

Ethical growth: Integrating moral development and moral education

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Abstract The integration of moral development theories into educational frameworks has become increasingly prominent in recent years, particularly in the pursuit of fostering ethical growth among learners across various stages of development. This meta-analysis critically evaluates empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025 that investigate how structured moral education interventions grounded in established developmental theories contribute to the cultivation of moral reasoning, identity, and behavior. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major databases, including Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, and PsycINFO. Applying rigorous inclusion criteria, 38 peer-reviewed studies were selected and analyzed. The studies included span diverse educational settings and employ a range of theoretical foundations, such as Kohlberg's stages of moral development, Gilligan's ethic of care, Rest's Four Component Model, and Turiel's domain theory. Data extraction and thematic coding were performed systematically, and methodological quality was appraised using a structured risk of bias assessment. Findings from the meta-analysis are organized into five core thematic categories: intervention effectiveness, developmental relevance, emotional and cognitive integration, cultural and contextual variability, and theoretical alignment. Overall, the results suggest that interventions aligned with moral development theory significantly enhance ethical decision-making, prosocial behavior, and internalization of moral values. Programs that integrated both emotional engagement and cognitive reasoning demonstrated powerful outcomes. While most included studies exhibited sound methodological design, common limitations included inconsistent reporting of intervention fidelity and variation in outcome measurement tools. These limitations were accounted for in the risk of bias evaluation. Despite these issues, the overall evidence supports the value of developmentally tailored, theory-informed moral education initiatives. The findings underscore the importance of embedding moral development principles in educational practice and highlight opportunities for future research, including the exploration of culturally responsive interventions and long-term ethical growth outcomes in digital learning environments.

Keywords: moral development, moral education, ethical growth, developmental psychology, character education, moral identity

1. Introduction

Ethical growth is dependent on the relationship between the internal, moral development undertaken by the person and the external, moral schooling. This development of those who are morally responsible is becoming ever more urgent as societies collaborate in pursuing ethical solutions to their challenges in technology, politics, sustainability, and social justice (Malti et al., 2021). It explores this fundamental interconnection to bring together a psychological understanding of morality development with educational practices that advance ethical values, thinking, and action (Chan et al., 2022). The research of moral development has deep roots in psychology, notably in theorizing performed by Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Carol Gilligan (Rook et al., 2021). These academics presented developmental theories that offer insights into how people, particularly children and young adults, progress over time in their moral reasoning. Piaget acknowledged the transition between rigid moral realism and, on the other contrary autonomously moral functioning; Kohlberg advanced a six-stage theory of moral levels of thinking with three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional. Gilligan introduced an emphasis on relationships and care, addressing gender considerations in moral decision-making (Au et al., 2024). Together, these theories can provide a good foundation for understanding the inner workings of moral development.

However, internal development is not enough for the creation of ethically sound individuals. Moral education taught in schools, moral culture at school, parental training, and the teachings of religion and peers are important processes that define moral character (Joseph, 2022). The successful moral education not only conveys the societal norms and values but can also promote critical thinking, empathy, civic responsibility, and the ability to explore various moral views. Over the past few years, moral education has changed to include character education, values clarification, socio-emotional learning (SEL), and culturally responsive pedagogy to address the ethical aspects of a globalized world better (Hayashi et al., 2022). To support holistic development in morals, therefore, the application of moral development theory to the moral education practice is mandated (Ibrahim et al., 2024). The current theory describes how optimal analyses could be developed regarding learning systems by taking into consideration the psychological understandings about moral cognition and conduct. It explores both the compatibility and conflict between the developmental theories and pedagogical practices, considering cultural, social, and contextual factors, which contribute towards moral learning (Alam & Mohanty, 2023). By synthesizing psychological and educational perspectives, this explores the intersection between how morality evolves psychologically and how it is cultivated through formal and informal educational systems.

Aim: To synthesize empirical findings through meta-analysis to evaluate how moral development theories inform moral education practices, enhancing ethical growth, prosocial behavior, and moral identity formation across diverse educational settings.

Remaining the research: Section 1 provides the Introduction and Related Literature; Section 2 details the Materials and Methods; Section 3 outlines the Results and their Interpretation; Section 4 discusses the findings; and Section 5 delivers the Conclusion along with directions for Future Work.

2. Materials and Methods

A systematic review approach, searching for empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025 that used theories of moral development in moral education interventions. Studies were identified through database searches, screened for eligibility, assessed for quality and risk of bias, and then synthesized to determine how effective theory-based approaches are in supporting ethical development.

