

Moral Education and the Formation of Labour Identity in Vocational Colleges: A Qualitative Study of Students' Interpretations of Work Ethics

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Abstract

Vocational education aims not only to develop occupational skills but also to cultivate work-related values and professional dispositions. In vocational colleges, moral education often emphasises discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and commitment to work. However, less is known about how students interpret these institutional messages and how they shape students' understandings of themselves as future workers. This qualitative study examines how moral education contributes to the formation of labour identity among vocational college students in China. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis from two public vocational colleges, the study explores how institutional practices construct an image of the "ideal worker" and how students interpret this discourse. It also considers how teaching practices, including lecture-based explanation, workplace cases, and guided discussion, shape students' engagement with moral education. The findings show that students respond in different ways, including



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instrumental acceptance, reflective adaptation, and critical distance. Internship experiences further mediate these interpretations. The study argues that labour identity formation is a negotiated process shaped by institutional discourse, workplace experience, and student agency.

Keywords: vocational education; moral education; labour identity; work ethics; pedagogical practices

Introduction

Vocational education has become an increasingly important part of contemporary education systems as governments seek to address youth unemployment, economic restructuring, and the growing demand for skilled labour. Vocational education and training institutions are expected not only to provide occupational knowledge and practical competence but also to prepare students for participation in labour markets and workplace communities. In this sense, vocational education is not limited to technical training. It also contributes to shaping how students understand work, responsibility, and their future roles in professional life (Billett 2011; Wheelahan 2015).

In the Chinese vocational education context, moral education is not simply an optional component of schooling but a formal and institutionalised part of student formation. In many vocational colleges, it is delivered through mandatory courses and related institutional activities concerned with professional ethics, student conduct, labour spirit, and preparation for working life (Li 2024). This institutional position makes moral education a particularly important site for examining how ideas about work and worker behaviour are communicated to students.

Research on vocational education has increasingly recognised that educational institutions shape students' identities as well as their skills. Through curriculum, pedagogy, institutional discourse, and workplace learning, students encounter ideas about what kinds of workers they should become. Much of this research has focused on vocational identity, usually understood as a sense of belonging to a particular occupation or professional community (Ferm et al. 2019; Kryger and Qvortrup 2025; Wuttke et al. 2024). Vocational identity is important, but it does not fully capture the broader ways in which students imagine themselves as future participants in labour markets and workplace relations.

This study adopts the concept of labour identity. Labour identity refers to the ways individuals understand themselves in relation to work, worker responsibilities, and economic participation. In this study, it is used to capture students' developing understandings of what kind of worker they should become, how they should behave in workplace settings, and how they position themselves in relation to labour expectations and employment futures. Compared with vocational identity, which is tied more closely to occupational belonging, labour identity captures a broader orientation to becoming a worker (Johansson 2025; Sugimura et al. 2025).

Within vocational colleges, moral education is one of the key institutional sites through which such orientations are shaped. Through moral education, students encounter repeated messages about discipline, reliability, cooperation, and dedication to work. These values are not presented simply as general ethical virtues; they are also linked to employability and professional conduct. In this way, moral education contributes to constructing a normative image of the “ideal worker”, namely a worker who is technically competent, disciplined, cooperative, and aligned with organisational expectations (Avis 2018).

However, the influence of these institutional messages should not be understood as automatic. Young people do not simply absorb the values promoted by educational institutions. Their responses are shaped by family background, internship experience, peer discussion, personal aspiration, and observations of labour market realities. Students may accept institutional values, reinterpret them in more practical ways, or question whether they accurately reflect the conditions of contemporary work. Labour identity formation is therefore not a linear outcome of schooling but a dynamic process of interpretation and negotiation (Furlong 2013; Okolie 2022; Tynjälä 2008).

Although there is substantial research on vocational training, employability, and workplace learning, relatively little empirical work has examined how school-based moral education shapes vocational students’ labour identities. Existing studies often focus on skills acquisition, career adaptability, or transitions to employment, while paying less attention to how institutional moral discourse influences students’ understandings of work (Fang et al. 2024; Gao and Mohamad 2025; Wang, Fan, and Niu 2025). This gap is significant because vocational colleges are not only preparing students for jobs; they are also shaping how students understand what it means to become a worker.

This study addresses that gap by examining how moral education in vocational colleges contributes to the formation of students’ labour identities. Drawing on qualitative data from two public vocational colleges in eastern China, it explores how institutional practices promote particular discourses of work ethics and how students interpret these messages in relation to their own experiences and expectations. By focusing on students’ perspectives, the study highlights the active role of young people in accepting, adapting, or questioning institutional expectations about work.

