



## Exploring Children's Morality: Theory, Data, and Practice in Early Childhood Education Yogyakarta

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### ABSTRACT

The moral development of early childhood is crucial for shaping their character and social interaction. This study examines the efficacy of the Project Approach in fostering moral development in young children within early childhood education settings. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative scoring of moral development with qualitative analysis of the children's responses. Using a five-point scoring rubric, the researchers assessed the moral reasoning abilities of the child participants through observations. The findings indicate that a majority of the children exhibit notable progress in their moral development, predominantly clustering within the "Developing" category, suggesting a shift towards more nuanced moral reasoning. The Project Approach's emphasis on real-world social interaction, critical thinking, and empathy cultivation appears to positively influence children's moral development. The results also highlight the importance of educational approaches that prioritize the cultivation of both cognitive and emotional aspects of morality. The study's conclusion is that the Project Approach significantly supports the development of more mature moral principles in students, facilitating children's transition to higher stages of moral development and fostering the foundations of healthy and sustainable morality. This result contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of how best to support children's moral growth.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The moral development of young children is an important aspect in shaping their character and social behavior (Farida et al., 2017; Wajdi et al., 2022). According to a recent study, over 80% of children in Indonesia exhibit moral challenges such as aggression, selfishness, and lack of empathy, highlighting the urgent need for effective moral education in early childhood (Frاندani et al., 2024; Prawinda et al., 2023; Zahra & Hayati, 2022). At this age, children begin to understand the difference between right and wrong and learn basic values such as honesty, fairness, and empathy (Fara & Suyadi, 2022; Vogel et al., 2018; Zahra & Hayati, 2022). However, the lack of emphasis on moral education in many Indonesian preschools has resulted in a concerning trend, with long-term implications for these children's social and emotional well-being (Frاندani et al., 2024; Lesmi et al., 2024; Maraendar et al., 2024; Prawinda et al., 2023). Therefore, moral education in early childhood education is crucial to help children develop a healthy moral understanding. Good moral learning in early childhood can establish a foundation for positive social attitudes and encourage children to interact well with their surrounding environment (Chan, 2019; Korotaeva & Chugaeva, 2019; Rehren & Sauer, 2024). As a basis for understanding how morality develops in children, it is important to understand the difference between development and learning.

According to Jean Piaget, development and learning are two distinct but interconnected processes in child development (Tourmen, 2016; Rhamadanty, 2023; Rubtsov, 2020). Development refers to the internal changes in a child's cognitive structure that occur over time and are influenced by physical maturity and interaction with the environment (Piaget, 1972; Rabindran & Madanagopal, 2020). Piaget describes this development as occurring in specific stages, such as the sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages, which reflect how children gradually come to understand the world (Rabindran & Madanagopal, 2020; Sanghvi, 2020). In contrast, learning more specifically refers to the process by which children acquire new knowledge through experience and interaction with the outside world (Rabindran & Madanagopal, 2020; Sanghvi, 2020). Piaget emphasizes that learning is not just a process of memorization, but an active engagement of children in exploring and adapting the information they acquire to their cognitive structures (Rabindran & Madanagopal, 2020). Thus, development focuses on the internal changes in children's thinking, while learning is more about the accumulation of knowledge from direct experience and social interaction. This distinction is crucial to understanding how moral learning can influence the moral development of children.

Moral learning has a significant influence on the moral development of young children (Hazizah & Ariyanti, 2019; Korotaeva & Chugaeva, 2019). Various learning approaches, such as group discussions, games, and good role models, can accelerate children's understanding of morality (Chan, 2019; Korotaeva & Chugaeva, 2019). However, each child develops at a different pace, and this is influenced by the existing moral theories (Chen et al., 2023; Mammen & Paulus, 2023; Karima et al., 2022). There are four main theories often used to understand moral development in children: the theories of Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Martin Hoffman, and Jonathan Haidt. Each of these theories offers a different perspective on how morality develops in children. To further understand moral development according to these theories, let's take a closer look at each theory in detail.

According to Jean Piaget's theory of moral development, children go through two main stages in their moral development: the heteronomous and autonomous stages (Costa, 2019; Rabindran & Madanagopal, 2020). In the heteronomous stage, children view rules as immutable and originating from external authorities, such as parents or teachers (Rabindran

& Madanagopal, 2020). In the autonomous stage, children begin to develop an understanding that rules can be negotiated and adjusted based on principles of fairness and cooperation. Piaget emphasizes that moral development is closely related to cognitive development, which influences how children understand the consequences of their actions. This theory was developed by Lawrence Kohlberg, Kohlberg expanded Piaget's theory to provide a more detailed picture of moral development.

