



Perceptions on the Introduction of Anti-Corruption Education to Early Childhood Development Learners: 'Catch Them Young' or 'Confuse Them Young'? Redefining Early Childhood Learning Environments for Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

The growing concern over corruption and the erosion of moral values has intensified debate on the appropriate age for introducing anti-corruption education. Both "catch them young" and "confuse them young" are important points of view: The former for early intervention and the latter to avoid presenting concepts to young children that are not developmentally appropriate. This study explores the perceptions of the stakeholders on introducing anti-corruption education at the Early Childhood Development (ECD) level, its perceived benefits, risks and pedagogical approaches. ECD setting were conducted using an interpretivist paradigm and a case study design in the Bawean Island, Gresik Regency, Indonesia. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to gather the data from 121 respondents; this included 58 teachers, 55 parents/carers, 5 school administrators and 3 teacher educators. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed descriptively and thematically respectively. Results reveal that 42 out of 58 teachers (72.41%) perceived the teaching of anti-corruption positively and 16 teachers (27.59%) perceived anti-corruption teaching negatively. Positive perceptions were associated with the preventive role of good early education and with practical methods, while worries identified developmental appropriateness issues, negative associations with the term "anti-corruption" and dependence on religious education for moral development. The study reveals five approaches that are suitable in developing integrity values, namely, habituation, modelling, play-based learning, thematic integration and parental engagement. The study suggests the ETHICS Framework based on the findings and theoretical perspectives, namely Environment, Thematic Integration, Habituation, Interactive Learning, Community Engagement, and Sustainability. The study shows that positive, developmentally appropriate and context-sensitive anti-corruption education can be helpful, if provided at an early stage.

Keywords: Anti-corruption education, early childhood development, moral development, experiential learning, ethical literacy, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The global struggle against corruption has increasingly recognized education as a critical front in prevention efforts. The Corruption Eradication Commission of Indonesia, for instance, has explicitly articulated that "campaigning and education are just as important as action and prevention" in combating corruption. This recognition has catalyzed a fundamental question: at what age should anti-corruption education commence?

The debate is far from settled. One school of thought advocates for the principle of "catch them young," arguing that corruption prevention must begin at birth or during early childhood when moral foundations are most malleable. The Anti-Corruption Commission of Sierra Leone exemplifies this approach, asserting that "the Commission believes in the adage 'catch them young'" and has organized numerous school campaigns targeting children as young as primary school age. Similarly, Step Up Nigeria's "Catch Them Young"



programme targets children aged six to fifteen, deploying storybooks, board games, and animations to teach the dangers of corruption.

Conversely, critics caution that premature exposure to corruption concepts may inadvertently "confuse them young." This perspective, articulated in a Nigerian study by Ebisi, Anekwe, and Olisa (2021), argues that exposing children to the concept of corruption at a tender age without addressing systemic inducement factors could render the knowledge counterproductive, potentially equipping children with "other means of attaining socially approved goals" inadvertently favored as a "situational necessity". The concern is that children may learn to identify corruption without developing the moral reasoning and resilience to resist it, or worse, may normalize corrupt behaviour through premature awareness of its existence.

This debate is especially relevant for early childhood education because pedagogical strategies need to correspond to the developmental phases. Kohlberg's theory on moral development indicates that there are different stages in moral development from pre-conventional to conventional to post-conventional and that approaches to instilling anti-corruption values need to be adapted for ages. The pre-conventional level, which is the punishment and obedience orientation stage, requires methods of reward and punishment, rather than ethical reasoning, to be applied.

The urgency of this question is underscored by the ever-increasing decay of moral fabric across societies. Corruption has become endemic in many contexts, and the need for "early detection of threats to Anti-Corruption initiatives" has never been greater. The family, as the first agent of socialization, plays a pivotal role; parents who engage in seemingly minor acts of dishonesty, lying about a child's age to secure cheaper school fees, for instance plant values that "over time, can evolve into more harmful and systemic forms of corruption". The home thus becomes "the first and most influential classroom in a child's life" where "the seeds of corruption are first sown".

This study contributes to this debate by investigating stakeholder perceptions of introducing anti-corruption education to Early Childhood Development (ECD) learners, using a case study of early childhood education settings in Indonesia, where the integration of anti-corruption values has been a subject of empirical investigation. The study is situated within an experiential paradigm, recognizing that values are most effectively internalized through direct experience, habituation, and modelling.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem this study addresses is fourfold:

First, pedagogical uncertainty. There exists significant debate regarding the appropriate age for introducing anti-corruption education, with conflicting perspectives on whether early exposure is beneficial or counterproductive. This uncertainty impedes curriculum development and policy formulation.

Second, developmental misalignment. Much anti-corruption education is designed without adequate consideration of developmental psychology. Kohlberg's theory demonstrates that children in the pre-conventional stage (ages 2-8) operate from a punishment/reward orientation, yet many programmes employ abstract ethical reasoning inappropriate for this developmental level. This misalignment risks rendering anti-corruption education ineffective or even confusing.

