



Early adolescents' beliefs about the development of their moral character: The case of Latvia

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Abstract: Moral education at school is a topical debate among policy makers, academics, and practitioners. As early adolescence is a crucial period of moral growth, this study aims at capturing early adolescents' beliefs about the development of their moral character in Latvia. In Spring 2022, 1465 pupils studying in Year 5 (11-12 years old) and Year 7 (13-14 years old) in 90 classrooms at 56 different schools in Latvia participated in the study. The questionnaire used to collect data contained 35 scale items and 3 open answer items which captured the four components of the moral growth process (i.e., understanding, purposefulness, moral crafting, and moral identity). Quantitative data were processed and analysed in MS Excel and SPSS using descriptive statistics: absolute values and percentage frequencies, central tendency indicators (arithmetic mean and mode), and dispersion indicators (standard deviation). The qualitative data (1158 statements from Year 5 pupils and 1284 statements from Year 7 pupils) were analysed and used to illustrate the main trends in respondents' answers. The results revealed that Latvian pupils have: a high level of understanding of the process of moral character development; a certain maturity in their decision of becoming better persons, which needs to be supported both in the family and at school; a mitigated practical involvement in their own moral development; and a quite strong emerging moral identity. This article offers a unique perspective on Latvian early adolescents' views on their moral growth. These findings can be particularly useful for parents, teachers, and school leaders who would wish to support pupils' moral development, and they are also an important contribution to the development and strengthening of moral education in the Latvian education system.

Keywords: early adolescence, moral character, moral education, moral growth, school education.

Introduction

Early adolescence as a socially constructed reality can be defined as a stage of life between the ages of 10 and 15 years, in which young teenagers undergo rapid multiple physical, cognitive, affective, moral, and social changes (Hansen et al., 2021; Urdan & Klein, 1998). These changes are usually undergone during the lower secondary education stage or in mid-school. This is a key developmental stage in which critical learning opportunities appear, including an increased sensitivity to social influences, identity formation, and social-emotional skills (Hansen et al., 2021, preface). It is a unique sensitive period of complex transformations “that brings both multiple stressors and new possibilities for growth” (Urdan & Klein, 1998, p. 1) and a crucial period for developing moral identity (Doering, 2013; Sengsavang, 2018).

Moral education at school is a topical debate among policy makers, academics, and practitioners (e.g., OECD, 2021; ICFE, 2021; for an overview of recent academic discussions, see Kristjánsson, 2021). Different models of moral development have been proposed from different perspectives, based, for example, on Kohlbergian moral development theory (Kohlberg, 1984), neo-Aristotelian virtue theory (e.g., Sanderse, 2015), and personalist anthropology (e.g., Biesta, 2021; Pérez Guerrero, 2022). For addressing pupils' moral growth, this study relies on this last trend, and particularly on the theory of the relational self of virtue (Fernández González, 2019a, 2019b), which captures the relevance of the person's fundamental disposition to engage in moral growth together with others. This approach was operationalised in a processual model for the development of pupils' moral character with four components: (1) understanding (cognitive-emotional perception of the process of moral character development); (2) purposefulness (freely and consciously committing to virtue development); (3) moral crafting (phronesis-guided practical involvement in moral growth); and (4) moral identity (the joy and support experienced in the process of moral development).

In Spring 2022, a research team from the University of Latvia started to implement a longitudinal study on school pupils' moral growth (Fernández González & Surikova, 2022). The study is carried out in the

context of recent Latvian legislation: the article 10.1 “Education and Virtue” of the Law of Education (Saeima, 1998) and the Guidelines on moral education (LR Ministru kabinets, 2016), taking into account also the guidelines on values and virtues in the new educational content (Skola2030, 2017). The study aims at capturing early adolescents’ beliefs about the development of their moral character in Latvia.

Methodology

The research questions addressed in this study were: How do pupils understand what moral growth is and how it happens? Are they interested and willing to engage in their own moral growth? What is their experience (motivations, barriers, strategies) in enacting and practising the virtues in their daily lives? Do they feel satisfied and supported in their moral growth, thus strengthening their moral identity?