Lawrence Kohlberg, who developed the theory of moral development based on Piaget's work, introduced a more detailed concept of moral development stages (Bidaki et al., 2022; Wahidah & Maemonah, 2020). Kohlberg divided moral development into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional (Bahri & Ozer, 2024). At the pre-conventional level, children are more influenced by punishment and reward. At the conventional level, they begin to value social rules and norms. At the post-conventional level, children start to develop more abstract and universal moral principles, such as justice and human rights (Auten et al., 2024; Darmawanti & Maemonah, 2022; Sunaryo & Fauziati, 2023). Kohlberg's theory provides a useful framework for understanding how children move from egocentric thinking to more complex moral considerations. From this theory, Martin L. Hoffman refines Kohlberg's theory that emotion is as important as logical reasoning in moral development.

Martin L. Hoffman argued that the moral development of children is influenced not only by cognitive factors but also by the child's capacity for empathy (Şakar, 2020; Li et al., 2025; Yucel et al., 2020). Hoffman contends that morality develops through the process of empathy, which begins from an early age (Andrews et al., 2021; Yucel et al., 2020). In the initial stage, children exhibit basic empathic responses towards those who are suffering, such as crying or feeling discomfort. As they grow older, their empathy becomes more cognitive, where they start to understand the feelings of others in a deeper and more complex manner. In the more advanced stage, particularly during the elementary school years and beyond, children develop social empathy, which allows them to better comprehend larger moral principles, such as justice and social obligation (Zava et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2020). For Hoffman, the ability of children to feel empathy and understand the feelings of others is the foundation for healthy moral development. This theory highlights the significance of emotion in shaping morality, which can then be connected to other moral theories. Hoffman's theory has been refined by Jonathan Haidt, who refined the moral development theory to include broader factors.

Jonathan Haidt offers a more contemporary perspective on moral development with his theory that emphasizes morality is more influenced by intuition and emotion than rational or cognitive processes (Chen et al., 2023; Erol, 2024; Hao, 2024). According to Haidt, moral development begins with moral intuition, which are the emotional responses children have to the social situations they encounter, that determine what they consider right or wrong (Asmara et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2023). As children grow older and gain more social experience, they are influenced by the social and cultural values they encounter, which reinforce or alter their moral intuitions. At a more mature stage, particularly during adolescence and adulthood, children begin to develop a more complex moral understanding, encompassing principles such as justice, human rights, and individual freedom (Baker & Liu, 2020; Malti et al., 2021; Killen & Dahl, 2021; Martin et al., 2021). Haidt argues that morality is shaped not only by rational thinking, but also by intuitive instincts and feelings influenced by the social and cultural context in which children grow up.

From the four theories, it can be concluded that the moral development of young children is a complex process, influenced by the interaction of cognitive, emotional, and social factors.

Moral learning applied in early childhood education needs to consider these various aspects so that children can develop well (Hazizah & Ariyanti, 2019; Korotaeva & Chugaeva, 2019; Sunaryo & Fauziati, 2023). However, there is a gap in research examining the practical application of these moral development theories in early childhood education settings. While there are some studies that explore the theoretical connections, more empirical research is needed to understand how these theories can be effectively implemented in the classroom. One relevant learning approach to support this moral development is the Project Approach developed by Lilian Katz. This approach allows children to learn through direct experience, exploration, and projects involving cooperation and moral development.

The Project Approach developed by Lilian Katz is a relevant learning approach to support the moral development of young children (Brown & Jain, 2020; Chen & Tippett, 2022; Izzati et al., 2025). This approach emphasizes active exploration, problem-solving, and decision-making, which provide children with opportunities to collaborate, think critically, and be responsible for their decisions (Brown & Jain, 2020; Chen & Tippett, 2022; Güley & Keskinliç, 2024). By engaging in project-based learning, children can recognize important values, learn empathy, develop social skills, and understand the moral responsibility for their actions (Brown & Jain, 2020; Chen & Tippett, 2022). The Project Approach's focus on direct experience, exploration, and cooperation aligns well with the various aspects of moral development highlighted by the theories of Piaget, Kohlberg, Hoffman, and Haidt. This research offers a novel examination of how the Project Approach can be implemented to effectively support the moral development of young children in early childhood education settings.

