

A Longitudinal Study on the Development of Moral Character in Early Adolescents: Intermediate Results

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Abstract: This paper presents the intermediate results of a 3-year longitudinal study on the development of moral character in early adolescents in Latvia. The study aimed to investigate pupils' understanding, engagement, experiences, and perceptions of their moral growth over a one-year period. In Spring 2023, 1000 pupils studying in Form 6 (mainly 12-13 years old) and Form 8 (mainly 14-15 years old) in 70 classrooms at 47 different schools in Latvia participated in the 2nd measurement of the study. The questionnaire used to collect data contained 35 scale items and 3 open answer items which captured 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 (998 statements from Form 6 pupils and 559 statements from Form 8 pupils) were used to illustrate the main trends in participants' answers. The results revealed that, at the time of the 2nd measurement, Latvian pupils have a good understanding of moral growth processes and an increasing maturity in their decision of becoming better persons. However, their practical involvement in their own moral development and their emerging moral identity need to be supported in the family and at school. These findings are relevant for the development and strengthening of moral education in the Latvian education system, and can be useful for parents, teachers, and school leaders.

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

Introduction

The pursuit of moral development is integral to leading a meaningful life. Eudaimonia has been identified as a primary focus to be emphasized in social science research over the next decade, in order to achieve what has been termed as “the well-being revolution” (Helliwell et al., 2023). Moral education is characterized by its richness and diversity, encompassing various theories, conceptions, developmental approaches, and models, sometimes complementing and at other times competing with each other. Examples include the Kohlbergian moral development theory (Kohlberg, 1984), moral affect theory (Noddings, 1984), Aristotelian virtue theory (Sanderse, 2015), neo-Aristotelian flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2019), non-Western perspectives (Metz, 2021), and personalist anthropology (Biesta, 2021).

The topic of moral education in schools is a current subject of debate involving policy makers, academics, and practitioners, as evidenced by discussions in recent literature (OECD, 2021; Stevenson, 2022; De Ruyter et al., 2022). In particular, the phase of early adolescence, spanning from 10 to 15 years of age, represents a critical period marked by heightened sensitivity to social influences, identity shaping, and the development of social-emotional skills (Hansen et al., 2021, preface). This stage also witnesses the emergence of moral identity (Kingsford et al., 2018).

Like numerous post-Soviet nations, within the past century Latvia has undergone significant shifts in moral value systems, transitioning from socialist ideals to a spectrum of approaches ranging from liberal and conservative ideologies to more recent inclinations toward new-liberal and human-inclusive approaches. In 2015, amendments to the Law of Education (Saeima, 1998) gave new life to moral education within the school system. Since 2017, a collaborative effort involving a team of researchers and education experts from the University of Latvia, and involving policymakers, in-service and pre-service teachers, pupils, and parents, has led to the undertaking of several research projects in moral education. In Spring 2022, this research team started to implement a longitudinal study on school pupils' moral growth (Fernández González & Surikova, 2022).

To address pupils' moral growth, this study relies on personalist anthropology, specifically drawing upon the theory of the relational self of virtue by Fernández González (2019a, 2019b). This theory emphasizes the significance of a person's deep disposition to engage in moral growth together with others. This approach was operationalised in a model designed to capture pupils' growth, which comprises four key components: (1) understanding (cognitive-emotional perception of the moral character development process); (2) purposefulness (voluntarily and consciously committing to moral development); (3) moral crafting (engaging practically in moral growth guided by phronesis); and (4) moral identity (experiencing joy and support throughout the process of moral development).

Drawing on data from a 3-year longitudinal study, this paper explores early adolescents' beliefs about the development of their moral character in Latvia, and its changes from the initial measurement in May 2022 (Fernández González & Surikova, 2023) to the second one in May 2023. The aim of the study was to understand the evolution of pupils' understanding, purposefulness, moral crafting experiences, and perceptions of their moral growth over a one-year period.

