

## **Suggestions to Improve Research on Moral Education as Interdisciplinary and International Collaboration in Korea**

Hyemin Han <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Educational Psychology Program, University of Alabama

### **Author Note**

Correspondence concerning this chapter should be addressed to Hyemin Han, Educational Psychology Program, University of Alabama, Box 870231, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, United States. Email: [hyemin.han@ua.edu](mailto:hyemin.han@ua.edu)

### **Abstract**

In this chapter, I overviewed the strengths and weaknesses of research on moral education in Korea and discussed several future directions for its improvement. I started by overviewing the interdisciplinary and international nature of moral education research to the conceptual aspect of my discussion. Based on the conceptual overview, I examined the strengths and weaknesses of moral education research in Korea. First, I suggested the organization of academic units, teacher education, and nationwide curricula for moral education as strengths. Second, with a brief analysis of journal publications, I mentioned the availability of empirical works and international visibility as current weaknesses of Korean moral education research. Finally, I suggested several future directions for moral education researchers in Korea to address the weak points while maximizing the benefits of the strengths.

*Keywords:* moral education in Korea, research on moral education, interdisciplinarity, empirical research

## **Suggestions to Improve Research on Moral Education as Interdisciplinary and International Collaboration in Korea**

In this paper, I will discuss the future directions for research on moral development and education in Korea. I will start by examining the nature of the field, which is highly multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary (Krettenauer, 2021; Kristjánsson, 2017), to substantiate the points that I will propose. Recent research in moral education shows that research on moral education engages collaboration among researchers from diverse fields, including but not limited to moral philosophy, psychology, and educational methods (Fowers, 2022; Han, 2015; Kristjánsson, 2013). Moreover, researchers are seeing increased collaborative approaches involving theoretical and empirical examinations (Fowers, 2022; Frey, 2010). Based on these, I will briefly overview where research on moral development and education is now in Korea. I will examine the current strengths and weaknesses in the field in Korea from an outsider's view. Finally, I intend to suggest several future directions to improve Korean moral educators' research performance and international visibility.

Before starting my discussion, let me mention several disclosures. First, although I received an undergraduate degree in ethics education from a Korean university, I completed my graduate training and am currently working at an institute in the United States. Thus, I need to be more knowledgeable about the context of Korean moral education, which internal persons can better perceive. My discussions and suggestions in this chapter might be more general and can be offered by researchers external to Korean moral education. Second, I have a limited practical experience in Korean moral education. I worked as a moral education teacher in Korean secondary schools, but the terms were brief. Hence, I will primarily focus on research-related aspects of Korean moral education.

## Research on Moral Education as Interdisciplinary and International Collaboration

Moral education aiming for moral and positive youth development should be a collaborative endeavor across different fields addressing ethics and human development (Fowers, 2022; Krettenauer, 2021; Kristjánsson, 2017). Because human morality naturally involves normative and prescriptive aspects of human behavior, moral philosophy addressing those aspects from conceptual and theoretical perspectives becomes a fundamental pillar of the collaborative project (Bella, 2022; Kristjánsson, 2009; Osman & Wiegmann, 2017). For instance, if a moral educator wants to know what (e.g., values or virtues) should be taught, moral philosophical theories will provide them with normative guidance. Moral philosophy will also offer theoretical justifications and support for the contents and methodologies in moral education (Kristjánsson, 2014; Sanderse, 2012, 2015, 2023). One concrete example is recent works in virtue and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) development by a group of moral philosophers. Their conceptual works started by proposing and justifying the necessity of internalizing moral virtues and cultivating *phronesis* as goals and purposes for moral and character education (Darnell et al., 2019; Han, 2024a; Kristjánsson, 2015). They also created conceptual models explaining functional components constituting moral functioning and explanations for developmental trajectories based on virtue ethics (Darnell et al., 2019; De Caro et al., 2021; Henderson, 2022, 2023; Kristjánsson & Fowers, 2022; Vaccarezza et al., 2023). The proposed models and explanations informed psychologists who eventually conducted empirical studies to examine virtue and *phronesis* development (Darnell et al., 2022; Han, 2024b, 2024c). Their works also ended up generating educational programs targeting diverse groups of students

and professionals (Harrison et al., 2024; Harrison & Polizzi, 2023; Kotzee et al., 2016; Kristjánsson, 2015; Polizzi & Harrison, 2022).