Third, the gap between values and practice. Research indicates that while early childhood educators generally support anti-corruption education, many lack awareness of how to implement it effectively. A study of Indonesian early childhood teachers found that 100% of informants "have not known about the concept of anti-corruption education, apart from the corruption cases". Similarly, a needs analysis of parents revealed that parents "do not yet know the character of anti-corruption, aren't yet aware of the anti-corruptive behavior performed by the child, has not been able to apply the method of parenting to develop anticorruption character of early childhood".



Fourth, the challenge of systemic corruption. Critics argue that early anti-corruption education is futile without addressing systemic inducement factors such as social pressure, scarce employment opportunities, and weak government institutions. This study must therefore consider whether anti-corruption education at ECD level can be effective in the absence of broader systemic reform.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To critically examine stakeholder perceptions regarding the introduction of anti-corruption education to Early Childhood Development learners.
2. To investigate the pedagogical strategies perceived as most appropriate for embedding anti-corruption values in early childhood learning environments.
3. To assess the perceived risks and benefits of "catching them young" versus the concern of "confusing them young."
4. To develop and propose a framework for age-appropriate anti-corruption pedagogy in early childhood education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the perceptions of early childhood educators, parents, and key informants regarding the introduction of anti-corruption education at the ECD level?
2. What factors influence positive and negative perceptions of anti-corruption education at ECD level?
3. What pedagogical approaches are perceived as age-appropriate and effective for embedding anti-corruption values in early childhood learning environments?
4. What framework can be proposed to address the tension between "catching them young" and avoiding "confusing them young"?

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development provides the foundational theoretical lens for this study. Kohlberg posits three levels of moral development, each comprising two stages:

Level I: Pre-conventional Morality (Ages 2-8)

- Stage 1: Punishment and Obedience Orientation. Children judge actions by their consequences; an action is deemed good if it results in rewards or presents, and bad or incorrect if it results in punishment.
- Stage 2: Individualism and Instrumental Goal Orientation. Children pursue their own interests, rationalizing actions to gain approval from others.

Level II: Conventional Morality (Ages 9-13)

- Stage 3: Interpersonal Relationships. Children seek approval from others, particularly peers.
- Stage 4: Maintaining Social Order. Children consider rules and laws as fixed and absolute.

Level III: Post-conventional Morality (Age 13+)

- Stage 5: Social Contract and Individual Rights. Individuals recognize that rules are social agreements that can be changed.

- Stage 6: Universal Principles. Individuals follow internalized ethical principles of justice and rights.

For early childhood education, the pre-conventional level is most relevant. This has profound implications for anti-corruption pedagogy: at this stage, children do not grasp abstract ethical principles but respond to concrete consequences. Strategies must therefore focus on reward and punishment, habituation, and modelling rather than abstract reasoning about corruption.

Experiential Learning Theory

Drawing on Kolb's experiential learning theory, the study recognizes that values are most effectively internalized through direct experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. As one teacher noted in a study of anti-corruption education in Indonesian kindergartens:

"It is necessary. A solution to prevent corruption can be done through education. It guides humans to grow intellectually and socially. Therefore, education is a preventive effort to prevent corruption attitude and behavior."

Experiential learning in early childhood contexts takes the form of play-based activities, habituation, storytelling, and modelling rather than didactic instruction. This aligns with research demonstrating that anti-corruption gymnastics, storybooks, and honesty centers are effective vehicles for value transmission.

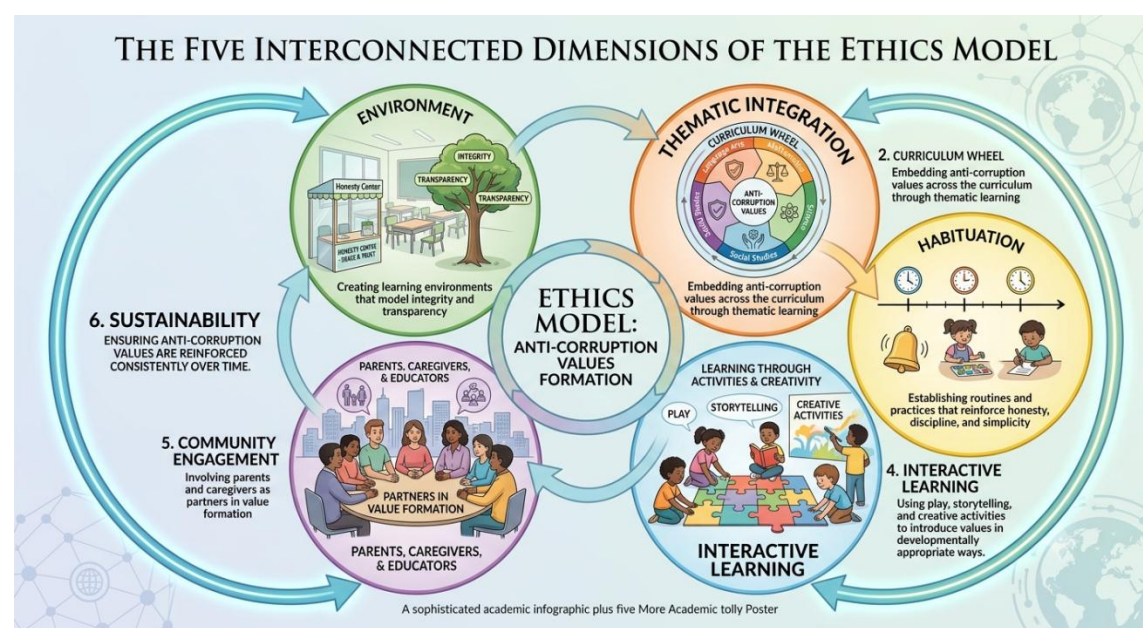
Social Learning Theory

Bandura's social learning theory emphasizes that children learn through observation and modelling. The home and school serve as primary sites for this learning. A parent who lies to avoid a debt or a teacher who engages in corrupt practices models behaviour that children internalize. Anti-corruption education must therefore address both the explicit curriculum (what is taught) and the hidden curriculum (what is modelled).

