REVISTA INVECOM
ISSN en línea: 2739-0063

Moral education in secondary education: a systematic review of academic trends

Educación moral en educación secundaria: revisión sistemática de corrientes académicas

Received: 25/05/2026 - **Accepted:** 03/08/2026

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Abstract

Moral education in contemporary educational institutions develops in a scenario of axiological pluralism, in which different understandings coexist about the foundation and purpose of the moral formation of adolescents. The objective of this article was to identify and systematize the main currents present in recent academic literature on moral education in secondary school students, as well as the role attributed to the family, culture, educational institution and religious organizations in the formation of moral conscience. To this end, a systematic review was carried out following the general guidelines of PRISMA. The search was executed in the databases Scopus, Web of Science and SciELO, with the keywords “moral education,” “moral relativism,” “Catholic morality,” and “moral development.” After a process of four successive filters—by database, by subject area, by temporality (2019-2026), and by direct relationship with the topic— 20 peer-reviewed articles were included. The analysis identified three currents present in the literature and in the theoretical framework consulted: one that questions the foundations of traditional morality from rationalist and vitalist perspectives; one that addresses moral education from secular frameworks centered on cognitive-moral development; and one that grounds it in Catholic morality and natural law. It is concluded that these currents coexist without a single consensus in the literature reviewed, and that the studies included agree in identifying the family, the educational institution, and the community as decisive actors in moral formation, regardless of the evaluative framework adopted.

Keywords: moral development, moral education, moral relativism.

Resumen

La educación moral en las instituciones educativas contemporáneas se desarrolla en un escenario de pluralismo axiológico, en el que coexisten distintas comprensiones sobre el fundamento y el fin de la formación moral de los adolescentes. El objetivo de este artículo fue identificar y sistematizar las principales corrientes presentes en la literatura académica reciente sobre educación moral en estudiantes de nivel secundaria, así como el papel atribuido a la familia, la cultura, la institución educativa y las organizaciones religiosas en la formación de la conciencia moral. Para ello, se realizó una revisión sistemática siguiendo los lineamientos generales de PRISMA. La búsqueda se ejecutó en las bases de datos Scopus, Web of Science y SciELO, con las palabras clave "educación moral", "relativismo moral", "moral católica" y "desarrollo moral". Tras un proceso de cuatro filtros sucesivos —por base de datos, por área temática, por temporalidad (2019-2026) y por relación directa con el tema— se incluyeron 20 artículos revisados por pares. El análisis identificó tres corrientes presentes en la literatura y en el marco teórico consultado: una que cuestiona los fundamentos de la moral tradicional desde perspectivas racionalistas y vitalistas; una que aborda la educación moral desde marcos seculares centrados en el desarrollo cognitivo-moral; y una que la fundamenta en la moral católica y la ley natural. Se concluye que estas corrientes coexisten sin un consenso único en la literatura revisada, y que los estudios incluidos coinciden en señalar a la familia, la institución educativa y la comunidad como actores decisivos en la formación moral, independientemente del marco valorativo adoptado.

Palabras clave: desarrollo moral, educación moral, relativismo moral.

Introduction

The moral formation of adolescents today unfolds against a backdrop of growing axiological pluralism. A number of studies document concern among families and educators over students' moral decisions (Aguiló, 2001), as well as over phenomena linked to inadequate moral formation, such as substance use (Cango & Suárez, 2021) or the mechanisms of moral disengagement associated with disruptive behavior (Gómez-Tabares et al., 2021). In some countries, for instance, the introduction of public gender policies into the school curriculum has become a matter of debate among educational stakeholders, which several studies describe as a source of social tension surrounding moral education (Morán, 2023).

This tension is nothing new: modern and contemporary philosophy records a long-standing dispute over the foundations of morality. Spinoza challenged traditional morality on the grounds that it depended on fear and superstition, proposing instead an ethics grounded in reason. Along similar critical lines, seventeenth-century French Libertinism upheld reason as the absolute criterion of truth against religious authority (Reale & Antíseri, 2011), while Nietzsche called for replacing moral values of Christian origin with a morality centered on the will and the affirmation of earthly life (Reale & Antíseri, 2010). Within education, Dewey questioned the effectiveness of moral instruction understood as catechesis, warning against a split between a morality “of school” and one “outside it” (Dewey, 1926; Dill, 2007).

A substantial portion of the recent literature, meanwhile, approaches moral education through secular frameworks centered on cognitive-moral development and the promotion of civic virtues, without explicit reference to a religious foundation (Shek & Zhu, 2019; Muñoz, 2020). A smaller but still present strand of the literature grounds moral education in the Catholic tradition and natural law, drawing on authors such as Thomas Aquinas and on documents of the ecclesial magisterium (Ocampo, 2019; John Paul II, 1993).