The study makes three contributions. First, it extends research on vocational education by foregrounding the moral and cultural dimensions of vocational training rather than focusing solely on technical competence or employability outcomes. Second, it contributes to scholarship on youth transitions to work by showing how educational institutions shape students’ understandings of themselves as future workers. Third, it provides empirical insight into how students interpret and negotiate institutional work ethics discourse in everyday educational settings.

The study addresses three research questions:

How is moral education enacted in vocational colleges to promote values of discipline, responsibility, and work ethics?

How do vocational college students interpret these moral messages in shaping their understanding of themselves as future workers?

How do students negotiate their labour identities in relation to labour expectations and employment realities?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Moral Education and Work Ethics in Vocational Education

Moral education has traditionally been understood as a component of schooling concerned with ethical awareness, social responsibility, and civic participation. In vocational education contexts, however, moral education often extends beyond abstract ethical reasoning to include the cultivation of values associated with work and professional conduct. Students are encouraged to develop dispositions based on qualities such as punctuality, diligence, accountability, teamwork, and reliability. These values are often framed as necessary not only for personal development but also for labour market success (Lapsley 2025).

Research on vocational pedagogy has shown that vocational education transmits more than technical skill. It also introduces students to the social norms and expectations associated with work. Billett (2011) argues that vocational learning takes place through participation in socially organised practices in which technical competence and workplace norms are closely intertwined. Similarly, vocational curricula commonly embed work-related attitudes such as responsibility, cooperation, and professional ethics in their formal and informal pedagogies (Avis 2018; Wheelahan 2015).

At the same time, critical scholarship has questioned whether the work-related values promoted in vocational education are neutral. Some studies suggest that vocational education may normalise particular assumptions about labour discipline, obedience, adaptability, and organisational commitment. From this perspective, moral education can function not only as ethical instruction but also as a mechanism through which preferred worker behaviours are produced and legitimised (Avis 2018; Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011). Yet despite these insights, the literature has paid comparatively little attention to how students themselves interpret moral education and whether they regard its messages as meaningful, useful, or unrealistic.

Vocational Education and Social Inequality

Vocational education has long been linked to questions of educational stratification and social inequality. In many systems, vocational tracks enrol disproportionate numbers of

students from working-class or otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds. As a result, vocational institutions often play an important role in shaping how young people imagine their opportunities, limits, and future positions in the labour market (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011; Furlong 2013).

Some scholars argue that vocational education promotes social inclusion by providing practical routes into employment, especially for students who may not thrive in academic pathways. Others emphasise that tracking systems may reproduce inequality by channelling students into lower-status occupations and more restricted career trajectories. The significance of vocational education, therefore, lies not only in labour market preparation but also in how it organises expectations about social mobility and occupational futures (Billett 2011; Wheelahan 2015).

Although social inequality is not the primary analytical focus of this study, it remains an important background condition. Messages about discipline, responsibility, and the “right” attitude to work may be interpreted differently depending on students’ experiences of opportunity, constraint, and perceived fairness. For this reason, labour identity formation is approached here as a process situated within broader structures of educational and labour market differentiation.

Labour Identity Formation in Vocational Education

Labour identity refers to how individuals understand themselves in relation to work, worker roles, and economic participation. For vocational students, this identity is formed during a crucial transitional stage in which they move from being students to imagining themselves as workers. Labour identity includes ideas about what a good worker is, what responsibilities work entails, and what forms of behaviour are regarded as appropriate or necessary in employment.

This concept overlaps with but is distinct from vocational identity. Vocational identity is commonly associated with belonging to a particular occupation or professional field. Labour identity is broader. It includes occupational orientation but also captures more general understandings of work, employability, and labour relations. In this study, this distinction is visible in students’ comments on employer expectations, obedience, responsibility, fairness, and respect at work. These comments were not only about belonging to a specific occupation, but about how students understood the broader conditions and moral expectations of becoming a worker. This broader framing is particularly useful in vocational college settings, where students may still be developing occupational trajectories while already encountering strong institutional messages about worker conduct (Ferm et al. 2019; Kryger and Qvortrup 2025).

Recent scholarship has renewed attention to identity development in vocational and professional education. Wuttke et al. (2024) underline that identity development is supported through training quality, guidance, and meaningful participation in practice. Sugimura et al. (2025) also show that personal and social identities can develop in

intertwined ways in vocationally oriented student populations. Identity formation research more broadly suggests that such processes are never purely passive. Individuals form identities through participation in social contexts, but they also interpret, rework, and sometimes resist the meanings offered to them. In vocational education, students encounter expectations through classes, internships, peer interaction, and teacher guidance. Labour identity therefore emerges through the interplay of institutional influences and student agency.

Institutional Discourse and the Construction of the Ideal Worker

The present study draws on the concept of institutional discourse to analyse how moral education constructs expectations about work. Educational institutions communicate not only formal knowledge but also normative ideas about appropriate conduct, desirable dispositions, and social roles. In vocational colleges, this often takes the form of a discourse of work ethics that links employability to moral and behavioural traits (Avis 2018).

