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Moral Issues Among Senior Secondary Students and the Teachers' Strategies to Mitigate Them

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ABSTRACT

Teaching moral values is a challenging endeavor that requires strategic measures, as well as a prime concern of the school since the society is facing unprecedented moral issues among students. Thus, the study aimed to discover observable prevailing moral issues among senior secondary students and the teachers' strategies to mitigate them and promote moral values. Convergent parallel design was used to conduct the study. 48 teachers were selected through the stratified sampling method. Interviews and questionnaires were used as the data collection technique. The data was analyzed and presented through Cresswell's thematic analysis method. The generated themes were operationalized into quantifiable numbers and presented through descriptive statistics. The study discovered new forms of moral issues, which include a lack of environmental hygiene, a lack of decorum, and disrespectful food practices. Further, numerical measures highlighted the most prevalent moral issues, including lack of academic responsibility, lack of environmental hygiene and academic dishonesty. Further, the teachers' contribution to the students' moral development process was also identified. The study revealed nine teaching strategies in which story narration, role modelling, conducive classroom practices and praise and reward stand out as widely used methods. A key limitation of this study is the labor-intensive nature of conducting a comprehensive thematic analysis process and triangulation.

1. Introduction

In education philosophy, axiology has a grounded framework. It seeks to answer the questions related to ethics, morality and values. Moral values serve as a belief system of a person regarding right and wrong and thus, lead a person's acts and thoughts. However, the discourse on morality has become increasingly prominent in modern educational and social contexts, raising questions about its importance. Aristotle famously said, "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all." (Good Reads, 2019). This statement stressed the pivotal role of education in shaping moral values. The great ancient philosophers envisioned a society with core values to ensure the consistent development and well-being of individuals and the wider community for generations (Mohd Rezaly et al., 2021). A virtuous and noble character always stands for right and justice even in adverse times. If a person lacks knowledge or skills, he/she is at a disadvantage, but if a person is educated and skillful but lacks moral standards, he/she may use his knowledge to exploit, manipulate and ruin the society.

Human beings have advanced qualities that distinct them from other living organisms. By creating a complex society through culture, language, shared norms, values and unbelievable discoveries, they proved their intellectual superiority over other creatures. This does not imply that they are free from flaws and negative traits. Some animalistic behaviors like territorial fights, competition for resources, power struggles and hostility towards other beings can be seen in human beings as well (Massara, 2018). These traits may emerge through inherent tendencies or learned through social engagement. However, struggles do not promote inclusivity, equity, justice, or peace rather lead to a chaotic, unruly, fragmented society in which harmony and mutual understanding are lacking. Thus, there must be a proper mechanism to inculcate moral values in humans.

Therefore, teaching moral values to individuals has become a prime concern. These are not just values that define one's character; these are the essence of life. Therefore, every nation makes a deliberate effort to inculcate moral values in students through education (Goudarzi et al., 2017). Moreover, morality is an indicator of the development of a nation's level of civilization (Man, Puji and Mohamad, 2018; as cited in Mohd Rezaly et al., 2021), because progress and excellence of a nation lie in the morals of its people (Mohd Rezaly et al., 2021). Therefore, imparting knowledge is not only the primary role of school. It has expanded responsibility in shaping students' overall development (Goudarzi et al., 2017). Nevertheless, schools strive to foster ethics and moral values through education and training by several means. It encompasses the hidden curriculum, introducing different subjects like religion, civic or character education, extracurricular activities and discipline through school policies (Gülcan, 2015; Massara, 2018; Yusof et al., 2018; MOE, 2019; MOE, 2020; MOE, 2024; Lin, 2024; Ratugamage & Fernando, 2024), etc.

Moreover, the role of the teacher in students' moral development is also a decisive factor. Students learn morality through observing and interacting with teachers. Teachers serve as the live models of moral values (Popovska & Popovski, 2021); their attire, behaviors, characteristics, communication (Umar et al., 2020), and leadership skills (Ding, Li, Li and Kulm, 2008 as cited in Menikdiwela, 2020) directly impact student moral development. However, understanding their paramount responsibility, teachers use various techniques to impart moral values in students. The adopted techniques comprise group work, role-play, simulation, discussion methods, story narration, etc. Teachers utilize these techniques to develop students' critical thinking, communication and perspective-taking abilities. This empowers them to make responsible decisions and respond to situations thoughtfully while fostering mutual understanding and rapport (Beane, 2002; Clark et al., 1997; Saye, 1998; Tredway, 1995; Basourakos and Winston, 1999 as cited in Schuitema et al., 2003; Gülcan, 2015; Ratugamage & Fernando, 2024).

However, despite these efforts, students consistently demonstrate immoral attitudes and behaviors. Multiple research studies endorsed the surging moral decline among school students in various contexts, which indicates that this is an emerging universal issue. The conspicuous moral issues among students are bullying, stealing, fighting, insulting educators, bunking classes, ignoring school protocols, late arrival, smoking, using foul language in class, disrupting the classroom, not completing homework, absenteeism, vandalism, etc. (Umar et al., 2020; Iqbal & Zahoor, 2024; Menikdiwela, 2020). Overlooking these moral issues may result in serious crimes (Mohd Rezaly et al., 2021). Hence, this has to be addressed while preventive measures are still viable.

