

Synergistic Path between Primary School Students' Personality Development and Moral Character Education

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Abstract: The fundamental task of "Cultivating Virtue and Nurturing Talents" (Lide Shuren) establishes a critical theoretical framework for basic education in China, positing that moral character education and personality development are not antagonistic but are intrinsically synergistic. However, in practice, an artificial dichotomy often persists, where moral education is equated with uniformity and discipline, while personality development is misconstrued as unchecked individualism. This paper, employing literature analysis and theoretical research, aims to deconstruct this false dichotomy and construct a practical model for synergy. It begins by defining the core concepts of moral character education and personality development within the "Lide Shuren" paradigm, arguing that moral guidance provides a value compass for healthy personality formation, while individualized expression is the vital manifestation of internalized virtue. The paper then analyzes the current disjuncture between the two domains, identifying key challenges such as standardized assessment systems and a lack of teacher training in differentiated pedagogy. The core contribution is the proposal of a multi-level synergistic path, encompassing curriculum design, pedagogical innovation, and teacher role transformation. The study concludes that achieving genuine synergy requires a systemic shift from a "transmission" model to an "ecological" model of education, where the school environment itself becomes an integrated field for nurturing both virtuous citizens and unique individuals.

1. Introduction

The proposal of "Cultivating Virtue and Nurturing Talents" (Lide Shuren) as the fundamental mission of education in China marks a profound and significant philosophical shift in the nation's educational paradigm [1]. This policy directive, which has been systematically integrated into the Compulsory Education Curriculum Plan and Standards (2022 Edition), moves beyond the instrumentalist view of education as a mere conduit for knowledge transmission and test preparation [2]. Instead, it emphasizes the holistic cultivation of well-rounded socialist builders and successors who possess both unwavering moral integrity and the professional competence necessary to contribute meaningfully to society. Within this overarching framework, the education of primary

school students demands particular attention. As children between the ages of six and twelve are in a critical and sensitive period of value formation, identity exploration, and character shaping, the educational approach during this stage must carefully navigate and integrate two seemingly distinct yet fundamentally interconnected domains: moral character education and personality development [3]. The imperative is to foster individuals who are not only ethically grounded but also vibrantly unique.

Historically, a persistent and counterproductive tension has characterized the practical implementation of these two educational aims. On one hand, moral character education (Deyu), with its legitimate focus on instilling collective values, social responsibility, and behavioral norms, has often been operationalized through standardized, top-down methods that inadvertently prioritize conformity and compliance [4]. This approach, while efficient for managing large classrooms, can reduce morality to a set of external rules to be obeyed rather than internal principles to be understood and embraced. Conversely, personality development (Gexing Fazhan), which encompasses the vital cultivation of unique interests, creative thinking, resilience, and individual potential, has frequently been sidelined within the core curriculum or viewed with apprehension as a potential disruptor to classroom order and uniform standards [5]. This false dichotomy—pitting collective morality against individual expression—is both theoretically flawed, as it misrepresents the nature of human development, and practically detrimental to the goal of holistic education [6]. It fails to recognize that a strong moral foundation is essential for guiding individual talents towards socially constructive and meaningful ends, preventing the descent into mere individualism [7]. Simultaneously, it overlooks the fact that a suppressed or unacknowledged personality can lead to a superficial, un-internalized, and ultimately fragile understanding of virtue, where children know the "what" but not the "why" of ethical behavior.

This paper, therefore, argues that from the perspective of "Lide Shuren," moral character and personality are not in opposition but are two synergistic and inseparable dimensions of a single educational reality—they are two sides of the same coin. A robust educational framework requires their integration. Consequently, the central research question guiding this study is: What are the effective pathways to achieve synergy between moral character education and personality development in Chinese primary schools? To answer this question, the study will unfold in three sequential parts. First, it will elaborate on the theoretical interdependence of these two concepts, drawing upon both contemporary educational philosophy and developmental psychology to build a compelling case for their synergy. Second, it will diagnose the practical barriers—ranging from standardized assessment regimes to pedagogical limitations—that currently hinder their integration in school settings. Finally, and most crucially, it will construct a comprehensive, multi-level model and propose concrete synergistic paths at the curricular, pedagogical, and systemic environmental levels, aiming to provide a practical blueprint for bridging the chasm between theoretical aspiration and educational practice.

