil dialogue and perspective-taking produce stronger results than transmission alone [3]. Evidence from school-based social and emotional learning programmes shows the same pattern at scale, with measurable gains in academic and behavioural outcomes across large samples and effects that remain detectable at follow-up assessments conducted months or years after the programme ends [4, 5].

This paper takes the coordination of the two as its object. It first sets out the conceptual relationship between the subject and character cultivation, then describes three problems that keep them apart in ordinary school work, and finally proposes four pathways supported by two planning tools. The discussion stays at the level of school and classroom practice, since that is where coordination either happens or fails to

happen. The paper is written from the standpoint of teachers working with the revised textbook rather than as an intervention study, and the situations described are ordinary ones that any primary school can arrange. No claim is made about measured effects on pupils. What the argument does rely on is published evidence about which teaching strategies and school conditions are associated with change in pupil behaviour, cited where it is used, together with the structure that the current curriculum documents supply.

2. The Relationship between the Two

2.1 Shared Aims

Both enterprises concern the internalisation of norms. The curriculum supplies the vocabulary, the sequence and the staged expectations: pupils in lower grades learn courtesy and self-care in concrete situations, and pupils in upper grades work with ideas such as public order, rights and the cultural traditions behind them [1, 2]. Character cultivation supplies the repetition through which such expectations become habit. A pupil who learns that honesty matters in a lesson and then experiences a teacher responding carefully to a mistake has received the same message twice, and the second delivery is the one that stays.

2.2 Different Emphases

The two also differ in ways worth preserving. Systematic teaching brings coverage and progression, which scattered experience cannot guarantee. Experience brings emotional weight, which a textbook page rarely achieves. Reviews of school climate show that the quality of relationships and the consistency of expectations across a school shape pupil outcomes independently of any single programme [6], and studies of civic learning opportunities report that structured chances to practise participation predict later commitment more strongly than knowledge of institutions does [7]. Coordination should therefore not mean absorbing character cultivation into lesson time. It means arranging the lesson and the surrounding experience so that each makes the other more effective.

2.3 Why Coordination Breaks Down

Coordination fails for predictable reasons. Lesson planning follows the textbook and the assessment that accompanies it, while routines

follow the school calendar, so the two rarely meet in one document. Teachers are accountable for coverage, not for conduct observed in the corridor. Parents receive information about marks and homework but little guidance about the behaviours being cultivated in a given month. Where schools have brought the two together deliberately, effects on pupil behaviour and on teacher-pupil relationships have been documented: a multi-site cluster randomised trial of an elementary social and emotional learning and character programme reported significant improvement across four pupil outcomes [8], and a quasi-experimental study of a tier-one character education programme found warmer teacher-pupil relationships, with closer relationships and fewer conflicts reported after implementation [9].

3. Problems in Current School Practice

3.1 Teaching and Practice Pull Apart

The most visible difficulty is the distance between what pupils can state and what they do. Lessons often end with a correct conclusion written in a workbook, and the behaviour that the conclusion describes is never rehearsed. Pupils learn that queueing is fair, and the queue at the lunch counter is still a scramble. Part of the explanation is practical: a class of forty pupils offers few opportunities for each child to practise a skill under observation. Part of it is conceptual, because coverage of content is easier to plan and to check than the formation of a habit. Repetition is the missing ingredient. A habit forms when a pupil performs the same action in similar circumstances often enough for it to become the default, and when someone responds to the performance in a way the pupil can understand. Schools supply the circumstances generously and the response unevenly: a teacher who watches a pupil hold a door for someone else and says nothing has missed the cheapest teaching moment on offer. Research on school climate makes the same point at a larger scale, since expectations that hold across settings predict pupil outcomes independently of any single lesson or programme [6].

3.2 Fragmentation across Settings

A second difficulty is that the adults involved work from different plans. The subject teacher plans units, the class teacher plans routines and

assembly topics, and families receive newsletters that mention neither. Pupils move between these settings and receive inconsistent messages: cooperation is praised in one lesson and rewarded only individually in a competition the same week. International reviews of moral education in school curricula reach a similar conclusion at the system level, noting that values teaching is concentrated in particular subjects and in collaborative activities, while knowledge, skills and behaviour receive uneven attention [10].