Resolving these moral issues requires a comprehensive understanding of their underlying nature and the distinct contribution made by the stakeholders. Although prior research has discovered the moral issues among students, there remains a critical gap in understanding practical intervention of educators to address this issue. Therefore, the objective of this research is twofold: to assess prevailing moral issues among senior secondary students and to analyze the strategies teachers utilize to foster students' moral values.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical background

Learning not only occurs in the structured environment or through a comprehensive syllabus; it also occurs through social interactions by observing others' attitudes, behaviors, and emotional reactions. Albert Bandura proposed this theory (1977, as cited in Bijandi & Nabavi, 2012) and it reoriented the concept of learning, which was then believed to be a behavioral change caused in an individual only through direct personal experience

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via the trial-and-error method and direct reinforcement. Whereas social learning theory elucidates that learning is not a passive process that completely relies on environmental triggers and responses; it involves mental processing. This encompasses four internal mental steps. Attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. To learn a behavior, a learner must actively focus on the modeled behavior and store it in their memory. In the reproduction stage, the mind evaluates its own mental and physical capabilities to imitate the behavior. In the fourth stage, vicarious reinforcement occurs where the learner's behavioral outcome depends on the weighed cost and benefits of performing the behavior. If the model is rewarded, the learner is motivated to replicate it. If the model is punished, the learner suppresses the behavior (Ruggles, 1977). Moreover, there are three types of models in observational learning, namely symbolic, verbal and live models. Symbolic models are characters in real or fictional worlds who demonstrate behaviors, especially in films, books, or online media. Verbal models refer to an explanation or a description of a behavior. A live model is a person who demonstrates a behavior through their personal conduct (Bandura, 1977, as cited in Bijandi & Nabavi, 2012). The theory used in this research to understand the role of teachers and the technique they used to develop students' moral values through role modeling and reinforcement.

2.2. Empirical background

Moral issues among students are highly problematic since they sabotage relationships with peers and teachers, disrupt the learning environment, hinder the character development of students, and decrease academic performance. Immorality can range from minor to major issues. The minor issues reported include, but are not limited to, envy, jealousy, pride, arrogance, a boastful attitude, gossiping, rudeness, lying (Mathew, 2017, as cited in Umar et al., 2020), etc. These issues highlight students' personal flaws, such as negative traits, emotions and attitudes that lead to immoral actions.

Beyond personal flaws, the literature also revealed major issues including bribery, harassment, violence (Mathew, 2017 as cited in Umar et al., 2020), drug abuse, theft, smoking, sexual misconduct, murder, and involvement in gangs and militant groups, etc. These are macro-level moral issues that cross legal and institutional boundaries, many of which constitute criminal offences and may require legal intervention (Haridi, 2016; Perpustakaan Laman Hikmah, 2019; Polis Diraja Malaysia, 2019 as cited in Mohd Rezaly et al., 2021; Umar et al., 2020). Moreover, research indicates that moral issues are not exclusively individual phenomena; collective moral issues such as vandalism and mass protest (Yahye, 2015) are also reported.

Further, the study of Umar et al. (2020) revealed moral issues that are deeply embedded within the school context, such as violating school policies and protocols, including noncompliance with school uniform, having shaggy haircuts, using mobile phones, skipping classes or sneaking out of school, etc. School-based moral issues are not confined to the school premises; they extend beyond the classroom boundaries. The study by Yahye (2015) revealed disruptive classroom behavior such as chewing gum in the class, fighting and using obscene speech. Moreover, in extreme instances, assault against school authority was also documented (Yahye, 2015; Louw, 2024). These behaviors manifest explicit disrespect toward school authority.

The spectrum of student moral issues is not restricted to social behavior but permeates into the academic domain. Academic dishonesty is widely prevalent among students. Examples include cheating in exams, academic entitlement and lack of concern for academic work, etc. (Louw, 2024; Umar et al., 2020). Consistent with these findings, Shi et al. (2019, as cited in Zhou & Hu, 2020) discovered various immoral activities among students in online learning, including plagiarism and cheating, watching pirated movies, using unauthorized software and viewing pornographic images. The scholarly works suggest that student moral issues are no longer geographically bound; they are equally prevalent across cyberspace and online educational mediums.

However, some research studies have documented moral issues among Sri Lankan students. The identified issues encompass substance addiction, using advanced communication & technologies for wrong purposes, distancing relationships such as parent-children and student-teacher, student lacks in spiritual development, adopting a Western lifestyle, decline in resistance to negative emotions, use of abusive language, demonstrate arrogant and aggressive behavior (MOE, 2024; Menikdiwela, 2020), etc.

2.3. Teaching Strategies Used to Promote Moral Values

Teachers' role is not limited to merely transmitting knowledge, delivering the subject content, administering assessment or tracking students' progress in the learning process; rather, their responsibility goes beyond the border. They have a significant role in creating virtuous character in students. How do they execute this responsibility? The literature provides evidence for different strategies that are useful in teaching moral values. As Ratugamage & Fernando (2024) explained, student-centered education is the best method to teach moral values. In agreement with this statement, scholars suggest learning methods such as cooperative learning, problem-based learning, projects, discussions, etc. are more effective since students actively participate in the learning process and are enabled to communicate with peers that build positive mutual social interaction (Beane, 2002; Clark et al., 1997; Saye, 1998; Tredway, 1995, as cited in Schuitema et al., 2003). Further, Gülcan (2015) discovered in his study that teachers use group activities, storytelling, video presentations, simulations and role play as teaching strategies to promote moral values.

