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The Consequentialist Role of Ethics Education in Developing Students' Moral Values: An Ethical Analysis

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Abstract: Contemporary high school curricula, including South Africa's Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), remain heavily content- and assessment-driven, leaving limited space for the deliberate cultivation of moral character (Department of Basic Education, 2012; Bourke et al., 2020). While the literature widely asserts the value of ethics education, comparatively few studies evaluate this value through the systematic lens of a single, explicit ethical theory or specify which values are being developed. This study conducts a consequentialist ethical examination of the importance of teaching ethics in schools for developing students' moral values. Adopting a qualitative desktop/secondary-literature design, a systematic search of JSTOR, Google Scholar, and PubMed (2019–2024) using defined search terms and inclusion/exclusion criteria yielded a purposively selected corpus, which was analyzed thematically with consequentialism as the interpretive lens. Ethics education is found to promote critical thinking, moral reasoning, decision-making, and social-emotional competence, while also introducing risks of value conflict, curricular overload, and assessment difficulty; when weighed against one another, the net utility is judged favorable. The study offers a theoretically grounded, consequentialist justification for integrating ethics education into secondary curricula and provides targeted recommendations for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers.

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INTRODUCTION

The primary function of formal education, as traditionally conceived and implemented within school systems globally, has been the transmission of core academic knowledge and skills. This model, while producing individuals proficient in subjects such as mathematics, the sciences, and languages, has increasingly drawn criticism for a profound omission: the

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deliberate, systematic cultivation of moral character and ethical decision-making faculties (Bourke et al., 2020).

This concern is not confined to South Africa. Studies from other developing-country contexts report a similar pattern of content-saturated, examination-driven curricula that crowd out space for moral formation, including work from Nigeria (Adeoye et al., 2023) and broader comparative accounts of curriculum reform (Fullan, 2007). Across these contexts, the result is the potential emergence of learners who are intellectually equipped yet may lack a coherent moral compass to navigate the complex, often ambiguous ethical landscapes of personal, professional, and civic life.

Rather than treating this as a general educational deficiency, this study frames it as a consequentialist problem: which outcomes, for students and society, follow from including or omitting structured ethics education. Consequentialism, the ethical theory that evaluates the moral worth of an action or policy by its outcomes, is introduced here as the study's guiding framework because it offers a clear evaluative standard, the balance of benefits and harms, against which a curriculum decision such as this can be assessed (Norcross, 2020).

This research is motivated by both scholarly concern and practical pedagogical experience. Adolescence, including high school, is a developmentally crucial phase for identity formation, value internalization, and the maturation of abstract reasoning (Steinberg, 2014). During this time, individuals begin to grapple with questions of justice, fairness, responsibility, and personal integrity. However, as the literature indicates, high school curricula, particularly in contexts like South Africa's CAPS, remain overwhelmingly content-saturated and assessment-driven (Department of Basic Education, 2012; Adeoye et al., 2023). The emphasis on standardized testing and measurable academic outcomes often sidelines the space needed for reflective dialogue on ethical dilemmas, thereby neglecting a fundamental dimension of holistic human development.

For this study, ethics is most usefully defined as a field of philosophy concerned with moral principles and how people ought to act. Definitions across the literature converge on a shared core, guiding right and wrong conduct, while diverging in emphasis: some accounts foreground human well-being and dignity (Varkey, 2021), others foreground societal norms (D'Olimpio, 2019), and others foreground power and justice (Freire, 2000). Read together rather than separately, these positions show that "ethics" in the education literature is not a single settled concept but a contested one, which is precisely why this study anchors its analysis in one explicit theory, consequentialism, rather than an undifferentiated appeal to "ethics" in general.

"Moral values", the outcome variable named in the revised title, is used in this study to mean the internalized standards, honesty, fairness, empathy, responsibility, and respect for others, that guide a student's judgment and conduct, as distinct from the purely civic or social values (e.g., voting behavior, group affiliation) that a broader values-education agenda might

also target. This narrower operational definition addresses the concern that "values" in the original draft were left undefined.

Although a substantial body of literature champions ethics education in general terms, it seldom evaluates that case through a single, explicit ethical-theoretical lens, and rarely specifies which values, moral, civic, or social, are being developed and by what evidence. This study's original contribution is as methodological as it is substantive. Rather than offering another descriptive account of ethics education's merits, it applies consequentialism systematically to weigh the anticipated benefits against the practical costs of implementation, producing a net-utility judgment rather than an unqualified endorsement.

