

Challenging Students Moral Laziness: Authentic Education Based on Existentialist Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Modern educational environments often face students' moral laziness, manifested as ethical passivity, reluctance to make difficult moral decisions, and a tendency to simply imitate norms without internalizing authentic values. Overly normative character education fails to foster a sense of personal responsibility and moral authenticity. Therefore, this study aims to reformulate the concept of authentic education based on the principles of existentialist philosophy (Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Camus) to challenge moral laziness and encourage students to become active and responsible moral agents. The method used is a qualitative philosophical study with interpretive content analysis. Core concepts of existentialism, such as freedom, responsibility, authenticity, and existential anxiety, are transformed into an applicable pedagogical framework. The findings indicate that the resulting Authentic Education emphasizes a pedagogy of awareness, in which students are encouraged to recognize their radical freedom of choice and the consequences of absolute responsibility for those choices. The learning process must create boundary situations (such as real ethical dilemmas) that force students to confront anxiety and choose their own values rather than accept predetermined ones. This article makes a theoretical contribution by offering an existentialist alternative to rule-based moral education, as well as a practical contribution in the form of a basis for designing a curriculum that focuses on developing moral authenticity and personal commitment, preparing students to act ethically in the real world.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education fundamentally possesses two principal objectives: to illuminate the nation (cognitive) and to cultivate character (affective and conative) (Fitrah et al., 2024). While the focus on cognitive aspects often dominates, moral issues among the younger generation increasingly demand serious attention. Amidst the unlimited flow of information and rapid social change, we are witnessing a shift in students' ethical

behavior patterns from clear violations of norms to a more subtle and insidious phenomenon: moral laziness (Jenni, 2016; Weltman, 2020).

Moral laziness, in this context, is defined not simply as being lazy about studying or procrastinating (which constitutes academic laziness) (Nongxa, 2020), but as an attitude of ethical passivity—a conscious reluctance or avoidance of taking full responsibility for moral choices and actions (Madsen, 2018). Manifestations of moral laziness in students include (Momeni et al., 2017; Lessy et al., 2024) (1) Conformity without Reflection: The tendency to follow moral norms or commands (such as school rules) simply to avoid punishment or seek praise, rather than due to the internalization of authentic values. (2) Ethical Anxiety Avoidance: Refusing to confront complex moral dilemmas or boundary situations and choosing the easiest or most popular solution to avoid the "burden of freedom" of choosing what is right. (3) Borrowed Morality: Adopting moral values from authority figures (teachers, parents, influencers) without going through a process of personal authentication, so that the morality practiced feels foreign and fragile when faced with real temptations or challenges.

This phenomenon creates a paradox: students may be knowledgeable about what is right (thanks to normative character education) but morally paralyzed because they have never been trained to choose that truth freely and responsibly (Marquez & Florendo, 2023). The impact is the emergence of a generation that is intellectually intelligent but vulnerable to moral ambiguity, lacking moral authenticity, and swayed by peer pressure or trends (Nanda & Kumar, 2024; Prasetya et al., 2024).

The dominant model of character and moral education today often adopts an essentialist or normative approach (Walker et al., 2015; Hart, 2022). This perspective regards morality as a collection of intrinsic values or principles (e.g., honesty, discipline, responsibility) that must be imparted to students (Rafikov et al., 2021; Dewey, 2023). Students are diminished to mere recipients of values (tabula rasa) instead of being active creators of them. They learn what is right, but they don't learn how to make their own moral choices (Mishra et al., 2023). An overemphasis on rule-following often results in only externally compliant behavior (compliance), rather than internal and authentic moral commitment (conviction). Once supervision or authority is removed, moral behavior also falters.

Morality based on rigid rules often fails to provide strong guidance when students face "boundary situations" (such as value conflicts, peer pressure, or existential crises) where clear rules are lacking. Therefore, a paradigm shift is needed from moral education based on external compliance to moral education based on internal authenticity (Setyosari & Kamdi, 2021).

Existentialist philosophy, particularly that advocated by figures such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, and Albert Camus, offers a strong philosophical foundation for building a model of moral education that challenges students' moral laziness (Prahasan, 2024). Existentialism argues that existence precedes essence. Humans are born into the world without a predetermined essence or purpose and are solely responsible for creating their own values and meaning in life through their choices (Aho, 2014; Iniobong, 2018; Chukwuokolo & Jeko, 2020).