This discourse contributes to the construction of the ideal worker. The ideal worker is not simply a skilled individual. Rather, it is a normative figure characterised by discipline, responsibility, cooperation, reliability, and commitment to collective goals. The exact form of this figure may vary across vocational fields, but the broader logic remains consistent: Students are encouraged to see employability as inseparable from moral self-regulation. Conceptualising moral education in these terms allows the study to examine how institutional expectations are embedded in teaching, documentation, and classroom practice.

Negotiated Labour Identity Formation

To understand students' responses to this discourse, the study also draws on the idea of negotiated identity formation. Students are not passive recipients of institutional messages. They evaluate such messages in light of personal experience, occupational aspiration, and perceptions of labour market reality. Negotiation can take multiple forms, including acceptance, adaptation, scepticism, or selective distancing (Furlong 2013; Wuttke et al. 2024).

This perspective is especially relevant in vocational education because students occupy a position between school and work. They are exposed to institutional expectations while simultaneously preparing for workplace participation. Internships, in particular, create opportunities to compare school-based moral discourse with everyday work practices. Studies of traineeship guidance, occupational image, and boundary-crossing have shown that workplace experience can powerfully influence how students make sense of occupations and of themselves in relation to those occupations (Brands et al. 2025; Dubeau and Chochard 2024; Popov 2024).

Based on the above discussion, this study develops a theoretical framework (see Figure 1) in which moral education functions as an institutional discourse that constructs an image of the ideal worker, while students negotiate these expectations through interpretation and internship experience in the process of labour identity formation.

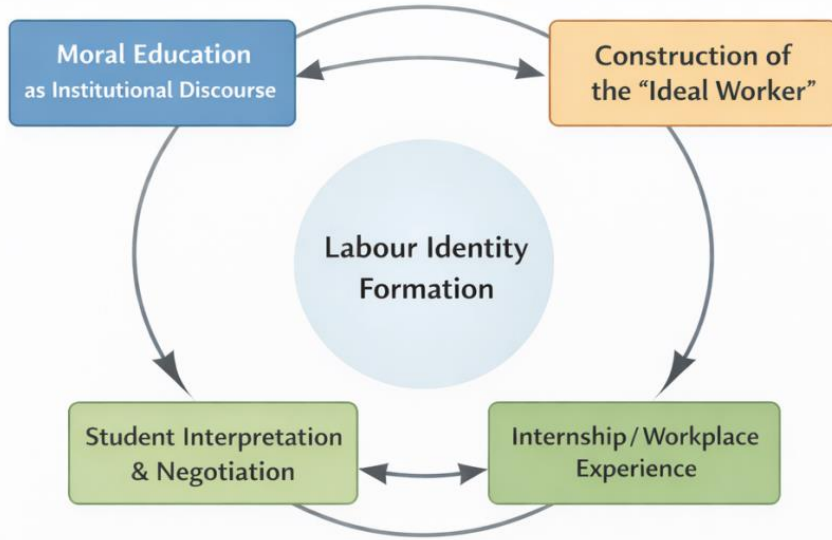


Figure 1: Theoretical framework of labour identity formation in vocational colleges

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative multiple case study design. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to understand how students interpret institutional messages and construct meanings around work, morality, and future employment. Since moral education is embedded in specific organisational settings, a case study design allows these processes to be examined in context rather than abstracted from the institutional environments in which they occur (Creswell and Poth 2018; Yin 2018).

A multiple case design was selected in order to compare patterns across different vocational fields. Examining two colleges made it possible to identify common features of moral education while also exploring contextual variation in how work ethics discourse was framed and interpreted. This design supports both contextual depth and limited cross-case comparison.

Research Sites and Participants

The research was conducted in two public vocational colleges in eastern China. College A primarily offered programmes related to engineering and manufacturing technologies, while College B specialised in service-oriented fields such as business administration

and tourism management. Both colleges followed the national vocational education curriculum framework and included mandatory moral education courses designed to cultivate professional ethics and work-related values.

A total of 42 participants were involved in the study. These included 32 vocational students, six moral education teachers, and four workplace mentors who supervised student internships. Most student participants were second-year students who had already completed at least one semester of moral education and were preparing for, or had recently engaged in, internship experience. This group was selected because it was positioned at a crucial point between schooling and employment, making it particularly relevant for exploring how students interpreted institutional messages about work.

Participants were recruited voluntarily. Students were informed about the study during class sessions and invited to participate if interested. Teachers and workplace mentors were contacted through institutional administrators. All participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided written consent prior to participation. This recruitment strategy may have introduced a degree of self-selection bias, as students who agreed to participate may have been more willing to reflect on their educational experiences than those who declined. For this reason, the findings should be understood as reflecting the perspectives of students willing to discuss moral education and work-related expectations, rather than as statistically representative of the entire student population.

