



Exploring Young Minds: Metaphorical Conceptualizations of Core Values among Primary School Students

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ABSTRACT

Values education plays a central role in the formation of moral character during primary schooling; however, limited research has examined how children cognitively conceptualize core human values in early educational settings. This study investigates how primary school students metaphorically represent the ten core values defined in the Turkish national curriculum justice, friendship, honesty, self-control, patience, respect, love, responsibility, patriotism, and benevolence. The research employed a qualitative design based on metaphor analysis. Data were collected using open-ended prompts inviting students to explain each value through metaphorical expressions, and the responses were analyzed through a systematic procedure including metaphor identification, source-domain coding, thematic categorization, inter-rater reliability checks, and the use of representative quotations to illustrate conceptual patterns. The findings reveal that children predominantly interpret values through concrete, observable behaviors embedded in everyday social interactions. Relationship-oriented values such as love, friendship, and respect were largely grounded in family-centered and interpersonal metaphors, whereas self-regulatory moral values such as responsibility, self-control, patience, and honesty were primarily expressed through metaphors related to behavioral regulation and everyday duties. Patriotism was conceptualized mainly as emotional attachment to national symbols rather than as active civic engagement, reflecting an affective orientation toward national belonging. Overall, the results suggest that during primary education, values are not yet internalized as abstract moral frameworks but are constructed cognitively through lived experiences, relational contexts, and socially modeled behaviors. By revealing how children interpret values through metaphorical thinking, this study contributes to the literature on values education and highlights the importance of experiential and socio-emotional pedagogical approaches that align with children's developmental characteristics.

KEYWORDS

Values education; metaphor analysis; primary school education; character development; moral cognition; qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

The formation and expression of core values during childhood constitute a fundamental area of inquiry within both developmental psychology and educational research. Values guide individuals' judgments, shape behavioral priorities, and influence social interactions across diverse contexts. Increasingly, contemporary research recognizes that value orientations begin to develop earlier than previously assumed and continue to evolve throughout childhood as children interact with their social environments. Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies demonstrate that value structures begin to emerge during middle childhood and gradually become more coherent as children accumulate social experiences within family, peer, and school contexts (Daniel & Benish-Weisman, 2019; Vecchione et al., 2020; İnan et al., 2024). Consequently, childhood is now understood not merely as a preparatory stage for later moral development but as a critical developmental period in which children actively construct and refine their value systems.

Within this developmental process, primary school settings play a particularly important role in the socialization of values. Schools provide structured environments in which children encounter explicit moral expectations, observe socially valued behaviors, and participate in interactions that shape their understanding of fairness, cooperation, responsibility, and respect. Educational systems around the world increasingly integrate values education into curricula with the aim of supporting students' moral development and social responsibility. However, understanding how children themselves interpret and internalize these values remains a complex challenge for educational research. Recent scholarship suggests that examining children's own perspectives can provide important insights into how values are understood, prioritized, and enacted in everyday school life (Benish-Weisman, 2024; Kayıran, 2025; İnan, 2011; Thornberg & Oğuz, 2016). Research that centers students' interpretations is therefore essential for bridging the gap between curricular intentions and the lived realities of values education in classrooms.

Despite the growing emphasis on values education within educational policy and practice, much of the existing research remains predominantly adult-centered. Numerous studies have explored the perspectives of teachers, school administrators, and policymakers, as well as the design and implementation of values-based curricula. These studies have contributed significantly to understanding instructional strategies such as role modeling, moral discussions, and character-building activities within school settings. Nevertheless, focusing primarily on institutional actors risks overlooking children's own meaning-making processes. Developmental research indicates that children do not simply internalize values transmitted by adults; instead, they interpret and reconstruct these values through everyday interactions and experiences within their social environments (Daniel & Benish-Weisman, 2019; Emre et al., 2023). Consequently, a critical gap remains between descriptions of how values are taught and analyses of how they are actually conceptualized by the students who encounter them in educational contexts.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly emphasized the importance of incorporating children's voices into research on moral and values education. Studies examining children's moral reasoning suggest that students may interpret values in ways that differ substantially from adult expectations or curricular definitions (Thornberg & Oğuz, 2016). For example, values such as responsibility or respect may be understood primarily in relation to concrete daily practices rather than abstract ethical principles. These findings highlight the importance of examining how children conceptualize values within their own experiential frameworks. Without such child-centered inquiry, educational research risks overlooking the interpretive processes through which students translate moral language into meaningful everyday behaviors.