The application of this perspective to moral education, termed Authentic Education, has transformative potential (Rumianowska, 2020). Students learn that they are free to choose, but this freedom comes with total responsibility (Verharen, 2020). Teachers no longer simply dictate values but become facilitators, helping students confront the existential anxieties that arise from this freedom. The primary goal of education shifts from simply becoming a "good person" as defined by society to becoming an authentic person, someone who lives in harmony with the choices and values they themselves create. The pedagogical focus is directed at providing real-life experiences and dilemmas that require students to act and choose under pressure so that their values (essence) are forged through action (existence). Thus, the existentialist framework is inherently a panacea for moral laziness, as it demands that students always be active subjects responsible for their moral existence (Prahasan, 2024).

Although research on moral education and existentialism is extant (Sherman, 2024; Sadat Mir Alavi & Rajaee, 2024), this article addresses a notable deficiency in educational literature through its targeted focus and framework. The main novelty lies in the identification and use of the concept of "student moral laziness" as the target problem. Previous studies tended to focus on moral violations (e.g., bullying, cheating, drug use) or lack of motivation to learn. This article instead examines a more fundamental and structural moral problem: the passivity of moral will. This article addresses moral laziness (the refusal to take responsibility) and provides a more in-depth examination of the psychological and philosophical origins of failures in character education. This article not only reiterates the relevance of existentialism for education but also explicitly formulates a framework for "Authentic Education" (AE) operationalized from existentialist principles. This AE is formulated to emphasize three pedagogical pillars that contrast with the normative model, namely (1) Elective Curriculum: Focus on the study of ethical dilemmas, not just rules. (2) Boundary Situation Method: Creating learning experiences that force students to confront the anxiety of moral choices. (3) Authenticity Goal: Measuring moral success not from compliance, but from the consistency between claimed values and students' chosen actions.

This article offers a strong theoretical bridge between Sartre's philosophy of radical freedom and the practical pedagogical implications for cultivating responsibility. This is rarely presented cohesively. Most interpretations of existentialism tend to be abstract. This article provides a conceptual roadmap for how awareness of freedom (i.e., the absence of essence) can paradoxically generate a drive for moral responsibility (i.e., creating one's own essence), which is the core antidote to moral laziness.

Thus, this article makes a significant contribution, both theoretically by introducing new terminology in the moral crisis of education, and practically by providing a structured philosophical basis for transforming character pedagogy.

2. METHOD

This research is a qualitative philosophical study with a hermeneutic-interpretive approach. This research focuses on the analysis, deconstruction, and reconstruction of philosophical concepts (especially from existentialism) for application in the realm of moral education. Hermeneutics-interpretation is used to interpret philosophical texts in depth, extract relevant meanings, and translate abstract philosophical principles into a concrete and systematic pedagogical framework. This research aims to formulate a conceptual model of authentic education based on existentialist philosophy to challenge the problem of moral laziness in students.

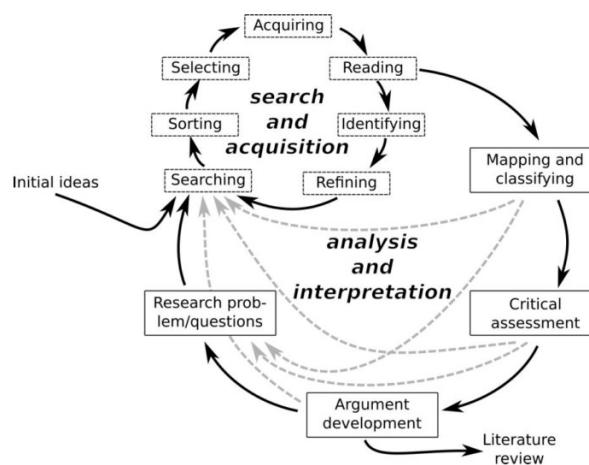


Figure 1. Hermeneutic-Interpretive Approach Design

The data used in this study is qualitative data sourced from literature. These include fundamental works by key figures in existentialist philosophy, such as *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre, 2015), *Existentialism is a Humanism* (Sartre, 2007), and *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard) (Lippitt, 2004). Literature on moral education and character theory that addresses the limitations of the normative model. Secondary studies on the application of existentialism in education (e.g., Greene, Morris) are also reviewed. Educational psychology research describes the phenomenon of moral laziness or ethical passivity in students.

