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# Assessing Students' Moral Development and Motivation in Moral Education

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## ABSTRACT

Major global crises such as the surge of terrorism and the repercussions of the economic downturn have rekindled an interest in the development of morality and the nurturing of universal values. To date, research on moral functioning has originated predominantly from Western contexts. This study aims to provide an Asian perspective to the existing models. It combines a Kohlbergian approach for the assessment of moral judgment, with a framework based on the Self-Determination Theory to assess the motivational regulations of Singaporean students. The presentation outlines the methodology used and the interim results obtained in the pilot study. The preliminary data indicate that, generally, the development of moral reasoning of the Singaporean students matches the level prescribed for their age group in Kohlberg's theory. There is however, a need to review the way in which Moral Education is conducted in schools in order to improve students' motivation in the subject.

## INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen a revived interest in moral character education, prompted by the global malaise resulting first, from the surge in criminal and deviant behaviour in modern societies, and secondly, a series of highly publicized violations of ethical conduct in diverse arenas. The recurrent spates of terrorism, beginning with the 9/11 World Trade Centre attacks and followed by the various bombing incidents in Bali, Mumbai and most recently, Jakarta, have undoubtedly imparted greater awareness of the need to revisit the oft-downplayed realms of ethics and morality. Shooting incidents in US institutions, such as the Columbine High School (1999) and Virginia Tech massacres (2007) and the Northern Illinois University shooting (2008), led to an accrued sense of urgency among politicians and educators, of the need to 'do something about it'. More recently, the decadence and excesses of key players in the financial sector, made public in the wake of the 2008 Wall Street meltdown, has shocked and appalled millions around the world. At this juncture, the words of C.S. Lewis, "Education without values, as useful as it is, seems rather to make man a more clever devil" ( The Quotations Page, 2009), have never sounded more apt.

Infusing moral values and character development in education is, in itself, a controversial subject. How moral education and character development are conducted varies from country to country, and from school to school. In collectivist societies such as China, citizenship education was originally presented as '*Deyu*', which denotes moral, political and ideological education. In fact, in Chinese literature, these three terms are interwoven and can be used interchangeably. Since the turn of the century, the *Deyu* curriculum has

undergone reform to cater to the needs of the people and the recent challenges encountered in the advent of the open door policy and the ensuing socio-economic changes (Zhao and Tan, 2007). This involved changes in both the objective of the curriculum and the way in which it is delivered. The focus is now on moral development through learning and life experiences, rather than compliance to social and political mandates through indoctrination (Qi and Tang, 2004). In India, a country steeped in tradition and culture, an informal approach seems to be favoured for fostering values in the child. Indeed, it is perceived, even within the school community, that the family and the society play a greater role in promoting values than the school. Thus, teachers there tend to favour informal approaches to values education, such as role-modelling, setting good examples and creating a positive and harmonious environment (Sharma and Mohite, 2007).

In democratic societies mindful of imposing unwanted beliefs on others, teacher educators face the dilemma of whether moral education should be inculcated implicitly within the hidden curriculum of the school, or whether it should be formally and explicitly included in the taught curriculum (Narvaez and Lapsley, 2008). With classrooms increasingly reflecting the pluralistic societies they support, there is a constant debate as to what to teach if an inclusive approach is to be adopted in the implementation of a moral education curriculum (Brimi, 2008). Nevertheless, societies at large expect their citizens to behave morally, and despite the reservations against the teaching of morality, more schools in the US have incorporated character education in their programs (Narvaez and Lapsley, 2008). Likewise, in the UK, citizenship and religious education is included in the National curriculum (Department for Education and Skills, and Quality and Curriculum Authority, 2005). However, the literature shows that in contexts such as the US, there was a general reluctance on the part of both teachers and students to engage in morality discussions or related programs. One contributing factor was that students failed to take moral education programs seriously, dismissing them as over-simplifications and misrepresentations of real-life issues and character traits (Romanowsky, 2003; Brimi, 2009). Teachers on the other hand, were generally ill-prepared for the task (Narvaez and Lapsley, 2008) and were wary of imposing beliefs on reluctant students.