One promising methodological approach for accessing children's conceptualizations of values is metaphor analysis. Metaphors function as cognitive tools that allow individuals to understand abstract ideas through more concrete and familiar experiences. According to conceptual metaphor theory, abstract concepts are often structured through mappings from concrete experiential domains, enabling individuals to make sense of complex phenomena in everyday language (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). In educational research, metaphor analysis has been widely used to reveal implicit beliefs, emotional orientations, and cognitive representations related to educational concepts. When applied to children's perspectives, metaphor-based methods can illuminate how abstract moral values such as justice, honesty, or responsibility are grounded in concrete experiences and social interactions within children's everyday lives.

Recent methodological studies further emphasize the value of metaphor analysis as a tool for uncovering learners' implicit conceptual frameworks. By encouraging participants to articulate analogies between abstract concepts and familiar experiences, metaphor-based inquiry can reveal underlying cognitive schemas that may not emerge through conventional survey or interview techniques (Vladimirovich et al., 2015). This methodological approach is particularly relevant when working with children, whose understanding of abstract concepts often develops through concrete representations and everyday experiences. Therefore, analyzing children's metaphors provides a meaningful window into the ways in which young learners cognitively structure moral and social concepts.

In addition to cognitive development, children's interpretations of values are shaped by broader socio-cultural contexts. Cross-cultural research demonstrates that while many moral values appear across societies, their meanings and expressions may vary depending on cultural norms, family practices, and institutional expectations (Benish-Weisman, 2024; Daniel & Benish-Weisman, 2019; Kayıran & Sönmez, 2018; Kayıran & Bağçeci, 2025). Schools, media, and community narratives collectively contribute to shaping how children understand concepts such as fairness, cooperation, and patriotism. Consequently, examining children's value representations within specific cultural contexts contributes not only to local educational

discussions but also to the broader international literature on value socialization and moral development.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to values education, several empirical gaps remain. First, although numerous studies examine the role of teachers and educational institutions in promoting moral values, relatively few studies focus directly on how primary school students themselves conceptualize these values. Second, research that investigates children's perspectives often focuses either on early childhood or adolescent populations, leaving the primary school years comparatively underexplored. Third, existing studies frequently treat values as discrete behavioral indicators rather than as conceptual systems through which children organize their moral understanding. These limitations highlight the need for research approaches that capture children's cognitive representations of values in more nuanced ways. Accordingly, the present study aims to address these gaps by conducting a qualitative, metaphor-centered investigation into how primary school students conceptualize core values within school contexts. In the Turkish education system, values education is organized around ten core root values emphasized in the national curriculum: justice, friendship, honesty, self-control, patience, respect, love, responsibility, patriotism, and benevolence. By examining the metaphors that students generate in response to prompts such as "X is like ... because ...", the study seeks to explore how children interpret these values and which conceptual images they use to represent them.

More specifically, this study aims to (a) identify the dominant metaphorical themes used by primary school students to describe the ten core values defined in the national curriculum, (b) examine how these metaphorical representations reflect children's everyday social experiences and cultural contexts, and (c) contribute to a deeper understanding of how values education is cognitively interpreted by learners at the primary school level. By centering children's own language and metaphorical expressions, the study seeks to illuminate the ways in which moral values are conceptualized in the mental worlds of young learners and to provide insights that may inform more developmentally responsive approaches to values education.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in a phenomenological approach to explore how primary school students conceptualize core human values through metaphorical expressions. Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to particular phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Van Manen, 2017).

Within the scope of this research, the phenomenon under investigation was the metaphorical conceptualization of values among primary school students. Because moral values such as justice, honesty, or responsibility are abstract constructs, metaphor analysis provides a powerful methodological tool to access the cognitive and experiential structures through which children understand these concepts.