The data collection technique used was an in-depth literature review through systematic steps: Identifying Key Concepts: Collecting texts discussing core philosophical concepts (freedom, responsibility, authenticity, bad faith) and pedagogical concepts (character education, norms, moral choice). Collecting Critiques: Collecting literature that explicitly critiques the effectiveness of rule-based moral education (the essentialist model). Gap Analysis: Identifying gaps between current moral education practices (which fail to address moral laziness) and potential solutions offered by existentialist philosophy.

Data analysis was conducted through three stages of progressive philosophical synthesis:

a. Deconstructive Analysis (Identifying the Problem)

This stage focuses on a critical analysis of the failure of conventional moral education in addressing students' moral laziness. Sartre's concept of bad faith (inauthenticity) is used as a deconstructive lens to understand moral laziness as a denial of moral freedom and responsibility.

b. Conceptual Transformation Analysis (Solution Building)

This is the core stage that transforms philosophical principles into pedagogical principles:

- Concept Operationalization: Abstract philosophical concepts (e.g., Absolute Responsibility, Existential Anxiety) are translated into operational curriculum elements and teaching methods (e.g., Ethical Choice Pedagogy, Limit Situation Method).
- Two-Way Synthesis: Integrating existential understandings of action and values to formulate Authentic Education, emphasizing that moral values must be chosen and created by students through action, not simply passively received.

c. Theoretical Model Construction (Presenting Results)

The final stage is formulating and presenting the Authentic Education model as a new, systematic framework. This model encompasses goals (achieving moral authenticity), content (dilemmas and limit situations), and evaluation (personal moral commitment and consistency).

The validity of this research's results is guaranteed through Philosophical Coherence, namely:

- Internal Coherence: Ensuring that the formulated concept of Authentic Education is logically consistent with the basic principles of existentialist philosophy.
- Pragmatic Relevance: Ensuring that the proposed framework has the potential to effectively challenge and address the phenomenon of moral laziness in students

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results of this study present conceptual findings that map the problem of Student Moral Laziness (SML) and construct a theoretical solution in the form of an Authentic Education (AE) model rooted in existentialist philosophy.

I. Problem Deconstruction: Identification of Student Moral Laziness (SML)

Through a hermeneutical analysis of existentialist literature (Sartre) and education, SML is identified as a pedagogical manifestation of the philosophical concept of Bad Faith or Inauthenticity.

Table 1. Identification of Student Moral Laziness

Philosophical Concepts (Sartre)	Pedagogical Manifestations (KMS)
Radical Freedom	When denied, students feel "forced" to comply.
Bad Faith (Inauthenticity)	Moral Laziness: Avoiding full responsibility for ethical actions by hiding behind rules or authority.
Existential Anxiety	When pressured, students choose the easiest norm rather than face the uncertainty of moral choices.

Conventional, essentialist moral education (emphasizing pre-existing rules) inadvertently facilitates SML. Students are trained solely to obey (external compliance) rather than to choose and take responsibility (internal commitment), which is the core of the crisis of moral authenticity.

II. Philosophical Synthesis: Pillars of Authentic Education (AE)

Existentialist philosophy is synthesized into three main pedagogical pillars designed to directly challenge and address SML.

1. Goal: Building Moral Authenticity

The goal of vocational schooling shifts from instilling a predetermined set of values to helping students achieve Moral Authenticity. Authenticity is defined as the consistency between the values students choose and the actions they take. This requires students to confront the reality that they are fully responsible for their character ("man is nothing but what he makes of himself" - Sartre).

2. Content: Pedagogy of Freedom and Responsibility

Curriculum content should center on two key existential themes:

- Awareness of Radical Freedom: Materials should explicitly reveal that even "not choosing" is a choice, and that no external authority (teachers, parents, society) can remove students' personal responsibility.
- Anxiety Recognition: The curriculum should include the study and discussion of Limit Situations—extreme conditions (such as death, guilt, unresolvable value conflicts) that force students to confront the fragility of existence and make truly meaningful choices.

3. Method: Application of Boundary Situations

Teaching methods must shift from normative lectures to experiences of moral dilemmas that demand action. The key method synthesized is the Boundary Situation Method (BSM):

Table 2. Application of Boundary Situations

BSM Principles	Implementation Description
Dilemmas Without a Single Answer	The teacher presents an ethical scenario in which all choices have serious consequences, forcing students to experience the anxiety of freedom.
Reflection on Existential Choices	Students are encouraged to reflect not only on what is right, but also on why they chose the action, and on what universal values they

BSM Principles	Implementation Description
	proclaim through that choice (such as Sartre's concept of anguish or universal fear).
Commitment	Assessment focuses on the depth and consistency of students'
Evaluation	personal commitment to the moral choices they make, not just their adherence to school rules.

