

Title

Legal Knowledge, Legal Consciousness, and Legal Behavior among Adolescents:
An Educational Analysis Based on a Large-Scale Survey of Japanese Junior and Senior
High School Students

Research Overview

This study examines relationships among adolescents' legal knowledge, legal consciousness, and legal behavior. Using large-scale survey data from Japanese junior and senior high school students, and drawing on moral education, legal socialization, and civic education research, it clarifies how values, judgment, and situational contexts shape legal behavior beyond knowledge acquisition.

Purpose of Study

Research in civic and moral education has consistently shown that knowledge acquisition alone does not ensure corresponding attitudes or behavior (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Torney-Purta et al., 2010). Contemporary educational theory further emphasizes that citizenship education should cultivate judgment, participation, and responsible agency rather than merely transmit correct knowledge (Biesta, 2011).

In socio-legal studies, legal consciousness is conceptualized not as knowledge of legal norms but as a culturally and situationally embedded framework through which individuals interpret and mobilize law in everyday life (Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Research on legal socialization similarly suggests that legal behavior is more strongly influenced by perceived legitimacy, procedural justice, and trust in institutions than by factual knowledge (Tyler, 2006; Tyler & Trinkner, 2018). Developmental theories of moral

reasoning further indicate that adolescents increasingly engage in context-sensitive judgment, often producing discrepancies between expressed values and actual behavior (Kohlberg, 1984; Rest et al., 1999).

Against this background, the present study aims to clarify the structural relationships among legal knowledge, legal consciousness, and legal behavior. By including both junior and senior high school students, it contributes empirically grounded insights to international discussions on moral education, civic judgment, and legal awareness.

Research Methods

The study is based on a nationwide questionnaire survey of approximately 3,000 Japanese junior and senior high school students. The survey design draws on frameworks distinguishing knowledge, attitudes, and behavior (Damayanti et al., 2024), as well as international civic education studies such as ICCS (Schulz, 2024; Damiani et al., 2024).

The questionnaire consisted of three components. First, legal knowledge items assessed understanding of basic civil and criminal law principles, including contracts, property rights, presumption of innocence, due process, and responsibility. Second, legal consciousness items measured value orientations toward law, including rule adherence, human rights, punishment, and social order. Third, legal behavior was examined through scenario-based items requiring students to select actions in concrete legal or quasi-legal situations.

All scale scores were normalized. Quantitative analyses included correlation analysis among the three dimensions and subgroup comparisons by school level (junior vs. senior high school) and gender.

Results and Discussion

The results show a moderate positive relationship between legal consciousness and legal behavior, while legal knowledge exhibits only weak associations with both. This pattern aligns with international findings indicating that knowledge alone has limited predictive power for legal compliance or civic engagement, whereas attitudinal and legitimacy-related factors are more influential (Tyler & Trinkner, 2018; Schulz, 2024).

Developmental comparisons reveal that junior high school students tend to demonstrate consistent, rule-oriented judgments across situations. In contrast, senior high school students—despite higher levels of legal knowledge—display greater variability in behavioral choices, with decisions more strongly shaped by situational context. From an educational perspective, this shift should be interpreted not as norm erosion but as an increase in evaluative complexity, consistent with theories of moral and civic development (Kohlberg, 1984; Rest et al., 1999).

These findings correspond with the ICCS 2022 European Report, which shows that older students strongly endorse democratic values while simultaneously expressing more critical and differentiated attitudes toward institutions and participation (Damiani et al., 2024). Gender-based analyses further indicate that female students exhibit greater coherence between legal consciousness and behavior, whereas male students more frequently justify deviations from norms through situational reasoning, a tendency also observed in international research (Schulz, 2024).

Overall, adolescents' legal behavior is best understood as context-adaptive rather than strictly norm-driven. While many students affirm legal rules and fairness at the level of consciousness, their application varies depending on the situation. These findings

reinforce the argument that legal and civic education should go beyond rule instruction to incorporate participatory and reflective learning that fosters judgment, responsibility, and civic agency (Biesta, 2011; Damayanti et al., 2024).

Keywords : legal consciousness, moral judgment, civic education, adolescents, values education