In Singapore, where this study was conducted, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has established a comprehensive Civics and Moral Education (CME) program which aims to equip students with the appropriate competencies and value systems that will enable them to face twenty-first century challenges and conflicts. The CME curriculum focuses on nurturing (i) moral and character development, and (ii) active citizenship. The curriculum covers the five broad themes (Self, Family, School, Society, and Nation and the World) as the students progress from primary, through secondary and finally, junior college levels. In addition, the syllabus focuses on inculcating a set of core values (for example, respect, responsibility, integrity, care, resilience and harmony). In the CME program (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2006), teachers are encouraged to use a variety of strategies to assist students' internalization of values and the development of competencies enabling effective moral functioning. According to Rest and his co-workers (1983; Narvaez & Rest, 1995), moral functioning consists of four components: moral judgment, moral sensitivity, moral motivation and moral action. In the classroom, these can be nurtured through the processes of perspective-taking, story-telling, cultural transmission, service

learning and community involvement. In *perspective-taking*, teachers create opportunities for students to put themselves in the shoes of others, and hence to develop empathy and altruism. *Story-telling* is particularly effective for the development of personal beliefs through narratives and the identification and clarification of values. *Cultural transmission* is especially valuable in a pluralistic society as it allows socially desirable cultural values to be nurtured. Students are encouraged to share their cultural practices and traditions, hence promoting an ethos of tolerance and respect. *Community involvement* and *service learning* programs are highly effective platforms for students to demonstrate moral motivation and moral action. Whereas community involvement programs allow students to contribute on a voluntary basis to the welfare of others, service learning presents opportunities for experiential learning through putting into practice their moral values, moral judgment and moral sensitivity.

With this comprehensive framework in place, one could hypothesize that the CME program would be well-received by both teachers and students in Singapore. However, there is scant published research on the impact of the CME curriculum on students' moral functioning. The aim of this article is therefore to investigate the impact of CME on students' moral judgment and their motivation with regards to the program. This study uses Kohlberg's theory of moral development as the basis for the assessment of students' moral judgment, and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the framework for assessing students' motivation in CME.

### **Kohlberg's theory of moral development**

In his doctoral dissertation entitled '*The development of modes of moral thinking and choice in the years 10-16*', Lawrence Kohlberg (1958) undertook one of the first systematic studies of the development of moral reasoning. Following Piaget's model of cognitive development, Kohlberg attempted to describe the development of moral reasoning in terms of a sequence of six stages, which are grouped into three developmental levels: pre-conventional (Stages 1 and 2), conventional (Stages 3 and 4) and post-conventional (Stages 5 and 6). Kohlberg perceived the stages as hierarchical and irreversible, with relatively few individuals at the highest stages.

At the pre-conventional level, which prevails in infancy and early childhood, moral judgment is determined by the physical outcomes on the self. Thus, at Stage 1, the child's decisions are linked to the pursuit of rewards or the avoidance of punishment. At Stage 2, choices are determined by the reciprocity of interests, with the expectation of a return of favors. The conventional level extends from late childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood. Moral reasoning at Stage 3 focuses on seeking the approval and fulfilling the expectations of others. At Stage 4, decisions on moral issues are influenced by the need to respect and adhere to societal rules and laws. The post-conventional level is characterized by moral reasoning going beyond the confines of authority. Thus, at Stage 5, moral judgment is based on social contract orientation, whereby decision-making is based on the democratic aim of doing what is best for the majority. Individuals who are at Stage 6, the highest stage, adhere to universal principles in their moral judgments, and are willing to make personal sacrifices for what they consider to be a good cause.

## The Self-Determination theory

The self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991, 2000) model was chosen since it provides a comprehensive treatment of students' motivation in a given field. This framework posits that three main levels of motivation can be established: amotivation (when there is no motivation), extrinsic motivation (when behavior is prompted by external agents) and intrinsic motivation (when behavior is initiated by internal factors, such as personal interest and enjoyment). Lately, the focus of motivational research was primarily on the attainment of intrinsic motivation, considered as the driving force for enhancing learning and performance (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Whereas intrinsic motivation is essentially a one-dimensional construct, the SDT views extrinsic motivation as a continuum of increasingly self-determined behaviors (Ryan and Deci, 2000), ranging from the most highly controlled external regulation, through the ego-oriented introjected regulation, to the more autonomous identified regulation. In external regulation, behavior is essentially controlled by external means such as punishment, rewards or higher authority. Introjected regulation involves behavior being prompted by the need for guilt avoidance or ego enhancement. Identified regulation describes behavior resulting from sufficient importance or value being ascribed to a task or a course of action.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Participants

This study involved two components: (i) a cross-sectional investigation involving the assessment of the stages of moral judgment of students across three levels of schooling; (ii) the assessment of students' motivational regulation based on the SDT framework. Investigations on moral reasoning involved a total of 183 students from secondary 1 (7<sup>th</sup> Grade), secondary 3 (9<sup>th</sup> Grade) and junior college (11<sup>th</sup> Grade) levels. The participants came from a government-funded state secondary school and a government-aided junior college. Another sample of thirty-three secondary school students participated in the assessment of students' motivation in CME. Further details of the student participants are given in Table 1.

