

# Exploring Higher Vocational School Teachers' Perceptions Towards Moral Education: A Review

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*Abstract: The universal objective shared by education systems worldwide is the cultivation of students' moral character. The importance of moral education is reflected in the design of the educational curriculum of each country. However, the direct implementers of Moral Education are the teachers. Thus, it is crucial to understand how teachers perceive the importance of teaching Moral Education. This study employs a literature review to describe the current state of the implementation of Moral Education in China, specifically in the context of higher vocational schools. The ultimate goal of the review is to determine the future research perspective of the implementation of Moral Education. Furthermore, among the contents of the review paper, legal bases of Moral Education, its curriculum design, and challenges in the implementation of Moral Education will be examined. The findings of this study will provide suggestions to further researchers on which aspect of the implementation of Moral Education among higher vocational schools needs further attention.*

*Keywords: Moral Education; Higher Vocation Education; Teachers Perceptions; Civic Education; Character Education;*

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## INTRODUCTION

The universal objective shared by education systems worldwide is the cultivation of students' moral character. This is clearly reflected through the inclusion of moral or character education subjects into school curricula around the world. However, depending on various factors, especially the political and religious ideologies of a country, the attention to the implementation of moral or character education may vary. In the context of Chinese moral education, in addition to moral values, political ideology and law courses are also integrated into the curriculum. This highlights the importance that the Chinese government gives to both civic and moral development of the students. Furthermore, it reflects the ultimate goal of the Chinese government in implementing moral education and that is to produce graduates who are patriotic and law-abiding citizens. However, like any other curriculum, there is a need for teachers who are capable of implementing the curriculum in a way that is described and expected in the policy. The huge responsibility of achieving the nation's goal of producing moral and ethical citizens lies on Moral Education teachers. Therefore, it is crucial to have an in-depth understanding of how teachers perceive the teaching of moral education in order to develop interventions that can further enhance their capacity to effectively teach Moral Education.

The country's educational curriculum is designed according to its moral education framework, thereby underscoring the importance of moral education (Zhang et al., 2022). Moral education aims to offer students direction on ethical principles and values, enhance their comprehension of societal norms, and boost their ability to navigate social situations. It, in turn, aims to foster their growth as conscientious and socially responsible citizens (Tang & Wang, 2020). Since moral education is a core component of the curriculum, schools must foster prosocial values and promote social goodness from a moral standpoint among students (Hoekema, 2010). However, moral education is regarded as a complex concept that intertwines many other disciplines (Kristjánsson, 2021; Nie, 2008). In the context of Chinese education, moral education has consistently held a prominent and central role within China's education system (Yue & Wang, 2022) and integrated in its civic-moral education. According to the official document titled "Implementation Outline for Civic Morality Construction in the New Era," released by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and State Council in 2019, Civic-Moral Education is

incorporated throughout all levels of the country's educational system, with schools serving as the principal venues for the cultivation of civic-moral education. China stands out as one of the few nations where moral education is required at every educational level, from elementary to graduate school (Yang, 2007). Schools, functioning as the principal foundation for personnel development, bear the fundamental responsibility of nurturing a new generation characterized by high aspirations, moral uprightness, sound education, and a robust sense of discipline, encapsulating the essence and trajectory of establishing a socialist spiritual civilization (Wang, 2005).

The complex concept of socialist spiritual civilization introduced by the Chinese leadership is to build a society that is both economically and spiritually advanced (Lynch, 2009). It is contrary to the national educational goal of the country in the 1970s, when the country's leadership put more emphasis on the role of education in contributing to economic advancement, thus weakening the promotion of moral education (Kam 1994, as cited in Jiang, 2014). The socialist spiritual civilization ideology is established to guarantee that society's pursuit extends beyond mere economic advancement, encompassing the enhancement of its moral and ethical dimensions. The Chinese leadership is firm in its commitment to preventing a scenario where societal prosperity is solely measured by material wealth while simultaneously witnessing a regression in moral and ethical values. Thus, Chinese society places great importance on moral education.

