



Character Building Culture in Kindergarten

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Abstract

Character education in early childhood is a foundational investment in a nation's human capital. This study investigates how teachers enact their roles in nurturing character among children aged 5–6 years through the Seven Habits of Outstanding Indonesian Children framework (Gerakan 7 Kebiasaan Anak Indonesia Hebat), a government-endorsed initiative emphasising waking up early, worship, physical exercise, healthy and nutritious eating, love of learning, social participation, and sleeping early. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through structured observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis across a full semester at a kindergarten in Riau Province. Participants included three classroom teachers and fifteen children. Data were analysed through Miles and Huberman's interactive model of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, with member-checking employed to establish credibility. Findings reveal four interconnected teacher roles: (1) motivator and appreciator, who reinforces children's efforts through positive reinforcement; (2) role model, who embodies the habits in daily practice; (3) consistent mentor, who structures routines and guided activities; and (4) school-home liaison, who bridges habit formation between school and family contexts. Together, these roles cultivated religious, disciplined, responsible, independent, and socially caring character traits in the children. This study contributes empirical evidence for policy implementation and provides practical guidance for early childhood educators committed to holistic character development.

Keywords: *Teacher Roles; Character Education; Early Childhood Education; Seven Habits of Outstanding Indonesian Children; Habitualization.*

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Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) occupies a pivotal position in the architecture of human development. The period from birth to age eight has long been recognised as a critical window—often called the 'golden age'—during which neurological connections form at an extraordinary pace and the foundations of cognition, emotion, and moral identity are established (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). For children aged 5–6 years, this window is particularly consequential: habits, values, and dispositions that emerge during this phase tend to persist across the life span, shaping academic outcomes, social relationships, and civic participation well into adulthood (Heckman, 2006).

Within the Indonesian education system, kindergarten (Taman Kanak-Kanak, TK) serves as the primary institutional context for formalised early character development. The national curriculum for ECE emphasises holistic development across religious-moral, social-emotional, language, cognitive, physical-motor, and artistic domains (Kemendikbud, 2020). The Indonesian government's long-range vision of 'Generasi Emas 2045' (Golden Generation 2045) positions character education as a non-negotiable pillar of national human resource development, aiming to produce graduates who are intellectually capable, morally upright, and globally competitive (Asman et al., 2021). In this policy landscape, early character formation is not merely a pedagogical ideal—it is a national priority.

Yet the contemporary childhood environment presents formidable countercurrents. Digital media penetration, increased sedentary behaviour, nutritional transitions towards processed foods, and weakening social cohesion collectively threaten the formation of positive habits in young children. Screen exposure in preschool-aged children has been associated with reduced physical activity, disrupted sleep, and diminished prosocial behaviour (Hinkley et al., 2020). These challenges underscore the urgency of systematic, school-based character education programmes that provide a protective and formative counter-environment.

In response, the Indonesian Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology launched the Gerakan 7 Kebiasaan Anak Indonesia Hebat (Movement of Seven Habits of Outstanding Indonesian Children) as an operational framework for embedding character values in daily school routines. The seven habits—waking up early, worship, physical exercise, healthy and nutritious eating, love of learning, social participation, and sleeping early—are not arbitrary; each is grounded in empirical evidence linking the habit to specific developmental outcomes. For instance, consistent early rising is associated with improved executive function and self-regulation (Preckel et al., 2020), while regular physical activity enhances cognitive development and prosocial behaviour in young children (Hinkley et al., 2020). Religious and moral education cultivates spiritual well-being and ethical reasoning (Rahmat & Suyadi, 2021). Nutritional adequacy supports brain development and learning readiness (Suriyati et al., 2021). Structured reading habits accelerate early literacy and intrinsic motivation (Meiliana & Ma'nun, 2023). Social participation nurtures empathy and cooperative skills (Masyhuri & Adawiyah, 2023). And adequate sleep is fundamental to memory consolidation, emotional regulation, and physical growth (Walker, 2017).

The success of any curriculum framework, however, ultimately rests with the teacher. In ECE settings, the teacher is simultaneously the architect of the learning environment, the primary adult attachment figure, and the most accessible behavioural model available to children (Bredenkamp & Joseph, 2023). Research consistently demonstrates that the quality of teacher-child interactions is among the strongest predictors of child outcomes in early education (Pianta et al., 2019). Teachers in kindergarten do not merely instruct—they motivate, guide, model, and connect. Their relational and pedagogical competencies determine whether formal habits frameworks translate into genuine character formation or remain superficial compliance exercises.

