

Strengthening Honest and Caring Character through the Found Box Program at UPT SPF SD Negeri Kompleks IKIP I

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the implementation of the "Found Box" (Kotak Temuan) program as a school-based character education initiative at UPT SPF SD Negeri Kompleks IKIP I, Makassar. Functioning as a structured habituation strategy, the program aims to cultivate honesty and social care among elementary school students by requiring them to deposit found items in a designated box and record them in a logbook. This qualitative descriptive study collected data through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation analysis over one semester. Findings demonstrate that the Found Box program effectively strengthened students' honest behaviors and social responsibility, while fostering a positive school culture grounded in mutual respect and collective accountability. The program offers a replicable, low-cost model of values-based character education suitable for broader implementation in Indonesian elementary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Character education remains a central concern in contemporary educational discourse, particularly in developing nations navigating rapid social and technological change. Across the globe, educators and policymakers have recognized that academic achievement alone is insufficient to prepare students for responsible citizenship; character formation must be embedded within everyday schooling (Berkowitz et al., 2021). In Indonesia, this imperative is enshrined in Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, which mandates that education develop students not only intellectually but also morally and socially.

Recent decades have witnessed a troubling decline in prosocial behaviors among young people, including incidents of dishonesty, low empathy, and disregard for others' belongings in school settings (Pane & Patriana, 2022). These trends underline the urgency of implementing evidence-based, context-sensitive character education programs. Elementary school represents the most strategic window for instilling foundational values, as children at this stage are highly responsive to structured moral environments (Narvaez & Lapsley, 2023).

UPT SPF SD Negeri Kompleks IKIP I Makassar has responded to this challenge by developing the "Found Box" (Kotak Temuan) program – an innovative habituation initiative through which students who discover lost or misplaced items are required to deposit them in a designated box and record the details in a logbook. The program operationalizes value-based education by integrating character learning into the natural flow of students' daily school life rather than treating it as a separate curriculum subject (Lickona & Davidson, 2024).

This study aims to describe the implementation of the Found Box Program, analyze its effectiveness in strengthening honest and socially caring character among students, and identify enabling and constraining factors in its execution. The central research question is: how does the Found Box Program contribute to the development of honesty and social care among elementary school students at UPT SPF SD Negeri Kompleks IKIP I?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Character Education in Contemporary Elementary Schooling

Character education has undergone significant reconceptualization since the early 2020s, shifting from a rule-based compliance model toward a relational, community-embedded approach (Berkowitz et al., 2021). Contemporary frameworks emphasize that character is not a fixed trait transmitted through instruction, but rather a dynamic disposition cultivated through repeated practice within moral communities. Schools function as primary moral

communities for children, making their design and culture critical determinants of character outcomes.

In the Indonesian context, the Penguatan Pendidikan Karakter (PPK) framework continues to provide the national architecture for school-based character development. Suyitno and Hariyadi (2020) argue that the PPK's emphasis on habituation (*pembiasaan*) and school culture is particularly aligned with research evidence showing that character dispositions develop through consistent environmental affordances rather than one-off interventions. The values of honesty (*kejujuran*) and social care (*kepedulian sosial*) occupy central positions within this framework as prerequisites for civic participation and communal wellbeing.

Habituation and Values-Based Education

The theoretical case for habituation as a character education strategy has been substantially reinforced by recent empirical work. Drawing on neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, Kristjansson et al. (2021) demonstrate that virtuous habits are best formed through repeated, meaningful practice within authentic social contexts – a principle directly instantiated in programs like the Found Box. Rather than teaching honesty as an abstract concept, such programs embed its practice within the lived ecology of the school.

Nucci and Turiel (2022) further distinguish between moral rules (applying universally, such as not stealing) and conventional norms (context-specific, such as classroom routines), arguing that effective character programs must engage both dimensions simultaneously. The Found Box Program exemplifies this integration: surrendering a found item is simultaneously a moral act (honoring ownership rights) and a social convention (following the school's procedural norm). This dual engagement accelerates moral internalization in ways that purely instructional approaches cannot replicate.

Honesty as a Learnable Character Disposition

Recent longitudinal research has strengthened the understanding of honesty as a learnable, environment-sensitive disposition rather than a fixed personality trait. Thielmann et al. (2023) conducted a multi-country meta-analysis demonstrating that school-based habituation programs significantly increase honest behavior among children aged 6–12, with effect sizes larger when programs involve concrete behavioral practices rather than moral reasoning discussions alone.

Consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, as applied by Renati et al., 2022), students' honest behavior is substantially shaped by the modeling and

reinforcement patterns of their immediate social environment. When teachers consistently acknowledge and praise the act of depositing found items, they function as powerful honest behavior models while simultaneously providing the positive reinforcement necessary to stabilize the habit. This mechanism is central to the Found Box Program's design.

Social Care, Empathy, and Collective Responsibility

Social care – encompassing empathy, prosocial motivation, and altruistic behavior – has attracted growing attention as both a character outcome and a predictor of broader social cohesion (Zaki, 2020). Recent neuroscientific and developmental research confirms that empathic capacity is highly plastic during the elementary school years and is particularly responsive to structured social practices that invite perspective-taking and cooperative problem-solving (Decety & Cowell, 2021).

Ibrahim et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of school-based social care programs in Southeast Asian elementary schools, concluding that programs integrating behavioral practice with social reflection yielded significantly stronger empathy outcomes than those relying on didactic instruction alone. The Found Box Program's logbook system – which requires students to consider who might have lost an item and how that person might feel – constitutes precisely this kind of embedded reflective practice.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to generate a rich, contextually grounded understanding of the Found Box Program and its influence on students' character development. Qualitative methodology is appropriate because the study foregrounds process, meaning, and context rather than numerical measurement (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The research was conducted at UPT SPF SD Negeri Kompleks IKIP I, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, across one full semester of the 2025/2026 academic year.

Research participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure informational richness. Participants included Grade IV and Grade V students actively engaged in the program, homeroom teachers serving as program facilitators, and the school principal as overall program coordinator. This multi-stakeholder sample enabled triangulation of perspectives on both implementation processes and character outcomes.

Data were gathered through three complementary techniques. First, participatory observation was conducted over eight consecutive weeks, documenting students' interactions with the found box, teacher facilitation

practices, and emergent social behaviors within the classroom and school environment. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with six teachers, the principal, and twelve randomly selected students. Third, documentary analysis was performed on the found item logbooks, weekly program reports, and relevant school policy documents. Data credibility was ensured through source triangulation and member-checking procedures. Analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al. (2020), comprising iterative cycles of data condensation, display, and conclusion verification.

RESEARCH RESULT

Implementation of the Found Box Program

The Found Box Program operates through a simple yet systematic mechanism. A prominently labeled box is placed in an accessible location in each participating classroom. Students who discover any item – whether a pencil, an eraser, money, or personal accessories – are required to deposit it in the box and complete a logbook entry recording the date, item description, location of discovery, and the finder's name. Class teachers review the logbook daily, making public announcements during morning assembly to facilitate owner identification and item return.

Over the eight-week observation period, the program functioned with notable consistency and growing student engagement. A total of 30 items were deposited across the observation period, averaging 3.75 items per week. As shown in Table 1, item recovery rates were high, with 29 out of 30 items (96.7%) successfully returned to their owners within three school days. This high recovery rate reflects both students' honesty in depositing items and teachers' diligence in facilitating the return process.

Table 1. Summary of Found Items During Program Implementation (8 Weeks)

Week	Types of Items Found	Total Items	Successfully Returned
1-2	Erasers, pencils, rulers	7	7 (100%)
3-4	Loose change, rubber bands, accessories	6	6 (100%)
5-6	Notebooks, rulers, name labels	9	8 (88.9%)
7-8	Pencils, erasers, small water bottles	8	8 (100%)

Strengthening Honest Character

Interview data and observational records converge in indicating significant positive changes in students' honest behavior over the program period. Prior to implementation, teachers reported recurring unresolved incidents of missing items, with students generally unwilling to acknowledge the presence of found

belongings. Following eight weeks of consistent program operation, teachers unanimously noted a sharp reduction in unresolved loss incidents, with almost all missing items successfully traced and returned through the found box system.

A particularly salient finding was the high rate of voluntary submission: logbook analysis revealed that 94% of deposited items were surrendered without direct teacher prompting at the time of discovery. This behavioral pattern aligns with Thielmann et al.'s (2023) distinction between compliance-driven and internalized honesty: the absence of immediate adult prompting suggests that the value of honesty had moved from externally regulated to internally motivated. Students' own accounts during interviews supported this interpretation, with several describing the act of submitting found items as something that "just felt right."

