



A Study Of The Moral Values Of Adolescent Students

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Abstract:

Moral values are central to shaping adolescents into ethical and responsible citizens. However, in today's rapidly changing world, exposure to social media, peer influence, and shifting family dynamics has led to increasing moral dilemmas among young learners. This study, based on Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development, examined the moral reasoning of adolescent students with respect to grade and gender. Using a descriptive survey method, data were collected from 73 students of Grades VIII and IX through a validated rating scale aligned to Kohlberg's three levels of morality. Results revealed that students demonstrated the highest mean scores in post-conventional reasoning, followed by pre-conventional and conventional reasoning. Grade IX students showed significantly higher post-conventional reasoning than Grade VIII, reflecting developmental progression, while reliance on pre-conventional and conventional reasoning declined. Gender-wise, girls scored significantly higher at the pre-conventional level, but no significant differences were observed at the conventional and post-conventional levels. The findings highlight the importance of strengthening moral education during adolescence to nurture principled, value-driven decision-making in students.

Keywords: Moral Values, Adolescents, Kohlberg's Theory

Introduction:

Adolescence is an important stage of life where young people experience fast changes in body, mind, and emotions. At this time, they start forming their identity, making choices on their own, and learning values that shape how they will act in the future. Qualities like honesty, respect, kindness, responsibility, and fairness are especially important for building good character and behaving ethically.

In today's contemporary world, young minds are exposed to social media, peer influence and frequent change in the dynamics of the family. Due to this, adolescents often come across moral dilemmas that challenge their understanding. It is a need of the hour for teachers, policymakers and stakeholders to create moral awareness during the adolescent stage.

Schools not only impart academic knowledge but also create awareness of value education. According to the initiatives taken by NEP 2020 highlights the inculcation of ethical and moral values are a core competency of Education.

Kohlberg (1968) said that morality is mainly based on justice, which means giving equal rights and duties fairly to everyone. He explained that justice is not just a set of rules, but a principle that guides people to make the right choices in all situations. Rules may change, but basic moral principles like fairness do not.

According to him, justice is not a rule or set of rules. It is a moral principle. By a moral principle, he means a mode of choosing, which is universal and all people either adopt or accept it always in all situations. There are exceptions to rules, but no exception to principles. A moral principle is not only a rule of action, but also a reason for action. Kohlberg (1968) explained that the principle of justice, as respect for persons, was "higher than law" because the claims of the law and social contract may be deduced from it. Moral philosophy is thus used to define the end point of moral development as being justice and to analyse the observed developmental progress towards the highest form of justice. It may be seen that psychoanalytic and social learning literatures are far behind cognitive and structural developmental studies in attempting systematically to specify the stages of development that underlie specific kinds of moral perspective, reasoning and capacity to act.

Kohlberg's Theory has six developmental stages which are ordered into three levels of moral development, each of which was further divided into two stages. So, there were six stages in all. They are briefly given below as:

- **Level I: Pre-Conventional Level** Stage 1: Punishment and Obedience Orientation Stage 2: The Instrumental Relativist Orientation
- **Level II: Conventional Level** Stage 3: Good Boy/ Girl Morality Orientation Stage 4: Society and authority maintenance orientation
- **Level III: Post-Conventional Level** Stage 5: Contrast and Legalistic Orientation Stage 6: Principled Orientation

Kohlberg claims that the above sequence is universal and the cultural factors may only speed up or slow down the moral development, but its sequence does not get change. Stages of moral development initially come from a child's interaction with others, not just from their parents or by their neurological system. He says that both role-taking opportunity and cognitive development are necessary, but not sufficient conditions for moral development. Kohlberg suggests that social participation, being rational, getting involved in various role-taking occasions in the family, school, and with peers, has a positive impact on the moral development of adolescents.

This study aims to explore the awareness and understanding of moral values among adolescent students, examine variations based on grade level and gender, and contribute to the broader discourse on character education in schools. The findings may offer recommendations for designing effective moral education programs that resonate with the needs and realities of today's learners.

Review of related studies: The main aim of reviewing the related literature is to get an insight into the conceptual framework in the particular area, which enables the investigator to understand the research approach, method, instrumentation, and data analysis to be applied in the study.

