PUPILS' PERCEPTIONS OF MORAL AND ETHICAL VALUES: THE CASE OF PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN PLATEAU STATE, NIGERIA

Jere NDAZHAGA,
jere.ndazhaga@fuep.edu.ng

Emmanuel Jidauna NOKSHUWAN
emmyjiddy@gmail.com
&
Ibrahim POLMI
ibropolmi@gmail.com

TETFund Centre of Excellence for Innovative Teaching and Learning in Primary and Early Childhood Education (T_CEIPEC), Federal University of Education, Pankshin, Plateau State. Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Moral and ethical values constitute the foundation of responsible citizenship, peaceful coexistence, and academic excellence among school children. However, growing concerns about indiscipline, dishonesty, disrespect, and other forms of unethical behaviour have raised questions about the effectiveness of values education in primary schools. Against this background, this study examined pupils' perceptions of moral and ethical values, the factors that threaten moral and ethical values, the impact on pupils' academic activities and learning environment; and differences in pupils' perceptions based on gender and whether the school is in the rural or urban area. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised Primary Four pupils in public primary schools in Plateau State. A sample of 150 pupils was selected using a multistage sampling technique involving the selection of one urban and one rural school from each of the three senatorial zones, resulting in six schools from which 25 pupils were randomly selected. Data was collected using the Pupils' Perception of Moral and Ethical Values Questionnaire. The instrument was validated by experts, while a pilot study produced a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.86. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation) were used to answer the research questions, while the Independent Samples t-test was used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that pupils perceived a general threat to moral and ethical values (Grand Mean = 3.01), particularly in honesty, truthfulness, respect, obedience, and academic integrity. Peer influence, inadequate moral instruction, negative media exposure, bullying, and weak reinforcement of good behaviour were identified as the major factors responsible for the threat to moral and ethical values (Grand Mean = 2.96). The study further found that the threat to moral and ethical values adversely affect pupils' academic activities and learning environment (Grand Mean = 3.05). The hypothesis testing revealed a significant difference between male and female pupils' perceptions of moral and ethical values, $t(148) = 2.24$, $p = .027$, and its impact on academic activities and learning environment, $t(148) = 2.08$, $p = .039$, while no significant difference existed between urban and rural pupils' perceptions moral and ethical value decline, $t(148) = 0.82$, $p = .414$. The study concluded that the threat to moral and ethical values poses a significant challenge to pupils' character development and academic achievement. It recommended strengthening value-based education through Social Studies and Civic Education,

alongside active collaboration among parents, teachers, and communities to reinforce positive moral behaviour among pupils.
Keywords: Moral Values, Ethical Values, Primary Schools, Citizenship, Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Education remains a fundamental instrument for promoting responsible citizenship, discipline, honesty, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence. Beyond the transmission of knowledge and skills, education plays a critical role in shaping learners' moral character and preparing them to become responsible members of society. Moral values are accepted principles that distinguish right from wrong and guide human behaviour, while ethical values are standards that promote integrity, accountability, justice, fairness, and responsible conduct in personal and social relationships (Ndazhaga, Nokshuwan, & Polmi, 2025).

Schacter, Gilbert, Nock & Wegner (2022) argued that pupils' perceptions influence their attitudes, behaviours, and moral decision-making, making pupils' views an important source of evidence for evaluating the moral and ethical values.

Globally, several empirical studies have reported a steady threat to moral and ethical values among school children. Benedicto (2025) found that schools that effectively integrated ethical education recorded significantly higher levels of honesty, discipline, responsibility, and respect than schools with weak value education programmes. Similarly, Hau & Dan (2024) established that continuous participation in ethical education significantly improved pupils' empathy, moral reasoning, responsible decision-making, classroom behaviour, and interpersonal relationships. In Indonesia, Hafidhi, Hanafi, Hadi, Kusumaningrum & Radewi (2024) reported that about 68% of teachers perceived declining honesty, discipline, respect for authority, and social responsibility among primary school pupils, attributing the trend to digital media exposure, peer influence, and inadequate parental supervision. Likewise, Tiara, Danar, Santoso, and Agustin (2024) found that pupils exposed to structured character education demonstrated higher levels of accountability, cooperation, tolerance, honesty, and respect than those without such programmes.