Conceptual Framework: The ETHICS Model

Drawing on these theoretical foundations, this study proposes the ETHICS Framework (Early Years Transformation through Honesty, Integrity, Character, and Simplicity). The framework integrates Kohlberg's developmental stages with experiential and social learning principles to provide an age-appropriate model for anti-corruption education in early childhood.

The ETHICS Model comprises five interconnected dimensions:





The model posits that effective anti-corruption education at ECD level requires a shift from "teaching about corruption" (which risks normalization) to "fostering integrity" (which builds positive character). This aligns with research showing that programmes focusing on positive values such as honesty, responsibility, and simplicity, rather than on corruption itself, are more effective and less likely to confuse young learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The 'Catch Them Young' Approach

The 'catch them young' approach to anti-corruption education is grounded in the recognition that values are formed early in life. Research demonstrates that young children are more malleable and impressionable than adults, making early childhood an optimal window for moral formation.

The Anti-Corruption Commission of Sierra Leone has operationalized this approach through its "Meet the Schools Campaign," which "targets children at a young age, most importantly secondary school pupils, [instilling] in them values of integrity and ethical conduct, countering the ingrained notion that corruption is a societal norm". The Commission has established Accountability Now Clubs in universities and partnered with youth organizations to extend the reach of anti-corruption education.

Similarly, Step Up Nigeria's "Catch Them Young" programme has "reached over 60,000 children across Nigeria" through storybooks, board games, and animations that teach "the dangers and consequences of corruption" in age-appropriate formats. The programme has also trained "nearly 2,000 teachers across 14 states to deliver anti-corruption education".

Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of early intervention. A mixed-methods study of five schools found that curriculum integration, role modelling, and experiential learning "significantly enhanced students' ethical awareness and behaviours," with quantitative analysis indicating a "25% improvement in honesty-related behaviours and an 18% increase in attitudes favoring simplicity". Parental involvement further amplified these outcomes, creating "a cohesive framework for value reinforcement".

The 'Confuse Them Young' Critique

Critics of early anti-corruption education raise several concerns. The most prominent critique, articulated by Ebisi, Anekwe, and Olisa (2021), argues that exposing children to the concept of corruption without addressing systemic inducement factors may be counterproductive. The authors contend that anti-corruption campaigns in Nigeria's primary school curriculum may inadvertently equip children with "other means of attaining socially approved goals" and that providing "knowledge of good and evil to the children" without "an enabling environment for the knowledge to be positively utilized could pose a counter-productive effect in future".

This critique highlights several concerns:

- **Normalization:** Premature exposure to corruption may normalize it, making children more susceptible rather than less.
- **Cognitive Dissonance:** Children may struggle to reconcile anti-corruption messages with observed behaviour of adults, leading to cynicism.
- **Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development** was used in this study. Kohlberg's model is qualitatively distinct stages of moral development from more "external" moral reasoning to more "conventional" and "principled" moral reasoning. The framework does not specify age divisions, but rather is a guideline for creating developmentally appropriate learning experiences.
- **Developmental Inappropriateness:** Abstract ethical reasoning is beyond the cognitive capacity of young children.

Level I: Pre-conventional Morality

Stage 1: Punishment and Obedience Orientation. Condemnations and orders are significant for moral



judgments.

Age-Appropriate Pedagogy in Anti-Corruption Education

Stage 2 Instrumental and Exchange Orientation. Moral judgement can be self-interest, reciprocity, and exchange.

A synthesis of the literature suggests several principles for age-appropriate anti-corruption education:

Level II: Conventional Morality

Developmental Alignment: Strategies must align with children's developmental stages. For children in Kohlberg's pre-conventional stage (ages 2-8), strategies should focus on reward and punishment, habituation, and modelling rather than abstract reasoning.

Positive Framing: Rather than teaching about corruption (which may normalize it), programmes should focus on positive values such as honesty, responsibility, and simplicity. Research demonstrates that "integrating simplicity as an anti-corruption value" addresses "materialism as a root cause of unethical behaviour".

Level III: Post-conventional Morality

Experiential Learning: Play-based and experiential methods are more effective than didactic instruction. Programmes using storybooks, board games, animations, and gymnastics have demonstrated effectiveness.

Terminology: The term "anti-corruption" may carry negative connotations. Some early childhood settings in Indonesia have adopted the term "honesty center" rather than "anti-corruption center" to create a "more positive perception of school residents about efforts to prevent corruption in a structured and systematic way through early education".

