

Ethics in Exile: Bridging Ancient Educational Ideals and Modern Policy

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the breakdown of the moral framework of contemporary secular education, the erosion of the ethics that have been created through it, and the urgent need to restore this moral framework through a philosophical and policy-oriented lens. It revisits the classical ideal of the *Paideia*, the ancient Greek model of character and virtue cultivation, which is accepted as the origin of moral education. It juxtaposes this model with the current trend in education towards utility and outcomes-based models. Drawing on both historical sources and contemporary educational theory, the paper argues that the marginalization of moral and ethical education has led to a fragmented and morally ambiguous school experience. Drawing on insights from thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor and Martha Nussbaum, the paper proposes a three-pronged strategy: grounding education in philosophical virtues, embedding ethical inquiry across curricula, and initiating inclusive policy reforms to build moral literacy. It explores this through comparative analyses of successful models of moral education in countries such as Finland, Canada and the United Kingdom, which have re-established the moral framework of education in a rapidly changing, modern world. The study examines the moral foundation within secular frameworks, rather than relying on them to reduce the potential confusion that can arise from basing education on religious principles. The methodology combines philosophical analysis, policy review and conceptual synthesis. In doing so, the paper argues for a shift in contemporary educational paradigms. It examines the impact of a technological model that privileges economic utility over fostering civic responsibility and personal integrity.

Citation: Mendis B.S.M, *Ethics in Exile: Bridging Ancient Educational Ideals and Modern Policy*. Asian Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Science ISSN: 2320-9720, 3 (4) 2026: 01-11.

Ultimately, the goal is to create an educational system that cultivates morally conscious citizens capable of engaging in a pluralistic and morally complex world through archaic educational frameworks. Such a reform is not merely desirable but essential for the prosperity of democratic societies.

Keywords - Moral Education, *Paideia*, Secularization, Virtue Ethics, Educational Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

Educational frameworks in contemporary secularized societies have increasingly moved away from the classical model of education, which was based solely on the pursuit of competitive knowledge, known as the cultivation of moral and intellectual virtues (Flatt, 2023). In classical Greek philosophy, the moral framework of education, or the *Paideia*, was formulated as a comprehensive process that transformed individuals into virtuous, responsible citizens who could contribute meaningfully to state governance (Jaeger & Highet, 1986). However, secularized education has evolved into an economically driven and outcomes-based form in the 20th century, and its growing global shift in the 21st century has pushed moral dimensions further aside in favor of employment and standardized measurements (Drabarek, 2021). As a result, today's hyper-secularized education often lacks a coherent moral vision and does not adequately equip students to navigate complex moral dilemmas and participate responsibly in civic life (Watkins, 2023).

This concern has also been highlighted by UNESCO in its landmark report *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (2021). It argues that education should move beyond narrow economic objectives and become a transformative force for human dignity, social justice, democratic participation, and environmental responsibility. The report calls for a renewed social contract that places ethical responsibility, solidarity, and collective well-being at the centre of educational policy. This international perspective reinforces the argument of the present study that contemporary education requires not only curricular innovation. However, it also a renewed philosophical foundation capable of cultivating morally responsible citizens in pluralistic societies.

Contemporary global developments have strengthened concerns about the ethical purpose of education. Rapid technological advancement, the widespread use of artificial intelligence, increasing cultural diversity, social polarization, and the growing influence of market-oriented educational reforms have transformed the significances of schooling (Li & Huang, 2025). Although these developments have enhanced access to knowledge and innovation, they have also raised important questions regarding the formation of moral judgment, civic responsibility, and ethical leadership among students (Argyropoulou & Lintzerakou, 2025). Contemporary educational systems are frequently evaluated through measurable outcomes such as academic achievement, employability, and economic productivity, while the cultivation of character, empathy, and social responsibility receives comparatively less attention (Owan, Ukam & Egame,

2023). Consequently, educators and policymakers increasingly recognize that sustainable educational reform requires not only intellectual excellence but also a renewed commitment to ethical development. Re-considering classical educational philosophy therefore offers valuable insights for addressing contemporary challenges and strengthening education's contribution to democratic citizenship and social cohesion.