We will also consider empirical and practical disciplines addressing educational methods and human development in moral domains as fundamental components in the collaboration for moral education mentioned above (Carr, 2007; Kohlberg, 1981, 1984). Those disciplines include but are not limited to moral psychology, developmental psychology, educational psychology, and pedagogy. Although moral philosophy provides theoretical foundations and justifications in the first place, it does not necessarily show us how one's moral functionalities develop and how to promote positive development based on empirical and practical evidence (Jeong & Han, 2012; Kristjánsson, 2012). Philosophers might be able to provide prototypical ideas about organizing and conducting moral education (Bella, 2022). However, examining how human morality develops over time and which intervention components effectively work to promote the optimal developmental trajectories is empirical researchers' and educators' job (Han et al., 2019; Yeager & Walton, 2011). They are supposed to collect and analyze data by working in labs and classrooms through psychological experiments and educational practices. For example, the previously mentioned example (i.e., the philosophical works on virtue and *phronesis* development) concluded in empirical examinations and school interventions (Darnell et al., 2022; Han, 2024b, 2024c; Polizzi & Harrison, 2022). Without such empirical works, their influences on education in practice would be significantly limited. Furthermore, identifying the neuroscientific, biological, and evolutionary infrastructure underlying moral functioning and development can also significantly inform empirical and practical endeavors to improve moral education as educational and developmental neuroscientists suggest (Han,

2016, 2024b, 2024a). Hence, we should acknowledge the importance of empirical research on interdisciplinary collaboration in moral education.

In addition to the philosophical and empirical disciplines, we should also pay attention to others in humanities and social sciences related to moral functioning. For example, we may examine the contributions of political science and sociology to improving moral education (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Higgins-D'Alessandro, 1996). Previous research on youth civic engagement which has been regarded as one of the most important goals of moral and character education suggests that one's moral, civic, and political functioning are inseparable from each other (Haste & Hogan, 2006; Letki, 2006; Youniss & Yates, 1999). For instance, several empirical studies examining the association between moral and civic development have reported that one's identity in the moral and political domain significantly overlaps and interacts (Han et al., 2021; Winterich et al., 2012). Hence, if we ignore theoretical and empirical findings from research in the related fields of humanities and social sciences, we will not gather abundant insights into understanding the mechanism of complex moral and civic functioning and promoting them in educational settings.

I will also underscore that high-quality research on moral education requires collaboration among international researchers. As society, including Korea, becomes highly diversified, collaborating with international researchers will provide novel insights into improving global citizenship education (Kim, 2019; Yemini et al., 2019). Regarding research practice, international cooperation for data collection from diverse populations and sharing ideas across international researchers with different perspectives can facilitate the development of generalizable theories (Lansford et al., 2021; Rachev et al., 2021;

Tierney et al., 2021), such as the developmental trajectories in moral domains among global youth, etc. As shown in previous moral psychological studies moral foundations and beliefs significantly vary across different countries and cultures (Han et al., 2014; Iurino & Saucier, 2020; Wang et al., 2014). Hence, if researchers conduct their projects in one country or region, their findings might be limited.

In this section, I briefly overviewed several fundamental aspects of moral education research, which will inform examining the strengths and weaknesses of Korean moral education research. First, moral education research and practice are interdisciplinary endeavors. They require various disciplines addressing theories (e.g., moral philosophy, political science) and practical and empirical aspects (e.g., moral, developmental, and educational psychology, pedagogy) of moral and character education. Second, international collaboration becomes essential to improve education addressing global moral and citizenship education and facilitate high-quality research on moral education.

### **Strengths in Research on Moral Education in Korea**

Given the highly interdisciplinary nature of moral education, moral educators in Korea have a significant systematic and structural benefit in being able to research moral education. First, I will discuss academic units in Korean higher education institutes focusing on moral and character education. Let me start by briefly discussing the structure of academic entities addressing moral and character education in higher education in Korea (Chu et al., 1996). Unlike the rest of the globe, higher education institutes in Korea have academic departments dedicated to training moral education teachers in elementary (e.g., moral education major/program at universities of education) and secondary schools (e.g., department of ethics education at colleges of education in universities). Such

academic units have faculty members with diverse academic backgrounds, such as moral psychology, educational methods, moral philosophy, civic education, and political science (e.g., [https://ethics.snu.ac.kr/new/eng/sub01/1\\_2.php](https://ethics.snu.ac.kr/new/eng/sub01/1_2.php)). In the case of universities of education, all students who will become elementary school teachers must complete designated courses focusing on moral education (e.g., [https://ethics.snu.ac.kr/new/eng/sub02/2\\_1.php](https://ethics.snu.ac.kr/new/eng/sub02/2_1.php)).