Yet despite the abundance of studies addressing particular aspects of moral education (drug use, moral disengagement, professional ethics programs, the development of moral judgment) no recent systematic review was found that organized this literature according to the underlying evaluative currents. This article's objective was therefore to identify and systematize the main currents present in recent academic literature on moral education among secondary school students, along with the role attributed to the family, culture, the educational institution, and religious organizations in the formation of moral conscience, without adjudicating among them.

Methodology

This systematic review was designed and carried out in accordance with the general guidelines of the PRISMA protocol (Haddaway et al., 2022), used as a guiding framework for organizing the search, selection, extraction, and evaluation stages of the literature. The bibliographic search was conducted in the Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and SciELO databases, using the key terms “moral education,” “moral relativism,” “Catholic morality,” and “moral development.” The selection process was structured around four successive filters. In the first filter, applied by database, the initial search retrieved 436 records (SciELO = 246; Scopus = 116; WoS = 74). The second filter narrowed the thematic scope to the social sciences, humanities, psychology, theology, philosophy, and ethics, reducing the corpus to 216 articles (SciELO = 104; Scopus = 90; WoS = 22). The third filter restricted the timeframe to publications from the last seven years (2019–2026), yielding 77 articles (49 + 21 + 7 by database). Finally, the fourth filter assessed the thematic relevance of each record, which made it possible to include 20 articles in the review (SciELO = 10; Scopus = 9; WoS = 1).

For each article included, authorship data, year of publication, country of origin, research type, and specific contribution to the review question were recorded in a spreadsheet. The final set of 20 studies brings together empirical research (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods) and review articles; this heterogeneity is treated as a feature of the corpus rather than an undeclared limitation.

As explicit methodological limitations, it should be noted that screening and data extraction were carried out by a single reviewer (the author), without independent verification by a second evaluator, which constitutes a departure from the PRISMA standard of dual screening and may introduce selection bias. Nor was a formal tool applied to assess risk of bias or the methodological quality of the included studies, given that the corpus combines empirical designs and review articles that are not comparable under a single instrument; for this reason, the synthesis is presented narratively and thematically rather than quantitatively. Readers are advised to bear these limitations in mind when interpreting the findings, and future reviews on the topic are encouraged to incorporate a second, independent reviewer and to broaden the set of databases consulted.

Results and discussion

The selection process described in the methodology section reduced 436 initial records to the 20 articles included in the synthesis (Table 1), drawn from 12 countries and published between 2019 and 2026.

Table 1

Studies included in the systematic review and their main contribution

Author(s) and Year	Country	Study Type	Source	Contribution to the Research
Adedeji et al. (2022)	Germany	Quantitative	Scopus	Analysis of the relationship between peer relationships and depressive symptoms in adolescents, and its impact on social well-being.
Cango & Suárez (2021)	Ecuador	Mixed	SciELO	Study of the link between drug use and moral education in adolescent students.
Caprio (2025)	Colombia	Qualitative	Scopus	Exploration of existential distress among students and its association with moral formation.
Castillo (2025)	Peru	Qualitative	Scopus	Relationship between teaching vocation and professional ethics from a deontological perspective.
Castillo & Llaro (2026)	Peru	Quantitative	Scopus	Evaluation of the contribution of Catholic morality programs to moral education at the secondary level.
Espinoza & Plaza (2024)	Spain	Mixed	Scopus	Identification of fourth-year secondary students' perceptions of their own moral development.
Morán (2023)	Argentina	Qualitative	SciELO	Critical discourse analysis surrounding the so-called “gender ideology” in public debate.
Gómez-Tabares et al. (2021)	Colombia	Quantitative	SciELO	Description of the mechanisms of moral disengagement associated with disruptive behavior in adolescence.
Laskoski (2022)	Brazil	Quantitative	Scopus	Research on the relationship between parenting styles and cognitive and emotional-moral development.
Morandín-Ahuerma (2020)	Mexico	Qualitative	SciELO	Reflection on the value of moral dilemmas in deliberative decision-making processes.
Morejón-Morán (2026)	Peru	Qualitative	SciELO	Study of values formation in elementary basic education institutions.
Muñoz (2020)	Colombia	Qualitative	SciELO	Analysis of the development of moral conscience and its connection to discursive formation in individuals.
Ocampo (2019)	Mexico	Review article	SciELO	Examination of the metaphysical foundations of moral law in the thought of Thomas Aquinas.

Quintana (2025)	Peru	Review article	SciELO	Review of the evidence on intrafamily values and religious education in light of the exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*.
Santos et al. (2021)	Spain	Review article	SciELO	Analysis of John Dewey's influence on the moral dimension of education.
Yurén et al. (2025)	Spain	Qualitative	Web of Science	Exploration of the use of induction and analogy in applied ethics within socio-educational projects.
Shek & Zhu (2019)	China	Quantitative	Scopus	Longitudinal study of the relationship between moral competence and externalizing behavior in adolescents.
Tsomokos et al. (2024)	United Kingdom	Quantitative	Scopus	Research on the association between chronotype and depression in adolescence, and its implications for school well-being.
Tume (2024)	Peru	Qualitative	SciELO	Analysis of participatory and democratic coexistence among basic education students in Peru.
Ziadet et al. (2025)	Ecuador	Qualitative	Scopus	Proposal for integrating ethics into the curriculum and its contribution to comprehensive moral formation.