This paper argues that the decline in the moral construction of education is not a by-product of secularization, but rather a consequence of the failure to integrate philosophical ethics into secular educational policy. It can be shown that the *Paideia* model provides a valuable philosophical foundation for re-creating a morally grounded, but religiously neutral, model of education (Fraile-Martinez et al., 2025). By revisiting ancient ideals and drawing on modern thinkers, the study identifies the potential for articulating an inclusive vision of moral education.

This paper argues for a tripartite reform. That is, it aims to (1) restore the philosophical foundations of education through virtue ethics, (2) incorporate ethical inquiry into curricula, and (3) initiate policy innovations that affirm moral development in pluralistic settings. These reforms are not intended to replace secularism, but to complement it with a renewed ethical compass. This proposed model calls for discursive engagement, teacher preparation in ethics, and alignment of policies with civic goals (Apple, 2023).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is clear that a significant body of scholarship has highlighted the decline of moral discourse in education over a very long period of time. Charles Taylor (2007) discusses the emergence of a "secular age" in which moral frameworks have become individualistic and pluralistic, often leading to moral relativism. Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) argues that the loss of a shared ethical narrative has led to emotionalism, in which moral claims lack rational coherence. Martha Nussbaum (1997) emphasizes the need for liberal education to foster global citizenship and moral reasoning, especially in multicultural societies. While this crisis may not be immediately understandable, it can be examined using the classical roots of the *Paideia* as a basis.

Werner Jaeger and Gilbert Heit (1986) document how Greek education prioritized virtue, wisdom, and civic engagement. Their work demonstrates how the original purpose of education was to produce moral individuals, not simply competent workers. Contemporary theorists such as Gert Biesta (2016) criticize the reduction of education to quantitative outcomes rather than the teaching of values and call for an approach that embraces both moral risk and subject matter. Case studies on the integration of ethics in Finland, Canada, and the United Kingdom reveal that secular education can successfully incorporate moral components without violating religious neutrality (Suwalska, 2021; Maxwell, Tremblay-Laprise & Fillion, 2016; Smith, 2020). These examples provide practical illustrations of the theoretical arguments presented by Taylor and Nussbaum.

Recent scholarship has further reinforced the importance of restoring character and moral education within contemporary schooling. James Arthur and David Carr (2013) argue that education should extend beyond the transmission of knowledge to cultivate virtues that enable students to exercise sound moral judgment and responsible citizenship. Similarly, Kristján Kristjánsson (2015) contends that virtue ethics provides a coherent philosophical framework for character education because it integrates moral reasoning with the habitual development of ethical dispositions. Rather than treating values as isolated competencies, virtue-based education encourages learners to develop practical wisdom, empathy, honesty, and resilience through sustained reflection and practice. These perspectives complement Gert Biesta's (2016) critique of performative educational cultures, which often reduce learning to measurable outcomes while neglecting the formation of the whole person. Collectively, this body of literature demonstrates an emerging international consensus that moral education is not incompatible with secular education. Instead, ethical formation can be fostered through inclusive pedagogical practices that promote dialogue, critical reflection, and civic responsibility while respecting cultural and religious diversity.

Recent international policy literature has further reinforced the call for reestablishing the ethical purpose of education. UNESCO's *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (2021) argues that contemporary education must move beyond a narrow emphasis on economic productivity and human capital development. Instead, it advocates an educational vision founded on solidarity, social justice, democratic participation, and environmental responsibility. The report proposes a renewed social contract in which education serves as a public good that prepares learners to address complex global challenges through ethical reflection, cooperation, and shared responsibility. UNESCO approaches these issues from a policy perspective rather than classical philosophy. Nevertheless, its vision closely reflects the classical ideal of *Paideia*, which regards education as the holistic formation of virtuous citizens committed to contributing responsibly to the common good. It suggests that ancient educational philosophy continues to provide valuable conceptual foundations for addressing contemporary educational challenges within secular and pluralistic societies.

Therefore, these scholars provide a compelling critique of current trends and offer a philosophical basis for educational reform. The convergence of classical and contemporary perspectives suggests the feasibility, and indeed the urgency, of a new focus on moral education based on non-religious, ethical principles.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative methodology based on philosophical analysis, comparative policy review and conceptual synthesis. Its aim is to explore and articulate an educational model that integrates moral formation within secular frameworks.