Metaphor analysis has been widely used in educational research to uncover underlying beliefs, conceptual structures, and meaning-making processes that may not be directly observable through conventional questioning techniques (Schmitt, 2005; Saban, 2008). In this context, the study aimed to reveal the mental images and analogical structures students use when describing the ten core values emphasized in the Turkish national curriculum.

Research Context

The study was conducted during the 2025–2026 academic year in primary schools located in different provinces of Türkiye. The Turkish national curriculum emphasizes ten core root values within values education: justice, friendship, honesty, self-control, patience, respect, love, responsibility, patriotism, and benevolence. These values are systematically integrated into classroom practices through curricular activities, textbooks, and teacher-led discussions. Primary school environments therefore provide an appropriate context for investigating how children interpret and internalize these values within their daily educational experiences.

Participants and Sampling

The study group consisted of 646 primary school students enrolled in public and private schools in Türkiye. Participants were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling, a widely used strategy in qualitative research that allows researchers to identify information-rich cases that meet predetermined criteria relevant to the research question (Patton, 2014).

The inclusion criteria for participants were:

- being enrolled in a primary school (grades 1–4)
- having completed basic literacy skills
- voluntarily participating in the research with parental consent

Criterion sampling ensured that participants had sufficient cognitive and linguistic abilities to express metaphorical representations of abstract value concepts. The large sample size was considered appropriate for metaphor analysis studies aiming to identify diverse conceptual patterns across participants. Previous studies employing metaphor-based qualitative analysis in educational contexts have similarly utilized large participant groups to capture the richness and variation of metaphorical expressions (Saban, 2008; Schmitt, 2005). Demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1 (see appendix).

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a metaphor elicitation form designed to identify students' conceptual representations of the ten core values included in the national curriculum. Metaphor elicitation techniques are commonly used in educational research to reveal individuals' underlying conceptual frameworks by encouraging participants to relate abstract concepts to familiar experiences (Schmitt, 2005). Students were asked to complete the following prompt for each value:

“X is like ... because ...”

This structure allowed participants to express:

- the source domain (the metaphor used)

- the target concept (the value)
- the justification explaining the relationship

Providing a justification (“because...”) is considered essential in metaphor research because it reveals the reasoning behind the conceptual association (Saban, 2008). Each participant produced one metaphor for each of the ten values.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in classroom environments during regular school hours. Prior to the implementation, necessary ethical permissions were obtained from the university ethics committee. Teachers informed students about the purpose of the study and explained how to complete the metaphor prompts. Students were encouraged to express their ideas freely and were informed that there were no right or wrong answers. The metaphor forms were distributed to students and completed individually. The average completion time ranged between 20 and 30 minutes. During the data collection process, researchers ensured that students clearly understood the metaphor prompt and the requirement to provide explanations for their metaphors.

Data Analysis

The metaphorical expressions produced by students were analyzed through qualitative content analysis combined with systematic metaphor analysis procedures. The analytical process followed the methodological framework proposed by Schmitt (2005) and Saban (2008) and consisted of five stages:

1. Data Screening

All responses were reviewed to determine whether they met the criteria for valid metaphorical expressions. Responses were excluded if they:

- did not contain a comparison structure
- lacked a justification
- consisted only of a single word

This step ensured that each metaphor contained both a source domain and an explanatory relationship.

2. Coding of Metaphors

Each valid metaphor was coded according to its source domain. For instance, metaphors such as “Love is like the sun” or “Love is like water” were treated as separate conceptual images representing the value. This step allowed the identification of recurring metaphorical patterns.

3. Category Development

Metaphors sharing similar semantic or conceptual features were grouped into thematic categories. For example, metaphors related to love were categorized under themes such as nurturance, guidance, protection, and emotional warmth. Frequency and percentage distributions were calculated to determine dominant conceptual patterns across students.

4. Inter-Coder Reliability

To ensure the reliability of the categorization process, two independent researchers coded the metaphors separately.

Inter-coder reliability was calculated using the formula proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994):

Reliability = Agreements / (Agreements + Disagreements)

Reliability coefficients above 0.80 are considered acceptable in qualitative research.