Methodology

This study addressed several research questions. Firstly, at the 2nd measurement point in May 2023, how did pupils comprehend the concept of moral growth and its mechanisms? Were they inclined and interested in actively participating in their own moral development? Furthermore, what were their experiences, encompassing motivations, barriers, and strategies, in embodying and practicing virtues in their daily lives? Did they perceive satisfaction and support in their moral development, which contributes to the reinforcement of their moral identity? Additionally, how did these beliefs evolve from the initial measurement conducted a year earlier?

Participants: The study involved a total of 1000 participants from 70 classes across 47 schools (Table 1). The Form 6 participants were mainly 12-13 years old (96 %), while those in Form 8 were mostly 14-15 years old (92 %). 53 % of participants were girls. Geographically, all regions of Latvia were represented in this study. The majority of participants were from Zemgale (31 %), Kurzeme (22 %), and Riga and Pieriga region (21 %).

Table 1

Characteristics of the research sample

Category of analysis	Form 6	Form 8	Total
Number of participants	534	466	1000
Number of classes	33	37	70
Number of schools	27	29	47*

Note. *Number of unique schools (9 schools participated with classes from both Form 6 and Form 8).

The study is representative at the level of the Latvian education system. Given that in the 2022-2023 school year there were 18130 and 20587 pupils in Form 6 and Form 8 in 592 Latvian general education institutions (excluding special education institutions) implementing general basic and secondary education programmes (Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 2022), the representative sample of Form 6 and Form 8 pupils participating in the study allows generalisation of results to the 592 schools with 3 % error (Fisher et al., 1995).

Measures: This study employed a comprehensive questionnaire, both theoretically grounded and empirically validated, to gather data on pupils' moral growth. The questionnaire consisted of 35 scale items and three open-answer items, organized into four sections, each capturing a distinct component of the moral growth process.

In Section A, an adapted version of the Character Growth Understanding and Mindset Scale (Dweck, 2000) assessed pupils' beliefs about moral growth. Using a 7-point Likert scale, participants rated six statements in both positive and negative forms (for avoiding desirability bias). The statements covered crucial aspects of moral character growth, including its lifelong improvement, connection with freedom, emotional components, role of moral reasoning, necessity of training, and the importance of joy in moral growth.

Section B, based on Identity Status Theory (Marcia, 2002), prompted participants to choose the statement that best reflected their identification with five levels of maturity in the decision to become 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*).

In Section C, adapted versions of the Virtue Grit Scale (Duckworth, 2016) and of the Brief Moral Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008) were employed. Pupils assessed their practical involvement in moral growth by rating in a 5-point scale two sets of assertions. The first set “My character growth experience” included 10 grit items addressing personal interest, goal orientation, overcoming difficulties, regular practice, strategic involvement in everyday life, and practical activities related to moral growth. The second set “My involvement in moral growth” included two parts: (1) the sub-set 2-a “Strategic involvement” contained 7 utterances about, e.g., the use of free time, avoiding situations and places inciting to bad moral behaviour, and looking for support among friends and relevant adults; and (2) the sub-set 2-b “Practical activities for moral growth”, which contained 6 statements about pupils’ involvement at school, in the family, in humanitarian activities, in sport and open-air activities, in artistic or cultural activities, and in religious or spiritual activities.

In Section D, which was grounded in the Expectancy Motivation Theory (Vroom, 1964), participants rated five items on a 5-point scale to capture both internal and external dimensions of moral identity development, including self-assessment of involvement and experienced joy in moral growth, as well as perceived support and recognition from friends, family, and school.

The questionnaire, initially developed in English in 2018, underwent translation into Latvian and was tailored to the participants' age group with appropriate vocabulary. The internal consistency of the closed-ended questions, both within sections and as a whole, demonstrated a good reliability ($\alpha = .855$) for the 2nd measurement data (Table 2).