First, a conceptual analysis of the *Paideia* is conducted using primary sources drawn from Greek philosophy and Christian humanism. Thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas are referred to in order to establish the historical significance of virtue-based education (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2003). This analysis is expanded by engaging with modern philosophers such as MacIntyre (1981) and Taylor (2007), who critique contemporary moral fragmentation.

Second, a comparative literature and policy review examines models of moral education in Finland, Canada and the United Kingdom. These countries have adopted different strategies for incorporating moral instruction without religious imposition (Suwalska, 2021; Maxwell, Tremblay-Laprise & Filion, 2016). Their frameworks are analyzed to extract principles relevant to pluralistic, democratic contexts.

Third, a theoretical synthesis integrates virtue ethics, liberal educational theory (e.g., Nussbaum, 1997; Dewey, 2017), and secularization theory. This synthesis aims to create a philosophical foundation and policy framework for moral education that can be implemented across diverse cultural and ideological settings.

The methodological approach is particularly appropriate because the research seeks to address normative questions concerning the aims and purposes of education rather than to measure empirical outcomes. Philosophical inquiry enables the critical examination of concepts such as virtue, moral responsibility, and civic education, while comparative policy analysis illustrates how these concepts are translated into practical educational frameworks (Biesta, 2016; Nussbaum, 1997). By integrating historical interpretation with contemporary educational philosophy, the study establishes a coherent bridge between classical ethical traditions and present-day policy challenges (MacIntyre, 1981). This interdisciplinary approach provides both conceptual depth and practical relevance for educational reform in diverse secular societies (Dewey, 2017).

The integration of these methods provides a comprehensive approach to understanding how moral education can be reclaimed in secular, pluralistic societies.

4. RESULTS

The philosophical and policy-oriented analysis of the study of ethical issues that have disappeared gradually from education due to secularization presents three significant findings relevant to contemporary society.

Educational disconnect: There is a profound gap between the desired moral and civic outcomes of modern education and its actual implementation. Public educational systems often proclaim values such as integrity, citizenship, and empathy; but practically, they emphasize structured testing, performance measurement, and marketable skills (Taylor, 2007). This disconnect leads to students' confusion about the purpose of schooling and undermines the moral development of learners (Nussbaum, 1997).

These findings are consistent with UNESCO's (2021) observation that educational systems across the world increasingly face the challenge of balancing economic demands with broader humanistic purposes. The report highlights that educational success should be evaluated not only by academic achievement and workforce preparation but also by the capacity to foster ethical responsibility, cooperation, and democratic engagement. The present findings support this position by demonstrating that moral education remains an essential component of sustainable educational development.

Policy feasibility in secular contexts: Countries such as Finland and Canada have demonstrated that ethics education is possible in secular systems. In Finland, ethical inquiry begins as early as grades 1 and 2 (Suwalska, 2021). In Canada, initial teacher education includes a curriculum component on ethics and classroom values (Maxwell, Tremblay-Laprise & Filion, 2016). In the UK, religious education is often unavoidable, but an increasing emphasis on ethics in the curriculum is highlighted in curricula (OFSTED, 2024). These examples indicate that secularism need not exclude moral education, but can be nurtured through inclusive, critical frameworks.

Philosophical Coexistence through Virtue Ethics: Classical and Contemporary Virtue Ethics provide a unified philosophical foundation for moral education. Aristotle's emphasis on habituation and character development resonates with MacIntyre's (1981) call for narrative unity in moral life. Such frameworks can be applied without reference to religious principles and are very suitable for pluralistic settings.

These findings support the thesis that the reintroduction of moral education in secular societies is necessary and possible. They provide the basis for proposing an educational model rooted in philosophical ethics and policy innovations.

5. DISCUSSION

The erosion of moral education in modern school systems represents not just an educational flaw but a civic and philosophical crisis. In many secular societies, schools have shifted from their primary role in character development to an instrumentalist paradigm that values efficiency, standardization, and economic output (Biesta, 2016). The result is a generation of students who excel in skills but lack moral purpose.

Reclaiming the *Paideia* offers a corrective vision grounded in both historical tradition and philosophical clarity. Yet, reintegrating moral formation into secular curricula requires careful navigation of pluralistic norms. The approach must be conversational, and while promoting ethical inquiry, it must avoid indoctrination. Both Dewey (2017) and Nussbaum (1997) support moral reasoning as essential to democratic education, emphasizing that critical thinking and ethical reflection go hand in hand.