Existing studies broadly converge on the claim that ethics education benefits students. Still, they reach this conclusion by different routes and with different degrees of evidentiary strength, and this section foregrounds those differences rather than a simple list of findings. Waghid (2024) and Miller (2013) both report gains in moral reasoning and character development, but Waghid's claims rest on secondary-school perspectives while Miller's are framed at a more general developmental level; the two studies therefore agree on direction but not on the mechanism by which change occurs. Chowning et al. (2012) and Zhou (2022) similarly agree that ethics education improves critical thinking and prosocial behavior.

A curriculum decision about ethics education can, in principle, be justified by more than one ethical theory, and the chosen theory shapes both the argument and its practical implications. Consequentialism evaluates the rightness of an action or policy by its outcomes; in this study, it focuses on the balance of positive and negative consequences of teaching ethics in schools (Portmore, 2020; Andrić, 2021). Deontology, by contrast, holds that certain duties or rules (such as honesty) must be followed regardless of outcome; a deontologist would argue for ethics education because students have a right to moral formation, not because of its downstream benefits (Kagan, 1998). Virtue ethics locates moral worth in cultivating character traits, courage, honesty, and compassion, rather than in rules or outcomes. It would justify ethics education as the practice ground for virtue itself. This study adopts consequentialism because it offers a comparatively tractable evaluative standard for the specific question posed: whether to integrate ethics modules into an already-crowded curriculum, where curriculum decision-makers must weigh the practical costs and benefits. The tension between these theories resurfaces in the discussion, where it is used to interpret the value-conflict finding rather than to resolve it.

The core problem, therefore, is not merely an absence of "ethics" as a topic, but the systemic undervaluation of character development as a central aim of education. This study posits that integrating structured ethics education is not a luxury but an ethical imperative for schools. It argues that such integration can bridge the identified gap, fostering not only individual moral autonomy but also the social cohesion necessary for a just, functioning democracy.

Against this backdrop, the study is guided by the following primary research question: What are the ethical implications of incorporating ethics modules into the high school curriculum? To unpack this central query, the investigation pursues three subsidiary questions:

- Why should ethics be incorporated into high school curricula?
- How can ethics be incorporated into a high school curriculum?
- How can the ethical theory of consequentialism inform the incorporation of ethics modules in high school curricula?

The overarching objective is to explore the implications of this incorporation, with specific sub-objectives aimed at conceptualizing ethics in education, examining the practical implications for curriculum and learners, and investigating its impact on ethical development.

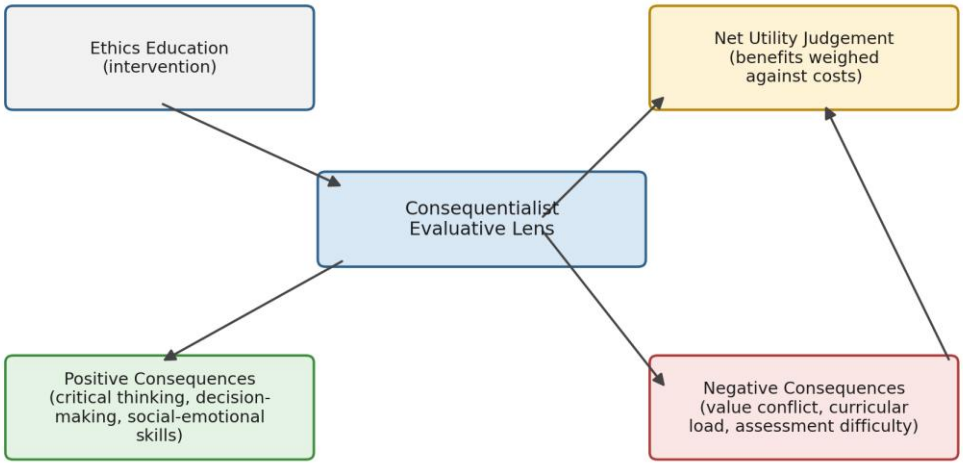


Figure 1. Conceptual framework: consequentialism as the evaluative lens weighing the positive and negative consequences of ethics education toward a net-utility judgment.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design using a desktop (secondary literature) study methodology. This approach was selected because it suits an in-depth, theoretical, and philosophical examination of the research problem, enabling synthesis and critical analysis of existing scholarly discourse without primary data collection (Yin, 2018).

