

Moral Values and Modernization: A Phenomenological Study of Religion and Moral Education Teachers' Efforts to Strengthen Students' Moral Formation in Dili, Timor-Leste

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Research Article

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study examines how Religion and Moral Education teachers in Dili, Timor-Leste, perceive the relationship between modernization, digital technology, and students' moral and religious formation, and how they respond to these changes in their educational practice. Seventeen teachers working in schools in Dili participated in the study. Data were collected through written open-ended interviews and analyzed using a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach involving reduction of the data, identification of units of meaning, thematic grouping, and interpretation in relation to the cultural, moral, and religious context of Timor-Leste. Six thematic areas emerged: perceived changes in students' behavior and moral/religious values; perceived impacts of technology and modernization; teachers' efforts as moral educators; methods used to strengthen morality and faith; challenges encountered by teachers; and recommendations for strengthening students' moral formation. Participants described both opportunities and risks associated with modernization and technology. Frequently reported concerns included excessive mobile-phone and social-media use, reduced attention to school activities, changes in interpersonal behavior, and reduced participation in religious activities. At the same time, participants identified educational opportunities provided by rapid access to information and technology. Teachers reported responding through personal guidance, counselling, spiritual activities, dialogue, collaboration with families and churches, and creative activities such as music and sport. The findings represent the perceptions and experiences of the participating teachers and should not be interpreted as population-level evidence that modernization itself causes particular student behaviors. The study highlights the importance of integrating moral education, digital responsibility, and cooperation among school, family, church, and community within the Dili educational context.

1. Introduction

Moral values comprise principles, norms, and standards that guide human conduct and social relationships. In educational settings, moral formation is closely related to the development of responsibility, respect, honesty, and social participation. The importance of moral education becomes particularly visible when social conditions change rapidly and established practices interact with new cultural and technological influences.

In Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste, modernization, globalization, and the expansion of digital technologies have introduced new opportunities for learning and communication. Digital resources can facilitate independent study, rapid access to information, and new forms of educational interaction. At the same time, teachers and families may encounter challenges related to excessive or inappropriate technology use, distraction, exposure to unsuitable online content, and changing patterns of social interaction.

The relationship between modernization and moral life is not necessarily one-directional. Giddens (1990, 1991) describes modernity as involving extensive transformations in social institutions and self-identity, while Inglehart (1997) links modernization with broader cultural change. Bauman (2001) emphasizes instability and rapid change in what he describes as liquid modernity. These perspectives provide a

framework for considering how educators interpret changes in students' values without assuming in advance that modernization is either wholly positive or wholly negative.

The educational response to these changes is also important. Kohlberg (1981) conceptualizes moral development in relation to cognitive and social development, while Lickona (1991) emphasizes moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action in character education. In the Timor-Leste context described by the participants, teachers of Religion and Moral Education understand their work as involving academic, ethical, cultural, and spiritual dimensions.

The present study therefore focuses on teachers' lived experiences and perceptions rather than claiming direct access to students' lived experiences. It asks how teachers understand changes associated with modernization and technology, what strategies they use to support students' moral formation, and what institutional and social challenges they encounter.

1.1 Research Questions

How do Religion and Moral Education teachers in Dili perceive the influence of modernization and technology on students' moral values and religious life?

How do teachers perceive changes in students' behavior and moral identity in the context of modernization?

What pedagogical and pastoral strategies do teachers report using to strengthen students' morality and ethical values?

1.2 Study Objective

The main objective was to explore the perceptions and experiences of Religion and Moral Education teachers in Dili concerning students' moral formation in the context of modernization. Specifically, the study sought to identify perceived positive and negative changes, examine reported behavioral changes, document teachers' methods and efforts, and formulate context-sensitive recommendations for schools, families, churches, and other stakeholders.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study draws on perspectives concerning morality, modernization, moral development, and character education. Bertens (2013) distinguishes ethical reflection from the practical expression of moral values. Giddens (1990, 1991) highlights the transformative character of modernity and its implications for identity. Inglehart (1997) examines modernization and cultural change, while Bauman (2001) emphasizes fluidity and instability in contemporary social life.

Kohlberg's (1981) theory of moral development provides a framework for considering moral reasoning across different stages of development. Lickona (1991) emphasizes the formation of character through

moral knowing, feeling, and action and highlights the importance of cooperation among school, family, and community. Habermas (1990) contributes a perspective on communication and modernity, while Kant and Jonas are used in the source manuscript to frame moral responsibility in relation to freedom, reason, and technological consequences.