5. Representative Quotations

Representative student quotations were selected for each category to illustrate how participants articulated their metaphors. Including direct quotations enhances the interpretive depth and transparency of qualitative research findings.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the rigor of the study, trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were applied.

- Credibility: achieved through systematic coding procedures and peer review of categories
- Transferability: supported by detailed descriptions of the research context and participants
- Dependability: ensured by documenting each stage of the analytic process
- Confirmability: achieved through independent coding and inter-coder reliability analysis

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from both students and their parents prior to data collection. Participants' identities were kept anonymous and all responses were used solely for research purposes.

FINDINGS

This section presents the thematic distributions of the metaphors produced by primary school students for each of the ten core values, together with frequencies (f) and percentages (%). For each value, an APA-style table is followed by a concise interpretive summary and illustrative quotations that exemplify both dominant and secondary themes.

Justice

Students predominantly conceptualized justice through the lens of equality/fairness, indicating that justice is primarily understood as impartial treatment and equal rights. A smaller but notable group framed justice as punishment–reward, suggesting an outcome-based understanding linked to sanctions and consequences. Secondary themes (truthfulness, sharing, non-discrimination) point to justice being interpreted also as a moral and relational principle, though less salient than equal treatment. Representative paraphrased expressions included

statements indicating that justice means treating everyone equally, punishing wrongdoing, and respecting the rights of others.

Table 2.

Thematic distribution of students' metaphors for the value of justice (N = 109)

Theme / Category	f	%
Equality / Fairness	69	63.30
Punishment–Reward / Sanction	15	13.76
Truthfulness / Honesty	10	9.17
Sharing	8	7.34
Non-discrimination	7	6.42

Note. Frequencies and percentages represent the distribution of metaphor categories produced by students for the value of justice.

Friendship

Table 3

Thematic distribution of students' metaphors for the value of friendship (N = 125)

Theme / Category	f	%
Social relationship – Spending time together	32	25.60
Bond of friendship	30	24.00
Trust – Sharing secrets	22	17.60
Helping – Solidarity	18	14.40
Love – Emotional closeness	15	12.00
Family analogy	8	6.40

Note. Frequencies and percentages represent the distribution of metaphor categories produced by students for the value of friendship.

Students most frequently conceptualized friendship as a domain of shared experiences and companionship, emphasizing spending time together and participating in common activities. Trust and emotional closeness were also prominent themes, suggesting that students perceive friendship as a relationship built on reliability and mutual support. The appearance of family-based metaphors further indicates that some children interpret friendship as a relationship resembling familial closeness. Representative paraphrased statements emphasized having fun together, trusting friends, and helping each other during difficult situations.

Honesty

Students primarily conceptualized honesty as telling the truth and avoiding lies, indicating that honesty is largely understood as a communicative behavior rather than an abstract moral principle. A smaller proportion of students associated honesty with trustworthiness and

reliability in interpersonal relationships. Overall, honesty appears to be interpreted as truthful speech within everyday interactions. Representative paraphrased expressions described honesty as telling the truth, not lying, and being someone others can trust.

Table 4.

Thematic distribution of students' metaphors for the value of honesty (N = 74)

Theme / Category	f	%
Truthfulness (Telling the truth)	29	39.19
Opposition to lying (Not lying)	22	29.73
Moral attitude / Trustworthiness	13	17.57
Social relationship dimension	7	9.46
Other / Unclear	3	4.05

Note. Frequencies and percentages represent the distribution of metaphor categories produced by students for the value of honesty.

Self-Control

Table 5.

Thematic distribution of students' metaphors for the value of self-control (N = 43)

Theme / Category	f	%
Behavioral control / Self-regulation	18	41.86
Cognitive self-control (Attention / Planning)	6	13.95
Emotional regulation	5	11.63
Avoidance / Impulse inhibition	4	9.30
Conceptual uncertainty (Don't know)	9	20.93
Misattribution	1	2.33

Note. Frequencies and percentages represent the distribution of metaphor categories produced by students for the value of self-control.