Search Strategy

Three databases were searched: JSTOR, Google Scholar, and PubMed, using combinations of the search terms “ethics education”, “moral education”, “values education”, “secondary school” or “high school”, and “consequentialism” or “ethical theory”, connected with Boolean operators (e.g., (“ethics education” OR “moral education”) AND (“secondary school” OR “high school”. The search was limited to sources published between 2019 and 2024, in line with a

purposive sampling strategy intended to prioritize currency, while seminal theoretical works predating this window (for example, on consequentialism and thematic analysis) were retained where necessary for foundational grounding.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included if they were peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, or published theses; written in English; and substantively concerned with ethics, moral or values education in a schooling context, or with the ethical theories used to frame the analysis. We excluded sources that were non-peer-reviewed opinion pieces or blogs, focused on professional or business ethics unrelated to schooling, were not available in English, or were duplicate records retrieved across databases.

Selection Process and Corpus

Applying these criteria across the three databases, titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, duplicates were removed, and full texts were reviewed for the final selection. This is a desktop literature analysis rather than a registered systematic review, and a PRISMA protocol was therefore not applied; in the interest of the transparency requested by reviewers, this limitation is explicitly acknowledged in the Limitations section below rather than presented as a formal systematic review. The final corpus retained for thematic analysis comprised the 21 sources listed in the reference list, spanning peer-reviewed articles, one government policy document (CAPS), and a small number of book-length theoretical sources on consequentialism.

Quality Appraisal

Each candidate source was appraised against four criteria before inclusion: peer review or equivalent editorial status; publication in an indexed academic journal or by an academic press; topical relevance to ethics/moral education or to the theoretical framework; and currency (published within the search window or seminal status if older). Sources that did not meet at least three of these four criteria were excluded.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. This involved a rigorous process of familiarising with the collected literature, systematically coding data extracts, and identifying, analyzing, and reporting recurring patterns (themes) relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Consistent with the consequentialist framework, coding combined deductive and inductive steps. Deductively, extracts were first sorted into consequence-oriented categories derived from the theory itself: anticipated positive consequences, anticipated negative consequences, the stakeholders affected (students, teachers, schools, society), and the strength of the evidence offered for each claim. Inductively, sub-themes within each category (for example, "critical thinking" and "decision-making" within positive consequences) emerged from the data. This two-step procedure operationalizes consequentialism as an

analytic lens rather than a general orientation, addressing the reviewers' request for clarity on how the theory guided coding, interpretation, and synthesis.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

Credibility was supported by drawing on multiple source types (peer-reviewed articles, theses, and theoretical books) so that recurring themes were corroborated across independent sources rather than resting on a single study. Dependability was supported by maintaining a documented record of the search terms, databases, and inclusion/exclusion decisions described above, so that the selection process can, in principle, be audited or repeated. Confirmability is addressed by acknowledging the researcher's own position as a former learner and prospective educator engaging with this literature, which motivated the choice of topic and required deliberate attention to counter-evidence during coding, particularly regarding the risks and costs of ethics education and not only its benefits. Transferability is supported by a rich contextual description of the South African CAPS curriculum, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other comparable curricular contexts.

The theoretical framework of consequentialism served as the primary analytic lens throughout this process, guiding the evaluation and organization of the literature by focusing on identifying and weighing the potential positive and negative consequences of integrating ethics into schools, as argued or implied by the reviewed sources.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of the literature, viewed through the consequentialist framework, yielded clear findings categorized into the potential positive and negative consequences of integrating ethics education into high school curricula.

Positive Consequences: The Argument for Integration

The literature strongly advocates ethics education, citing significant beneficial outcomes.

Promotion of Critical Thinking and Moral Reasoning

A dominant finding is that ethics education powerfully catalyzes the development of critical thinking. By engaging with moral dilemmas, case studies, and philosophical arguments, students move beyond passively receiving information to actively analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing it (Meyer, 2023). They learn to deconstruct complex issues, identify underlying assumptions and biases, consider stakeholder perspectives, and construct logically sound justifications for their positions.

Enhancement of Decision-Making Capabilities

Closely linked to critical thinking is improved practical decision-making. Ethics education provides frameworks (such as consequentialist or deontological analyses) that students can apply to real and hypothetical scenarios. It encourages them to consider the short- and long-

term consequences of their choices, weigh competing values, and prioritise actions that align with ethical principles and promote others' well-being (Noddings, 2013).