In such a situation, higher education institutes in Korea have well-established academic units as potential cores for interdisciplinary collaboration as a valuable infrastructure for research on moral education. In the cases of moral education researchers in higher education institutes out of Korea, many of them are scattered across different academic units, such as the departments of programs of philosophy (moral philosophers), (educational) psychology (moral psychologists), civics education (pedagogy researchers), political science (political science researchers), and sociology (sociologists). Of course, collaborative research centers and units focusing on moral and character education, such as the Center for the Study of Ethical Development (<https://ethicaldevelopment.ua.edu/>), the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (<https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/>), and the Center for Character & Citizenship (<https://characterandcitizenship.org/>), exist. However, most do not manage teacher education programs granting moral educator licensures or certificates. The constituents of such centers are affiliated with the centers while having their academic home units, unlike their Korean counterparts who have academic departments of ethics education as their home departments. That suggests academic units for moral education in Korea have stronger formal infrastructures for interdisciplinary research, teacher education, and networking than their non-Korean counterparts. Given



interdisciplinarity is a core aspect of research on moral education, it can be a unique asset for Korean moral educators ensuring potential academic competitiveness in the field.

I will also mention the teacher education programs implemented by the academic departments in Korea as another asset. Teacher education students at colleges of education at universities, candidates to be secondary moral education teachers, are majoring in moral education by taking courses offered by multidisciplinary faculty members (Chu et al., 1996). They become moral educators possessing college-level knowledge in various disciplines engaging in moral education. From the pedagogical perspective, such has a significant benefit as moral education is interdisciplinary, and consequently, teachers who are implementing it should also be familiar with various constituent disciplines. For instance, a hypothetical teacher with expertise in moral philosophy might not know how students' moral functioning develops over time and how to organize and arrange educational activities to facilitate moral development according to the current development level. Likewise, an educational psychologist studying moral development without a background in content-related disciplines, such as moral philosophy, political science, and sociology, could not identify what should be taught in moral education. Given these hypothetical cases, Korean teacher education programs in moral education have unique strengths to train moral education teachers with knowledge and skills in various fields addressing contents and techniques for moral education. In terms of educational research, such well-trained teachers will become good collaborators who can deliver research-based educational interventions and collect data successfully based on their expertise (Callan et al., 2022).

In addition to the well-established interdisciplinary teacher preparation programs, the nationwide application of moral education curricula will offer additional benefits to moral education researchers. Moral education and related subjects are officially required or elective courses in Korean elementary and secondary schools (Jeong, 2005). Consequently, several million elementary and secondary schoolers are taking moral education courses. From the perspective of an empirical researcher, this is a significant strength not in numerous countries where moral education is not adopted as a regular subject. With appropriate support for collaboration, moral educators can access the large-scale participant pool to conduct various empirical studies, such as examining the developmental trajectories in moral domains, testing newly invented moral educational interventions, etc. The large-scale participant pool also allows researchers to collect data from populations with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds receiving homogenous moral education according to the homogenous curricula (Dobronyi et al., 2019; King et al., 2018).

In this section, I overviewed strengths in research on moral education in Korea. First, I proposed that the organization of the academic units focusing on moral education is multidisciplinary. This can stimulate interdisciplinary collaboration, which is essential in moral education research, thanks to the infrastructure and network in the academic units. Second, I mentioned the multidisciplinary nature of the Korean teacher education programs for moral educators. Korean moral education teachers can be ideal collaborators with their training and expertise. Finally, the nationwide large-scale implementation of curricula for moral education is another unique asset. Moral education researchers will be able to access a large-scale participant pool consisting of students receiving the homogeneous moral education that does not prevalently exist in the rest of the world.

## **Research on Moral Education in Korea Now: Where It is and What Can Be Improved**

Although Korea has the unique strengths in research on moral education that I mentioned above, it also encounters several challenges. I will briefly discuss the challenges and weaknesses before proposing several suggestions.