2. Theoretical Foundation: The Intrinsic Link between Moral Character and Personality

The proposed synergy between moral character education and personality development is not merely a pragmatic aspiration for a harmonious classroom; it is fundamentally grounded in a robust theoretical understanding of the child as a holistic, integrated being. This perspective draws from developmental psychology, which posits that cognitive, social, emotional, and ethical domains of development are deeply intertwined, not separate tracks. Furthermore, it aligns with the constructivist view of learning, which suggests that values, like knowledge, are not passively received but actively built and personalized by the individual. Viewing these two domains as synergistic is, therefore, to acknowledge the complex reality of human growth, where the "what"

one becomes (character) is inextricably linked with "who" one is (personality).

2.1 Moral Character as the Compass and Framework for Personality

A well-developed personality, comprising traits like creativity, curiosity, and assertiveness, is a powerful force. However, without the guiding framework of a moral compass, this force can veer into egocentrism, social disruption, or even the misuse of talents. Unchecked assertiveness may become aggression; unguided curiosity may disregard ethical boundaries. Moral character education, within the "Lide Shuren" paradigm, provides this essential framework. It instills a foundational value orientation—such as honesty, empathy, respect, and justice—that shapes the application and direction of individual personality traits.

This guiding function operates on two levels. First, it acts as a regulatory mechanism, helping children learn to temper and channel their innate tendencies in socially constructive ways. For instance, a child's natural leadership quality (a personality trait) is refined through the virtues of fairness and active listening (moral character), transforming a potential tendency to dominate into a capacity for inclusive collaboration. Second, moral character provides the deeper "why" behind social rules, moving beyond mere compliance. It answers why we should use our talents responsibly: not just because it is a rule, but because of our inherent respect for the well-being of others and the community.

Thus, moral education does not stifle personality; it elevates and socializes it. It ensures that the expression of individuality is not an end in itself but is directed towards positive, meaningful, and collectively beneficial ends. A vibrant personality, when guided by virtue, becomes a source of innovation and social good, rather than a force of alienation.

2.2 Personality as the Vehicle and Catalyst for Authentic Moral Expression

Conversely, moral virtues, when taught as a set of abstract principles or rigid rules, risk remaining inert and disconnected from a child's lived experience. A value like "responsibility" or "compassion" is not a monolithic behavior but a principle that must be animated through an individual's unique characteristics, strengths, and preferences. Personality is the indispensable vehicle that translates abstract virtue into concrete, authentic action.

The internalization and expression of any moral value are inherently filtered through a child's personality. Consider the virtue of "responsibility." A naturally outgoing and socially confident child might express it by organizing a community clean-up project, mobilizing peers, and taking a public leadership role. In contrast, a more reflective, introverted child might demonstrate the same virtue by taking meticulous, unsupervised care of the classroom library, ensuring every book is perfectly sorted and maintained. Both actions are valid and praiseworthy expressions of responsibility, yet they are colored by distinct personalities.

When the educational system recognizes and values these diverse expressions, it achieves two critical goals. First, it makes morality authentic and personally meaningful, allowing children to connect with virtues in a way that feels natural and empowering to them. Second, it enriches the moral ecology of the classroom by demonstrating that there are multiple, equally valid ways to be a good person. Suppressing individuality, in this context, is not only a psychological disservice but a pedagogical failure. It risks creating a generation that can recite moral precepts on command but lacks the creative capacity and personal connection to apply them flexibly, resiliently, and sincerely in the complex and unpredictable situations of real life. True moral maturity, therefore, is not evidenced by uniformity of action, but by the unique and consistent alignment of one's personal strengths with ethical principles. This interdependent relationship can be visualized as shown in Figure 1.