Sucharitha R (2011) in a study of moral judgement of secondary school students in relation to some variables states that the children have a certain number of moral stages, namely good and bad, and obedient and punishment before entering to the school age. The sample of the study included 720 students from urban, rural and semi-urban setups. There seems to be an immediate need to develop other stages of Kohlberg moral development, through certain specific programmes to inculcate them among the students. The researcher found that the class of study in which the student is studying appears to be a significant factor that determines the capacity of moral judgement.

Sr. Merciana C.C.R (1996) conducted a comparative Study of Moral Values of Students in schools in the presence and absence of instruction of morals. The objectives of her study were 1. To compare the moral values of students where moral education is imparted and in schools where it is not imparted. 2. To compare the moral values of boys and girls in schools where moral education is imparted. It was found that there is a difference in the moral values of students instructed in moral values as a special subject and those not instructed in moral values. This difference was seen in case of both boys and girls.

Pandya, Jensen and Bhangaonkar(2021) conducted a study 'Moral reasoning among children in India: The intersection of culture, development, and social class.' The findings revealed that older children employed a rich set of indigenous duty concepts, thereby also using the Ethic of Community more than younger

children. Secondly, younger children already reasoned in terms of the Ethic of Divinity. High-SES children used the Ethic of Autonomy more than low-SES children and conceptualized the individual in independent and psychological terms; whereas low-SES children's view of autonomy invoked fear of physical punishment.

Chaudhary P (2015) found significant difference between moral judgment of male and female adolescent students. Female students were found to possess higher moral judgment competence than male students. Rural students were found to possess more moral judgment competence than urban students. Home environment and school environment has significant role in predicting Moral Judgment of Adolescent Students.

Need for the study:

Moral values are essential for character development which will help them to differentiate between right and wrong and build strong moral foundation. Through values, education can develop the social, moral, aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of a person. Adolescence is one of the most critical phases of development, in which individuals start making their independent decisions based on their moral identity. In today's technologically driven world, adolescents are openly exposed to various influences through media, and this can easily hamper or improve their moral practices. Therefore, it's important to know the level of awareness of moral values like fairness, empathy, honesty, respect, etc., among adolescents. By exploring the awareness of moral value among Grade VIII & IX students, the researcher intends to study trends with respect to moral development. The findings of this research will be useful for teachers, school administrators and curriculum planners to plan a meaningful value education course that is age-suited and sensitive to students' developmental demands. Hence, this study aims to offer meaningful insights into the moral consciousness of the adolescent population and contribute to the formation of ethically responsible future citizens.

Statement of the Research Problem: A Study of the Moral Values of Adolescent Students.

Operational definitions:

Moral Values: In this study, moral values refer to the stages of moral reasoning as conceptualized by Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. They are measured across three levels: Level 1: Pre-conventional morality – moral reasoning based on obedience, punishment, and self-interest. Level 2: Conventional morality – moral reasoning guided by conformity, social approval, and adherence to rules. Level 3: Post-conventional morality – moral reasoning guided by universal ethical principles such as justice, equality, and human rights.

Adolescents: In this study, adolescents refers to students aged between 13 to 16 years. They are categorized by grade level (Grade 8 and Grade 9) and gender (boys and girls) for analysis

Research Questions:

1. How does students' moral reasoning reflect different stages of Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development?
2. Does the awareness of moral values differ significantly between students of Grade VIII and Grade IX?
3. Is there any significant difference in the awareness of moral values between male and female students?

Objectives of the Study:

1. To study the level of moral development among teenage students
2. To examine whether there are significant differences in moral development based on their grade level and gender.

Hypotheses:

1. There is no significant difference in the level of moral development of teenage students
2. There is no significant difference between the levels of moral development of students of Grade VIII and Grade IX
3. There is no significant difference between the level of moral development of male and female students.

Research Methodology

For the present study, the researcher has used the Descriptive Survey Method to carry out the research. The survey method was considered appropriate as it enabled the collection of quantitative data from participants in a relatively short time and allowed comparison across grade levels and gender.

Sample

The sample consisted of 73 adolescent students, 36 from Grade VIII and 37 from Grade IX enrolled in a secondary school from Vasai, Maharashtra. Out of the 73 students, 34 were males and 39 were females. The sampling frame comprised the intact classes available to the researcher. Convenience sampling approach was used, employing intact classes of students in Grades VIII and IX. In this non-probability procedure, whole classes that were accessible to the researcher were selected rather than selecting individual students randomly.