Note. Author's own elaboration based on the articles included in the review

Thematic analysis of the 20 included studies, read alongside the philosophical framework consulted, made it possible to identify three currents of thought on moral education present in the academic literature. These currents are described below independently, without establishing a hierarchy of validity among them.

Current A: Rationalist and vitalist questioning of traditional morality

This current, philosophical in origin rather than empirical, challenges religious morality's claim to universality. Spinoza argues that good and evil do not exist in nature as objective categories but only as ways in which humans think, and that morality must be grounded in reason rather than fear (Reale & Antíseri, 2011). French Libertinism revived Epicureanism and skepticism to relativize the beliefs upheld by Catholic Christianity, proposing reason's judgment as the absolute criterion of truth (Reale & Antíseri, 2011). Nietzsche, for his part, branded Christian morality a "slave morality" and called for replacing it with values centered on the will, strength, and the love of earthly life (Reale & Antíseri, 2010). Dewey extended this critique into the school setting, questioning whether moral instruction should be reduced to a transmission of virtues detached from the student's own experience (Dewey, 1926; Dill, 2007).

Current B: Moral education through secular frameworks

Most of the empirical studies included in this review fall within this current, which approaches moral education without explicit reference to a religious foundation, emphasizing cognitive-moral development, the prevention of risk behaviors, and moral disengagement. Studies from Ecuador (Cango & Suárez, 2021) and Colombia (Gómez-Tabares et al., 2021) document the association between substance use, moral disengagement, and disruptive behavior in adolescents. Research from Brazil (Laskoski, 2022) and China (Shek & Zhu, 2019) links parenting style and moral competence to emotional regulation and the reduction of externalizing behaviors. Drawing on moral development theory, Kohlberg, building on Piaget, proposes that students' moral development advances through three levels and six age-linked stages (Kohlberg, 1992; Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972; Muñoz, 2020), one of the most frequently cited theoretical frameworks among studies in this current.

Current C: Grounding in catholic morality and natural law

A subset of the included studies, together with complementary doctrinal sources, approaches moral education from within the Catholic tradition. This current holds that moral conscience is perfected through natural

reason and revelation, and that a natural law guides human action (Ocampo, 2019; Vélez, 2021; Reale & Antíseri, 2007). The magisterium of the Catholic Church presents moral education as the comprehensive formation of conscience, oriented toward the pursuit of the good (John Paul II, 1993). Recent empirical studies in Peru have examined the contribution of programs grounded in Catholic moral principles to secondary students' moral decision-making (Castillo & Llaro, 2026) and the relationship between teaching vocation and professional ethics from a deontological perspective (Castillo, 2025). It should be noted that these two studies were conducted by the author of the present review, a fact disclosed here in the interest of editorial transparency.

Points of Convergence Across the Three Currents

Despite their differing foundations, the 20 included studies converge on at least three points: (a) family and parenting style significantly shape adolescents' moral development (Laskoski, 2022; Quintana, 2025); (b) the educational institution and its formation programs (ethics, citizenship, values) play a relevant role regardless of the evaluative framework adopted (Morejón-Morán, 2026; Santos et al., 2021; Yurén et al., 2025); and (c) the absence of structured formative spaces (programs, workshops, seminars) is associated with greater vulnerability to risk behaviors and moral disengagement (Ziadet et al., 2025; Espinoza & Plaza, 2024).

Conclusions

The recent academic literature on moral education among secondary school students reflects not a single consensus but the coexistence of at least three currents: one that questions the foundations of traditional morality on the basis of reason and the affirmation of earthly life; one that approaches moral education through secular frameworks centered on cognitive-moral development; and one that grounds it in Catholic morality and natural law. This review did not set out to adjudicate the validity of any of these currents, but rather to document their presence and relative weight in the indexed literature available between 2019 and 2026.

A finding that cuts across all three currents is that, regardless of the evaluative framework adopted, the studies reviewed attribute to the family, the educational institution, and the community a decisive role in adolescents' moral formation, and converge in recommending the development of structured programs, workshops, or formative spaces as a means of strengthening such formation. This suggests that the design of moral education programs could benefit from an explicit identification of the evaluative framework held by the educational community they target, rather than the uncritical adoption of a single model.

As limitations, this review combined empirical studies and theoretical-doctrinal sources under a single PRISMA process, was carried out by a single reviewer without independent double screening, and was restricted to three databases. Future research could broaden database coverage, incorporate a second reviewer, and develop comparative empirical studies assessing the outcomes of moral education programs designed from each of the currents identified.

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