

# Analysis of the conditions and didactic strategies for evaluating ethical learning: A systematic review

## *Análisis de las condiciones y estrategias didácticas de evaluación de los aprendizajes éticos. Una revisión sistemática*

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### ABSTRACT

Ethical learning for human development is recognized as a fundamental right that has been receiving renewed interest in models, approaches, and research centers in recent years. At the same time, there has also been increased concern over how ethical learning should be assessed, although little if any research provides any scientific evidence from the most widespread practices in quality publications. The purpose of this study is therefore to analyze the didactic strategies and conditions used to assess ethical learning in the international scientific literature. The systematic revision method was used following the PRISMA protocol, which was applied to scientific journal articles published in Scopus from 2018 to 2022, yielding a sample of 69 studies. The variables analyzed cover aspects regarding the method of evaluation, the design of the study, the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample,

and elements regarding the content. The most significant results clearly show that individual assessment is the main technique used (91%), self-assessment is chosen most often (65%), the most commonly used tool is the questionnaire (51%), and that quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods are often combined, along with widespread use of various different assessment instruments in each study (62%). Most of the research studies (66%) do not make use of any pretesting/post-testing or control groups (85%) and evaluate programs that last less than a year (81%). The samples are generally lower than 500 individuals (67%) and are primarily adults (59%). Lastly, most studies assess cognitive aspects (65%) on a wide range of topics associated with ethical learning, chief among which is character learning. Thus, the complexity of assessing ethical learning implies major demands that are not yet met and requires that significant progress be made to address an essential challenge in education.

**Keywords:** educational strategies, educational evaluation, moral education, ethics, systematic review

## RESUMEN

El valor de los aprendizajes éticos para el desarrollo humano se reconoce como un derecho fundamental, que ha experimentado un interés renovado en modelos, enfoques y centros de investigación en los últimos años. Sin embargo, se observa también una preocupación por las posibilidades y estrategias necesarias para su evaluación, no encontrándose investigaciones que proporcionen evidencias científicas sobre las prácticas más extendidas en publicaciones de calidad. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar las condiciones y estrategias didácticas utilizadas para la evaluación de los aprendizajes éticos en la literatura científica internacional. El método utilizado es la revisión sistemática según el protocolo PRISMA, mediante el cual se han revisado los artículos científicos publicados en Scopus de 2018 a 2022, obteniendo una muestra de 69 estudios. Las variables analizadas abarcan aspectos relacionados con la metodología de evaluación, el diseño del estudio, características sociodemográficas de la muestra y elementos relativos al contenido. Los resultados más significativos ponen de manifiesto que la modalidad de evaluación mayoritaria es individual (91%), se opta preferiblemente por la autoevaluación (65%), el tipo de herramienta más empleado es el cuestionario (51%) y se combinan métodos cuantitativos, cualitativos y mixtos, con un uso extendido de varios instrumentos de evaluación en cada estudio (62%). La mayoría de las investigaciones (66%) no aplica pretest/posttest, ni grupo de control (85%) y evalúa programas de duración inferior a un año (81%). Las muestras son generalmente inferiores a 500 individuos (67%), con primacía de personas adultas (59%). Por último, gran parte de los estudios evalúan aspectos cognitivos (65%), sobre una diversidad de temáticas asociadas al aprendizaje ético, entre las que destaca la educación del carácter. Así pues, la complejidad de la evaluación del aprendizaje ético implica importantes exigencias que no se encuentran aún satisfechas y que requieren avances significativos para responder a un reto educativo esencial.

**Palabras clave:** estrategias educativas, evaluación de la educación, educación moral, ética, revisión sistemática

## INTRODUCTION

### Current trends in moral education

Seventy-five years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was passed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in Resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948, it is well worth re-visiting a text that constitutes an undeniable point of reference for Western societies and a beacon for the present and future of our cultures. Specifically, Article 26.2 defines the purpose of education as:

the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

Beyond a doubt, at the heart of these great words lies a deep ethical component that emanates from the idea of full development of the personality, which encompasses the full range of dimensions of the person (Ibáñez-Martín, 2017), as well as the educational duty to promote values with a high moral charge in individuals and groups of people as a way to maintain peaceful coexistence, a high level good so strongly sought in our times (Alderdice, 2021).