Holistic Integration: Anti-corruption values should be integrated across the curriculum rather than treated as a separate subject. Thematic learning, recommended in many early childhood curricula, supports this integration.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Methodological Orientation

This study falls into the interpretivist paradigm, which is suitable for studying the meanings that stakeholders make from the introduction, age-appropriateness and pedagogical implementation of anti-corruption education. The study is not focused on a research paradigm of experiential learning but rather on learning through experience, habituation, modelling and social interaction as a pedagogical and theoretical orientation to learning.

The method used is a combination of qualitative interpretation of the interview data and descriptive quantitative analysis of the questionnaire data. This combination was used to find the distribution of teachers' perceptions and to interpret their reasons, concerns and pedagogical considerations that underlie their perceptions.

Research Design

This study used a case study design that focused on ECE settings in Bawean Island, Gresik Regency, Indonesia. The design allowed the phenomenon to be studied in its natural context of the educational setting through the responses to structured questionnaires and semi-structured key-informant interviews. Descriptive quantitative evidence is used to provide explanation not inference, and qualitative evidence is used to provide explanation and context to stakeholder perceptions.



Study Site, Population and Participants

The study was carried out in early childhood education institutions in the Bawean Island, Gresik Regency, Indonesia. The site was chosen because previous studies showed that the anti-corruption values were previously incorporated into the early childhood education in the area. This study included stakeholders who are engaged or associated with ECD education. Overall, 58 early childhood teachers, 55 parents/caregivers, 5 school administrators and 3 teacher educators participated. Questionnaires provided evidence from teachers and parents/caregivers, and interview evidence was provided by teachers, administrators and teacher educators.

Sample Size selection criteria

The selection of participants was based on their relevance to the purpose of the study and their direct involvement in Early Childhood Development education. There were four groups of subjects in the study.

1. The ECD teachers were purposively selected since they are the teachers who have firsthand contact with young children and who have already implemented classroom-based learning activities.
2. The parents/caregivers were chosen from the population of parents linked to the involved ECD institutions using simple random sampling to get their feedback on how children are valued at home.
3. School administrators were purposively selected because of their knowledge of institutional practices, curriculum implementation, and teacher supervision.
4. The teacher educators were purposively selected because of their experience in ECD teacher education and pedagogical development.

Those who were directly involved with the selected ECD institutions, as well as ECD teacher education, had relevant experience and knowledge of early childhood learning and values formation, were available during the data-collection period and gave informed consent to participate in the study were included. A final sample of 121 was drawn from 58 ECD teachers, 55 parents/caregivers, 5 school administrators and 3 teacher educators. The sample was designed to give insights from the key stakeholder groups relevant to the study, not for the purpose of statistical generalization. This is in line with the case study design and the focus of the study, which was to have a better understanding of the perceptions of the stakeholders in the selected context.

Participant category	Number (n)	Sampling technique	Role in the study
Early childhood teachers	58	Purposive	Questionnaire respondents; interview participants
Parents/caregivers	55	Simple random	Questionnaire respondents
School administrators	5	Purposive	Key informant interview participants
Teacher educators	3	Purposive	Key informant interview participants
Total	121		All participant categories

Recruitment of participants was done by the Head of Educational Board of Gresik Regency who invited the head of the teachers to be a participant in the activity. The teachers, school administration and teacher educators were selected based on their first-hand experience of teaching ECD and/or in administration of education in ECD. The parents/caregivers were selected through simple random sampling, with 55 parents/caregivers being selected. Table 1 summarizes the resulting sample and sampling procedures.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

Questionnaire: A structured questionnaire was used to gather data from the 58 teachers and 55 parents/caregivers. The questionnaire measured perceptions of anti-corruption education at the ECD level, awareness of anti-corruption values and pedagogical strategies, perceived benefits and risks of introducing anti-corruption education early and confidence in implementing anti-corruption education. Descriptive frequency

ncies and percentages were generated from the data obtained from the questionnaires. No additional validity or reliability coefficient is claimed in this revision, as the original questionnaire is not included, nor is there a report on the pilot test. The content of the instrument was matched with the research questions and constructs in the literature studied.

- Anti-corruption education at ECD level – perceptions.
- Knowledge of anti-corruption principles and didactic approaches.
- Perceived benefit and risk of early introduction.
- Confidence in implementing anti-corruption education.

Semi structured interviews were conducted with teachers, administrators and teacher educators, which were termed as Key Informant Interviews. The protocol dealt with issues of whether ECD currently conveys anti-corruption values, whether ECD should teach anti-corruption values in addition to religious and moral education, suitable ways for children in ECD, and whether there are risks to introducing concepts of corruption at ECD level. The findings from the questionnaire were explained and contextualized using data from interviews.

- Does anti-corruption currently form a part of the current curriculum of early childhood education?
- Do we still need to teach anti-corruption in addition to our religious and moral education?
- Which methods/strategies are optimal for young children?
- What are the risk(s) of bringing anti-corruption ideas at ECD level?

Quantitative Data Analysis

The percentage for each teacher-perception result was computed with the 58 teacher respondents as the denominator: $\text{Percentage} = (\text{number of teachers that crossed the check mark in the response category} \div 58) \times 100$. Thus, $42/58 \times 100 = 72.41\%$ positive and $16/58 \times 100 = 27.59\%$ negative. The parent/caregiver responses were not aggregated with teacher responses when determining the teacher-perception percentages.

Descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage distribution) were used to analyze data obtained from the questionnaires. During the calculation of the percentage value for the principal teacher-perception result, the number of teachers in a response category is divided by the total number of the teacher respondents, then multiplied by 100. So, there are 42 teachers out of 58 that responded positively (72.41%) and 16 teachers who responded negatively (27.59%). The figures of 71.63% and 28.37% were revised since they do not match the denominator of 58.

Qualitative Data Analysis, Validity and Trustworthiness

The analysis of interview material was done in a thematic way following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) which involved familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition and naming themes, and reporting. Recurring reasons for positive and negative perceptions, age-appropriateness, terminology, religious and cultural framing, practical pedagogy and parental engagement were analyzed. Credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability related to trustworthiness.

FINDINGS

Research Question 1: Perceptions of Anti-Corruption Education at ECD Level

What are the perceptions of early childhood educators, parents, and key informants regarding the introduction of anti-corruption education at the ECD level?

The quantitative findings showed that the 58 teachers that responded to the questionnaire had a positive perception of anti-corruption education in ECD (42 (72.41%)), and a negative perception of anti-corruption education in ECD (16 (27.59%)). The percentages mentioned are in turn calculated directly from the teachers' sample as stated ($42/58 \times 100$ and $16/58 \times 100$), replacing the previously reported 71.63% and 28.37%.



Teacher perception	Frequency (n)	Percentage	Calculation
Positive	42	72.41%	$42 \div 58 \times 100$
Negative	16	27.59%	$16 \div 58 \times 100$
Total	58	100.00%	$58 \div 58 \times 100$
Dimension	Empirical/theoretical basis	Key activities	Intended outcome
1. Environment	Positive language and integrity-rich learning environments; social learning by modelling.	Honesty boxes, Integrity corners and value boards.	Integrity high settings that model positive behaviours.
2. Thematic Integration	Requires values to be integrated into other learning and cultural/religious frameworks.	Thematic learning and connections across the curriculum.	Value learning which is connected and context sensitive.
3. Habituation	Practical routines and repeated practice, developmental and experiential learning principles.	Queuing, sharing, telling the truth, responsible behaviour, praise.	Self-reinforcement of positive behaviours.
4. Interactive Learning	Usefulness of storybooks, games, animations, drama, poetry, art and play.	Storybooks, games, role play, creative activities.	Interesting and suitable values teaching.
5. Community Engagement	Emphasis on social learning and modelling in the home by parents, knowledge gap.	Parent education, family activities, school and community partnerships.	Home-school consistency in values.
6. Sustainability	Continuity, assessment and adjustment; awareness that education is not a solution to system change.	Constant reinforcement, evaluation and modification of reward; slowly decrease external reward.	Continuity and responsive integrity formation.

Factors Associated with Positive Perceptions:

- **Age:** The original analysis showed that the age group 20-30 had the highest positive-perception rate (71.43%) and the age group 41-50 had the lowest (57.14%). Subgroup percentages remain as descriptive results of the analysis and not as actual frequencies (these latter should be compared with the raw data and should not be reported in the manuscript).
- **Teaching Experience:** The highest positive-perception rate in the original analysis was for teachers with less than 10 years' experience (84.00%) while the lowest was for teachers with 21–30 years' experience (33.34%).



- **Educational Level:** There was a slight difference in the positive perceptions for teachers with bachelor's degrees (72.92%) and high-school education (70.00%), as reported in the original analysis.

Factors Associated with Negative Perceptions:

- **Religious Framing:** Some teachers argued that religious education already provides sufficient moral guidance. One teacher stated, "Not necessary. In our religion, it is clearly explained the right and wrong deed. What we need to do as an educator is to strengthen or foster the children's faith".
- **Perceived Unfamiliarity:** All informants (100%) "have not known about the concept of anti-corruption education, apart from the corruption cases". This suggests that negative perceptions may be rooted in unfamiliarity rather than principled opposition.

Parent Perspectives: A needs analysis of 55 parents revealed that:

- Parents "do not yet know the character of anti-corruption."
- Parents are "not yet aware of the anti-corruptive behavior performed by the child."
- Parents "has not been able to apply the method of parenting to develop anticorruption character of early childhood".
- "All parents do not know all the nine anti-corruption characters".

This indicates a significant gap between aspiration and capacity.

Research Question 2: Factors Influencing Perceptions

What factors influence positive and negative perceptions of anti-corruption education at ECD level?

Positive Perception Factors:

1. Preventive Value: Teachers recognized anti-corruption education as a preventive strategy. One teacher noted, "A solution to prevent corruption can be done through education. It guides humans to grow intellectually and socially. Therefore, education is a preventive effort to prevent corruption attitude and behavior".

2. Distinctiveness from Religious Education: Some teachers recognized that anti-corruption education and religious education "have different contexts, even though both build the characters of the learners," suggesting a need for both.

3. Practical Implementation: Teachers who had experience with practical approaches such as honesty centers, storybooks, and gymnastics were more positive.