First, I will discuss the lack of empirical studies conducted by Korean moral educators with an illustrative example from academic journals. As an illustrative example, I briefly overviewed articles published in two peer-reviewed academic journals in ethics and moral education, the Journal of Moral Education (JME, <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjme20>), an international journal, and the Journal of Moral & Ethics Education (JMEE, <https://kmeea.com/homepage/custom/search>), a Korean journal. I examined articles published in 2023 and how many were original empirical papers based on collected data and data analysis, including quantitative and qualitative analysis. For the brief analysis, I visually inspected their titles, abstracts; and full texts, if needed. Also, I only examined papers assigned to issues published in 2023 (four issues per journal). The JMEE only listed articles assigned to paper-published issues without offering the online first functionality. When I analyzed the articles published in the JME in 2023, there were 32 original papers. Among them, 15 (46.88%) were empirical papers. In the case of the JMEE, among 39 published papers, only one (2.56%) reported an empirical study. One more paper also demonstrated several concrete examples from classroom activities, but the author did not conduct any data-based analysis to elaborate conclusions. A  $\chi^2$  test indicated that the proportions of empirical papers in the journals significantly differ,  $\chi^2(1) = 12.46, p < .001, \phi = 41.89$ . The quantitative test indicates that a

disproportionally smaller number of empirical papers were published in the JMEE than in the JME.

The abovementioned illustrative example shows that most of the JMEE papers were conceptual papers or papers suggesting instructional methods in moral education instead of empirical papers. Regarding this trend in the JMEE, conceptual and empirical studies are complementary, and both are integral parts of endeavors for moral education (Ruyter, 2019). Hence, the significantly low proportion of empirical works published in the JMEE may warrant further attention. Of course, I acknowledge that the proportion of empirical papers published in the JMEE has increased gradually. However, more quantitative and qualitative studies are necessary to substantiate conceptual and methodological ideas proposed by Korean moral educators. As researchers in education generally agree, the effectiveness of interventions including those in moral domains can better be substantiated by empirical evidence collected from labs and classroom settings (Han et al., 2019; Henderson, 2024). Doing so will allow researchers and educators to identify which factors, components, and mechanisms in educational activities are fundamental in promoting moral development (M. Brown et al., 2023; Yeager & Walton, 2011). Even many moral philosophers interested in education, who do not directly engage in empirical data collection and analysis, also underscore the necessity of empirical approaches in research on moral development and education (Kristjánsson, 2013; Sanderse, 2015). The example of collaboration in virtues and *phronesis* briefly introduced in the prior section can be a good example (Darnell et al., 2022; Han, 2024b, 2024c). The recent trend in the rise of experimental philosophy may also be a good example supporting the point (Cohen et al., 2024; Han et al., 2022; May et al., 2021).

This may become a weak point and potential room for improvement in research on moral education in Korea. As mentioned in the prior section, although conceptual and theoretical works like those frequently published in the JMEE can provide ideas about the prototypes and models for moral education, they can demonstrate whether the proposed methodologies effectively work in educational settings only with subsequent empirical studies testing them. For example, we can see many papers about the curriculum analyses and pedagogical model developments in the JMEE. However, we cannot evaluate whether they will effectively promote moral and positive youth development without empirical data when teachers implement them in classrooms. Educational psychologists argue that large-scale educational interventions can significantly influence students' long-term growth, so careful empirical examinations are necessary before applying them in schools (A. L. Brown, 1992; Han et al., 2018; Yeager & Walton, 2011). Given Korea implements national-wide curricula for moral education (Chu et al., 1996; Jeong, 2005), if educators decide to implement one component or program, its impacts will be substantial. Hence, although the scale of moral education in Korea can be a unique asset for Korean moral educators as I previously mentioned, the lack of empirical studies supporting educational suggestions and guidelines can diminish such a strength.

