Unveiling the Moral Reasoning of Junior High School Students

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive qualitative study examined the moral reasoning of public junior high school students in the Division of Digos City, Davao Region. Its purpose was to explore how students approach ethical dilemmas and perceive their role in moral decision-making, identifying key influences such as peers, family, school, and digital exposure on their moral development. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions using a semi-structured interview guide. Four essential themes were extracted as regards the influences on moral reasoning: Family as the Primary Moral Architect, School as the Reinforcing Structure, Faith as a Spiritual Compass, and Peers as a Double-Edged Sword. Added on the role of moral reasoning in shaping decision making in day-to-day interactions, three essential themes emerged: Prosocial Application, Moral Resilience, and Navigating Moral Dilemmas. Three essential themes emerged as regards the insights of public junior high school students on moral reasoning: Moral Learning Through Experience, Internalizing Moral Judgment, and Moral Strength Emerging from Adversity. The findings further showed that moral understanding deepens through personal experience and consequence, evolving from external rules to an internalized compass. The results provide valuable insights for designing more effective, context-sensitive values education programs that bridge theoretical instruction with the real-world ethical challenges faced by adolescents.

Keywords: Values education**,** moral reasoning, public junior high school students, descriptive qualitative, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Moral reasoning is the ability to think about what is right and wrong and then use that thinking to guide one's actions in real-life situations. Among junior high school students, moral reasoning faces a serious problem: there is a growing gap between the values they are taught in class and the real ethical problems they face every day. Students often learn abstract lessons about right and wrong, but they struggle to apply these lessons to situations like peer pressure, cheating, cyberbullying, and conflicts on social media. Studies show that without proper guidance, students may either make excuses for bad behavior or develop rigid thinking that lacks careful reflection (Killen & Dahl, 2021; Meyer, 2024). This problem becomes worse when schools do not prioritize moral education, when adults model unclear or inconsistent behavior, or when online interactions distort what students see as right or wrong. As a result, many young people are not prepared to handle morally confusing situations, which raises important questions about how schools can help build ethical skills (Verma et al., 2025).

While international studies provide valuable insights into adolescents' moral reasoning, similar concerns are also evident within the Philippine educational context. Adolescents in the country increasingly encounter moral dilemmas shaped by social pressures, technological influences, and evolving cultural norms. These realities challenge students to navigate complex ethical situations both inside and outside the classroom. In Italy, Ieracitano et al. (2024) found that young social media users struggled with online hate speech, which created difficult moral questions about anonymity and accountability. In Vietnam, Le et al. (2024) reported that students had poor critical reading skills, which limited their ability to deeply understand moral texts. In China, Zhou et al. (2024) showed that the use of artificial intelligence in education raised new ethical issues,

such as how to maintain honesty when using AI tools. These examples point to a global pattern: adolescent moral reasoning is under increasing pressure from digital technology, weak teaching support, and changing social norms. This calls for solutions that fit each local context.

Consequently, scholars have begun examining how moral education programs in Philippine schools influence students' ability to apply ethical principles in real-life situations. In the Philippines, research shows similar and specific problems. Dela Cruz et al. (2024) found that senior high school students in Manila often knew moral values in theory but did not live them out in practice, especially when with their peers. Afable's (2024) study at Carmona National High School revealed that students saw Values Education as repetitive and unrelated to real-life moral problems, such as lying or stealing due to poverty. Likewise, Lim (2024) noted that school leaders often failed to model consistent moral behavior, which made it harder for students to develop clear and confident moral reasoning when facing ethical dilemmas. By understanding how Filipino students interpret and respond to moral dilemmas, educators and policymakers can design more contextually relevant strategies for values formation. These findings point to a national concern: moral education in the Philippines often lacks real-world relevance, and social pressures weaken students' ability to act consistently on their values.

Despite extensive literature on moral reasoning globally and nationally, I failed to access a study that utilized phenomenology to explore this topic among junior high school students in under-resourced public schools. In some studies, quantitative research was used. For example, Dela Cruz et al. (2024) employed a quantitative survey design to examine moral reasoning among senior high school students in Manila, focusing specifically on how students compartmentalize moral values in theory versus practice under peer influence. Similarly, Afable (2024) used a quantitative approach to measure students' perceptions of Values Education as repetitive and disconnected from real-life moral dilemmas such as poverty-induced dishonesty. Both studies focused on senior high school students in urban or resourced settings, and neither explored the lived experiences of junior high school students using a descriptive qualitative design. Moreover, these studies did not specifically investigate how students in under-resourced public schools navigate moral reasoning related to bullying, family instability, or gadget addiction.

Existing studies on moral reasoning among Filipino adolescents primarily focus on senior high school students in urban or well-resourced settings. For instance, Dela Cruz et al. (2024) and Afable (2024) examined values education perceptions among older students in Manila and Cavite, using quantitative methods that did not capture the depth of students' lived experiences. However, the lived experiences of junior high school students remain underexplored, particularly those in under-resourced public schools where moral dilemmas such as bullying, family instability, and gadget addiction may be more acute. A systematic review by Wei, Zhao, and Chooi (2025) found that family conflict is consistently associated with problematic digital media use among adolescents, with emotional distress, self-concept disruption, and social-interpersonal disruptions serving as key psychological pathways. Moreover, a study by Saramosing et al. (2026) on Grade 10 learners in a public school division in found that while students consider Values Education essential for character development and ethical decision-making, its relevance diminishes when lessons are not contextualized or applied beyond the classroom. These findings highlight the need for a descriptive qualitative exploration that deeply centers junior high school students' own voices and narratives on how they perceive and navigate moral reasoning in daily life, gap this study addresses within the context of the Division of Digos City.

The urgency of this study is underscored by pressing societal issues in the Philippines, particularly in Mindanao, including youth crime, cyberbullying, online exploitation, moral decline, challenges facing Generation Z, and family fragmentation. In Digos City and the broader Davao Region, educators and community stakeholders have expressed concern over how these macro-level issues affect student well-being and social cohesion. To address this community-level need, this study focuses on junior high school students in public schools within the Division of Digos City. Unlike previous quantitative or phenomenological studies, this research uses a descriptive qualitative design to center students' own voices and narratives on how they navigate moral reasoning in daily life. Aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), particularly Target 4.7 on fostering a culture of peace and non-violence, this study aims to generate insights for localized values education and youth support strategies that are relevant and responsive to under-resourced school settings.

To maximize impact, the study's findings will be shared through multiple channels. Locally, results will be presented in Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions and PTA meetings to drive immediate pedagogical improvements. At the national and international levels, the study will be featured in research forums to inform policy discussions on moral education. For broader academic and professional reach, a peer-reviewed journal publication is planned, contributing to the global discourse on adolescent ethics. This tiered strategy ensures actionable insights at grassroots, policy, and scholarly levels.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the moral reasoning of public junior high school students in the Division of Digos City. Specifically, the study sought to examine how students interpret ethical dilemmas and how their reasoning influences their decisions in everyday interactions. It also aimed to identify the social and environmental factors that shape their moral development, including family, school, peers, and digital exposure. Through this exploration, the study intended to provide insights that may support educators, parents, and policymakers in developing more relevant and effective approaches to values education.

Research Questions

The general objective of this study was to explore and understand the moral reasoning of junior high school students by examining their experiences, perceptions, and insights. This study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the influences on the moral reasoning of public junior high school students?

2. How does their moral reasoning shape their decision-making in their day-to-day interactions?

3. What insights can the public junior high school students share as regards moral reasoning?

Theoretical Lens

This study was seen through the lens of **Theory of Moral Development** (Kohlberg, 1981), and **Social Learning Theory** (Bandura, 1977). The Theory of Moral Development provides a structured framework for understanding how individuals progress in their moral reasoning. It offers a systematic way to analyze the ethical decision-making processes of junior high school students, allowing the research to classify their responses and behaviors according to distinct levels of moral maturity. Kohlberg posits that moral development occurs through three progressive levels, pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional, each characterized by increasingly complex reasoning. At the pre-conventional level, individuals base judgments on external consequences such as avoiding punishment or seeking personal gain. The conventional level reflects a focus on social conformity and adherence to rules, while the post-conventional level involves principled reasoning based on universal ethical values. This framework helped the research categorize student responses into specific stages, clarifying whether their reasoning is self-interested, socially driven, or grounded in abstract principles. For example, a student who justifies honesty in an exam to avoid detention aligns with Stage 1 (obedience and punishment), whereas a student who values honesty to maintain trust with peers reflects Stage 3 (good interpersonal relationships).

Meanwhile, Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) posits that individuals learn behaviors, attitudes, and moral reasoning through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within their social environment. Bandura emphasizes the role of modeling, where individuals adopt behaviors by observing influential figures like parents, peers, and media personalities. This theory aided the research by providing a framework to understand how junior high school students develop moral reasoning not just through direct instruction but through the social influences they encounter daily. Concepts such as observational learning and vicarious reinforcement help explain why students may adopt certain ethical behaviors based on the consequences they observe others experiencing (Ott, 2024).

The interaction between these two theories guided the study in a complementary way. Kohlberg's theory helped determine the level of moral reasoning a student had reached based on how they justified their decisions, while Bandura's theory explained where that reasoning might have come from, specifically, through observation of and imitation of role models in their family, school, and digital environments. For instance, a student operating at Kohlberg's conventional level (seeking approval from others) may have developed that orientation because they consistently observed their parents or teachers rewarding socially acceptable behavior, as explained by Bandura. In this way, Kohlberg provided the "what" (the stage of moral reasoning), and Bandura provided the "how" (the social learning process behind that reasoning).

These two theories also guided the development of the interview questions and the analysis of data. The interview questions were designed to present hypothetical moral dilemmas related to cheating, fairness, peer pressure, bullying, and honesty. Each question asked students not only what they would do but also why they would do it. The "why" was analyzed using Kohlberg's stages, for example, whether the student's justification focused on punishment, social approval, or universal principles. At the same time, follow-up questions asked students to recall if they had ever seen a parent, teacher, friend, or social media personality act in a similar way. These responses were analyzed using Bandura's concepts of modeling and vicarious reinforcement. During data analysis, each student's narrative was examined twice: first through Kohlberg's lens to identify their dominant stage of moral reasoning, and second through Bandura's lens to trace the social sources of that reasoning. This dual analysis allowed the study to understand not just the level of moral maturity but also the environmental influences that shaped it. By integrating these two theories, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of how junior high school students develop and apply their moral reasoning in various social and academic contexts.

Importance of the Study

This study held significance for several stakeholders. For junior high school students, it provides an opportunity to reflect on their own moral reasoning, helping them become more aware of how they navigate ethical dilemmas in their personal and academic lives.

Educators and Values Education teachers benefit from insights into moral reasoning of students, enabling them to design more effective teaching strategies and programs that foster ethical awareness and decision-making skills.

Parents and guardians gain a deeper understanding of how family values and home environments influence moral development, equipping them to better support their children in making ethical choices.

School administrators can use the findings to reinforce character education initiatives and policies that promote ethical behavior among students.

Policymakers and educational authorities may draw from the study to refine curricula and implement more effective moral development programs.

Researchers and academicians benefit from the qualitative perspective this study contributes to the growing body of literature on moral education, which may inspire further research across different cultural and educational settings.

