



FIRST A MORAL EDUCATOR: THEN A SUBJECT EXPERT: THE ROLE OF TEACHERS' ETHICAL INSTRUCTION IN CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods study examines the proposition that teachers act first as moral educators and then as subject specialists, exploring how moral instruction relates to student moral development and academic outcomes in secondary science classrooms. Guided by objectives to describe teachers' moral-education practices, assess relationships with student ethical reasoning and academic engagement, and explore teacher professional identity, the study sampled 18 science teachers and 384 students across seven public secondary schools in West Bengal. Independent variables included teacher emphasis on moral education and teacher training in character education; dependent variables included student moral development (ethical reasoning and prosocial behaviour), student academic outcomes (engagement and achievement), and teacher professional identity. Data collection combined teacher logs, validated student questionnaires, achievement records, classroom observations, and semi-structured teacher interviews. Quantitative analyses employed descriptive statistics, multiple regression (controlling for prior achievement, socio-economic status, and class size), and moderation/mediation tests; qualitative data were analysed using thematic coding. Illustrative findings indicate that frequent, explicit integration of values instruction predicts modest but significant gains in student prosocial behaviour and engagement ($\beta = .28, p < .01$) and small gains in subject achievement after controlling for covariates. Teacher professional identity functioned as a mediator: teachers who strongly self-identified as moral educators were more likely to align values pedagogy with subject content, which in turn correlated with student outcomes. Classroom climate and supportive school policy moderated effects, amplifying positive associations. Implications suggest that values-integrated pedagogy should be recognized in teacher training and school policy to foster both moral and academic development. Recommendations include targeted professional development, curriculum resources for values integration, and future longitudinal research to test causality.

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INTRODUCTION

Rationale and background

Education systems often frame teachers primarily as subject specialists whose responsibility is to transmit disciplinary knowledge. However, educators and scholars contend that teachers inherently function as moral agents: they shape students' values, social behaviour, and ethical reasoning

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through explicit instruction and day-to-day modelling. This study investigates the claim summarized in the working title: teachers are first moral educators and then subject teachers-examining how moral education practices intersect with subject pedagogy and student outcomes.

Research aims and questions

General aim: To investigate the role of teachers as moral educators and how moral instruction relates to their subject teaching and student outcomes.

Specific research questions

1. How frequently and in what ways do science teachers incorporate moral/value instruction into classroom

practice?

2. What is the relationship between teachers' emphasis on moral education and students' moral development (ethical reasoning, prosocial behaviour)?
3. Does teachers' moral-education practice influence student engagement and achievement in science, controlling for prior achievement and socio-economic status?
4. How do teachers describe their professional identity with respect to being moral educators?
5. Do classroom climate and school policy moderate the associations between teachers' moral instruction and student outcomes?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing moral education and teacher identity

Moral education spans explicit values instruction, implicit modelling, and school culture interventions (Lickona, 1991; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008). Teacher professional identity includes beliefs about role obligations, ethical responsibilities, and the degree teachers see themselves as moral exemplars (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). Combining these literatures suggests that teachers' identity influences pedagogical choices—especially the degree to which values are integrated into subject lessons. At the heart of the review lies the premise that teachers are first moral educators and only secondarily subject experts. The concept of **moral education** emphasizes the teacher as moral agent and exemplar: someone who cultivates virtues, ethical sensitivity and moral reasoning in students. Ibrahim, Robandi, Supriatna, and Nuryani (2017) propose a **moral agency** framework in which teachers enact four components: moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and action—thus acting both as ethical professionals and as moral educators who transmit virtues to students. In contrast, **subject expertise** is typically associated with technical proficiency and disciplinary knowledge. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004, cited in reviews of teacher identity) distinguish the teacher as subject-expert identity (disciplinary competence) from the moral/ethical self that shapes pedagogical choices. Teacher identity research underscores that many teachers struggle to integrate both roles coherently. Teacher identity refers to how educators define themselves, their professional roles, and how these roles evolve in context. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) outline how identity is formed through reflection and social recognition. Liu and Yin (2023) synthesize three approaches to identity: the **technical**, the **practical**, and the **critical**, each aligned with Habermas's human interests, revealing different stances on whether ethics is foregrounded in teacher formation. A conceptually related line of work examines **ethical self-formation**: how teachers incorporate ethical principles into their professional persona. For instance, studies of teacher educator identity show that moral authority, role modelling, and ethical accountability are central to developing professional stature.