In early childhood education, the application of the Project Approach can be carried out through several stages: first, project selection, where children choose projects relevant to their lives, allowing them to recognize important values and learn empathy for the needs of others. Second, exploration and investigation, where children gather information and discuss, developing social skills and learning to appreciate the views of others. Third, project development and completion, where children work together in groups to design and complete projects, while learning to make joint decisions and understand the moral responsibility for their actions (Brown & Jain, 2020; Chen & Tippett, 2022). Finally, reflection and presentation, where, after the project is completed, children reflect on what they have learned and present the project results, giving them the opportunity to evaluate their decisions and their impact on themselves and others, thus supporting their overall moral development. To ensure the success of this approach in developing children's morality, it is important to conduct an evaluation that includes various indicators of children's moral development applied in the process.

In evaluating the moral development of children in schools that implement the Project Approach, some indicators that can be used include: children's ability to cooperate with friends, their ability to make fair decisions, and their ability to understand and appreciate the perspectives of others (Chan et al., 2022; García-Moriyón et al., 2020; Gianistika, 2022; Martin et al., 2021; Zarrett et al., 2021). Additionally, teachers can observe how children resolve conflicts within their groups, as well as how they reflect on moral values after completing projects. Evaluating the process and outcomes of the projects becomes crucial to understanding the extent to which children's morality develops in this context (Brown & Jain, 2020; Chan, 2019). Alongside the importance of this evaluation, this study aims to examine and analyze the moral development of young children based on the four main moral theories, as well as evaluate the implementation of the Project Approach in supporting the moral development of children.

This research aims to examine and analyze the moral development of young children based on the four main moral theories, namely Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Martin L. Hoffman, and Jonathan Haidt. The study will also evaluate the moral development of children using empirical data, which will be connected to these moral development theories. Furthermore, this research will discuss how the Project Approach by Lilian Katz can be implemented as an effective approach to support moral development in early childhood, and how the evaluation of the implementation of this approach can provide further insights into its effectiveness in the context of early childhood education. Thus research not only provides theoretical insights into moral development but also practical and evaluative contributions that can be used by educators to design.

## 2. METHODS

This research uses a mixed-method approach, combining descriptive qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative component aims to provide a deep and detailed description of the moral development of early childhood based on the theories previously explained (Haki et al., 2024; Renjith et al., 2021). The quantitative component involves a scoring system with 5 categories to evaluate the children's moral development (Balcerowska-Czerniak & Kupcewicz, 2017; Calle Rubio et al., 2025; Yoo & Smetana, 2022; Wahdini et al., 2021; Yenen & Ulucan, 2021). The data collection technique used is participatory observation, which allows the researcher to be directly involved in learning activities at the school while observing the moral development of the children. Observations were conducted at four different kindergartens, namely TK Cendekia, TK ABA Musholla, TK ABA Sendangadi, and TK ABA Bayen, which included a total of 284 children participating in this research.

The four kindergartens were selected because they implement the Project Approach developed by Lilian Katz in their learning. This approach has very distinctive characteristics, namely project-based learning which encourages children to learn through direct exploration, collaboration, and problem-solving. In this context, the Project Approach allows children to be involved in a learning process that takes into account their moral development, such as cooperation, empathy, and fairness.

The observation process was carried out continuously during the implementation period of the Project Approach to capture the dynamics of social interactions and moral learning that occurred in each school. Using a participatory observation technique, the researcher not only observed the children's behaviour but also engaged in activities that could demonstrate their moral understanding. The data collected from these observations was then analyzed to examine the moral development of the children in accordance with the applied theories, as well as to evaluate the influence of the Project Approach in supporting the moral development of the children.

The indicators of children's moral development used in this research include the ability to cooperate in groups, as observed through children's interactions in completing projects together, the ability to make fair decisions, evident when children decide on group matters with their friends, ability to appreciate others' perspectives, demonstrated through group discussions and empathetic actions, ability to resolve conflicts constructively, observed through how children resolve disagreements among themselves during project activities, and moral reflection (Cesco, 2025; Turiel, 2015; Unal & Gunes, 2024; Wahdini et al., 2021; Yenen & Ulucan, 2021). Seen in how children evaluate their actions and impact on others after the project is completed.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Result

The data collected through participatory observation at the four kindergartens that implemented the Project Approach indicate how this approach supports the moral development of children. As shown in **Table 1**, each school carried out project-based activities.