Recent years have witnessed a renewed pedagogical interest in the ethical dimension of education, as seen in the increasing number of publications on this subject and the appearance of different interdisciplinary models, approaches, and methodologies that provide new insights to interpreting and developing ethical learning (Conroy, 2021; Ruiz-Corbella & García-Gutiérrez, 2023). Current trends include the perspective of gender and educational inclusion (Lee, 2022), new ways and proposals for teacher training (Higgins, 2011), questions about political polarization in the early 21st century and its threat to the quality of democracies and the exercise of citizenship (Cortina, 2022), the role played by digital technologies in civics (D'Olimpio, 2017), the contributions of neurology to education (Narvaez, 2019), and pressing concerns about social justice and sustainability (Schinkel, 2023), among others.

Specifically, the emergence of different approaches that advocate that «educating the whole person is more than a rhetorical growth» (Higgins, 2022, p. 87) seems steeped in the very heart of the word 'education'. This conception covers the first levels of the education system with approaches such as Whole Child Development (WCD), defined as:

a holistic development approach with the goal to educate the whole child, physically, socially, emotionally, and academically, with the active engagement and support of the community. The WCD approach recognises that all children, particularly those

facing extreme adversity, require a range of knowledge, skills, experiences, and core values that will enable them to engage as productive and ethical citizens (Tarricone et al., 2020, p. 7).

It has gained notable relevance in some conceptions of higher education that place ethics on the main lines of what it means to *be a university student* (Esteban Bara & Caro Samada, 2023), fostered by sharp critics such as the former dean of Harvard College, Harry R. Lewis, in his book on university education titled *Excellence without a Soul* (2007). According to Lewis, a professor of computer science, the university should be understood as a distinctive opportunity for students to grow, one that balances intellectual and moral development for the purpose of seeking out vital horizons of meaningfulness, with a civic, engaged view to the society they inhabit (Lewis, 2007).

Likewise noteworthy is the emergence of an Aristotelian conception of character education (Walker et al., 2015) motivated by a renewed interest in the ethics of virtue that began in the mid-20th century, the repercussions of which are still being felt today (Curren, 2010). Its development is evident in recent work done by large-scale international research such as the *Human Flourishing Program* at Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science, the *Oxford Character Project* at the University of Oxford, the *Center for Character and Citizenship* at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (USA), the *Aretai Center on Virtues* at the Università degli Studi di Genova (Italy), and the *Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues* at the University of Birmingham (UK). Over the last decade, the Jubilee Centre has gained notable relevance, fostering collaboration among teachers, school administrators, and leaders from teachers' unions (namely, the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), each with around 50,000 and 21,000 members, respectively), families, social organizations, young people, etc. to draw up a *Character Education Framework Guidance* (2019), promoted by the British Government's Department of Education. Its aim consisted in providing guidelines and recommendations to help English schools self-assess their current and future actions for character education, understood as the educational action to promote the «spiritual, moral, social, and cultural (SMSC) development of pupils and prepare them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life» (Department of Education, 2019, p. 4).

One factor explaining the widespread acceptance of these pedagogical proposals with a major ethical component is their consistency with Article 26.2 of the aforementioned United Nations Declaration, considering that full development of the human personality must contemplate the person's different dimensions, where ethical learning is located, although neither exclusively nor in isolation from the rest. For example, the Jubilee Centre (2022), in Aristotelian terms, identifies four sweeping domains or types of virtues in character development. These

domains encompass the intellectual virtues (focused on discerning correct action and knowledge and understanding of reality), virtues that are specifically moral (that allow us to act on an idea of the good in situations that require an ethical response), civic virtues (necessary for exercising responsible citizenship committed to the common good), and instrumental or performative virtues, which lack any ethical value in and of themselves but are nevertheless essential for acquiring the rest of the virtues. In this Aristotelian view, character is not conceived as something monolithic, nor exclusively or even mainly cognitive or intellectual, as so commonly occurred with Kohlberg-based approaches in the late 20th century. Rather, it incorporates the affective or emotional component as a mainstay of development, linked to the behavioral and the rational, the ethical weight of which in human development must be justified (Kristjánsson, 2018). In addition, the second noteworthy factor in the emergence of character education is its interdisciplinary origin and development, which starts off from philosophy but is not limited to it. Instead, it welcomes contributions from contemporary psychology, especially positive and humanistic psychology (Kristjánsson, 2015). To overcome a dichotomy that separated and confronted them, these disciplines have looked to current proposals such as neo-Aristotelian character education and like-minded conceptions such as Self Determination Theory (Ryan et al., 2013) for a common space of confluence and collaboration in which they obtain a mutual benefit that directly affects education.