Delimitation and Limitation of the Study

This study was delimited to public junior high school students within the Division of Digos City, focusing on three or more selected schools. The participants consisted of 18 students, ensuring a manageable yet representative sample for qualitative analysis. By concentrating on this location and educational setting, the study aimed to explore moral reasoning within a well-defined context, allowing for detailed examination while acknowledging that findings may not extend to private institutions, other grade levels, or different geographical regions.

A key limitation of this study was its lack of statistical generalizability due to the qualitative approach and the confined scope of participants and locations. The findings do not fully represent the moral reasoning of all junior high school students, as cultural, socioeconomic, and institutional differences in other areas are not accounted for. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews and focus groups may introduce biases, as participants might not always express their true perspectives. Despite these constraints, the study provided valuable insights into the ethical decision-making processes of students within the specified context, serving as a basis for further research.

Definition of Terms

In research, it is essential to define key concepts to ensure clarity and proper understanding of the study. For this study, the researcher defines the following terms both conceptually and operationally:

Junior High School Students. Students in Grades 7 to 10 developing moral reasoning and ethical decision-making skills.

Moral Dilemmas. Real or hypothetical situations where students choose between conflicting moral principles, each involving ethical compromise.

Moral Development. The process by which students acquire, internalize, and apply ethical principles and values.

Moral Reasoning. The cognitive process of analyzing dilemmas, making decisions, and justifying actions based on moral principles.

Peer Influence. The effect of classmates, friends, or social groups on a student's attitudes, behaviors, and moral choices.

Values Education. School-based formal and informal processes that foster ethical awareness of students, moral reasoning, and character development.

Review of Related Literature

Presented in this section is a comprehensive review of literature, conceptual frameworks, and empirical studies relevant to the moral reasoning of junior high school students. The discussion is structured around key themes that align with the research questions, integrating contemporary theories and recent findings to provide a robust theoretical foundation.

The Concept of Moral Reasoning in Adolescence

Moral reasoning refers to the cognitive and evaluative processes through which individuals discern right from wrong, guiding their ethical decision-making (Meyer, 2024). Adolescence marks a critical period in moral development, as cognitive maturation and social experiences shape reasoning capacities (Ochoa & Dela Cruz, 2024). A contemporary application of framework of Kohlberg is Defining Issues Test (DIT) of Rest (1979), which assesses moral judgment through scenario-based dilemmas. Recent studies using the DIT indicate that adolescents progress through stages of moral reasoning, with higher education levels correlating with more advanced ethical judgment (Zhao et al., 2024).

Adding on, the theory of Ethics of Care introduces a gender perspective (Gilligan, 1982), arguing that females often prioritize relational and empathetic considerations in moral reasoning, whereas males may emphasize justice and rules. This distinction is relevant in examining how junior high school students perceive moral dilemmas, particularly in peer and school interactions. Additionally, domain theory (Nucci & Turiel, 2009) differentiates moral reasoning which concerned with fairness and harm from social-conventional reasoning based on societal norms, providing a framework for understanding how adolescents distinguish between ethical violations and rule-breaking behaviors.

Experiences of Junior High School Students in Moral Reasoning

Junior high school students encounter various moral dilemmas in academic and social settings, shaping their ethical perspectives. Recent empirical research highlights that adolescents in similar cultural and educational contexts exhibit diverse reasoning patterns based on exposure to moral discussions, peer influence, and digital interactions (Yang et al., 2025). For instance, students engaged in structured moral education programs demonstrate heightened sensitivity to ethical issues, suggesting that school-based interventions enhance reasoning skills (Meyer, 2024).

However, conflicting influences, such as peer pressure and social media, can complicate moral reasoning. Studies indicate that adolescents often struggle with moral disengagement in online environments, where anonymity reduces accountability (Weber & Siniora, 2021). Conversely, positive peer and teacher relationships foster moral identity development, reinforcing prosocial reasoning (Afable, 2024). These findings underscore the need to explore students' firsthand experiences to understand how they navigate moral challenges.

Cognitive and Emotional Aspects of Moral Reasoning

Moral reasoning in adolescence is shaped by cognitive processes such as logical analysis, perspective-taking and emotional factors like empathy and guilt. Research suggests that cognitive development enables adolescents to evaluate complex ethical dilemmas, while emotional regulation influences their ability to act consistently with moral judgments (Yang et al., 2025). For example, students with strong empathetic tendencies are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors, whereas poor emotional control may lead to impulsive or morally disengaged decisions (Afable, 2024).

Teachers play a crucial role in nurturing moral sensitivity by modeling ethical behavior and facilitating reflective discussions (Muchlis et al., 2025). Additionally, critical reading and epistemic inquiry in subjects like science encourage students to examine socio-scientific dilemmas, broadening their moral reasoning (Lee et al., 2024). These insights highlight the interplay between education, emotional intelligence, and moral development in junior high school settings.

Adolescence as a Critical Stage in Moral Development

Adolescence is a transformative period where moral reasoning evolves through social, familial, and educational influences (Dela Cruz et al., 2024). Studies indicate that structured moral education and real-world ethical applications enhance reasoning skills, particularly when students engage in debates, case analyses, and role-playing scenarios (Cumilang et al., 2025). In addition to, Digital technology further complicates this development, as adolescents encounter novel ethical dilemmas in online spaces, from cyberbullying to misinformation (Zhou et al., 2024).

Further, school leadership and disciplinary policies also shape moral reasoning by reinforcing ethical norms (Lim, 2024). For instance, transparent and fair school regulations help students internalize moral responsibility, whereas inconsistent enforcement may foster ethical ambiguity (Khairani & Aulia, 2025). Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing interventions that align with adolescents' developmental needs.

Factors Influencing Moral Reasoning

Among Junior High School Students

Family and Social Environment

Parental guidance and family values form the foundation of adolescents' moral reasoning (Khairani & Aulia, 2025). Research suggests that authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth and clear expectations,

promotes ethical decision-making, whereas neglect or excessive control may hinder moral development. Peer influence also plays a significant role, as adolescents often conform to group norms when facing moral dilemmas (Mokhtari et al., 2025). Cultural context further shapes reasoning, with collectivist societies prioritizing communal harmony and individualistic cultures emphasizing personal rights (Weber & Siniora, 2021).

Educational Influences

Teachers and curricula significantly impact moral reasoning by integrating ethical discussions into learning (Muchlis et al., 2025). Active learning strategies, such as dilemma-based debates, enhance students' ability to analyze moral issues critically. Additionally, Lee et al. (2024) posit that interdisciplinary approaches such as embedding moral inquiry in science education, foster epistemic insights, helping students evaluate socio-scientific controversies School policies that promote fairness and accountability further reinforce ethical behavior, underscoring the importance of a holistic educational environment.

Digital and Online Interactions

Social media and digital platforms introduce new ethical challenges, requiring adolescents to apply moral reasoning in virtual contexts (Kumar & Jurgens, 2025). Adding on, Zhao et al. (2025) claim that studies show that exposure to online debates and cyberbullying influences prosocial reasoning, with some students demonstrating heightened moral awareness while others exhibit disengagement. Digital literacy programs that teach ethical online behavior can mitigate risks, equipping students to navigate moral dilemmas in digital spaces responsibly.

The existing literature offers a comprehensive examination of moral reasoning in adolescence, highlighting its cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions through frameworks like stages of the theory of Kohlberg, ethics of care, and domain theory of Giligan. Studies emphasize the role of education, family, peers, and digital environments in shaping adolescents' ethical decision-making, with particular attention to how moral reasoning evolves through structured interventions and real-world applications. However, while these studies provide valuable insights into external influences and developmental patterns, they predominantly rely on quantitative assessments and observational methods, leaving a significant gap in understanding how adolescents themselves perceive and experience moral dilemmas in their daily lives.

Current research extensively explores factors such as moral education programs, peer influence, and digital interactions but often overlooks the firsthand perspectives of junior high school students. For instance, while studies like those of Zhao et al. (2024) and Yang et al. (2025) demonstrate the impact of educational interventions on moral reasoning, they do not capture personal interpretations of students of moral challenges or the reasoning behind their choices. Similarly, investigations into digital moral reasoning (Kumar & Jurgens, 2025; Zhou et al., 2024) focus on behavioral outcomes rather than students' own narratives about navigating online ethical dilemmas. Additionally, cultural and contextual nuances, especially in collectivist settings like the Philippines, remain underexamined, leaving questions about how students reconcile societal expectations with personal values.

This study aims to bridge these gaps by centering the voices of junior high school students, an approach largely absent in prior quantitative or phenomenologically focused research. While existing studies have measured moral reasoning through surveys or examined isolated experiences, this research explores perceptions of students, decision-making processes, and personal insights using a descriptive qualitative design. By adopting this approach, the study uncovers previously unrecognized influences on adolescent ethical development, such as the interplay of family, peers, school, and digital exposure as narrated by the students themselves. Unlike earlier studies that focused on senior high school students in urban settings, this research focuses on under-resourced public junior high schools in the Division of Digos City. The findings therefore did not only enrich academic discourse but also provide educators and policymakers with actionable insights to design more effective, context-sensitive moral education programs tailored to the unique needs of today's adolescents.

Organization of the Study

Provided in the first chapter is the introduction to the study, including the background, research objectives, and research questions. It also presents the rationale for the study, emphasizing the significance of understanding the moral reasoning of junior high school students. Additionally, this chapter outlines the scope and limitations of the study.

The second chapter contains reviews of relevant literature, beginning with an overview of moral reasoning and its role in adolescent development. This chapter discusses key studies on moral education, ethical decision-making, and social influences on moral reasoning. It also presents the theoretical frameworks guiding the study, including Theory of Moral Development and Social Learning Theory.

Detailed in the third chapter are the research methodology, including the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures. The ethical considerations in conducting the study are also addressed.

Presented in the fourth chapter are the results of the study, including the themes and patterns that emerge from the data analysis. This chapter provides a thorough interpretation of the findings, supported by direct excerpts from participants.

The final chapter discusses the implications of the findings, offering conclusions and recommendations for educators, policymakers, and future researchers. It highlights the contributions of the study to the field of moral education and adolescent development.

METHODOLOGY

Presented in this chapter are the research design, research locale, research participants, data sources, data collection, data analysis, the trustworthiness of the study, the role of the researcher, and the ethical considerations observed during the entire duration of the conduct of this study.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative approach, specifically a descriptive qualitative research design. A qualitative approach is a methodological framework that emphasizes understanding human experiences, behaviors, and social phenomena through non-numerical data such as interviews, observations, and textual analysis (Johnson & Christensen, 2024). This approach is particularly suited for examining the subjective meanings individuals attach to their experiences, allowing for an in-depth exploration of complex issues like moral reasoning (Harari & Weinstock, 2021).

Further, a descriptive qualitative design is focused on providing a detailed and comprehensive account of a phenomenon as it naturally occurs, without manipulating variables or imposing predetermined frameworks (Chen et al., 2021). This design prioritized the perspectives of the participants, capturing their voices and experiences in their own words (Moore, 2022). By employing methods such as semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, this approach enabled researchers to gather rich, contextualized data that reflects the nuances of participants' moral reasoning processes (Fusch et al., 2022).