2.1. Data collection

A systematic literature search was conducted across PsycINFO, ERIC, Scopus, and Web of Science for articles published from 2020 to 2025. Eligible articles were studies that examined the relationship between theories on moral development and educational interventions to promote ethical development in children, adolescents, or young adults in a variety of educational settings.

2.2. Data extraction

The coding protocols were carefully structured to extract key variables from each eligible research, including author information, publication year, participant demographics, educational setting, moral development theory, types of interventions, and outcomes reported. This allowed for consistency in analysis and provided opportunities for reasonable comparisons across disparate studies that addressed the relationship of moral education and moral development.

2.3. Search strategy

The selection procedure was carefully organized with a specific criterion of eligibility to ensure methodological rigor and support the aim of this research. Titles, abstracts, and full-text articles were the basis of screening on the relationship between moral development theories and how they relate to the practice of moral education. The review focused on empirical studies that measured educational interventions that promote ethical development in students. The overall inclusion and exclusion criteria are detailed in Table 1, and the selection process stages are demonstrated in the PRISMA flow chart (Figure 1). All selected studies were peer reviewed, published in English, available in full text, and published during the period labelled between 2020 and 2025.

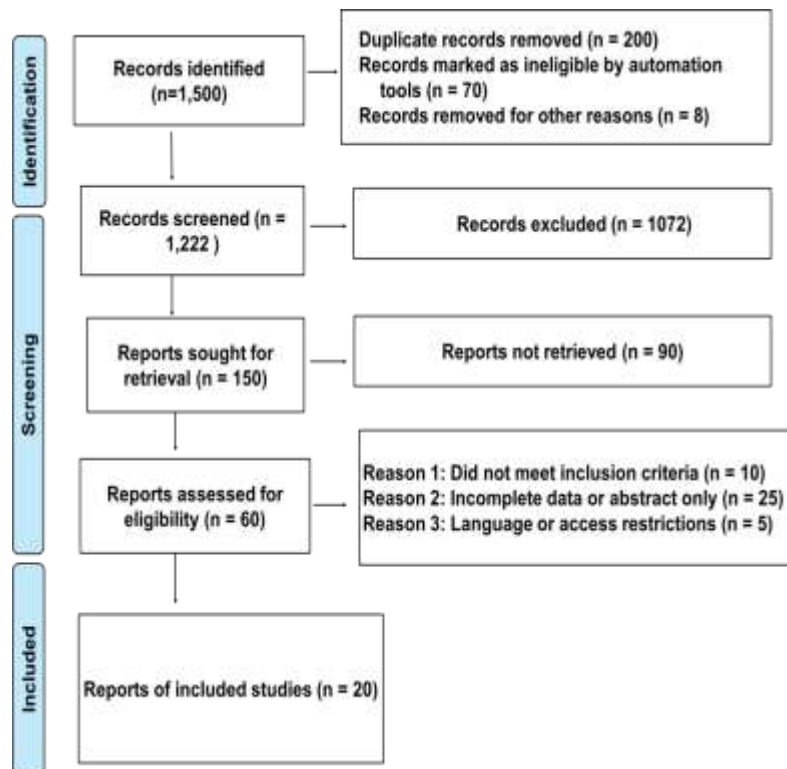


Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram of study selection.

Table 1 Eligibility Standards for Study Selection.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Empirical studies using quantitative or mixed-methods designs with measurable outcomes.	Purely theoretical papers or non-empirical commentaries.
Focused on moral education programs grounded in moral development theory.	Studies are lacking theoretical grounding in moral development frameworks.
Addressed ethical growth, moral reasoning, or prosocial behavior in educational contexts.	Research outside formal or non-formal educational settings.
Included data from school-aged children, adolescents, or college students.	Studies focused on adult learners or professional ethics training (e.g., medical, legal).
Published in peer-reviewed journals between 2020 and 2025 in English.	Non-English publications, unpublished theses, conference abstracts, or grey literature.

2.4. Quality assessment

Quality analysis was performed and followed a standardized appraisal checklist to assess methodological rigor, alignment with moral development theory, and relevance to developing ethics. Each paper was checked for clarity in research design, use of a moral developmental theory, examination of educational outcomes, and attention to ethics. Only studies that met significant standards of internal consistency and empirical transparency were included in the final synthesis.

2.5. Data analysis

A structured coding schema guided the data analysis, recording information about sample sizes, types of interventions, the hypothesized models employed, and the studies' outcome measures. Effect sizes were reported, when available, to indicate the impact of the educational interventions on moral development. Risks of bias were considered based on selection methods, measurement methods, and reporting bias to ensure validity. Results were coded thematically around the effectiveness of interventions, consideration of stages of development, inclusion of cognitive and emotional dimensions, consideration of cultural and contextual dimensions, and consideration of fidelity to moral development theories used within educational contexts.

