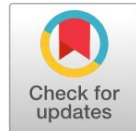


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Re-writing Character: A Narrative Analysis of Moral Development in Modern Educational Settings

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ABSTRACT

Background. Character education in contemporary universities increasingly unfolds through academic pressure, digital interaction, social diversity, and institutional expectations that complicate students' moral decision-making.

Purpose. This study aimed to explore how university students narrated, interpreted, and reconstructed their moral development within modern educational settings.

Method. A qualitative narrative inquiry involved 24 undergraduate students selected purposively from different academic years and fields of study. Data were collected through semi-structured narrative interviews, reflective writing, and institutional documents, then analyzed by examining temporal sequences, moral conflicts, turning points, relational influences, narrative positioning, and identity reconstruction.

Results. Students rarely described formal moral instruction as the primary source of change; morally difficult experiences became transformative when accompanied by dialogue, meaningful consequences, and opportunities for reflection. Academic dishonesty, peer conflict, organizational failure, digital misconduct, and social exclusion frequently challenged existing self-images and encouraged participants to revise their understanding of responsibility, honesty, empathy, and fairness.

Conclusion. The study concludes that character develops through an unfinished narrative process in which students reinterpret past actions, negotiate present tensions, and imagine more ethical future selves. Universities should therefore integrate reflective, relational, and restorative practices into character education in practice.

KEYWORDS

Character Education, Moral Development, Narrative Inquiry

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INTRODUCTION

Character formation remains one of the central responsibilities of education because schools and universities do more than transmit academic knowledge. Educational institutions also shape how learners understand responsibility, justice, empathy, integrity, discipline, and social participation. Moral development has traditionally been discussed through philosophical,

psychological, and pedagogical frameworks that explain how individuals learn to distinguish right from wrong and translate ethical understanding into action.

Contemporary educational settings, however, are increasingly influenced by digital communication, cultural diversity, changing family structures, academic competition, and rapidly shifting social values. These developments require character education to be examined as a dynamic process rather than as the simple transmission of fixed virtues (Hejwosz-Gromkowska, 2026; Vanello, 2025).

Modern learners construct their moral identities through interactions with teachers, peers, families, online communities, popular culture, and institutional expectations. Moral learning therefore occurs not only through formal lessons but also through everyday experiences of inclusion, exclusion, conflict, cooperation, recognition, failure, and responsibility. Students interpret these experiences by creating stories about who they are, what they value, and how they should behave toward others. Narrative becomes important because individuals frequently understand moral choices by connecting present actions with past experiences and imagined future identities. Character development can consequently be viewed as an ongoing process of interpreting, revising, and retelling personal and collective stories (Nukulkij, 2025; Sheikh, 2026).

The concept of “re-writing character” captures the possibility that moral identity is neither permanent nor completed at a particular stage of development. Students may revise their understanding of honesty after experiencing academic pressure, redefine empathy after encountering social difference, or reconstruct responsibility after making a harmful decision. Educational environments can support or hinder these revisions depending on the quality of dialogue, reflection, relationships, and institutional culture they provide. A narrative perspective offers a meaningful approach for examining how learners reinterpret moral experiences and transform them into accounts of personal growth, ethical conflict, or unresolved tension (Guttesen, 2025; Rai, 2023).

Conventional character education frequently presents moral values as abstract principles that students are expected to understand, memorize, and display. Such approaches may produce knowledge of desirable behavior without revealing how learners actually negotiate moral dilemmas in complex situations. Students may understand the importance of honesty while still struggling with cheating, recognize the value of respect while participating in exclusion, or endorse responsibility while avoiding accountability. The gap between moral knowledge and moral action suggests that character cannot be adequately studied through value statements or behavioral checklists alone (Abaquita, 2026; Gomez, 2026).

Modern educational settings also expose students to competing moral messages. Schools may promote cooperation while rewarding individual competition, encourage honesty while placing excessive emphasis on grades, or advocate inclusion while tolerating subtle discrimination. Digital environments further complicate moral development by allowing anonymity, rapid judgment, public comparison, and constant exposure to conflicting norms. Students must interpret these contradictions while forming their own ethical positions. Research that focuses only on institutional programs may overlook how learners understand, resist, adapt, or reinterpret the moral expectations surrounding them (Josselson, 2023; Williams, 2022).