Despite the policy momentum behind the Seven Habits framework, empirical studies documenting how teachers concretely enact their roles in implementing it remain scarce. Prior research in Indonesia has addressed character education broadly (Salsabilah, 2024; Zulkarnain, 2019), but few studies have zoomed in on the specific micro-practices teachers employ within the Seven Habits framework, particularly in Riau Province, where socio-cultural contexts and institutional resources differ markedly from Java-centric research sites. This gap represents both

a scholarly and practical deficit: without rich empirical accounts of effective teacher practice, curriculum policy risks being implemented inconsistently or ineffectively.

Accordingly, this study aims to provide a thick description of the roles that kindergarten teachers play in cultivating character in children aged 5–6 years through the Seven Habits of Outstanding Indonesian Children. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How do kindergarten teachers enact their roles in nurturing the character of children aged 5–6 years through the Seven Habits of Outstanding Indonesian Children framework? The findings contribute to both the empirical literature on ECE character education and to the practical knowledge base of teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers working within the Indonesian context.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, which is appropriate when the aim is to produce a rich, contextualised account of a social phenomenon as it naturally occurs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative approach was chosen because the research question requires understanding the meaning, process, and texture of teacher practice—phenomena that cannot be reduced to numerical indices. The design is descriptive in that it does not seek to test a causal hypothesis but rather to document, describe, and interpret the roles that teachers play in implementing the Seven Habits framework.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at a kindergarten (TK) in Riau Province, Sumatra, Indonesia, over one full academic semester (January–June 2025). The school was selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (a) formal adoption of the Seven Habits programme, (b) institutional willingness to participate, and (c) diversity of teacher experience levels. Participants comprised three classroom teachers with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 12 years, fifteen children aged 5–6 years enrolled in the senior kindergarten class (Group B), and five parents serving as supplementary informants. Table 1 summarises participant demographics.

Table 1. Research Participant Profiles

No.	Participant	Role	Teaching Experience
1	Teacher A	Head Teacher	12 years
2	Teacher B	Class Teacher	7 years
3	Teacher C	Class Teacher	5 years
4	15 children (age 5–6)	Research Subjects	—
5	5 Parents	Supporting Informants	—

Data Collection

Data were collected through three complementary techniques consistent with qualitative triangulation (Sugiyono, 2013): (1) structured observation, using a purpose-built observation guide with indicators mapped to each of the seven habits; (2) semi-structured interviews conducted with all three teachers and five parents, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes; and (3) documentary analysis, examining lesson plans, daily activity journals, and photographs of classroom routines. Table 2 summarises the instruments and data sources.

Table 2. Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

Technique	Instruments	Data Source
Observation	Structured observation guide with indicators per habit	Teachers and children in classroom
Interview	Semi-structured interview guide	Teachers and parents
Documentation	Daily activity journals, lesson plans, photos	School administrative records

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Miles et al. (2020) interactive model, comprising three concurrent phases: (1) data reduction, in which raw observational field notes, interview transcripts, and documents were systematically coded and categorised according to emergent thematic patterns; (2) data display, in which coded categories were organised into narrative summaries and thematic matrices to facilitate comparison and pattern recognition; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, in which provisional interpretations were iteratively tested against the data through member-checking with teacher participants.

Results and Discussion

The analysis yielded four principal findings, each corresponding to a distinct teacher role enacted in the implementation of the Seven Habits framework. These roles are not mutually exclusive; in practice, they overlap and reinforce one another across a typical school day. Table 3 presents the mapping of habits to teacher strategies and character outcomes, followed by Table 4 summarising the overall role-based findings.