Furthermore, I chose the descriptive qualitative design because it aligned with my goal of understanding how junior high school students interpreted and navigated moral dilemmas within their social and academic environments. Given the subjective nature of moral reasoning, this design allowed me to explore the perspectives of students in depth, uncovering the underlying themes and patterns in their ethical decision-making. By prioritizing their voices, I provided a nuanced and authentic representation of their moral reasoning, which would be difficult to achieve through quantitative methods.

Research Participants

This study utilized a snowball sampling technique to identify participants. I began the process by coordinating formally with the Department of Education Schools Division of Digos City to secure permission to conduct the study. Upon approval, coordination was made with school heads, guidance counselors, and teachers in selected public schools within the Division of Digos City to facilitate the implementation of the research. These school personnel serve as the key informants and were asked to refer initial 15 potential participants from Grades 7 to 10 who can meaningfully contribute to the study. Recommendations were made based on observable characteristics such as demonstrated maturity, ability to articulate thought processes, and active participation in classroom discussions relating to values and ethics. Teachers and guidance counselors utilized their professional observations and experiences with students to identify students with a large number of diversified perspectives and experiences, relevant to this study.

Adding on, the final sample consisted of 18 public junior high school students. This number is appropriate for qualitative research, as methodological guidelines confirm that sample sizes can range from 1 to 20 participants depending on the research depth and context (Subedi, 2026; Wutich, Beresford, & Bernard, 2024). Participants met specific inclusion criteria: they were currently enrolled in Grades 7, 8, 9, or 10 in a public school under the Digos City Division; they demonstrated willingness to engage in discussions about moral reasoning; they possessed sufficient cognitive and communicative ability to articulate their experiences with ethical dilemmas; and they provided both written assent and parental consent. To assess willingness and ability, potential participants took part in a brief orientation where they were presented with age-appropriate moral dilemma scenarios and invited to share their perspectives. This allowed the researcher to observe their comfort and engagement firsthand. Additionally, a short, relaxed screening interview was conducted where each student was asked to reflect on and describe a personal experience involving moral reasoning. This interaction, conducted in clear and simple language, helped evaluate their capacity for logical thinking, self-reflection, and coherent expression. Academic records were also reviewed with proper consent to confirm basic literacy skills appropriate for their grade level.

Consequently, students were excluded if they had cognitive or communicative impairments that could hinder meaningful participation, if they declined to adhere to confidentiality protocols, or if they attended private institutions outside the target geographic area. Given that all participants were minors, ethical protocols were carefully followed. Informed consent forms were secured from parents or guardians, and separate assent forms, written in student-friendly language, were provided to and signed by the participants themselves. This two-tiered consent process emphasized the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Moreover, the study recognized that some participants might come from vulnerable backgrounds, including economically disadvantaged households or those with limited literacy. Additional safeguards were implemented, such as using simplified consent and assent forms, providing thorough verbal explanations of the study procedures, ensuring strict confidentiality, and continually reinforcing the participants' rights throughout the research process.

Data Sources

This study utilized primary data sources, including semi-structured In-Depth Interviews (IDIs), Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and field notes, to gather in-depth insights into the moral reasoning of junior high school students. This process enabled participants to articulate their thoughts, experiences, and ethical dilemmas in their own words, providing rich qualitative data. Field notes offer real-time observations of the interactions of participants and behaviors in natural settings, complementing the self-reported data from interviews and discussions.

Existing literature on moral reasoning, adolescent moral development, and values education were reviewed. Studies from psychology, education, and sociology provide context and theoretical grounding for understanding the moral reasoning process. Key references include research on Kohlberg's Theory of Moral

Development (Kohlberg, 1981) and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), as well as studies on the impact of peer influence, digital media, and values education on adolescents' ethical decision-making (Berkowitz & Grych, 1998).

More so, the integration of primary and secondary data sources strengthened the study's depth and credibility. Primary data, including field notes, ensures authenticity and relevance to the lived experiences of the participants, while secondary data provides a broader theoretical and empirical foundation. Together, these sources facilitated a comprehensive exploration of moral reasoning among junior high school students, contributing to both practical and academic discussions on moral education and adolescent ethics.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, I sought approval from the Dean of the Graduate School of the University of the Immaculate Conception (UIC). After which, ethical clearance was secured from the UIC-Research Ethics Committee (UIC-REC) to ensure compliance with research integrity and participant protection guidelines. Upon receipt of ethical clearance, official permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Schools Division Superintendent (SDS), followed by approval from the respective school principals. The principals then endorsed the researcher to the teachers in each school.

Given that participants were minors, a two-stage consent process was implemented. Parents or guardians first received a comprehensive orientation about the study's purpose, procedures, and the extent of their child's participation, which involved one semi-structured interview (30-45 minutes) and potentially a focus group discussion (FGD). The informed consent form (ICF) and Assent form, written in both English and Filipino to ensure comprehension, was provided for parental signature. Only after obtaining parental consent, student participants were oriented about the study and were asked to sign an assent form, also available in English and Filipino. Both documents contained clear statements emphasizing that participation was entirely voluntary, and participants who refused to participate or withdraw at any time without facing negative consequences to their academic standing or school relationships.

All IDIs and FGD were conducted in person to facilitate richer interaction and non-verbal communication. The semi-structured interviews explored the experiences of students with ethical dilemmas, decision-making processes, and influencing factors, while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions. FGD involved six participants to encourage dynamic exchange about moral reasoning in peer context while the IDIs involved 12 participants.

The research acknowledged potential risks, including mild discomfort when discussing personal moral dilemmas or anxiety about peer perceptions during FGD. Mitigation measures include: conducting sessions in private, comfortable school spaces; reminding participants of their right to skip questions or pause discussions; and having guidance counselors available for support if needed. All sessions were audio-recorded with participant permission, then transcribed verbatimly while replacing identifying information with pseudonyms.

Strict adherence to the Data Privacy Act of 2012 was maintained throughout. Data collection was limited to information relevant to the research questions, with no unnecessary personal details gathered. Audio files and transcripts were stored in password-protected digital files, accessible only to the primary researcher and thesis adviser. All data were anonymized through pseudonyms and the removal of identifying school/community details. Raw data were securely stored for three years after study completion before being permanently deleted from all devices and cloud storage.

To ensure accuracy and ethical representation, member checking was implemented. Participants had the opportunity to review their interview transcripts before analysis to verify content, request clarifications, or remove any potentially identifying information they found sensitive. This process not only enhances data validity but also reinforced participants' agency in the research.

By combining rigorous ethical protocols with multiple data collection methods, the study aimed to develop a nuanced understanding of junior high school students' moral reasoning while prioritizing participant welfare

and data security at every stage. The comprehensive approach to consent, risk mitigation, and privacy protection aligned with best practices in qualitative research with adolescent populations**.**

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), a qualitative approach that identifies patterns and themes from participants' responses. This method allowed for the systematic organization and interpretation of data, highlighting key aspects of moral reasoning of students. As the primary researcher, I engaged deeply in each phase of this analytical process, which unfolded across six iterative steps. All coding was done purely manually, without the use of any qualitative data analysis software.

First, I immersed myself in the data through familiarization. I personally transcribed all audio recordings from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussion verbatim. This transcription process was not merely mechanical; it served as my initial encounter with the narratives, allowing me to listen intently to each voice of the students, tone, and pauses. I read and re-read the transcripts multiple times, jotting down preliminary impressions and reflections in a research journal. This phase was crucial for me to become intimately acquainted with the depth and nuance of the shared experiences of students regarding moral dilemmas.

Second, I began initial coding. Working manually and using digital memos, I systematically reviewed each transcript line-by-line. I assigned short, descriptive labels or codes to segments of text that captured meaningful ideas. For example, phrases like "my mother taught me to be kind" were coded as "Parental Instruction," while instances of "my friend told me what I did was wrong" were coded as "Peer Correction." I remained open to both semantic (surface-level) and latent (underlying meaning) codes, ensuring that the students' own words and implied meanings guided the coding framework.

Third, it involved theme identification. After generating a comprehensive list of codes, I printed them out and began sorting them into clusters based on conceptual relationships. I used physical grouping and visual mapping to see how codes like "Parental Instruction," "Discipline at Home," and "Family as First Teacher" coalesced into a potential theme, which later crystallized as Family as the Primary Moral Architect. This process was recursive; I constantly moved back and forth between the codes and the raw data to ensure the emerging themes were firmly grounded in the accounts of the participants.

Fourth, I engaged in reviewing themes. Here, I critically examined the candidate themes for coherence, distinctiveness, and relevance to the research questions. I created thematic maps and checked if all relevant data extracts fit within the thematic structure. Some initial themes were merged, for instance, "School Lessons" and "Teacher Guidance" were integrated into School as the Reinforcing Structure. Others were subdivided or renamed to better capture the essence of the data. This refining process ensured that the themes accurately reflected the collective experiences of the participants.

Fifth, I was defining and naming themes. For each stabilized theme, I wrote a detailed analytical description. I articulated what the theme captured, how it related to the research questions, and what story it told about the moral reasoning of students. I also selected vivid and representative quotations from the transcripts that embodied each theme. This step transformed the themes from abstract categories into rich, narrative-driven constructs ready for reporting.

Finally, during report writing, I synthesized the analytical narrative. I wove together the defined themes, supported by direct excerpts from the participants, to construct a coherent and insightful account of the findings. This synthesis did not merely list themes but integrated them into a compelling discussion that addressed the objectives of the study, connecting the lived experiences of students to the broader concepts of moral development and values education. Throughout this entire analytical journey, I acted as transcriber, coder, interpreter, and synthesizer, ensuring that the final analysis remained faithful to the voices of the junior high school students while contributing meaningful scholarly insights.

By employing thematic analysis, this study ensured a rigorous and insightful examination of the moral reasoning experiences of junior high school students, contributing to the broader discourse on moral education and adolescent ethical development.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To establish the trustworthiness of this qualitative research, the study adhered to the four evaluative criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria provided a structured framework for ensuring the quality, rigor, and credibility of the research process and its findings.

Credibility. To ensure credibility, I implemented multiple verification strategies throughout the research process. I conducted triangulation by combining data from individual interviews and focus group discussions to cross-validate findings about students' moral reasoning. I performed member checking by allowing participants to review and verify their interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations. I maintained prolonged engagement with participants through multiple contact points to develop a comprehensive understanding of their moral reasoning processes. Throughout data collection, I kept reflexive field notes to document my observations, reactions, and potential biases.

It refers to the confidence in the truth value of the findings, established through rigorous data collection and verification methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following Donkoh and Mensah (2023), member checking confirmed that participant perspectives were accurately represented. Prolonged engagement, as emphasized by Bang (2024), allows for deeper immersion in the context and builds rapport. Maintaining reflexive notes, as recommended by White and Davis (2023), supports researcher awareness and minimizes bias.

Transferability. To achieve transferability, I provided thick, contextual descriptions of the research setting and participant characteristics. These detailed accounts included information about the school environment, student demographics, and specific examples of moral dilemmas discussed. I thoroughly documented the cultural dynamics of the school and students' experiences to facilitate meaningful comparisons.