The emphasis on the moral education of the Chinese leadership has been prevalent in its laws and policies, especially those concerned with education. Article 24 of Chapter 1 of China's constitution stipulates the role of the state in the promotion of education on ideals and morality (National People's Congress, 2019). Moreover, Article 5 of Chapter 1 of China's Education Law specifies that the aim of education is to cultivate citizens who are well-rounded in moral, intellectual, and physical aspects (National People's Congress, 1985). The emphasis on the importance of Moral Education was also reflected in the Vocational Education Law of the country which includes a provision emphasizing the equal importance of moral education and skills training (Ministry of Education, 1996). Furthermore, the amended law mandates that the implementation of vocational education shall be guided by the core socialist values, contributing to the strengthening of moral education in the country's vocational education (National People's Congress, 2022).

To fully realize the aims of the national laws and policies for Moral Education in China, it is necessary to investigate factors affecting its implementation. Chen (2022) asserted that the teacher is considered an important factor that needs serious attention to improve moral education further. The teachers are described as the direct executors of the moral education curriculum (Zhang et al., 2022). Moreover, they are perceived as moral role models, naturally commanding followership and garnering high student respect. The behavioral and moral attributes teachers exhibit have a weighty influence on students (Han & Du, 2014). To improve moral education further, teachers need to strengthen their moral education competencies (Liu, 2014; Zhang, 2019).

Substantial literature underscores the importance of teachers in implementing moral education in the higher vocational curriculum. Alongside this are the recommendations that suggest enhancing the implementation through further strengthening moral education teachers. However, it is also significant to understand the teachers' perceptions towards moral education to provide appropriate interventions or continue professional development training. This idea concurred with Asif et al. (2020) who asserted that teachers' perspectives and ideas regarding the objectives of moral education and the subjects they feel students should learn are vital because of their crucial role in their students' moral growth.

The purpose of this study is not to seek a breakthrough but to describe the current state of the moral education in higher vocational schools and how teachers perceived its implementation. This study aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on improving the rigorous and scientific research system of moral education in higher vocational schools through a literature review. The findings of this study are intended to provide education managers with insightful information related to the teachers' perceptions of moral education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW PROCEDURE

This review paper comprehensively synthesized pertinent studies by utilizing the Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Employing specific keywords such as "Moral Education," "Ideological Education," "Higher Vocational Schools," and "Higher Vocational Education," this study analyzed papers pertaining to the implementation of Moral Education in Higher Vocational Schools across China.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### 3.1 Overview of Moral Education in Chinese Higher Vocational Schools

Moral education aims to cultivate people into virtuous moral subjects through moral education and constantly improve and surpass themselves in practice. Both explicit and recessive moral education are its modes. It is explicit moral education to exert purposeful and planned influence on the formation of students' moral character through moral education classroom teaching and moral education practice activities. At the same time, implicit moral education influences the teachers' moral quality, words, and deeds (Li, 2022).

In China, moral education is attached to higher vocational colleges. The main body of moral education lies in the education of students, and one of the concrete measures to implement it is an excellent ideological and political theory course. Among them, "Ideological Ethics and Rule of Law" is a compulsory course of ideological and political theory courses for students in higher vocational colleges, integrating ideological, political, scientific, theoretical, comprehensive, and practical. Make students establish a correct world outlook, outlook on life, and values to help college students improve their ideological and moral quality and become new people who consciously assume the great responsibility of national rejuvenation.

With the development of the times, people have gradually increased their attention to moral education in higher vocational colleges. The first is to study the system construction of moral education in higher vocational colleges from a macro perspective (Chen, 2015), internal reasons (Li, 2022), innovative ideas (Wang, 2021; Li, 2023), and Countermeasure Thinking (Gu, 2021). The second is to put forward a way to carry out moral education as a whole according to the actual characteristics of moral education (Gao, 2019; Xu, 2021; Peng, 2013; Li, 2015). The third is to enrich and improve the carriers and forms of moral education in specific ways and methods (Zhang, 2019). For example, improve the education environment and enhancing students' right to speak and main body status (You and Liu, 2023); implement innovative initiatives from the perspective of curriculum design and student participation (Zhang, 2016; Ding, 2018); and explore ways to implement implicit moral education (Liu, 2014).

#### 3.1.1 Structure and Characteristics of Higher Vocational Education in China

China's higher vocational education currently covers a relatively complete cultivation system of four levels: junior college, undergraduate, master's, and doctoral. From the point of view of its "both" characteristics, it has the triple characteristics of higher education, vocational education, and professional education. It belongs to higher education at the educational level. However, the content belongs to vocational education, and the nature of education belongs to professional education, so it is a high-level professional vocational education. Tian (2022) asserted that vocational and technical schools were established to address the growing economic growth demand. Vocational education has been primarily geared towards employment.