Another issue is that the lack of empirical studies in Korea may hinder the further examination of effective components and features for moral education on a large scale via additional analyses and syntheses, such as meta-analysis and data synthesis. For example, a group of character educators, particularly those in the United States, conducted meta-analyses of previous studies on moral and character education to identify which components effectively promoted developmental outcomes (M. Brown et al., 2023;

McGrath et al., 2021). Researchers interested in exemplar-applied moral education synthesized quantitative data from previous experimental and classroom studies and suggested concrete guidelines for moral educators based on the Self-determination Theory (Han & Graham, 2024). Such large-scale data analyses, which can significantly improve the statistical power and conclusions' credibility (Costafreda, 2009), can only be done when moral educators complete abundant empirical studies and collected datasets. Hence, if Korean moral educators have not done various empirical studies, it would be difficult to conduct large-scale secondary analyses of collected data to obtain practical implication reliability from such analyses. It would significantly hinder the evidence-based improvement of Korean moral education.

We should also examine the international visibility and collaboration among Korean moral educators researching moral and character education. I will also employ the papers published in the JME as an illustrative example. To examine the international visibility of Korean moral educators in the journal, I searched for articles authored by Korean authors between 2020 and 2023. I entered search conditions on SCOPUS

(<https://www.scopus.com>), an international academic database, as follows:

1. To extract the list of all published articles during the period: ***SOURCE-ID ( 24810 ) AND PUBYEAR > 2019 AND PUBYEAR < 2024***
2. To extract the list of articles authored by Korean scholars: ***SOURCE-ID ( 24810 ) AND PUBYEAR > 2019 AND PUBYEAR < 2024 AND ( LIMIT-TO ( AFFILCOUNTRY, "South Korea" ) )***

I used the first search term to print out the list of all papers published in the JME during the period. The search resulted in 166 published articles. When the second search

condition was entered, I could extract only one paper authored by a Korean author (.60%). However, that sole paper was deemed to be written as a part of the author's dissertation research conducted at an institution in the United States with their advisor. For additional information, I counted the number of article authors in Asia. The result indicated that there were 25 authors in Asia including 11 in China, 4 in Hong Kong, 3 in Singapore, 3 in Taiwan, 1 in Japan, 1 in Malaysia, 1 in Oman, and 1 in Korea. These Asian authors published 12 articles (7.23%) collectively.

The illustrative example of SCOPUS searches demonstrates that Korean author(s) have not published in the JME actively compared with other Asian authors. As shown, the proportion of papers authored by Korean author(s) during 2020-2023 was only .60% while that of papers co-authored by non-Korean Asian authors was 7.23%. Given the robustness of the infrastructure for potential interdisciplinary collaboration and educational practice represented by the academic department dedicated to ethics education and national-level curricula, there might be room for improving Korean researchers' international visibility of research on moral education.

In this section, I discussed two challenges that Korean moral educators should address for improvement. First, I mentioned that more empirical studies should be performed as represented by the small number of published empirical articles. Given empirical research is essential in developing theories and practices of moral education, I hope more Korean moral education researchers conduct and publish empirical research. Second, the international visibility of research on moral education done by Korean researchers should be promoted. Despite Korea's unique assets and strengths in moral

education research, it is unfortunate that the researchers have not frequently published their studies in international academic journals.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter, I discussed the nature of research on moral education, particularly its interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary. Based on the discussion, I examined the potential strengths and weaknesses in moral education research in Korea. The organization of academic units focusing on ethics education in Korea, including their multidisciplinary faculty members and curricula, and the standardized nationwide teacher education system and moral education curricula are fundamental strengths. However, the lack of empirical research represented by articles in the JMEE and the weak international visibility of research are considerable weaknesses. Given these, research on moral education has the potential to flourish while getting international recognition with several measures for improvement. From now on, I will briefly suggest several ideas to address the weaknesses mentioned above.

First, graduate schools may consider reorganizing curricula to encourage graduate students in moral education to receive more training in research methods. Currently, graduate programs in Korean ethics education have strengths in offering advanced knowledge and skills in teaching methods and subject contents. However, most do not have a curriculum-wise emphasis on research methods, including quantitative and qualitative methods. Similar to the college where I am currently working (<https://catalog.ua.edu/graduate/education/educational-studies-psychology-research-methodology-counseling/educational-psychology-phd/#requirements>), the programs and departments in Korea may also adopt a substantial number of methods courses as



requirements or electives to let their graduate students receive methodological training officially. Because I understand that many Korean graduate students in moral education are also interested in pedagogy or subject contents, the curriculum-wise revision I suggested may need to be implemented as an addition (e.g., creating a new track focusing on empirical research) rather than replacing the current one.