Limited attention to students’ own narratives creates another significant problem. Quantitative measures can identify levels of moral reasoning, empathy, or character strength, but they often provide little explanation of how individuals make sense of moral change. Behavioral observations can document what students do, yet they may not capture the meanings students attach to their decisions. Narrative analysis is needed to examine how learners describe turning points, moral

failures, influential relationships, internal conflicts, and attempts at self-correction. Such analysis can reveal the processes through which character is maintained, challenged, or rewritten within educational life (Abaquita, 2026; Gomez, 2026).

The primary objective of this study is to explore how students narrate their moral development within modern educational settings. The investigation seeks to identify the experiences, relationships, conflicts, and institutional conditions that students consider influential in shaping their character. Attention will be directed toward stories involving honesty, responsibility, empathy, fairness, respect, courage, self-discipline, and social concern. The study aims to understand moral development from the perspective of learners rather than assuming that institutional definitions fully represent their experiences (Mungal, 2026; Zheleznov, 2025).

The study also aims to analyze the narrative structures through which students explain moral change. Particular attention will be given to how participants describe beginnings, crises, turning points, consequences, and resolutions within their personal accounts. Narrative positioning will be examined to determine whether students portray themselves as responsible agents, passive victims, moral learners, conflicted actors, or transformed individuals. Such analysis is expected to reveal how character is constructed through language and how moral identity is negotiated across time (Cooper, 2026; Zhunussova, 2026).

The research further seeks to identify the educational conditions that support or obstruct positive moral reconstruction. Teacher guidance, peer relationships, disciplinary practices, reflective activities, digital experiences, school culture, and opportunities for dialogue may influence how students interpret moral events. The study is expected to clarify whether educational settings encourage genuine ethical reflection or merely demand outward compliance. The findings may provide a basis for designing character education that responds to students' lived experiences and supports deeper forms of moral agency (Gasser, 2022; Langford, 2026).

Existing studies on moral development have been strongly influenced by stage-based, trait-based, and competency-based frameworks. These approaches have contributed valuable explanations of moral reasoning, prosocial behavior, identity, and ethical decision-making. Many studies, however, treat moral development as a measurable level or relatively stable personal attribute. Such perspectives may not fully explain how students revise their moral self-understanding after contradictory, emotionally difficult, or socially complex experiences. Narrative continuity and change remain insufficiently examined in much of the character-education literature (Tohirin, 2025; Weiss, 2023).

Research on character education has also concentrated heavily on program effectiveness, curriculum implementation, teacher strategies, and measurable behavioral outcomes. These studies are useful for evaluating interventions, but they often position students as recipients of moral instruction rather than interpreters of moral experience. Limited research has explored how learners narrate the intended and unintended consequences of school rules, disciplinary encounters, peer conflicts, digital interactions, and institutional expectations. The absence of these perspectives restricts understanding of how character education is actually experienced by students (Crawford, 2025; Harrison, 2023).

Narrative studies in education have frequently addressed identity, professional development, trauma, migration, or learning experience, while moral development has received less sustained attention as a narrative process. Studies that do examine moral stories often focus on early childhood, religious formation, or exceptional ethical dilemmas. Everyday moral development among students in contemporary educational settings remains underexplored. The present research

addresses this gap by analyzing how ordinary educational experiences become part of students' evolving moral narratives (Aziz, 2025; Chen, 2025).

The novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing character as a continuously revised narrative rather than a fixed collection of virtues. The idea of re-writing character emphasizes that students can reinterpret earlier actions, challenge inherited moral assumptions, and construct new understandings of themselves. This perspective moves beyond the question of whether students possess particular character traits. Greater attention is given to how moral identity is narrated, disrupted, defended, and transformed through educational experience (Svyrydenko, 2024; Yen, 2026).

Another innovative aspect concerns the integration of personal stories with the moral conditions of modern educational institutions. Students' narratives will not be treated as isolated psychological accounts. Their stories will be examined in relation to school culture, digital interaction, academic pressure, teacher authority, peer recognition, and institutional definitions of success. This contextual approach can reveal how educational structures shape the kinds of moral identities students are able or expected to construct.