Higher vocational education has the characteristics of solid guidance of career planning, flexible guidance forms, diverse training modes, and a relatively high actual employment rate. From the overall characteristics of the system and the generic level of talent training, although vocational education belongs to the national education system, it has an irreplaceable type of education. First, vocational education provides professional skills and quality education to the students, provides young students with professional skills in employment, systematic scientific and cultural knowledge, and cultivates their excellent professional ethics and work attitude, to promote the improvement of their survival and development ability. Second, higher vocational education has an important mission, to undertake the training of technical personnel and the mission of innovation and technology improvement. Third, higher vocational education provides achievements for regional industries and community public services through school-enterprise cooperation, leads social culture, and participates in social governance.

#### 3.1.2 Role of Moral Education in Higher Vocational Schools

The core concept of China's higher education is "cultivate morality and cultivate people." It is an important task to train new people with both morality and ability. On August 14, 2019, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and The General Office of the State Council issued Several Opinions on Deepening the Reform and Innovation of Ideological and Political Theory Courses in Schools in the New Era, pointing out that the goal of ideological and political courses (moral education) is to "guide students to become virtuous adults, aspire to become talents, establish a correct world outlook, outlook on life, values, and firm belief in Marxism." It should strengthen the faith in socialism and communism, strengthen confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics, deepen patriotism, and consciously integrate love for China's national conditions, aspirations for

strengthening China, and service to the country into efforts to uphold and develop the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics, build a great modern socialist country, and realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” Several Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving School Moral Education issued by the Ministry of Education pointed out that school moral education plays an important role in guiding the healthy growth of young people and promoting economic development and social progress.

The significance of moral education to higher vocational education is widely accepted, and its implementation has attracted the interest of researchers and scholars. Moral education, which students are first exposed to in elementary school, is crucial in helping to mold their personalities and support their emotional growth (Huang, 2020). The most prevalent impact of moral education on the implementation of higher vocational education is students' improved ideals, beliefs, patriotism, and moral cultivation (Li, 2018).

Higher vocational education is an important level of higher education. The goal is to train college students to develop practical talents at a certain level encompassing ideological, moral, cultural, professional, physical, and psychological qualities (Li, 2013); deeply analyze and study the current situation of moral education of students in higher vocational colleges; analyze the reasons and find out ways to strengthen the scientific, reasonable, systematic and effective moral education of students in higher vocational colleges; further enhance the purpose and pertinency of moral education in higher vocational colleges; and ensure the healthy growth of students in higher vocational colleges. Making them grow into high-end technical talents in contemporary social and economic development is of very explicit significance, and it is an urgent and essential topic for moral education in higher vocational colleges.

The ultimate purpose of moral education in higher vocational colleges is to enable students to distinguish right from wrong and good from evil and set up correct and healthy life values. Good moral character is a magic weapon that can benefit a person for life and make a person better adapt to society. Every individual has growth demands, and they need teachers to guide them to distinguish right from wrong. Only in this way can they gain the respect of others and the society's recognition. Moral education in higher vocational colleges meets the demands of students' personal growth and development (Yan, 2022).

The continuous deepening of moral education research will promote the smooth development of moral education in higher vocational colleges and further achieve practical education results, which will improve the moral level of students in higher vocational colleges, promote their healthy growth and success, and enhance the effectiveness of moral education in higher vocational colleges. Thus, constantly improve and enrich the theory of moral education in higher vocational colleges (An, 2013).

### ***3.1.3 Policy Framework for Moral Education in Chinese Higher Vocational Schools***

The country's vocational education is categorized into junior secondary, senior secondary, and tertiary levels. The tertiary level, commonly referred to as higher vocational education, encompasses a junior college (2 to 3 years) degree program that strongly emphasizes cultivating practical skills and aims to produce highly skilled technical professionals for the forefront of production. Compared to general higher education, which focuses on students' quality theoretical education, higher vocational education focuses on vocational and practical technical education. In addition to technical and vocational education, the curriculum for higher vocational courses also includes moral education.

