

COMMUNICATION SKILLS, MORAL DEVELOPMENT, AND GENDER DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Since 2018, moral education has changed in Japan. Specifically, the focus has shifted from emotional understanding, to thinking and deliberating. Consequently, it is important to consider the development of morality as well as the development of the ability to deliberate and think. However, in Japan, not many studies have been conducted on the development of the ability to think and deliberate among the elementary and junior high school students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine communication skills and moral development in elementary and middle school students. The results revealed that while communication skills decreased as the students got older, their morality increased. No gender differences in moral development between males and females from the sixth grade of elementary school to the ninth grade of middle school. Based on these results, the implications for moral lessons that focus on thinking and deliberating are provided.

Keywords: *Ability to deliberate, social perspective-taking, development, gender differences, Japan.*

1. Introduction

Since 2018, the teaching method employed in moral education in elementary and junior high schools in Japan has changed. Specifically, moral lessons no longer focus on emotional understanding but on thinking and deliberating. Consequently, it is imperative to consider the development of children's morality as well as the development of their ability to think and deliberate. Although studies on the development of morality in elementary and junior high school students in Japan have been conducted, there is no research on the development of the ability to think and deliberate. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to examine communication skills and moral development in elementary and junior high school students.

The Defining Issues Test, which is based on Kohlberg's stages of moral development, has often been employed to measure moral development among children in Japan (e.g., Sakurai, 2011). It has been shown that as children age, they advance through stages of moral development. Furthermore, there are differences in moral development between males and females from the fifth grade of elementary school to university (Sakurai, 2011). Sugawara et al. (2006) also developed a behavioral standard scale. This scale, which has been shown to correlate with Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Fujisawa et al., 2006), comprises of five factors. The first factor, egocentric, involves pursuing one's own profit and freedom without displaying any concern for the impression it creates on others. Peer-standards, the second factor, entail placing importance on aligning with one's peers. The third factor, regional-standards, occurs when importance is placed on local community approval. The fourth factor, care about others, involves recognizing the importance of caring for others who are unrelated. Finally, public values, the fifth factor, entail showing concern for public values and fairness in society as a whole. Previous studies have revealed that third-year junior high school students, high school students, and university students are more selfish than first-year junior high school students (Fujisawa, 2019). Furthermore, 12–15-year-olds admitted to welfare facilities scored higher on the egocentric and peer-standards factors than 16–18-year-olds. Furthermore, both groups had low scores for care about others and public values (Nagafusa et al., 2012). Subsequently, Araki and Matsuo (2017) revised the social perspective-taking test, which corresponds to one of Kohlberg's moral development stages. However, in relation to the latter, no studies have been conducted on elementary school students or compared the social perspective-taking ability of students in different grades. Therefore, in this study, it was considered meaningful to clarify the development of social perspective-taking ability among elementary and junior high school students.

However, in relation to communication skills, Syoji et al. (2012) conducted a review of communication skills scales. An examination thereof revealed the following terms were important: related, non-verbal communication, self-assertion, and emotional expression. Syoji et al. (2012) noted that although communication has been related to a substantial number of interpersonal relationships, it has rarely been associated with behavioral and cognitive elements, including thinking and deliberating. Although *communication with peers* is not directly related to thinking and deliberating, Iida and Ishikuma (2002) found that eighth grade students had higher scores in this area than ninth graders. Finally, Ueno and Okada (2006) developed a communication skills scale that comprises the following four subscales: listening/speaking, non-verbal skills, assertion, and deliberating. This scale was employed in this study to examine the development of communication skills.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to clarify the development of morality and communication skills in elementary and junior high school students, and apply them in moral lessons in which the focus was on thinking and deliberating.

2. Methods

Participants: The participants included 76 sixth graders in the elementary school, and 120 seventh graders, 153 eighth graders, and 112 ninth graders in the middle school who were enrolled in public schools in the Tokyo metropolitan area of Japan.

Procedure: The participants completed a questionnaire survey after consent from the principal, the students' parents, and students had been obtained.