Development of Social-Emotional and Civic Skills

The literature consistently highlights ethics' role in fostering prosocial attitudes and behaviors. Through discussions of fairness, justice, empathy, and respect, students develop a deeper understanding of, and concern for, others (Zhou, 2022). Furthermore, by exploring civic duty, social responsibility, and human rights, ethics education prepares students to participate actively and ethically in a democratic society (Osler & Starkey, 2020). The perceived impact of ethics education on key areas of student development is summarised in Table 1.

***Table 1**: Perceived Impact of Ethics Education on Key Student Development Areas*

Development Area	Potential Positive Impact	Supporting Scholarship
Cognitive Skills	Enhanced critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem-solving, and perspective-taking.	Chowning et al. (2012); Waghid (2024)
Moral Character	Growth in empathy, integrity, fairness, respect, responsibility, and resilience.	Miller (2013)
Social Competence	Improved communication, conflict resolution, collaboration, and the ability to engage respectfully with diversity.	Zhou (2022); Nucci and Narvaez (2008)
Civic Preparedness	Increased sense of social justice, ethical leadership, understanding of rights/duties, and motivation for community engagement.	Osler and Starkey (2020)

Negative Consequences and Implementation Challenges

A consequentialist analysis must also account for potential adverse outcomes and practical obstacles.

Risk of Value Conflicts and Classroom Tension

In pluralistic classrooms, teaching ethics can surface profound differences in students' moral beliefs rooted in culture, religion, or personal experience. Discussions on topics like abortion, euthanasia, or distributive justice can lead to heated debates, discomfort, or feelings of marginalization if not expertly facilitated (Norcross, 2020).

Curricular and Resource Challenges

The most frequently cited practical obstacle is the overloaded curriculum. Integrating a meaningful ethics program requires time, a scarce commodity in schools focused on examinable content (Adeoye et al., 2023). Furthermore, successful implementation demands significant investment in teacher training (UNESCO IICBA, 2024), and a lack of appropriate, context-sensitive teaching materials poses a further resource challenge (Ngubane, 2024).

Assessment Difficulties

Assessing ethical understanding is uniquely challenging. Traditional tests that measure factual recall are ill-suited to evaluating moral reasoning, empathy, or character development (Modiba & Mafumo, 2024).

DISCUSSION

Synthesized through the lens of consequentialism, this study's findings present a compelling yet nuanced case for integrating ethics into high school education. This discussion interprets these findings, weighing the projected benefits against the identified challenges to argue that, with deliberate implementation, the net consequences are strongly favorable.

The finding that ethics education strengthens critical thinking and moral reasoning aligns broadly with Waghid (2024) and Chowning et al. (2012), providing convergent support across independently conducted studies. However, this study's emphasis on implementation costs, value conflict, curricular load, and assessment difficulty goes beyond the largely benefits-focused framing in Miller (2013) and Zhou (2022), neither of which weighs these costs against the benefits within a single evaluative frame. Where the present study diverges most clearly from the literature it draws on is in treating consequentialism as an explicit decision procedure rather than a background assumption: Adeoye et al. (2023) and Ngubane (2024) document implementation costs without offering a framework for weighing them against the benefits documented elsewhere in the literature, which is precisely the synthesis this study attempts.

From a consequentialist standpoint, the aggregate potential benefits of ethics education, enhanced critical thinking, improved decision-making, fostered empathy, responsible citizenship, and a positive school culture represent a significant increase in overall well-being (utility) for students and society. Moral reasoning is as crucial to life success and societal health as mathematical or scientific literacy. These long-term, diffuse benefits to the community arguably outweigh the more immediate, contained costs of implementation.

The challenges identified- value conflicts, curriculum pressure, and teacher training needs- are substantial but not insurmountable. They represent contingent negative consequences rather than inevitable ones. For instance, the risk of value conflict can be mitigated by adopting a pedagogical approach focused on procedural ethics (teaching how to think ethically) rather than prescriptive ethics (teaching what to think) (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008).

The theory itself offers guidance for overcoming hurdles. A rule-consequentialist perspective supports establishing ethics as a core, cross-curricular responsibility rather than an add-on subject. This approach alleviates curriculum crowding by integrating ethics into existing content.

Furthermore, the consequentialist emphasis on outcomes highlights the need to invest in teacher development. The significant positive consequences depend on teacher competence.