Negative Perception Factors:

1. Religious Sufficiency: Teachers who believed that religious education already addresses moral formation saw anti-corruption education as redundant.

2. Terminological Concerns: Some teachers expressed that "the term anti-corruption or the like is closer to a negative connotation, because the information we receive from electronic media and other social media, the term corruption is a term of crime". This led some schools to adopt alternative terminology such as "honesty center."

3. Developmental Concerns: Teachers with more experience (21-30 years) expressed greater skepticism, perhaps reflecting experience with previous pedagogical fads or concern about age-appropriateness.

Research Question 3: Age-Appropriate Pedagogical Approaches

What pedagogical approaches are perceived as age-appropriate and effective for embedding anti-corruption



values in early childhood learning environments?

Approaches Identified by Participants and Supported by Literature:

1. Honesty Centers: The Umar Mas'ud Kindergarten in Bawean Island, Indonesia, developed an "honesty center" as a dedicated space within the classroom where anti-corruption values are taught through play-based learning. "An honesty center is basically an anti-corruption center," but the school chose a "term that has a positive connotation, namely by taking one of the core values of anti-corruption education, which is honesty".

2. Habituation: "Design or organize a habituation program, with a focus on internalizing anti-corruption ideals that are appropriate for early children's development and requirements" . Habituation includes daily routines such as sharing, queuing, and truth-telling.

3. Storybooks and Play-Based Learning: "Teachers need to provide a setting that is supportive, instructive, and able to encourage a range of developments, including moral development. For instance, by providing and reading children's books that demand moral principles or moral character" . Step Up Nigeria has developed "storybooks, board games, comic series, and animations" as part of their anti-corruption education approach .

4. Creative Activities: Anti-corruption gymnastics, poetry, art, and drama have been used to convey anti-corruption messages in age-appropriate ways. The Anti-Corruption Commission of Sierra Leone "leverages on talent shows" where "young participants convey powerful anti-corruption messages that resonate with their peers" .

5. Religious and Cultural Integration: Anti-corruption values can be embedded within existing religious and cultural frameworks. Research on Islamic early childhood education demonstrates how anti-corruption values such as honesty, responsibility, and simplicity align with Islamic teachings .

6. Parental Engagement: "Parents have a key role in educating children about the negative impacts of corruption by integrating anti-corruption values in everyday life" . Parental involvement "amplified" outcomes, creating "a cohesive framework for value reinforcement" .

Research Question 4: Proposed Framework

What framework can be proposed to address the tension between "catching them young" and avoiding "confusing them young"?

The findings inform the development of the ETHICS Framework, presented in Section 9.

PROPOSED FRAMEWORK: THE ETHICS MODEL

The ETHICS Framework (Early Years Transformation through Honesty, Integrity, Character, and Simplicity), a product of the synthesis of empirical findings and theoretical literature, was created. The six letters of ETHICS each represent a distinct dimension that are interconnected: Environment, Thematic Integration, Habituation, Interactive Learning, Community Engagement and Sustainability. The first five dimensions represent the main pedagogical responses that were found, whereas Sustainability serves as the continuity, evaluation and adaptation mechanism to keep the value formation going over time. The framework is thus offered as a suggested conceptual model, not as an intervention validated by empirical studies.

The dimensions are derived from the following: Environment responds to findings of positive terminology and integrity-rich learning spaces, Thematic Integration reflects the need to embed values in existing curriculum and cultural/religious contexts, Habituation reflects the importance of routines and repeated practice, Interactive Learning reflects the value and reported use of storybooks, games, gymnastics, poetry, art, drama and play, Community Engagement reflects the identified parent knowledge and modelling gap, and Sustainability reflects ongoing evaluation and adaptation. The dimensions clarify the foundations of the study based upon development, experiences and social learning.



Theoretical Foundations

The ETHICS Model is grounded in:

- Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory: Strategies are differentiated by stage, with a focus on pre-conventional morality (punishment/reward orientation) for ECD learners.
- Experiential Learning Theory: Values are internalized through direct experience, habituation, and active experimentation.
- Social Learning Theory: Modelling, observation, and reinforcement are key mechanisms.
- Cultural and Religious Integration: Anti-corruption values are embedded within existing cultural and religious frameworks.

The Six Dimensions of the ETHICS Model

Stage Focus Key Activities Intended Outcomes

1. Environment Creating integrity-rich spaces Honesty centers, integrity corners, value displays Visual and spatial reinforcement of integrity values
2. Thematic Integration Embedding values across curriculum Thematic learning, cross-curricular connections Holistic, connected learning experiences
3. Habituation Daily routines reinforcing values Queuing, sharing, truth-telling, responsible behaviour Internalized habits of honesty and responsibility
4. Interactive Learning Play-based and experiential methods Storybooks, board games, role-play, creative activities Engaging, age-appropriate value transmission
5. Community Engagement Involving parents and caregivers Parenting education, family activities, school-community partnerships Cohesive value formation across home and school
6. Sustainability Consistency and reinforcement Ongoing reinforcement, evaluation, and adaptation Long-term value internalization

Pedagogical Strategies by Stage

Stage 1: Environment

- Establish "honesty centers" or "integrity corners" in classrooms.
- Display visual reminders of values (honesty, responsibility, simplicity).
- Ensure that learning materials (storybooks, posters) reflect integrity values.
- Create a positive, safe environment where truth-telling is rewarded.