According to Basourakos (1999) and Winston (1999; as cited in Schuitema et al., 2003), dramatization is the most effective way of teaching moral values since it provides the opportunity to experience real-life moral dilemmas through characters and

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students learn perspective-taking, caring, emotional understanding, and ethical decision-making in situations involving conflicting values or choices, etc. The UAE curriculum emphasizes the role-play method and discussion methods as effective means of teaching moral values (Massara, 2018). The discussion method is a teaching strategy in which students actively exchange ideas, opinions, and viewpoints on moral issues, dilemmas, or value-conflicting situations (Schuitema et al., 2003). Rather than simply receiving moral principles from the teacher, students critically examine issues, justify their positions, listen to different viewpoints, and reflect on the consequences of different actions.

Moreover, service learning is also a most effective method that provides real-life scenarios to practice social skills. In this method, students learn to identify issues in their community through the experience they gain and explore different strategies to ward off the issue. This promotes critical thinking and communication skills (Schuitema et al., 2003), which are important to navigate social situations and provide opportunities to be an active citizen. Teaching strategies are not only confined to instructional designs; they require strategies to create favorable learning environmental conditions. As researchers elucidate, democratic classroom practices are imperative for students to be able to express their opinions and make decisions. This fosters self-confidence and self-esteem in students (Covell and Howe, 2001; Torney-Purta, 2002; as cited in Schuitema et al., 2003; Iqbal & Zahoor, 2024; Gülcan, 2015). Overall, the center idea of literature regarding teachers' strategy is based on a student-centered approach.

As scholars mentioned in value education, a democratic classroom setting is a prerequisite. Further, teachers should act as facilitators who foster engagement and communication among the students through different teaching strategies using corporative and collaborative learning methods such as the discussion method, project-based learning, problem-based learning, simulation and role-play methods. The aim is to bring about critical thinking, reflection, problem-solving skills and communication skills through experiential learning whereby students are able to understand and apply them in real-life scenarios where they confront real moral dilemmas. The documented literature provides proactive teaching strategies that are used to inculcate moral values but does not sufficiently explain the strategies for mitigating moral issues. Further, except for the study of Gülcan (2015), the extensive literature categorizes what the best teaching strategies are for developing students' moral values but does not adequately provide evidence on how teachers are actually using these strategies in the real classroom setting. Further, available empirical studies regarding this area are outdated; hence, contemporary research on this particular area is required. Moreover, existing research on teaching strategies is strictly confined to foreign literature, leaving a significant gap since these frameworks have not been investigated within our country's context. Moreover, except for a few specific studies (Menikdiwela, 2020; Ratugamage & Fernando, 2024; and the book "A virtuous generation, a better society" issued by MOE, 2024), the students' moral issues were underexplored in the Sri Lankan context. Thus, the study was focused on two aspects: the strategies teachers utilize in the moral development process and prevailing forms of moral issues.

3. Methodology

Research design is the overall plan or the strategy used to answer the research question. The current study required both quantitative and qualitative data; thus, the mixed-method approach of convergent parallel design was used to conduct the study.

3.1 Sampling Technique

The stratified sampling method has been used in this study. The selected population is divided into strata according to the traits of the population, such as school type and divisions of schools. This method ensures the selected sample accurately reflects the characteristics of the wider population. 48 teachers were selected for the study.

3.2 Sampling population

The population of the sample refers to the targeted group that the study is intended to investigate and draw conclusions about. The population of this study is teachers in all 123 public schools in the Colombo Educational Zone.

3.3 Sampling Technique

The stratified proportionate sampling method has been used in this study. The selected population is divided into strata according to the traits of the population, such as school type and divisions of the schools. There are four educational divisions, namely, Colombo-North, Colombo-Central, Colombo-South and Boralla and three school types, including 1AB, 1C and type 2. The numbers of schools in these educational divisions are 28, 41, 30 and 24 respectively.

3.4 Sample size

A two-stage stratified sampling procedure was employed. In the first stage the 123 schools in the Colombo educational zone were stratified according to four educational divisions and three school types. The study employs a qualitative dominant research design; thus, 10% of the population was selected for the sample. Proportionate allocation was used to determine the number of schools to be selected from each stratum, which yielded the sample of 12 schools.