Participants: in total 1465 pupils from 90 classes in 56 schools participated in the study (Table 1). The respondents in Year 5 were predominantly 11-12 years old (95%), while those in Year 7 were 13-14 years old (97%). 51% of respondents were girls. The majority of respondents were from Riga and the Near Riga region (26%) and from Zemgale (21%), but all regions of Latvia were represented in this study.

Table 1

Characteristics of the research sample

Category of analysis	Year 5	Year 7	Total
Number of respondents	644	821	1465
Number of classes	39	51	90
Number of schools	31	37	56*

Note. *Number of unique schools (12 schools participated with classes from both Year 5 and Year 7).

The study is representative at the level of the Latvian education system. Given that in the 2020-2021 school year there were 17910 and 20743 pupils in Year 4 and Year 6 in 634 Latvian general education institutions (excluding special education institutions) implementing general basic and secondary education programmes (Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 2021), a representative sample of Year 5 and Year 7 pupils was obtained for the 2021-2022 school year, which allows generalisation of results to the 634 schools with less than 3 % error (Fisher et al., 1995).

Materials or measures: a theoretically grounded and practically validated questionnaire was used to collect data, which contained 35 scale items and 3 open answer items grouped in four sections that captured the four components of the moral growth process.

Section A used the character growth understanding and mind-set scale (adapted from Dweck, 2000) for addressing pupils’ beliefs about character growth. Six statements to be rated in a 7-point Likert scale were provided in both positive and negative form for avoiding desirability bias. They addressed several key points of character growth: its improvement during the whole life, its relationship with freedom, its emotional component, the role of moral reasoning, the necessity of training, and the importance of joy for growing in virtue.

Section B was based on identity status theory (Marcia, 2002): respondents were asked to choose the statement they identified with the most from a list of five levels of maturity in the decision of becoming a better person: not interested, never thought about it (*diffusion*), have doubts about engaging (*moratorium*), engaged since childhood (*foreclosure*), and engaged after overcoming a moral crisis (*achievement*).

Section C was based on the virtue grit scale (adapted from Duckworth, 2016) and the brief moral resilience scale (adapted from Smith et al., 2008): pupils assessed their practical involvement in moral growth in everyday life by rating in a 5-point scale two sets of assertions. The first set “My character growth experience” included 10 grit items (some of them reversed) which were analysed under 4 headings: *personal interest* (e.g., “My interest in virtue growth changes from year to year”), *goal orientation* (e.g., “When I decide to acquire a good habit, I never give up till I acquire it”), *overcoming difficulties* (e.g., “I have overcome setbacks to conquer a virtuous character”), and *regular practice* (e.g.,

“I work hard to acquire virtues”). And the second set “My involvement in moral growth” included two parts: the sub-set 2-a “Strategic involvement” contained 7 utterances regarding pupils’ use of free time, avoiding places, persons and events that incite to bad moral behaviour, as well as websites, social networks, etc., meeting with friends who give good moral example, reading about or listening to moral exemplars, and asking for advice to relevant adults; and the sub-set 2-b “Practical activities for moral growth” contained 6 statements about involvement at school (lessons and homework), in the family, in humanitarian activities, in sport and open-air activities, in artistic or cultural activities, and in religious or spiritual activities.

Finally, in section D, which was based on expectancy motivation theory (Vroom, 1964), respondents rated in a 5-point scale five items that captured moral identity development in its internal (self-assessment of involvement and experienced joy in moral growth) and external dimensions (perceived support and recognition from friends, family, and school).

The questionnaire, developed in English in 2018, was translated into Latvian, and tailored to the respondents’ age group, using appropriate vocabulary. The internal consistency of the closed-ended questions (by sections and as a whole) and the reliability of the data were good ($\alpha = .830$) (Table 2).

Table 2

Reliability test results for scale items

Moral growth category	Cronbach’s alpha
Section A – Understanding	.746 (6 items, 7-point Likert scale)
Section B – Purposefulness	N/A (1 item, 5-point Likert scale)
Section C – Moral crafting	.782 (23 items, 5-point Likert scale)
Section D – Moral identity	.646 (5 items, 5-point Likert scale)
Sections A, B, C, & D	.830 (35 items)

Procedure: the data collection took place both on paper and online in Spring 2022 in cooperation with 90 class teachers in 56 schools in all regions of Latvia. A total of 1465 pupils’ questionnaires were received. Quantitative data were processed and analysed in MS Excel and SPSS using descriptive statistics: absolute values and percentage frequencies, central tendency indicators (arithmetic mean and mode), and dispersion indicators (standard deviation). Qualitative data (pupils’ statements) were used to illustrate the main trends in respondents’ answers. The analysis covered 1158 statements (7691 words) from Year 5 pupils and 1284 statements (8700 words) from Year 7 pupils.