Table 2

Reliability test results for scale items

Moral growth category	Cronbach's alpha
Section A – Understanding	.783 (6 items, 7-point Likert scale)
Section B – Purposefulness	N/A (1 item, 5-point Likert scale)
Section C – Moral crafting	.798 (23 items, 5-point Likert scale)
Section D – Moral identity	.687 (5 items, 5-point Likert scale)
Sections A, B, C, & D	.855 (35 items)

Procedure: Data collection, implemented during the Spring of 2023, used questionnaires in both paper and online formats. Quantitative data underwent processing and analysis in MS Excel and SPSS, utilizing descriptive statistics. Additionally, qualitative data, consisting of 928 statements (6911 words) from Form 6 pupils and 559 statements (4645 words) from Form 8 pupils, were used to illustrate the main trends in participants’ responses.

Results

Initially, the average of each component was ranked (Table 3) to obtain an overarching perspective on the results. Subsequently, the most significant outcomes for each individual were identified.

Table 3

Ranking results

Ranking	Moral growth category	Arithmetic mean (<i>M</i>)		min.-max.
		May 2022	May 2023	
1 st	A – Understanding	5.18	5.18 ↑	1-7
2 nd	B – Purposefulness	3.45	3.61 ↑	1-5
3 rd	D – Moral identity	3.33	3.21 ↓	1-5
4 th	C – Moral crafting	3.11	3.06 ↓	1-5

The ranking results show that, on the one hand, understanding the moral development process (category A) was the highest of the four indicators, and the maturity of the decision to engage in one's own moral development (B) came second. These two indicators had a similar high rank in the 1st measurement and had a positive (increasing) dynamic. On the other hand, pupils' practical engagement in their own moral development was the lowest rated (4th), and pupils' moral identity came third. These two indicators had also low ranks in the 1st measurement and presented a negative (decreasing) dynamic. The detail of the results for each component are presented below.

A – Pupils' understanding of the process of developing moral character: Overall, 68 % 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, 70 % agreed that developing moral character brings joy ($M_o = 6$ in a 7-point scale), 75 % agreed that moral growth happens throughout life ($M_o = 6$), and 71 % 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 ($M_o = 4$, $M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.393$) and that practicing is necessary to develop one's moral character ($M_o = 5$, $M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.426$). Comparing the 1st and 2nd measurements it was found that Form 8 pupils' understanding of moral growth improved slightly, while Form 6 pupils' overall understanding remained unchanged since last year.

B - Pupils' purposefulness towards developing their moral character: More than half of the participants (54 %) had a strong interest and desire to involve in their own moral development ($M_o = 5$ in a 5-point scale, $M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.413$). While 1/4 of pupils (25 %) strived since childhood to become better people by developing their moral character, almost 2/5 of pupils (38 %) admitted that they engaged in their moral development rather after a personal moral conversion, by evaluating their previous moral behaviour. As a pupil in Form 6 commented, *"I myself often didn't like the way I behaved, often with anger and envy, so now I am improving myself to get rid of those traits and be happier with myself"*. A Form 8 pupil also commented: *"I realised that I was becoming too nasty and arrogant. It's selfish. I started working with myself on this some years ago"*. About 1/5 of pupils (21 %) had never thought about developing good character, as illustrated in the following remarks: *"Nobody ever talks about it in everyday life, so I didn't think it was important!"* (a pupil in Form 8); *"Before this questionnaire, I hadn't started thinking about how to develop my moral character"* (a pupil in Form 6). Very few pupils (10 %) were not interested in their own moral development. Comparing the 1st and 2nd measurement, the maturity of the moral growth decision of pupils in Forms 6 and 8 was found to have increased slightly.