The philosophical vision advanced in this study echoes strongly with UNESCO's (2021) proposal for a new social contract for education. Rather than viewing education primarily as an instrument for economic competitiveness, UNESCO advocates educational systems that cultivate solidarity, ethical responsibility, cooperation, and respect for human dignity. These principles closely parallel the classical concept of *Paideia*, which regarded education as the holistic formation of virtuous citizens dedicated to the common good. Consequently, revisiting ancient educational ideals does not represent a nostalgic return to the past but offers a philosophically vigorous framework for addressing the ethical and civic challenges confronting contemporary education.

Teacher education becomes an important factor in this transformation. As James Arthur and David Carr (2013) argue, educators must be equipped to facilitate moral discourse in classrooms, not as authoritarian moralists, but as guides to moral deliberation. This includes training in virtue ethics, case-based reasoning, and Socratic dialogue (Drabarek, 2021). In addition, policies should support curriculum flexibility and national standards that recognize ethical development as a measurable educational goal (National Education Commission, 2022).

Beyond curriculum reform, the integration of ethical education has significant implications for democratic governance and social cohesion (Biesta, 2016). Contemporary societies are increasingly characterized by cultural diversity, digital communication, and rapid technological change, all of which require citizens to exercise critical judgment, ethical reasoning, and respectful dialogue (Kalev, Hytti, & Sandström, 2025). Educational institutions therefore have a responsibility not only to transmit knowledge but also to cultivate the moral dispositions necessary for democratic participation. As Biesta (2016) argues, education should prepare individuals to exist as responsible subjects capable of making ethical decisions rather than merely producing measurable academic outcomes. Likewise, Nussbaum (1997) maintains that democratic societies depend upon educational systems that foster empathy, critical reflection, and the capacity to understand diverse perspectives.

These concerns are particularly significant in developing and multicultural societies. In these contexts, education plays a crucial role in promoting national unity while respecting cultural and religious diversity (Bosio, 2024). A virtue-based educational framework provides common ethical principles such as justice, honesty, responsibility, and compassion, that transcend ideological differences without imposing a particular religious worldview. MacIntyre (1981) further argues that moral traditions acquire meaning through shared practices and communities rather than through abstract principles alone. From this perspective, schools should function not merely as centres of academic instruction but also as communities in which ethical habits are cultivated through dialogue, participation, and reflective practice. Such an approach strengthens both individual character formation and the long-term resilience of democratic institutions.

Importantly, resistance to moral education in secular settings often stems from fears of religious transgression or cultural bias (Zilliacus & Kallioniemi, 2016). However, models explored in Finland, Canada, and the United Kingdom demonstrate that moral education can be both

inclusive and pluralistic. These systems focus on shared human values such as honesty, empathy, and responsibility—concepts that transcend particular religious or ideological boundaries (Smith, 2020).

Thus, a reformed educational model must integrate philosophical ethics, curriculum innovation, and teacher preparation. It must view moral literacy not as an optional enrichment, but as essential to the human formation that underpins democratic life. Without this foundation, education risks becoming merely technical at best, and, at worst, dehumanizing. Armed with moral literacy, students are empowered not only to succeed, but also to live well and contribute meaningfully to society.

The analysis presented in this study suggests a conceptual framework for reestablishing the moral purpose of contemporary education. The framework begins with the classical ideal of *Paideia*, which recognizes education as the holistic cultivation of intellectual, moral, and civic virtues. This philosophical foundation informs the development of virtue ethics as the prescriptive basis for educational practice. Based upon this foundation, ethical inquiry is integrated across the curriculum to encourage critical reflection, moral reasoning, and responsible decision-making. These educational practices are further reinforced through inclusive policy reforms that integrate moral literacy within national educational frameworks while respecting secularism and cultural pluralism. Together, these interconnected elements contribute to the formation of morally responsible citizens who are empowered to participate constructively in democratic societies and to encourage the common good.

6. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR MORAL EDUCATION

Table 1. Conceptual Framework for Reclaiming Moral Education

Classical Foundation	Educational Process	Educational Outcome
<i>Paideia</i>	Virtue Ethics	Moral Literacy
Character Formation	Ethical Inquiry	Civic Responsibility
Practical Wisdom	Curriculum Integration	Democratic Citizenship

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis and findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to guide the integration of moral education with secular educational systems.

- **Policy Integration of Moral Education:**

Ministries of education should adopt national frameworks that include moral education as a core component of the curriculum. These policies should emphasize philosophical ethics and civic responsibility while respecting pluralism and cultural diversity.

- **Teacher training and professional development:**

Teacher educational programs should be revised to include foundational courses in virtue ethics, moral philosophy, and moral education. Continuing professional development should support educators in facilitating moral inquiry and dialogic learning.

- **Curriculum Design and Implementation:**

Curriculum developers need to incorporate moral reflection across subjects relevant to real-life contexts, not as stand-alone content, but in the form of integrated themes such as justice, empathy, responsibility, and integrity.

- **School Culture and Leadership:**

School leaders should foster an ethical climate that supports respectful dialogue, civic engagement, and ethical behavior. Policies on discipline, inclusion, and participation should reflect the values promoted in ethical education.

- **Community and Stakeholder Engagement:**

Ethics education initiatives should involve parents, local communities, and policy stakeholders in their development and evaluation. Transparency and inclusion enhance public trust and effectiveness in implementation.

- **Further Research and Evaluation:**

Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the impact of ethical education in secular schools. Comparative research should continue to explore best practices derived from different cultural and educational contexts.

Implementing these recommendations will help to ensure that ethics no longer remains merely a status quo in education but becomes an essential component of building citizens with moral discernment and democratic participation.

8. CONCLUSION

In an era marked by technological change, social fragmentation, and moral ambiguity, education must reaffirm its role in shaping morally responsible citizens (Nussbaum, 1997; UNESCO, 2021). This paper has argued for a return to the classical ideal of the *Paideia*, reinterpreted for modern secular contexts through philosophical ethics and inclusive policy reforms (Jaeger, 1945; MacIntyre, 1981). By analyzing both historical traditions and contemporary case studies, it becomes clear that moral education can be non-religious, non-partisan, pluralistic, and deeply formative (Dewey, 2017; Biesta, 2016).

The proposed tripartite strategy offers a holistic approach to reintegrating moral literacy into education, by restoring virtue ethics, embedding ethical inquiry across curricula, and reforming policy frameworks (Aristotle, 2011; MacIntyre, 1981). Such an approach addresses the ethical vacuum that threatens civic harmony and personal integrity, while respecting the principles of secular pluralism (Nussbaum, 1997). The examples of Finland and Canada illustrate the practical viability of this vision. Their success demonstrates that moral education can flourish by relying on dialogue, critical reasoning, and shared values, rather than reliance on religious dogma (UNESCO, 2021). These systems point toward a new educational philosophy that balances cognitive development with moral understanding (Biesta, 2016).

The significance of this study extends beyond the philosophical reconstruction of classical educational ideals. It contributes to contemporary debates on educational reform by demonstrating that ethical formation and secular education are complementary rather than contradictory objectives (Biesta, 2016; Nussbaum, 1997). In an era when educational success is frequently measured through standardized assessments and economic productivity, this paper argues that moral literacy should be recognized as an equally important educational outcome. Re-establishing ethical inquiry within educational policy not only strengthens individual character but also promotes social trust, intercultural understanding, and responsible democratic participation (Dewey, 2017; Bosio, 2024).

Consequently, future educational reforms should seek a balanced framework that integrates academic excellence, ethical reflection, and civic responsibility as mutually reinforcing dimensions of quality education. Thereby promoting both individual flourishing and the common good. The vision presented in this study is consistent with UNESCO's (2021) call for a renewed social contract for education that reestablishes ethical responsibility, democratic participation, and human flourishing as central purposes of educational systems.

Ultimately, reclaiming the moral foundations of education is not a return to the past, but a forward-looking reform that is essential for the sustainability of democratic societies. It calls on educators, policymakers, and philosophers alike to consider moral development as the heart of true education. In doing so, we ensure that our schools do not simply produce workers, but also nurture individuals with wisdom, compassion, and civic virtues.

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