Results

First, the average of each component was ranked (Table 3) for getting a global picture of results, and then, the most significant results for each component were looked for.

Table 3

Ranking results

Ranking	Moral growth category	Arithmetic mean (<i>M</i>) / min.-max.
1 st	A – Understanding	5.18 / 1-7
2 nd	B – Purposefulness	3.45 / 1-5
3 rd	D – Moral identity	3.33 / 1-5
4 th	C – Moral crafting	3.11 / 1-5

The ranking results show that understanding the moral development process is the highest of the four indicators, maturity of decision to engage in one’s own moral development comes second, pupils’ practical engagement in their own moral development is the lowest, and pupils’ moral identity comes third. The detail of the results for each component are presented below.

A – Pupils’ understanding of the process of developing moral character: about 3/4 of pupils had a good understanding of what moral character is, and that it is possible to develop it over a lifetime and how to do so. Looking in more detail, 69 % agreed that developing moral character brings joy ($M_o = 7$ in a 7-point scale), 77 % agreed that moral growth happens throughout life ($M_o = 6$), and 72 % agreed that managing one’s emotions is part of that process ($M_o = 6$). However, about 2/5 pupils did not yet have a clear understanding that freedom increases with character development ($M_o = 4$, $M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.527$) and that practicing is necessary to develop one’s moral character ($M_o = 6$, $M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.579$).

B - Pupils’ purposefulness towards developing their moral character: more than half of the respondents (54 %) had a strong interest and desire to involve in their own moral development ($M_o = 5$ in a 5-point scale, $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.398$). While 1/5 of pupils (20 %) strived since childhood to become better people by developing their moral character, about 1/3 of pupils (34 %) admitted that they engaged in their moral development rather after a personal moral conversion, by evaluating their previous moral behaviour. As a pupil in Year 5 commented, *“I recently realised that my behaviour and attitude towards everything was lax, so I am trying to improve it”*. A Year 7 pupil also commented: *“Looking back, I have realised that I did not like how I used to be. I wanted to improve and so I started to develop my moral character”*. However, about 1/4 of the pupils (26 %) had never thought about developing good character, as illustrated in the following remark by a pupil in Year 5: *“This is the first time I thought about developing moral character and the first time I heard that character can be developed!”*. Very few pupils (9 %) were not interested in their own moral development.

C - Pupils’ moral character development in daily life: as indicated above (Table 3), pupils’ practical involvement in their own moral development was the lowest ranked indicator ($M = 3.11$ on a 5-point scale). As for the pupils’ experience of developing moral character, they generally rated it neutral ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.174$, $M_o = 3$ for all indicators except one indicator on their ability to focus on getting good habits for more than a month ($M_o = 4$)). Respondents rated highest their interest in moral development (especially the indicator pointing out that their interest in it does not disappear easily ($M = 3.46$)), and their orientation to the goal of becoming better persons (especially the indicator pointing out that they do not lack goal orientation for moral development ($M = 3.36$)). Pupils were less prone to recognise in themselves the ability to overcoming difficulties in acquiring virtues (especially regarding the acknowledgment that setbacks stop them from developing morally ($M = 2.91$)), and to practicing virtues consistently (most of pupils rather disagreed that they are continually seeking to improve their moral character ($M = 2.96$)).

Regarding the moral growth strategies used by pupils, overall 57 % of them rarely or never asked for advice on developing moral character ($M_o = 1$, $M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.248$) and 41 % of them never took interest or took little interest in moral authorities, i.e. people who exemplify moral growth ($M_o = 2$, $M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.277$). Furthermore, 45 % of respondents rarely or never tried to avoid morally disruptive online environments ($M_o = 2$). The most commonly used strategies for moral growth were meeting friends who give good moral example ($M_o = 4$) and having a clear plan for using free time ($M_o = 3$).

