

LANGUAGES

Teaching Moral Values in Primary Education through English Literature: A Study using Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol

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Abstract

This research investigates the pedagogical value of integrating Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* into primary education as a literary tool for teaching moral virtues. The study examines how the novella can support the development of ethical values such as empathy, generosity, and compassion among young learners. A quantitative research design was adopted by employing survey questionnaires from teachers and students.

The results indicate that most teachers perceive the novella as an effective resource for character education, despite certain practical challenges including limited classroom time and varying levels of student engagement. Teachers reported positive perceptions regarding students' attitudes and behaviour after studying the story. Student responses also demonstrate that literature can contribute to moral awareness and encourage the application of ethical values in everyday social interactions.

The findings suggest that literary narratives such as *A Christmas Carol* can play a meaningful role in character education within primary classrooms. The study contributes to ongoing discussions on the role of literature in shaping moral reasoning and supporting holistic education.

Keywords: moral education, virtues, English literature, primary education, character development

Introduction

Literature has long been recognized as a powerful medium for exploring human values and moral development. Among classic literary works, Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* stands out as a compelling narrative illustrating personal transformation and ethical awakening. The story follows the journey of Ebenezer Scrooge, a cold and selfish businessman who undergoes a profound change in character after confronting the consequences of his actions.

Scrooge's transformation—from an individual lacking empathy to someone who demonstrates generosity and compassion—provides an important moral narrative that continues to resonate with readers across generations. Because of its clear moral themes and emotionally engaging storyline, the novella offers educators an effective resource for teaching virtues to young learners.

This study examines how *A Christmas Carol* can be used as a pedagogical tool in primary education to foster moral awareness and positive social values among students. Specifically, the research explores the ways in which the story supports the development of virtues such as empathy, kindness, and social responsibility.

By analysing both teachers' and students' perspectives, the research aims to assess how literary narratives can contribute to character education. The study adopts an interdisciplinary perspective that combines insights from literature, educational psychology, and moral education. Ultimately, the research seeks to provide practical insights for educators interested in integrating literary works into moral instruction in primary classrooms through the following questions:

Q1: How do primary school teachers perceive the effectiveness of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* in teaching moral values such as empathy, generosity, and kindness?

Q2: How do primary school students respond to the use of *A Christmas Carol* in English lessons, particularly in terms of engagement and perceived influence on their moral understanding and behaviour?

Literature Review

The relationship between literature and moral education has attracted significant attention in educational research. Scholars have suggested that narratives play an important role in shaping children's ethical understanding and social awareness. Literary characters

and stories allow students to explore moral dilemmas, reflect on values, and develop empathy for others.

Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* provides a strong example of how literature can illustrate moral transformation. The character of Scrooge demonstrates how personal reflection and emotional experiences can lead to ethical growth. Scholars such as Sucksmith and Carey [1] highlight Dickens's ability to portray complex psychological development through vivid storytelling and characterisation.

Educational theorists also emphasize the importance of nurturing empathy and care within the learning environment. Noddings [2] argues that education should focus not only on academic knowledge but also on cultivating relationships, compassion, and moral responsibility. This perspective aligns closely with the themes presented in Dickens's novella.

Kohlberg's theory of moral development (1981) [3] further provides a useful framework for understanding Scrooge's transformation. According to Kohlberg, individuals progress through stages of moral reasoning as they develop ethical awareness. Scrooge's journey from self-interest to social responsibility reflects this developmental process and illustrates how narratives can model moral learning. Other scholars have highlighted the broader role of literature in developing students' moral imagination. Carlsen and Sherrill (1988) [4] suggest that reading experiences can shape readers' perspectives and encourage deeper emotional engagement with social issues. Similarly, Carter (2007) [5] discusses how literary texts can support literacy development while also encouraging ethical reflection.

From a psychological perspective, Haidt (2012) [6] explains that narratives influence moral intuition by engaging emotions and social values. Stories can therefore play a significant role in helping young readers internalize moral principles.

Together, these perspectives suggest that literary works such as *A Christmas Carol* can serve as valuable resources for teaching moral values. The present study builds upon this body of research by examining how the novella can be implemented in primary education and how both teachers and students perceive its educational impact

Methodology

This study employs a non-experimental, descriptive quantitative approach to investigate the educational impact of using *A Christmas Carol* to teach virtues in primary classrooms.