The Outline of the National Medium and Long Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) points out that school work should adhere to moral education first. Attaching great importance to the moral education of young students in vocational colleges, China has successively promulgated and implemented guiding documents such as the Vocational Education Law, the Opinions on Further Strengthening and Improving Moral Education in Schools, the Outline for the Implementation of Patriotic Education and the Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Moral Education in Vocational Schools, which have pointed out the direction for moral education in schools under the new situation. The basic principle is to proceed from the actual situation of vocational education, adhere to the direction of building socialism with Chinese characteristics, train new people with "four qualities" as the goal, and further strengthen the pertinence and effectiveness of ideological education. The main contents are scientific theory, namely the latest achievements of the Sinicization of Marxism, patriotism, collectivism, socialist education, professional ethics education, hard struggle, and hard entrepreneurial thought education.

In 2021, the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued the "Opinions on Promoting the High Quality Development of Modern Vocational Education." It is particularly pointed out that the quality and effectiveness of ideological and political theory courses should be improved. Some scholars have explained the strategies

for implementing precise ideological and political education in vocational colleges (You & Liu, 2023) and the "Three Comprehensive Education" work system in vocational colleges (Tang, 2019).

### 3.2 Teachers' Perceptions Toward Moral Education

Teachers' attitude towards moral education is a problem of practical significance. Teachers preach and teach to solve doubts. Teaching without class, teaching and learning is a fine tradition that runs through China's ancient and modern education. Teachers really teach, and students truly learn. These two ropes into a strong to learn to gain, learn to succeed. The critical role of teachers in moral education is to educate and guide students to buckle the first "button" in college life and plant the seeds of truth, kindness, and beauty in students' hearts. The intrinsic characteristics of teachers, namely the subject factors, especially teachers' attitudes towards moral education, play a crucial role in promoting moral education and achieving practical results. The actual situation is that some teachers have not established a correct concept of moral education, did not try to analyze the situation accurately, lack of understanding of moral education, the simplification of classroom teaching model, and therefore did not do scientific teaching, which leads to moral education with twice the effort (You & Liu, 2023).

The analysis of teachers' moral education attitudes needs to be deepened, and the scientificity of the research need to be strengthened. Starting from the fairness and equality of moral education concepts, teachers should constantly make great efforts in teaching concepts, teaching attitudes, interacting and communicating with students, enhancing personality charm and moral cultivation, researching the core content of moral education, innovating the ways and methods of moral education, and building an effective communication platform for new media (Mo, 2021). Strengthening the training of political ability can enhance the attitude of moral education. Students in higher vocational colleges first listen to teachers' words, second judge teachers' knowledge, and third view teachers' actions. Only by respecting students' main status and improving their ability to express discourse can they be good examples and become students' guides (Xu, 2021).

According to the diversified, different, and hierarchical characteristics of higher vocational students, teachers should construct a multi-dimensional teaching moral education model in practice, corresponding to the growth needs of different students, and improve the purpose and effectiveness of moral education.

#### 3.2.1 Factors Influencing Teachers' Perceptions

The perceptions of teachers can be influenced by various factors depending on the given context or scenario. For example, in the context of perceiving knowledge risk, Borgia et al. (2022) revealed that gender, age, education, experience, and employment significantly influenced teachers' perceptions. Similarly, Rafique, Muhammad, & Akhtar (2020) found that gender, teaching experience, rank, and job type significantly influenced University teachers' perceptions of teacher empowerment. Looking from the perspectives of the teachers, the study aims to describe how empowerment is being perceived by the teachers. This concurred with Abebe et al. (2021) which revealed that teachers' teaching experience and educational qualifications are positively correlated with their perceptions of empowerment.

In the context of Inquiry-Based Science Education, García-Ruiz, Lupión-Cobos, & Blanco-López (2021) discovered that pre-service teachers' perceptions of the inquiry approach in the science classroom were significantly influenced by gender and previous academic and teaching experience. The results of the study showed pre-service teachers were favorable to the use of the inquiry approach in teaching science. However, since there is a disparity in the teachers' perceptions based on gender and previous academic and teaching experience, the study provided recommendations for professional development of science teachers.

Furthermore, in the discussion of teachers' perceptions of retention, Jing & Yan (2016) uncovered significant differences in perceptions when the participants were grouped according to their income, educational qualification, specialty, gender, age, and marital status. The author attempted to investigate how teachers' demographic characteristics can influence their decision to stay working in the school. The study was inspired by the low retention rate among teachers of independent colleges or schools in China. Guided by the result of the study, the author analyzed each variable and recommended intervention actions.