**Table 1.** School that implemented of project approach.

School	Region	Project Activity
TK Cendekia	Bantul	Discussion about grapes, a visit to a vineyard, and making grape popsicles.
TK ABA Musholla	Yogyakarta	Discussion about fish, a visit to the Gajahwong Fish Tourism.
TK ABA Sendangadi	Sleman	Discussion about longan fruit, a visit to a longan orchard.
TK ABA Bayen	Sleman	Introduction to the art of batik, a demonstration of the tie-dye batik process.

This table shows the activities carried out at each kindergarten, which is the implementation of the Project Approach by Lilian Katz. Each project activity is designed to support active learning and children's involvement in various aspects of development, including morality. Based on observations of these activities, this research aims to analyse how this approach affects the moral development of children in kindergarten. The following is a further analysis of the findings from each location.

At TK Cendekia, the implementation of the Project Approach began with a structured discussion about grapes that caught the children's attention. The teacher started with a brainstorming activity using fruits beginning with the letter A to stimulate the children's responses. The discussion evolved into a dynamic conversation, where the children asked questions that demonstrated their curiosity, such as how to pick grapes or questions about the taste of grapes. The culminating activity was a visit to a grape farm, which gave the children the opportunity to witness the growth of grapes firsthand and discuss with the farmers. During this activity, the children not only learned about botany but also developed social, language, and critical thinking skills through the process of observation and reflection. The implementation of the Project Approach provided the children with the chance to directly explore their world and take responsibility for the knowledge they acquired, while also developing moral attitudes, such as cooperation and respecting the opinions of their peers.

At TK ABA Musholla, the learning theme focused on fish, which began with the children's interest in the food they consume. The teacher utilized this moment to develop a discussion about fish, with the children sharing their personal experiences, such as feeding fish or seeing them in the pond. This project was followed by a visit to the Gajahwong fish tourism site, which allowed the children to see various types of fish directly and learn more about their way of life. The interaction among the children, where they shared knowledge and experiences, enriched the learning process. Here, the Project Approach was applied to explore the topic in an enjoyable way, motivating the children to ask more questions and develop their curiosity. The children also developed social, communication, and problem-solving skills, which also supported their moral development through cooperation and appreciation of others' perspectives.

The implementation of the Project Approach at TK ABA Sendangadi focused on the theme of longan fruit. The teacher began the learning with a simple discussion about fruits, which then developed into a more in-depth topic about longan. The children shared their experiences about the taste of longan, and how to peel it, and compared it to other fruits, such as rambutan. This project involved a visit to a longan orchard, where the children gained further knowledge about how to care for longan trees and the growth of the fruit. In addition to learning about the botanical topic, the children also developed critical thinking skills by asking in-depth questions about this topic, as well as social skills through interaction and collaboration within the group. The implementation of the Project Approach here shows how children can connect new knowledge with their personal experiences, while also developing moral values through discussion, exploration, and reflection on their actions.

The implementation of the Project Approach at TK ABA Bayen focused on the art of batik, which began with the introduction of the tools and materials used in tie-dye batik. The children were invited to be directly involved in the batik-making process, introducing them to the concept of traditional art and local culture. The teacher facilitated this learning by providing opportunities for the children to observe, discuss, and ask questions about the batik-making process. Some children shared their experiences with batik, while others showed interest in the natural dyes used in batik.

Based on the implementation of the Project Approach in four different kindergartens, it can be seen that each school has successfully created a learning environment that not only enriches the children's knowledge but also supports their moral development. After the implementation of the Project Approach, an evaluation of the children's moral development can be observed through their ability to make fair decisions, their capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully, and how they reflect on the moral values they learned during the learning process. This assessment also includes observing the children's engagement in the project, how they communicate with their peers, and the extent to which they are able to apply moral values in their daily actions, such as sharing knowledge or empathizing with friends who have different questions or needs. As shown in **Table 2**, the distribution of moral assessment scores provides a more detailed understanding of the children's moral development.