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Sample size

$$Total\ Schools\ in\ Colombo\ Educational\ Zone \times \frac{10}{100}$$

$$= 12\ Schools$$

$$= 123 \times \frac{10}{100}$$

Sample size for each division

$$= \frac{Number\ of\ Schools\ in\ the\ Division}{Total\ Schools\ in\ Colombo\ Zone} \times Total\ Sample\ Size$$

$$\text{Colombo} - \text{North} = \frac{28}{123} \times 12 = 3\ schools$$

$$\text{Colombo} - \text{Central} = \frac{41}{123} \times 12 = 4\ schools$$

$$\text{Colombo} - \text{South} = \frac{30}{123} \times 12 = 3\ schools$$

$$\text{Boralle} = \frac{24}{123} \times 12 = 2\ schools$$

Table 1. Distribution of sample across educational divisions and type of Schools

School type	CN	CC	CS	B	Total School
1AB	01	01	01	01	04
1C	01	01	01	01	04
Type2	01	02	01	00	04
Total	03	04	03	02	12

CN - Colombo North

CC – Colombo Central

CS – Colombo South

B - Borella

Table 1. represents the number of schools selected from each type of school and division proportionally according to the share it holds in the sample population. This shows that the selected sample accurately reflects the diverse characteristics of the population and ensures higher precision in estimation.

In the second stage, 4 teachers were selected randomly from each selected school, constituting a final sample of 48 teachers.

Table 2. The participants' distribution across types of school

School categories	Selected schools	Selected teachers from each school	Selected teachers from each school type
1AB	4	4	16
1C	4	4	16
Type2	4	4	16
Total	12		48

Table 2. represents the sample size of each category across different types of schools. The sample includes schools and teachers. 12 schools and 4 teachers were selected from each school in the sample. This ensures fair representation and reduced bias.

Table 3. Profile of teacher participants by teaching subjects

Subjects	Number of teachers
Language	9
History	4
Civic	3
Commerce	2
Math	7
Religion	8
Science	5
Art	3
ICT	4
Health	3
Total	48

Table 3. depicts teacher demographics across teaching subjects. The diversity of subject specialization was considered relevant to the study, as moral values development is not confined to a particular subject area. This helps researchers to capture a holistic perspective on how subject matter, teaching strategies and

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pedagogical priorities influence students' moral development. This ensures richer and more nuanced deep insight.

Table 4. Distribution of teacher participants across different levels of teaching experience

Years of experience	Teachers
1-5	9
6-10	12
11-15	16
16-20	8
Above 20	3
Total	48

Further, Table 4. represents a diverse range of teachers' experiences. The sample includes novice, mid-career and veteran teachers. The varied experiences provide different viewpoints based on the tenure, such as the obstacles they face, the way they manage situations, adapting to the situations and the strategies they use over the years. This ensures the data is not skewed towards one particular professional view.

3.4 Data Collection Technique & Validation

The study used interviews and surveys as data collection techniques. Incorporating two forms of techniques ensures comprehensive coverage and mitigates the risk of omitting crucial data. The data collection tools include an interview guide and questionnaire validated through content validity. Eight field experts evaluated the three research instruments using a five-point Likert scale-based validation process. The content validity ratio was subsequently calculated for each item and the items that attain a high CVR were retained in the final instrument. Further, a pilot test was employed to test the clarity, feasibility, ambiguity and relevance of the tool. Accordingly, necessary revision was made. Moreover, the data triangulation method is used to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

3.5 Data Analysis Method

The qualitative data was analyzed through Creswell's thematic analysis method. This method helped to systematically record the data and fragment the data into small manageable units for coding and theme generating. The quantitative data was analyzed through descriptive statistical analysis. Used frequency and percentage analysis as a complimentary tool to verify the theme generated by demonstrating the weight of participants' responses.

3.6 Data triangulation

The data obtained through interviews and teachers' questionnaires were compared and cross-checked to identify similarities, complementary findings and discrepancies, then analyzed through thematic analysis to identify themes. Consequently, the number of participants who referred to each theme was counted.

3.7 Ethical Consideration

The study was conducted following formal authorization from the zonal educational office and the school authorities. Further, written informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. The data was represented anonymously in quotations by using codes such as Particiant-1,2 ,3, etc. as P1, P2, P3…...

3.8 Limitation of the Study

Since this is qualitative dominant research, it primarily depended on interviews and observation, which is more comprehensive and time-consuming. The data recording, categorizing, analyzing and triangulation process required excessive time & work.

4. Data Analysis and Results

Teachers' responses from the interviews and the questionnaire were triangulated and presented in the table below. A respondent was counted once under a theme even if they mentioned it multiple times. Findings were presented in percentages to indicate how many respondents referred to each theme. The percentage represents the proportion of the total sample of 48. This approach highlights the most critical factor or most commonly experienced or perceived concern but does not imply statistical generalizability.

4.1 Explore the prevailing moral issues among senior secondary level students

The objective aimed to discover the prevailing moral issues and to find the new trends and patterns in moral issues among senior secondary students.

Table 5. Teachers' responses to the students' observable moral issues

No	Themes	F	%	Codes
1	Lack of academic responsibility	44	92	Absenteeism, Neglecting classroom/school responsibilities, Tardy submission
2	Lack of environmental Hygiene	43	90	Trashing school premises, Improper use of

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No	Themes	F	%	Codes
				sanitation facilities
3	Academic dishonesty	37	77	Cheating during the exam, copying others work, Undue credit
4	Vandalism	26	54	Breaking or damaging school properties, Disrupting the proper function of equipment
5	Substance addiction	21	44	Engage in substance using, Bringing to school
6	Misuse of communication & technology	12	25	Use social media to disgrace or offend others, Using mobile phones during class hours
7	Disrespectful food practices	7	15	Fighting with food, Eating food in concealment during the lesson delivery
8	Lack of decorum	6	13	Lack of respect to national anthem, school song, Failure to uphold religious respect
9	Premature romantic affaires	5	10	Undue public romantic behavior, Fighting over romantic issues, Self-harm
10	Sexual misconduct	3	6	Violating others bodily boundaries

Table 5. represents different forms of moral issues that were categorized under specific themes along with generated codes. Additionally, the frequency and percentage of occurrence of each category were also presented. The emerged themes, together with explanations and participant quotations, were outlined below.