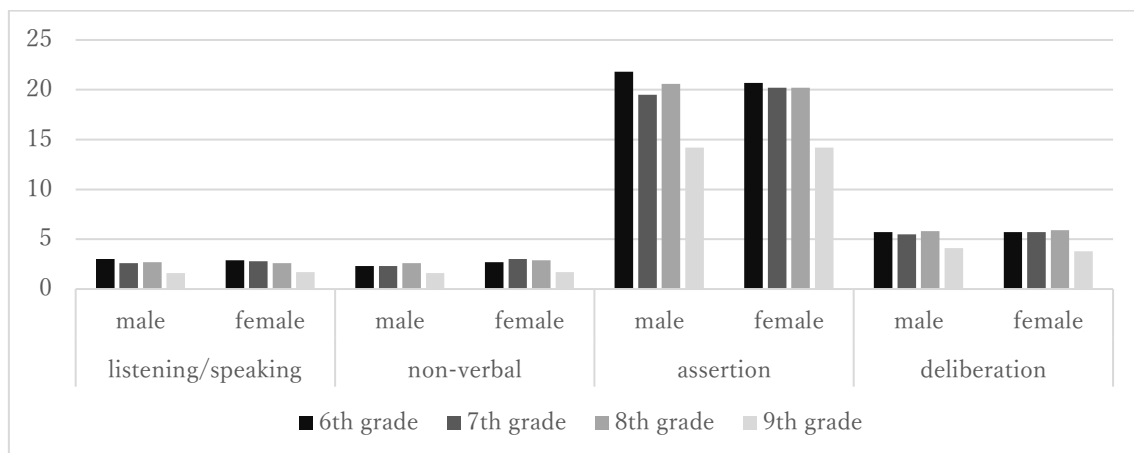
Survey content: In relation to morality, Araki and Matsuo's (2017) social perspective-taking test, which had been developed with reference to Kohlberg was employed. Furthermore, Okado et al.'s (2006) communication skills scale, which comprised four factors, namely, listening/speaking, non-verbal skills, assertions, and deliberation, was also administered.

Scoring: The manual was employed to calculate the developmental stage score in the social perspective-taking test (Araki and Matsuo, 2017). The higher the score, the higher the participant's social perspective. The relevant manual was also utilized to calculate each subscale score of the communication skills scale. High scores in each subscale indicated a high degree of the particular factor.

3. Results and discussion

In relation to communication skills, an analysis of variance was performed on each subscale score as the dependent variable, and grade and gender as two factors. The results revealed all grades had significant scores (listening/speaking: $F(3) = 64.4, p < .001$; non-verbal: $F(3) = 43.3, p < .001$; assertion: $F(3) = 78.7, p < .001$; deliberation: $F(3) = 56.6, p < .001$) (Figure 1). In relation to non-verbal communication, the interaction between grade and gender was significant. No gender differences were found. When multiple comparisons were performed using the Bonferroni method for all variables, other than non-verbal communication, listening/speaking, assertions, and discussions were higher in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades than in ninth grade ($p < .001$).

Figure 1. Subscale scores of communication skills for each grade.



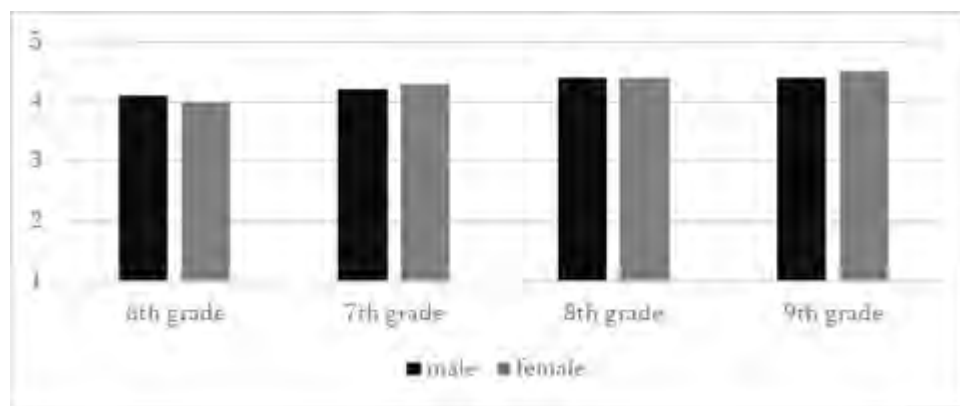
With regard to social perspective-taking, an analysis of variance was performed with each subscale score as the dependent variable, and grade and gender as two factors. The results revealed all grades had significant scores ($F(3) = 11.9, p < .001$) (Figure 2). Furthermore, multiple comparisons were performed

using the Bonferroni method. The social perspective-taking scores were higher in the seventh than in the sixth grade ($p < .001$), higher in ninth than the seventh grade ($p < .05$), higher in the eighth than in the sixth grade ($p < .001$), and higher in the ninth than in the sixth grade ($p < .001$). No gender differences were found.

These results revealed that the ability to acquire a social perspective generally increased from the sixth to the ninth grade and communication skills decreased from the ninth grade. Therefore, one may deduce that the ability to acquire social perspective-taking increases with age. Furthermore, with age, one becomes aware of various roles and can make decisions in relation to them. It was also clarified that communication skills generally declined with age. However, it is unclear from this result whether communication skills decline with increasing age, or whether refraining from mentioning because they can consider the feelings and position of others as they get older seems to reduce their communication skills.

It is also uncertain from this study whether communication skills decrease as one ages or whether one refrains from considering the feelings and position of others as one gets older. Therefore, it may play a role in having older students express their opinions in combination with worksheets rather than having them express their opinions directly in front of others. Simultaneously, it is also meaningful in moral lessons to not only refrain oneself from expressing one's opinion in front of people who have different views but also incorporate training that enables oneself to express thoughts after careful contemplation on a daily basis.

Figure 2. The scores of the social perspective-taking test.



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