

Representation of Moral Education Components in Elementary Textbooks: A Meta-Synthesis Study

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Introduction

Moral education, as a cornerstone of educational systems, cultivates virtues and reduces negative traits, shaping students' character for responsible social engagement (Beheshti, 2018). In Islamic traditions, it is a primary goal of prophetic missions, emphasizing values like responsibility, honesty, and kindness (Nateghi et al., 2021). In Iran, elementary textbooks serve as key tools for imparting these values, using narrative texts, visuals, and activities (Maleki, 2018). Despite their importance, the systematic representation of moral education components such as responsibility, empathy, and spiritual values through these tools remains underexplored, creating a research gap. This study employs a meta-synthesis to analyze how these components are represented in Iranian elementary textbooks, aiming to address this gap and enhance moral education frameworks (Frisancho & Delgado, 2018). This study aims to describe and analyze the representation of moral education components in Iranian elementary textbooks. It addresses the research question: How have studies represented moral education components in these textbooks, and what patterns can be identified? The objective is to synthesize

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existing research to develop a comprehensive framework for improving moral education through curriculum design, focusing on tools like stories, visuals, and group activities (Klaassen et al., 2016).

Methodology

A descriptive–analytical meta-synthesis was conducted following Roberts’ six-stage framework (Roberts et al., 2002). The research population consisted of studies on moral education in elementary textbooks published between 2015 and 2025 (internationally) and 1394–1404 (Iranian calendar) across databases such as Noormags, SID, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Using the keywords “*moral education*” and “*elementary textbooks*,” a total of 87 articles were identified. Through purposive sampling, 43 articles (25 domestic and 18 international) were selected based on methodological quality, thematic relevance, and full-text availability, evaluated using the CASP checklist.

Data were extracted using standardized forms that captured bibliographic information, research methodologies, and findings related to moral components and their representation. Open coding was used to identify key concepts (e.g., “*hero stories*”), which were grouped into categories (e.g., “*individual moral components*”) and synthesized into overarching themes (e.g., “*multimodal representation*”). Reliability was ensured through independent coding by two researchers (Cohen’s Kappa = 0.85), with discrepancies resolved through discussion. The process was further validated by peer review (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007).

Findings

The meta-synthesis revealed that Iranian elementary textbooks represent components of moral education through various multimodal tools, including narrative texts, visuals, practical activities, dialogues, and group exercises. Three key patterns emerged:

- (1) **Multimodal Representation** – the integration of stories, visuals, and activities to promote multisensory learning (Golshan et al., 2023);
- (2) **Interactive Representation** – the use of group activities and role-playing to foster social skills such as communication and cooperation (Stinson, 2016); and
- (3) **Context-Based Representation** – the connection of moral values to Islamic-Iranian culture and everyday experiences, thereby reinforcing cultural identity (Nikpanah, 2022).

The identified components included responsibility (e.g., *hero stories* in Persian textbooks), virtues such as kindness (e.g., Saadi’s anecdotes), emotional self-awareness (e.g., reflective tasks in *Hadiyehaye Asemani*), ethical decision-making

(e.g., social studies scenarios), and spiritual values (e.g., Quranic stories) (Afkari et al., 2024; Alborzi et al., 2023).

Conclusion

The findings align with previous research, confirming that multimodal representation enhances deep learning through multisensory engagement (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Interactive methods, such as role-playing, foster social and communication skills, consistent with Stinson (2016). Context-based approaches strengthen cultural identity, as highlighted by Nikpanah (2022), in line with Bandura's social learning theory. However, the limited representation of competencies for complex contexts—such as digital ethics—mirrors international findings (Habte et al., 2021), emphasizing the need for curriculum renewal. Integrating theoretical content (e.g., Quranic stories) with practical experiences (e.g., environmental projects) supports Kolb's experiential learning theory, promoting the development of practical moral skills.

Overall, Iranian elementary textbooks effectively represent moral education components through multimodal, interactive, and context-based approaches rooted in Islamic-Iranian culture. These patterns cultivate responsibility, empathy, and cultural identity, preparing students for ethical participation in society. Nonetheless, gaps remain in addressing modern moral challenges such as digital ethics, which call for curriculum revision.

Key recommendations include:

- Enriching multimodal resources
- Expanding interactive activities
- Strengthening cultural integration
- Incorporating digital ethics scenarios
- Emphasizing creative and participatory teaching methods in teacher training programs
- Conducting future research to examine other educational systems and evaluate behavioral outcomes to enhance generalizability.

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