Students mainly described self-control through behavioral self-regulation, such as controlling actions or resisting impulses. Emotional and cognitive dimensions appeared less frequently. The relatively high number of uncertain responses suggests that the concept may be perceived as abstract or difficult to define for students at this developmental stage.

Representative paraphrased expressions described self-control as controlling one's actions, not reacting immediately when angry, and managing one's behavior.

Patience

Students overwhelmingly associated patience with waiting, indicating that the concept is primarily interpreted as the ability to wait calmly until the appropriate time. Emotional regulation and perseverance appeared as secondary themes, suggesting that only a smaller group connected patience with maintaining emotional balance or persistence.

Representative paraphrased expressions described patience as waiting calmly, not becoming angry quickly, and remaining calm in difficult situations.

Table 6.

Thematic distribution of students' metaphors for the value of patience (N = 98)

Theme / Category	f	%
Waiting / Waiting until the right time	78	79.59
Emotional regulation / Staying calm	12	12.24
Perseverance toward a goal	5	5.10
Unclear / Don't know	3	3.06

Note. Frequencies and percentages represent the distribution of metaphor categories produced by students for the value of patience.

Respect

Table 7.

Thematic distribution of students' metaphors for the value of respect (N = 106)

Theme / Category	f	%
Family / Elders	23	21.70
Good behavior / Politeness	21	19.81
Not using bad words	15	14.15
Tolerance / Empathy	11	10.38
Manners / Etiquette	10	9.43
Obedience / School discipline	7	6.60
Helping / Being useful	7	6.60
Waiting / Patience	5	4.72
Happiness / Positive feelings	4	3.77
Respect for everyone / Universality	3	2.83

Note. Frequencies and percentages represent the distribution of metaphor categories produced by students for the value of respect.

Students most frequently defined respect through references to family members and elders, followed by polite behavior and appropriate manners. This pattern indicates that respect is strongly socialized through family and cultural norms emphasizing appropriate conduct toward older individuals and authority figures.

Students described respect through behaviors such as being polite, not using offensive language, and treating others kindly.

Love

Students primarily conceptualized love through family relationships and emotional attachment, indicating that love is grounded in close interpersonal bonds, particularly with parents and

family members. Emotional states and caring behaviors were also mentioned as important aspects of love.

Table 8.

Thematic distribution of students' metaphors for the value of love (N = 110)

Theme / Category	f	%
Family and close relationships	50	45.45
Emotion / Abstract inner state	25	22.73
Behavior / Action	16	14.55
Valuing / Showing interest	8	7.27
Concrete object / Thing	5	4.55
Romantic affection / Liking	3	2.73
Unclear / Incomplete	3	2.73

Note. Frequencies and percentages represent the distribution of metaphor categories produced by students for the value of love.

Representative expressions described love as caring for others, feeling close to family members, and showing affection.

Responsibility

Table 9.

Thematic distribution of students' metaphors for the value of responsibility (N = 66)

Theme / Category	f	%
Duty / Task	22	33.33
School- or homework-related duties	17	25.76
Order / Planning / Rules	8	12.12
Household and family duties	6	9.09
Environmental / Social responsibility	4	6.06
Generalized obligation	5	7.58
Helping / Kindness	3	4.55
Objection / Negative metaphor	1	1.52

Note. Frequencies and percentages represent the distribution of metaphor categories produced by students for the value of responsibility.

Students most frequently associated responsibility with completing assigned tasks, particularly school-related duties such as homework and preparation for school. This indicates that responsibility is mainly understood as fulfilling obligations given by adults.

Students described responsibility as doing homework, completing tasks, and helping with duties at home.

Patriotism

Students mainly conceptualized patriotism through emotional attachment to the country and national symbols, particularly the flag. Action-based interpretations such as protecting or serving the country appeared less frequently.

Representative expressions referred to loving one's country, respecting the national flag, and valuing national leaders.

Table 10.