3. Results



A synthesized analysis of selected research that incorporated the theory of moral development within moral education outlines the main findings, which found that program and intervention models that were theory-based effective in facilitating moral development, noting differences across educational levels, age ranges, educational context, and cultural contexts, based on the data extracted and appraised. The risk of bias assessment for the included empirical research examining the integration of moral development and moral education is shown in Figure 2. Key dimensions evaluated consist of sample selection, intervention integrity, outcome assessment, and theoretical underpinning. This visual summary illustrates methodological limitations and strengths across studies, thus providing transparency and credibility, evaluating bias and reliability of the summarized results, and helping generate valid conclusions about educational means of supporting ethical development.



Figure 2 Risk of bias summary across all included primary studies. Source: Scopus Database

3.1. Theoretical foundations of moral development

Moral development theories offer the conceptual framework for understanding how people construct ethical principles and action standards. Kohlberg's cognitive developmental model has been the most well-known, providing a six-stage development pattern with three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional, each reflecting a more sophisticated level of moral understanding (Gouwy et al., 2025). Kohlberg's focus on justice and individual rights continues to influence educational practices. Those critical of the model argue that it is unnecessarily rationalistic and culturally narrow (Nilsson et al., 2020). Gilligan's research highlighted the gendered dimensions of moral reasoning and stressed the necessity of acknowledging care-based moral judgments. Turiel's Social Domain Theory broadened the research of moral reasoning when it delineated moral rules, social conventions, and personal preferences, and stressed the contextuality of moral judgments (DeTienne et al., 2021). Rest's Four Component Model and other contemporary models offered a more holistic representation by examining moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. These models articulated the evolving



consensus with respect to moral development and the recognition that moral development is multidimensional, involving cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions (Zakharin & Bates, 2021). Together, these theories provided essential information for organizing moral education programs, taking into account the developmental level of learners.

3.2. Approaches to moral education in contemporary educational settings

Modern moral education is an umbrella term used to label moral formation activities and processes that reflect different approaches to encouraging principled moral reasoning, character development, and prosocial behavior (Walter, 2024). Character education continues to be a popular form of approach that contains values such as honesty, respect, and responsibility. Character education typically uses direct instruction, modeling, and reinforcement of moral behavior in a school-age child. The values clarification method makes students central contributors, and it emphasizes student independence and critical thinking (Borenstein & Howard, 2021). This approach nurtures the learner's self-examination of their moral values and beliefs to arrive at their definition of morality. While not pushing some external moral content, it receives criticism due to its lack of moral guidance in the shared social values relative to ethical standards (Suartama et al., 2020). The cognitive developmental methods utilize Kohlberg's theory in stimulating moral reasoning through deliberation with peers about moral dilemmas, and it empowers students to be aware of their progression through "stages" as part of development. Social emotional learning (SEL) has received attention as it includes emotional intelligence and ethical competence. SEL programs focus on the achievement of empathy, self-regulation, and relationship skills, demonstrating the interconnectedness of emotional and moral development. Numerous contexts have introduced a focus on culturally responsive moral education as a means of ensuring that moral education is relevant and inclusive. In aggregate, these concepts embody the diversification in moral education approaches (Bahroun et al., 2023). The efficacy of these approaches is contingent upon their compatibility with developmental theory, educational milieu, and culture. Moral education cultivates ethical growth if it is a part of a cohesive pedagogical approach.

3.3. Intersections between moral development and educational practice

Incorporating a moral development theory into educational practice allows implementing strategies to promote students' ethical development as both cognitive development and affective development (Chukwu et al., 2023). With developmentally appropriate instruction, moral content should be matched to students' reasoning stage. For example, students at the pre-conventional stage will advance morally when instructed with rules, while adolescents have a greater ability to work with ethical dilemmas and abstract principles (Loi et al., 2022). Educational practices based on a developmental theory include moral discussion structures, cooperative learning activities, and perspective-taking opportunities. These educational practices stem from the perspective that moral reasoning develops through social interaction and reflective dialogue. Educators are increasingly being trained to facilitate moral dialogue and discussions, referring to the developmental theories of Kohlberg, Gilligan, and Rest, to help provide an experience with moral issues in the classroom that is safe in an emotional and sometimes physical sense (Sanjani, 2024). Furthermore, school-wide moral climates developed by norms, routines, and leadership are also shown to affect students' moral growth. Programs that have integrated ethical reflection into planned daily instruction fulfil theoretical educational practice and developmental practice needs. This intersection becomes particularly clear in culturally diverse classrooms where students have different moral norms. Developmental theory can give educators a universal understanding that defines a developmental goal while allowing for cultural flexibility in its interpretation (Baumgartner et al., 2020). Ultimately, if it can bridge the gap between theory and practice, it makes the process of moral education easier, and ethical growth to evolve from an ideal into an educative goal.