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Participant group	Number	Institution	Programme/Field	Gender	Role in study
Vocational students	32	College A (16); College B (16)	Engineering, manufacturing, business, tourism	18 male, 14 female	Semi-structured interview participants
Moral education teachers	6	College A (3); College B (3)	Moral education / ideological and political education	3 male, 3 female	Semi-structured interview participants
Workplace mentors	4	Partner enterprises linked to both colleges	Manufacturing firms and service-sector companies	3 male, 1 female	Semi-structured interview participants
Total	42	—	—	—	—

Data Collection

Data were collected over one academic semester through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. This combination enabled methodological triangulation and provided multiple perspectives on how moral education was enacted and interpreted.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of data. Student interviews explored experiences of moral education, views on work-related values, understandings of what it means to be a good worker, and expectations regarding employment. Teacher interviews focused on the aims of moral education, the teaching strategies used to promote work values, and perceptions of how students responded to course content. Workplace mentors were asked about their expectations of interns and whether these aligned with the values promoted by vocational colleges.

A total of 42 interviews were conducted, each lasting between 40 and 70 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and audio-recorded with participants' consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim before analysis.

In addition, eight moral education classes were observed, each lasting approximately 90 minutes. Observations focused on how teachers introduced ideas related to work ethics, professional responsibility, and worker behaviour, as well as how students responded in classroom interaction. Detailed field notes were taken during and immediately after each session.

Document analysis was conducted to examine how moral education was formally framed in each institution. Documents included course syllabi, teaching materials, policy documents related to student conduct and moral education, and student handbooks. These documents provided insight into the official discourse surrounding work-related values and helped contextualise interview and observation data.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to identify recurring patterns of meaning across interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents while remaining attentive to contextual nuance.

The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, all materials were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the dataset. During this stage, initial notes were made on recurrent ideas concerning worker behaviour, workplace expectations, and students' responses to moral education. Second, an open coding process was carried out using NVivo 12 to organise the data. Codes captured descriptive and interpretive categories such as discipline and responsibility, good worker expectations, practical usefulness of moral education, and doubt about institutional messages.

Third, related codes were grouped into broader categories. These categories were then refined into themes that captured patterns across the dataset. The final themes were shaped both by the data and by the theoretical framework, especially the concepts of the ideal worker and negotiated labour identity formation. Finally, patterns were compared across the two cases in order to identify both shared dynamics and programme-specific differences.

Coding and theme development were iterative rather than linear. During this process, the first researcher repeatedly returned to the raw data to refine categories, compare patterns across interviews, observations, and documents, and assess whether emerging themes were supported by contrasting or disconfirming accounts. The analysis was conducted by the first researcher, with themes refined through repeated comparison across data sources and across the two institutional cases.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Several strategies were used to enhance trustworthiness. First, data triangulation was achieved by drawing on interviews, observations, and documents. Second, prolonged engagement with the field over one semester enabled a deeper understanding of institutional context and participant experience. Third, preliminary interpretations were shared with several participants for feedback, providing a limited form of member checking.

Ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's university ethics review committee before data collection began. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed of the purpose of the study. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and identifying details have been removed. The researchers had no employment or teaching relationship with either college at the time and did not assess or supervise any participating students. Although access was arranged through institutional permission, participation was voluntary and interviews were conducted independently from teaching activities. To manage potential bias, the researcher kept reflexive field notes and compared interpretations across interviews, observations, and documents.

Findings

The analysis revealed that moral education in the two vocational colleges did more than communicate general ethical values. It promoted a normative discourse of work through which students were encouraged to imagine themselves as future workers who should be disciplined, responsible, cooperative, and committed to collective goals. However, students did not respond to these institutional messages in a uniform manner. Instead, they interpreted them in relation to their own experiences, internship encounters, and expectations about employment. Labour identity formation thus emerged as a negotiated process shaped by the interaction between institutional discourse and student agency.

Three themes were identified. First, moral education constructed a recognisable image of the ideal worker. Second, students responded to this discourse in different ways, ranging from instrumental acceptance to reflective adaptation and critical distance. Third, internships served as a crucial site in which institutional messages were tested against workplace realities.

Constructing the Ideal Worker through Moral Education

Across both colleges, moral education consistently promoted a normative image of the good or ideal worker. Classroom teaching, institutional documents, and teacher interviews all emphasised values such as discipline, punctuality, responsibility, teamwork, and dedication to work. These values were presented not as optional qualities but as necessary attributes of employable workers. In this sense, moral education did not simply encourage students to become “better people” in general terms; it linked moral worth directly to workplace readiness and employability.