It represents the degree to which qualitative findings can be applied to other contexts or settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As suggested by Drisko (2025), such rich descriptions enable readers to assess the potential applicability of findings to similar educational contexts. Thorough contextual documentation, as noted by Walker and Brown (2023), aids other researchers in understanding the setting and determining the relevance of findings to their own work.

Dependability. To establish dependability, I created and maintained a comprehensive audit trail documenting all research decisions and procedures. This record included details about data collection methods, coding processes, and analytical decisions. I engaged in peer debriefing sessions with experienced qualitative researchers to review my processes and interpretations.

It refers to the consistency and reliability of the research process over time and across conditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following recommendations of Tuval-Mashiach (2021), maintaining an audit trail ensures methodological transparency and allows others to follow the research path. Peer debriefing, as advised by Buckley et al. (2022), provides external validation and helps identify potential oversights in the analytical process.

Confirmability. To ensure confirmability, I practiced bracketing (epoché) throughout the study to identify and set aside my personal beliefs about moral reasoning. I maintained an audit trail containing raw data, coding frameworks, and reflective memos. I supported key themes with direct participant quotations to show the grounding of findings in actual experiences of participants.

It indicates the degree to which findings are shaped by respondents and conditions of inquiry rather than researcher biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following Dorfler and Stierand's (2021) approach, bracketing helps researchers suspend preconceptions. Maintaining a clear audit trail, as highlighted by Subrahmanyam (2025),

demonstrates how interpretations emerge directly from the data. Using participant quotations, as noted by Ahmed (2024), strengthens objectivity by anchoring findings in the voices of the participants.

By systematically addressing these four criteria throughout the research process, I ensured the trustworthiness of the findings of the study and their value for understanding moral reasoning among junior high school students. The combination of verification strategies, transparent documentation, and reflexive practices produced results that are credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable.

Role of the Researcher

In this study, as the researcher, I played a central role in data collection, analysis, and interpretation, serving as the primary instrument for exploring moral reasoning of students. My responsibilities encompassed being an interviewer, transcriber, translator, typist, data analyst, and interpreter. As an interviewer, I facilitated the IDIs and the FGD, adopting an empathetic and neutral stance to create a safe space for participants to share their thoughts openly. I carefully guided conversations to elicit rich, meaningful responses while avoiding leading questions or imposing my own perspectives.

Following data collection, I took on the role of a transcriber, meticulously converting audio recordings into written text to ensure accuracy. Since some participants may express themselves in their native language, I also served as a translator, converting their responses into English while preserving the original meaning and nuances. As a typist, I organized and compiled the transcribed data systematically, preparing it for analysis.

In my role as a data analyst, I engaged in thematic analysis, identifying patterns and themes within the participants' narratives. I maintained reflexivity by continuously reflecting on my own biases and preconceptions to prevent them from influencing the findings. To ensure the credibility of interpretations, I employed member checking, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of their responses, and peer debriefing, where I consulted with colleagues to validate my analysis. Finally, as an interpreter, I drew meaningful conclusions from the data, ensuring that my insights remain faithful to the participants' perspectives.

Throughout the study, I upheld ethical responsibilities by obtaining informed consent, protecting confidentiality, and respecting cultural sensitivities. By fulfilling these multifaceted roles, I contributed to the dependability and ethical integrity of the research, ensuring that the findings provide a valid and insightful exploration of junior high school students' moral reasoning.

Ethical Considerations

This study is committed to upholding the highest ethical standards in research. Prior to implementation, the research protocol undergone rigorous review and approval by the University of the Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee (UIC-REC) to ensure full compliance with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, particularly minors. As the principal researcher, I possess the necessary qualifications to conduct this study, holding a degree in Master of Values Education and having completed specialized training in qualitative research methods and ethical research practices with adolescent populations. Throughout the research process, I collaborated closely with my thesis adviser and panel members, who bring extensive expertise in moral education and qualitative methodologies, to ensure methodological rigor and ethical compliance.

The study benefited from full access to research facilities of UIC and resources, including the comprehensive collection of literature on moral development and qualitative research methods of the university library. These institutional resources provided essential support for data analysis and interpretation. All research activities adhered strictly to ethical principles, including obtaining informed consent from both parents and participants, ensuring voluntary participation with the right to withdraw at any time without consequence, maintaining strict confidentiality through data anonymization, and implementing appropriate safeguards to protect participant welfare. Data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the research team and were retained for three years post-study before secure disposal, in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

RESULTS

This chapter presents the themes generated based on the analysis of the responses to the three research questions covering the primary influences that shape the moral reasoning of students, the role of moral reasoning in shaping decision making in their day-to-day interaction, and the insights of the public junior high school students as regards moral reasoning.

Profile of the Participants

As presented in Table 1, the participants in this study consisted of 18 public junior high school students, strategically selected to offer diverse perspectives on moral reasoning. The sample included 12 students who participated in In-Depth Interviews (IDI) and six who took part in Focus Group Discussions (FGD). In terms of demographic composition, 10 participants were female, and eight were male. Across grade levels, there were four Grade 7 students, four Grade 8 students, five Grade 9 students, and five Grade 10 students.

This participant structure was designed to allow for both detailed individual reflection through the IDIs and dynamic peer interaction through the FGD. The selection aimed to gather varied viewpoints supporting a comprehensive exploration of how students understand and navigate moral dilemmas. The profile below summarizes these characteristics and illustrates how the participants were chosen to share their personal experiences and insights regarding moral reasoning in their daily lives.

Table 1.1 Profile of the Participants

Participants Code	**Sex**	**Grade Level**
IDI 1	Female	7
IDI 2	Female	8
IDI 3	Male	9
IDI 4	Female	10
IDI 5	Female	7
IDI 6	Female	8
IDI 7	Female	9
IDI 8	Male	10
IDI 9	Female	7
IDI 10	Male	8
IDI 11	Male	9
IDI 12	Female	10
FGD 1	Male	7
FGD 2	Female	8
FGD 3	Female	8
FGD 4	Male	9
FGD 5	Female	10
FGD 6	Female	10

Influences on the Moral Reasoning of Public Junior High School Students

This theme identifies the primary influences that shape students' moral reasoning. It examines how family, school, religion, and peers actively construct their understanding of right and wrong.

Presented in Table 2 are core ideas and essential themes generated from the responses of the participants. Four essential themes were extracted as regards the influences on moral reasoning: *Family as the Primary Moral Architect*, *School as the Reinforcing Structure*, *Faith as a Spiritual Compass*, and *Peers as a Double-Edged Sword*. The data reveals a clear hierarchy of influence, with the family acting as the chief architect, the school serving as a crucial reinforcing structure, faith providing a spiritual compass, and peers presenting a double-edged sword that can either challenge or strengthen their moral convictions.

Family as the Primary Moral Architect. The family unit is overwhelmingly identified as the first and most influential source of moral education. Students perceive their homes as the birthplace of their values, where core principles like respect, obedience, and the fundamental distinction between right and wrong are initially taught and modeled. The family is universally recognized as the first and most fundamental source of moral education. Thus, Parents and guardians are the primary teachers who instill core values, define right and wrong, and shape the initial character and behavior of a child.

The verbatim responses from the interviews consistently point to the family's foundational role. As IDI1 succinctly stated,

Sila man gyud ang sinugdanan... Gikan man gyud sa ilaha kana nagsugod ang kung unsa atong batasan. **(IDI1)**

They are really the foundation. Our behavior really starts from them.

This sentiment was echoed by another participant, who defined the family's role directly:

Ang role *sa pamilya kay magtudlo ug kanang*

tamang pamatasan. **(IDI4)**

The role of the family is to teach the right behavior.

Another participant further elaborated on this instructional role, noting,

Sila ang muraq nagatudlo ug maayong pamatasan sa ilahang mga anak. **(IDI5)**

They are the ones who teach good behavior to their children.

The influence is not merely about abstract rules but involves continuous, practical guidance. IDI10 shared,

*Gitudloan lagi ko sa akong mama kung unsaon pagkamaayo, unsaon pagbinuotan ug ah... kabalo kung unsa ang angay buhaton***. (IDI10)**

My mother always teaches me how to be good, how to be kind and ah... know what's the right thing to do.

This highlights the active, day-to-day involvement of parents in moral cultivation. Finally, IDI12 provided a profound insight into why the family's influence is so potent:

Ang family *gyud nimo ang* first *nga nakaila sa imo. Sila pud ang* first *nga magtudlo nimo kung unsa ang tama ug mali.* **(IDI12)**

Your family is the first to know you. They are also the first to teach you what is right and wrong.

This suggests that moral lessons are deeply personalized and delivered within a context of intimate knowledge and trust. This primary role of the family was corroborated in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD). FGD1 reinforced the concept by connecting it to formal learning:

In our lessons *sa ESP, ang pamilya daw kay pangunahing yunit ng lipunan... dira magsugod ang tanan... sila ang una magtudlo* about *sa imong* moral. **(FGD1)**

In our ESP lessons, the family is said to be the primary unit of society... everything starts there... they are the first to teach you about your morals.

This collective insight from both IDI and FGD solidifies the family's irreplaceable position as the cornerstone of moral development.

School as the Reinforcing Structure. While the family lays the foundation, the school is perceived as a vital institution that systematically reinforces, clarifies, and provides a practical arena for applying moral principles. Subjects like Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao (ESP) or Values Education are particularly highlighted as direct channels for moral instruction, with teachers acting as authoritative figures who correct misbehavior and explicitly teach virtuous conduct. The school, particularly through the ESP (Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao) subject, serves as a crucial institution that systematically reinforces and

Table 1.2 Influences on the Moral Reasoning of Public Junior High School Students formalizes moral lessons. Teachers act as authoritative figures who correct misbehavior, provide explicit moral instruction, and emphasize the importance of values for a peaceful life.

Essential Themes	**Core Ideas**
Family as the Primary Moral Architect	Family teaches basic moral values. Parents guides right and wrong. Family shapes early child moral character.
School as the Reinforcing Structure	School reinforces moral lessons. ESP provides formal values education. Teachers correct behaviors in each value.
Faith as a Spiritual Compass	Faith guides moral decision. Religious practices such as prayer and worship provide moral strength. Actions are aligned with religious beliefs.
Peers as a Double-Edged Sword	Peer can lead to right or wrong behavior. Positive peers give moral advice and correction. Peers provide emotional and moral support.

The students' responses clearly illustrate the school's reinforcing function. IDI1 acknowledged that while values start at home, they are actively focused on in school:

Sa values *mao gyud ang* focus *nila ma'am... Sa skwelhan pud magsugod ang kuan.* **(IDI1)**

Values is really their focus... It also starts in school.

For some, like IDI2, the school's role was paramount:

Ang ESP *ra jud ang nakat-uon sa akoa ug tama ug mali***. (IDI2)**

It was only ESP that taught me about right and wrong.

This indicates that the subject's profound impact. The reinforcing nature often comes through correction, as IDI4 experienced:

Ginabadlong mi sa maestra nga mali jud daw ang among gibuhát. **(IDI4)**

The teacher scolded us that what we did was wrong.