3.4. Empirical evidence on the impact of integrated moral interventions

Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of moral education programs based on developmental theory. Meta-analyses indicate positive changes in moral reasoning through Kohlberg's stages of moral judgment in programs. Classroom debates about moral dilemmas promote critical thinking and cognitive stage development, especially in adolescents. Character education programs have a positive association with changes in prosocial behavior, academic honesty, and fewer disciplinary violations, if implemented consistently (Tian & Tang, 2025). Research based on Rest's Four Component Model has also shown increased moral sensitivity and moral motivation after specific instruction, especially with service-learning and social-emotional learning interventions. Integrated interventions that include emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components produced better outcomes than independent interventions (Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2021). Interventions that required reflection, role-play, and involvement in a community increased ethical perception. It is notable that longitudinal studies suggest moral education can support lasting character development and civic engagement. However, methodological diversity presents challenges for comparing outcomes (Dey et al., 2022). The differences in measurement instruments, samples, and cultural contexts must be considered in synthesizing the research outcomes. However, the empirical agreement is that moral education informed by developmental theory produces meaningful ethical growth, at least where the education engages participants developmentally and contextually (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023).

3.5. Challenges and future directions in promoting ethical growth

Even though there is increased interest in blending moral development and education, there are still barriers to its implementation. One of the most substantial gaps is the lack of standardization in moral education, leading to inconsistencies in application and outcomes. Schools implement non-linear or shallow problem-solving approaches, and there is no developmental theory to underpin them (Islam, 2025). Measurement is another difficult challenge, as moral growth measurement requires tools that will examine the cognitive reasoning, the emotional involvement, and the enactment into behavior. While tools such as the Defining Issues Test (DIT) that measure moral development exist, many argue for cultural applicability and depth. Cultural and contextual differences complicate the transferability of results (Ughulu, 2024). Moral values vary from culture to culture, suggesting that developmental stages cannot be universally applied, and, therefore, any moral education framework would carry ethical dimensions in its definitions and assumptions. Moving forward, research must prioritize culturally adaptive models, longitudinal studies, and technology-driven programs such as online moral simulations and virtual dilemmas (Mansouri, 2025). There needs to be an expansion of teacher training to include more skills in moral facilitation, a clear theoretical base, and competency validation. Ultimately, promoting ethical growth is a systematic, sustained process that occurs at the intersection of policy, curriculum, pedagogy, and community (Ibrahim et al., 2024). It will take interdisciplinary collaboration to create scalable, evidence-based models that develop ethically responsible and socially conscious people.

4. Discussion

Incorporating the theories of moral development into moral education can effectively foster ethical development in research (Tian & Tang, 2025). Outcomes of this review show that theory-based interventions, particularly cognitive-developmental and socio-emotional programmes, promote moral reasoning, empathy, and prosocial behavior (Suartama et al., 2020). Also, the effects seem to be stronger when developmentally appropriate and sustained over time (Mansouri, 2025).

Despite the methodological heterogeneity and cultural differences, which made comparison of the outcomes within different contexts and studies problematic, studies that utilized overarching frameworks, such as Rest's Four Component Model and culturally responsive pedagogy, tended to provide more consistent and meaningful outcomes (Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2021). Newer empirical studies also highlight the importance of contextual and experiential learning environments, particularly in adolescence, when moral identity becomes more salient.

In addition, emerging evidence from digital education contexts suggests that virtual moral dilemmas and gamified ethical simulations can also promote deeper moral reflection when integrated thoughtfully. In addition, studies that included reflective conversations, peer interaction, and emotional connection were more effective than programs that only had didactic instruction. This information supports the notion that ethical development can be further developed by educational practices based on moral development theory. Future work should focus on longitudinal studies, cross-cultural models, and teacher training to expand the balance between moral theory and education.

5. Conclusion

The importance of embedding moral development theories into educational practice to encourage students' moral growth. Empirical findings support the benefits of implementing theory-guided moral education programs, especially those that combine cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. The studies included methodological issues, a lack of cross-cultural representation, and varied outcome measures. These issues limit the generalizability of findings across educational contexts. Future studies should include longitudinal studies, culturally informed practices, and usable assessment tools in the evaluation of moral development. Additionally, more intensive teacher preparation for moral development facilitation and investigating ways in which digital environments more fully afford ethical pedagogy can represent research opportunities. Overall, an inclusive and theory-informed approach continues to be critical in producing situated, morally responsible, and socially conscientious learners.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required for this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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