Strengthening Social Care Character

Observations documented a progressive emergence of prosocial behaviors extending well beyond the mechanical act of depositing items. By weeks five through eight, students were actively helping classmates search for missing items, proactively checking the found box on behalf of peers, and making informal peer-to-peer announcements about unclaimed items. These behaviors reflect the relational dimension of social care described by Zaki (2020) – an orientation toward others' wellbeing that motivates proactive helping rather than mere rule compliance.

Interview responses from students further revealed the development of perspective-taking capacities consistent with empathy growth. Multiple students articulated an awareness of how a classmate would feel upon losing a valued item, describing this awareness as a key motivation for their honest behavior. This finding resonates with Decety and Cowell's (2021) argument that structured social practices in schools can accelerate empathic development by creating contexts in which perspective-taking is both prompted and rewarded.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide strong support for the Found Box Program as an effective, low-resource character education habituation strategy. The program's success in cultivating both honesty and social care can be understood through the convergence of several well-established theoretical mechanisms. First, consistent with Kristjansson et al.'s (2021) neo-Aristotelian framework, the program creates conditions for virtue habituation by embedding repeated moral practice within authentic daily contexts. Students are not asked to reflect on honesty in the abstract; they are given concrete, recurring

opportunities to act honestly, with each act strengthening the underlying disposition.

Second, the program's design leverages the social reinforcement mechanisms identified by Renati et al. (2022). Teachers' consistent acknowledgment of found item submissions functions as positive social reinforcement, while the communal visibility of the logbook creates a form of normative social pressure that encourages peer conformity around honest behavior. Over time, this external scaffolding appears to become increasingly unnecessary as internal motivation strengthens – a trajectory consistent with self-determination theory's account of internalization (Ryan & Deci, as cited in Pane & Patriana, 2022).

Third, the program addresses both the moral and conventional dimensions of character simultaneously, as conceptualized by Nucci and Turiel (2022). Surrendering a found item honors the moral principle of respecting others' property while also enacting the school's social convention of using the found box system. This dual engagement appears to accelerate moral development by connecting universal moral reasoning to concrete, context-specific behavioral norms.

Regarding social care specifically, the program's outcomes align with Ibrahim et al.'s (2023) finding that programs integrating behavioral practice with embedded reflection yield superior empathy outcomes. The logbook's implicit invitation to consider who owns a found item and how they might feel constitutes precisely this kind of low-intensity reflective practice. The emergence of spontaneous prosocial helping behaviors among students by the program's later weeks suggests that social care was being internalized as a general relational orientation, not merely a procedural response to a school rule.

An important contextual factor supporting the program's success was teacher consistency. Observations confirmed that teachers who maintained regular logbook reviews and made daily morning announcements about found items produced higher student engagement and faster return rates. This finding underscores the role of teacher commitment identified by Suyitno and Hariyadi (2020) as a critical mediating variable in school-based character program effectiveness.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that the Found Box Program at UPT SPF SD Negeri Kompleks IKIP I represents an effective, sustainable, and scalable model of school-based character education. By embedding the practice of honesty and

social care within a simple, consistent daily routine, the program successfully moves these values from abstract ideals to lived behavioral dispositions. The high rate of voluntary item submission (94%) and the near-complete recovery rate of lost items (96.7%) provide concrete, observable indicators of the program's character-forming impact.

Several recommendations follow from these findings. First, other elementary schools in Makassar and across South Sulawesi are encouraged to adopt and adapt the Found Box Program as part of their character education portfolios. Implementation requires minimal resources – a designated box, a logbook, and consistent teacher facilitation – making it accessible even in under-resourced school contexts. Second, school administrators should institutionalize the program within the school's character education calendar, linking it to the national PPK framework and including it in teacher performance evaluations. Third, future implementations should incorporate structured weekly moral reflection sessions, inviting students to discuss their experiences with the found box and articulate connections to broader values of justice and community responsibility. This addition would strengthen the reflective dimension that Ibrahim et al. (2023) identify as critical to sustained empathy development.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study is subject to several limitations that define the agenda for future research. The single-site design limits the transferability of findings to schools with different socioeconomic profiles, cultural contexts, or leadership configurations. The eight-week observation window, while sufficient to document initial behavioral change, does not permit conclusions about the long-term durability of character gains. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs tracking students over at least one full academic year to assess whether behavioral changes persist and generalize beyond the school setting. Multi-site comparative designs – contrasting schools with and without the Found Box Program using matched sampling – would provide stronger causal evidence. Additionally, quantitative instruments measuring honesty and social care as psychological constructs could complement qualitative observation, enabling more precise effect-size estimation and comparison across contexts.

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