Tool Used

The investigator created a rating scale consisting of 30 items. There were 10 statements pertaining to each level of Kohlberg's Model of Development. The tool was validated by experts and the reliability by test-retest method was 0.77.

Descriptive Data Analysis

The data was scored and the mean and SD for each level of morality were calculated. The analysis of data is shown in the table below

		Level One Pre-conventional Morality	Level Two Conventional Morality	Level Three Post-Conventional Morality
Overall (N=73)	Mean	36.02	34.84	38.93
	SD	5.82	4.54	4.86
Grade VIII (N=36)	Mean	37.05	35.86	37.75
	SD	6.32	4.28	5.32
Grade IX (N=37)	Mean	35.02	33.86	40.08
	SD	5.17	4.62	4.12
Boys (N=34)	Mean	33.85	35.29	39.02
	SD	6.17	5.49	4.43
Girls (N=39)	Mean	37.92	34.46	38.85
	SD	4.83	3.55	5.27

Interpretation:

For Entire Sample: Level 3 (Post-conventional morality) has the highest average score (38.93), suggesting that respondents tend more towards higher-order moral reasoning based on universal principles, justice, and ethical values. Level 1 (Pre-conventional morality) has a moderate average (36.02), indicating a fair presence of moral reasoning based on rules, obedience, and consequences. Level 2 (Conventional morality) has the lowest average (34.85), showing that fewer respondents remain primarily focused on conformity and social approval compared to the other two stages. Level 1 has the highest variation in responses, suggesting that individuals differ widely in how much they rely on

obedience/punishment or self-interest in moral reasoning. Level 2 is the most consistent (least variation), meaning respondents are more uniform in conventional reasoning. Level 3 also shows moderate variation.

Grade Wise: For Grade VIII students highest mean is for Level Three among the three, suggesting that they are beginning to show more advanced reasoning, considering fairness, justice, and universal values. Overall, their moral reasoning seems to be in transition — they still rely on pre-conventional rules but are developing strong post-conventional thinking. Conventional reasoning is comparatively weaker. In Grade IX students the mean is highest for Level Three indicating that students are clearly moving towards post-conventional morality (principle-based reasoning). The comparatively lower values in Levels One and Two reflects moral maturation, with reasoning based more on universal values rather than rules or social approval.

Gender Wise analysis: At Pre-conventional level, boys score lower showing less reliance on rules, obedience, and consequences compared to girls. They are moving away from this early stage of moral reasoning. For Conventional level, boys score slightly higher than girls, suggesting that conformity, social approval, and law/order reasoning are more central for them. For post conventional level, for boys as well as girls, the mean of this level is higher than other two levels, meaning their moral reasoning is strongly oriented towards universal ethical principles.

Testing of Hypotheses

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the levels of moral development of teenage students

	Level One	Level Two	Level Three
Mean	36.02	34.84	38.93
SD	5.82	4.54	4.86

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F value
Between-treatments	644.4932	2	322.2466	13.7907**
Within-treatments	5629.9452	216	26.0646	

** significant at 0.01 level

The data was subjected to ANOVA. The F value 13.79 is significant at 0.01 level indicating that there is significant difference in the mean values of the three levels of moral reasoning with the mean of postconventional moral reasoning being significantly higher than that of preconventional and conventional reasoning. The null hypothesis is rejected and it is concluded that teenage students show significant difference in the level of moral development.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in the levels of moral development among students of different grades.

Levels of Moral Development	Grade	N	Mean	SD	T value
Level One	VIII	36	37.06	6.33	1.5
	IX	37	35.03	5.18	
Level Two	VIII	36	35.86	4.28	1.91
	IX	37	33.86	4.63	
Level Three	VIII	36	37.75	5.32	2.09*
	IX	37	40.08	4.13	

*significant at 0.05level **significant at 0.01 level

The difference in pre-conventional reasoning between Grade 8 and Grade 9 is not statistically significant. Students in both grades still show some reliance on rule-based thinking, though it slightly less in Grade 9. In case of conventional reasoning, there is a moderate difference between the grades. Grade 9 students score lower, suggesting that conformity and social approval are less important compared to Grade 8. There is a significant difference in post-conventional reasoning between Grade 8 and Grade 9. Grade 9 students show

a clearer shift toward principle-based reasoning, which is consistent with developmental expectations in Kohlberg's theory.

