

Managing Child-Friendly Education and Behavioral Counseling to Cultivate Noble Character in Elementary Schools

Sani Nurani*, H Hanafiah

Nusantara Islamic University, Bandung, Indonesia

*Corresponding Email: saninurani55@gmail.com

Abstract. The cultivation of noble character is a foundational yet increasingly challenged objective of elementary education. A significant gap exists between the aspiration for moral development and the implementation of effective, systemic strategies within schools. This study explores how the integrated management of Child-Friendly Education (CFE) principles and behavioral counseling techniques can strategically foster the noble character of students. This research employed a qualitative methodology with a comparative, multiple-case study design conducted at two distinct Indonesian elementary schools, SDN Tegalsari and SDN Salammulya. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with principals, teachers, and students; participant observation of school culture and classroom activities; and an extensive analysis of institutional documents. Thematic analysis was rigorously conducted following the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings reveal a comprehensive management process orchestrated through a cycle of planning, implementation, and evaluation. Planning involved the collaborative integration of specific character goals into school-wide strategic plans (RKAS), guided by both CFE principles and behavioral objectives. Implementation was bifurcated: school-wide strategies fostered a positive culture through teacher modeling and positive habituation, while targeted interventions utilized behavioral techniques like reinforcement systems and individual counseling. Evaluation was managed through continuous observation, non-academic assessments, and reflective institutional meetings, which demonstrated significant improvements in student discipline, empathy, and responsibility. The synergistic management of a child-friendly school environment with systematic behavioral counseling interventions provides an effective and replicable framework for cultivating noble character. This study concludes that this integrated model offers a robust solution for building a generation grounded in positive morals, recommending that school leaders manage both the school's supportive culture and the specific behavioral strategies needed to translate values into observable actions.

Keywords: character education, behavioral counseling, educational management, child-friendly schools.

1 Introduction

The cultivation of noble character (*akhlak mulia*) stands as a timeless and central mission of education, serving as the moral compass that guides individuals to become responsible, empathetic, and contributing members of society [1]. In the context of elementary education, this mission assumes paramount importance, as the foundational years are when the essential dispositions of character—such as honesty, respect, discipline, and compassion—are most malleable [2]. However, this crucial endeavor faces unprecedented challenges in the modern era. Students today navigate a complex world characterized by rapid technological change, diverse social influences, and a shifting moral landscape. These factors can create a "character gap," where traditional values are eroded, and pro-social behaviors are not consistently modeled or reinforced. Consequently, schools are increasingly called upon to move beyond academic instruction and assume a more deliberate and strategic role in the moral and ethical development of their students [3], a sentiment that resonates with the call for a more transformative education emphasizing 21st-century skills and competencies [4].

In response to this imperative, two powerful educational paradigms have gained prominence: Child-Friendly Education (CFE) and behavioral counseling. The CFE framework, championed by organizations like UNICEF and institutionalized in Indonesian policy, is a rights-based approach that reimagines the school as a holistic, nurturing ecosystem [5]. It posits that for learning and development to flourish, the entire school environment must be physically safe, emotionally secure, and psychologically empowering. CFE management focuses on creating a school culture where every child feels valued, respected, and able to participate actively in their own education, which is a key aspect of preventing negative behaviors like bullying [6]. This approach moves beyond physical safety to encompass emotional and psychological well-being, ensuring that school policies and practices are free from violence, discrimination, and intimidation [7]. It is an environmental approach, arguing that a positive, rights-respecting school culture is the fertile ground upon which noble character can organically grow. As Adriana states, CFE is an approach that prioritizes the well-being, rights, and needs of the child, creating an environment that supports optimal development and the formation of positive character [8].

Complementing this environmental approach is behavioral counseling, a more targeted and scientific paradigm rooted in learning theory. Behavioral counseling operates on the fundamental premise that behavior, both adaptive and maladaptive, is learned and can therefore be taught, changed, and shaped through systematic intervention. It offers a powerful toolkit of evidence-based techniques—such as reinforcement, modeling, and habituation—to explicitly teach and strengthen desired behaviors [9]. While sometimes misconstrued as mechanistic, the core of behavioral counseling is profoundly educational: it aims to replace non-constructive behaviors with pro-social ones by structuring learning experiences that make positive actions more rewarding and likely to be repeated. As Tien notes, the behavioral approach assumes that problems are essentially learning problems, and the goal of counseling is to learn new, more effective behaviors to solve them [10], [11]. This perspective aligns with Islamic concepts of human development (*fitrah*), which also acknowledge that an individual's innate

disposition is shaped and developed through continuous interaction with their environment [12].