III. Model Construction: Authentic Education Framework

The result of this research is a theoretical model of Authentic Education (AE) that serves as an antidote to Moral Laziness. This model operates in a cycle emphasizing action-choice-responsibility.

- Starting Point: Recognition that students operate in Moral Laziness (Inauthenticity).
- Core Intervention: Application of the Boundary Situation Method (BSM).
- Core Experience: Students experience Existential Anxiety arising from their awareness of Radical Freedom.
- Action: Students make Autonomous Moral Choices and commit to them.
- Outcome: Formation of Moral Authenticity and overcoming Moral Laziness, where students become subjects responsible for their own moral essence.

Thus, Authentic Education successfully challenges AUTHORITY by shifting the focus of moral education from what should be done to who should be through free choice and full responsibility

Discussion

This discussion section aims to interpret the main findings, namely the construction of the Authentic Education (AE) model, by reconnecting it to the context of the problem of Student Moral Laziness (SML) and placing it within the broader debate on moral education theory. The results of this study confirm that challenging SML requires a paradigm shift from a normative model that emphasizes external compliance to an existentialist model that prioritizes authenticity and absolute responsibility for choice.

Interpretation of Findings: Moral Laziness as Pedagogical Bad Faith

A key finding of this study is the identification of SML as a pedagogical manifestation of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical concept of negative faith or inauthenticity. Moral laziness is not a failure to understand rules, but rather a conscious refusal to accept freedom and the anxiety that accompanies it.

In the school context, students are often encouraged to act "good" for rewards (A's, praise, avoiding punishment). This system paradoxically facilitates bad faith because it allows students to conclude, "I'm good because the rules force me too, or because my teacher tells me to." This is a form of denial of responsibility.

Authentic Education (AE) serves as a direct antidote to this bad faith (Leahy, 2009; Bialystok, 2017). By forcing students to confront the Limit Situation Method, they are thrust into existential moments where they cannot hide behind established norms. In

situations where there is no absolute "correct" rules, students are forced to create their own values through choice.

The AE model implies that teachers must stop being agents of norm transfer and become facilitators who help students navigate the anxiety of freedom. This aligns with the existentialist view that responsibility arises from freedom (Lieb, 2020). If students never feel free to choose, they will never feel fully accountable for the outcomes. Moral laziness thrives in environments where moral choices feel constrained.

Theoretical Contrast: Existentialism versus Other Moral Models

The construction of character education in this article contrasts sharply with two dominant models of moral education:

Contrast with Character Education (Essentialism)

Traditional character education models (often called Essentialist or Virtue Ethics-based) assume that there is a set of universal virtues (essences) that must be instilled (drilled) in students (Sanderse, 2012; Fernández Espinosa & Domingo, 2025). Success is measured by how well students reflect these virtues.

- Key Difference: The essentialist model offers a sense of moral security because values are predetermined. In contrast, Virtue Education offers moral anxiety because values must be chosen independently.
- Implication: While the essentialist model may be successful in fostering compliance in structured environments, it fails when students encounter ambiguous situations (which constitute most of adult moral life). Virtue Education, with its focus on authenticity, trains students to become value-makers amidst ambiguity, overcoming the moral fragility caused by dependence on external rules.

Contrast with Kohlberg's Cognitive Moral Development Theory

Kohlberg's theory focuses on the development of moral reasoning abilities over time (Mathes, 2021; Tao et al., 2025), moving from the preconventional stage (based on punishment/rewards) to the postconventional stage (based on universal principles).

- Similarities: Both AE and Kohlberg's theory seek a higher level of morality than simple obedience (the conventional stage).
- Key Differences: Kohlberg emphasizes reasoning, the ability to logically consider why an action is right. Existentialism emphasizes authentic choice and action. A student may possess postconventional moral reasoning (knowing what is right) but still act inauthentically for fear of social consequences—a dissonance that Kohlberg failed to resolve. AE fills this gap by linking awareness (choice) directly to responsibility. AE argues that sophisticated moral reasoning is useless if it is not accompanied by the existential courage to choose and act in accordance with an authentic conscience.