**Table 2.** Distribution scores of moral assessment.

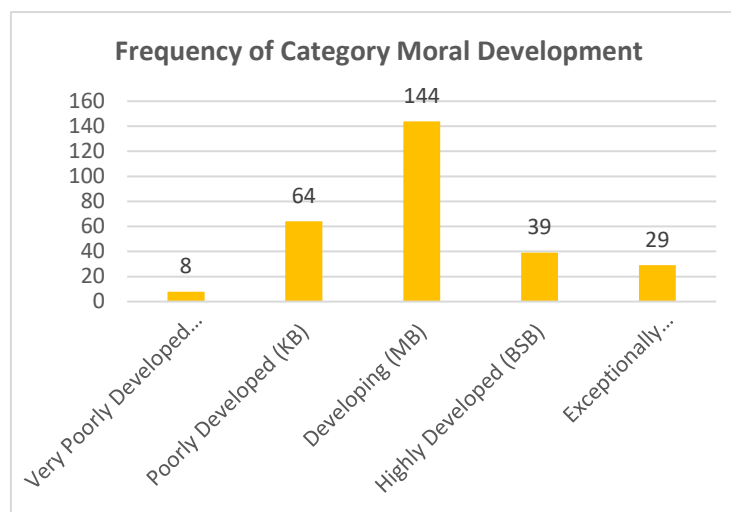
Number	Range	Frequency	%
1	59-63	2	1
2	64-68	4	1
3	69-73	10	4
4	74-78	38	13
5	79-83	75	26
6	84-88	68	24
7	89-93	55	19
8	94-98	7	2
9	99-103	25	9
<b>Total</b>	284	100	100

The evaluation results show the distribution of scores for 284 students. Based on these results, the students will be grouped into five categories to facilitate the analysis of their development. The first category, "Very Poorly Developed," includes scores below 70. The second category, "Poorly Developed," includes scores between 70 and 80. The "Developing" category includes scores between 80 and 90, which is the largest category. The "Highly Developed" category includes scores between 90 and 95, and the final category,

"Exceptionally Developed," includes scores above 95. With this categorization, the evaluation of the children's moral development can be conducted in a clearer and more structured manner, providing a deeper understanding of each participant's ability to reach the expected level of development. As shown in **Table 3** and **Figure 1**, the following is the categorized evaluation results:

**Table 3.** Category and frequency of distributions scores.

Category	Group	Range	Frequency	Percentage
Very Poorly Developed (SKB)	Low	<70	8	3
Poorly Developed (KB)	Medium	70-80	64	23
Developing (MB)	High	80-90	144	51
Highly Developed (BSB)	Very High	90-95	39	14
Exceptionally Developed (BSBS)	Excellent	>95	29	10



**Figure 1.** Frequency of category moral development.

Based on the results of the assessment of children's moral development, the data shows a distribution of scores divided into five categories. The "Very Poorly Developed" category, which includes scores below 70, only covers around 3% of the total participants. The "Poorly Developed" category, which includes scores between 70 and 80, involves 23% of the participants. The majority of children are in the "Developing" category, with scores between 80 and 90, which covers 51% of the participants. Meanwhile, the "Highly Developed" category, with scores between 90 and 95, consists of 14% of the participants, and the "Exceptionally Developed" category, which includes scores above 95, consists of 10% of the participants. Overall, this distribution shows that the majority of children are at a high level of moral development, with more than half of the participants demonstrating good achievement in the "Developing" category. This reflects the effective implementation of the Project Approach in supporting the moral development of children in various schools.

### 3.2. Discussion

The findings of this study showcase a positive trend in the moral development of young children engaged in the Project Approach. The observed progress across different categories of moral development suggests that this approach effectively fosters a deeper understanding of moral principles and encourages more nuanced moral reasoning. These results resonate

with several prominent theories of moral development, and exploring the implications of these findings within the frameworks of Piaget, Kohlberg, Hoffman, and Haidt will provide further insights into the mechanisms underlying this observed growth.

### **Jean Piaget**

Based on the frequency distribution showing the categorized score ranges, it can be seen that the majority of students, around 51%, are in the "Developing" category with scores between 80 and 90. This reflects fairly good moral development, likely related to children's transition towards the autonomous stage according to Piaget. At this stage, children start to understand that rules can be negotiated, and they begin to consider principles of fairness and cooperation more in their moral decision-making. On the other hand, 23% of participants are in the "Poorly Developed" category with scores between 70 and 80, indicating that some children are still at the heteronomous stage.