Teachers are seen not just as disciplinarians but as guides. IDI7 explained,

Kay mga teachers ma'am*, ginatudluan mi nila ug mga tarong na pamatasan* through *sa pagsaway ug pagtudlo sa tama na buhaton.* **(IDI7)**

The teachers teach us proper behavior through scolding and teaching us what is right to do.

The lessons learned often extend beyond personal betterment to prosocial behavior. IDI8 described a teacher who imparted lessons that emphasized collective well-being:

Naga paku-an jud syag lessons*... Dili ra kaayo ku-anon imoha kaugalingon kundi ku-anon pud nimo ang mga tao***. (IDI8)**

She really gives lessons... You don't just help yourself; you also help others.

The FGD data supports this, with FGD2 articulating the practical benefit of this moral education:

Amoang lesson sa ESP ma'am is about morality ma'am... *kung kabalo daw mi sa kung unsa ang tama ug mali maka*live *daw mi ug* peace *daw* ma'am *walay gubot.* **(FGD2)**

Our lesson in ESP is about morality... if we know what is right and wrong, we can live peacefully, without trouble.

This shows that students perceive moral reasoning learned in school as a practical tool for creating a harmonious life.

Faith as a Spiritual Compass. For a significant number of students, faith, prayer, and a relationship with God serve as a central guiding force in their moral reasoning. This sub-theme depicts spirituality as a moral compass that provides direction, strength, and a framework for gratitude, which in turn influences their decisions and actions. Faith in God provides a spiritual and internal guide for moral decision-making. Religious practices (prayer, church attendance) are seen as sources of strength, guidance, and gratitude, helping individuals align their actions with their faith.

The verbatim responses reveal a deep, personal reliance on faith. IDI3 described their actions as being directly guided by divinity:

Kanang ang kuan nako ...ginabuhát nako kay by the guidance of God *...kanang naga-ampo, nagasimba..mao to.* **(IDI3)**

What I do is by the guidance of God... praying, going to church... that's it.

For IDI5, the disciplined environment of a religious grandmother. It was a formative influence.

Si Lola disiplinado man kaayo sya. **(IDI5)**

My grandmother is very disciplined.

Daily practices of gratitude are also common, as IDI9 shared:

Kami everytime everyday...everytime mi *mangaon ah...naga-ampo gyud mi* first to thank God. **(IDI9)**

We always, every day, whenever we eat... we pray first to thank God.

This faith is often taught and modeled by family members, creating a powerful synergy between the first two sub-themes. IDI10 stated,

My dad is *makadiyos* po... He also taught me *na...* once I wake up *mag*pray *ko, magpasalamat ko.* **(IDI10)**

My dad is God-fearing... He also taught me that when I wake up, I should pray, I should give thanks.

In times of struggle, students like IDI12 turn to this spiritual compass for strength:

Nangayo ko ug kanang guide *niya nga* Lord*... Tagai ko ug kusog.* **(IDI12)**

I asked for His guidance, Lord… Give me strength.

The FGD response from FGD5 perfectly encapsulates this sub-theme, describing God as a primary source of moral energy:

Naa ma'am *si* God... *Sila lang akong saligan... Sila akong* source of energy *na mubuhát ug tama*. **(FGD5)**

There is God... He the only one I rely on...He my source of energy to do what is right.

This confirms that for many students, faith is not a passive belief but an active and essential resource for navigating moral choices.

Peers as a Double-Edged Sword. The influence of peers represents a complex and potent force in adolescent moral development, acting as a double-edged sword. Peers can be a source of negative pressure, leading students toward poor decisions, but they can also serve as a positive influence, offering correction, support, and inspiration to be better. Peer influence has a dual potential: it can lead one astray or provide essential moral correction and support. Positive peers act as a corrective force, offering advice, calling out wrong behavior, and providing emotional support that fosters positive moral growth.

The interview data provides clear examples of both edges of this sword. The negative aspect is illustrated by IDI2, who succumbed to peer pressure with regrettable results:

Naa koy desisyon nong gipakuyog ko sa akong classmate*... Nikuha ko ato... pero nagdagan-dagan lang sila*. **(IDI12)**

I had a decision, when my classmates asked me to go with them... I went... but they just ran around.

Conversely, the positive power of peers is profound. IDI3 appreciated friends who held them accountable:

Akoang friends*...katong.....wala ko nila pasagdaan...katong kuan...katong nagbuhat ko ug mali ilaha kong gitama.* **(IDI3)**

My friends... they didn't neglect me... when... when I did something wrong, they corrected me.

For some, like IDI7, a morally upright friend was transformative:

I have a friend. She has a good heart and moral... *Didto nag*-change akong negative life into positive life. (**IDI7**)

I have a friend who has a good heart, and who is a moral person.That was when I turned my negative life into a positive one.

This shows the potential for peers to catalyze significant personal growth. This corrective and advisory role was also mentioned by IDI8:

Kining pag tambag ma'am *pag naa koy mali na nabuhat... ilahang ginakorek, gaku-an silag mga* advice**. (IDI8)**

When I do something wrong... they correct me, they give me advice.

Beyond correction, peers provide crucial emotional support, as IDI11 noted:

Katong kuan na down *na kaayo ko unya siya naa siya didto para sa akoa.* (**IDI14)**

Yes, by being there for me. When I was down, she was there for me.

The supportive role of peers is vividly captured in the FGD. FGD2 shared an example of a friend who offered constructive criticism:

Buyagon ko niya ma'am *kung unsa nga mali akong nahimo... Muana sya nganong manaway man ka na wala man gane ka nagtan-aw sa imohang* self. **(FGD2)**

My friend would advise me about the wrong things I've done... saying…Why are you mocking others when you're not even looking at yourself.

This demonstrates how peers can serve as mirrors, fostering self-reflection and moral accountability within the social group. The moral reasoning of junior high school students is built upon these four foundational pillars. The family provides the blueprint, the school constructs and reinforces the framework, faith offers a navigational guide, and peers present both challenges to and affirmations of the entire structure. Understanding this interconnected ecosystem is essential for comprehending how young individuals develop their sense of right and wrong.

Role of Moral Reasoning in Shaping Decision Making in their Day-to- Day Interaction

Moral reasoning transcends abstract knowledge; it is ultimately expressed and tested through action in the complex arena of daily life. This captures the active, and often challenging, process through which students enact their moral beliefs. Presented in Table 3 are the core ideas and essential themes that were generated from participants' responses. Three essential themes emerged: *Prosocial Application,*

Moral Resilience and Navigating Moral Dilemmas. The data reveals that it moves beyond the sources of their morality to explore how it functions under pressure, highlighting three key dynamics: the proactive expression of goodness, the resilience required to uphold principles against temptation, and the difficult navigation of situations where moral values conflict with other desires or fears.*Prosocial Application.* This generated theme illustrates how moral reasoning translates into positive, helpful, and responsible actions toward others. It demonstrates that students' morality is not merely a set of prohibitions but an active force that drives them to contribute positively to their social environment through tutoring, defending the vulnerable, and taking initiative without expectation of reward. Moral values are actively applied through helping, protecting, and teaching others**.** These prosocial acts, such as tutoring, standing up against bullying, and performing acts of service, are driven by empathy and a sense of responsibility**,** and they bring personal satisfaction.

The verbatim responses provide rich examples of this prosocial behavior in action. IDI4 demonstrated patience and a desire to uplift others academically, stating,

Akoang gipasabot sa iyaha... Tudluan nako siya ug maayo hangtod sa makasabot siya. **(IDI4)**

I explained it to him... I tutored him properly until he understood.

IDI6 exhibited moral courage by physically intervening to protect a peer:

Niadto ko dito tapos nakakita ko ug usa ka bata na giaway-away siya mao ng didtoa ni stand up *ko para sa iyaha***. (IDI6**)

I went there and then I saw a child being bullied, so I stood up for him.

Similarly, IDI7 described a common classroom kindness:

Kanang pag naa koy nakitan ma'am na classmate *na naglisud syag sabot sa ano* activities*... akoa gina*explain *sa iyaha.* **(IDI7***)*

When I see a classmate struggling to understand the activities... I explain it to them.

A key aspect of this prosocial application is intrinsic motivation, as shown by IDI9, who cleaned a classroom out of a personal sense of responsibility:

Nakita man nako na hugaw ang room *bisag wala may... nagkuha ko ug silhig ug gilimpyohan nako ang* room**. (IDI)**

I saw that the room was dirty even though no one... I got a broom and cleaned the room.

For some students like IDI11, this behavior becomes a defined role, suggesting a deeper internalization of moral duty:

Ako man gyud ang kuan dira... nagsilbi na tarong sa ilaha. Akoa ang nagkuan sa ilaha. **(IDI11)**

I am the one who... serves them properly. I am the one who guides them.

This theme of proactive helping was strongly supported in the FGD. FGD3 shared a simple yet powerful act of generosity and its impact on self-perception:

Naa koy classmate *nga walay baon tapos tagaan nimo ma'am. Tan-aw nako sa akong sarili nga kaya man diay nako manghatag ug makalipay sya*. **(FGD 3)**

I have a classmate who has no allowance, then you give them some. I look at myself and realize that I can give and make someone happy.

This reflection confirms that prosocial actions are not only beneficial to the recipient but are also crucial for the moral actor's own sense of agency and character.

Table 2 Role of Moral Reasoning in Shaping Decision Making in their Day-to-Day Interaction

Essential Themes	**Core Ideas**
Prosocial Application	Students help, protect and support others. Actions are driven by empathy and responsibility. Acts like tutoring and confronting bullying occur.
Moral Resilience	Students choose right despite pressure

	Students' self-control and resist peers. Decisions are guided by inner and parental support.
Navigating Moral Dilemmas	Students face conflicting choices. Students weigh outcomes and responsibilities. Decisions may cause guilt or uncertainty.

Moral Resilience. Moral resilience refers to the capacity to withstand negative peer pressure, temptation, and external influences by steadfastly adhering to internalized moral convictions. This sub-theme highlights the active, and sometimes difficult, choice to do what is right, even in the face of fear, social ostracization, or the allure of an easier path. Moral resilience is the conscious effort to uphold one's values despite external pressures or temptations to do wrong. It involves self-control, resisting peer pressure, and making a deliberate choice to do what is right, often supported by internal strength and parental guidance.

The students' narratives are filled with instances of this resilience. IDI1 described resisting the pressure to join a gang despite feeling afraid:

Bisag mali unya mao to kanang mahadlok man ko nila... pero wala jud ko nisunod sa ilaha. **(IDI1)**

Even though it was wrong and I feared them... I still did not follow them.

For IDI5, this fortitude was consciously cultivated with familial support:

Sa tabang sa akoa mga ginikanan nagpabilin ko na kuan ..like*... ahhh mubuhát ug tama.* **(IDI5)**

With the help of my parents, I remained... to do what is right.

This points to the foundational pillars providing the strength for this resilience.

The internal dialogue required for this resilience is evident. IDI8 articulated a strategy of mental fortification:

Dili lang dili magpa-affect *sa* surroundings*... Kanang kuanon ang* self *kung kabalo nga tama to mao jud toy buhaton nimo. (***IDI8)**

You should not be affected by your surroundings... You should strengthen yourself if you know it's right, that's what you should do.