Studies across Africa reveal similar patterns. Belay, Eneyew & Merawi (2025) reported that inadequate implementation of citizenship education, insufficient teacher preparation, and limited instructional resources reduced schools' effectiveness in promoting ethical behaviour. In addition, weak family structures, rapid urbanization, globalization, and increasing media exposure contribute significantly to declining moral values, indiscipline, aggression, and weak civic responsibility among primary school pupils.

In Nigeria, empirical evidence equally suggests increasing manifestations of dishonesty, bullying, truancy, aggression, examination malpractice, disrespect for teachers, and weak civic responsibility despite the emphasis placed on character formation in Federal Republic of Nigeria (2024). Akinola (2024) found that over 70% of teachers perceived a significant deterioration in pupils' moral behaviour and associated it with poor parental supervision, peer influence, economic hardship, and inappropriate digital media exposure. Similarly, Zubairu, Inuwa & Musa (2025) reported that inadequate instructional resources, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teacher training, and weak implementation of citizenship education limited the development of desirable moral values among pupils.

Evidence from Plateau State supports these national findings. Ndazhaga, Polmi & Nokshuwan (2024) reported declining honesty, discipline, cooperation, respect for authority, and responsibility among primary school pupils in Pankshin Local Government Area. Likewise,

Ndazhaga, Nokshuwan & Polmi (2025) documented increasing cases of truancy, bullying, dishonesty, disobedience, disrespect for teachers, and weak commitment to school rules. However, both studies relied primarily on teachers' perceptions, with limited empirical evidence on pupils' own perceptions of threats to moral and ethical values.

Empirical studies have also identified several factors responsible for threat to moral and ethical values among pupils. Korley & Mumuni (2024) found that consistent parental guidance, positive role modelling, and effective communication significantly enhanced honesty, discipline, empathy, responsibility, and respect among children. Conversely, Benedicto (2025) reported that excessive digital media exposure reduced face-to-face interaction and encouraged cyberbullying, aggression, disrespect for authority, and imitation of antisocial behaviours. Nigerian studies similarly identified poor parental supervision, poverty, peer pressure, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate instructional resources, and ineffective implementation of citizenship education as major contributors to declining moral standards among pupils (Akinola, 2024; Zubairu et al, 2025). In Plateau State, Ndazhaga et al (2024) identified social media exposure, weakening family structures, peer influence, and changing societal values as major predictors of truancy, dishonesty, bullying, and indiscipline among primary school pupils.

Research has further established that declining moral and ethical values adversely affect pupils' academic activities and learning evironment. Hau & Dan (2024) found that pupils who participated in ethical education programmes demonstrated better classroom participation, stronger academic motivation, improved concentration, and higher academic performance. Similarly, Tiara et al. (2024) reported that effective character education improved attendance, classroom discipline, cooperation, and learning outcomes. Chowdhury, Salkila & Obaydullah (2019) also reported that weak discipline increased classroom disruption, absenteeism, bullying, examination malpractice, and poor academic performance. Likewise, Akinola (2024) found that declining moral standards reduced classroom participation, learning motivation, and educational achievement. Ndazhaga, Polmi & Nokshuwan (2024) also reported that pupils who exhibit dishonesty, truancy, poor discipline, and disrespect for authority experienced lower classroom participation, increased absenteeism, weak concentration, and poor academic performance in Plateau State.

The threat to moral and ethical values among primary school pupils has become a major concern in contemporary Nigerian society. Behaviours such as dishonesty, disobedience, disrespect for authority, bullying, truancy, examination malpractice, aggression, and indiscipline are increasingly observed despite the inclusion of Social Studies and Civic Education in the primary school curriculum.

In Plateau State, parents, teachers, and community leaders have expressed concern over the growing erosion of moral standards among pupils. Although Social Studies and Civic Education are expected to promote responsible citizenship, honesty, discipline, tolerance, cooperation, and respect for authority, the persistence of unethical behaviours raises concerns about the effectiveness of value education and its implications for pupils' academic achievement. Although previous studies have examined moral and ethical value decline, they have focused largely on the perceptions of teachers, parents, and other stakeholders, with limited attention given to pupils' own perspectives. This represents an important gap because pupils are directly involved in school interactions and can provide first-hand information on the extent, causes, and effects of threats to moral and ethical values.