Thematic distribution of students' metaphors for the value of patriotism (N = 110)

Theme / Category	f	%
Loving one's country / Homeland	58	52.73
Respect and love for the flag	19	17.27
Love for Atatürk	11	10.00
Protecting / Defending the nation	10	9.09
Sacrifice / Serving the country	7	6.36
Other / Symbolic	5	4.55

Note. Frequencies and percentages represent the distribution of metaphor categories produced by students for the value of patriotism.

Benevolence

Table 11.

Thematic distribution of students' metaphors for the value of benevolence (N = 158)

Theme / Category	f	%
Helping / Providing support	78	49.37
Sharing / Doing good deeds	41	25.95
Emotional care / Compassion	19	12.03
Helping family – Domestic support	10	6.33
Organized help	4	2.53
Other / Unclear	6	3.80

Note. Frequencies and percentages represent the distribution of metaphor categories produced by students for the value of benevolence.

Students most frequently interpreted benevolence as helping others, indicating that benevolence is largely understood as prosocial behavior directed toward supporting people in need. Sharing and showing compassion also emerged as relevant themes.

Students described benevolence as helping others, sharing with people who need support, and being kind to others.

Cross-value synthesis

Across all ten core values, students tended to conceptualize values through concrete behavioral and relational experiences rather than abstract moral reasoning. Social values such as love,

friendship, respect, and benevolence were closely associated with family relationships and interpersonal interactions. In contrast, individual moral values such as responsibility, honesty, patience, and self-control were primarily interpreted through observable behaviors within daily routines. Overall, the findings suggest that value concepts at the primary school level are largely grounded in social modeling and everyday practices, reflecting children's developmental tendency to understand moral concepts through concrete experiences.

Table 12.

Dominant metaphorical themes across the ten core values

Value	Most dominant theme	Main interpretation (brief)
Justice	Equality / Fairness	Justice is primarily conceptualized as equal treatment and protection of rights.
Friendship	Spending time together	Friendship is constructed through companionship and shared experiences.
Honesty	Telling the truth	Honesty is mostly framed as truthful speech and avoiding lies.
Self-control	Behavioral regulation	Self-control is defined through managing one's actions and impulses.
Patience	Waiting	Patience is understood as waiting and controlling reactions over time.
Respect	Family / Elders	Respect is grounded in intergenerational norms and polite conduct.
Love	Family bonds	Love is anchored in attachment and close family relationships.
Responsibility	Duty / Task	Responsibility is framed as fulfilling assigned duties (especially school tasks).
Patriotism	Love of country	Patriotism is mainly affective/symbolic (country and flag love).
Benevolence	Helping/support	Benevolence is conceptualized as helping behavior and prosocial support.

Note. The table summarizes the dominant metaphorical themes for each core value and their brief interpretive meanings.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to explore how primary school students metaphorically conceptualize the ten core values defined in the Turkish national curriculum. The findings reveal that children predominantly interpret abstract moral and civic values through concrete behavioral experiences and relational contexts. In other words, values such as justice, responsibility, or honesty are not primarily understood as abstract ethical principles but rather as observable actions embedded in everyday life situations. This pattern supports developmental research suggesting that younger children tend to represent moral concepts through concrete and

context-bound experiences rather than abstract moral reasoning (Daniel & Benish-Weisman, 2019; Vecchione et al., 2020).

The predominance of action-oriented metaphors (e.g., waiting, completing tasks, telling the truth) indicates that students' conceptualizations of values are closely linked to behavioral practices that they regularly observe or perform. From a developmental perspective, this finding is consistent with studies showing that children's early moral schemas are grounded in concrete experiences and social routines (Benish-Weisman, 2024). Similarly, research on values development suggests that value acquisition during middle childhood occurs through repeated exposure to socially reinforced behaviors within family and school environments (Daniel & Benish-Weisman, 2019). The present results therefore reinforce the idea that values education at the primary level is experienced largely through behavioral modeling rather than abstract instruction.

One of the most salient findings of this study is that several values particularly love, respect, and friendship were frequently conceptualized through references to family members and close interpersonal relationships. Students often framed these values using metaphors related to parents, siblings, and other emotionally significant figures. This pattern aligns with developmental research highlighting the family as the primary context in which moral emotions and value orientations first emerge (Grusec & Davidov, 2021; Kayıran & Bağçeci, 2018).