These perspectives are used interpretively rather than as hypotheses to be statistically tested. The phenomenological focus remains on how participants describe and interpret their educational experiences.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative phenomenological design. The approach was selected to explore the experiences, meanings, and interpretations expressed by teachers concerning moral education in a context of modernization and technological change. A hermeneutic dimension was used to interpret the meanings of participants' accounts in relation to the educational, cultural, moral, and religious context of Timor-Leste.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The participants were 17 teachers working in schools in Dili. They were identified in the source manuscript as former students of the Instituto de Ciências Religiosas (ICR) and as educators with experience in Religion and Moral Education. Four participants were teaching Ethics/Citizenship or Music at the time of data collection but were reported to have previously taught Religion and Moral Education. The source manuscript reports participants with teaching experience ranging from approximately one to 24 years.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through written open-ended interviews. The source manuscript explains that written responses allowed participants time to reflect on each question and provided a direct written record of their responses. Interviews were conducted at places and times selected by participants, with attention to comfort and privacy. Because responses were provided in writing, the revised draft does not describe an additional transcription stage.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis followed a phenomenological-hermeneutic orientation. First, the written responses were organized and read to identify meaningful statements. Second, the researchers applied a reduction-oriented process intended to focus on the essential meanings of participants' accounts. Third, units of meaning were identified and grouped into recurring thematic categories. Fourth, the categories were interpreted in relation to the cultural, moral, educational, and religious context of Timor-Leste and connected with the theoretical framework.

Six thematic categories were identified: (1) changes in students' behavior and moral/religious values; (2) perceived impact of technology and modernization; (3) teachers' efforts as moral educators; (4) methods used to strengthen morality and faith; (5) challenges faced by teachers; and (6) recommendations.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study received institutional authorization from the Instituto de Ciências Religiosas (ICR), Universidade Católica Timorense (UCT), in November 2025. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw.

4. Results

4.1 Participant Profile

The study included 17 participants: 12 men and 5 women, according to the participant summary in the source manuscript. Participants were teachers working in different schools in Dili. Their reported ages ranged from 27 to 58 years, although some demographic fields in the original table were incomplete. Four participants were teaching Ethics/Citizenship or Music at the time of the study but had previously taught Religion and Moral Education.

Theme	Participant evidence	Main content	Interpretive focus
1. Behavioral and moral/religious changes	P1, P2, P9, P10 and others	Teachers reported changes in attention, respect, participation in religious activities, and other behaviors.	Perceived changes in students' moral and religious life.
2. Technology and modernization	P1–P17, with positive observations also reported by P8 and P15	Concerns included excessive mobile-phone/social-media use and exposure to inappropriate content; positive aspects included access to information.	Ambivalent perceptions of digital modernization.
3. Teachers as moral educators	Most participants	Personal guidance, counselling, dialogue, spiritual activities, and cooperation with families and church actors.	Teachers' perceived moral and pastoral role.
4. Methods for strengthening morality and faith	Examples include P4, P7, P8, P10 and P15	Bible sharing, catechesis, retreats, pastoral activities, counselling, music, sport, and dialogue.	Practical strategies reported by teachers.
5. Challenges	Most participants; P5 reported no major challenge	Phone use, limited parental cooperation, institutional regulation, approaching students, and other contextual difficulties.	Institutional and relational constraints.
6. Recommendations	P1–P17	Character formation, teacher training, technology education, school regulations, materials, and cooperation among stakeholders.	Suggested responses to perceived challenges.

4.2 Perceived Changes in Students' Behavior and Values

Participants frequently described changes in students' behavior that they associated, in their own perceptions, with technology use and wider cultural change. Reported concerns included spending substantial time with technology, reduced attention to learning, reduced participation in religious activities, and changes in respect and discipline. These reports should be understood as teachers' perceptions rather than independent measurements of student behavior.

Some participants also described concerns about exposure to pornography or other inappropriate online content, reduced self-control, online gaming, and possible school disengagement. Because these claims were reported through teacher accounts, the study does not establish the prevalence or causal effect of these behaviors among students.

4.3 Perceived Positive and Negative Effects of Technology

Most participants emphasized risks associated with inappropriate or uncontrolled technology use. Reported concerns included social-media distraction, excessive mobile-phone use, reduced participation in religious activities, and perceived weakening of some traditional values. Some participants also reported positive effects, particularly rapid access to information and opportunities for learning. This contrast indicates that participants did not describe technology as uniformly harmful; rather, they emphasized the importance of how technology is used and guided.

4.4 Teachers' Efforts to Strengthen Moral Formation

Participants described a range of practices intended to support students' moral and spiritual development. These included personal approach and relationship-building, counselling, dialogue, spiritual retreats, prayer and Mass participation, Bible-related activities, pastoral work, cooperation with parents and church actors, and creative activities involving music and sport.

The accounts portray teachers as educators who combine subject teaching with personal guidance. For example, participants reported identifying students whom they perceived as negatively affected by technology and responding through counselling and personal accompaniment. Other teachers emphasized dialogue and participation in religious activities.

4.5 Challenges Reported by Teachers

Participants reported challenges involving students' mobile-phone use, difficulty building trust with some students, limited cooperation with parents, weak or unclear school regulations, and difficulties addressing students with different beliefs or attitudes toward moral guidance. The source manuscript also reports concerns related to students' involvement in martial-arts groups. These statements are presented here as participant-reported contextual concerns and not as evidence that participation in martial arts causes criminality or moral decline.