It is against this background that this study investigated pupils' perceptions of the threats to moral and ethical values in primary schools in Plateau State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study

examined the perceived threat to moral and ethical values, the factors responsible for the threats, and its effects on pupils' academic activities and learning environment.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to assess pupils' perceptions of the threats to moral and ethical values in primary schools in Plateau State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

i. examine pupils' perceptions of the threat to moral and ethical values in primary schools in Plateau State.
ii. identify the key factors responsible for the threats to moral and ethical values among primary school pupils.
iii. identify the perceived effects of the threat to moral and ethical values on pupils' academic activities and learning environment.
iv. find out if there is any gender difference in pupils' perceptions of the threats to moral and ethical values in primary schools.
v. find out if there is any difference between pupils' perceptions of the threats to moral and ethical values in primary schools in urban and rural areas.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study:

i. What is the perceptions of pupils to the threats of moral and ethical values in primary schools in Plateau State?
ii. What factors are responsible for the threats of moral and ethical values among primary school pupils in Plateau State?
iii. What are the perceived effects of the threats to moral and ethical value on pupils' academic activities and learning environment?
iv. Is there any gender difference in pupils' perceptions of the threats to moral and ethical values in primary schools?
v. Is there any difference between pupils' perceptions of the threats to moral and ethical values in primary schools in urban and rural?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses will be tested at 0.05 level of significance:

H_{01}: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female pupils regarding their perception of the threat to moral and ethical values in primary schools in Plateau State.

H_{02}: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of pupils in urban and rural areas regarding the threats to moral and ethical values in primary schools in Plateau State.

H_{03}: There is no significant difference in the mean responses of male and female pupils regarding the perceived effects of the threats to moral and ethical values on pupils' academic activities and learning environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised Primary 4 pupils in public primary schools in Plateau State, Nigeria. A sample of 150 pupils was selected through a multistage sampling technique involving the selection of one urban and one rural school from each of the 3 senatorial zones, giving 6 schools, from which 25 pupils were

randomly selected. Primary 4 pupils were chosen because they possess the cognitive ability and adequate exposure at that level to provide reliable responses. Data was collected using the Pupils' Perception of Moral and Ethical Values Questionnaire. The instrument was validated by experts, and a pilot study yielded a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.86. Frequency counts, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations were used to answer the research questions, while the hypotheses were tested using the Independent Samples t-test at the 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Pupils' perceptions of Moral and Ethical Values under threat in Primary Schools.

S/N	Statement	*M*	*SD*	Decision
1	Greeting elders	3.42	0.81	Accepted
2	Sharing lunch or school supplies with classmates	2.36	0.87	Rejected
3	Telling the truth even when punishment is involved	3.61	0.72	Accepted
4	Respecting pupils from different ethnic groups	3.28	0.89	Accepted
5	Keeping classrooms and playgrounds clean	2.43	0.91	Rejected
6	Helping injured classmates	3.18	0.93	Accepted
7	Waiting for one's turn during games	3.22	0.87	Accepted
8	Saying sorry after wrongdoing	2.48	0.86	Rejected
9	Not cheating during examinations or classwork	3.70	0.69	Accepted
10	Listening quietly when teachers speak	3.46	0.75	Accepted
	Grand Mean	**3.11**	**0.82**	**Accepted**

Criterion mean = 2.50

Source: Field Analysis, 2026

The results in (Table 1) indicate that pupils generally perceived moral and ethical values to be under threat in primary schools across Plateau State, as shown by the reported grand mean of 3.11, which exceeded the criterion mean of 2.50. Examination honesty recorded the highest mean score (M = 3.70, SD = 0.69), followed by personal truthfulness under pressure (M = 3.61, SD = 0.72) and obedience to teachers (M = 3.46, SD = 0.75). Conversely, sharing lunch or school supplies (M = 2.36, SD = 0.87), classroom orderliness (M = 2.43, SD = 0.91) and apologising after minor wrongdoing (M = 2.48, SD = 0.86) fell below the criterion mean. These findings suggest that pupils' concerns were more pronounced regarding honesty, truthfulness and respect for school authority than certain interpersonal behaviours.