Second, system-level supports are required to facilitate interdisciplinary and empirical research on moral education. For example, I mentioned that Korean moral education teachers who received interdisciplinary training, particularly those pursuing graduate degrees, can be practical researchers conducting classroom empirical studies with expertise. However, there should be a system to promote their motivation to engage in empirical studies. I can imagine several means, such as institutional efforts to assist collaboration between researchers, graduate students, administrators, school teachers, etc. Furthermore, it would also be beneficial if educators and researchers create a cultural atmosphere that encourages and highly values empirical research for improving moral education based on evidence. We may consider several possible solutions, such as organizing a special issue reporting and discussing the implications of empirical studies, creating committees in academic societies and organizations to discuss action plans to facilitate empirical research, awarding moral educators conducting exemplary empirical studies, etc.

Third, I will briefly discuss boosting international visibility. As I previously mentioned, researchers and institutional infrastructure for research on moral education in Korea have many strengths and benefits. Such strengths and benefits include the multidisciplinary of faculty members in academic units, large-scale national-level

implementation of moral education curricula, etc. However, unfortunately, as shown in the example of the JME publications, moral education research in Korea has not been well represented at the global level despite its unique strengths and assets. I suggest Korean moral educators seek more opportunities for international collaboration. For example, international research projects by researchers in the United States, United Kingdom, and Taiwan were published several times (Lee et al., 2022, 2024; Thoma et al., 2019). Korean researchers will be able to attract the attention of international researchers by utilizing their strengths as selling points. Furthermore, interdisciplinary collaboration with researchers in fields that have not been traditional collaborators, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality researchers (e.g., Han [2023, 2024d] and Harrison [2024]), should be encouraged to be able to address moral and ethical issues among children and adolescents in the future. In addition to individual researcher-level efforts, system and institutional efforts to facilitate and reinforce such collaboration should be considered and implemented.

However, as I mentioned I have limited knowledge about the context and system of Korean moral education, more detailed system-wise discussions might be out of the scope of this chapter. Although I provided several suggestions based on preliminary data that I gathered, including the data from the JME and JMEE, there might be additional contextual factors specific to Korean education that could not be grasped via visible data and should be considered. I hope my chapter provides Korean moral educators with some big-picture ideas so they can better develop ideas for further improvements. I hope that my chapter can show Korean moral educators where research on moral education is now with concrete data, i.e., the proportion of published empirical studies and international visibility.

Also, my brief suggestions provide some food for thought about starting improvements at the individual and system levels.

There are several limitations in my brief examinations in this chapter. First, I examined only two journals in moral education, the JME and JMEE. Although these two journals are the most reputable among moral educators, reviewing similar journals, such as the Journal of Character Education (English) and the Journal of Ethics Education Studies (Korean) would be necessary. Because the main purpose of this chapter is to discuss future directions for research on moral education in Korea instead of conducting an empirically rigorous analysis of literature, I intentionally selected the two representative journals instead of examining all available in the field. Second, papers addressing moral education are published in journals in relevant fields, such as moral philosophy, developmental psychology, social psychology, and educational psychology. In this chapter, I only examined those in journals explicitly focusing on moral education. Although moral educators frequently intend to publish their works in journals like the JME and JMEE, journals in the related fields should also be examined in future studies for more comprehensive information. This can particularly be a significant limitation while examining publication trends in places other than Korea and several countries where moral education is set as an individual subject and academic departments focusing on the subject exist.

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### **Author Biography**

Dr. Hyemin Han is an Associate Professor of Educational Psychology and Educational Neuroscience at the University of Alabama. Dr. Han also coordinates the Educational Psychology graduate program. With interdisciplinary research interests in improving moral education, Dr. Han conducts research projects in Social, Emotional, and Educational (SEED) Neuroscience. His research interests include the neuroscience of morality, socio-moral development, growth mindset, educational intervention, computational simulation, and professional ethics education. Regarding topics in moral and character education, he is particularly interested in using diverse exemplars to promote students' cognitive, affective, and motivational development in moral domains. Before joining the University of Alabama, he worked as a moral education teacher in secondary schools in South Korea. He received bachelor's degrees in ethics education (BA) and astronomy (BS) from Seoul National University, a master's degree in Science, Technology, and Society (MS) from the Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), and a PhD degree in Developmental and Psychological Sciences from Stanford University.