4.6 Recommendations Reported by Participants

1. Strengthen character and spiritual formation through cooperation among relevant stakeholders.
2. Provide training for teachers and students concerning information technology and responsible technology use.
3. Strengthen and clarify school regulations concerning student behavior and technology.
4. Improve the availability of teaching materials for Moral and Religion Education.
5. Provide opportunities for catechetical, pastoral, musical, sporting, and other constructive student activities.
6. Strengthen continuing professional development for teachers of Moral and Religion Education.

7. Promote cooperation among schools, families, churches, government, and community actors.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that the participating teachers perceive modernization as an ambivalent process. On one hand, technology increases access to information and can support learning. On the other hand, participants perceive excessive or inappropriate use of digital technologies as creating challenges for attention, discipline, family-school relationships, and religious participation. This interpretation is compatible with theoretical perspectives that describe modernization as a process involving substantial changes in social practices and identity (Giddens, 1990, 1991; Inglehart, 1997).

The findings also resonate with Bauman's (2001) discussion of social fluidity and changing institutions. Participants described family, school, church, and community cooperation as increasingly important in providing stable guidance. However, the present study does not independently demonstrate a general weakening of these institutions; it documents how the participating teachers interpret their current educational context.

The teachers' reported strategies are consistent with character-education perspectives that emphasize moral understanding, moral commitment, and moral action (Lickona, 1991). Personal accompaniment, dialogue, counselling, service, spiritual activities, music, and sport were described as practical ways of connecting moral formation with students' daily lives.

The findings can also be discussed in relation to Kohlberg's (1981) theory of moral development. Teachers' emphasis on dialogue, reflection, responsibility, and guidance suggests that moral education is understood as more than the transmission of rules. Nevertheless, the present qualitative design does not measure students' stages of moral reasoning and therefore cannot establish whether participants' practices produce particular developmental outcomes.

An important contribution of the study is its contextual focus on Dili and on teachers who work at the intersection of religious education, cultural identity, and technological change. The findings suggest that participants see moral education as requiring cooperation among school, family, church, and community. This emphasis is consistent with Lickona's (1991) argument for a wider community context for character formation.

At the same time, the study has important limitations. The participants were teachers rather than students, the sample was limited to Dili, and the data were collected through written open-ended interviews. The findings therefore represent the perspectives of this particular group and should not be generalized to all students, teachers, or schools in Timor-Leste.

6. Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored how 17 teachers in Dili understand moral education in a context of modernization and digital change. Participants described both opportunities and challenges associated with technology. Frequently reported concerns involved excessive mobile-phone and social-media use, changes in students' attention and behavior, reduced participation in religious activities, and difficulties in maintaining cooperation among students, families, and schools. Participants also recognized positive opportunities associated with rapid access to information and technology.

Teachers reported responding through personal guidance, counselling, dialogue, spiritual activities, pastoral engagement, and creative activities such as music and sport. Their recommendations emphasize character formation, responsible technology use, teacher development, appropriate school regulations, educational materials, and cooperation among school, family, church, government, and community.

The study should be interpreted as an account of teachers' perceptions and experiences. It does not establish that modernization or technology independently causes particular student behaviors. Future research should include students, parents, and school leaders and, where appropriate, combine qualitative accounts with additional forms of evidence to examine the issues identified by the participants.

Research Team and Institutional Authorization

1. Investigators: Pedro dos Santos, S. Fil., M. Ed (Coordinator); Maria Lina Soares, M. Pd (Member); Marcolino Gomes, M. Theo (Member); Gregorius Aquino Dhika, S. Fil (Member).
2. Course Coordinator, Formation of Teachers of Religion and Moral (FPMRC): Maria Lina Soares, S. Pd., M. Pd.
3. Director, *Instituto de Ciências Religiosas/universidade catolica Timorense (UCT)* (): Pe. Jovito Rêgo de Jesus Araújo.
4. Institutional authorization: September, 2025.

Declarations

1. **Data availability.** The underlying written interview responses are subject to participant confidentiality. Data may be made available in an appropriately anonymized form where ethically and institutionally permissible.
2. **Institutional roles and authorization.** Maria Lina Soares served as Coordinator of the Formação de Professores de Moral e Religião (FPMR) course. Pe. Jovito Rêgo de Jesus Araújo served as Director of the Instituto de Ciências Religiosas (ICR). The institutional authorization and research documentation were completed in November 2025.
3. **Author contributions.** Pedro dos Santos served as coordinator of the research. Maria Lina Soares, Marcolino Gomes, and Gregorius Aquino Dhika participated as members of the research team. All

authors contributed to the development of the study and approved the final manuscript for publication.

4. **Funding.** This research was financially supported by Universidade Católica Timorese (UCT) São João Paulo II.
5. **Competing interests.** All four authors confirm that they have no conflicts of interest or competing interests to declare.
6. **Consent for publication.** The investigators confirm that the participants consented to the use and publication of the research findings in scholarly publications, in accordance with the study's informed-consent procedures.
7. **Ethics approval and informed consent.** The study was conducted with institutional authorization and with informed consent from all participants. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, their voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw. Written informed consent was obtained before data collection.

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