In the context of perceptions towards educational research, Manu & Owusu-Ansah (2019) revealed that pre-service teachers' age, gender, and years of teaching were found to be significantly correlated with their perceptions. It highlights the relationship between participants' perceptions and their demographic characteristics.

Concerning Moral Education, Yang (2022) investigated the teachers' perceptions of the design and implementation of Moral Education. It was revealed that there is a significant difference in teachers' perceptions when grouped according to age. The study found that scores of teachers aged 20-30 and 51-60 are significantly different in the aspects of moral education design and moral education implementation, the former is better than the latter. It underscores how age may influence teachers' perceptions of Moral Education.

On the other hand, Siddiqui and Soomro (2022) compared the perceptions of Moral Education of public and private school teachers and revealed that there was no significant difference between the two groups. Furthermore, it was found that perceived importance and practices were significantly correlated.

The teachers' perceptions of a particular subject highly depend on the context of the study. This study attempts to explore whether higher vocational school teachers' demographic profiles can influence their perceptions in the context of the implementation of Moral Education. Understanding how demographic profile of teachers influence their perception of Moral Education may help education managers to provide interventions for the betterment of teaching and learning of Moral Education. This is of great significance especially that China has facing the challenge of shortage of teachers and the need for timely updating of the content and method of moral education. In addition, some higher vocational colleges need to pay enough attention to moral education. One is the arbitrariness of moral education courses. Teachers simply teach the content of textbooks, which is not moral education in the real sense, and students are very passive in learning related moral education theories. Second, the moral education courses offered by some colleges and universities are boring theories; teachers ignore students' inner emotions and actual psychological needs, fail to design effective moral education content, and lack interest in teaching, which fundamentally affects teachers' cultivation of students' moral literacy (Mo, 2021).

### ***3.2.2 Teacher Training Programs and Moral Education***

The role of moral education teachers in colleges and universities should be transformed into learners, instructors, psychotherapists, and artists of interpersonal relations. Learners' lifelong learning attitude, instructors' profound knowledge, therapists' attention to students' minds, and artists' communication art are the core role characteristics of moral education teachers (Li, 2022).

In recent years, the construction of teachers in higher vocational colleges has achieved certain results, but there is still a gap in quantity and quality. Generally speaking, problems such as insufficient quantity, unequal structure, unequal ability, and the construction of ideological and political teams in higher vocational colleges face a series of challenges. In this case, teacher training and moral education are urgently needed.

The main problem with teacher ethics training is that it needs to fit more closely with educational practice, and the second problem is that the training objectives need to be more specific. Sometimes, there needs to be more emphasis on theory and a need for more realizability, especially the lack of training in case discussion. The designation of a moral education plan should be individualized teaching, adhere to the standardization of management, training industry and development of diversified standards, carry out pre-service and post-service training and team building (Chen, 2022), consciously improve theoretical literacy, enhance professional ability, actively strengthen ideological and moral cultivation, improve personal quality.

### **3.3 Identified Gaps and Limitations in Existing Research**

There is substantial literature that investigates the implementation of Moral Education in China. However, there is a population gap in the literature, considering that only a few studies have been implemented to describe higher vocational school teachers' perceptions towards Moral Education. Furthermore, to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the mentioned subject, it is necessary to gather data from multiple varied sources, thus, necessitating the use of a mixed-methods research design.

Future researchers may explore teachers' perceptions regarding moral education, focusing on its importance, efficacy, and practical implementation. Additionally, future studies may also examine differences in teachers' perceptions of moral education based on demographic profiles. Lastly, challenges faced by higher vocational school teachers in teaching moral education may also be considered in future research.

**LIMITATION AND EXPECTATION****4.1 Scope**

The study consolidated studies pertaining to Moral Education in higher vocational schools from a single database, with other databases not being included in the review process.

**4.2 Generalizability**

In this study, the concept of Moral Education is examined specifically within the context of Chinese higher vocational schools. It's important to note that the findings of this study cannot be readily generalized or extrapolated to other populations, such as those in different countries. Therefore, further exploration is essential to corroborate and extend the findings of this study.

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