For IDI11, this was described as a conscious internal struggle and effort:

Piliton jud nako akoang self *nga buhaton ang tama***. (IDI11)**

I really force myself to do what is right.

The stance of IDI12 was one of firm resolve:

Dili jud ka dapat magpadala sa bad *na mga desisyon***. (IDI12)**

You really should not give in to bad decisions.

The FGD data provides a clear, everyday example of this resilience. FGD2 explained how moral reasoning directly influences a daily choice between responsibility and distraction:

*Makabati ug maka*feel *gyud ko na lisod magdesisyon pero tungod sa akong* moral reasoning*, mas pili-on nako ang mutabang sa balay kaysa magdula lang pirmi sa* cellphone. **(FGD2)**

I really feel that it's hard to make decisions, but because of my moral reasoning, I choose to help at home rather than just always play on my cellphone.

This shows that moral resilience is not only about resisting dramatic evils but also about consistently choosing virtuous actions over more tempting, passive alternatives.

Navigating Moral Dilemmas. This sub-theme delves into the experience of internal conflict and difficult decision-making that arises when moral beliefs clash with other compelling factors, such as personal fear, loyalty to friends, complex family situations, or the desire to avoid punishment. It reveals that moral reasoning is often exercised in grey areas where the "right" choice is not immediately clear or comes with significant personal cost. Moral dilemmas create internal conflict and confusion, often involving a choice between conflicting loyalties (e.g., to friends vs. to the truth) or difficult personal circumstances. Decisions in these situations are guided by weighing consequences, considering one's responsibilities to family, and often result in feelings of guilt or uncertainty.

The interview data is rich with examples of these taxing dilemmas. IDI5 faced a conflict between honesty and loyalty:

Maglibog ko kung itug-an ba nako or *dili. Kay kung itug-an nako masuko akoa kauban unya kung e di pud ko mutug kay muraq mali pud akoa desisyon.* **(IDI5)**

I'm confused whether to tell or not. If I tell, my friend will be mad, but if I don't, my decision also feels wrong.

IDI6 was paralyzed by the fear of parental reprimand, leading to a lingering secret:

Naglibog ko ma'am *kung iingon ba nako or dili... Hantod karo lang gyapon nako naingon.* **(IDI6)**

I was confused whether to tell or not... Until now I still haven't told them.

Some dilemmas were profoundly life-altering. IDI10 described the painful decision of choosing which parent to live with after a separation, basing her choice on the well-being of her siblings:

*Nag*think if *kinsa akoang ubanaan...* So *ako-a po gibasehan po ato* is *ang ako-a mga* brothers *po.* **(IDI10)**

I thought about who I would go with... So, I based it on my brothers.

Similarly, IDI11 grappled with the desire to escape a tumultuous home life against her responsibility to her siblings:

*Nagplano ko na mulayas ko pero wala nalang kay ako man guy mukuan sa ilaha... Looy pud akoa mga manghod***. (IDI11)**

I planned to run away but I didn't because I am the one who... I also pity my siblings.

IDI12 was haunted by a dilemma where the moral choice (helping a victim) conflicted with the instinct for self-preservation:

Naghadlok ko sa akoa self *nga ako raman gud usa... Nidagan ko... Nalain ko sa akoa* self for like *na*guilty *ko***. (IDI12)**

I was scared for myself because I was alone... I ran away... I felt bad about myself, like I felt guilty.

The FGD provided a near-universal example of a moral dilemma in an academic setting. FGD3 expressed a common temptation:

Sa exam ma'am *kanang maglisud ka ug* answer *matintal ko kung manundog ba ko or magbintot-bintot nalang.* **(FGD3)**

During exams, when you find it hard to answer, I am tempted to cheat or just guess.

This simple statement encapsulates the core of a moral dilemma: the conflict between the desire for success (or avoiding failure) and the internalized value of academic honesty.

The dynamics of moral application and conflict reveal that students' moral reasoning is a living, active process. It empowers them to perform acts of kindness (Prosocial Application), requires conscious effort and strength to maintain (Moral Resilience), and is truly tested in the crucible of difficult choices where values, desires, and fears collide (Navigating Moral Dilemmas). This theme demonstrates that moral development is not just about knowing what is right, but about the ongoing, dynamic struggle to enact it in a complex world.

Insights of the Public Junior High School Students as regards Moral Reasoning

Moral development is not a static achievement but a dynamic, lifelong process of refinement. The insights of the public junior high school students as regards moral reasoning delve into the transformative journey through which students' moral principles evolve from externally imposed rules into a deeply personal and resilient compass.

Presented in Table 4 are the issues probed, core ideas, categories, and essential themes that emerged from the responses of the participants. Three essential themes emerged: *Moral Learning Through Experience*, *Internalizing Moral Judgement,* and *Moral Strength Emerging from Diversity*. It captures the key mechanisms by which their understanding of morality deepens and strengthens over time, moving from learning through direct experience to developing an autonomous moral self and finally, forging resilience through life's inevitable challenges.*Moral Learning Through Experience.* This theme highlights that some of the most profound moral lessons are not merely taught but are learned through the direct experience of making mistakes, facing the consequences, and engaging in subsequent self-reflection. Feelings of guilt, regret, and disappointment serve as powerful, internal feedback mechanisms that solidify abstract moral concepts into tangible personal truths. Moral understanding deepens through direct personal experience and facing the consequences of one's actions. Guilt and regret are powerful teachers that lead to reflection, realization of mistakes, and a clearer understanding of right and wrong.

The students' reflections are poignant testaments to this learning process. IDI4 described the internal conflict and resolution that follows a wrongful action:

Makonsensya ko... unya makaingon ko sa akoa sarili na kuan ...na..unta dili nako magtubag-tubag. **(IDI4)**

I feel guilty... and I tell myself... I wish I wouldn't talk back.

This shows how the feeling of a guilty conscience (*makonsensya*) directly fuels a commitment to change. Similarly, IDI7 articulated a classic pattern of realization through retrospection:

*Pagkadugayan na*realize *nako na mali diay to akoang gipangtubag... Na*realize *nako na mali jud diay ko ato*. (**IDI7**)

Later, I realized that talking back was wrong... I realized that I was wrong.

This process also involves re-evaluating the intentions of authority figures. IDI9 shared,

*Na*realize *nako na mali to siya kay gusto lang nila na* of course *mapangaralan or ma*educate *mi unsay tama nga buhaton.* **(IDI9)**

I realized it was wrong because they just want to, of course, advise or educate us on what is the right thing to do.

Table 3 Insights of the Public Junior High School Students as Regards Moral Reasoning

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
Moral Learning Through Experience	Students learn morality through consequences. Mistakes learn to lead to reflection and growth. Experience deepens understanding of right and wrong.
Internalizing Moral Judgement	Students shift from rules to personal values. Students become aware and confident in choosing what is right. Moral choices become self-guided and intentional.
Moral Strength Emerging from Diversity	Challenges strengthen moral reasoning. Adversity builds resilience and maturity. Hard times deepen dependence on faith and family.

This indicated that there is a shift from seeing correction as a personal attack to understanding it as moral guidance. IDI11 generalized this, stating that lived experience is a primary teacher:

Sa akong mga experiences *sa kinabuhi is daghan kog ma* learn and *mas makabalo ko kung unsa ang tama og mali.* **(IDI11)**

In my life experiences, I learn a lot and I get to know more about what is right and wrong.

Even when they act against their better judgment, as IDI12 confessed:

Gibuhat gihapon nako even though *kabalo ko na mali*, **(IDI12)**

I still did it even if I know it was wrong.

The FGD provided a powerful, detailed example of this experiential learning. FGD3 connected a specific regret to a clear decline in academic performance:

Nagmahay ko ma'am nga nidayun ko ug buhat sa usa ka butang nga dili maayo. Sauna honor *gyud ko pagka-*elementary. *Sukad na na*introduce *sa akoa ang mga* online games *wa na ko ka*focus *sa pagskwela.* **(FGD3)**

I regretted that I continued to do something that wasn't good. Like before, I was an honor student in elementary, but since I was introduced to online games, I can no longer focus on my studies.

This narrative directly links a moral failing (neglecting responsibilities) with a tangible negative consequence (academic decline), cementing the lesson through lived outcome.

Internalizing Moral Judgement. This sub-theme describes the crucial developmental shift from viewing morality as a set of rules enforced by external authorities (parents, teachers) to developing an internalized, personal moral code that guides autonomous decision-making. It marks the transition from compliance to genuine integrity, where the motivation to do good comes from within rather than from a fear of punishment. The students' responses illustrate various stages of this internalization. There is a developmental shift from relying on external rules and teachings (from parents, teachers) to developing an internalized, personal moral

code. With maturity comes increased self-awareness and confidence in one's own ability to discern and choose right from wrong independently.

For some, like IDI1, the process still heavily relies on recalling external guidance:

Hinumduman lang gyud nako unsa ang gitudlo sa akoang parents *sa akoa.* **(IDI1)**

I just always remember what my parents taught me.

This represents an important step where external rules are consciously chosen as a guide. A more advanced stage involves active self-management, as described by IDI8:

*Gina*keep in mind *nako pirme na dili lang dili magpa* affect *sa* surroundings**. (IDI8)**

I always keep in mind that I should not be affected by my surroundings.

This shows a conscious effort to uphold an internal standard against external pressures. With age comes a sense of ownership and certainty. IDI9 noted,

As we've grown older*, syempre nagkadako nagkabuot*... We know *nga unsa nay tama ug unsa nay mali***. (IDI9**)

As we've grown older, of course, as we grow, we develop understanding... We know what is already right and what is wrong.

This "knowing" suggests an internal moral faculty that has been developed. This evolves into a deliberate, personal choice, as IDI11 asserted:

*Mas pilion pagyud namo nga pilion ang tama og iwasan ang mali***. (IDI11)**

We really choose what is right and avoid what is wrong.

The ultimate expression of this internalization is when moral knowledge seamlessly translates into action, as IDI12 simply stated:

*Kung kabalo ka na tama na, imoha jung buhaton***. (IDI12)**

If you know it's right, you will do it.

The FGD response from FGD4 perfectly captures the essence of this sub-theme, linking maturity with the consolidation of an internal moral framework:

*Mas nag*strong ma'am *kay mas mas kuan naman mga dalaga naman... kabalo naman mi sa kung unsa ang tama ug unsa ang mali***. (FGD4)**

We became stronger because we are more mature now... we already know what is right and what is wrong.

This collective insight confirms that students themselves perceive their moral reasoning as evolving from externally dictated rules to an internal, self-owned compass.

*Moral Strength Emerging from Diversity***.** This sub-theme reveals that significant personal challenges and hardships are not merely obstacles to moral development but are often the very crucibles in which moral character is tested and ultimately strengthened. Navigating family breakdown, academic failure, grief, and mental health struggles provides a profound context for students to apply, question, and ultimately fortify their moral principles. Challenging life experiences (e.g., family problems, academic failure, emotional distress) are catalysts for moral strengthening. Overcoming adversity fosters resilience, a deeper appreciation for morality, and can lead to a renewed reliance on faith and family support.