Assessment of moral judgment						
Level of schooling	Total Number of students	No. of males	No. of females	Mean age		
Secondary 1	60	29	31	13		
Secondary 3	67	35	32	15		
Junior College	56	26	30	17		
Assessment of motivation in CME						
Level of schooling	Total Number of students	No. of males	No. of females	Mean age		
Secondary 2	33	13	20	14		

Table 1. Participants' details.

### Assessing Moral judgment

This study made use of Form A of Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview (MJl) (1958). The written form of the interview was used in lieu of oral interviews as it facilitated the collection of data from a larger number of subjects and in a shorter time. The survey thus consisted of the three moral dilemmas on the issues of Life v/s Law (Heinz dilemma), Morality and Conscience v/s Punishment (Judge's dilemma), Contract v/s Authority (Joe's dilemma), followed by the interview items. In each scenario, the participant was presented with a conflict between two moral issues, a moral dilemma to which his/her responses are reflections of the different stages of moral reasoning. The survey was administered in a classroom environment in the participants' schools, under the supervision of the students' teachers. The students were instructed to give written responses to the items and were informed that there was no right or wrong answer to the questions. They were assured of the confidentiality of their comments. They were encouraged to reply honestly and, if necessary, to seek clarifications from the survey administrators.

### Assessing Motivation in CME

A 17-item survey was conducted with a pilot sample of thirty-three Secondary 2 students to explore their perceived motivation towards CME. We used five-point Likert type scales, ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree), for item scoring. The survey items, corresponding to five subscales, were adapted from established instruments that were used and validated by other researchers. To measure *amotivation*, the lack of any inclination toward CME, three survey items were adapted from the Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al., 1992). In addition, we adapted 14 survey items from the Academic Self-Regulation Questionnaire (SRQ-A; Ryan & Connell, 1989) for the measurement of motivational regulations. The items included a list of students' views on moral education and possible reasons for attending CME lessons in school. The extent to which a student agreed with the statements thus reflected the different motivational regulations. Table 2 shows examples of survey items for each of the motivational regulations.

Motivational regulation	Examples of survey items
Amotivation	I find moral education lessons boring
External regulation	I attend moral education lessons because my teacher will be angry with me if I don't
Introjected regulation	I feel guilty if I don't attend moral education lessons
Identified regulation	I attend moral education lessons because I feel it is in my best interests to acquire moral values
Intrinsic regulation	I enjoy moral education lessons

Table 2. Examples of survey items.

## RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the number of students from each of the levels of schooling and at the various stages of moral development measured in terms of global scores. A pure stage is shown as a single digit, whereas a double or triple digit score denotes a transitional stage. For example, Stage 1.2 denotes a transition between Stages 1 and 2. Irrespective of the level of schooling, the largest number of students was recorded for Stage 3. For the secondary 1 (SEC1) level, most students (15) were at Stage 3, and an equal number (15) in transition between Stages 1 and 3 (Stage 1.3). Likewise, at the secondary 3 (SEC3) level, the largest number (26) of students was at Stage 3, with a considerable number in transition between Stages 2 and 3. Finally, at the junior college level (JC), most students were either at Stage 3 or in transition between Stages 3 and 4.