The findings broadly agree with Zhao et al. (2025), whose study examined the relationship between children's moral judgments about cheating and their cheating behaviour. They also relate to Jelimo et al. (2025), who highlighted the importance of honesty, responsibility and respect in school moral education. However, these studies do not directly establish the prevalence of perceived threats among primary school pupils in Plateau State. The present findings therefore contribute context-specific evidence that academic integrity and truthfulness deserve greater attention in primary education.

The study concludes that schools should strengthen practical moral instruction, teacher role-modelling, fair assessment and the reinforcement of positive behaviour while recognising that the results reflect pupils' perceptions rather than independently measured changes in moral conduct.

Research Question 2

Table 2: **Mean Ratings of Pupils on Factors Responsible for the Threats to Moral and Ethical Values.**

S/N	Statement	*M*	*SD*	Decision
1	Friends laugh at pupils who do the right thing	3.26	0.90	Accepted
2	Parents remind pupils to respect others	2.10	0.95	Rejected
3	Teachers spend more time teaching academic subjects than values	3.45	0.82	Accepted
4	Nollywood movies influence pupils negatively	3.33	0.88	Accepted
5	Pupils who fight are rarely punished	2.44	0.89	Rejected
6	Older pupils bully younger pupils	3.41	0.80	Accepted
7	Communities celebrate kindness and good behaviour	2.18	0.92	Rejected
8	Pupils copy bad behaviour to avoid teasing	3.52	0.74	Accepted
9	Pupils with expensive items sometimes mistreat others	2.39	0.88	Rejected
10	Teachers rarely recognize good behavior	3.36	0.81	Accepted
	Grand Mean	**2.94**	**0.85**	**Accepted**

Criterion mean = 2.50

Source: Field Analysis, 2026

The findings in Table 2 revealed that pupils identified several factors contributing to the threats to moral and ethical values, with a grand mean of 2.94 above the criterion mean of 2.50. The results indicate that peer pressure, inadequate attention to moral instruction, negative media influence, bullying, and lack of recognition of good behaviour are major factors threatening morals among pupils. The highest-rated factor was pupils copying bad behaviour to avoid teasing (M = 3.52, SD = 0.74), followed by teachers spending more time on academic subjects than moral instruction (M = 3.45, SD = 0.82). This suggests that peer acceptance and school practices play significant roles in shaping pupils' moral behaviour.

The interpretation of this finding means that moral development among children does not occur in isolation but is influenced by their social environment. At the primary school level, pupils are highly influenced by their classmates; therefore, negative peer approval can encourage behaviours that contradict expected moral standards. The findings support Korley and Mumuni (2024), who found that peer relationships strongly influence children's moral reasoning and behavioural choices. Similarly, Chowdhury et al. (2019) identified weak emphasis on moral education as a challenge affecting value development among learners. The finding differs from studies that place family background as the dominant threat to moral. This variation may be explained by the age of respondents, as primary school pupils may have stronger awareness of school experiences and peer relationships than family-related influences. The implication is that schools should strengthen moral education, peer mentoring, and positive behaviour reinforcement strategies.

The findings above showed that peer influence, inadequate moral instruction, negative media exposure, bullying, and weak reinforcement of good behaviour are the major factors contributing to the threats to moral and ethical values among pupils. This implies that moral development among primary school pupils is influenced by multiple interacting social and environmental factors rather than by a single source.

Research Question 3

Table 3: Mean Ratings of Pupils on the Effects of the threats to Moral and Ethical Values on Academic Activities and learning environment.

S/N	Statement	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Decision
1	Pupils from different tribes avoid playing together	2.38	0.94	Rejected
2	Classmates steal others' belongings	3.12	0.87	Accepted
3	Pupils who refuse cheating are mocked	3.46	0.80	Accepted
4	Friends reject pupils who obey rules	2.72	0.91	Accepted
5	Pupils make fun of respectful classmates	2.41	0.96	Rejected
6	Lack of sharing creates sadness among pupils	3.18	0.82	Accepted
7	Pupils lie to teachers to avoid duties	3.54	0.72	Accepted
8	Frequent fights occur during break	2.88	0.86	Accepted
9	Cheating sometimes appears to be rewarded	3.58	0.69	Accepted
10	Loss of trust among friends	3.32	0.79	Accepted
	Grand Mean	**3.06**	**0.84**	**Accepted**

Note. Criterion mean = 2.50. Mean scores of 2.50 and above were accepted, while mean scores below 2.50 were rejected.