Theme 1: Lack of academic responsibility

Lack of academic responsibility refers to diminished obligation towards academic work, such as skipping classes, ignoring deadlines, failing to take ownership of their own learning and missing predetermined academic goals. The majority of the respondents reported students' lack of responsibility in academic work, such as neglecting classroom/school responsibilities, tardy submission of assignments, and absenteeism. Teachers expressed,

"If any duties are assigned to them, they try to evade them or pass them on to others." P14

"...some students demonstrate a lack of motivation to do assignments/projects, etc. Always tend to postpone the work and miss the deadline." P20

The evidence suggests that students refuse to take responsibility and are not intrinsically motivated to direct themselves towards academic activities; hence, they simply postpone the assigned task and fail to complete it on stipulated time.

Theme 2: Lack of Environmental Hygiene

This refers to failing to maintain the cleanliness and order in our surroundings. Notable forms of misconduct pertaining to this theme are trashing school premises, improper use of sanitation facilities and deliberate clogging of drains. Teachers reported,

"...not dispose of garbage in a proper manner; they carelessly scatter litter all around the premises." P4

".... sometimes students throw plastic bottles and wrappers in drains, causing them to clog." P13

The quotes highlight the persisting unhygienic environmental practices among students in academic settings. This mirrors disregard for environmental health and reflects a lack of personal accountability and communal responsibility.

Theme 3: Academic dishonesty

This refers to undermined integrity in academic work and disregards the value of genuine effort such as cheating during the exam, copying others' work and claiming undue credit. Teachers noted,

"During exams, some students tend to cheat. They depend on others..." P14

"Another common problem among students is copying others' work and claiming that is their own idea when probing." P36

These quotes illustrate that teachers frequently witness unethical practices among students during academic tasks. Further, this is not an isolated incident. It is deeply intertwined with other moral issues like lying, plagiarism and contempt for rules.

Theme 4: Vandalism

Vandalism refers to deliberate destruction or damage of private or public property. This theme highlights vandalistic behavior

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among students in a school environment. The codes identified included breaking or damaging school properties, disrupting the proper function of equipment, and defacing materials. Teachers stated,

"...If students have disagreements with the school management, they break lights, taps, toilet commodes, etc." P2

"Some teachers are reluctant to take students to IT labs since they may purposefully cause the equipment to malfunction" P37

Students' vandalistic behavior shows a lack of social responsibility and recklessness in using public and private property, while some respondents explained it as a destructive outlet of anger or revengeful behavior. This indicates poor self-control and coping strategies.

Theme 5: Substance addiction

Addiction is a state where the mind is dependent on a substance and struggles to control its urge. This theme encompasses the substance usage among students and other immoral behaviors associated with that. Identified codes are engaged in substance use, bringing it to school and inducing others to use. Teachers noted,

"Some students were caught buying cigarettes." P11

".... learn to use substances from some toxic relationships from outside the school or the society that they are living in, but the big issue is peer influence. One rotten egg is enough to ruin the batch; if one falls prey to addictions, he definitely tries to entice others." P28

Unlike other moral issues, this causes severe repercussions, such as legal issues and might give rise to other forms of juvenile delinquency. The statements clearly prove that

Theme 6: Misuse of communication & technology

This refers to malpractices in communication and technology usage among students. The identified codes are using social media to disgrace or offend others, engaging in non-academic activities and deliberately overloading messages. Teachers reported,

"...students create memes and stickers using teachers' images along with disrespectful quotes and share them through social media." P2

".... unless closely monitored, they play computer games and use social media rather than completing assigned tasks." P32

Students are expected to use communication and technology ethically and responsibly for their academic requirements, but the evidence depicts students' irresponsible usage of communication and technology along with violation of ethical standards. This raises concerns about students' internalized moral values.

Themes 7: Disrespectful food practices

This refers to mishandling, wasting or demonstrating a lack of concern or value for food. Participants expressed irresponsible food behavior in students, such as fighting with food, eating food in concealment during the lesson delivery and harassing peers by snatching or hiding their food. Teachers stated,

"While teachers conducting the lessons, some students tend to eat secretly and distract others by arousing the eagerness to eat and sometimes discreetly sharing food, so pulling and grabbing the food may result in food spillage" P33

"During interval time we can notice some students are fighting with food, throwing at one another" P8

The statements indicate that students engage in dishonorable treatment of food, wasting of food, lack of gratitude towards food resources and lack of self-discipline in handling food. This is a clear indication that students do not recognize such behavior as misconduct.

