

**EXAMINING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORAL REASONING,
COGNITIVE REASONING AND LEARNING PREFERENCES OF HIGH-
SCHOOL STUDENTS IN SELECTED SOUTH AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS**

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	vi
List of Figures.....	x
Abstract.....	xii
Declaration.....	xv
Acknowledgements.....	xvi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.2 Statement of the problem	6
1.3 Significance of the Study	7
1.4 Research Questions	8
1.5 Conceptual Framework	8
1.6 Aims of Study	9
1.7 Participants in the Study and Sample.....	10
1.8 Limitations	11
1.9 Summary	11
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	13
2.1 Moral Reasoning	13
2.1.1 Introduction	13
2.1.2 Cognitive Developmental Theory and Moral Reasoning.....	14
2.1.3 Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development	15
2.1.4 James Rest's Four Component Model	18
2.1.5 Defining Issues Test	20
2.1.6 Moral reasoning amongst pre-school, adolescents and college students	24
2.1.7 Moral Reasoning and Curriculum	27
2.1.8 Summary.....	27
2.2 Cognitive Reasoning	28
2.2.1 Introduction	28
2.2.2 Cognitive Reasoning	28
2.2.3 Arlin Test of Formal Reasoning	31
2.2.4 Formal Reasoning and Curriculum	34
2.2.5 Summary.....	34
2.3 Learning Preferences.....	35
2.3.1 Introduction	35
2.3.2 Review of Research on Different Learning Preferences	36
2.3.3 Summary.....	38
2.4 Moral Reasoning, Cognitive Reasoning, Learning Preferences and Data Analysis Technique.	39

Chapter 3: Research Methods	40
3.1 Introduction	40
3.2 Planning and Methods of Inquiry	40
3.2.1 Identification of focus of study.....	40
3.2.2 Research Design and Choice of Methods.....	41
3.2.3 Ethics approval and Approval from DECS, CESA and AISSA.....	53
3.3 Summary	53
Chapter 4: Sampling and Data Collection	55
4.1 Procedures for selection of schools and students	55
4.2 Administration of instruments.....	56
4.3 Instruments and underlying scales/constructs used in study.....	57
4.3.1 The Defining Issues Test (DIT).....	57
4.3.2 Arlin Test Of Formal Reasoning	58
4.3.3 Index of Learning Styles (ILS).....	59
4.3.4 Learning Preference Inventory (LPI)	60
4.3.5 VARK.....	61
4.4 Utility of instruments and scales: Statistical procedures utilised in the study	62
4.4.1 Reported reliability/validity of instruments, scales and constructs	63
4.5 Summary	69
Chapter 5: Moral Reasoning - Relationship with Age, Class/Grade, Sex and School-type	
.....	71
5.1 Introduction	71
5.2 The DIT scale and its Utility	71
5.3 Moral Reasoning and its association with age, class, sex and school type.....	73
5.3.1 Moral Reasoning at different age levels	73
5.3.2 Performance on DIT by Age Group	75
5.3.3 Moral Reasoning at different Class/Grade levels	75
5.3.4 Performance on DIT by Class Distribution	77
5.3.5 Moral Reasoning and Distribution by Sex	78
5.3.6 Performance on DIT by Distribution of Sex	79
5.3.7 Moral Reasoning and Distribution by School Type	80
5.3.8 Performance on DIT by School Type.....	82
5.4 Predicting Moral Reasoning and Underlying Assumptions.....	82
5.5 Summary	85
Chapter 6: Cognitive Reasoning – Relationship with Age, Class/Grade, Sex and School	
Type.....	86
6.1 Introduction	86
6.2 Arlin Test of Formal Reasoning (ATFR) subscales and their utilities.....	86

6.3 Cognitive reasoning and its association with Age, Class, Sex and School Type	87
6.3.1 Cognitive Reasoning at different age levels	87
6.3.2 Performance on ATFR by age group	91
6.3.3 Cognitive Reasoning at different class levels	92
6.3.4 Performance on ATFR by class	95
6.3.5 Cognitive reasoning of males and females	97
6.3.6 Performance of males and females on ATFR	99
6.3.7 Cognitive Reasoning and School Type	101
6.3.8 Performance on ATFR by School Types	104
6.4 Cognitive Reasoning and Underlying Assumptions	105
6.5 Summary	107
Chapter 7: Learning Preferences – Relationship with age, class/grade, sex and school type	108
7.1 Introduction	108
7.2 The Learning Preference Instruments	108
7.2.1 Index of Learning Styles (ILS)	108
7.2.2 Learning Preference Inventory (LPI)	109
7.2.3 Visual, Aural Read/Write, Kinaesthetic (VARK)	109
7.3 Non Parametric Statistics	110
7.4 Index of Learning Styles by age, class/grade, sex and school type	113
7.5 Learning Preference Inventory and age, class/grade, sex and school type	118
7.6 Visual, Aural Read/Write and Kinaesthetic (VARK) and age, class/ grade, sex and school type	121
7.7 Learning Preference Instruments and their underlying Assumptions	124
7.8 Summary	127
Chapter 8: Relationship between Moral Reasoning, Cognitive Reasoning and Learning Preferences	128
8.1 Introduction - Correlations (Strengths of Association) of DIT with the Various Scales	128
8.2 Correlations for categorical variables	130
8.3 DIT and ATFR	131
8.3.1 Correlation between DIT, ATFR scores and ATFR subscales	131
8.3.2 Correlation between DIT and ATFR Cognitive Levels	133
8.4 DIT and ILS	135
8.5 DIT and LPI	144
8.6 DIT and VARK	147
8.7 DIT and its implications with ATFR, ILS, LPI and VARK	152