In observed classes, teachers frequently framed such values through workplace scenarios. One teacher at College A explained that employers judge workers not only by technical competence but also by their attitudes, especially reliability and seriousness. Another stressed that even small errors in engineering settings could have wider consequences, making responsibility a central trait of professional behaviour. These classroom messages linked moral values directly to labour performance and organisational usefulness. The ideal worker was constructed not only as ethically upright but also as behaviourally manageable and operationally dependable. Pedagogically, the observed classes were mainly teacher-led, but they included short case examples, guided questioning, and occasional whole-class discussion. Teachers typically introduced a work-related value, connected it to a workplace incident or employer expectation, and then asked students to comment on how a “qualified worker” should respond. In a few lessons, students were invited to relate these examples to internship experience, although discussion remained strongly guided by the teacher’s framing.

Teacher interviews reinforced this discourse. As one teacher stated, “Technical skills alone are not enough. Employers expect workers to be responsible, disciplined, and reliable. Moral education helps students understand what kind of worker they should become.” This quotation is significant because it shows that moral education was explicitly understood as shaping future *workerhood* rather than merely transmitting abstract moral principles. The phrase “what kind of worker” indicates that the teaching of work ethics was also a process of defining desirable labour subjectivity.

This view was echoed in College B, where teachers in service-related programmes emphasised cooperation, communication, and interpersonal responsibility. Here, the ideal worker was not simply obedient but also emotionally regulated and capable of effective interaction with colleagues and customers. The precise content of the ideal worker therefore varied by vocational field. In engineering and manufacturing, it was associated more strongly with accuracy, discipline, and task responsibility. In service-oriented programmes, it was linked more often to communication, teamwork, and responsiveness. Even so, both colleges promoted the broader idea that employability depends on moral and behavioural self-regulation as much as on technical competence.

Institutional documents reinforced the same message. Course syllabi and student handbooks described moral education as a means of cultivating professional ethics, dedication to work, and social responsibility. Through these materials, students were positioned not only as learners but as future contributors to economic and social development. Moral education thus functioned as a site in which the ideal worker was defined and normalised. Taken together, these findings suggest that moral education in vocational colleges operates as an institutional discourse through which students are invited to imagine themselves as disciplined and employable future workers.

Students' Responses to Work Ethics Discourse

Although the institutional discourse of the ideal worker was relatively coherent, students did not interpret it uniformly. Their responses fell into three broad patterns: instrumental acceptance, reflective adaptation, and critical distance. These patterns were not rigid categories, and individual students sometimes moved between them. However, they illuminate the different interpretive positions through which students engaged with institutional expectations. More importantly, they show that labour identity formation did not involve simple internalisation of school-based messages. Instead, students developed different understandings of what kind of worker they should become and how they should position themselves in relation to institutional work ethics discourse.

Instrumental Acceptance

Some students accepted moral education in primarily pragmatic terms. They saw the values promoted in class as useful guidance for entering employment, even if they did not discuss them in highly moralised language. One student explained that responsibility and hard work were important because “companies expect workers to behave like this”. Another said that moral education helped students understand “how we should behave when we start working”.

A longer account from one student illustrates this pattern more clearly:

I think the classes are useful because they tell us what companies care about. Teachers always talk about responsibility, discipline, and attitude. Maybe not everything is like that in reality, but if you are just starting work, you still need to understand these expectations first. (Student 8, College B)

What is notable here is that the student did not describe moral education primarily as a source of ethical conviction, but as a practical guide to becoming recognisable to employers. Even the qualification “maybe not everything is like that in reality” does not undermine acceptance; instead, it reinforces the student’s pragmatic orientation. The value of moral education lies in helping one understand how managers in workplaces judge newcomers.

For these students, moral education was valued because it translated workplace expectations into clear behavioural guidance. The discourse of the ideal worker was not

experienced as abstract ideology but as practical knowledge that could help them adapt to organisational life. Their acceptance was therefore instrumental as much as normative. In these cases, labour identity took shape as a pragmatic orientation towards becoming a compliant, employable, and institutionally legible worker.

Reflective Adaptation

A second group of students agreed with the values promoted in moral education but felt that they needed to be interpreted more flexibly. These students did not reject responsibility, discipline, or teamwork. Instead, they regarded such values as incomplete unless adapted to the complexity of actual workplaces.

One student noted that teachers often suggested that “if you work hard and follow the rules, everything will go well”, but added that the workplace is more complicated than that. Another observed that ideas presented in moral education classes sounded ideal, whereas people already in employment described workplace realities differently. A further example shows this more clearly:

I do not think the teachers are wrong when they talk about responsibility and teamwork. These things are important. But at work you also have to see the situation. Sometimes just following the rules is not enough, and sometimes different people handle things in different ways. (Student 17, College A)

This quotation is important because it does not reject institutional values. The student explicitly says that the teachers are “not wrong”. At the same time, the student resists a literal or absolute application of these values by insisting on situational judgement. This is not passive agreement, nor is it full opposition. It is a form of interpretive adjustment through which school-based values are retained but translated into more contingent understandings of workplace life.