Stage 2: Thematic Integration

- Embed anti-corruption values within thematic units (e.g., "My Community," "Sharing," "Being Fair").
- Use thematic learning to make connections across subjects.
- Ensure that values are taught not as separate subjects but as part of everyday learning.

Stage 3: Habituation

- Establish daily routines that reinforce values (e.g., sharing snacks, queuing, truth-telling).
- Use rewards and praise to reinforce positive behaviour.
- Apply educational consequences for dishonesty rather than punitive measures.



- "Do the exercises or practices of the sumah of the two rak'ahs and eat together according to their proportions" as a form of habitual value practice.

Stage 4: Interactive Learning

- Use storybooks that "demand moral principles or moral character".
- Develop board games, comic series, and animations that teach integrity.
- Create anti-corruption gymnastics, poetry, and art activities.
- Use "play-based learning program with the subtlety of introducing anti-corruption character qualities".
- Practice "role-play and moral dilemma discussions" appropriate for the pre-conventional stage.

Stage 5: Community Engagement

- Provide "parenting education to improve the parenting of anti-corruption character in early childhood".
- Involve parents in school activities and value reinforcement.
- Ensure that parents understand anti-corruption values and can model them at home.
- Address the observation that "parents have a key role in educating children about the negative impacts of corruption".

Stage 6: Sustainability

- Conduct "a process evaluation of the child's moral development".
- Gradually reduce reliance on rewards as values are internalized.
- Ensure consistency across teachers, parents, and settings.
- Adapt strategies as children move to higher developmental stages.

Ethical Considerations

All participants gave informed consent and ethical approval was obtained. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and that they had the right to withdraw at any time.

1. Positive Framing: The model focuses on positive values (honesty, integrity, responsibility, simplicity) rather than on corruption itself. This avoids normalizing corruption through premature exposure.

2. Developmental Alignment: Strategies are explicitly aligned with Kohlberg's pre-conventional stage, using reward/punishment and habituation rather than abstract ethical reasoning. This avoids confusing young learners with concepts beyond their cognitive capacity.

3. Terminological Sensitivity: The model uses positive terminology ("honesty center," "integrity values") rather than negative terminology ("anti-corruption"), acknowledging research that the term "anti-corruption" may carry negative connotations.

4. Holistic Integration: Values are embedded across the curriculum rather than taught as a separate, potentially confusing subject. Thematic learning ensures that values are connected to children lived experiences.

5. Systemic Recognition: The model acknowledges that early childhood education cannot substitute for systemic reform. It focuses on what is achievable within the early learning environment while recognizing the need for broader societal change.

Contribution to Knowledge

The ETHICS Model makes three significant contributions:

1. Theoretical Integration: It synthesizes moral development theory, experiential learning, and social learn-



ing theory into a coherent framework for anti-corruption pedagogy in early childhood education.

2. Practical Applicability: It provides a concrete, stage-based curriculum architecture that can be adapted to diverse cultural, religious, and institutional contexts.

3. Resolution of Debate: It addresses the 'catch them young' versus 'confuse them young' debate by demonstrating that early intervention is beneficial when implemented through positive, developmentally appropriate, experientially grounded strategies.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The Prevalence of Positive Perceptions

The finding that 72.41% of teachers hold positive perceptions of anti-corruption education at ECD level is significant. It suggests that despite the debate, there is substantial support for early intervention. The factors associated with positive perceptions younger age, less teaching experience, and undergraduate education suggest that teacher education and generational change may increase support over time.

The positive perception is consistent with the belief that "education is a preventive effort to prevent corruption attitude and behavior". Teachers recognized that anti-corruption education complements rather than competes with religious and moral education, addressing a gap that religion alone may not fill. This aligns with research that many religious leaders have been involved in corruption, suggesting that "even if Islam has clearly prohibited corruption, it does not guarantee that its followers will not commit it".

The 'Confuse Them Young' Concern: A Cautionary Note

The 27.59% of teachers with negative perceptions cannot be dismissed. Their concerns that religious education is sufficient, that anti-corruption terminology carries negative connotations, and that early exposure may be confusing raise legitimate issues.

The concern that "exposing the child to what is corruption and how to identify a corrupt person or acts at a tender age" without "an enabling environment for the knowledge to be positively utilized could pose a counter-productive effect" is well-founded. Children may learn to identify corruption without developing the moral reasoning to resist it, potentially normalizing corrupt behaviour.

The ETHICS Model addresses this by shifting the focus from "teaching about corruption" to "fostering integrity." This is consistent with research showing that programmes focusing on positive values are more effective and less likely to confuse. By using positive terminology ("honesty centers") and focusing on values rather than corruption, the model mitigates the risk of normalization.

The Role of Pedagogy in Addressing the Tension

The study underscores that the effectiveness of anti-corruption education depends less on the age of introduction and more on the pedagogy employed. As Kohlberg's theory demonstrates, the same content must be taught differently at different developmental stages.

For children in the pre-conventional stage (ages 2-8):

- What works: Rewards, praise, habituation, modelling, play-based learning, concrete consequences.
- What does not work: Abstract ethical reasoning, complex explanations of corruption, fear-based messaging.