Therefore, allocating resources to high-quality, ongoing teacher training is not merely a cost but a necessary investment to achieve the desired beneficial outcomes.

A strong consequentialist argument must also engage with potential criticisms. Could ethics education have negative unintended consequences? For example, might an excessive focus on outcome-based reasoning undermine commitments to personal integrity or justice (Sandel, 2020)? The value-conflict finding reported above can, in fact, be read through each of the three theories introduced in the literature review: a consequentialist response is to teach *procedural* rather than prescriptive ethics, as noted above; a deontological response would instead insist that certain rules (respect for persons, honesty) be taught as non-negotiable regardless of the discomfort they cause; and a virtue-ethics response would treat the discomfort itself as part of the practice of moral character formation, to be worked through rather than avoided. This study underscores the importance of a balanced curriculum that exposes students to multiple ethical theories, enabling them to understand each theory's strengths and limitations. The goal is intellectual and moral agility, not indoctrination into a single framework; this caveat also qualifies this study's reliance on consequentialism as an analytic choice rather than a claim that consequentialism is the correct ethical theory.

Another critique is that schools cannot, and should not, be responsible for moral formation, a role belonging to families or religious communities. However, a consequentialist would argue that in a diverse society, the school is the only communal institution that engages all young people. Failing to provide a shared space for structured ethical deliberation forfeits a critical opportunity to build a common foundation for civic life.

Theoretical contribution. This study's contribution to the literature is the demonstration, rather than mere assertion, of a consequentialist evaluation procedure that can be applied to curriculum-integration questions more broadly: identify the affected stakeholders, weigh the anticipated positive and negative consequences for each, and derive a net-utility judgment that is explicit about the conditions under which it would change.

CONCLUSION

This study ethically examined the importance of teaching ethics in schools, using a consequentialist framework to evaluate its potential to enhance students' moral values. The research confirms a significant gap in modern education: academic proficiency is prioritized at the expense of systematic moral and character formation.

The conclusions are threefold. First, integrating ethics education is justified by its preponderance of positive consequences. It is a powerful vehicle for developing essential intellectual and character virtues: critical thinking, ethical reasoning, empathetic understanding, social responsibility, and the capacity for principled decision-making. Second, implementation challenges, including curricular constraints, potential value conflicts, and teacher preparedness, are significant but not prohibitive. Third, consequentialist ethical

theory provides a clear, pragmatic lens for both advocating for and designing ethics education.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, as a desktop/secondary-literature analysis, it draws entirely on existing scholarship rather than primary empirical data from South African classrooms, teachers, or learners; its conclusions are therefore interpretive rather than empirically generalizable. Second, the purposive sampling strategy, while transparent, was not a registered systematic review and did not follow a PRISMA protocol; the final corpus, while screened against explicit criteria, may not be exhaustive. Third, foregrounding consequentialism, while analytically productive for the specific question posed, privileges a single theoretical lens among several plausible alternatives (notably deontology and virtue ethics), and doing so may understate objections these competing theories would raise. Future research combining this theoretical analysis with primary empirical data, for example, interviews or surveys with South African educators and learners, would help to test the transferability of these conclusions.

Recommendations

For Educators

Educators should use interactive, experiential teaching methods, discussions, debates, role-play, and case studies that foster critical thinking, empathy, and moral reasoning, delivered in a safe, inclusive classroom where students can explore ethical disagreement without it escalating into conflict.

For Curriculum Developers

Curriculum developers should prioritize early introduction of ethics content, provide teachers with ongoing training and resources, design assessment strategies that go beyond traditional testing to include reflective essays and group projects, and consider a cross-curricular, rather than single-subject, integration model to address the curricular-load concern identified in this study.

For Policymakers

Policymakers should allocate dedicated curriculum time and teacher-training budgets for ethics education. They should commission the empirical follow-up research recommended above before mandating a specific implementation model at scale.

This research advances the field by moving beyond abstract philosophical disagreement to a pragmatic examination of measurable benefits. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies that measure the long-term impact of ethics education on student behavior and civic participation, as well as action research on effective teacher-training models for ethical pedagogy.

Author Contributions

Langelihle Benard Jele conceptualized the study, conducted the literature search and analysis, and wrote the original manuscript. Sibonise Mabengwna contributed to data curation and manuscript revision. Prof Beatrice Okyere-Manu supervised the research and provided critical scholarly input. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

This study is a literature-based analysis. All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article and its reference list.

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