These accounts indicate a pattern of reflective adaptation. Institutional messages remained meaningful, but their practical relevance was subject to modification. Students in this group did not simply internalise what they were taught. Rather, they reinterpreted it through an awareness of uncertainty, informal workplace norms, and the contingent character of labour market life. Here, labour identity took shape through a conditional understanding of workerhood in which institutional expectations were accepted, but only after being reworked through students’ anticipated or observed experiences of real work.

Critical Distance

A third pattern involved greater scepticism. Some students regarded moral education as overly idealised or incomplete. They did not necessarily reject work-related values themselves, but they questioned whether the institutional discourse adequately reflected real employment conditions, organisational hierarchies, or issues of fairness.

One student remarked that classes sometimes made work sound too simple, as if success depended only on being hardworking. Another argued that whether things go well at work also depends on management, treatment by employers, and broader organisational conditions. One student expressed this particularly clearly:

In class they talk as if being responsible and obedient is enough to become a good worker. But in real jobs, it also depends on whether the company is fair, whether the manager treats people properly, and whether workers are respected. It is not only about your attitude. (Student 12, College A)

This quotation is analytically significant because it introduces factors that are largely absent from institutional discourse: fairness, managerial authority, and respect. The student does not deny the value of responsibility, but challenges the assumption that worker success or worth can be explained only by personal morality. In doing so, the student shifts attention from individual conduct to the relational and structural conditions of work.

These students maintained a degree of critical distance from the ideal worker discourse, suggesting that they were aware of its limits as an account of contemporary employment. Their scepticism was directed not necessarily at work ethics themselves, but at the simplification through which institutional discourse presented employment as morally transparent and behaviourally controllable. In these cases, labour identity took shape through a more sceptical positioning towards institutional expectations, in which becoming a worker meant not only learning to behave properly but also recognising the broader conditions under which work is organised and valued.

Taken together, these three patterns show that labour identity formation cannot be understood as straightforward moral socialisation. Students engaged in interpretive work that ranged from pragmatic alignment to conditional reinterpretation and sceptical distancing. The findings suggest that students' agency is differentiated: It may appear through practical acceptance, selective translation, or critical questioning, rather than only through open resistance. The classroom observations also suggest that teaching approach shaped, but did not determine, these response patterns. More lecture-based explanations tended to support instrumental acceptance because students treated moral education as a set of behavioural rules for employment. By contrast, when teachers used workplace cases or invited students to discuss internship experiences, students more often articulated reflective adaptation or critical distance. However, because the study did not systematically compare pedagogical interventions, this relationship should be understood as an interpretive pattern rather than a causal finding.

Internships as a Space of Labour Identity Negotiation

Internships played a particularly important role in shaping how students negotiated institutional messages. They provided students with direct exposure to workplace routines, expectations, and relationships, allowing them to compare school-based moral

discourse with actual work practice. In this sense, internships were not simply an extension of classroom learning. They were interpretive sites in which students assessed whether institutional messages about work were realistic, sufficient, or incomplete.

For some students, internships confirmed the values promoted in moral education. One student explained that responsibility became much more concrete during internship because if one person failed to complete a task, the whole team was affected. Another said that attitudes and responsibility, which had initially seemed abstract in class, were clearly valued by employers in practice. One student stated:

Before the internship, I thought the classes were repeating the same things about attitude and responsibility. But after I started working, I realised these things mattered more than I expected. If your attitude is poor, people notice it immediately. (Student 14, College B)

This quotation shows that internships could strengthen the legitimacy of institutional discourse by translating abstract classroom messages into visible workplace consequences. Values such as attitude and responsibility became credible not because students were told they mattered, but because students observed how they operated in everyday organisational settings. For these students, internship experience reinforced the credibility of moral education and supported an understanding of themselves as workers who needed to embody these expectations in practice.

At the same time, internships also revealed the limits of moral education discourse. Several students observed that work often requires situational judgement, flexibility, and adaptation rather than simple rule-following. One student noted that in class workers were told to follow rules, but in real workplaces people sometimes needed to adjust to different circumstances. Another explained:

In school, things are explained in a more standard way. But during internship I found that different supervisors expect different things, and sometimes you have to adapt quickly instead of just doing what the rules say. (Student 9, College A)

This comment indicates that workplace learning introduced complexity that could not be fully captured by the more standardised language of moral education. Rather than rejecting classroom values altogether, the student points to the gap between institutional generalisation and workplace variation. Internships did not merely validate school-based discourse; they also complicated it by exposing students to the uneven and relational character of work.