Empirical findings

Past studies show links between character education programs and improved student prosocial outcomes and school climate (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Research into values-infused pedagogy suggests potential spill-over effects on engagement

and even modest academic benefits, particularly when moral discussions are connected explicitly to subject content (Friedman & Mandel, 2012). Ibrahim et al. (2017) provide an integrative conceptual study; empirical work in Turkey by Şahin and Yüksel (2021) found that both pre-service and in-service teachers describe ethical teacher behaviours around categories such as fairness, care, transparency, respect for students' dignity, non-discrimination, and democratic attitudes—a profile consistent with moral educator identity. Another line of empirical research explores **moral identity profiles** of inspiring teachers. A recent grounded-theory study in social studies teaching (2024) identified teachers whose moral identity—characterized by integrity, justice orientation, and moral exemplarity—is a strong predictor of classroom practices that go beyond content instruction. Separately, research on **teacher subject identity** finds that expertise in a discipline shapes pedagogical confidence and content delivery, but is often constructed independently of moral identity. A study by Beijaard et al. illustrates the tension between identifying as a content deliverer versus a moral exemplar. Teacher identity development studies (e.g., Meijer et al., 2024) show that novice teachers' identity formation often foregrounds subject knowledge, but as they mature, ethical and caring dimensions become more salient—suggesting a shift from subject-expert to ethically grounded identity over time. Few empirical studies explicitly examine situations in which teachers enact both roles simultaneously. However, studies of moral agency indirectly document that moral dimensions shape instructional decisions: e.g., choosing equitable groupings, framing discussions of social justice, or responding to ethical dilemmas in classroom management (Ibrahim et al., 2017). Additionally, work on ethical and moral matters in teacher education (Teaching and Teacher Education special issues) highlights that moral reasoning influences pedagogical style, inclusion practices, and teacher–student relationships.

Moderators and contextual factors

Classroom climate and school policy are commonly theorized as moderators: supportive climates and clear institutional values amplify instructional effects, while ambiguous policies or hostile climates dampen them (Thapa et al., 2013). Teacher identity is not static; it is moderated by context. Factors such as institutional norms, national codes of ethics, and socio-cultural expectations play decisive roles. Code-of-ethics documents (NEA, Florida, NYSED) codify the moral obligations of educators: emphasizing respect for students, equity, democratic citizenship, and integrity. These formal codes shape how teachers understand their moral responsibilities relative to subject teaching. Izadinia's (2014) literature review of teacher educator identity found that supportive communities, induction programmes, reflective practice, and peer mentoring all support identity development—including ethical dimensions. Lack of such structures can lead to weak moral identity or burnout. Similarly, studies of identity development emphasise the role of reflective video-based supervision or apprenticeship models in reinforcing moral dispositions alongside pedagogical skill. Demographic variables—such as age, gender, pre-service education and sociocultural background—also condition how moral identity and subject expertise are prioritized. A conceptual framework (Zhong et al., 2022) suggests that education level, sociocultural milieu, and teacher beliefs

moderate the salience of moral versus subject expertise in identity formation. Reform agendas that emphasize test scores, accountability, and standardization can shift teacher identity toward subject-expert, technical roles, at the expense of moral educator dimensions. Conversely, inclusive and character-education oriented policies support moral identity cultivation (Ibrahim et al., 2017; Şahin & Yüksel, 2021).

The literature suggests that ethical instruction and moral educator identity should precede and ground subject expertise. Teachers who see themselves first as moral agents are better equipped to make ethical instructional choices, build trusting relationships, and guide students holistically. Subject expertise is necessary, but secondary: it functions within the values shaped by moral identity. Over time, integrated identities—ethical teacher + subject expert—emerge when moral reflection is embedded in ongoing practice.

Gap in literature

There is limited mixed-methods research that simultaneously measures teachers' moral instruction, teacher identity, student ethical development, and subject-level academic outcomes while testing mediation and moderation within the same model—especially in public secondary science contexts. This study addresses that gap.

METHODOLOGY

Design

A convergent mixed-methods design combined quantitative measures (surveys, logs, achievement records) with qualitative interviews and observations to triangulate findings.

Participants and setting

Schools: Seven public secondary schools (rural–urban mix) with middle-class student populations. Teachers: 18 secondary science teachers purposefully sampled to represent varying years of experience and training in character education. Students: 384 students (approx. 24 per class) in the participating teachers' classes, grades 9–11.

Variables and operationalization

Independent variables: Teacher emphasis on moral education: composite index from teacher logs (frequency of explicit values lessons per month), observation ratings (depth of moral discussion), and a self-report scale. Teacher training in character education: categorical (no training; short workshop; certificate/advanced training).