Theme 8: Lack of decorum

Lack of decorum means failure to maintain appropriate behavior in a social setting. In this theme it is viewed as school-related decorum, such as maintaining respectful behavior during the national anthem, school song and religious observance. The features of breach of decorum are failure to uphold religious respect and lack of respect for the national anthem and school song. Teachers stated,

"*During religious activities students are talking loud, laughing, teasing others, not paying attention, etc.…" P6*

"...some students do not care or behave inappropriately during the national anthem or school song without paying respect to…." P3

The evidence reflects reduced religious commitments and insensitivity towards religious practices. Moreover, the evidence implies that students are not emotionally connected to the nation's values and dignity, thus demonstrating a low sense of national pride.

Theme 9: Premature romantic affaires

This theme illustrates moral issues that arise from premature romantic relationships. This refers to involvement in romantic affairs at an early stage, where adolescents are not mature enough to manage them in a healthy and responsible manner. Identified codes under this theme are undue public romantic behavior, fighting over romantic issues and doing self-harm in emotional distress. Teachers expressed,

"There were instances where students in uniform were loitering and engaged in unsuitable public behavior with their romantic partner." P38

"When they get involved in romantic relationships, it causes distraction from learning and in emotional distress, or to show more affection, they do self-injurious things like scratch or carve their partner's name in hand with sharp objects." P11

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A uniform is a collective identity of a school; misbehaving in public while wearing the school uniform sabotages the reputation of the school. Evidence shows that students fail to uphold loyalty and respect towards school as well as violate social standards and compromise their personal dignity. Further noted, in an emotional outburst students engage in self-harming behavior.

Theme 10: Sexual misconduct

This means inappropriate sexual behavior. Violating others' bodily boundaries is the main code identified in this theme. One teacher noted,

"Some students do immoral things like, inappropriately touching others' body parts to tease them." P9

" ... I have noticed physical harassment like unwelcoming patting… " P25

Evidence shows that students are involved in physical harassment which violates others' bodily autonomy. This indicates that students undermine the fundamental human rights. Peer-to-peer victimization manifests a lack of empathy and self-regulation.

4.1 The Strategies teachers use to control moral issues and inculcate moral values

The different types of strategies that teachers utilized to cultivate moral values and manage moral issues were subjected to investigation in this objective.

Table 6. Teachers' strategies for moral development

No	Strategies	f	%
1	Stories narration	48	100
2	Role modeling	48	100
3	Creating conducive classroom	46	96
4	Praise and rewards	43	90
5	Warning	42	88
6	Integrated lesson	41	85
7	Cooperative learning	41	85
8	Restorative practices	10	21
9	Assign responsibilities	5	10

Table 6. represents the teachers' strategies for developing students' moral values. The strategies identified through thematic analysis were presented along with their percentage distribution. The data indicate the extent to which each strategy is practiced in promoting moral development. Further, emerged themes were presented below with brief explanations and supporting participant quotations.

4.1.1. Story narration

This is a method that teachers used to teach moral concepts such as integrity, fairness, respect, compassion, etc. through value-oriented stories from real-life experiences, historical events and literature to instill moral values in students. This theme was unanimously reported by all participants, which underscores the prominence of this method. One teacher noted,

"I used to narrate stories of religious leaders, social activists, freedom fighters and my own life experiences to motivate their moral thought." P6

4.1.2. Acting as a role model

This refers to teachers demonstrating ethical behavior through their personal conduct. For example, maintaining trustworthiness, accepting mistakes, modeling time management, treating everyone equally and with respect, etc. The highest response rate suggests that the method was universally recognized by teachers. One teacher expressed,

"I always be punctual, neatly clad, and politely speak to students and teach students to be so…. even if I make mistakes in subject delivery, I accept my faults and correct them because we have to practice what we preach…" P19

4.1.3. Creating a conducive classroom

This means creating a culture of respect, fairness, and responsibility in the classroom where students are encouraged to express their ideas without judgement. This ensures a safe, trusting environment where everyone feels valued and not left behind. One teacher stated,

"I involve everyone in classroom responsibilities on a rotation basis; even for the backwards learners I give them the opportunity to develop their skills so that they feel valued…" P03

4.1.4. Praise and reward

This refers to reward and praise-based encouragement. Teachers use constructive feedback or incentives and physical tokens to strengthen desired behavior. One teacher reported,

"I let the child know that I am happy about their change and praise them publicly to make them feel valued and inspire others to be good." P17

4.1.5. Warning

This refers to teachers undertaking prompt corrective measures such as verbal warnings and written warnings to mitigate emergent moral issues. One teacher explained,

"When students act inappropriately, we take immediate action without delay because ignoring it may encourage others to make

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similar mistakes. So, in case of immoral acts, we try to control it by giving a verbal warning; if not, we give written notice so that the parents also will be aware of it." P25

4.1.6. Integrating moral lessons

This refers to deliberately including moral lessons into main subjects rather than teaching them as standalone subjects. One teacher expressed,

"…moral lessons are not directly linked to my subject since I am teaching commerce, but I educate students to be honest in dealing with money and truthful in every transaction and business activity." P1

4.1.7. Encourage cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is a strategy that enables students to work as a group to develop critical thinking, communication skills and problem-solving skills and build empathy. One teacher noted,

"I assign group work and group them with higher-performing and lower-performing so that when they work together, they communicate their ideas and understand where the poor one's struggle is and help them." P12