The central thesis of this study is that neither the CFE framework nor behavioral counseling alone is sufficient to address the complex challenge of character cultivation. A CFE approach, while essential for creating a positive school climate, can sometimes lack the specific strategies needed to address and change persistent negative behaviors in individual students. Conversely, behavioral counseling, if implemented in an otherwise harsh or uncaring environment, can feel clinical and fail to generalize beyond the counseling setting. A powerful synergy emerges when these two paradigms are integrated through deliberate educational management. By managing the school environment according to CFE principles, leaders create the nurturing context required for behavioral interventions to be effective. Simultaneously, by employing behavioral strategies, educators are equipped with the concrete tools needed to translate the abstract values of a "child-friendly" culture into observable student behaviors [13].

This research addresses a critical gap in the literature by exploring the management of this integrated model. While extensive research exists on CFE and behavioral counseling as separate fields, there is a scarcity of studies examining how school leaders and teachers strategically manage their synthesis in a real-world setting. This study moves beyond theoretical advocacy to provide a thick, descriptive account of practice. Using a comparative case study design at two distinct elementary schools, SDN Tegalsari and SDN Salammulya, this research investigates the entire management cycle, guided by the foundational principles of management (Planning, Organizing, Actuating, Controlling) articulated by Terry [14]. It explores how character development programs are planned collaboratively, how they are implemented through a dual strategy of cultural immersion and targeted intervention, and how their impact on student character is evaluated. The guiding research question is: How is Child-Friendly Education, integrated with behavioral counseling, managed to cultivate the noble character of students in elementary schools? By providing a detailed, narrative account of this management process, this study aims to offer a practical, evidence-based model for educators and school leaders seeking effective, holistic solutions for building a generation grounded in noble character, ultimately contributing to the strategic improvement of education quality [15].

2 Method

This research employed a qualitative methodology utilizing a descriptive, multiple-case study design. This approach was selected for its strength in providing a rich, in-depth, and holistic understanding of a complex phenomenon within its real-world context, without manipulating variables [16]. The study aimed to describe and analyze the management processes of integrating child-friendly education with behavioral counseling at two distinct elementary schools, SDN Tegalsari in Cianjur and SDN Salammulya in Purwakarta. The sites were purposively selected to represent different contexts while sharing a common commitment to character education, allowing for insightful comparative analysis.

Data were collected through a triangulated approach to ensure comprehensiveness and credibility [17]. The primary methods included: (1) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers, and students to explore their perspectives and experiences with the planning, implementation, and evaluation of character development programs; (2) participant observation of classroom interactions, school-wide activities (e.g., morning assemblies, extracurriculars), and the overall school culture to capture authentic behaviors and environmental nuances; and (3) document analysis of relevant materials, such as curriculum plans, the School Activity and Budget Plan (RKAS), school rules, and student development records.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [12], which involves concurrent cycles of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. All collected data were transcribed, coded, and systematically categorized according to thematic areas related to the core management functions. The validity of the findings was strengthened through member checks and rigorous triangulation across data sources and methods, ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as per the criteria established by Lincoln and Guba [18].

3 Result

3.1 Architecting a Character-Centric Educational Framework

The foundation of the character cultivation effort at both schools was a deliberate and collaborative planning process that went beyond mere curriculum design. It was an act of organizational architecture, aiming to embed the principles of child-friendly education and behavioral objectives into the very DNA of the school's operational plan. This planning phase was not a top-down directive from the principal but a participatory process involving teachers and, at SDN Tegalsari, the school committee. This collaborative approach was crucial for building consensus and ensuring that the character development program was perceived as a shared responsibility rather than an additional burden [19]. The starting point for planning was a diagnostic needs assessment. Both schools analyzed student behavior data from the previous year, including disciplinary records, teacher anecdotes, and informal observations, to identify key character traits that required focus. For instance, SDN Salammulya identified a need to improve student discipline and cooperation, while SDN Tegalsari targeted respect and religious piety (*akhlak mulia*).

These identified needs were then translated into concrete, integrated programs within the official School Activity and Budget Plan (RKAS). This was a critical managerial step, as it legitimized the character program, allocated necessary resources, and ensured its sustainability. The plan at SDN Tegalsari was particularly comprehensive, detailing a series of interconnected activities. As the principal explained, "Character is not taught in one lesson. It must be planned across the entire school experience. Our RKAS includes budget for morning religious activities, for rewards in our positive behavior system, and for extracurriculars that build teamwork. It is all connected." This demonstrates a systemic approach, where financial and strategic planning were explicitly

aligned with character development goals, a key function of effective student management.