Participants

The participants include 30 primary school teachers ($n=30$) and 60 students ($n=60$) from several educational institutions in Vietnam. Teachers who incorporated the novella into their classroom instruction participated in the study, along with students who engaged with the story as part of their learning activities.

Data Collection

Quantitative data

Structured survey questionnaires were distributed to both teachers and students following the instructional period to capture the perceived effectiveness of the novella and observations of student behaviour. Student surveys evaluated their understanding of moral values, enjoyment of the story, and perceived changes in behaviour. All instruments utilized a 5-point Likert scale.

The teacher survey ($n = 30$) consists of 5 main thematic sections in which teachers are required to provide their demographics and background to identify their teaching experiences and familiarity with the novella. The reasons for choosing the story to teach in the classes and the specific activities conducted are also documented. Teachers were asked to state barriers, such as time constraints and language difficulty by answering open-ended and multiple-choice questions. Through observing, teachers measured the changes in students' empathy, generosity and kindness, and overall evaluated the novella's general effectiveness and the likelihood of future recommendation.

The students survey ($n = 60$) measures students' enjoyment and prior familiarity with the story. Using multiple-choice and open-ended questions, the survey aims to identify specific virtues students recognized within the narrative. Students also assessed their perceived changes in social behavior and treatment of others through yes/no and reflective items.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means (M), and standard deviations (SD), to identify trends and patterns. The internal consistency of the survey instruments was verified using Cronbach's Alpha to ensure reliability [7]. After being collected, the data were coded and entered into a digital database (Microsoft Excel). For binary (yes/no) questions, a coding system of 1 (Yes) and 0 (No) was applied.

The analysis focused on identifying trends and patterns among 30 teachers and 60 students. Following the statistical framework of Karl Pearson (1894) [8], Frequency (f), Percentage (P), Mean (M), and Standard Deviation (SD) were utilized. Frequency (f) and Percentage (P) were used to summarize the demographic data, challenges and students' recognition of specific virtues. Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) were calculated for all 5-point Likert scale items, in which the Mean (M) provides the measurement of central tendency in the perception of the novella's effectiveness. The mean scores were categorized into a specific hierarchy (e.g., 1.00–1.80: Strongly Disagree; 1.81–2.60: Disagree; 2.61–3.40: Neutral; 3.41–4.20: Agree; 4.21–5.00: Strongly Agree). The **Standard Deviation** was used to assess the degree of consensus among participants; a lower (SD) indicated a high level of agreement, while a higher (SD) suggested more varied opinions.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The survey results provide meaningful insights into the educational use of A Christmas Carol in primary classrooms

Teachers' perceptions and observations

Teachers reported encountering challenges when incorporating the novella into their teaching schedules. The most frequently mentioned difficulties included limited instructional time and differences in students' reading abilities.

Despite these challenges, as shown in **Table 1**, the majority of teachers expressed strong support for using the story in character education. The results generally indicate positive attitudes, with all items receiving mean scores above 3.9. The highest mean score ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.65$) shows that teachers agree with the effectiveness of the story in helping students understand moral values. Moreover, teachers also believe that the story promoted kindness ($M = 4.18$) and students showed their interest in the story ($M = 4.10$).

Table 1: Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Moral Values through Literature (n = 30).

Statement	Mean	SD
The story helps students understand moral values	4.32	0.65
Students showed interest in the story	4.10	0.72
The story improved students' empathy	4.05	0.74
The story encouraged generosity	3.96	0.81
The story promoted kindness	4.18	0.68

In terms of student development, around **70% of teachers observed noticeable improvements in students' attitudes and behaviours**, particularly regarding empathy, kindness, and generosity. Teachers reported that classroom discussions about Scrooge's transformation encouraged students to reflect on their own behaviour toward others.

Table 2: Teachers Observing Behavioural Changes in Students (n = 30).

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	21	70%
No	9	30%

Students' enjoyment of the story

Student responses also revealed generally positive attitudes toward the story. As shown in **Table 3**, approximately **85% of students reported that they enjoyed studying the novella**, while about 15% found it less engaging, mainly due to language difficulty.

Importantly, **65% of students stated that the story influenced how they interacted with others**, including classmates and family members (Table 4). Several students described situations in which they tried to be more helpful or considerate after learning about Scrooge's transformation.