Table 3. The Seven Habits of Outstanding Indonesian Children: Teacher Strategies and Character Outcomes

No	Habit	Teacher Strategy	Character Outcome
1	Waking Up Early	Morning circle, punctuality reinforcement	Discipline, time management
2	Worship / Prayer	Morning prayer routine, religious stories	Religiosity, spiritual awareness
3	Physical Exercise	Daily senam (gymnastics), active play	Physical health, cooperation
4	Healthy & Nutritious Eating	Communal meals, nutrition education	Health awareness, self-care
5	Love of Learning	Literacy corners, reading activities	Curiosity, responsibility
6	Social Participation	Group work, community projects	Empathy, teamwork, social care
7	Sleeping Early	Parent communication, rest routine advocacy	Self-regulation, healthy habits

Teachers as Motivators and Appreciators

The most consistently observed teacher behaviour across all three classrooms was the deliberate use of positive reinforcement to acknowledge children's engagement with habitualized activities. Teachers employed verbal praise ('Very well done—you came to school on time again today!'), non-verbal affirmations (thumbs-up gestures, gentle pats on the shoulder), and tangible reward systems (sticker charts) to recognise effort rather than outcome. This distinction—praising effort over achievement—is theoretically significant: it nurtures a growth mindset orientation even in very young learners (Dweck, 2006).

Observational data showed that motivational episodes occurred most frequently during morning arrival (reinforcing the early-rising habit), post-prayer activities (reinforcing the worship habit), and mealtimes (reinforcing healthy eating). Teacher A described her approach explicitly: 'I always make sure to say something positive when a child brings a nutritious lunchbox. It might seem small, but they remember. The next week, more children bring vegetables.' This aligns with Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which holds that positive reinforcement strengthens self-efficacy beliefs, increasing the likelihood of continued behaviour.

These findings corroborate Zulkarnain's (2019) framework, which identifies the teacher's motivational function as essential for 'activating children's potential' and making habitualized practice feel meaningful rather than coercive. Similarly, Fadilah et al. (2024) found that motivational reinforcement was the most frequently cited teacher practice among ECE practitioners implementing the Seven Habits framework, and that its consistent application was associated with higher levels of child engagement and reduced resistance to habitualized routines. From a neurodevelopmental perspective, positive reinforcement activates dopaminergic reward pathways, consolidating behavioural memories associated with pleasurable social feedback (Immordino-Yang & Gotlieb, 2017), thereby supporting the neurobiological underpinnings of habit formation.

Teachers as Role Models

Across all six months of observation, teachers demonstrated a high level of behavioural intentionality in their own conduct. They arrived punctually each morning, modelling the early-rising habit; they participated visibly in morning prayer, modelling the worship habit; they changed into sports attire and joined senam (group gymnastics), modelling physical exercise; and they brought and ate nutritious meals alongside children during communal mealtimes, modelling healthy eating. This embodied teaching—practising what is formally taught—was not incidental. Teacher B articulated it explicitly: 'The children are watching everything I do. If I tell them to eat vegetables but I don't eat them myself, they notice. Children that age are very perceptive.'

Social learning theory provides the conceptual foundation for understanding why role modelling is particularly powerful in ECE settings. Bandura (1977) demonstrated that observational learning—acquiring behaviour by watching credible, powerful, and nurturing models—is one of the primary mechanisms through which children develop repertoires of social behaviour. In kindergarten, the teacher is the most credible adult model available, making her daily conduct a *de facto* curriculum.

Zulkarnain (2019) warned that teachers must 'guard themselves carefully in appearance and conduct', as any inconsistency between what teachers preach and what they practise is quickly noticed by young children and undermines the moral authority essential for character education. This cautionary note was evident in our data: on one occasion, when Teacher C arrived approximately ten minutes late due to traffic, several children spontaneously commented 'Teacher, you're late—the rule is early!', demonstrating that they had internalised the habit norm and were applying it reflexively. This episode illustrates that when modelling is effective, children become self-regulating agents of the habit culture, not merely passive recipients.

These findings extend Fadilah et al.'s. (2024) conclusion that teacher role modelling is 'the most potent vehicle for character transmission in early childhood settings', adding observational specificity about which modelled behaviours generate the strongest child responses. The literature on early moral development supports this finding: children as young as three years demonstrate a strong capacity for imitation of moral behaviour (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009), and this imitative tendency is amplified when the model is a trusted, warm attachment figure (Ainsworth & Scheiter, 2021).

Teachers as Consistent Mentors

A third, closely related role was that of the consistent mentor: the teacher who structures, guides, and sustains habitualized practice through predictable daily routines. Unlike the role model role (which is primarily about the teacher's own conduct), the mentoring role involves active scaffolding of children's habit-enactment. Observations documented numerous instances of scaffolded guidance: teachers physically guiding children to wash their hands before meals;

gently redirecting children who were sedentary to participate in group gymnastics; sitting alongside children during communal reading to model reading posture and comprehension strategies; and prompting children to tidy up communal spaces after free play.