4.1.8. Restorative practices

It is an approach to discipline deviant students by having them repair harm caused by them; for instance, school properties or things damaged outside of school. One teacher stated,

"If any student is found to be guilty of deliberately breaking school property, he has to restore it so he will not do it again." P21

4.1.9. Assign responsibility

This refers to entrusting duties to behaviorally challenged students as a means of curbing their misbehavior. One teacher mentioned,

"I assign school-based responsibilities to behaviorally challenging students so to some extent their immoral behaviors can be controlled." P1

5. Discussion

Table 5. provides evidence for existing moral issues among senior secondary-level students. The thematic analysis, along with the descriptive analysis, represents the range of moral issues among students with a clear variation of prevalence from high to low. The emerged themes provide in-depth understanding of the phenomena. The findings outlined 10 themes of moral issues. Lack of academic responsibility was marked by the highest number of response rates, which indicates the widespread tendency. The finding is consistent with other research studies (Menikdiwela, 2020). The issue brings about negative repercussions such as lower academic performance, ineffective time management and lower self-esteem. This theme has a cross-cutting connection with academic dishonesty. When students fail to uphold academic duties, it drives them to unethical shortcuts. Academic dishonesty is the third most prevalent issue identified in the response data. Such behavior undermines the fairness of the assessment process and would not provide accurate performance details. Moreover, it devalues the genuine work of the honest students and demotivates them when they witness others achieve grades by unfair means. The findings are underpinned by other scholarly works (Umar et al., 2020; Yahye, 2015; Menikdiwela, 2020).

Lack of environmental hygiene is more of a social responsibility issue than a hygienic issue. The environment is a common space that the entire community uses. Thus, maintaining cleanliness is a collective responsibility; otherwise, it causes pollution and detrimental effects on health and ecosystems. The higher percentage suggests that students fail to uphold their communal duties. Further, more than half of the respondents reported vandalistic behavior among students. Vandalism often causes harm, financial loss and disrespect for others. The school assets are public property that is established for collective benefits. Destruction imposes unnecessary maintenance expenditure and deprives peers of using shared educational assets. This manifests a lack of social responsibility among students since they disregard how individual actions impact other people around them. This theme corroborates the findings of Menikdiwela (2020) and Yahye (2015).

The theme of substance addiction impairs students' academic performance, social relationship and overall well-being. Participants indicate that students were introduced to substance use through undesirable social interactions outside of the school, which implies that students are being targeted and exploited by a dangerous network. Further, there are high possibilities that vulnerable students may be susceptible to substance use due to peer pressure. The findings align with the results of Umar et al. (2020) and Menikdiwela (2020). Menikdiwela (2020); further revealed that students were involved in dangerous drugs such as Ganja, cocaine, and marijuana and drug affairs such as distributing and consuming them on school premises. The results of the current study and the previous study indicate a potential institutional and social crisis.

Moreover, the theme of misuse of communication and technology emerged from the contemporary e-learning platforms. The finding is underpinned by the study of Shi et al. (2019, as cited in Zhou & Hu, 2020) as well as supported by the framework of MOE (2024). According to Wang (2019, as cited in Zhou & Hu, 2020), the reasons for this issue are lack of teachers' supervision and overwhelming information online which prevent students from distinguishing right from wrong and being influenced by public opinion; further, freedom and anonymity of the network also lead to irresponsible online usage.

Further, disrespectful food practices are an unexpected finding. Food handling is not only taught through structured education but also acquired through religious teaching and long-established

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traditional practices. Food considered a blessing and wasted is viewed as a deeply ungrateful act. The responses revealed students' negligence and failure to comply with instructions and guidance in food handling. Further, the lack of decorum among students during the national anthem and religious observance was also highlighted in the study. Religious education and civic responsibilities are taught progressively throughout primary and senior secondary education; however, this moral issue demonstrates that students failed to translate the learned principles into daily practices. This raises concerns about devotion to the religion, patriotism and national pride towards the country. However, the theme of lack of environmental hygiene, lack of decorum and disrespectful food practices have not been previously explored in the existing literature. It does not imply that these issues are limited to the Sri Lankan context; it proves this is a rising global trend.

The theme of premature romantic relationships is in agreement with the perspective presented in "Virtuous Generation", the framework for moral education published by the MOE (2024) and the study of Menikdiwela (2020). This topic may be a controversial theme since people may have divergent viewpoints on romantic relationships at an adolescent age. However, a key concern is how such a relationship impacts the student's overall development. If this premature relationship hinders students' personality development and brings negative consequences, it has to be addressed. The evidence provides a clear picture about students' deviant behaviors when they engage in romantic relationships, such as self-harming, violating social standards and nonadherence to schools' code of conduct. This theme has not been identified as a moral issue in other foreign research works, which highlighted the contextual nature of moral issues. Similar behavior may differ across cultural and social contexts.

Moreover, the theme of sexual misconduct corresponds with the study of Menikdiwela (2020) and Umar et al. (2020) but does not identify extreme misbehaviors such as prostitution, premarital sex and homosexuality in the existing literature. Although Menikdiwela (2020) found homosexuality in the Sri Lankan context that was not observed in the present study. The findings may be influenced by the social desirability factor whereby participants are reluctant to disclose behavior that is viewed negatively. Nevertheless, this raises concern regarding future occurrence.