### Assessment of ethical learning

One of the most important challenges and at the same time one of the most complex, faced by all the different proposals and models of education that consider ethical learning to be essential, is how to assess it. Indeed, assessing the achievement of the objectives of any educational activity or project in order to identify success factors or apply corrective actions constitutes of them basic pillars of education. Thus, the traditionally more empirical approach of psychology (Kristjánsson, 2015) requires pedagogy to have a way of validating its methodologies based largely (though not exclusively) on the results obtained, thereby providing the most objective evidence possible of its effectiveness. However, aspirations to objective assessment in education entail a number of different problems that need considering. First and foremost, as López-Gómez (2016) states, assessment is not only measuring or scoring, since not everything that is assessable can be considered measurable. In other words, not everything that needs to be assessed can be measured by strictly objective means and quantified into numbers: «the richness of teaching and learning is hard to measure and synthesize in a number» (López-Gómez, 2016, p. 199). And if this first problem can be extended to learning in

general, the scientific literature and the teaching practice find it particularly difficult to apply to one of its dimensions: ethical learning.

Different authors note that the complexity of ethical learning demands similarly complex methods and instruments of evaluation, ones not limited to any single quantitative or qualitative approach. Rather, a multifaceted approach to a multidimensional phenomenon, be it cognitive, behavioral, emotional, etc., requires mixing methods and even having different evaluators that can triangulate different perspectives from a variety of different contexts (García-Gutiérrez et al., 2018; Harrison et al., 2016; Reyero, 2014). And yet, in practice we find an overabundance of self-assessment questionnaires that consist only of self-observation, which itself brings in its own set of associated problems. For one, the individual turns into both the judge and object of the evaluation, with his/her own interests in obtaining certain results. Moreover, even if we accept a subject's supposed neutrality and objectivity in evaluating him/herself, there is no guarantee his/her evaluation is accurate: the learner may overestimate or underestimate his/her ethical skills in connection with low self-esteem or a personal bias for self-confirmation (Kristjánsson, 2015).

Another noteworthy aspect concerns the difficulty of isolating the object of evaluation, since it does not appear in the person independently from his/her traits, behaviors, emotions, etc. Rather, they are all integrated and in continuous interaction, making it difficult to accurately point out the internal or external causes motivating them (Alexander, 2016; Wright et al., 2020). For example, to determine how ethically desirable a given behavior is, it would not suffice to observe it in a learner; rather, it is necessary to find out if it is motivated by other ethically justified reasons than merely by chance, or even worse, by spurious interests (Miller, 2018). In that sense, the influence of context also constitutes a key factor in ethical learning, so much so that some authors claim that character is completely dependent upon environmental characteristics, which has come to be known as *situationalism* (Meritt et al., 2010).

This is what makes the evaluation of ethical learning one of the main challenges on which there is little or no agreement in the scientific literature (Arthur et al., 2017). It requires a painstaking degree of rigor and high levels of systematization and experimentality by means of pre-testing and post-testing and control groups (Kristjánsson, 2015), which has led some authors such as Curren and Kotzee (2014) to wonder whether this type of measuring is even possible. In this regard, any achievement of the goals for full development of personality as laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights may be cobbled by our not yet having an evidence-based understanding of the most effective methods for assessing ethical learning. And yet, there is still no extensive research on the methods used to assess ethical learning that gives a broad perspective of the current situation and provides reliable knowledge of the conditions in which this type of assessment is

being carried out (the methods and instruments used, the procedures, the degree of experimentality, the most habitual recipients and their socio-demographic characteristics, the contexts and settings in which the assessment is done, etc.).

Consequently, the general aim of this article is to analyze the didactic conditions and strategies used to assess ethical learning by means of scientific evidence from the international professional literature in recent years. The specific aims are the following:

- To identify the assessment methods and agents used most often in current research on ethical learning.
- To detect the main approaches to assessing ethic learning used in current scientific research.
- To categorize the preferred assessment instruments by number and type of tool.
- To examine the degree of experimentality of the research on ethical learning.
- To determine the main countries where studies are carried out on the assessment of ethical learning today.
- To describe the sociodemographic characteristics of the subjects comprising the samples of participants in research on the assessment of ethical learning.
- To determine the fundamental elements of ethics that are assessed in current research carried out on this topic.