Ho3: There is no significant difference in the level of moral development between male and female students.

Levels of Moral Development	Gender	N	Mean	SD	T value
Level One	Boys	34	33.85	6.17	3.16**
	Girls	39	37.92	4.83	
Level Two	Boys	34	35.29	5.49	0.77
	Girls	39	34.46	3.55	
Level Three	Boys	34	39.02	4.43	0.15
	Girls	39	38.85	5.27	

*significant at 0.05level **significant at 0.01 level

For Level One, value of t is significant at 0.01level indicating that girls have higher preconventional morality compared to boys. For Level Two and Level Three, t value is not significant. The null hypothesis is rejected for Level One but accepted for Level Two and Level Three. It can be concluded that girls have significantly higher level of preconventional morality compared to boys. But in case of conventional morality and postconventional morality there is no difference in the moral development of girls and boys.

Findings and Discussions

Overall, the data shows a developmental progression. As students move from Grade 8 to Grade 9, they rely less on external rules or social expectations and more on higher-order moral values, consistent with Kohlberg's theory that moral reasoning matures with age and cognitive development. The main developmental change seen as students move from Grade 8 to 9 is the growth of advanced moral reasoning, while reliance on rule-based and conformity-based reasoning declines only slightly. These results resonate with the findings of Pandya and Bhangaokar (2021) whose longitudinal study reported that while much of the reasoning in middle childhood was dominated by a concern for punishment avoidance from God, by adolescence customary traditional authority and God's authority gained prominence. The research also reported that the degree of use of autonomy increased over the course of adolescence, as did the types of moral concepts.

Boys are more inclined toward post-conventional reasoning and universal principles, but also influenced by social conformity. Girls are more influenced by pre-conventional reasoning (rules and obedience) alongside strong post-conventional thinking. Both genders show development towards higher moral reasoning, but the pattern differs with boys leaning more toward ethical principles, while girls still balance principles with rule-based reasoning. These findings differ from those of Patel S. (2023) who found that boys had significantly higher moral values compared to girls. Gogoi et.al(2018) found that girls have high moral judgement ability than boys.

Implications of the study

Some implications that emerge from the study are:

1. Since Grade 9 students show higher post-conventional reasoning, teachers should create opportunities for younger students (Grade 8) to engage in discussions on justice, fairness, and universal values. Eg story-based moral dilemmas can be presented to Grade 8 students to practice reasoning beyond obedience and conformity. teachers can organise debates on ethical issue such as environmental responsibility, digital ethics.
2. Girls tend to rely more on pre-conventional reasoning. Hence, teachers can gradually guide them to think beyond rules and punishments by encouraging open-ended discussions that highlight fairness, empathy, and social justice. Both boys and girls should be engaged in cooperative learning, peer teaching, and mixed-gender discussions to balance different reasoning perspectives.
3. Various pedagogical approaches like Socratic questioning and classroom debates on moral dilemmas to encourage students to articulate reasoning beyond "right or wrong", role plays to take

different perspectives and involving students in community service can provide opportunities for practicing post-conventional reasoning.

4. Schools should move beyond rule-enforcement and emphasize moral dialogue, reflective journals, and democratic classroom practices. Curriculum planners in schools could incorporate value-based education modules that nurture students' ability to move from rule-following to universal ethical principles.

Conclusion

Moral reasoning develops progressively with age/grade, moving from pre-conventional to post-conventional stages, in line with Kohlberg's theory. The most robust developmental shift is toward post-conventional morality, reflecting students' growing ability to reason using ethical principles beyond rules and social approval. The study points that both boys and girls ultimately converge at the higher level of post-conventional reasoning, showing that moral maturity at this stage is not strongly gender-dependent. The study highlights that fostering moral development during adolescence is crucial, as this stage marks a shift from rule-based and conformity-driven reasoning to higher-order, principle-based thinking. Nurturing this growth through education can shape ethically responsible individuals capable of making just and value-driven decisions in society. Future research can extend this study to larger and more diverse samples, and test specific intervention programs that can accelerate the shift toward post-conventional moral reasoning

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