The interview data contains powerful narratives of growth through adversity. IDI9, from a broken family, found inspiration to persevere:

I belong to a broken family, but my parents inspired me to continue my studies. **(IDI9)**

This shows how adversity can reinforce commitment to positive values. IDI10 learned emotional regulation through parental discipline:

I have that realization that even though *nga gikasab an ko... Dapat ah* I know how to manage my emotion**. (IDI10)**

I have that realization that even though I was scolded... I should know how to manage my emotion.

It turns a negative experience into a lesson in self-control.

The most severe adversities can lead to the most profound moral strengthening. IDI11 shared an incredibly vulnerable moment of facing overwhelming problems and suicidal thoughts, yet choosing life based on a moral conviction:

Katong daghan...katong nagsabay tanan akoang problema nag-isip gane ka maam na an-aon nimo imo sarili...pero naghunahuna ka sa tama. **(IDI11)**

When all problems occurred simultaneously, you even think about ending your life... but you think about what is right.

This represents the ultimate test of moral resilience. For IDI12, the adversity of loss led to a deepened spiritual faith:

*Katong na*heal *nako nibalik ko kay* God. **(IDI12)**

When I got healed from, I returned to God.

This demonstrates how hardship can catalyze a return to and strengthening of foundational pillars. The FGD provided a relatable example of how navigating academic setback, with familial support, fosters greater understanding. FGD1 shared:

*Pagk*a Grade 8 *nako... murag* first *ko ato 94 lang ako* average*... Ingon sa akong* parents *nga okay lang daw na... Bawi lang* next quarter*... Mao ng mas nasabtan nako karon ang mga bagay-bagay.* **(FGD1)**

When I was in Grade 8... it was my first time to get a 94 average... My parents said it's okay... Just do better next quarter... That's why I understand things better now.

This experience of failure and supportive guidance led to a more mature perspective, illustrating how adversity, when processed constructively, directly contributes to moral and emotional growth. The process of moral internalization and growth is a transformative journey. Progress of students by learning from the direct consequences of their actions (Learning Through Experience), gradually taking ownership of their morality until it becomes an Internal Compass, and discovering that their principles are not weakened but are Forged into Resilience through the challenges of life. This theme underscores that moral maturity is an evolving capacity, deepened not despite struggle but because of it.

DISCUSSION

Discussed in this chapter are the findings on the moral reasoning of junior high school students, organized around three themes: influences that shape moral reasoning of students, role of moral reasoning in shaping decision making in their day-to-day interaction, and insights of the public junior high school students as regards moral reasoning.

Influences on The Moral Reasoning of Public Junior High School Students

The moral architecture of students is constructed upon a clear hierarchy of formative influences. There were four essential themes extracted as regards the influences on the moral reasoning of public junior high school students such as family as the primary moral architect, school as the reinforcing structure, faith as a spiritual compass, and peers as a double-edged sword. Together, these four pillars create a synergistic ecosystem that fundamentally shapes the students' ethical framework and understanding of the world.

Family as the Primary Moral Architect. This theme strongly affirmed the role as the primary and most influential architect of moral foundation of a child. Participants consistently described their families as the origin point of their values and behavior, where they first learned to distinguish right from wrong. The results of this study align with the research of Lim (2024), which emphasizes that the Filipino family serves as a potent source of moral modeling, instilling core cultural values such as respect for elders and a profound sense of familial responsibility. Further, the findings support the work of Koutroubas and Galanakis (2022), which highlight that a moral development of a child is deeply rooted in familial interactions and the consistent reinforcement of ethical behaviors at home. This consistency also echoes the study by Tang et al. (2024), which findings indicate that the family environment provides the foundational social context where moral norms and prosocial attitudes are initially observed, practiced, and internalized.

Additionally, in the study of Dela Cruz et al. (2024), it was noted that early familial bonds serve as a lasting foundation for moral character, portraying parents as foundational and trusted guides rather than mere rule enforcers. This observation further supports the study by Khairani and Aulia (2025), which highlighted that authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth and clear expectations, directly promotes ethical decision-making in adolescents. Moreover, Yang et al. (2025) affirmed that strong family relationships foster moral identity by modeling and reinforcing prosocial values.

School as the Reinforcing Structure. The school, particularly through the Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao (ESP) subject, serves as the formal institution that systematically reinforces the moral lessons initiated at home. Students consistently reported that the school provides direct instruction on values, with teachers actively correcting behavior and explaining the principles behind moral actions. This finding specifically underscores the indispensable role of the school's formal curriculum in shaping character, as emphasized by Khairani and Aulia (2025), which posit that structured academic programs are essential for fostering ethical reasoning. Further, the finding supports the work of Meyer (2024) on the role of the school in developing the cognitive skills necessary for moral judgment. The result of the study affirms the notion of Dela Cruz (2023), which argues that the school environment must provide consistent and explicit ethical instruction to complement familial foundations.

This role of the school as a reinforcing agent resonates with the broader objectives of character education and underscores its function as a vital social system for moral development (Muchlis et al., 2025). Furthermore, this finding aligns with the perspectives of Khairani and Aulia (2025) and Meyer (2024), which emphasize that structured educational environments are critical for systematically fostering ethical reasoning and reinforcing the moral lessons initiated in the home.

*Faith as a Spiritual Compass***.** For many participants, faith served as an internalized spiritual compass, providing guidance, strength, and a sense of purpose in their moral decision-making. The practices of prayer, church attendance, and expressing gratitude were frequently mentioned as mechanisms that connect their daily actions to a higher spiritual framework. These findings confirm the existing research that highlights the integral role of spirituality in Filipino moral development. The results of this study affirm the findings of Ochoa and Dela Cruz (2024), which identified “divinity” as a key dimension in the moral reasoning of Filipino young adults, illustrating how faith is interwoven with their ethical considerations. This aligns with the work of Koutroubas and Galanakis (2022), which emphasized that in many cultural contexts, including the Philippines, foundational values and spiritual orientation are first nurtured within the family unit. Furthermore, the integration of spirituality as a unique motivational source complements secular moral frameworks, a

perspective also noted in studies on moral development in religiously influenced societies (Kumar & Jurgens, 2025).

The findings of this study strongly affirm the role of the family as the primary and most influential architect of a moral foundation of a child. Participants consistently described their families as the origin point of their values and behavior, where they first learned to distinguish right from wrong. This result resonates with empirical research on Filipino family dynamics, such as the work of Koutroubas and Galanakis (2022), which underscores the family as the principal environment where initial moral socialization and value transmission occur. The data further aligns with Lim (2024), which study highlights that within Filipino culture, the family serves as a potent source of modeling, actively instilling core cultural values such as respect for elders and a profound sense of familial responsibility. Additionally, the narratives support the findings of Dela Cruz et al. (2024), emphasizing the enduring impact of early familial bonds and consistent parental guidance on the formation of an ethical framework of a child. This foundational influence establishes a baseline of ethical understanding that all other institutions subsequently build upon or challenge. The consistency with which participants credited their families for their core morals underscores the enduring power of the home as the primary site of character formation, a universal concept that finds a unique and powerful expression within the collectivist context of Filipino culture. This foundational influence establishes a baseline of ethical understanding that all other institutions subsequently build upon or challenge.

*Peers as a Double-Edged Sword***.** The influence of peers emerged as a potent and dualistic force, capable of both challenging and strengthening an individual's moral resolve. Participants shared experiences where peer pressure led them toward mischief, yet equally powerful were accounts of friends who offered corrective advice and steadfast support during moments of moral failure. This duality aligns with the recognition that peer groups serve as significant sources of behavioral modeling and social reinforcement, shaping ethical decision-making through observation and interaction (Zhou et al., 2024). The impact of these relationships on collective behavior and psychological security further underscores their role in moral development (Mokhtari et al., 2025). This aligns with studies highlighting how moral reasoning of adolescents is significantly mediated by their social environment, where peers can either promote or inhibit ethical actions (Yang et al., 2025).

The data resonates what Mokhtari et al. (2025) averred that adolescence is a period of heightened sensitivity to peer opinion, making these relationships a critical arena for moral testing and growth. Also, the result confirms the study by Carlo et al. (2024) which revealed that the presence of morally upright peers who are willing to correct wrong behavior acts as a vital external conscience and a buffer against negative influences, a dynamic central to theories of prosocial development This finding further supports the study Yang et al. (2025 which found out that positive peer relationships actively promote ethical behavior and strengthen moral identity during adolescence). This underscores that peer influence should not be viewed monolithically as a risk factor; rather, positive peer relationships function as an essential support system that can reinforce prosocial values and provide the courage to resist negative social pressures.

Role of Moral Reasoning in Shaping

Decision- making in their Day-to-Day Interaction

Moral development truly comes alive not in theory, but in practice. This theme captures the dynamic process where abstract values are tested through real-world application. Students actively engage in prosocial behaviors, demonstrating empathy and responsibility by helping others. This application, however, demands significant moral resilience to resist negative pressures and navigate complex dilemmas where moral imperatives conflict. These daily struggles and acts of courage reveal that moral reasoning is an active, ongoing process of choosing between right and wrong, often under difficult circumstances, highlighting the continuous effort required to live according to principles of individual.

Prosocial Application. The study found that students actively translate their moral understanding into concrete prosocial actions, such as tutoring classmates, defending the bullied, and initiating community cleaning. These behaviors demonstrate a move beyond abstract moral knowledge to its active embodiment in daily life. This

finding aligns with the work of Carlo et al. (2024), who link such prosocial behaviors to empathic moral reasoning, where individuals are driven by a genuine concern for the welfare of others. Furthermore, the results affirm the assertion of Harari and Weinstock (2021) that prosocial actions are a key manifestation of moral identity in action. Similarly, Muchlis et al. (2025) observed that active learning approaches, which include service-oriented tasks, effectively translate moral education into tangible, prosocial student conduct.

The description of the participants of these acts as personally rewarding reveals the formation of a positive feedback loop that strengthens their moral identity through lived experience. Their proactive willingness to help, even when not solicited, demonstrates an emerging internalized sense of social responsibility. This internalization aligns with a core objective of values education, which according to Afable (2024) seeks to move ethical understanding from passive knowledge to active practice This finding resonates with the research highlighting what Carlo et al. (2024) mentioned that moral maturity is demonstrated not only through reasoning but through consistent prosocial action., Furthermore, the development of this self-motivated, helpful orientation is a key indicator of positive youth development and is foundational to fostering community well-being and cohesion (Harari & Weinstock, 2021).

Moral Resilience. A key finding was the demonstration of moral resilience, where students consciously exerted effort to uphold their values against external pressures such as gang recruitment, academic dishonesty, and substance abuse. This internal fortitude, often described by participants as "forcing oneself" to do what is right, reflects a significant developmental achievement. This struggle to adhere to principles despite social pressure aligns with studies that highlight moral resilience as an active, effortful process central to adolescent character formation (Harari & Weinstock, 2021). Furthermore, the conscious effort to resist negative influences and choose ethical action resonates with research emphasizing the role of self-regulation and internal control in adolescent moral development (Carlo et al., 2024). The findings affirm a progression toward a more internalized moral orientation, where actions are guided by personal conviction rather than mere obedience, a shift noted in studies on the maturation of moral autonomy during adolescence (Beyers et al., 2025).