## METHOD

The method used to address the above aims was the systematic review in accordance with the guidelines in the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) declaration in order to ensure the rigor and quality required in educational research projects such as this (Sánchez-Serrano et al., 2022).

### Defining the criteria

The selection criteria followed integrates the scientific articles published between 2018 and 2022 in the Scopus database. Once a sufficient sample was obtained, the scope of the research is not widened to other databases nor is any other time period considered.

Table 1 below lists the criteria adopted in greater detail:

**Table 1.***Search criteria determined for selecting articles*

<b>Selection criteria</b>	<b>Definition of search criteria</b>
Typology	Scientific article published (not forthcoming) indexed in the SCOPUS database
Date range	2018 to 2022
Object of study	The search descriptors used were the following: «character education» or «educación del carácter» and «evaluation» or «evaluación».
Languages	Spanish and English

### Data extraction process

The articles were selected in four stages, on the basis of the previously defined criteria. The first stage set the equation to search for articles in the SCOPUS database published between 2018 and 2022 that contained the descriptors «character education» or «educación del carácter» and «evaluation» or «evaluación».

In the second stage the results from the first stage were filtered to only include the following keywords: «morality»; «moral education»; «ethics»; «virtue»; «morals»; «evaluation»; «character building»; «values»; «moral development»; «values education»; «civic education»; «program evaluation»; «virtues»; «character strengths»; «moral character»; «citizenship education»; «meta-analysis» and «student character».

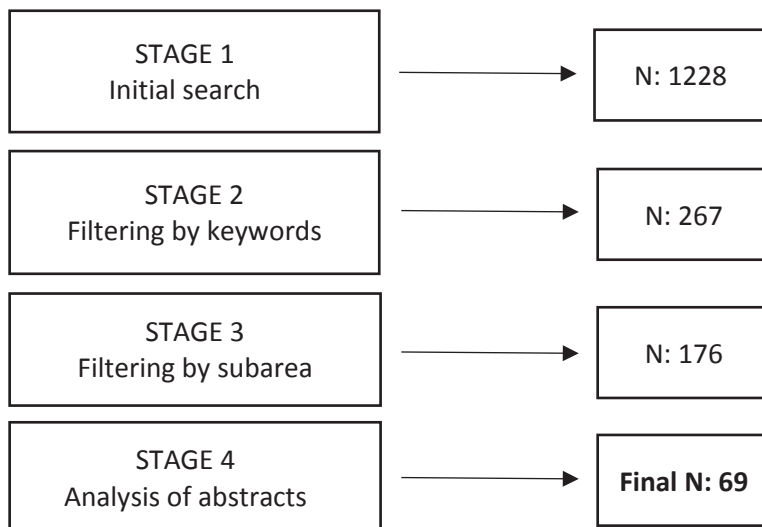
In the third stage, only articles belonging to the sub-area of «Social Sciences» were selected.

The last stage of the data extraction process consisted of analyzing the content of the abstract of each article. The ones selected contained procedures, programs, and systems for assessing ethical behavior, character education, and/or moral education.

Figure 1 below features a diagram of the process followed for obtaining the final sample:

**Figure 1**

*Stages for article selection*



Once the final sample was obtained (n=69), a database was created using Microsoft Excel as an analysis instrument. From that database, the content of the articles was analyzed attending to the previously determined variables. The bibliographic references of the sample are provided in Appendix 1.

### Variables of analysis

The variables in Table 2 below were used to analyze the content of the articles from the final sample.

**Table 2**

*Classification of variables used in the extraction of data*

<b>Methodologies</b>	Evaluation modality (individual/group)	
	Evaluation agent (self-assessment/hetero-assessment/co-assessment)	
	Type of assessment (quantitative /qualitative/ mixed)	
	Evaluation instruments:	Number of instruments used Tool type (questionnaire/interview/other)
<b>Study design</b>	Degree of experimentality:	Pretest and post-test (yes/no) Control group (yes/no)
	Number of evaluations	
	Length of the intervention program	
	Country of research	
	Category of participants (students/teachers/others)	
<b>Sociodemographic variables of the sample</b>	Total number of participants	
	Number of participants per sample group	
	Age	
	Level of education	
<b>Variables regarding content</b>	Elements evaluated	
	Thematic areas	

## RESULTS

The results obtained in each variable are presented below.