According to the percentage analysis, certain themes accounted for more than 70%. Themes Lack of academic responsibility, lack of environmental hygiene, and academic dishonesty reported 92%, 90%, and 77%, respectively, which revealed a high level of prevalence and requires targeted intervention to eradicate these moral issues with systematic and corrective measures.

Themes of vandalism & substance addiction constituted 54% & 44%, respectively. With nearly half of the sample endorsing these issues, thus, this cannot be overlooked. Even though the prevalence is less in comparison with previously mentioned moral issues, these themes are considered more serious than other facts; thus, urgent measures are required to address the issue and to prevent the continuation of the problem. Themes of misuse of communication and technology, disrespectful food practices, lack of decorum, premature romantic affairs and sexual misconduct yielded response rates of 25%, 15%, 13%, 10% & 6%, respectively. Though these themes are not widely reported, they should not undermine their significance because they carry potential long-term impact on students' character development. Hence, strategic measures are needed to reshape student moral conduct.

Table 4.6 represents strategies utilized by teachers. According to the data, story narration & role modeling are the predominant strategies. The story narration is considered verbal modeling. Teachers describe and discuss the characters and situations in the stories that confront moral dilemmas or ethical complexity and how to be involved in ethical decision-making. The unanimous responses depict that this is a widely implemented method. This finding coincides with the study by Gülcan (2015). Moreover, the strategy of role modeling is considered live modeling in which teachers demonstrate ethical behavior through their personal conduct. All participants agreed to this approach. The data shows that teachers preferred this method and are competent about hidden curriculum practices and intentionally display moral conduct. Popovska & Popovski (2021) elucidate in their study that teachers demonstrating moral values in their personal conduct is a prerequisite to teaching moral values.

Creating a conducive classroom is another strategy that gained the highest responses, which shows that this strategy is uniformly adopted by teachers. This is classified under live modeling. Teachers mirror exemplary moral behavior through action such as respect, empathy, and fairness towards others and they create a positive classroom management system, which serves as an inclusive and democratic classroom where all student's thoughts and feelings are conveyed and listened to. Thus, every student observes the teachers' behavior and replicates it. Many studies emphasize the importance of this strategy (Ratugamage & Fernando, 2024; Schuitema et al., 2003; Iqbal & Zahoor, 2024; and Gülcan, 2015). As a strategy, praise and reward also gained the highest response rate. The percentage is significant, which depicts that this is a common practice among teachers. In social learning theory, reward serves as a motivation for fostering targeted behavior. Moreover, this practice is also considered a vicarious reinforcement in social learning theory (Ruggles, 1977). Vicarious reinforcement is an indirect form of reinforcement. Students are motivated to behave in a certain way by observing others rewarded or praised for similar behavior.

Further, teachers use warnings as an immediate corrective measure. This involves verbal and written warnings that are categorized under verbal and visual modeling. This is a negative form of reinforcement. Moreover, this is considered a vicarious punishment in social learning theory (Ruggles, 1977). When students observe another person being punished for an immoral act or undesirable behavior, they are less likely to be involved in

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such an act, reflecting on the negative consequences and avoiding a similar result. The strategies of integrating moral lessons and cooperative learning gained equal responses, which indicates equal preference for these strategies. Integrating moral lessons into subject teaching is verbal modeling (Bandura, 1977, as cited in Bijandi & Nabavi, 2012). Teachers take proactive measures to instill moral values in parallel with subject teaching. This is a positive indicator that teachers have taken ownership of this responsibility.

Moreover, encouraging cooperative learning is a student-centered instructional method in which teachers are involved in grouping, planning, assigning roles, and monitoring their engagement. This method enables students to observe and learn from their peers and understand group dynamics, which drive the holistic growth of a student by improving problem-solving skills, critical thinking, commitment, empathy, perspective-taking ability, etc. According to Iqbal & Zahoor (2024), teacher-centered curriculum is also a contributing factor of student moral issues since students' engagement is very minimal; hence, the widespread implementation of this strategy reflects a favorable trend in the selected sample. Only a small proportion of respondents reported the strategy of restorative practices and assigning responsibility as a measure of control of moral issues. In comparison with other strategies, this obtained a low percentage, which suggests infrequent usage of these methods.

6. Conclusion

The study discovered numerous types of moral issues. The issues of lack of environmental hygiene, lack of decorum, and disrespectful food practices have not been previously explored in the existing literature, which suggests that these are emerging forms of moral issues. Moreover, moral issues extend beyond serious misconduct to everyday behavioral issues that hinder students' moral development. Immediate intervention is needed to address these issues; overlooking the factor may bring about detrimental consequences. Further, the study contributes to the existing knowledge by revealing nine teaching strategies that were not discovered in the Sri Lankan moral educational landscape. The findings suggest that teachers take proactive measures and are committed to educating students on moral values despite the subject they teach. Teachers use verbal, symbolic and live modeling to foster moral behavior in students. Overall, the study provides valuable insight into teachers' approaches to moral education, enabling teachers and teacher trainers to critically assess the strategies' effectiveness and refine them.

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