This consistent, relational mentoring was particularly evident around the healthy-eating habit. When Teacher A observed a child attempting to discard an unwanted vegetable portion, she did not simply confiscate the food—she knelt to the child's eye level, explained why vegetables matter for growing bodies, and made a game of trying 'just one bite.' This kind of patient, individualised guidance embodies what Vygotsky (1978) called scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development: the teacher provides just enough support to extend the child's capacity slightly beyond what they could manage independently, then gradually withdraws that support as competence grows.

The consistency dimension proved equally important. Because habit formation requires repeated enactment in the same context until the behaviour becomes automatic (Wood & Rünger, 2016), teachers who maintained structured routines across weeks and months—rather than implementing activities sporadically—observed more durable character outcomes. This finding resonates with Fadilah et al's. (2024) argument that 'the effectiveness of the Seven Habits framework depends fundamentally on the consistency and continuity of habitualization processes'. Suharjana (2013) similarly documented that children who experienced consistent, supervised physical activity routines demonstrated superior health behaviours and character traits compared to those in less-structured settings. The implication for practice is clear: sporadic 'character days' are insufficient; genuine character formation requires the architectural consistency of daily routine.

Teachers as School–Home Liaison

The fourth role—and the one most frequently overlooked in implementation—is that of the school–home liaison. Our data revealed that teachers who actively communicated with parents about the Seven Habits programme achieved significantly greater habit consistency than those who did not. Communication took multiple forms: brief daily exchanges at drop-off and pick-up times; WhatsApp group updates sharing photos and descriptions of in-school habit activities; a monthly parent workshop (held twice during the study period) in which teachers explained each habit's developmental rationale; and a home-habit journal in which parents recorded their child's practice of the seven habits at home.

These liaison practices are theoretically grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) mesosystem concept—the links between the home and school microsystems. When the mesosystem is strong (i.e., when home and school communicate regularly and share aligned values), children experience consistent behavioural expectations across settings, which reinforces habit consolidation. Meiliana & Ma'nun (2023) documented that parent–teacher collaboration, including regular communication and shared support of school-based learning, was a significant predictor of positive character development in ECE children.

Masyhuri & Adawiyah (2023) further argued that parental involvement in character education is not supplementary but essential, as 'the home is the first school and parents are the first teachers'. Without deliberate school–home bridging by teachers, the character habits practised at school risk remaining context-specific behaviours rather than generalised dispositions. Our observational data supported this: children whose parents reported practising the habits at home (particularly the early-rising and early-sleeping habits) showed greater consistency in school-based habit behaviour and required less corrective guidance from teachers over the course of the semester.

Sinulingga (2025) corroborated these findings, reporting that kindergarten programmes with structured parent-engagement components demonstrated measurably stronger character outcomes on the Seven Habits assessment rubric compared to school-only implementation. This comparative evidence strengthens the practical case for institutionalising school–home liaison as a formal, structured component of the Seven Habits programme rather than leaving it to individual teacher initiative.

Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the four teacher roles form an integrated pedagogical ecology for character formation. Table 4 synthesises the key findings across roles, implementation forms, and character values formed.

Table 4. Summary of Teacher Roles, Implementation Forms, and Character Outcomes		
Teacher's Role	Implementation Form	Character Values Formed
Motivator & Appreciator	Verbal praise, stickers, positive reinforcement	Confidence, discipline, enthusiasm
Role Model	Demonstrating punctuality, prayer, orderliness	Religiosity, respect, responsibility
Consistent Mentor	Structured routines, guided activities, reminders	Self-regulation, independence, environmental care
School–Home Liaison	Daily communication, parent workshops, journals	Consistency across settings, family values

Figure 1 below illustrates the conceptual model emerging from this study, depicting the interrelationships among the four teacher roles and their collective contribution to child character outcomes through the Seven Habits framework.