### About the research method

First, regarding the modality of evaluation, 91% of the research articles analyzed were found to follow an individual method, 6% were done in group mode, and 3% apply a mixed method of both individual and group. Regarding agents of evaluation, 65% use self-assessment whereas 25% make use of hetero-assessment and 19%

use co-assessment. In terms of the type of evaluation, 63 studies specify the type, with the following results: 35% use a quantitative methodology, 30% work with a qualitative methodology, and 35% use a mixed methodology. Six studies do not specify the type of methodology used.

To analyze the evaluation instruments used, the number of tools was differentiated from the tool type. Thus, 25 research articles (37%) use a single instrument, another 25 (37%) apply two instruments, and 17 (25%) make use of three or more instruments. The tool used most often is the questionnaire, which makes up 51% of all instruments, in contrast to interviews (17%) and observation (12%). The remaining 20% use other instruments, which include focus groups, case studies, descriptive analyses, moral dilemmas, pictures, traditional games, etc. Of the research that uses the interview, 14 specify which type: seven use semi-structured interviews, five use in-depth interviews, one uses the open-ended interview and one uses two types of interviews: semi-structured and in-depth.

### About the design of the study

The results regarding the design of the study specify the degree of experimentality, the number of number of evaluations carried out in each research article, and the length of the intervention programs.

Regarding the degree of experimentality, 23 of the research articles analyzed (34%) applied pretesting and post-testing, whereas 44 (66%) did not. Furthermore, only 10 used a control group (15%) whereas 57 (85%) do not.

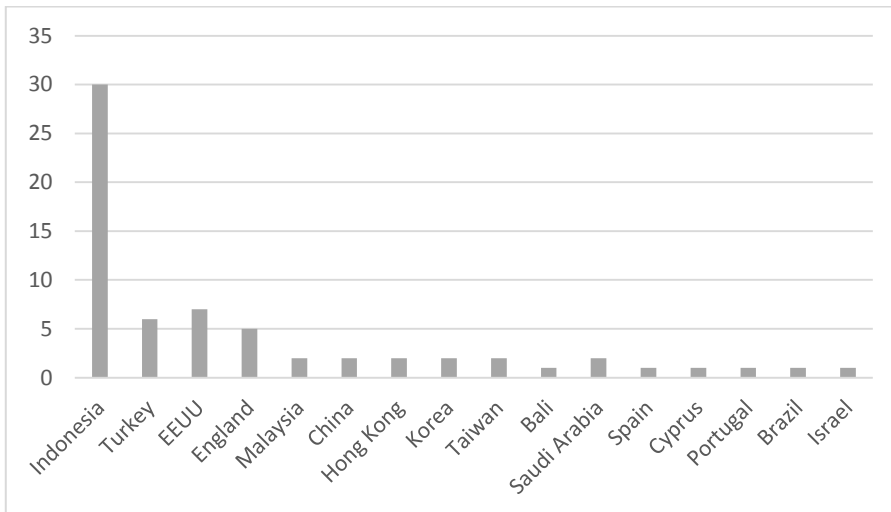
Regarding the number of evaluations carried out in the research, 25 studies (36%) performed two evaluations, 17 (25%) applied one single evaluation, 12 studies (17%) make reference to three evaluations, two studies (3%) performed five evaluations, two (3%) carried out four evaluations, and one (1%) study applied six evaluations.

The data on the length of the intervention programs are as follows: of the 69 research articles, 27 (39%) carried out intervention programs of a specific length. Specifically, three (11%) featured a length of less than one month, six interventions (22%) lasted between one and three months, eight (30%) of the research articles were done on programs lasting between three and six months, eight (30%) had a length ranging from six to twelve months, and one research article (4%) was based on an intervention program lasting between 12 months and six years. In contrast, 42 research articles (61%) do not specify the length of the intervention programs or do not evaluate the effects of a particular program.

Lastly, Figure 2 below lists the countries where the research articles in the sample were carried out, when specified:

**Figure 2**

*Countries in which the research was carried out*



## Results from the sample

Regarding the categories of the participants of the research, the findings are as follows: in a clear majority of the studies analyzed, 49 (74%) evaluate one single type of participant. Of all the participants, 53% are students, 23% are faculty, and 24% belong to other population groups (management teams, people employed at higher education institutions, alumni, education experts, educational administrators, inspection personnel, women, professional guidance counselors, and family).