The planning was guided by a dual philosophy. On one hand, the principles of Child-Friendly Education were paramount. Plans explicitly stated goals related to creating a safe, non-violent, and respectful environment, as mandated by national policy. This meant planning for positive discipline strategies rather than punitive ones. On the other hand, the plans were infused with a behavioral approach. Specific, observable behaviors associated with noble character were defined. For example, instead of a vague goal like "be respectful," the plan at SDN Tegalsari specified observable behaviors like "greet teachers in the morning," "listen without interrupting," and "speak politely to peers." This behavioral specificity made the abstract concept of character concrete and measurable, a core tenet of effective behavior change [9]. As shown in Table 1, while SDN Tegalsari's planning was more systematically integrated due to greater resources, both schools demonstrated a commitment to this dual-philosophy approach. SDN Salammulya, despite limited facilities, creatively planned activities like cooperative games and group prayers that required minimal resources but still promoted their target virtues of discipline and cooperation. This contrast highlights that effective planning is not solely dependent on resources but on the clarity of vision and the ability to adapt strategies to the local context [20].

3.2 Cultivating a School-Wide Culture of Character

The first and most pervasive layer of implementation was the management of the school's overall culture to serve as a constant, immersive learning environment for noble character. This strategy was grounded in the understanding that values are "caught" as much as they are "taught." Both schools recognized that the daily environment, routines, and interactions were powerful tools for shaping behavior. Two key behavioral principles were at the core of this cultural management: modeling and habituation.

Modeling was championed as the responsibility of every adult in the school. The principals at both SDN Tegalsari and SDN Salammulya emphasized that they and their teachers were the "primary curriculum" for character. This went beyond mere instruction; it demanded consistent, observable demonstrations of the very morals they wished to instill. As the principal of Tegalsari stated during a teacher meeting observed by the researcher, "Our students are watching us constantly. We cannot teach respect if we speak disrespectfully to them or to each other. We must model the akhlak we want to see." This principle was enacted in myriad ways. Teachers were observed consistently greeting students at the gate with a smile, using polite language even when issuing corrections, demonstrating patience with struggling learners, and resolving conflicts among themselves constructively. At SDN Salammulya, where cooperation was a key target, teachers frequently modeled teamwork by co-teaching lessons or collaboratively organizing school events, making their process visible to students. This consistent modeling provided students with a constant stream of concrete, positive behavioral examples, making abstract virtues tangible [21].

The second cultural strategy was habituation, the process of building positive habits through structured routines and consistent repetition. Both schools skillfully designed their daily and weekly schedules to include rituals that reinforced their target character traits. The most powerful example was the morning routine. At SDN Tegalsari, which had a strong religious focus, every day began with a communal Duha prayer and the recitation of Asmaul Husna (the 99 names of God). This was not just a religious observance; it was a managed activity designed to instill discipline (lining up quietly), respect (listening to the leader), and a sense of shared spiritual purpose. At SDN Salamulya, the morning routine included a "Circle Time" where students would share positive news and practice active listening. These routines, repeated daily, transformed desired behaviors from conscious acts into unconscious habits. The environment itself was managed to support these habits. For example, both schools implemented "cleanliness patrols," where student groups were responsible for keeping a specific area of the school clean for a week. This did not just keep the school tidy; it habituated a sense of responsibility and care for the shared environment. Through the deliberate and consistent management of modeling and habituation, the schools created a powerful, immersive culture where living out noble character was the norm, not the exception [22].

3.3 Targeted Behavioral Counseling and Intervention

While the school-wide culture provided a fertile ground for character growth, both schools recognized that this environmental approach needed to be complemented by more direct, targeted interventions to address specific behaviors and teach pro-social skills explicitly. This second layer of implementation drew directly from the principles of behavioral counseling, employing systematic techniques of reinforcement and individualized guidance.