The importance of the study rests on its theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical contributions. Theoretically, the research may enrich moral-development theory by highlighting temporality, interpretation, identity revision, and narrative agency. Methodologically, narrative analysis offers access to meanings and tensions that cannot be captured adequately through standardized instruments alone. Pedagogically, the findings may help educators design character education that encourages reflection, dialogue, accountability, and moral imagination. Such contributions are essential for developing educational practices that do not merely prescribe virtue but help students understand how ethical character is formed, challenged, and rewritten throughout their lives (Heybach, 2024; Keinonen, 2024).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore how university students interpreted and reconstructed their character education experiences in modern educational settings. Narrative inquiry was selected because moral development is not merely reflected in observable behavior but is also expressed through personal stories, remembered events, ethical conflicts, relationships, and changing interpretations of the self. The design enabled participants to describe how particular educational experiences influenced their understanding of honesty, responsibility, empathy, fairness, discipline, respect, and social concern (Nuradin, 2026; Nurhadi, 2025).

The study treated character development as a dynamic process that unfolded across time rather than as a fixed set of moral traits. Participants' stories were examined to identify how they connected past experiences, present moral positions, and future aspirations. Attention was directed toward critical incidents, turning points, moral dilemmas, disciplinary experiences, interactions with lecturers and peers, participation in campus activities, and encounters within digital learning environments. Each narrative was interpreted as an account of how students understood moral continuity, conflict, failure, reflection, and transformation.

The research adopted an interpretive orientation because the meaning of character education was expected to vary according to participants' social backgrounds, academic experiences, relationships, and institutional contexts. The researchers did not attempt to measure moral development numerically or classify participants according to predetermined developmental stages. The analysis focused on how moral identities were constructed through language, how participants

positioned themselves in relation to others, and how educational environments supported or constrained character formation.

The research population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled at a selected university who had experienced formal and informal character education during their studies. Character education experiences included classroom instruction, academic regulations, student organizations, community service, religious or civic activities, disciplinary procedures, peer interactions, digital communication, and institutional programs designed to promote ethical behavior. University students were considered appropriate participants because higher education exposes learners to greater personal independence, academic responsibility, social diversity, and complex moral decision-making.

A purposive sample of 24 university students was selected from different academic years and fields of study. Participant selection was based on their willingness to describe meaningful character education experiences and their ability to reflect on changes in their moral understanding. Maximum-variation considerations were applied to include students with diverse academic backgrounds, organizational involvement, educational experiences, and levels of participation in campus activities. Such diversity allowed the study to examine both shared patterns and contrasting moral narratives.

Participants were required to be actively enrolled undergraduate students, have completed at least two semesters of university education, and have experienced at least one event they considered influential in shaping their character. Students who were unwilling to participate in recorded interviews or unable to provide informed consent were excluded. Participant recruitment continued until the collected narratives provided sufficient depth, variation, and recurring thematic patterns to address the research objectives. The term “participants” was preferred over “respondents” because the study emphasized personal meaning and narrative interpretation rather than standardized responses.

The primary research instrument was the researcher, who was responsible for establishing rapport, conducting interviews, interpreting narratives, and maintaining sensitivity toward the moral and emotional dimensions of participants’ experiences. Researcher involvement required reflexive awareness because personal beliefs about character, morality, and education could influence questioning and interpretation. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the study to document analytical decisions, emerging assumptions, emotional responses, and possible interpretive bias (Eremin, 2025; Gustafson, 2022).

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured narrative interviews. The interview guide contained open-ended prompts that encouraged participants to recount specific experiences rather than provide abstract definitions of good character. Questions addressed memorable character education activities, moral dilemmas, experiences of success or failure, disciplinary encounters, relationships with lecturers and peers, digital interactions, moments of regret, and perceived changes in personal values. Follow-up questions were used to clarify the sequence of events, participants’ feelings, the roles of other people, and the meanings attached to each experience.

Reflective writing prompts were used as a supplementary instrument to provide participants with opportunities to describe experiences that might not emerge fully during spoken interviews. Participants were invited to write a brief account of an event that changed how they understood themselves as moral individuals. Relevant institutional documents, including student codes of conduct, character education guidelines, program descriptions, and campus activity materials, were reviewed to understand the formal moral expectations surrounding the participants. These

documents were used as contextual evidence rather than as substitutes for students' personal narratives (Beck, 2024; Zhunussova, 2026).