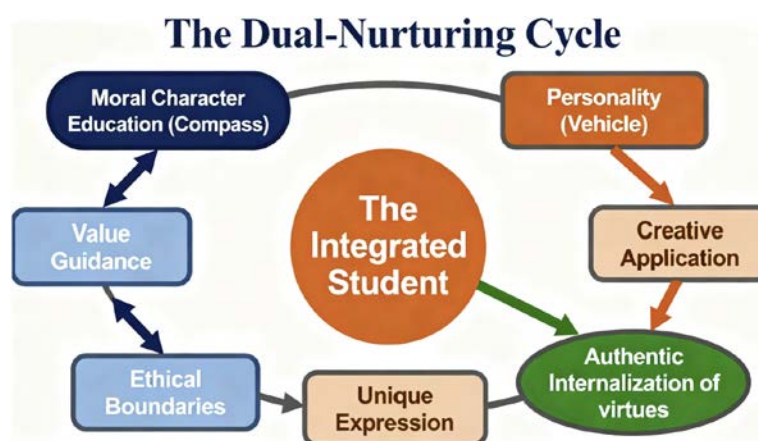


Figure 1: The Dual-Nurturing Cycle of Moral Character and Personality.

3. Current Disjuncture: Analyzing the Barriers to Synergy

Despite the compelling theoretical link between moral character and personality development, the practical implementation within a vast number of Chinese primary schools remains starkly segregated. This theory-practice gap is not a mere oversight but is perpetuated by several deeply entrenched systemic and practical barriers that actively hinder the effective synergy envisioned by the "Lide Shuren" framework. These barriers create an educational environment where moral education and personality development are often treated as competing priorities, or where one is sacrificed at the altar of the other.

3.1 The Hegemony of Standardized Assessment and the "One-Size-Fits-All" Paradigm

The most formidable barrier is the prevailing ecosystem of high-stakes standardized testing. The intense emphasis on quantifiable academic outcomes in core subjects like Chinese and Mathematics creates a powerful incentive structure that inevitably marginalizes both nuanced moral education and non-standardized personality development. This manifests in several concrete ways:

The Quantification of Morality: When moral education is formally assessed, it is frequently reduced to a paper-and-pencil test in the "Ideological and Moral Character" course. Students are evaluated on their ability to recall and select the "correct" virtuous answer from a multiple-choice list, rather than on any authentic demonstration of empathy, cooperation, or ethical reasoning in their daily interactions. This reduces complex moral development to a measurable metric of knowledge acquisition, completely bypassing the behavioral and dispositional aspects of character.

The Extracurricular Status of Personality: Activities that are crucial for fostering individual expression and creativity—such as art, music, drama, and in-depth project-based learning—are systematically positioned as peripheral "enrichment" rather than core components of learning. In the relentless drive to improve test scores, these subjects are often the first to be curtailed or eliminated to allocate more instructional time for test preparation drills. This sends a clear, albeit implicit, message to students, parents, and teachers: that the development of a unique personality is a luxury, secondary to academic performance in a narrow set of disciplines.

The Constriction of Pedagogical Space: This systemic pressure leaves teachers with little professional autonomy or temporal space to appreciate, let alone nurture, the diverse ways in which students internalize and express values. The curriculum becomes a race to cover content, disincentivizing the open-ended discussions, reflective activities, and personalized projects that are essential for synergy to flourish.

3.2 The Pedagogical Gap: Teacher Readiness and Classroom Culture

A second critical barrier lies at the level of teacher preparedness and the prevailing culture of classroom management. Many teachers enter the profession trained within and for a system that prioritizes the efficient delivery of a standardized curriculum to a cohesive, manageable classroom group.

The Deficit in Differentiated Pedagogy: Many teachers lack sustained training, practical resources, and consequently, the confidence to implement differentiated instruction and student-centered pedagogies. While they may recognize varying abilities, they are often unequipped to cater to diverse learning styles, emotional temperaments, and modes of creative expression. The skills required to facilitate a Socratic seminar on an ethical dilemma, or to guide twenty-five different student-directed projects, are distinct from those needed to lead a whole-class lesson.