Internships also shaped labour identity in occupationally specific ways. Students in engineering programmes often emphasised technical accuracy, reliability, and task completion as essential features of responsible work. Students in service-related programmes more often highlighted communication, flexibility, and interpersonal skills. Through internship experience, abstract ideals were translated into field-specific

understandings of good work and worker identity. This suggests that labour identity was negotiated not only at the level of general moral values, but also through concrete encounters with the practical demands of particular occupational settings.

Overall, internships served as a bridge between institutional discourse and labour market reality. They were not only sites of skill application but spaces of interpretive comparison in which students assessed whether school-based values were realistic, sufficient, or incomplete. Labour identity formation was therefore shaped not only by what colleges taught but also by how students tested those messages in workplace settings. This confirms that labour identity in vocational education emerges through the interaction between institutional discourse, lived work experience, and students' own interpretive labour.

Discussion

This study examined how moral education in vocational colleges contributes to the formation of students' labour identities. The findings show that moral education does not simply communicate general ethical principles. Rather, it functions as an institutional discourse through which vocational colleges define desirable worker qualities and connect employability to moral and behavioural dispositions. At the same time, students do not engage with these institutional messages in a uniform or passive manner. Instead, they interpret, adapt, and sometimes question them in light of their own experiences, internship encounters, and perceptions of labour market realities. Labour identity formation therefore emerges as a negotiated process shaped by the interaction between institutional discourse, workplace experience, and student agency.

Moral Education and the Construction of the Ideal Worker

The first research question asked how moral education is enacted in vocational colleges to promote values such as discipline, responsibility, and work ethics. The findings suggest that moral education is closely tied to labour preparation and operates as an institutional mechanism for constructing a normative image of the "ideal worker". Across both colleges, teachers, classroom practices, and institutional documents consistently presented employability as dependent not only on technical competence but also on behavioural qualities such as punctuality, reliability, cooperation, and commitment to work.

This finding extends earlier research suggesting that vocational education contributes to shaping students' orientations towards work as well as their occupational competence (Billett 2011). It also resonates with critical perspectives arguing that vocational education may help produce worker subjectivities aligned with organisational demands and labour market expectations (Avis 2018; Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011). In the present study, moral education clearly served this function by repeatedly linking work-related values to the kind of worker students were expected to become.

Importantly, the findings indicate that the ideal worker was not presented simply as an ethically good person in general terms. Instead, the ideal worker was defined through a labour-oriented logic in which moral worth was tied to workplace usefulness, behavioural discipline, and organisational reliability. This point matters because it shows that moral education in vocational colleges is not only about transmitting desirable values, but also about producing a particular understanding of employable workerhood.

At the same time, the findings suggest that the ideal worker was not constructed in exactly the same way across the two colleges. In the engineering-oriented setting, moral education more often emphasised precision, seriousness, and task accountability. In the service-oriented setting, it placed greater emphasis on communication, emotional management, and teamwork. This indicates that the ideal worker is not a fixed abstract figure but an occupationally inflected construct shaped by programme context. Even so, the broader message remained consistent across both institutions: Employability was framed as inseparable from moral self-discipline and appropriate conduct.

Students' Interpretations of Institutional Work Ethics Discourse

The second research question focused on how students interpret the moral messages promoted in vocational colleges. A key contribution of this study is the finding that students' responses to institutional work ethics discourse were differentiated rather than uniform. The analysis identified three broad patterns of response: instrumental acceptance, reflective adaptation, and critical distance. These patterns demonstrate that students are not passive recipients of institutional expectations but active interpreters of them.

Students showing instrumental acceptance regarded moral education primarily as practical guidance for entering the workplace. They accepted institutional messages because these messages appeared useful for understanding employer expectations and organisational behaviour. In these cases, moral education was interpreted less as abstract ethical instruction and more as employability knowledge. This suggests that institutional discourse can be persuasive not only at a moral level but also through its perceived practical value. Labour identity, in this form, was shaped as a pragmatic orientation towards becoming a compliant and employable worker.

Students showing reflective adaptation accepted many of the values promoted by moral education but did not treat them as sufficient on their own. Instead, they adjusted these values in light of their understanding of workplace complexity. For these students, responsibility, discipline, and teamwork remained important, but they had to be interpreted flexibly rather than followed mechanically. This pattern is important because it shows that student agency often operates through selective reinterpretation rather than direct rejection. Labour identity here was formed through a more conditional and situational understanding of workerhood.

Students expressing critical distance questioned whether moral education fully reflected the realities of contemporary work. They did not necessarily reject work-related values themselves, but they doubted whether success at work could be explained solely through diligence, obedience, and responsibility. Some pointed to management style, workplace inequality, organisational conditions, and respect in the workplace as factors largely absent from the institutional narrative. In such cases, labour identity was formed through a more sceptical positioning towards institutional expectations, one that acknowledged not only worker behaviour but also the broader conditions under which labour is organised and evaluated.