At this stage, they tend to see rules as unchangeable and originating from external authorities, like parents or teachers, without understanding the concept of flexibility or fairness within those rules. The "Very Poorly Developed" category, covering only 3% of participants, also shows the presence of children who may still be heavily dependent on external rules and less able to view rules in a broader, principle-based context. On the other side, the "Highly Developed" and "Exceptionally Developed" categories, covering 14% and 10% of participants respectively, indicate that there are some children who have reached a very mature level of moral development, most likely already in the autonomous stage. They can start to assess rules in the context of fairness and cooperation, and understand the consequences of their actions more deeply, in line with their more complex cognitive development.

Overall, this distribution reflects that the majority of students have begun to reach a more advanced stage of moral development, in line with the implementation of the Project Approach that emphasizes the development of understanding and flexibility in rules. This suggests that the educational approach used has played a significant role in supporting the transition from the heteronomous to the autonomous stage, where children start to internalize higher moral principles.

The results show that the majority of children (51%) are in the "Developing" category, indicating a fairly good level of moral development. This suggests that the Project Approach has been effective in supporting children's transition towards the autonomous stage of moral development, as described by Piaget's theory. These findings are consistent with previous research on the positive impact of project-based learning approaches in fostering children's moral development. The implementation of the Project Approach in the current study appears to have effectively supported the transition from the heteronomous to the autonomous stage of moral reasoning, from children exhibiting egocentric tendencies, they can develop more collaborative behaviors, as described by Piaget's theory (Zulfa et al., 2024; García-Moriyón et al., 2020; Sa'diyah et al., 2023; Trivedi-Bateman & Gadd, 2024). Overall, the positive results observed in this study are in line with previous research on the benefits of project-based learning for enhancing children's moral competence and reasoning.

### **Lawrence Kohlberg**

Based on the breakdown of the students' moral development scores, we can see how they're distributed across the different categories. The "Very Poorly Developed" group, with scores below 70, only has 8 students, about 3% of the total. These kids are probably still in

the pre-conventional stage, where they just link their behavior to getting rewards or avoiding punishments from adults, without really understanding rules or norms in a deeper way. Next, the "Poorly Developed" category, with scores between 70 and 80, has 64 students, around 23%. These kids may be starting to reach the conventional level, where they respect rules and social norms, knowing they're important for keeping things orderly. They might follow rules not just to avoid trouble, but also to gain acceptance from their family or friends. But their idea of fairness is still pretty dependent on what authorities tell them.

The largest group is the "Developing" category, with 144 students or 51%. These kids are likely between the conventional and post-conventional levels. They're starting to grasp justice on a more complex level and can see rules in a more flexible way, based on broader principles like human rights or cooperation. They're getting more critical about rules and realizing they don't always fit every situation. Then there's the "Highly Developed" group, with 39 students (14%), who are probably at the post-conventional level. They're developing more abstract, universal moral principles. They don't just follow rules because of social norms or rewards, but they evaluate rules based on higher values like justice and human rights. They might even challenge rules they see as unfair. Finally, the "Exceptionally Developed" category has 29 students (10%). These kids have likely reached a really mature moral outlook, with a deep understanding of justice and strong moral principles. They're operating at the post-conventional level, prioritizing the bigger moral picture over just following rules or social norms.

The results show that the majority of children are in the "Developing" category, indicating they are in the transition between the conventional and post-conventional stages of moral development. This suggests that the Project Approach has been effective in supporting children's moral development, as they are starting to grasp more complex moral principles and reevaluate rules based on broader considerations of fairness, justice, and human rights.

Previous research has shown that project-based learning approaches can enhance children's moral development (García-Moriyón et al., 2020; de la Torre-Neches et al., 2020; Trivedi-Bateman & Gadd, 2024). These studies have demonstrated that project-based learning approaches can make children more aware of social interactions and involve them in collaborative decision-making (conventional stage), in line with Kohlberg's model of moral development (Cesco, 2025; Dongoran et al., 2024; Trivedi-Bateman & Gadd, 2024). This aligns with research showing that classroom activities can improve students' moral development stage, engaging in interactive experiences with others provides opportunities for students to develop and strengthen their moral reasoning and decision-making abilities.

### **Martin L. Hoffman**

Based on the evaluation of children's moral development, it appears that this development is strongly influenced by the children's ability to empathize, which develops with their age and experience. In the "Very Poorly Developed" category, with scores below 70, which is followed by only 3% of the students, children tend not to have developed deep empathy. They are more focused on fulfilling their personal needs and are not yet fully able to understand the feelings of others. This reflects the early stage of empathy development, where children begin to respond to the feelings of others, but their empathy is still limited.