This resilience was frequently strengthened by the deliberate recollection of parental guidance, demonstrating that foundational moral lessons serve as a stabilizing force that helps students resist negative influences. This connection between family instruction and moral fortitude is supported by findings that highlight the role of authoritative parenting in fostering ethical decision-making (Khairani & Aulia, 2025) and the enduring impact of family modeling on adolescent character formation (Dela Cruz et al., 2024). Further, research confirms that family remains a primary source of strength and consistency amid external pressures (Lim, 2024). The narratives of participants illustrate that moral resilience does not mean the absence of temptation but rather the ability to manage it through self-regulation and a firm dedication to principles of the individual. This perspective aligns with studies showing that facing and overcoming ethical conflicts is crucial for the development of a stable moral identity, enabling individuals to uphold their integrity within challenging social contexts (Killen & Dahl, 2021).

Navigating Moral Dilemmas. Junior high school students frequently faced moral dilemmas that created significant internal conflict, such as choosing between loyalty to a friend and adherence to the truth or balancing personal desires with familial obligations. These situations, characterized by competing “rights,” pushed them into a space of cognitive and emotional discomfort as they navigated difficult choices. This experience resonates with the work of Weber and Siniora (2021), who state that grappling with such dilemmas is crucial for advancing to more complex stages of moral reasoning, as it forces individuals to weigh abstract principles and consequences. Such dilemmas are central to the very process of moral development (Killen & Dahl, 2021). Further, Dela Cruz et al. (2024) emphasize that Filipino adolescents often experience these conflicts within peer-driven scenarios, where the tension between social harmony and personal ethics becomes pronounced. This alignment underscores that navigating moral dilemmas is a common and formative experience in adolescent ethical growth, particularly within relational and collectivist contexts.

The resulting feelings of guilt, confusion, and prolonged uncertainty highlight that navigating moral dilemmas is a process fraught with ambiguity. These dilemmas are not merely academic exercises but are deeply personal struggles that shape moral identity, a challenge often explored in educational contexts (Verma et al., 2025). The difficulty of these choices resonates with Weber and Siniora (2021), who state that grappling

with such conflicts is crucial for advancing more complex stages of moral reasoning. Furthermore, the finding that students often base their final decisions on considerations for their family's well-being or a deep-seated sense of responsibility underscores the collectivist underpinnings of their moral reasoning. This demonstrates how cultural context influences the resolution of ethical conflicts, a dynamic similarly observed in Filipino settings where familial obligations heavily guide adolescent decision-making (Dela Cruz et al., 2024).

Insights of the public junior high school students as regards moral reasoning

Moral development is a transformative journey from external imposition to internal conviction. This theme charts the evolution of morality as students learn profoundly through personal experience, with consequences and regret serving as powerful teachers. Over time, they progress from simply following rules set by authority figures to developing a personal, internal compass that autonomously guides their choices. Crucially, this moral identity is often forged and strengthened through adversity, where overcoming challenges builds resilience and deepens their ethical commitment. This internalization marks the culmination of a process where morality becomes an integral part of the self.

*Moral Learning Through Experience***.** The data clearly illustrates that moral understanding is profoundly deepened through direct personal experience and the consequences of one's actions. Participants described how feelings of guilt and regret over past mistakes, such as talking back to elders or neglecting studies, served as powerful catalysts for reflection and behavioral change. This insight aligns with existing research of Chuang (2021) on moral development that the process mirrors the principles of constructivist learning, where knowledge is actively built through experience, particularly through resolving conflicts between actions and value. Furthermore, this corroborates with what Lind (2023) averred that the pattern of learning through lived consequences is a recognized driver of socio-moral growth during adolescence. Studies also indicate that navigating the emotional outcomes of one's choices, such as guilt, is integral to developing a more nuanced ethical understanding (Malti et al., 2021).

This process of learning through lived experience is a cornerstone of moral-cognitive development. As Malti et al. (2021) argue, adolescence is a critical period for such experiential learning, where emotions like guilt and regret become instructive guides. The participants' narratives move beyond rote learning to demonstrate a process where erroneous actions create a dissonance that is resolved through a restructuring of understanding. This aligns with constructivist perspectives on learning, where knowledge is actively built through experience, particularly through the resolution of cognitive conflict (Chuang, 2021). This pattern affirms the assertion that experiential learning, where emotions like guilt serve as internal feedback, is integral to socio-moral growth (Lind, 2023). Through this dynamic process, students developed a more nuanced and personally validated grasp of right and wrong, highlighting that moral development is propelled by direct, personal encounters with the consequences of one's actions.

*Internalizing moral judgement***.** A central developmental trajectory observed in the study is the shift from a morality based on external rules to one guided by an internal compass. While younger students often referred to recalling parental directives, older participants articulated a more self-owned morality, explicitly stating they "choose to choose what is right." This observed shift aligns with established research on moral development. The progression mirrors the movement from a conventional orientation, focused on social conformity, toward a post-conventional stage guided by internalized principles, as outlined in Kohlberg's framework (Nainggolan & Naibaho, 2022). This confirms what Soltani et al. (2022) argued that internalization process reflects the growing capacity for moral autonomy, a critical outcome of adolescent development. The finding further conforms to the contention of Meyer (2024) that ultimately, fostering this transition from external compliance to internal conviction is recognized as a central goal of effective moral and values education.

This transition from externally guided behavior to self-directed ethical judgment reflects the development of moral autonomy, where students become the primary authors and upholders of their own moral standards. The confidence they expressed in discerning and acting upon what is right signifies the consolidation of a maturing moral identity. This process of internalization represents a fundamental shift toward principled reasoning, a recognized indicator of progressive moral development (Nainggolan & Naibaho, 2022; Soltani et al., 2022).

Fostering this autonomous, internalized moral compass is a central aim of moral education, as it prepares individuals to enact ethical decisions consistently, even without external supervision or the threat of immediate consequences (Meyer, 2024). Ultimately, the cultivation of such self-determined character is essential for nurturing stable and resilient ethical agents (Carlo et al., 2024).

Moral strength emerging from adversity. The findings reveal that significant life challenges, including family breakdown, academic failure, and emotional distress, often serve as catalysts for moral strengthening. Participants who faced such adversity reported that these experiences, while painful, ultimately solidified their moral resolve, deepened their empathy, and strengthened their reliance on faith. This finding aligns with the research of Malti, Galarneau, and Peplak (2021), who posit that navigating life stressors is integral to moral development in adolescence, fostering resilience and a more mature ethical understanding. The process of overcoming hardship to build moral strength further supports the study by Amik et al. (2025) that post-traumatic growth can redefine personal values and strengthen character. Moreover, the concept that adversity forges moral resilience resonates with Cumilang et al. (2025), who illustrate how students develop greater perseverance and ethical clarity through academic challenges and personal struggles.

Rather than causing moral disintegration, these adversities were often framed as formative trials that tested and ultimately fortified character. The process of overcoming hardship provided a stark, real-world context for applying moral principles, moving them from abstract concepts to essential tools for survival and growth, as seen in studies on academic resilience (Cumilang et al., 2025). This finding further supports the study of Malti et al. (2021) that posits that navigating life stressors is integral to moral development in adolescence, fostering resilience and a more mature ethical understanding Additionally, Amik et al. (2025) argued that the process of post-traumatic growth can redefine personal values and strengthen character, demonstrating that challenging experiences are catalysts for moral fortification rather than breakdown. This illustrates that the moral self is not forged in comfort but is often tempered and refined through difficult life experiences, leading to a more profound and resilient ethical commitment.

Implications for Educational Practices

The study implies that moral reasoning among public junior high school students develops primarily through guided experience rather than passive instruction. Within the context of Values Education, this suggests that the curriculum may need to emphasize practical moral decision-making over the memorization of abstract rules. Lessons on good manners and right conduct may be designed to include real-life scenarios such as peer pressure, honesty, and responsibility, allowing students to practice navigating ethical dilemmas in safe classroom settings. Moreover, the development of moral reasoning may be integrated across other subject areas, not confined to Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao alone. For instance, discussions on fairness in Mathematics group work, honesty in Science reporting, or empathy in English literature can reinforce values in everyday academic contexts. This implies that the Values Education curriculum may adopt a more experiential and reflective approach, where students regularly examine their own decisions, listen to peers' perspectives, and revise their understanding of what is right and wrong based on guided facilitation rather than direct lecturing.

Concluding Remarks

This research journey has been more than an academic requirement for me as a Master of Arts in Values Education student; it has been a deeply personal and transformative experience. One important insight from this study is that moral development among students cannot rely solely on formal lessons in values education. While subjects like Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao provide an important foundation, students' moral reasoning becomes stronger when schools create spaces where values are lived, discussed, and practiced in everyday interactions. Teachers therefore play a crucial role not only as instructors but also as role models who guide students in reflecting on real-life moral situations. Classroom discussions, collaborative activities, and opportunities for students to express their perspectives on ethical dilemmas can help deepen their understanding of right and wrong beyond theoretical concepts.

The findings also revealed that no student develops moral reasoning in isolation. Parents, the community, and even faith traditions play essential roles. One participant shared how a neighbor's reminder about "doing what

is right even when no one is watching" stayed with her longer than any textbook lesson. Another spoke about how attending church youth group helped him reflect on forgiveness after a family conflict. Schools may adopt a holistic approach to values formation by strengthening partnerships with families and encouraging positive peer environments. Moral education becomes meaningful when students see consistency between what they learn in school, what they experience at home, and what they hear in their faith community. By fostering supportive relationships, encouraging empathy, integrating moral reflection into daily school practices, and respecting the spiritual backgrounds of students, educators and parents together can help adolescents develop the confidence and resilience needed to make responsible decisions in complex situations. This study reminded me that behind every student is a web of relationships, family, teachers, friends, and faith, and when all these supports the adolescent, deep moral reasoning is possible.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

School leaders may create a holistic moral learning environment that demands deliberate policy to support the moral development and enhancement of junior high school students. To promote moral reasoning, teachers may integrate values education into daily academic subjects, such as debating ethical issues in history or analyzing character motivations in literature. They may also use role-playing scenarios to help students practice resolving common social conflicts like bullying or peer pressure. Students may strengthen their moral reasoning through structured reflection, such as maintaining a values journal to analyze daily decisions, and by participating in peer-led dialogue groups to discuss real-life dilemmas. Administrators may adopt frameworks like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to recognize prosocial behavior consistently and establish dedicated advisory periods focused on social-emotional learning led by trained teachers or counselors.

Future research may be taken using other research designs or other groups of population. Researchers may develop and evaluate targeted curriculum modules or teacher-training workshops aimed at integrating moral reasoning strategies into core subjects like Mathematics, Science, and English. Studies may also investigate the specific challenges teachers face in implementing values education or explore the long-term impact of parent-engagement workshops on student behavior. Longitudinal research may track student cohorts over multiple years to clarify how moral reasoning evolves, while comparative studies may examine the effectiveness of different whole-school approaches, such as PBIS versus restorative justice models, to guide administrative policy and resource allocation.

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Approval Sheet

This thesis titled, **"UNVEILING THE MORAL REASONING OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS,"** of the University of the Immaculate Conception prepared and submitted by **SARAH JANE D. CAGANG** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Values Education, has been examined and is recommended for approval and acceptance.

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