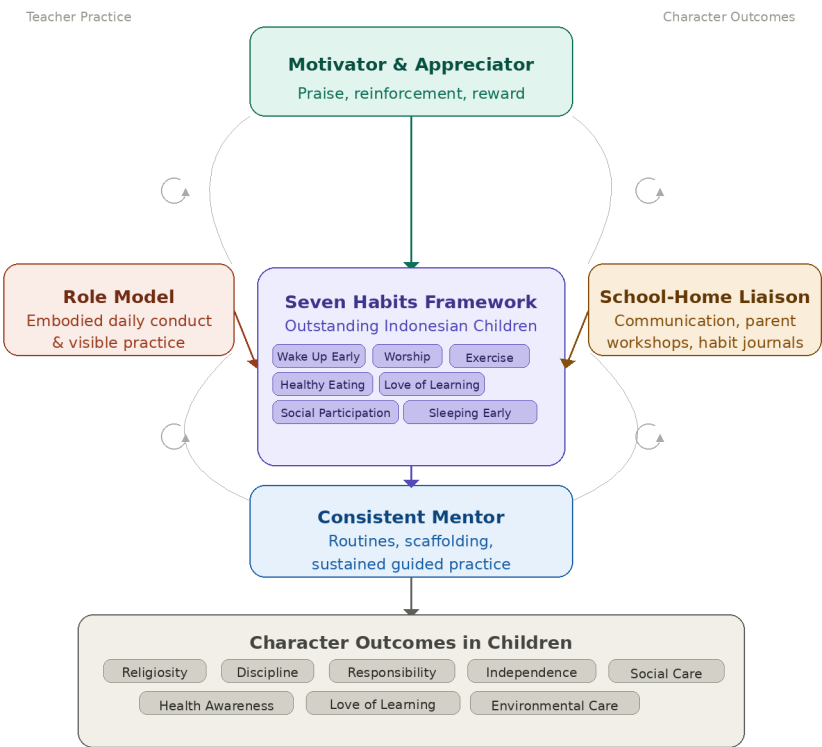


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Teacher Roles in Character Formation through the Seven Habits Framework

This integrated model carries several implications. First, it underscores the insufficiency of any single-role approach: teachers who only motivate without modelling, or who only model without maintaining consistent routines, are unlikely to achieve durable character outcomes. Second, it highlights the systemic dimension of character education—the school-home liaison role extends the reach of character formation beyond the classroom walls, addressing a critical ecological gap that purely school-centric approaches neglect. Third, it provides a practical

framework that can inform teacher professional development programmes, offering specific, observable role-based competencies as targets for training and assessment.

Conclusion

This study set out to illuminate how kindergarten teachers enact their roles in cultivating character in children aged 5–6 years through the Seven Habits of Outstanding Indonesian Children framework. Through six months of immersive fieldwork combining structured observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis, four core teacher roles were identified and analysed: motivator and appreciator, role model, consistent mentor, and school–home liaison. These roles are not linear or sequential—they operate simultaneously, reinforcing one another within the ecology of the kindergarten classroom and extending into the family context through deliberate liaison practices.

The evidence indicates that when all four roles are enacted with intentionality, consistency, and relational warmth, children develop observable character traits including religiosity, discipline, responsibility, independence, environmental care, and social empathy. These outcomes align with the character values prioritised by Indonesia's national education policy and with the developmental goals of the 'Generasi Emas 2045' agenda.

Several practical implications flow from these findings. For teachers, the study affirms that daily behavioural choices—from arriving punctually to eating nutritiously alongside children—constitute a de facto character curriculum with measurable impact. For school leaders, the findings support institutionalising structured parent-engagement mechanisms as a formal component of the Seven Habits programme. For curriculum developers and policymakers, the composite role model developed here offers a concrete, empirically grounded framework for teacher competency standards and professional development content.

This study is not without limitations. As a single-site qualitative study, its findings are contextually bound and cannot be generalised without caution to kindergartens with different institutional cultures, resource levels, or socio-economic contexts. Future research should employ multi-site comparative designs to assess the transferability of these findings, incorporate child self-report and peer assessment instruments to capture character development from the child's own perspective, and investigate whether the integrated four-role model predicts measurably better long-term character outcomes compared to partial implementations. Longitudinal designs tracking the same cohort of children into primary school would also be particularly valuable in establishing the durability of habit-based character formation in early childhood.

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The authors are graduates of early childhood education. The three of them researched the environment for early childhood, focusing on teacher performance in kindergartens.

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