Misconceptions of Classroom Management: In this context, the concept of "classroom management" can be subtly misinterpreted. The goal can shift from fostering a dynamic, productive learning environment to one of maintaining order, silence, and uniformity. A quiet, compliant classroom is often (mis)taken as an indicator of effective teaching and learning. This mindset inherently suppresses spontaneous questions, dissenting opinions, and the messy, noisy process of creative collaboration—all of which are natural expressions of developing personalities and the testing of moral ideas.

The Perpetuation of the Divide: Without targeted professional development in facilitative techniques, social-emotional learning, and the management of diverse classrooms, even well-intentioned teachers may unintentionally perpetuate the divide. Their default mode of instruction may reinforce passivity and conformity, stifling the very individual engagement necessary for deep moral internalization.

The cumulative effect of these barriers is a systemic imbalance in how time and resources are allocated, which can be conceptually represented in Figure 2.

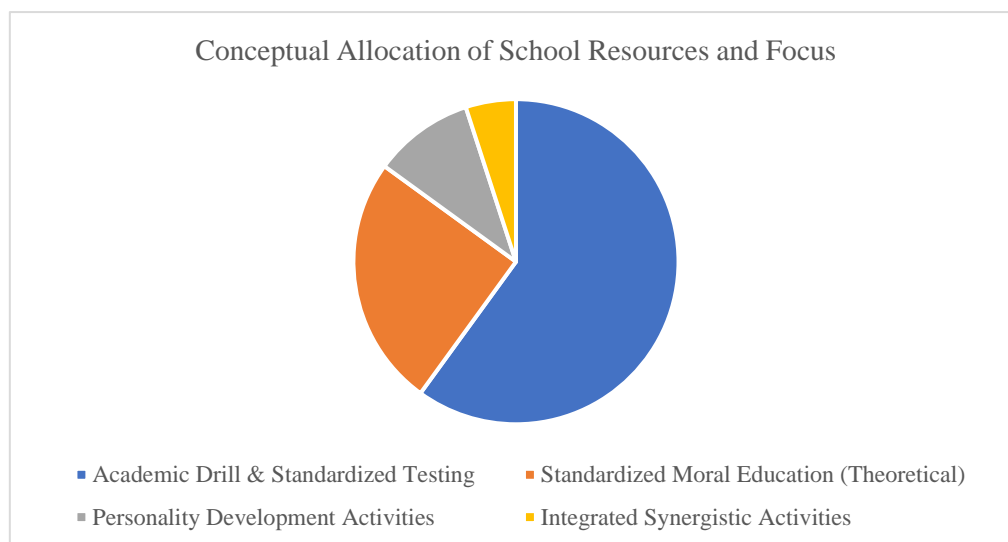


Figure 2: The Current Imbalance in Educational Focus

4. Constructing the Synergistic Path: A Multi-Level Ecosystem Model

To effectively overcome the deeply rooted barriers identified, a fragmented approach is insufficient. What is required is a deliberate, structured, and systemic strategy that operates concurrently at multiple levels of the educational ecosystem. This synergistic path necessitates a

fundamental re-imagining of curriculum design, pedagogical practices, and the broader school culture to create an environment where moral character and personality development are continuously and reciprocally reinforced, transforming the theoretical vision of "Lide Shuren" into a lived reality for every student.

4.1 Curriculum Integration: Weaving Morality and Personality into the Fabric of Learning

The curriculum must be intentionally redesigned to transcend its traditional role as a collection of discrete subjects and become an integrated, experiential tapestry that explicitly and implicitly fosters connections between ethical understanding and personal expression.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) with a Moral Core: This pedagogy stands as a powerful vehicle for achieving synergy, as it seamlessly blends the "why" of morality with the "how" of personality. Instead of teaching virtues like cooperation, responsibility, or empathy as abstract concepts, a well-designed PBL unit embeds them as non-negotiable components for project success. Advocate for their final design, exercising civic responsibility and a sense of justice (moral character).

In this model, the moral imperative provides the project's driving force, while the expression of individual talents becomes essential for its execution, making the synergy between the two domains both tangible and necessary for achievement.