Overall, these findings suggest that literary narratives can effectively encourage moral reflection and social awareness among young learners.

Table 3: Students' Enjoyment of the Story (n = 60).

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very much	24	40%
Much	27	45%
Neutral	6	10%
Little	2	3.33%
Not at all	1	1.67%

Table 4: Students Reporting Behaviour Change (n = 60).

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	39	65%
No	21	35%

Table 5: Students' Perceptions of the Moral Values in the Story.

Statement	Mean	SD
The story helps me understand kindness	4.21	0.71
The story teaches me to help others	4.08	0.76
The story makes me think about my behaviour	3.95	0.82
The story encourages me to be generous	3.89	0.85
The story is interesting to learn	4.30	0.69

Discussion

The results support existing research suggesting that literature can contribute to moral education. The high score regarding the effectiveness of the story aligns with Noddings's emphasis on care-based educational practices, which prioritize empathy and interpersonal understanding.

Teachers' observations of behavioural changes among students also reflect Kohlberg's theory that moral reasoning develops through reflection on ethical situations. The narrative structure of A Christmas Carol provides students with a clear moral example that encourages reflection on ethical decision-making.

Student responses further demonstrate the role of narrative engagement in shaping moral perspectives. As Haidt suggests, stories influence moral intuitions

by appealing to emotional understanding. The experiences reported by students in this study indicate that literary narratives can encourage empathy and social responsibility beyond the classroom.

Although teachers identified several practical challenges, the overall findings confirm that A Christmas Carol offers meaningful opportunities for integrating moral education into literacy instruction.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that A Christmas Carol can serve as an effective tool for teaching moral values in primary education. Both teachers and students reported positive learning experiences and observed behavioural changes related to empathy, generosity, and kindness.

While practical challenges such as limited time and language difficulty exist, the educational benefits appear to outweigh these obstacles. The story's clear moral themes and engaging narrative make it a useful resource for character education.

Future research could explore how cultural context influences the interpretation of literary narratives in moral education. Longitudinal studies may also provide deeper insight into the long-term effects of literature-based character education.

Further investigations could examine different teaching strategies and compare classrooms that use literary narratives with those that rely on alternative methods of moral instruction. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of how literature can support ethical development in educational contexts.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

Participation in the study was voluntary and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising all data, and students were informed that their responses would not affect their academic evaluation.

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Competing interests

None of the authors have conflicts of interest to declare

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Appendix A: Teacher Questionnaire

Section 1: Background Information

Gender: Male Female Prefer not to say

Teaching experience:

1–5 years 6–10 years 11–15 years Over 15 years

Grade level you teach: Grade 3 Grade 4 Grade 5

Section 2: Experience with the Story

How familiar were you with *A Christmas Carol* before using it in class?

Not familiar Slightly familiar Moderately familiar Very familiar Extremely familiar

Why did you decide to use the story in your classroom? (Select all that apply)

- Teaching moral values Curriculum requirement
 Recommendation from colleagues Student interest in literature
 Other: _____

Section 3: Teaching Practices

Which teaching activities did you use?

- Story discussion Role-playing Group reading
 Moral reflection activities Writing exercises

What challenges did you face when teaching the story?

Section 4: Impact on Students

To what extent did the story help students understand moral values?

Not at all Slightly Moderately Very much Extremely

Did you observe changes in student behaviour? Yes No

If yes, describe briefly:

Section 5: Evaluation

Overall, how effective is *A Christmas Carol* as a teaching tool?

Very ineffective Ineffective Neutral Effective Very effective

Would you recommend using this story in primary education? Yes No

Appendix B: Student Questionnaire

Section 1: Personal Information

Age: _____ Grade: _____

Section 2: Reading Experience

Before studying the story, had you heard about A Christmas Carol? Yes No

Did you enjoy reading or learning about the story?

Not at all A little Somewhat Very much

Section 3: Understanding the Story

What lesson did you learn from the story?

Which values do you think the story teaches?

Kindness Generosity Empathy Helping others

Section 4: Personal Reflection

Did the story make you think differently about how you treat others? Yes No

After reading the story, did you try to be kinder or more helpful? Yes No

Example:

Section 5: Overall Evaluation

How would you rate your learning experience?

Very bad Bad Normal Good Excellent

Would you like to read more stories like this in class? Yes No