According to socialization theories of moral development, children initially acquire moral norms through emotionally meaningful interactions with caregivers and significant adults. These interactions provide the affective foundation upon which later moral reasoning develops (Grusec & Davidov, 2021). The findings of the present study support this perspective by showing that children interpret social values through relational experiences that are emotionally salient and familiar. In particular, the association of respect with elders and love with parental relationships suggests that early value representations are deeply embedded in family-based socialization processes.

Furthermore, research on values transmission indicates that parental modeling plays a crucial role in shaping children's moral priorities and social behavior (Benish-Weisman, 2024). When children observe consistent value-based behaviors within the family environment such as helping others or showing respect, they are more likely to internalize these behaviors as normative standards. The metaphorical expressions identified in this study reflect this mechanism, as many students described values through relational scenarios that mirror everyday family interactions.

While relational values were primarily grounded in family contexts, individual moral values such as responsibility, patience, honesty, and self-control were predominantly represented through specific behavioral practices. For example, responsibility was frequently associated with completing homework or fulfilling assigned duties, patience was equated with waiting, and honesty was defined mainly as telling the truth.

This pattern corresponds with developmental findings indicating that children's moral understanding during middle childhood tends to focus on observable actions rather than internalized ethical principles (Daniel & Benish-Weisman, 2019; Kayıran, 2026). In early stages of moral development, children typically interpret moral concepts in terms of rule-following and behavioral compliance. Only later do these concepts evolve into more abstract ethical principles involving intentions, internal values, and moral reasoning (Meydan et al., 2024; Vecchione et al., 2020).

The results therefore suggest that values education in primary schools may be most meaningful when moral concepts are embedded in concrete activities and daily routines. Classroom practices such as assigning responsibilities, encouraging cooperation, and modeling respectful communication may serve as effective pedagogical strategies for reinforcing value-based behaviors at this developmental stage.

Another notable finding concerns the conceptualization of patriotism. Students predominantly described patriotism through emotional attachment to national symbols, particularly love for the country and respect for the national flag. Behavioral expressions such as defending the nation or contributing to society appeared less frequently.

This finding is consistent with research suggesting that early forms of patriotism in childhood are largely affective and symbolic rather than civic and participatory (Barrett & Oppenheimer, 2011). Young children tend to associate patriotism with emotional identification with national symbols, traditions, and collective narratives. As cognitive and social capacities develop, these emotional attachments may gradually evolve into more complex forms of civic engagement and democratic participation.

The findings therefore indicate that patriotic education at the primary level may initially function through emotional identification and symbolic affiliation rather than through explicit civic action. Educational practices that connect national values with meaningful narratives, cultural symbols, and shared experiences may therefore strengthen children's sense of belonging and collective identity.

The findings of this study offer several implications for values education practices in primary schools. First, the predominance of behavioral and relational metaphors suggests that values are most effectively understood by children when they are embedded in concrete experiences. Educational programs may therefore benefit from emphasizing experiential learning strategies such as cooperative activities, classroom responsibilities, and community-oriented projects.

Second, given the strong influence of family-based socialization observed in the findings, values education initiatives may be strengthened through increased collaboration between schools and families. Programs that involve parents in value-related activities or discussions may reinforce the consistency between school-based instruction and home-based practices.

Finally, teachers play a critical role in mediating value learning through both explicit instruction and implicit modeling. Previous research emphasizes that teachers' everyday

interactions with students including fairness in classroom management, respectful communication, and encouragement of cooperation serve as powerful mechanisms of value transmission (Thornberg & Oğuz, 2016; Kayiran, 2023). Consequently, teacher education programs should include training that supports educators in integrating value-oriented practices into daily classroom routines.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study provides valuable insights into children's metaphorical conceptualizations of core values, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative design captures students' representations at a particular moment but does not examine how these representations evolve over time. Longitudinal studies could explore how children's metaphorical understandings of values change as cognitive and social development progresses. Second, the study focuses on a specific cultural and educational context. Cross-cultural research could investigate whether similar metaphorical patterns appear in different educational systems or whether cultural norms influence the ways children conceptualize values.