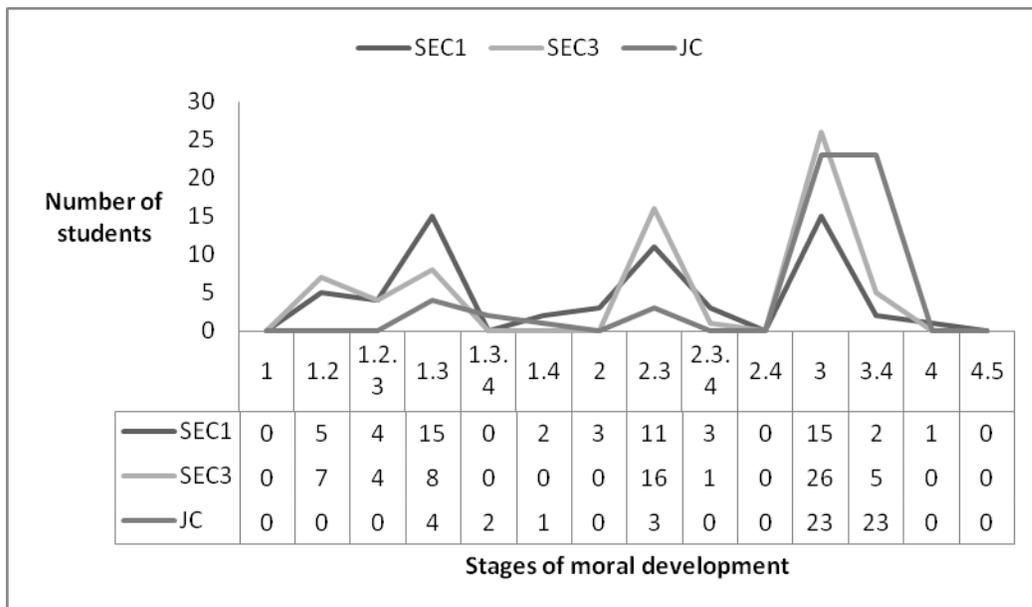


Figure 1. Cross-sectional distribution of students at the various stages of moral development

Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviation for the students' perceived motivation. High mean scores indicate high self-determined and autonomous motivation. In this study, mean scores ( $\bar{x}$ ) below or equal to 2 are arbitrarily designated as low, while for moderate mean scores,  $2 < \bar{x} < 4$ . High mean scores are those above 4. From Table 3, mean scores were in the moderate range for all motivational regulations, except amotivation, for which the mean score was low. From highest to lowest mean scores, the motivational regulations ranked as follows: identified regulation, intrinsic motivation, introjected regulation and external regulation. The highest mean scores were obtained for identified regulation and intrinsic motivation, suggesting that most students showed at least some degree of self-determined motivation towards CME. The mean score for identified regulation was higher than that for intrinsic motivation, indicating that the students' motivation in CME was to a larger extent, due to their understanding of its importance and value to them, rather than their innate interest in the subject.

Motivational regulation	Number of students	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Amotivation	33	1.00	3.67	1.9293	.75809
External	33	1.00	4.67	2.7172	.87051
Introjected	33	1.25	4.75	2.9318	.77377
Identified	33	1.00	5.00	3.8030	.85868
Intrinsic	33	1.33	5.00	3.6465	.80769

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the motivational regulations of survey participants.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, the observed trend in the development of moral reasoning reflects that obtained in earlier studies (Colby *et al.*, 1983) which suggested that children and young adolescents were predominantly at the pre-conventional stages, while the older adolescents and adults were mainly at the conventional stages. The findings in this study showed that the thirteen-year-old SEC1 students formed the predominant group (48.3%) at the pre-conventional level, followed by the SEC3 (28.3%) and the JC (12.5%) students. In transition towards and at the conventional level, the trend was reversed, with the JC students forming the dominant group (87.5%), followed by the SEC3 (71.7%) and the SEC1 (51.7%) groups. This suggests that students in Singapore are in par with the predicted trend in the development of moral cognition.

The investigation on students' motivational regulations showed that the SEC3 student participants displayed a moderate degree of self-determined motivation in CME. In general, the students' motivation dwelled in their awareness of the value of the CME program and their recognition of its importance in their development, rather than in their innate interest in the subject. These findings have implications on the design and implementation of the CME curriculum, and the way in which the course is delivered in the classroom. Rather than merely emphasizing on the importance of values and morals, curriculum specialists and teachers should perhaps focus on how to make CME lessons more engaging and relevant to students. In an attempt to identify what works in character education, Berkowitz and Bier (2007), found that such programs run most effectively when implemented broadly and with fidelity, and when they include professional development, interactive pedagogical strategies, explicit focus on ethics or character, social and emotional competencies training, behavior management strategies, elements of community service and service learning. Perhaps it is timely that the teaching of CME should move away from its former parochial stance, and adopt a more learner-centered approach, with provision for the students to explore and make meaning of current, real-world issues. The task of educators is now to facilitate moral functioning, rather than to prescribe what it should be.

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