The interview guide and reflective prompts were reviewed by experts in qualitative research, character education, and educational psychology. Expert review focused on question clarity, ethical sensitivity, relevance to the research objectives, and the ability of each prompt to elicit detailed narratives. A pilot interview was conducted with two students who were not included in the final sample. The pilot process helped refine question wording, interview sequence, probing strategies, and the approximate duration required for each session.

The study began with ethical approval and institutional permission. Potential participants received a clear explanation of the research purpose, data-collection process, voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw without academic consequences. Written informed consent was obtained before interviews were conducted. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' identities, while identifying references to individuals, courses, departments, and specific campus incidents were removed or modified during transcription and reporting.

Individual interviews were conducted in a private setting or through a secure online platform according to participant accessibility. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with permission. Participants were encouraged to describe events chronologically, beginning with the context of the experience and continuing through the conflict, response, consequence, reflection, and perceived moral change. Interviewers used nonjudgmental probing to obtain richer descriptions without directing participants toward socially desirable answers.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked against the original files for accuracy. Participants were given an opportunity to review the main content of their transcripts and clarify statements that could be misunderstood. Reflective narratives and institutional documents were organized alongside the interview transcripts. All data were stored securely in password-protected files and accessed only for research purposes.

Narrative analysis was conducted through several interconnected stages. The first stage involved repeated reading to understand each participant's story as a complete account. The second stage identified narrative elements such as setting, characters, moral conflict, turning points, actions, consequences, and resolutions. The third stage examined how participants positioned themselves as responsible agents, victims, observers, learners, resisters, or transformed individuals. The fourth stage compared narratives across participants to identify recurring patterns and meaningful differences in character development.

Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing, data-source triangulation, and maintenance of an audit trail. Member checking allowed participants to confirm whether the researchers' interpretations represented their experiences adequately. Peer debriefing involved discussion with qualitative research colleagues to challenge premature conclusions and alternative interpretations. Triangulation compared interview narratives, reflective writing, and institutional documents. An audit trail documented participant recruitment, interview decisions, coding development, theme refinement, and changes in interpretation (Crawford, 2025; Leon, 2026).

Ethical care remained important because discussions of moral failure, conflict, punishment, and regret could cause discomfort. Participants were allowed to pause, decline questions, or end the interview at any time. Sensitive experiences were reported without unnecessary personal detail, and the analysis avoided labeling participants as morally deficient. Final interpretations emphasized the

complexity of character development and recognized that moral growth often involved contradiction, uncertainty, accountability, and revision of the self.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study involved 24 undergraduate students representing different academic years, fields of study, and levels of participation in campus activities. The participants consisted of 10 male and 14 female students between 18 and 23 years of age. Six students were enrolled in their second year, eight were in their third year, and ten were in their fourth year. Fourteen participants had experience in student organizations, nine had participated in community-service activities, and eleven had encountered formal character education through university courses or institutional programs. Each participant completed one narrative interview and one reflective writing task, generating approximately 1,260 minutes of recorded interviews and 218 pages of transcribed and written material.

The narrative corpus contained stories related to academic honesty, interpersonal responsibility, empathy, discipline, social inclusion, digital behavior, and accountability. Academic pressure and peer relationships appeared most frequently as contexts in which students encountered moral conflict. Experiences involving plagiarism, group assignments, organizational responsibilities, online communication, and lecturer feedback were repeatedly described as moments that challenged participants' previous understanding of good character. Table 1 presents an overview of the participants and the principal contexts represented in their narratives.

Table 1. Overview of Participants and Character Education Experiences

Participant Characteristic	Category	Number of Participants
Gender	Male	10
	Female	14
Academic level	Second year	6
	Third year	8
	Fourth year	10
Student organization experience	Active involvement	14
Community-service experience	Participated	9
Formal character education exposure	Course or institutional program	11
Dominant narrative context	Academic honesty	16
	Peer relationships	15
	Responsibility and leadership	13
	Digital behavior	12
	Social inclusion and empathy	10

The narratives showed that character education was experienced less as a formal transfer of moral values and more as a series of disruptions to students' existing self-understanding. Participants rarely described lectures about morality as the most influential source of character formation. Critical incidents involving failure, embarrassment, conflict, disappointment, or accountability were more often identified as events that changed how students interpreted honesty, responsibility, empathy, and fairness. Moral development appeared to emerge when students were required to confront the consequences of their choices rather than merely repeat institutional definitions of virtue.