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 ($M = 3.06$ on a 5-point scale). As for pupils' experience of developing moral character, they generally rated it neutral ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.149$, $M_o = 3$ for all indicators excepting three – $M_o = 4$). Participants rated highest the continuity of their interest in moral growth ($M = 3.51$), and their stability and goal orientation for moral development ($M = 3.45$). Pupils were less prone to agree that they do not give up easily ($M = 2.87$) and that they cope well with setbacks ($M = 2.90$). Regarding the moral growth strategies used by pupils, overall, 58 % of them rarely or never asked for advice on developing moral character ($M_o = 2$, $M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.231$) and 43 % of them never took interest or took little interest in moral authorities, i.e. people who exemplify moral growth ($M_o = 2$, $M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.218$). Furthermore, 48 % of participants rarely or never tried to avoid morally disruptive online environments ($M_o = 3$). The most commonly used strategies for moral growth were meeting friends who give good moral example ($M = 3.22$) and having a clear plan for using free time ($M = 3.17$). Regarding the environments in which young people engage for their moral development, most pupils often or very often engaged in sports and outdoor activities ($M_o = 5$), and they reported to help in family chores, to do homework regularly, and to try to learn at school ($M_o = 4$). However, 52 % 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 participants never or rarely engaged in them ($M_o = 1$). Comparing the 1st and 2nd measurement it was found that the overall indicator of pupils' practical engagement has slightly decreased. Pupils' assessment of their experience of developing moral character did not change, but their assessment of their plans for moral growth and

their factual involvement in moral growth activities decreased by 0.6 and 0.11 points respectively (in a 5-point scale).

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 participants (72 %) get joy or great joy in the process of moral growth ($M_o = 3$, $M = 2.97$, $SD = .994$). 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, as can be seen in a Form 6 pupil's comment: *"I feel very good because I see improvements and I like to develop my moral character"*, and in a Form 8 pupil's comment: *"I feel better because I think I've worked a bit on my moral character"*. Moreover, determination to overcome difficulties or challenges was also mentioned: *"The first few days are harder, but not so much, after a few days I do it more often with pleasure"* (a Form 6 pupil). But on the other hand, there were also references to a certain lack of motivation due to poor knowledge, for example in this Form 6 pupil's comment: *"I have never tried to develop my moral character, I don't even know what it is"*, or due to difficulties or challenges, as in this Form 8 pupil's reflection: *"I feel quite bad about developing my moral character because the environment in which I am trying to develop hurts me so much that I don't enjoy developing my moral character at the moment"*. 3/4 of the participants rated their efforts to develop their moral character quite highly ($M_o = 3$, $M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.007$). Only 25 % of pupils felt that they do little or nothing in this area. Around 4/5 of participants felt support for their moral development from different environments: especially from family, but also from friends, and less so in the school environment. Some of pupils' statements, sharing examples from their own lives, illustrated well these quantitative results: *"I told my friends about my goal in character development and they supported me"* (a Form 8 pupil's comment on support from friends); *"If I do something really wrong in public, my parents gently reprimand me and tell me why and how to fix/improve it"* (a Form 6 pupil's comment on support from family); *"I can always talk to my class teacher and she will always listen to me and give me wise advice"* (a Form 8 pupil's comment on support in the school environment). Comparing the 1st and 2nd measurement, it was found that the overall score of pupils' moral identity slightly decreased, which may indicate a certain instability of moral identity, a tendency to fluctuate and possibly an increase in demandingness towards oneself and others.

Discussion

In general, it should be noted that the results of the 2nd measurement are intermediate results obtained in the middle of the study, when it is still difficult to judge the general dynamics of pupils' moral growth. However, it can be hypothesised that pupils' increased understanding of the moral growth process (A-understanding) and an increased desire to improve one's character (B-Purposefulness) may have an influence on the two other aspects of moral growth, i.e., on the practical involvement in one's own moral growth (C-Moral crafting) and on the satisfaction and support experienced in this process (D-Moral identity): as the level of awareness and purposefulness increases, pupils may become more conscientious and critical in their evaluation of the other aspects of moral growth, thus leading to a decrease in the scores and overall indicators of these aspects.

The following discussion was organised around three topics related to salient results: support to moral growth; moral growth and emotions; and moral growth and friendship.