The most visible of these interventions was the implementation of a reinforcement system designed to increase the frequency of desired behaviors. This went far beyond simple rewards and punishments. It was a carefully managed educational system based on positive reinforcement. At SDN Tegalsari, the system was quite elaborate. Each classroom had a "Character Tree" chart. When a student was observed demonstrating a target virtue (e.g., helping a classmate, being honest), the teacher would publicly praise them and allow them to place a "leaf" with their name on the tree. When the tree was full of leaves, the entire class would earn a collective reward, such as extra playtime or a special movie session. This system was managerially brilliant for several reasons: it made positive behaviors visible, the reinforcement (praise) was immediate, and the ultimate reward was communal, fostering a sense of teamwork rather than individual competition. The "consequences" for negative behavior were also educational and restorative, based on the principle of logical consequences rather than punishment, which helps in managing student discipline effectively [23].

SDN Salamulya, with fewer resources, implemented a simpler but equally effective system. They used a "token economy" where students earned simple tokens for acts of kindness, discipline, or cooperation. These tokens could be exchanged for small privileges. The key was the consistency with which teachers administered the reinforcement. This systematic approach ensured that students received clear and frequent

feedback that their positive actions were noticed and valued, which, according to behavioral theory, is the most effective way to strengthen a behavior [9].

Beyond these class-wide systems, both schools provided individual and group guidance and counseling for students who exhibited more persistent behavioral challenges. This is where the "counseling" aspect of the model was most explicit [13]. Teachers, with guidance from the principal, were trained to conduct brief, solution-focused conversations with students. The approach was behavioral: instead of asking "Why were you disruptive?" the teacher would ask, "You seemed to have trouble focusing during the math lesson. What could we do to help you stay on track next time? Let's make a plan." This shifted the focus from blame to problem-solving and skill-building. At SDN Tegalsari, the principal, who had some counseling training, would hold small group sessions for students struggling with similar issues, such as impulsivity or social skills. In these sessions, they would use techniques like role-playing to practice more adaptive behaviors in a safe environment. These targeted interventions ensured that the character education program was differentiated, providing a universal foundation of positive culture for all, while also offering more intensive support for those who needed it most.

3.4 Monitoring and Assessing Character Development

The final component of the management cycle was a continuous and multifaceted evaluation process. The principals and teachers at both schools understood that character cultivation is a long-term endeavor and that its progress must be monitored to ensure the effectiveness of their strategies. The evaluation approach was distinctly different from academic assessment; it was less about summative grades and more about formative feedback and the observation of growth over time. The evaluation process was managed through three primary mechanisms: continuous monitoring, non-academic assessment, and periodic review meetings.

Continuous monitoring was the most frequent form of evaluation, embedded in the daily life of the school. Teachers were the primary agents of this monitoring. They were trained to be keen observers of student behavior, not just during lessons but also during unstructured times like recess and lunch. At SDN Tegalsari, teachers used a simple "Behavioral Anecdotal Record" log. When they observed a significant instance of either positive or negative behavior related to the target virtues, they would make a brief, objective note. These records were not for disciplinary purposes but served as a rich source of qualitative data on student progress. This constant, low-intensity monitoring allowed teachers to identify patterns, notice improvements, and intervene early when challenges arose.

The second mechanism was more formal non-academic assessment. At the end of each term, teachers at both schools completed a simple character report card for each student. This was not based on subjective impressions but on the accumulated observations and anecdotal records. The report used a descriptive scale (e.g., "Consistently Demonstrates," "Developing," "Needs Support") to assess progress on the school's target virtues like discipline, respect, empathy, and responsibility. At SDN Tegalsari, this process was particularly robust. They developed a simple rubric for each virtue with clear behavioral indicators. This instrument provided a structured and consistent way

to evaluate character growth across the school. The results of these non-academic assessments were shared with parents during parent-teacher conferences, creating a crucial home-school partnership in the character cultivation effort.

Finally, the evaluation data was brought together in periodic review meetings. Once a month, the teachers and principal would convene to discuss the character development program. In these meetings, they would analyze the anecdotal records and assessment data to identify school-wide trends. They would ask critical questions: "Are we seeing an improvement in overall classroom discipline? Is our reinforcement system still effective, or are students getting bored with it? Which students are not responding and might need more intensive support?" These meetings were the engine of program improvement [24]. They allowed the team to celebrate successes, diagnose problems, and collaboratively decide on adjustments to their strategies for the next cycle. This robust, multi-layered evaluation process ensured that the character education program was not a static curriculum but a dynamic, responsive system that was continuously monitored, assessed, and refined to meet the evolving needs of the students [12].