As to the number of participants, the median of all the samples is 215 subjects. Of the 83 samples, 51 (61%) were found to number fewer than 100 individuals, 22 (27%) had between 100 and 500 individuals, six samples (7%) had 500 to 1000 individuals, and four (5%) had a sample size of 1000 to 3023. The ages of the participants in the samples range from three to 66 years old; regarding level of education, most (39%) are adults (without specifying their level of education), postgraduate students (20%), primary school pupils (19%), secondary education students (16%), children in early childhood education (4%), and students in primary and secondary together (1%).

Of the 69 research articles, 11 used two samples, four had three samples, and one had four different samples.

## On the content of the assessments

Regarding the elements that the studies aimed to assess, 66 research articles (97%) clearly stated them, in contrast to two (3%) that avoided specifying them. The elements most often evaluated are perceptions, which appear 27 times in different studies and make up 25% of the elements evaluated by all the research. Skills appear 25 times (24%), cognitive thinking appears on 24 occasions (23%), beliefs are evaluated 18 times (17%), attitudes appear on nine occasions (8%), disposition at two moments (2%), and motivations appear only once (1%). In addition, 30 studies (45%) were found to evaluate one single element of the ones noted above, 32 research articles covered two dimensions (48%), and four articles (6%) took three elements into account.

Lastly, in the 69 total research articles, a total of 136 thematic areas of evaluation were found. Of them, 30 (14%) assess character education; all the rest relate to ethical learning in a wide variety of thematic areas.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The scientific evidence found in the recent publications on ethical learning from the last several years provides relevant conclusions in terms of the didactic strategies and conditions that characterize the evaluation process. One significant fact is that in nearly all the cases studied, an individual method of evaluation was chosen; group assessment of ethical learning was an option used only rarely, practically exceptionally. In other words, evaluation focuses fundamentally on the students rather than on the institutions of groups they belong to. This is consistent with the personalized nature of student-centered education, without disregarding its social dimension or the link between individual learning and the school ethos in ethical terms (García-Gutiérrez, 2020; Ibáñez-Martín, 2017; Montero-Carretero & Cervelló-Gimeno, 2019), which mainly requires finding out how much each student has learned. Therefore, it is based on putting into practice the concerns voiced by Fuentes and Sánchez-Pérez (2023) on the limitations some measure have in education that are commonly used in other social sciences to offset the effects of bias caused by social desirability, such as anonymity. Although this may work in other types of social sciences, education needs to be personalized, which draws on the students' knowledge and individualization of the assessment.

Furthermore, the analysis of recent empirical research confirms the findings in theoretical studies that warn about the overuse of self-assessment and self-reporting (Arthur et al., 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015). This point should be taken into account given the errors and biases compromising this type of assessments.

However, it is also relevant to see a significant amount of research that includes complementary forms of assessment of ethical learning –more than 40%– with co-assessment (peer assessment) and hetero-assessment (assessment by other agents: teachers, families, and other people) strategies that incorporate new perspectives, generate a more holistic view of learning (López-Gómez, 2016) and make it possible to develop enriching processes of triangulation (Jubilee Centre, 2022; Pike et al., 2015).

Findings also show a notable balance regarding the use of quantitative and qualitative methods for assessing ethical learning, in similar proportions, with neither outweighing the other to any great extent. For example, more than one third of the studies entailed mixed methodologies that combine both approaches to assessment, and six out of every ten articles analyzed use more than one assessment instrument. However, these results contrast with the findings in other studies carried out on specific methodologies with a relevant ethical dimension, such as Service Learning (Redondo-Corcobado & Fuentes, 2020). Because of the deliberative nature of ethical learning and the centrality of the processes alongside the results (Alexander, 2016), those studies mainly use qualitative type assessments based on observations, field diaries, or individual or group interviews due to their potential to encourage reflections linked to action and their dialog-based nature that incorporates intellectual and emotional elements and «facilitates processes of conscience-creating, of pitting different stances against each other, and of building a narrative that adds meaning to the experience» (García-Romero et al., 2019, p. 167). However, even though they are still in the minority, some of the research articles analyzed here make use of mixed methods and a variety of different assessment instruments to one extent or another. Such is the case in Harrison et al. (2016) and Wright et al. (2020), which thereby overcome the constraints of quantitative assessment instruments applied to both students and teachers (Reyero, 2014).