Regarding the environments in which young people engage for their moral development, most pupils often or very often engaged in sports and outdoor activities ($M_o = 5$), family chores ($M_o = 4$) and school activities ($M_o = 4$). However, 53 % of pupils admitted that they never or rarely engage in cultural or artistic activities ($M_o = 2$). For their part, spiritual and religious activities were the least used opportunities for moral development: 71 % of respondents never or rarely engaged in them ($M_o = 1$).

D - Pupils’ moral identity: overall, pupils felt a relatively high level of joy and support for moral development, which relates to their moral identity. A good number of respondents (75 %) get joy or great joy in the process of moral growth ($M_o = 3$, $M = 3.02$, $SD = .970$). Analysing pupils’ statements on how they felt about developing their moral character, on the one hand, a number of positive trends were found: positive emotions were mentioned, such as in a Year 5 pupil’s comment that *“I feel very good because my character is getting better and it makes me happy”*, and in a Year 7 pupil’s comment that *“If I change myself for the better, it makes me happy”*. Moreover, determination to overcome difficulties or challenges was also mentioned: *“Sometimes I want to give up because it is hard, but I try anyway”* (a Year 5 pupil). But on the other hand, there were also references to a certain lack of motivation due to poor knowledge, for example in this Year 5 pupil’s comment: *“I don’t feel motivated because I don’t really know much about it”*, or due to difficulties or challenges, as in this Year 7 pupil’s reflection:

“Sometimes I try but people don’t treat me very well, so I lose motivation. Why should I be nice to them if they are not nice to me?” More than 3/4 of the respondents rated their efforts to develop their moral character quite highly ($M = 3$, $M = 3.06$, $SD = .951$). Only 22 % of pupils felt that they do little or nothing in this area.

Almost all respondents (more than 4/5) felt support for their moral development in different environments: especially from family, but also from friends, and less so in the school environment. Some of the pupils’ statements, sharing examples from their own lives, illustrated well these quantitative results: *“Recently I have found very good friends, they are very supportive in all situations, sometimes it feels like if one of us is going through something, we are all going through it together”* (a Year 7 pupil’s comment on support from friends); *“Whenever I fail at something, nobody gets angry with me, but they help me, and it is easier for me to develop my character”* (a Year 7 pupil’s comment on support from family); *“My teachers set a good example in behaviour”* (a Year 5 pupil’s comment on support in the school environment).

Discussion

The discussion was organised around three topics related to salient results: moral growth and emotions; moral growth, moral conscience, and freedom; and support to moral growth.

Moral growth and emotions: more than half of respondents were interested and willing to engage in their own moral development, and about 3/4 of pupils agreed that the development of moral character brings them joy and that managing one’s emotions is part of developing moral character. Speaking about their own experience, more than 4/5 of pupils found joy or great joy in the process of moral development. These results show that many youngsters felt the attraction of becoming better persons and were able to recognise and acknowledge this positive emotion.

This emotionally positive perception of their moral growth process is particularly relevant, given that moral character development is closely related to moral emotions. The positive psychology trend (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman et al., 2005) has contributed to an increasing appreciation of the role of emotions in morality, and the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022) defines character as “a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct” (p. 7). According to Darnell et al. (2019), moral emotions represent one of the four components of phronesis, and ‘rationally grounded moral emotions’ are included in the sense of self of a virtuous person.

Early adolescence is a key developmental stage regarding the development of social-emotional skills (Hansen et al., 2021, preface), when youngsters “become more aware of emotions and their meanings on a cognitive level” (Hansen et al., 2021, p. 165). If, in Aristotle understanding, the virtuous person rejoices doing the good, for early adolescents’ moral growth it is even more important to find joy in this process, given their “enhanced motivational/reward sensitivity” which, if not well oriented, “may also motivate [them] to engage in behaviours that are ‘rewarding’ (e.g., exciting) but carry risk, such as substance use” (Hansen et al., 2021, p. 64).

Moral growth, moral conscience, and freedom: approximately 1/3 of respondents engaged in their own moral development after a personal moral conversion, by evaluating some previous moral action that they found unsatisfactory. This points to the relevant fact that early adolescent have an active moral conscience and engage in moral judgment regarding their own life. This finding resonates with recent research, which found that increased cognitive sophistication, which characterises this developmental period (Urdu & Klein, 1998, p. 6), goes hand in hand with better moral reasoning skills: “adolescents are increasingly able to notice and attend to multiple concerns, which can then be more effectively coordinated into sophisticated moral judgments” (Smetana et al., 2014, p. 32).