Together, these findings refine existing research on vocational identity and youth transitions to work. They show that labour identity formation involves interpretive work through which students evaluate, translate, and sometimes challenge institutional messages about what it means to become a worker (Ferm et al. 2019; Furlong 2013; Kryger and Qvortrup 2025). More importantly, the findings show that student agency is differentiated: It may take the form of pragmatic alignment, selective reinterpretation, or sceptical distancing, rather than appearing only as overt resistance.

Internships as a Mediating Space of Labour Identity Formation

The third research question asked how students negotiate their labour identities in relation to labour expectations and employment realities. The findings demonstrate that internships played a particularly important role in this process. Internship experiences functioned as a mediating space in which students encountered actual workplace norms and compared them with the values promoted in moral education courses.

For some students, internships reinforced institutional messages. They found that employers did indeed value responsibility, punctuality, attitude, and teamwork, and this strengthened their acceptance of what had been taught in class. In these cases, internships made school-based values appear more concrete and practically meaningful. This aligns with previous research emphasising that workplace learning can strengthen professional orientation and identity development (Billett 2011; Tynjälä 2008). It is also consistent with newer research showing that workplace guidance, occupational image, and mentor support shape how students experience training and transition (Dubeau and Chochard 2024; Okolie 2022; Schneider et al. 2024).

However, internships did not simply confirm moral education. They also exposed students to forms of workplace complexity that were less visible in classroom discourse. Students observed that work often involves situational judgement, informal adaptation, interpersonal negotiation, and organisational inconsistency. This means that internships served not just as sites of skill application, but as interpretive sites in which institutional discourse was tested against labour market reality. In this respect, internships played a dual role: They could validate school-based values, but they could also reveal their incompleteness.

This mediating role of internships is theoretically significant. It suggests that labour identity formation occurs through movement between educational discourse and workplace experience. Moral education provides a normative framework through which students are encouraged to understand worker behaviour, but internship participation allows them to evaluate whether that framework is realistic, sufficient, or incomplete. Labour identity is formed neither wholly in school nor wholly at work, but in the interaction between the two. Recent research on workplace learning, dual vocational education and training (VET), and internships similarly emphasises that transitions across settings can be formative precisely because students must negotiate different expectations, perspectives, and forms of guidance (Brands et al. 2025; Busse and Maué 2025; Popov 2024; Wijga, Beausaert, and Kyndt 2025).

Overall, the discussion shows that moral education in vocational colleges is significant not because it simply transmits values, but because it provides a normative framework through which students are invited to imagine themselves as future workers. Yet this framework is never passively absorbed. Rather, labour identity is formed through students' ongoing interpretation of institutional messages in relation to workplace experience and employment expectations.

Conclusion

This study examined how moral education in vocational colleges contributes to students' labour identity formation. Based on interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis in two public vocational colleges in eastern China, it showed that labour identity formation is not a direct outcome of institutional socialisation, but a negotiated process shaped by moral education discourse, workplace experience, and student agency.

The findings show that moral education constructs a normative image of the ideal worker by linking employability to discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and appropriate conduct. However, students interpreted these messages differently. Their responses ranged from instrumental acceptance to reflective adaptation and critical distance. These patterns suggest that students actively make sense of institutional expectations rather than simply absorbing them. Internship experiences further shaped this process by allowing students to compare school-based values with workplace realities.

The study contributes to vocational education research by highlighting the moral and cultural dimensions of vocational training, distinguishing labour identity from vocational identity, and showing differentiated forms of student agency. It also suggests that moral education should move beyond presenting work ethics as fixed norms. Curriculum design should provide more opportunities for students to discuss internship experiences, workplace complexity, fairness, and the gap between formal values and actual labour conditions. Although situated in China, the concept of labour identity may also be useful in other vocational systems where students are prepared not only for

occupational competence but also for broader expectations about worker conduct and employability.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted in only two vocational colleges in eastern China, so the findings are context-specific. Second, it focused on students during college and internship transition, and cannot fully capture how labour identities develop after graduation. Third, because moral education in Chinese vocational colleges operates within explicit ideological and institutional frameworks, participants may have moderated their responses according to perceived expectations. Students may have underreported critical distance while overreporting instrumental acceptance of values such as discipline, responsibility, and dedication. Although confidentiality was emphasised, social desirability bias cannot be fully excluded.

Future research could use longitudinal designs to examine how labour identities develop after graduation and through longer-term workplace participation. Comparative studies across regions, institutional types, or national contexts could also clarify how moral education and labour identity formation vary across vocational systems. Further research could also examine how social class, gender, migration status, and regional labour markets shape students' interpretations of institutional moral discourse.

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