Support to moral growth: In early adolescence, often marked by negative changes in motivational indices (Urda & Klein, 1998), adolescents may particularly benefit from increased support and education on moral values at home and school: parental support positively correlates with moral identity (Sengsavang, 2018), which emphasizes the importance of family involvement. In this study, about 1/5 of pupils had never thought about developing good character. Given the context-dependent nature of moral identity development and the substantial time spent at school, this suggests a need for clearer support in moral character development at school, e.g., employing character 'caught', 'taught', and 'sought' strategies (Arthur et al., 2022). As moral growth is context sensitive, at school "discussions about morality cannot be overly generalized and should be discussed with respect to specific contexts" (Sengsavang, 2018, p. 35).

The results also highlight underutilized opportunities for moral growth in cultural, artistic, spiritual, and religious activities. Following Kristjánsson's (2016) suggestion on promoting an 'enchanted' moral life and emphasizing the importance of emotional awe, enriching experiences in these domains during early adolescence can be encouraged to inspire and foster moral development. In addition, almost half of pupils acknowledged that they do not often make the effort of avoiding morally disruptive online environments. Pupils certainly need specific support to develop a conscious habit of avoiding this kind of online spaces. Unfortunately, the use of technology in the field of moral education is still an undeveloped field, but significant efforts are being done for conceptualizing and measuring the so-called 'cyber wisdom' (Polizzi & Harrison, 2022; Harrison et al., 2023).

Moral growth and emotions: More than half of the participants expressed interest and willingness to actively participate in their moral development. Approximately 3/4 of pupils agreed that developing moral character brings them joy, with a similar percentage recognizing the role of managing emotions in moral character development. Over 80 % of pupils reported having joy or great joy in their moral development journey, indicating a positive emotional experience in becoming better individuals. This emotionally positive perception is crucial, as emotions play a significant role in shaping the moral self (Kristjánsson, 2010). This is acknowledged also by The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022), which defines character as a set of traits that generate specific moral emotions, influencing motivation and guiding conduct.

Moral growth and friendship. This study revealed that early adolescents are eager to seek support from friends with high moral standards. This finding resonates with recent research on friendships as the most powerful relationships (Dunbar, 2021) with the highest positive impact on happiness, health, and length of life (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023; Cuddeback, 2021). True friendship has also been found to be crucial for living a moral life (Kristjánsson, 2022; MacIntyre, 2019; Rajskey, 2023). Previous studies have indicated that during early adolescence, children develop an increased ability for social comparison, particularly in relation to their peers, and that "adults, especially parents, continue to exert a large influence over youths' beliefs and behaviours" (Urdu & Klein, 1998, p. 16). Most respondents in this study lack both the skills to seek guidance from a trusted adult and appealing moral role models – individuals exemplifying moral and ethical growth, which suggests that early adolescents would benefit from support in initiating personal conversations, such as mentoring or moral coaching, with relevant adults, especially within their family context.

Conclusions

In conclusion, overall, at the 2nd measurement point in May 2023, Latvian pupils had:

- a high level of understanding of the process of moral character development, which remained stable since the 1st measurement (May 2022). 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 has increased slightly since May 2022. This maturity 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, which has slightly decreased since May 2022, in particular regarding their involvement in moral growth activities. Pupils are willing to seek support from friends with high moral standards, and they involve family, school 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, which has however slightly decreased since the first measurement. A high number of pupils find joy in developing their moral character. Pupils feel a clear support for moral development from their families and friends, but less from the school environment.

These conclusions are still provisory, as they are based on intermediate results of a longitudinal study. Nevertheless, this article presents a distinctive outlook on pupils' perspectives regarding moral character growth. It can prove particularly beneficial for parents, educators, and school administrators aiming to foster moral development in pupils, and it is a significant contribution to the advancement of moral education within the Latvian education system. The insights provided here offer valuable material for personal consideration and are conducive to discussions within families, classrooms, teacher meetings, school leadership seminars, and educational policy deliberations. Additionally, this study may serve as a valuable resource for academic professionals engaged in the training of future educators and the ongoing development of practicing teachers.

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