The stories also revealed that character development did not occur through a simple progression from moral weakness to moral maturity. Several participants described periods of

regression, unresolved tension, and repeated failure before reporting meaningful change. A student who admitted copying an assignment, for example, did not immediately develop stronger academic integrity after receiving a warning. Moral reconstruction occurred only after the student recognized how dishonesty damaged trust with peers and weakened confidence in personal academic ability. Such patterns indicated that character formation involved reinterpretation, emotional discomfort, social feedback, and gradual revision of personal narratives.

Five major themes were identified across the participants' narratives: moral disruption, relational recognition, reflective accountability, negotiated integrity, and future-oriented moral identity. Moral disruption referred to experiences that challenged participants' previous beliefs about themselves as responsible or ethical individuals. Relational recognition described the influence of lecturers, peers, family members, and community members who confronted, supported, or reinterpreted participants' behavior. Reflective accountability involved acknowledging personal responsibility without reducing moral failure to punishment or institutional compliance.

Negotiated integrity represented the process through which students balanced personal values, peer pressure, academic demands, and institutional expectations. Future-oriented moral identity referred to participants' efforts to construct a revised image of the person they intended to become. These themes were interconnected rather than independent. Moral disruption frequently initiated reflection, relational encounters shaped interpretation, and accountability supported the construction of a more coherent moral identity. Table 2 summarizes the themes and their narrative expressions.

Table 2. Major Themes in Students' Narratives of Moral Development

Theme	Narrative Expression	Number of Narratives
Moral disruption	Failure, conflict, shame, exclusion, or ethical uncertainty	19
Relational recognition	Moral influence of lecturers, peers, family, or community	18
Reflective accountability	Acceptance of personal responsibility and consequences	16
Negotiated integrity	Tension between values, pressure, and institutional demands	17
Future-oriented moral identity	Commitment to becoming a more responsible person	15

Interpretive inference suggested that moral change was more likely to occur when participants connected an event with a revised understanding of themselves. Narratives that merely described punishment tended to show compliance rather than transformation. Stories containing reflection, dialogue, and recognition of consequences displayed stronger evidence of moral reconstruction. The central inferential pattern was that educational experiences shaped character most meaningfully when students were encouraged to interpret why an action mattered, whom it affected, and how it related to their desired identity.

The analysis also inferred that institutional rules were insufficient when they were disconnected from relational and reflective processes. Participants frequently understood regulations as external demands until lecturers or peers helped them interpret the human consequences behind those rules. Academic integrity became meaningful when students associated plagiarism with damaged trust and weakened authorship rather than only with formal sanctions. Responsibility became morally significant when organizational failure affected other students rather than when participants merely feared negative evaluation. These interpretive patterns indicate that moral development was mediated by meaning, relationship, and identity reconstruction.

A strong relationship emerged between moral disruption and reflective accountability. Participants who described a clear turning point were more likely to acknowledge their role in the event and articulate a revised moral position. Experiences of failure alone did not guarantee growth. Moral change became visible when participants reinterpreted failure as evidence that their previous assumptions, habits, or justifications were inadequate. Reflection transformed an uncomfortable experience into a narrative resource for character development.

Relational recognition was closely connected with future-oriented moral identity. Students often required another person to recognize their potential beyond a single mistake before they could imagine a different moral self. Supportive lecturers were described as individuals who criticized harmful actions without defining the student entirely by those actions. Peer relationships also influenced moral reconstruction by providing either pressure toward conformity or encouragement toward accountability. The relationship among the themes suggests that character was rewritten through interaction between personal reflection and social recognition.

Table 3. Relationships Among Narrative Processes

Narrative Process	Related Process	Interpretive Relationship
Moral disruption	Reflective accountability	Conflict stimulated reconsideration of personal responsibility
Relational recognition	Future-oriented identity	Recognition supported belief in the possibility of moral change
Institutional pressure	Negotiated integrity	External demands created tension between compliance and conviction
Digital experience	Empathy and responsibility	Online consequences expanded awareness of harm and accountability
Reflective dialogue	Narrative reconstruction	Conversation helped participants revise the meaning of past actions

The narrative of “Alya,” a fourth-year student, illustrates the process of rewriting character through academic failure and relational accountability. Alya described herself as a disciplined and high-achieving student who believed that good character was demonstrated primarily through academic success. During a demanding semester, she submitted an assignment containing unattributed material because she feared receiving a low grade. The lecturer identified the plagiarism and asked Alya to explain the reasoning behind her decision rather than imposing an immediate penalty. Alya initially defended her action by referring to limited time and academic pressure.