3.3 Weak Assessment of Character Outcomes

Assessment is the third difficulty, and arguably the one that keeps the first two in place. Written tests measure what a pupil can recall about rules and rights. They do not capture whether the pupil keeps an agreement, manages frustration in group work, or takes responsibility for a class post. Large-scale international work on social and emotional skills has begun to supply instruments for this purpose [11], and meta-analytic work on character education indicates that programmes with clear behavioural targets produce the clearest results [12]. Most schools, however, still lack a routine way to record observed conduct and to use it in planning.

4. Pathways for Coordinated Development

4.1 Organise Teaching around the Five Competencies

The competency framework gives schools a shared structure. Each competency can be paired with a cultivation task that pupils perform repeatedly outside lesson time, so that the lesson explains what the task is for and the task provides the practice the lesson cannot. Table 1 sets out one possible mapping for a school year.

Table 1. Mapping of Core Competencies to Coordinated Cultivation Tasks

Core Competency	Focus in Lessons	Cultivation Task outside the Lesson
Political Identity	National symbols, community and country	Taking part in flag-raising and class duties with an understanding of why they matter
Moral Cultivation	Honesty, courtesy and care for others in graded situations	Practising courtesy and honesty in daily routines, with feedback from teachers and peers
Rule of Law Awareness	School rules, basic rights	Keeping agreements made in class and

	and duties	following rules the class has helped to write
Sound Personality	Self-management, emotion regulation, cooperation	Managing frustration during group work and asking for help in an acceptable way
Responsibility	Roles in family, class and community	Holding a class post for a fixed period and reporting back to the class

4.2 Use Situations rather than Examples

Teaching that relies on narrated examples produces agreement; teaching that puts pupils in a situation produces decisions. A lesson on fairness becomes a different event when the class has to divide a limited resource, argue for a principle, and live with the outcome for a week. Reviews of teaching strategies in moral education consistently identify dialogue, perspective-taking and guided reflection as the methods with the strongest support [3], and these methods depend on pupils having something real to talk about. Schools can generate such situations cheaply: rotating class posts, pupil-run mediation of small disputes, mock class rule negotiations, and service projects in the neighbourhood. One case shows the shape of it. A grade three class needs to share eight sets of art materials among thirty-two pupils for a month. The teacher spends ten minutes on the principles involved, then asks pupils to propose an arrangement, to vote on it, and to write down what they agreed. The arrangement runs for four weeks, is reviewed at the end, and is revised if it has failed. Pupils argue about fairness, meet the consequences of their own proposal, and watch a teacher treat their agreement as binding. None of this requires materials beyond what the classroom already holds.

4.3 Connect School, Family and Community

Coordination across settings requires that families know which behaviour is being cultivated and why. A monthly note naming one competency, the task attached to it and the wording teachers use with pupils costs little and changes what parents notice at home. Evidence on social and emotional learning suggests that gains hold better where the same expectations appear in more than one setting [4, 5], and work on school climate indicates that consistency of expectations is one of the mechanisms through which schools influence outcomes [6].

Community settings extend the range: a service project gives pupils a reason to behave cooperatively with people who are not assessing them.

4.4 Record What Pupils Actually Do

Assessment needs to move from recall to observation. A simple growth portfolio works: one observed incident per pupil per month, written in two sentences, naming the competency and the behaviour, plus a pupil self-rating. Reviews of character education report stronger effects where programmes state behavioural targets and monitor them [12], and trials of structured elementary programmes confirm that outcomes can be measured well enough to detect change over a single term [8]. Records matter only if they change what happens next. A brief monthly review in which teachers read the observations together and decide on one adjustment, whether to repeat an activity, revise a rule, or work with a particular pupil, turns a folder of notes into a planning instrument. Without that review the portfolio becomes an archive, and teachers who see no return on the writing stop writing. Table 2 shows how evidence can be attached to ordinary school activity.

Table 2. Implementation Matrix for Coordinated Activities

Setting	Activity	Character Outcome	Evidence to Collect
Classroom	Rule-making dialogue and dilemma discussion	Respect for others' views, reasoned judgement	Observation checklist and teacher notes
Class routine	Weekly rotation of class posts	Responsibility, follow-through	Post log and brief peer review
School activity	Community service project	Care for others, civic participation	Reflection sheet and records of attendance
Home	Family agreement on screen time and chores	Self-management, honesty	Parent feedback form returned monthly
School-wide	Assembly recognition of specific behaviour	Shared norms across the school	Recognition records grouped by competency

5. Conditions for Implementation

5.1 Teacher Capacity

Teachers need to interpret the revised textbook before they can coordinate it with anything else.