Less encouraging are the results found regarding the degree of experimentality: only one third of the research on the assessment of ethical learning applies pre-testing and post-testing, and even fewer (14%) use control group. In contrast, more positive results can be found regarding the length of the programs, which in 81% of the cases ranges between one month and one year. Specifically, six out of 10 programs that assess the effects on the students' ethical learning have a duration of between three and 12 months, which lends a degree of consistency to the assessments carried out. Still, despite the need for further progress on making assessment methods more rigorous and scientific (Kristjánsson, 2015; Current & Kotzee, 2014), two points need to be made regarding how these measurements apply to the assessment of ethical learning: one of a realistic nature and the other of an ethical one. The former realistically entails acknowledging that the

sophistication of assessment measurements with experimental aspirations requires a level of exigency for both social sciences and education that cannot always be applied at schools, where resources are generally in short supply, and especially at pre-university levels, where teachers and administrators do not always have the research skills needed or access to external researchers. As a result, this situations underscores the need for closer inter-institutional collaboration to bring about mutually enriching exchanges regarding research and assessment. As to the second point, although measures such as control groups make it easier to access evidence on attributing the responsibility of learning to the programs or interventions performed on the experimental group rather than to the natural process of the students' own ethical maturity, a number of specifically ethical questions arise on the decision to exclude the control group from learning about ethics, given that the student, for morally dubious reasons, are unlikely to benefit from whatever findings the research intervention may subsequently bring (Hirsch & Navia, 2018). This may actually go against the principle of *Beneficence*, that, along with *Autonomy* and *Justice* as defined in the *National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research* (1979), requires not only protecting the subjects participating in research from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their maximum well-being. Thus, it becomes difficult to justify that researchers should be allowed to decide that one group of students, chosen at random but with the same characteristics as another group, is not to receive equal treatment in benefiting from such a relevant matter in their development as ethical learning.

Also worth noting are a few relevant questions regarding the characteristics of the sample of participants in the research analyzed. As might be expected, nearly all the samples were made up of a single type of participant: students. Nevertheless, a significant percentage (23%) focuses on teacher evaluation, which implies acknowledging the role of the teacher in the students' ethical learning, especially in how that learning becomes internalized in their own person. This places us in one of the classic yet controversial strategies of moral education, in which teachers, much like the characters in a novel or film, cannot be expected to teach what they themselves do not understand (Carr, 2006), and it is impossible to understand fully that which is not experienced and practiced. Indeed, this has given rise to a number of different theories and approaches, such as today's *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (Zagzebski, 2017).

Another drawback is that the size of the samples is generally not very large, with most (67%) having fewer than 500 individual participants in the studies analyzed. This points to only moderately sized studies that only rarely feature a broad scope. This seems consistent with the nature of the research articles studied, which are mostly concerned with assessing the results from intervention programs in which the degree of connection with the specific needs of a particular context is quite

high (Berkowitz, 2011). This contrasts sharply with international assessments of learning on contents, such as science, mathematics, and language arts, that are considered essential for evaluating the quality of the education systems but with which, a reductionist interpretation may lead to an impoverished interpretation of the idea of education (Jover et al., 2024).

Similarly, the participating subjects were found to belong to a wide range of ages, from three to 66 years old, segmented into different age groups, which raises two interrelated questions. On one hand is the conception of ethical learning as an aspect inherent to the human condition that cannot be restricted to any single stage of life or only to infancy and early childhood. Rather, it is a possibility that remains open throughout our entire existence. On the other hand, and without necessarily contradicting the above, segmentation hints at different life cycles in which ethical learning takes place in a different way, and thus ought to be assessed by means of different strategies. Furthermore, it seems significant that more than half the participants were adults, which may not be because of any theoretical preference toward studying ethical learning at this life stage (although this may true in some cases). Rather, it is more likely to be a more pragmatic consequence of having easier access to research samples, since practically all the studies of this kind were done at the university level with the presence of groups of young adults predominating this context, as other similar research has likewise concluded (Redondo-Corcobado & Fuentes, 2020).