Finally, future research may integrate qualitative metaphor analysis with quantitative methods in order to examine the relationships between value representations, classroom practices, and students' behavioral outcomes. Such mixed-method approaches could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how values education influences children's moral development.

CONCLUSION

This study examined primary school students' metaphorical conceptualizations of the ten core values emphasized in the Turkish national curriculum. By focusing on students' metaphorical representations, the research aimed to uncover how young learners interpret and make sense of abstract moral and civic concepts within their everyday experiences. The findings reveal that children primarily conceptualize values through concrete behaviors, observable actions, and relational contexts rather than through abstract ethical reasoning.

More specifically, the results indicate that social values such as love, respect, and friendship are predominantly framed through close interpersonal relationships, particularly those involving family members. These findings suggest that children's early value representations are strongly embedded in emotionally meaningful interactions within their immediate social environments. In contrast, individual moral values including responsibility, patience, honesty, and self-control—were mostly articulated through action-oriented practices such as completing tasks, waiting, telling the truth, or regulating one's behavior. These patterns indicate that at the primary school level, moral concepts tend to be interpreted through everyday behavioral routines rather than through generalized ethical principles.

Another important finding concerns the conceptualization of patriotism. Students predominantly defined patriotism through emotional attachment to national symbols, particularly love for the country and respect for the national flag. Behavioral expressions of

citizenship, such as civic participation or collective responsibility, appeared less frequently. This pattern suggests that patriotic understanding during childhood is primarily affective and symbolic, while more action-oriented forms of civic engagement may develop later as cognitive and social capacities mature.

Taken together, these findings highlight the experiential and relational nature of value formation in childhood. Rather than emerging solely from formal instruction, children's understanding of values appears to develop through concrete social experiences, observation of significant adults, and participation in everyday practices within family and school contexts. Consequently, values education at the primary level may benefit from pedagogical approaches that emphasize experiential learning, relational engagement, and concrete behavioral modeling.

From an educational perspective, the results suggest several implications for the design and implementation of values education programs. First, instructional approaches should prioritize experiential and activity-based learning strategies that enable students to engage with values through concrete practices such as collaborative tasks, classroom responsibilities, and problem-solving activities. Second, given the strong influence of family contexts observed in the findings, effective values education programs may benefit from integrating family–school collaboration mechanisms that reinforce value learning across both environments. Third, educational practices should move beyond rule-based instruction toward participatory learning experiences that encourage students to practice values through democratic participation, collective responsibility, and community-oriented initiatives.

Finally, the metaphor-based approach adopted in this study demonstrates the value of exploring children's perspectives directly when investigating value formation processes. By revealing the cognitive and experiential frameworks through which children interpret values, metaphor analysis provides a valuable methodological tool for understanding how moral concepts are internalized during childhood. Future research may expand this approach to different educational levels, cultural contexts, and comparative settings in order to further illuminate how children's value representations evolve across developmental stages and social environments.

Overall, the findings contribute to the literature on values education by demonstrating that children's understanding of core values is primarily grounded in relational experiences and observable practices. These insights provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the ongoing efforts to implement effective values education policies within primary school settings.

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Ethics Statement

This study was conducted with the approval of the Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Approval Date: August 22, 2025; Decision No: 20; Document No: E-72321963-050.04-451137).

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APPENDIX

Table 1.

Demographic characteristics of the participants

Variable	Category	n
Age	6 years	61
	7 years	81
	8 years	28

	9 years	69
	10 years	407
Gender	Female	333
	Male	313
Mother's Employment Status	Employed	198
	Unemployed	448
Father's Employment Status	Employed	589
	Unemployed	57
Mother's Education Level	Primary Education	252
	Secondary Education (High School)	228
	Associate Degree	27
	Undergraduate Degree	104
	Master's Degree	17
	Doctorate	18
Father's Education Level	Primary Education	159
	Secondary Education (High School)	223
	Undergraduate Degree	213
	Master's Degree	47
	Doctorate	4
School Type	Public	580
	Private	66