The turning point occurred when the lecturer asked whether a high grade obtained through another person’s work still represented her abilities. Alya reported feeling ashamed, not only because the violation had been discovered but because the question challenged the moral identity she had constructed as a responsible student. She rewrote the assignment, accepted a reduced grade, and began documenting sources more carefully in subsequent courses. Her narrative concluded with a revised definition of discipline as the willingness to complete work honestly, even when the result might be imperfect.

Alya’s story demonstrates that moral development involved a transition from performance-based character to integrity-based character. Her earlier self-narrative equated achievement with moral worth, creating conditions in which dishonesty could be justified as a strategy for protecting academic identity. The lecturer’s response disrupted this narrative by separating genuine responsibility from outward success. The absence of humiliating punishment allowed Alya to

confront the contradiction between her behavior and her desired identity without becoming entirely defensive.

The case also illustrates the importance of narrative agency. Alya did not present herself solely as a victim of academic pressure or as a naturally dishonest student. She gradually repositioned herself as an individual capable of acknowledging failure, accepting consequences, and changing future behavior. The educational value of the event arose from the opportunity to reinterpret the mistake rather than simply erase it. Her revised story became a moral framework for later decisions involving authorship, time management, and academic responsibility.

The findings indicate that moral development in modern educational settings occurred through narrative reconstruction rather than through the passive acceptance of prescribed values. Students rewrote their character when difficult experiences challenged existing self-images and encouraged them to reinterpret responsibility, integrity, empathy, and fairness. Formal character education contributed to this process only when institutional expectations were connected with reflection, dialogue, relational support, and meaningful consequences.

The study also reveals that character remained unfinished and contextually negotiated. Students could demonstrate integrity in one setting while struggling with responsibility in another. Digital interaction, academic competition, peer pressure, and institutional demands created new moral tensions that required continuing interpretation. Modern character education should therefore help students develop the capacity to examine their own stories, recognize contradictions, accept accountability, and imagine more ethical future identities.

The findings demonstrate that moral development among university students was shaped primarily through experiences that disrupted their previous understanding of themselves. Academic dishonesty, interpersonal conflict, organizational failure, social exclusion, digital misconduct, and disciplinary encounters became important moments of moral reflection. Participants rarely identified formal lectures about values as the strongest influence on character formation. Experiences involving consequences, emotional discomfort, and accountability were more frequently described as events that changed how they understood honesty, responsibility, empathy, fairness, and respect.

Five interconnected narrative patterns characterized the students' moral development: moral disruption, relational recognition, reflective accountability, negotiated integrity, and future-oriented moral identity. Moral disruption appeared when students experienced tension between their behavior and the kind of person they believed themselves to be. Relational recognition emerged through encounters with lecturers, peers, family members, and community members who challenged or supported the participants. Reflective accountability developed when students moved beyond excuses and began to acknowledge their role in an ethical problem.

Students' narratives also showed that moral development did not follow a simple, linear progression from inadequate behavior to stable virtue. Several participants reported repeating similar mistakes, resisting criticism, or understanding a moral lesson only after a considerable period of reflection. Character formation involved hesitation, contradiction, regression, and gradual reinterpretation. Moral growth became visible when participants could explain how an earlier experience changed their present decisions and future intentions.

The case of Alya illustrated the broader process of narrative reconstruction found across the data. Her experience of plagiarism challenged an identity based on academic achievement and encouraged the development of an integrity-based understanding of discipline. The lecturer's reflective response allowed her to reinterpret the incident as a moral turning point rather than

merely as a violation followed by punishment. Her narrative demonstrated how students could rewrite a morally difficult event into a framework for more responsible future action.

The findings are consistent with developmental perspectives that regard moral growth as a process involving reflection, judgment, emotional experience, and social interaction. Earlier research has often shown that moral understanding becomes more complex when individuals encounter dilemmas that cannot be resolved through simple rules. The participants in this study similarly developed deeper moral awareness when educational experiences exposed contradictions between personal values, institutional expectations, and actual behavior. Their narratives suggest that moral development depends on the interpretation of ethical tension rather than on the passive acquisition of moral vocabulary.