The revision changed the structure and content of units, integrated major thematic education requirements, and reorganised material according to a spiral design in which expectations rise across grades [2]. Teachers who have not worked through those changes tend to teach the new textbook using habits formed on the old one, which reduces the time available for situational work. School-based study of the textbook, focused on what changed and why, is the prerequisite for everything else proposed here.

5.2 School-Level Arrangements

Coordination also needs an administrative home. A school that assigns one post or one committee to hold the mapping, the activity calendar and the records gives the work somewhere to live; a school that leaves it to individual enthusiasm tends to lose it when staff change. Time matters as much as structure. Reflection on a service project takes fifteen minutes that must be found somewhere, and if it is not timetabled it will not happen. Continuity deserves the same attention. Where a mapping and a set of records depend on one enthusiastic teacher, they usually disappear when that teacher moves, and the school restarts from nothing the following year. Keeping the mapping in a shared document that a named post-holder reviews each term is a modest safeguard, and it also lets a new teacher see what pupils have already practised.

5.3 Limits Worth Observing

Two cautions apply. The first concerns age: lower grades need concrete, repeated action with immediate feedback, while upper grades can work with principles and with more abstract dilemmas, and the curriculum standards design content accordingly [1]. The second concerns load. Adding observation records and portfolios to an already full week will produce paperwork rather than character. Two sentences per pupil per month, written against a named competency, is enough to change planning; anything more elaborate tends to be abandoned by the middle of the term.

6. Conclusion

Morality and Rule of Law education and character cultivation belong together because they address the same outcome from two directions: one supplies the framework, the sequence and the vocabulary, and the other

supplies the repetition through which norms become conduct. The revised curriculum documents have made the connection explicit, and the remaining work is organisational rather than theoretical. Schools need a mapping that ties each competency to an activity pupils actually perform, situations that require decisions rather than agreement, a channel that carries the same message into family life, and a record brief enough to survive contact with the school week. Where these four elements are in place, pupils receive the same expectation in lesson, corridor and home, and the gap between what they can state and what they do begins to close.

References

- [1] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Compulsory Education Curriculum Standards: Morality and Rule of Law (2022 Edition) [S]. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2022.
- [2] Wang Shiguang. Changes in the revised unified primary school textbook Morality and Rule of Law [J]. Curriculum, Teaching Material and Method, 2025, 45(8): 4-12.
- [3] Schuitema, J., ten Dam, G., & Veugelers, W. Teaching strategies for moral education: A review [J]. Journal of Curriculum Studies, 2008, 40(1): 69-89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270701294210>
- [4] Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions [J]. Child Development, 2011, 82(1): 405-432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x>
- [5] Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects [J]. Child Development, 2017, 88(4): 1156-1171. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12864>
- [6] Wang, M.-T., & Degol, J. L. School climate: A review of the construct, measurement, and impact on student outcomes [J]. Educational Psychology Review, 2016, 28(2): 315-352. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-015-9319-1>
- [7] Kahne, J., & Sporte, S. Developing citizens: The impact of civic learning opportunities on students' commitment to civic participation [J]. American Educational Research Journal, 2008, 45(3): 738-766. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831208316951>
- [8] Zhang, Y., Larson, M., & Cook, C. R. A multi-site cluster randomized controlled trial evaluating the effect of CharacterStrong's PurposeFull People elementary program on student outcomes [J]. Canadian Journal of School Psychology, 2025, 40(2): 79-101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08295735251340750>
- [9] Garwood, J. D. Change in teacher-student relationship quality during a tier-one character education intervention [J]. Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal, 2024, 11(7): 235-245. <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.117.17321>
- [10] Jiang, Y., Zhou, M., & Kong, S.-H. Multiculturalism and moral education in Asian school curricula: A scoping review [J]. Cogent Education, 2026, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2026.2728278>
- [11] OECD. Beyond Academic Learning: First Results from the Survey of Social and Emotional Skills [R]. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1787/92a11084-en>
- [12] Jeynes, W. H. A meta-analysis on the relationship between character education and student achievement and behavioral outcomes [J]. Education and Urban Society, 2019, 51(1): 33-71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124517747681>