Literature and History as Dialogue Platforms: The humanities must be transformed from repositories of fixed knowledge and predetermined lessons into dynamic laboratories for ethical and personal exploration. When reading a complex literary work or studying a contentious historical period, the pedagogical goal shifts from extracting a single "correct" moral to facilitating a dialogic inquiry. Teachers can guide students to discuss multiple interpretations, empathize with conflicting perspectives (e.g., understanding the motivations of both a revolutionary and a loyalist), and articulate their own reasoned, evidence-based judgments. This process intrinsically connects the development of ethical reasoning (moral character) with the cultivation of a unique intellectual voice, critical thinking, and the confidence to express a personal perspective (personality).

4.2 Pedagogical Innovation: The Teacher as a Facilitator of Holistic Growth

The successful implementation of an integrated curriculum hinges on a parallel transformation in the teacher's role. This requires a fundamental shift from that of a primary knowledge-transmitter to a facilitator, coach, and co-inquirer who is skilled at cultivating the conditions for holistic child development.

Differentiated Instruction as an Ethical Practice: Providing students with meaningful choices in how they engage with, process, and demonstrate their understanding of moral concepts is more than a pedagogical best practice; it is an ethical commitment to respecting and valuing individual differences. When exploring a concept like "justice" or "integrity," students could be offered a menu of options: writing a traditional essay, creating a political cartoon, composing and performing a song, or producing a short documentary. This approach acknowledges that internalization is a personal process. By allowing students to use their innate strengths and preferred modes of expression (personality) to grapple with complex ideas (moral character), the learning becomes deeper, more authentic, and more likely to influence future behavior.

Socratic Dialogue and Reflective Practice: Moving beyond didactic lectures on values, teachers must become adept at using Socratic questioning and facilitating reflective sessions to stimulate moral and intellectual autonomy. By posing open-ended ethical dilemmas—"To what extent should we prioritize individual freedom over collective safety?" or "Was the character's betrayal justified?"—teachers encourage students to develop their own voice, construct logical arguments, listen actively, and critique the reasoning of others. This structured yet open inquiry nurtures critical

thinking and intellectual courage (key aspects of personality) within a disciplined framework of ethical reasoning (moral character), demonstrating that moral development is an active, personal construction rather than a passive reception of rules.

4.3 Systemic Support: Cultivating a Synergistic School Ecology

For curricular and pedagogical innovations to be sustainable and widespread, they must be nurtured by a supportive and aligned school-wide system. The entire school environment—its policies, culture, and support structures—must consciously reflect and reinforce the desired synergy.

Diverse and Inclusive Evaluation: The assessment system must undergo a paradigm shift to align with the goals of holistic education. Moving beyond the narrow metrics of standardized tests, a synergistic model employs authentic assessment tools. These include:

Learning Portfolios that curate a student's growth over time, showcasing both academic progress and reflections on personal and moral development; Structured Peer and Self-Assessments that foster metacognition and social awareness; Teacher Observational Records that systematically capture demonstrations of empathy, collaboration, and creative problem-solving in everyday interactions. This multi-faceted approach provides a richer, more complete picture of a child's development, valuing growth in moral reasoning and creative expression as much as academic proficiency.

Teacher Professional Development: Ongoing, high-quality professional learning is the engine that drives this systemic change. One-off workshops are inadequate. Instead, schools must invest in sustained, job-embedded training on the specific competencies required for fostering synergy. Critical topics include: facilitating classroom dialogue and managing controversial issues, integrating Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) into academic instruction, designing and implementing differentiated instruction and project-based learning, and practicing restorative (as opposed to purely punitive) classroom management techniques that build community. Equipping teachers with these skills, along with ongoing coaching and collaborative planning time, is essential for building the confidence and capacity needed to bridge the theory-practice gap and become effective architects of the synergistic classroom.

The comprehensive nature of this multi-level model is summarized in Figure 3.