The prominence of relational recognition corresponds with scholarship emphasizing the importance of care, dialogue, and interpersonal relationships in character education. Participants frequently described lecturers and peers as moral witnesses whose responses influenced how they interpreted their actions. Constructive confrontation encouraged accountability, while humiliating or purely punitive responses often produced defensiveness. This pattern supports the view that character develops within relationships where learners are recognized as responsible individuals who remain capable of moral change.

The results differ from character-education models that emphasize the direct transmission and habitual practice of predetermined virtues. Formal instruction, institutional slogans, and codes of conduct were not irrelevant, but they rarely became transformative without connection to lived experience. Students could define honesty or responsibility accurately while continuing to justify behavior that contradicted those values. The findings therefore challenge the assumption that moral knowledge, repeated messaging, or external compliance necessarily produces moral agency.

The narrative pattern also extends studies that measure character through trait scales, moral-reasoning scores, or behavioral indicators. Standardized measures can identify tendencies, but they may not explain why the same student behaves responsibly in one context and inconsistently in another. Narrative analysis revealed how students negotiated identity across academic, organizational, interpersonal, and digital settings. Moral character appeared less as a fixed possession and more as an evolving interpretation of the self in relation to changing circumstances.

The findings signify that moral development in higher education is closely connected with identity reconstruction. Students did not merely learn what behavior was expected; they revised the stories through which they understood themselves. Moral transformation occurred when an event challenged an established self-image, such as being disciplined, successful, kind, or trustworthy. The resulting tension created an opportunity to examine whether their actions genuinely reflected those identities.

The results also signify that moral failure can become educationally meaningful when it is approached through reflection and accountability. A mistake did not automatically lead to growth, and punishment alone did not guarantee moral change. Participants developed stronger moral understanding when they were required to consider consequences, affected relationships, and alternative actions. Ethical difficulty became a source of development only when students were able to interpret it critically.

The persistence of unresolved tension signifies that character should not be treated as a finished educational outcome. Students continued to face conflicts between achievement and honesty, loyalty and fairness, freedom and responsibility, or self-protection and empathy. Digital environments intensified some of these tensions by separating actions from immediate face-to-face

consequences. Character education therefore involves continuing moral work rather than the completion of a predetermined list of virtues.

The emergence of future-oriented moral identity signifies the importance of imagination in moral development. Participants often described change by referring to the kind of student, professional, friend, or citizen they hoped to become. Moral action was influenced not only by rules and past consequences but also by an envisioned future self. The ability to imagine a more responsible identity helped participants connect present choices with long-term ethical commitments.

The findings imply that universities should design character education around meaningful experience rather than rely primarily on moral instruction. Courses and institutional programs need to create opportunities for students to analyze authentic dilemmas, examine consequences, and articulate the values underlying their decisions. Reflection should be connected with real academic, organizational, and social situations. Such an approach can help students move from knowledge about virtue toward an understanding of how virtue is enacted under pressure.

Lecturers need to recognize that their responses to student misconduct can influence moral reconstruction. A purely punitive approach may communicate institutional boundaries, but it may not help students understand why their behavior was harmful. Reflective questioning, restorative dialogue, and proportionate consequences can encourage students to assume responsibility while preserving the possibility of change. Accountability becomes more educational when it addresses both the action and the student's capacity to develop.

Character education should also include narrative practices such as reflective journals, moral autobiographies, critical-incident analysis, peer dialogue, and guided storytelling. These activities allow students to examine how earlier experiences shape present behavior. Narrative work can make contradictions visible and help learners identify recurring patterns in their decisions. Such practices should not become forced confessions but should provide structured opportunities for ethical self-examination (Zhunussova, 2026).

Institutional policy should acknowledge that campus culture communicates moral values through everyday practices. Universities cannot promote cooperation while rewarding only individual competition, encourage honesty while normalizing unrealistic workloads, or advocate inclusion while ignoring subtle exclusion. Character education loses credibility when institutional behavior contradicts its stated values. Moral development therefore requires coherence between curriculum, assessment, discipline, leadership, student services, and digital policy.

The findings may be explained by the narrative nature of human identity. Individuals understand themselves by connecting experiences across time and assigning meaning to particular events. Moral disruption becomes powerful because it interrupts an existing personal story. A student who sees herself as honest must reinterpret either the behavior or the identity when confronted with evidence of dishonesty.