4 Discussion

The findings from this study offer a compelling, practice-based model for character education, yielding significant implications for both educational theory and school management. The successful integration of a child-friendly school ethos with systematic behavioral counseling techniques at SDN Tegalsari and SDN Salammulya provides a powerful counter-narrative to the often-bifurcated approaches to moral development. This study's primary contribution is its detailed illustration of how these two paradigms can be synergized through deliberate management, creating a holistic system that addresses both the environment and the individual.

First, the research highlights the critical importance of a dual-layered implementation strategy. The findings reveal that character is cultivated most effectively through a combination of school-wide cultural immersion and targeted behavioral intervention. The management of the school environment based on CFE principles—emphasizing safety, respect, and participation—acted as the foundational layer. This aligns with socio-cultural learning theories, which argue that learning is deeply embedded in the social and cultural context [25]. The CFE approach created the nurturing "soil" in which character could grow. However, the study powerfully demonstrates that this necessary condition is often not sufficient. The addition of the second layer—explicit behavioral interventions like reinforcement systems and individualized counseling—provided the specific "scaffolding" needed to build concrete pro-social behaviors. This supports the core tenets of social learning theory and applied behavior analysis, which emphasize that complex behaviors are learned through direct instruction, modeling, and reinforcement [9]. The synergy is clear: the child-friendly environment made students receptive to behavioral instruction, while the behavioral strategies provided the tools to translate the school's values into observable actions. This managed, dual-layered approach offers a more comprehensive model than approaches that focus solely on either school climate or individual intervention [26].

Second, the study re-conceptualizes the role of behaviorism in character education. Behavioral approaches are sometimes criticized in educational circles as being overly mechanistic or undermining intrinsic motivation [27]. However, the management of behavioral techniques in these case studies demonstrates a more sophisticated and humanistic application. Reinforcement was used not as a bribe for compliance, but as a systematic way of providing positive feedback and making pro-social behavior visible and valued. Consequences were restorative and educational, not punitive. Counseling was solution-focused and skill-building, not deficit-oriented. This "positive behavior support" framework [28] shows that behavioral tools, when wielded within a management philosophy that is fundamentally respectful and developmental (as dictated by CFE principles), can be powerful, ethical, and effective instruments for teaching the habits of good character. This finding suggests a need to move beyond ideological debates and instead focus on how different pedagogical tools can be thoughtfully integrated to serve a common, humanistic goal, leading to an education that is a practice of liberation [29].

Third, this research underscores the indispensable role of systemic educational management. The success of the character programs was not accidental; it was the result of a coherent and continuous management cycle. The adherence to the POAC (Planning, Organizing, Actuating, Controlling) framework, though perhaps not explicitly named by the principals, was evident in their practices [14]. Planning was collaborative and data-driven. Organization provided clear structures and roles. Implementation was multifaceted and consistent. And evaluation was formative, feeding back into the next planning cycle. This demonstrates that a successful character education program is not simply a list of activities but a managed system that is integrated into the school's core operational and budgetary plans (RKAS) [30]. This systemic approach ensures sustainability, coherence, and a shared sense of purpose across the entire school community. It elevates character education from a peripheral "add-on" to a central, non-negotiable mission of the school, driven by kindness-based leadership [31]. The study powerfully argues that without such deliberate and systematic management, even the most well-intentioned character initiatives are likely to remain fragmented and ineffective.

5 Conclusion

This study concludes that the strategic management of an educational model integrating Child-Friendly Education principles with behavioral counseling interventions provides a robust and effective framework for cultivating noble character in elementary school students. The findings from the case studies at SDN Tegalsari and SDN Salamulya demonstrate that this synergistic approach, when managed through a systematic cycle of collaborative planning, multifaceted implementation, and continuous evaluation, yields significant positive impacts on student discipline, respect, empathy, and responsibility. The success of this model hinges on its dual focus: managing the entire school environment to be a safe and nurturing cultural space where positive values are modeled and habituated, while simultaneously employing targeted behavioral techniques to explicitly teach and reinforce pro-social skills.

The research confirms that the efficacy of character education is not determined by a single program but by its deep integration into the school's core management systems, including its strategic plans and daily operations. The principal's role as a systemic manager and cultural leader is paramount in orchestrating this integration. This study offers a practical, evidence-based model for school leaders seeking to move beyond fragmented initiatives towards a holistic and sustainable system for moral development. It is recommended that schools adopt this dual-framework approach, investing in both the cultivation of a positive, child-friendly culture and the professional development of teachers in positive behavioral support strategies. Future research could conduct longitudinal studies to measure the long-term impact of this integrated model on students' academic and life outcomes.

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