Finally, as regards the contents of assessment, a considerable imbalance was found in the dimensions of ethical learning. Few (10%) assessed the volitional or emotional dimension (attitudes and dispositions) compared to ones of a behavioral (24%) nature (skills), and both were well below the cognitive dimensions of perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs (65%). In studies that analyze a second element, the gap between the two percentages actually widens. There may be two interpretations of these data. From an operational point of view, it may certainly be easier to assess the cognitive dimension, i.e., the knowledge, concepts, and ideas about ethics, than those of an emotional or behavioral nature. However, it is difficult to accept the idea that ethical learning can be assessed solely by looking at only one of its dimensions, as the vast majority of authors cited have pointed out (Jubilee Centre, 2022; Miller, 2018). The second interpretation that can be made is more about historical background, attending to an eminently cognitive, rationalist model such as can be found in the works of Kohlberg, which dominated the world of moral education for decades in the 20th century and to a certain extent still does. Although it no longer exists in the so-called neo-Kohlbergian theoretical underpinnings and adapted approaches (Arthur et al., 2017), it does linger on in the practice of the assessment of ethical learning in recent research (Gozálvez & Jover, 2016).

The other issue analyzed in this last category of variables brings to light three phenomena to be taken into account. First, there is a wide variety of topics on ethical learning being discussed in recent research, which reveals a field of knowledge rich in perspectives that encourage myriad approaches to a phenomenon as complex as the ethical dimension of human beings and open a wide range of possibilities for future research. Second, despite the above, that same wealth of approaches is sometimes mistaken for an excessive linguistic heterogeneity in which different terms are used to refer to the same concepts. This can actually hinder the advance of knowledge, so it would be advisable to aspire to having a common vocabulary that is both extensive enough to convey all the shades of meaning in each concept while also sufficiently recognizable for valid academic, scientific dialog. Lastly, among the many different topics on ethical learning, one that stands above the rest is the notion of character education, a logical consequence this approach has generated around the world in recent years, as well as empirical proof of the impact in research on ethical learning in general and on what has become one of its most complex but necessary dimensions: its assessment.

Indeed, this article contributes to the research on the moral dimension of educational action by analyzing the didactic strategies of assessing ethical learning currently being used. However, a few methodological limitations need to be mentioned in order to consider how to appraise the results obtained as well as what new lines of research may be worth pursuing. In first place, regarding the procedure, the study has been limited to the time period of 2018 to 2022 because of space constraints. However, it would be interesting to complement the findings of this article with the results in time periods immediately before and immediately after the one chosen. This would make it possible to compare and contrast them to see how this area of knowledge is evolving and progressing, as well as to gain a more accurate understanding of the impact of the assessment methods that pedagogic research identifies as being the most effective and suitable ones for the object of study. In addition, it should be noted that the research here focuses on the results from the Scopus database. While this provides some assurance as to scope and quality, it also features the constraints of using one single database. It would therefore be worthwhile to carry out complementary analyses that comprise other sources, such as the *Web of Science*, the *Education Resources Information Center*, and others. Lastly, another limitation worth noting is the uneven use of terminology in the vocabulary on ethical learning and moral education. Even though the growing attention to character education has significantly contributed to the use of a common language, this area of knowledge still has many concepts that are not unequivocal. Rather, the terms are laden with nuances, cultural influences, and social and historical conditions of education systems, all of which must be taken into account, especially when drawing comparisons between them. That said, their

shared centrality in education in so many different societies and cultures lends them a commonality that begs the rigorous attention of researchers and educators alike.

Among the future lines of research that the results of this study open up are ones that delve into the conditions that enable more experience-based assessment of ethical learning. In other words, it is important to determine which aspects can help make the research carried out have higher levels of quality, rigor, systematization and control, which also entails keeping a detailed account of the characteristics of the research in the scientific literature to help the scientific community replicate or refute them. In addition, it seems reasonable to pay more attention to the age group of adolescence, since this is the time period when some of the most important processes of maturity take place, including moral development. Third, some consideration should be given to the reasons behind a kind of «zoning» of educational research in recent years on ethical learning, with a predominance of some Asian countries posing questions of a different nature, especially because of their distance from Western countries with a significant tradition in this area. And lastly, responsible educational research should not keep focusing its methods of assessing ethical learning on something as limited as self-assessment reports. Instead, more holistic tools and approaches need to be developed, ones that can encompass the entire range of the complexity we recognize today in ethical learning.

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## APPENDIX 1

### List of Articles Comprising the Systematic Review

- Agrawal, R., Williams, K., & Miller, B. J. (2020). An Assessment of Student Moral Development at the National Defense University: Implications for Ethics Education and Moral Development for Senior Government and Military Leaders. *Journal of Military Ethics*, 19(4), 312-330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15027570.2021.1881217>
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