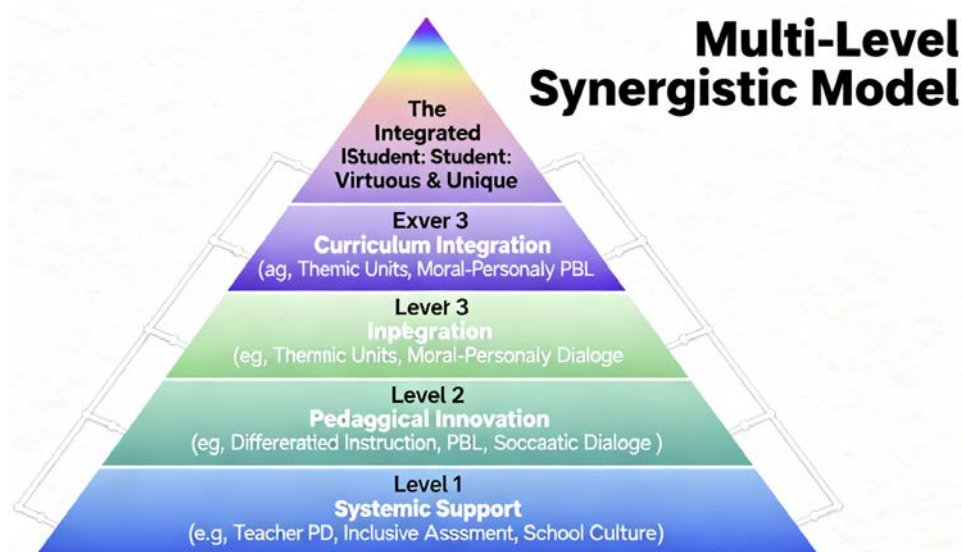


Figure 3: A Multi-Level Model for Achieving Synergy

5. Discussion and conclusion

The fundamental task of "Cultivating Virtue and Nurturing Talents" presents a profound and defining challenge for contemporary Chinese education, demanding nothing less than a decisive move beyond compartmentalized and utilitarian models of schooling. This research has systematically demonstrated that the historical separation between moral character education and personality development is a false and counterproductive dichotomy, one that is untenable both in theoretical conception and in light of the ultimate goal of fostering truly holistic, well-rounded individuals. The analysis confirms that moral character provides the indispensable ethical compass and value framework necessary to guide burgeoning personalities towards socially constructive ends, preventing individual talents from devolving into mere individualism. Conversely, the unique constellation of traits, interests, and strengths that constitute a child's personality provides the vital vehicle for the authentic expression, creative application, and deep internalization of virtues, transforming abstract principles into lived experience.

The barriers to realizing this synergy—primarily the hegemony of standardized assessment and significant pedagogical readiness gaps—are indeed formidable, deeply entrenched in longstanding institutional habits and societal expectations. However, they are not insurmountable. The synergistic paths proposed in this study, operating through integrated curriculum design, innovative student-centered pedagogy, and transformative systemic support, offer a concrete and multi-leveled roadmap for primary schools to begin this essential work. Embarking on this path requires a fundamental paradigm shift from viewing education as the efficient transmission of a standardized body of knowledge and rules, towards understanding it as the careful curation of a dynamic and nurturing learning ecosystem. In this intentionally designed ecosystem, every classroom interaction, every project-based lesson, and every formative assessment becomes a potential opportunity to simultaneously nurture the virtuous citizen and the unique individual, recognizing that these are two dimensions of the same developmental process.

The future vitality and success of Chinese education, firmly rooted in the "Lide Shuren" vision, therefore hinge upon its capacity to courageously and consistently integrate these two pillars. This endeavor transcends mere pedagogical technique; it is a moral imperative aimed at empowering a new generation to contribute to a harmonious and innovative society. By fostering individuals who are both ethically grounded and brilliantly unique, education can fulfill its highest purpose: to cultivate not only capable scholars but also compassionate citizens and creative problem-solvers who can navigate the complexities of the modern world with both integrity and imagination. The journey towards this ideal is undoubtedly challenging, but the imperative to begin—to re-imagine our classrooms as workshops for both character and creativity—is both urgent and essential for our shared future.

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