The strong role of relationships may be explained by the social character of moral judgment. Students often rely on others to recognize the consequences of their actions and to evaluate whether change is possible. Lecturers, peers, and family members function as audiences, critics, and supporters within moral narratives. Their responses can either strengthen defensiveness or encourage responsibility (Tohirin, 2025).

The limited influence of formal character instruction may be explained by the distance between abstract values and contextual decisions. Moral principles become difficult to apply when students face academic pressure, peer expectations, fear of failure, or uncertain consequences.

Knowledge of a value does not remove competing motivations. Character develops when students learn to interpret these tensions and choose actions that remain consistent with their commitments.

The importance of future-oriented identity may be explained by the motivational function of moral aspiration. Rules can restrict behavior, but aspirations provide reasons for sustained change. Students were more likely to reinterpret past mistakes when they connected them with a desired professional or personal identity. Moral development therefore involved not only avoiding wrongdoing but also constructing a meaningful vision of who they intended to become.

Future character-education programs should incorporate sustained narrative reflection across the university curriculum. A single course or orientation session is unlikely to address the changing moral challenges students encounter. Reflective activities should appear at different stages of study and connect with academic integrity, leadership, community engagement, professional ethics, and digital citizenship. Repeated opportunities for reflection may help students recognize how their moral narratives develop over time.

Future research should examine moral development longitudinally. Narrative interviews conducted at several points could reveal how students reinterpret the same event as their identities and circumstances change. Longitudinal inquiry would also help distinguish temporary compliance from deeper moral reconstruction. Such designs could clarify whether future-oriented commitments are sustained in later behavior (Weiss, 2023).

Comparative studies should explore how institutional culture, discipline systems, religious orientation, academic field, and digital environment shape moral narratives. Students in professional programs may interpret responsibility differently from those in general academic programs. Institutions with restorative disciplinary practices may produce different forms of moral reflection from institutions emphasizing punishment. Cross-context analysis can reveal which educational conditions most consistently support ethical agency.

Future methodological development should combine narrative analysis with observation, reflective diaries, peer accounts, digital artifacts, and institutional documents. Self-narratives are valuable but may be selective, retrospective, or influenced by social desirability. Multiple sources can strengthen interpretation without reducing character to numerical measurement alone. The next stage of research should preserve the depth of students' stories while examining how those stories correspond with behavior, relationships, and institutional practice.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this study is that moral development among university students occurred primarily through narrative reconstruction rather than through the passive acceptance of prescribed values. Students' character changed when morally disruptive experiences, such as academic dishonesty, interpersonal conflict, organizational failure, digital misconduct, and social exclusion, challenged their previous self-understanding. Relational recognition, reflective accountability, negotiated integrity, and future-oriented moral identity shaped how participants interpreted these experiences. The distinctive finding lies in the role of difficult experiences as potential moral turning points. Failure or punishment alone did not produce transformation; meaningful change emerged when students connected their actions with their consequences, relationships, and desired future identities.

The study contributes conceptually by framing character as an evolving moral narrative rather than a fixed collection of virtues or stable personality traits. Moral development is understood as a continuing process through which students interpret past actions, negotiate present tensions, and construct future ethical commitments. The research also offers a methodological contribution by

applying narrative inquiry to examine the temporal, relational, and contextual dimensions of character education. Narrative interviews, reflective writing, and institutional documents enabled the study to reveal contradictions, turning points, and identity revisions that standardized measures might not adequately capture. This approach expands character-education research by placing students' lived experiences and moral agency at the center of analysis.

The limitations of this study arise from its small purposive sample, single institutional context, reliance on retrospective self-narratives, and interpretive nature. Participants may have reconstructed events selectively, minimized morally sensitive details, or presented themselves in socially acceptable ways. The findings cannot therefore be generalized statistically to all university students or educational settings. Future research should use longitudinal narrative designs to examine how moral identities change across different stages of university education. Comparative studies involving diverse institutions, cultural settings, academic disciplines, and disciplinary systems are also needed. Interviews could be combined with observations, digital artifacts, peer accounts, reflective diaries, and behavioral evidence to strengthen interpretation and clarify the relationship between narrated moral change and actual ethical practice.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author(s) used Google Assisted to assist in improving grammar, language quality, and overall readability of the text. After using this tool, the author(s) Carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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