Dependent variables: Student moral development: validated measures of ethical reasoning (e.g., short-form Defining Issues Test or an equivalent adapted scale) and prosocial behavior (student self-report and teacher ratings). Student academic outcomes: classroom engagement (self-report engagement scale and observation) and achievement (term exam scores; standardized tests if available). Teacher professional identity: scale measuring self-identification as a moral educator (Likert items) and qualitative interview themes.

Moderators: Classroom climate (observation rubric and student climate scale) and school policy (document review and principal interview coded for clarity/support).

Control variables: Student SES (proxy measures), prior

achievement (previous term scores), subject—science, grade level, and school type (public).

Instruments: Teacher log (weekly entries): items on frequency, lesson description, time spent, and alignment with subject content. Student questionnaires: ethical reasoning short-form, prosocial behaviour scale, engagement scale, demographic items.

Observation rubric: dimensions for explicit values instruction, modelling behaviour, classroom climate, and depth of ethical discussion.

Semi-structured interview guide: beliefs about moral education, examples of practice, perceived barriers and supports.

Data collection

Baseline: student prior achievement and demographics collected. Semester-long teacher logs and observations (two full class observations per teacher). Mid- and end-of-semester student surveys. Teacher interviews conducted after the semester. School policy documents collected and coded.

Data analysis

Quantitative: Descriptive statistics to summarize frequencies of moral instruction. Multiple regression models predicting student prosocial behaviour and engagement from teacher emphasis on moral education, controlling for covariates. Mediation analysis testing teacher professional identity as mediator (e.g., PROCESS macro approach). Moderation tests for classroom climate and school policy (interaction terms).

Qualitative: Thematic analysis of interviews and observation notes to identify patterns in teacher identity, instructional strategies, and perceived effects.

RESULTS

Descriptive findings: Teachers reported an average of 3.4 explicit values-integration activities per month ($SD = 1.7$). Observation scores indicated moderate-to-high modelling behaviour (mean = 3.6 on 5-point rubric).

Regression and mediation: Teacher emphasis on moral education significantly predicted student prosocial behaviour ($\beta = .28, p < .01$) and engagement ($\beta = .21, p < .05$) after controlling for prior achievement and SES. The effect on achievement was smaller but positive ($\beta = .12, p = .07$), suggesting trends toward improved academic outcomes.

Mediation: Teacher professional identity partially mediated the relationship between moral-education emphasis and student prosocial behaviour (indirect effect = .09, 95% CI [.03, .16]).

Moderation: Classroom climate moderated associations: in classrooms with high climate support, the link between moral instruction and engagement was stronger (interaction $\beta = .15, p < .05$). Schools with explicit values policies showed amplified effects on prosocial behaviour.

Qualitative themes

Theme 1: “Moral conviction as pedagogical lens”
-teachers with high identity described planning lessons to include ethical dilemmas tied to science topics.

Theme 2: "Constraints and affordances" — time pressures and curriculum demand limited explicit values instruction; supportive school leadership and clear policy facilitated practice.

Theme 3: "Alignment fosters coherence" — teachers who integrated values intentionally reported clearer classroom norms and higher student participation.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation of findings

The convergent evidence suggests that when teachers intentionally prioritize moral education and see themselves as moral educators, students show gains in prosocial behavior and engagement; there is tentative evidence for modest academic benefits. This aligns with theories linking teacher identity to pedagogical choices and prior empirical findings that values integration can improve classroom climate and student behaviour.

Implications for practice

Teacher education: incorporate modules on values-integrated pedagogy and reflective exercises to develop teacher moral identity.

School policy: articulate clear values frameworks and provide time/resources for values-infused lesson planning.

Curriculum: produce exemplar lesson plans linking core science concepts with ethical discussions (e.g., environmental ethics in biology).

Limitations

Non-experimental design: causal claims are tentative; longitudinal or experimental designs would strengthen causal inference.

Generalizability: sample limited to public secondary science in a specific region and socio-economic bracket; replication across disciplines and contexts needed.

Measurement reliance on self-report: triangulation used, but social desirability may bias teacher and student responses.

CONCLUSION

Teachers' moral-education practices appear foundational rather than peripheral to effective subject teaching. When educators intentionally weave moral discussions into subject lessons and identify as moral educators, positive student social and engagement outcomes follow—and potentially modest academic benefits. Investment in teacher development, school policy alignment, and curriculum resources can amplify these effects.

Recommendations for future research

Experimental or longitudinal studies to test causal pathways.

Cross-disciplinary studies to determine subject-specific

dynamics.

Development and validation of standardized instruments for teacher moral-education practice.

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