Early adolescence is a key period for the formation of the moral conscience. Moral identity “begins to emerge in middle childhood perhaps as a social moral identity” (Sengsavang, 2018, p. ii), and, in the formation of the moral conscience, the sense of personal freedom plays a central role. However, while in a virtue ethics understanding virtue growth goes hand in hand with and increasing of personal freedom as self-mastering, only 60% of pupils in this study had a clear understanding that freedom grows with character development. This can be discussed, considering that early adolescents experience changes

that challenge their incipient moral identity: “their sense of self and who they are is more differentiated and less integrated during this time period” (Sengsavang, 2018, p. 35), in which they are navigating, as Baird (2008) put it, between the demands of the “imaginary audience” (teens’ tendency to believe that others are always watching and evaluating them) and those of the “personal fable” (the common adolescent belief that their self is unique, invulnerable, and omnipotent). Early adolescents start thinking differently, questioning how moral values affect their sense of freedom and, “as [they] experience puberty and transition into high school, they might be more concerned with the need to belong and “fit in” with their peers rather than upholding their moral values” (Sengsavang, 2018, p. 34). This lead to the next topic of the discussion, early adolescents’ need for support.

Support to moral growth: early adolescence is a period that has been characterised by “negative changes on a variety of motivational indices” (Urdu & Klein, 1998, p. 8), and this is why “adolescents may especially need greater support and education regarding moral values both at home and at school” (Sengsavang, 2018, p. 34). Family support is important, because “parental support positively predicted mean-level of moral identity” (Sengsavang, 2018, p. 32). The role of school is also important, because “moral identity development is context-dependent” (Sengsavang, 2018, p. ii) and children spend many hours a day at school. In this study, 1/5 of pupils had never thought about developing good character. This could indicate that school should support more clearly moral character development, using moral character ‘caught’, ‘taught’ and ‘sought’ strategies (Arthur et al., 2022). In this regard, effective family-school collaboration is crucial for supporting youngsters’ moral growth (Surikova & Fernández González, 2022a, 2022b).

This study found that involvement in cultural, artistic, spiritual, and religious activities were rarely used opportunities for moral growth. However, as Kristjánsson (2016) put it in his proposal for an extended, ‘enchanted’ account of moral life, “I would hesitate to describe a human life as flourishing that did not include considerable elements of emotional awe. Children’s experiences of the world are typically filled with awe, but unfortunately the capacity for awe often seems to dissipate in adolescence and become suppressed in many adults” (pp. 711-712). Enriching early adolescents’ cultural, artistic, as well as spiritual and religious experiences, where they can draw inspiration for moral development, should be particularly encouraged.

Conclusions

In conclusion, overall, Latvian pupils have:

- a high level of understanding of the process of moral character development. However, their understanding of the acquisition of freedom through character development and the need to practise in order to foster one’s own moral growth needs to be further developed;
- a certain maturity in their decision of becoming better persons, which needs to be supported both in the family and at school, where pupils should meet opportunities to think purposefully about their own moral development;
- a mitigated practical involvement in their own moral development. Pupils are willing to seek support from friends with high moral standards, and they involve family cores and sport and outdoor activities. However, they rarely seek advice from a trusted adult or take an interest in people who are exemplars of moral growth. Pupils also need specific support for getting the habit of avoiding morally disruptive online environments. Enriching pupils’ cultural, artistic, as well as spiritual and religious experiences, where they can draw inspiration for moral development, might also be particularly encouraged;
- a quite strong moral identity. A high number of pupils find joy in developing their moral character. Pupils feel the most support for moral development from their families and friends, but less from the school environment.

This article offers a unique perspective on pupils’ views on their moral character development. These findings can be particularly useful for parents, teachers, and school leaders who wish to support pupils’ moral development, and they are also an important contribution to the development and strengthening of moral education in the Latvian education system. This article offers valuable material for personal reflection and for discussing the topic in the family, in the classroom, in teachers’ meetings, school

leaders' seminars, and educational policy discussions, as well as for academic staff involved in the preparation of future teachers and in the continuing education of in-service teachers.

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