Source: Field Analysis, 2026

Table 4.3 shows that pupils generally perceived the threat to moral and ethical values as having negative effects on academic activities and learning environment, as indicated by the grand mean of 3.06, which is above the criterion mean of 2.50. Eight of the ten statements were accepted, with the highest-rated effects being that cheating sometimes appears to be rewarded (M = 3.58, SD = 0.69), pupils lie to teachers to avoid duties (M = 3.54, SD = 0.72), and pupils who refuse cheating are mocked (M = 3.46, SD = 0.80). Pupils also agreed that threats to moral values contribute to loss of trust among friends, lack of sharing, stealing, frequent fight, and rejection of pupils who obey rules, suggesting that moral decline weakens discipline, honesty, peer relationships, and the overall learning environment. However, pupils did not agree that pupils from different tribes avoid playing together (M = 2.38, SD = 0.94) or that respectful classmates are mocked (M = 2.41, SD = 0.96), indicating that these behaviours were not perceived as major threats to moral and ethical values in the study area.

This study revealed that pupils perceived that the threats to moral and ethical values as having considerable effects on academic activities and learning environment. The accepted items demonstrate that behaviours such as cheating, dishonesty, indiscipline, peer pressure, and lack of trust contributed to an unhealthy learning environment. When unethical behaviours become common, pupils may lose motivation for hard work, develop poor attitudes toward learning, and experience reduced academic engagement.

This finding agrees with Jelimo et al. (2025), who found that discipline, honesty, and responsibility contribute positively to academic achievement. Their study emphasized that learners with strong moral values demonstrate better commitment to academic activities and improved learning outcomes. The current finding supports this position by showing that the absence of these values may encourage behaviours that negatively influence pupils' academic progress.

Similarly, the finding agrees with Tiara et al. (2024), who found that character education strengthens behaviours necessary for effective learning. They noted that values such as honesty, respect, cooperation, and responsibility support positive learner attitudes and academic success. The present study confirms that strengthening moral education can help reduce academic dishonesty, improve discipline, and promote a supportive learning environment. Therefore, schools should intensify moral and ethical education to promote responsible behaviours that enhance pupils' academic achievement.

The findings revealed that declining moral and ethical values negatively affect pupils' academic activities and learning environment by encouraging cheating, dishonesty, indiscipline, and poor interpersonal relationships within the school environment. This implies that moral and ethical values constitute an important component of the learning environment and have a direct relationship with pupils' academic experiences and educational outcomes.

Testing of Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

Table 4: Independent Samples *t*-Test of Male and Female Pupils' Perceptions of the threats to Moral and Ethical Value

Group	M	SD	*T*	Df	*p*-value
Male	3.08	0.81	2.24	148	.027
Female	3.15	0.83			

Note. p < .05.

Source: Field Analysis, 2026

The findings in Table 4 indicate no statistically significant difference between male pupils (\(M = 3.08, SD = 0.81) and female pupils (M = 3.15, SD = 0.83) in their perceptions of threats to moral and ethical values, t(148) = -0.45, p > .05). Consequently, the null hypothesis was not rejected at the 0.05 significance level. Although female pupils recorded a slightly higher mean score than male pupils, the reported test did not establish that the difference was statistically significant. The findings suggest that the study did not identify sufficient evidence of a gender-related difference in the overall scores measured.

The finding is relevant to the broader literature on moral development, including Zhao et al. (2025), who investigated children's moral judgments about cheating, and Jelimo et al. (2025), who examined students' perceptions of moral education. However, these studies should not be cited as direct confirmation of gender similarity unless their analyses explicitly examined comparable gender differences. The present result therefore provides evidence specific to the sampled primary school pupils in Plateau State.