The ETHICS Model operationalizes this insight. Its focus on habituation, interactive learning, and positive framing ensures that children internalize values without being "confused" by concepts beyond their developmental capacity.



The Hidden Curriculum and Systemic Factors

The study's findings highlight the importance of the hidden curriculum the values modelled by teachers, parents, and the broader environment. As one analysis notes, "If discipline is not enforced in the home, expecting it from external institutions becomes an illusion". The home is "the first and most influential classroom in a child's life". Parents who engage in dishonest acts, however minor, model behaviour that children internalize.

This underscores the importance of community engagement in the ETHICS Model. Anti-corruption education cannot stop at the school gate; it must involve parents and caregivers as partners. The finding that "parents do not yet know the character of anti-corruption" and are "not yet aware of the anti-corruptive behavior performed by the child" indicates a significant gap that must be addressed through parenting education.

Reimagining Early Childhood Environments for Sustainable Development

The study suggests that reimagining early childhood learning environments as sites of integrity formation can contribute to sustainable development. Corruption is a major obstacle to sustainable development, diverting resources from education, healthcare, and infrastructure. By fostering integrity from an early age, anti-corruption education contributes to the development of ethical citizens who will govern responsibly and hold leaders accountable.

This aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and Goal 4 (Quality Education). As one teacher noted, education "guides humans to grow intellectually and socially," making it "a preventive effort to prevent corruption attitude and behavior".

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has some limitations that should be taken into account. It was carried out in a particular ECD setting (Bawean Island), and therefore cannot be used for statistical generalization to all ECD settings. The results from the questionnaire are descriptive and were based on 58 teacher respondents, no inferential tests were done. The questionnaire items, frequencies of subgroups, excerpts from the interviews, and a documented pilot-test/reliability coefficient are not included in the manuscript. These omissions make independent replication difficult and should be corrected from the original study records, if available. Lastly, the ETHICS Framework is a proposed synthesis that was developed from the results of the study and literature, and needs to be evaluated empirically in future studies, not as a proven framework.

CONCLUSION

This study has investigated stakeholder perceptions of introducing anti-corruption education to Early Childhood Development learners, examining whether the approach constitutes "catching them young" or risks "confusing them young." The findings suggest that:

1. There is substantial support for early intervention: 72.41% of teachers hold positive perceptions, recognizing anti-corruption education as a necessary preventive strategy.
2. Concerns about "confusing them young" are legitimate but addressable: The concerns raised by critics normalization, developmental inappropriateness, systemic factors can be mitigated through positive framing, developmental alignment, and holistic integration.
3. Pedagogy is key: The effectiveness of anti-corruption education depends less on the age of introduction and more on the pedagogical approach. Strategies must align with Kohlberg's pre-conventional stage, using habituation, modelling, and play-based learning.
4. Context matters: Cultural, religious, and institutional contexts shape perceptions and implementation. The use of "honesty centers" rather than "anti-corruption centers" reflects local wisdom and sensitivity to community perceptions.

The ETHICS Framework is a complete, theoretically informed and practically useful framework for anti-corr-



uption education in early childhood. Its emphasis on positive values, developmental alignment, experiential learning, and community engagement indicates that early intervention can be of benefit when done through developmentally sensitive pedagogy when done through developmentally sensitive pedagogy.

The implications are significant. For educators, the framework provides practical strategies for embedding anti-corruption values in early childhood learning environments. For policymakers, it offers guidance on curriculum development and teacher education. For parents and communities, it emphasizes the importance of consistent value formation across home and school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Early Childhood Educators

1. Implement age-appropriate anti-corruption education using the ETHICS Model.
2. Focus on positive values (honesty, responsibility, simplicity) rather than on corruption itself.
3. Use developmentally appropriate strategies: habituation, modelling, play-based learning, storybooks, and creative activities.
4. Establish "honesty centers" or "integrity corners" in classrooms.
5. Integrate anti-corruption values across the curriculum through thematic learning.

For Teacher Education Institutions

1. Include anti-corruption pedagogy in pre-service teacher education.
2. Train teachers in Kohlberg's moral development theory and its implications for pedagogy.
3. Provide practical training in experiential and play-based methods for value formation.
4. Develop resources (lesson plans, storybooks, activities) for anti-corruption education at ECD level.

For Policymakers

1. Develop national guidelines for anti-corruption education at ECD level.
2. Integrate anti-corruption values into early childhood curriculum frameworks.
3. Support research on effective pedagogical approaches.
4. Fund the development of age-appropriate resources (storybooks, board games, animations).

For Parents and Communities

1. Participate in parenting education on anti-corruption values.
2. Model honesty, responsibility, and simplicity at home.
3. Engage with schools in reinforcing anti-corruption values.
4. Support children in developing integrity through consistent expectations and positive reinforcement.

For Future Research

1. Conduct longitudinal studies on the long-term impact of anti-corruption education at ECD level.
2. Investigate cultural and contextual variations in perceptions and implementation.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the ETHICS Model in diverse settings.



4. Examine the role of the hidden curriculum and systemic factors in value formation.
5. Explore the integration of anti-corruption values with other dimensions of sustainable development education.

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