In the "Poorly Developed" category, with scores between 70-80, which covers about 23% of the students, children begin to develop a more cognitive empathy, recognizing the feelings of others in simple social contexts. They start to appreciate social norms and rules, although their understanding is still limited to personal experience. In the "Developing" category, which accounts for 51% of the participants, children begin to understand larger moral principles

such as justice and social responsibility. Their social empathy develops, making them more sensitive to the feelings of others and considering the moral consequences of their actions. In the "Highly Developed" and "Exceptionally Developed" categories, which account for 14% and 10% of the students respectively, we see children who have developed deep empathy and a broad understanding of larger moral principles, such as universal justice and human rights. They not only demonstrate empathy towards those close to them, but also towards larger social groups, starting to act based on more abstract moral principles. This indicates that they have reached a more advanced stage of empathy development.

Overall, this study shows that the majority of children are in the "Developing" category, reflecting that they have already developed a more complex capacity for empathy and a broader understanding of morality. Educational approaches such as the Project Approach have likely played a role in supporting the development of this empathy, which in turn contributes to the moral development of children based on principles of justice and social responsibility. This research aligns that the project approach improves the ability for collaborative learning, as it involves developing empathy in students' interactions to cooperate on projects as a form of social responsibility (Dongoran et al., 2024; García-Moriyón et al., 2020; de la Torre-Neches et al., 2020; Hutchison, 2016). This aligns with Hoffman's theory that moral development must include empathy development.

### **Jonathan Haidt**

Based on the distribution of children's moral development scores, the majority of students are in the "Developing" category, which includes 144 children with scores between 80 and 90. Children in this category are beginning to develop more complex moral intuitions, with a deeper understanding of moral principles such as social justice and human rights. They are aware that their actions impact others, which is in line with Haidt's theory that the moral development of children is influenced by their emotional intuitions, not just rational thinking. This category shows that most children are more mature in their moral development.

In the "Poorly Developed" category, which covers 64 students or around 23%, children have scores between 70 and 80. Although they are beginning to develop better moral intuitions, their understanding is still influenced by the social and cultural norms around them. They are starting to understand the feelings of others, but their understanding does not yet fully encompass more universal moral principles. Meanwhile, in the "Very Poorly Developed" category, which covers 8 children, they have scores below 70. Children in this category are still very early in their moral development and are more focused on basic needs and avoiding punishment, reflecting a still-simple moral intuition.

On the other hand, in the "Highly Developed" category, which covers 39 students or 14%, children have scores between 90 and 95. They have developed a very mature moral understanding, with high empathy and consideration of more complex moral values, such as social justice and individual freedom. The "Exceptionally Developed" category, which covers 29 children, shows students with scores above 95. Children in this category demonstrate a very high understanding of larger moral principles and show a very high level of empathy and understanding towards others.

The findings of this study indicate that the moral development of children is not only dependent on rationality but is also influenced by their intuitions and emotional responses that develop along with their social experiences. The educational approach implemented, such as the Project Approach, has likely played an important role in deepening children's moral understanding by giving them opportunities to interact with more real-life social situations. The studies that have been conducted shown that the project approach is designed

to engage children's ability to appreciate others' perspectives, resolve conflicts, and interact to complete projects (Gozdalska, 2023; Jin et al., 2023; Sa'diyah et al., 2023; Trivedi-Bateman & Gadd, 2024). This aligns with Haidt's theory that moral development can be encouraged by providing opportunities for children to apply their intuitive moral reasoning in practical contexts.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The study's conclusion is that the Project Approach, which engages children in real-world social contexts and critical thinking, significantly supports the development of more mature moral principles in students. The findings indicate that most children have progressed beyond basic moral understanding, exhibiting increased empathy, consideration of justice and human rights, and stronger moral intuition. This suggests the right educational approach can facilitate children's transition to higher stages of moral development, fostering the foundations of healthy and sustainable morality.

However, this research has several limitations. First, the sample used was limited to 4 schools and 284 children in Yogyakarta, which may not fully represent schools and children in the region of Yogyakarta. Second, this study has a short duration that applies the project approach, so the long-term effect of the project approach on moral development has not been determined. Lastly, this study does not consider external factors that could affect children's morality. Future studies should involve more samples (children and schools), in terms of demographics and social backgrounds, to give the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should extend the intervention (project approach) that can explore the long-term effects of the project approach on children's morality. In the future studies can consider the influence of external factors which can affect children's morality.

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#### 6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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