The study concludes that male and female pupils did not differ significantly in their overall perceptions of moral and ethical threats in this analysis. This does not prove that both genders have identical experiences or that gender differences cannot occur in particular behavioural dimensions.

Hypothesis 2

Table 5: Independent Samples t-Test of Urban and Rural Pupils' Perceptions of the threats to Moral and Ethical Values

Group	M	SD	*T*	Df	*p*-value
Urban	2.91	0.83	0.43	148	.414
Rural	2.98	0.87			

Note. p > .05.

Source: Field Analysis, 2026

The results in Table 5 show no statistically significant difference between urban pupils (M = 2.91, SD = 0.83) and rural pupils (M = 2.98, SD = 0.87) in their perceptions of factors responsible for threats to moral and ethical values, t(148) = -0.43, p > .05). The null hypothesis was therefore not rejected at the 0.05 significance level. Although rural pupils recorded a slightly higher mean score than urban pupils, the reported difference was not statistically significant. The finding indicates that the study did not establish a location-based difference in the overall ratings of the factors examined.

The result broadly relates to Korley and Mumuni (2024), whose research highlighted the contribution of home, school and social environments to children's moral development. It also relates to Jelimo et al. (2025), which discussed peer pressure and school practices as concerns in moral education. Nevertheless, these studies cannot directly confirm that urban and rural pupils have similar perceptions unless comparable location-based tests were conducted.

The study concludes that no statistically significant difference was established between the two groups in the sampled schools. Educational authorities may therefore consider common measures to strengthen moral education and school discipline while allowing individual schools to respond to their particular circumstances. The result does not demonstrate that urban and rural school environments are identical.

Hypothesis 3

Table 6: Independent Samples *t*-Test of Male and Female Pupils' Perceived Effects of the Threats to Moral and Ethical Values on Academic Activities and Learning Environment

Group	M	SD	*T*	Df	*p*-value
Male	3.03	0.82	-0.44	148	.039
Female	3.09	0.85			

Note. p < .05.

Source: Field Analysis,2026

The results in Table 6 show no statistically significant difference between male pupils (M = 3.03, SD = 0.82) and female pupils (M = 3.09, SD = 0.85) in the perceptions of the effects of moral and ethical threats on academic activities and the learning environment, t(148) = -0.44, p > .05). Accordingly, the null hypothesis was not rejected at the 0.05 significance level. Female pupils recorded a slightly higher mean score, but the reported analysis did not establish a statistically significant difference. The finding suggests that the study did not identify sufficient evidence that gender differentiated pupils' overall perceptions of these effects.

The findings relate broadly to Zhao et al. (2025), which examined children's moral judgments and cheating behaviour, and Jelimo et al. (2025), which discussed honesty, responsibility and respect within school moral education. However, these studies do not directly confirm that boys and girls perceive the effects of moral and ethical threats similarly. The present result should therefore be interpreted as a finding specific to the sampled pupils rather than proof of complete gender equivalence.

The study concludes that school-wide strategies promoting academic honesty, accountability, respectful relationships and consistent behavioural expectations are appropriate for both male and female pupils. Such measures should be complemented by attention to individual needs and any specific challenges identified through further assessment.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that pupils perceive noticeable threats in moral and ethical values within primary schools in Plateau State. This is as a result of inadequate parental guidance, and inconsistent enforcement of discipline in primary schools. Strengthening value-based education therefore requires coordinated efforts involving teachers, parents, school administrators, government agencies, and community stakeholders to reinforce positive behaviour and responsible citizenship among pupils.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- Since a significant gender difference was found in pupils' perception of the threats to moral and ethical values, schools should adopt gender-responsive moral education strategies that encourage equal participation of male and female pupils in activities promoting honesty, respect, responsibility, and discipline.
- As no significant difference was found between urban and rural pupils regarding factors responsible for the threats to moral and ethical values, value-based education programmes should be implemented across all primary schools in Plateau State. Primary schools, parents, and communities should collaborate to address common challenges such as peer pressure, media influence, and weak reinforcement of positive behaviour.
- Since a significant gender difference was found in pupils' perception of the effects of the threats to moral and ethical values on academic activities, moral instruction should be integrated into academic activities to help pupils understand the relationship between ethical behaviour, discipline, and learning success.

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