Pedagogical Implications of Authentic Education (AE)

The AE model has transformative implications for moral education practices in schools, requiring a reorientation of the teacher's role and curriculum structure.

Reorienting the Teacher's Role

Teachers in AU act as Existential Provocateurs. Their role is not to provide answers, but to pose challenging questions and create a space where students can no longer avoid responsibility. Teachers must have the courage to allow students to experience uncomfortable moral anxieties. This requires teachers who themselves have faced and accepted their own radical freedoms, so they can facilitate the same process in their students.

Action-Focused Curriculum Design (Boundary Situation Pedagogy)

The curriculum must be transformed from a list of values to a series of concrete dilemmas that demand judgment and action (rather than mere academic discussion).

- Authentic Case Studies: Using complex, real-life cases, where no one is completely "right," forces students to choose which values to prioritize and why.
- Existential Choice Project: Students may be assigned to advocate for a position they personally believe in (e.g., a social justice issue at school) and take full responsibility for the process and outcome, thereby learning that value is created through struggle and commitment.

By prioritizing subjective experience and personal responsibility through BSM, AE directly addresses the core of BSM: the passivity of the will.

Although this study successfully constructs a robust theoretical framework for Moral Authenticity as a challenge to the BSM, several limitations require further exploration. This research is philosophical-conceptual, meaning the AE model is presented in theoretical form. The biggest challenge is: How to measure Moral Authenticity? While the normative model measures compliance (easily measured), AE measures internal commitment (difficult to measure). Future research needs to develop qualitative and phenomenological psychometric instruments that can assess students' levels of moral authenticity and sense of responsibility, rather than simply measuring external behavior. Implementing AE requires a radical shift in school culture. Teachers must be prepared to navigate uncomfortable anxieties and conflicts, which may conflict with the school's need for order and control (Eckhoff & Goodman-Scott, 2023; Skilling et al., 2023). Action research is needed to test the feasibility of the PA model in real school settings, including developing adequate teacher training on how to be an Existential Provocateur without violating students' ethical or psychological boundaries.

Existentialist philosophy deals with weighty concepts such as anxiety, death, and absurdity. There is a need to empirically explore the most appropriate age and developmental stage for introducing these concepts to students without causing excessive psychological distress. English language learning must be tailored to

challenge, not destroy, the will of students. This discussion reinforces the argument that Student Moral Laziness is not a simple behavioral problem, but rather a crisis of authenticity rooted in the failure of the moral education system to internalize freedom and responsibility. Authentic Education, rooted in Existentialism, offers a necessary antithesis to this passivity. By positioning students as creators of their own values amidst existential anxiety (through BSM), English language learning facilitates the transition from bad faith to an authentic and responsible moral life. Implementing this model will require philosophical and pedagogical courage from the entire educational community.

4. CONCLUSION

This philosophical research has successfully identified and formulated an Authentic Education (AE) model rooted in existentialist philosophy as a fundamental solution to addressing the problem of Student Moral Laziness (SML). Authentic Education (AE) is defined as a pedagogical manifestation of inauthenticity (Bad Faith), in which students refuse to assume full responsibility for their moral choices and prefer to hide behind externally imposed norms. AE directly challenges SML by shifting the focus of moral education from normative compliance (the essentialist model) to personal authenticity (the existentialist model). The AE model is built on the principle of radical freedom (Sartre), which paradoxically results in absolute responsibility for students' self-making.

Authentic Education (AE) is a key instrument formulated to trigger existential anxiety in students, forcing them to make authentic moral choices amidst ambiguity, and thereby create their own values. Therefore, Authentic Education offers a framework that not only instructs students in what is right but also trains them to become courageous and responsible moral agents, whose character is forged through personal commitment, not merely external compliance.

As a recommendation, schools are encouraged to reduce the portion of lecture-based moral instruction and replace it with regular BSM sessions, where students are presented with real ethical dilemmas that require personal decision-making and public accountability. Teachers need to be retrained to act as Existential Facilitators, individuals who can create a safe yet challenging space for students to confront their moral anxieties without providing ready-made answers. Further research suggests conducting action research to test the effectiveness of the AE model in a real school environment, with a focus on its impact on reducing cases of Student Moral Laziness. Furthermore, conduct psychometric studies to develop and validate qualitative measurement tools that can assess students' levels of moral authenticity and sense of responsibility internally, not just through external behavioral observations.

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