Chapter 9: Relationships between ATFR_Val and DIT_SP/DIT_5A	154
9.1 Introduction	154
9.2 Current debates on linear regressions and emerging techniques	154
9.2.1 Direct and indirect effects	156
9.2.2 Interpreting LISREL path models [Fit indices].....	158
9.3 Direct Effects of ATFR_Val on DIT_SP and DIT_5A.....	161
9.3.1 Direct Effects: ATFR_Scr and ATFR_Val, ATFR_Val and DIT_SP	161
9.3.2 Direct Effects: ATFR_Scr and ATFR_Val, ATFR_Val and DIT_5A ...	163
9.3.3 Direct Effects: ATFR_Scr and ATFR_Val, ATFR_Val and DIT_5A & DIT_SP	165
9.4 Summary	167
Chapter 10: Moderators (and Mediator) influencing the Direct Effects of ATFR_Val on	
DIT_SP and DIT_5A.....	168
10.1 Moderation and mediation effects.....	168
10.2 Moderators impacting on the direct effect of ATFR_Val and DIT_SP/DIT_5A	171
.....	
10.3 Analysing moderating effects in LISREL.....	171
10.3.1 Sex as a moderator of the direct effect of ATFR_Val on DIT_SP and DIT_5A	173
.....	
10.3.2 Class as a moderator of the direct effect of ATFR_Val on DIT_SP and DIT_5A	185
.....	
10.3.3 School-type as a moderator of the direct effect of ATFR_Val on DIT_SP and	199
DIT_5A.....	
10.4 Summary of moderator effects of ATFR_Val on DIT_SP and DIT_5A	208
Chapter 11: Mediation of ATFR_Val direct effect on DIT_SP and DIT_5A	210
11.1 The study of mediation effects and its importance	210
11.2 Current analytic methods and rules for interpretation (include myths and problems)	210
.....	
11.3 Identifying mediating effects through SEM and LISREL	213
11.3.1 LPI_Constructs as mediators of the direct effect of ATFR_Val on DIT_SP	214
.....	
11.3.2 LPI_Constructs as mediators of the direct effect of ATFR_Val on DIT_5A	216
.....	
11.3.3 VARK Constructs as mediators of the direct effect of ATFR_Val on DIT_SP	218
.....	
11.3.4 VARK Constructs as mediators of the direct effect of ATFR_Val on DIT_5A	220
.....	
11.3.5 ILS Constructs as mediators of the direct effect of ATFR_Val on DIT_SP	221
.....	
11.3.6 ILS Constructs as mediators of the direct effect of ATFR_Val on DIT_5A	225
.....	

11.4 Summary of mediating effects of ATFR_Val on DIT_SP and DIT_5A	228
Chapter 12: Discussion and Conclusion	229
12.1 Introduction	229
12.2 Design of Study	229
12.3 Summary of Findings and Discussion.....	230
12.4 Implications for research.....	237
12.5 Implications for education (curriculum, teaching and learning).....	239
12.6 Limitations of study	240
12.7 Concluding remarks	241
Appendices	242
References:.....	380

List of Tables

Table 2.1 The Four Component Model (Rest, et al. 1999, p. 101).....	19
Table 2.2 Features of Defining Issues Test (DITS) moral judgement schemas (Narvaez et al., 2004).	21
Table 3.1 Frequency of missing data	48
Table 3.2 EM Estimated Statistics	49
Table 5.1 Moral Reasoning at increasing ages	73
Table 5.3. Moral Reasoning at different class level	76
Table 5.5 Moral Reasoning as measured by DIT and Distribution by Sex	78
Table 5.7 Moral Reasoning and Distribution by School Type	81
Table 5.8 Performance on DIT by School type	82
Table 6.1 ATFR Scores at Different Age Levels.....	88
Table 6.2 Cognitive Reasoning Levels and Age (Frequency distributions)	90
Table 6.3 Performance on ATFR by age groups (ANOVA)	91
Table 6.4 ATFR Scores at Different Year Levels	93
Table 6.5 Cognitive Reasoning Levels and Class (Frequency Distributions)	94
Table 6.7 ATFR Scores and Sex.....	97
Table 6.8 Cognitive Reasoning Levels and Sex	98
Table 6.9 Performance of males and females on ATFR (Independent Sample Test)	100
Table 6.10 ATFR Scores and School Types.....	101
Table 6.11 Performance on ATFR by School Type (ANOVA)	104
Table 7.1a: Categories in VARK.....	111
Table 7.1b: Categories in LPI.....	111
Table 7.1c: Categories in ILS	112
Table 7.2 Index of Learning Styles (ILS) and Age (Kruskal-Wallis Test: Ranks)	114
Table 7.3 Index and Learning Styles (ILS) and Class/Grade (Kruskal-Wallis Test: Ranks)	115
Table 7.4 Index of Learning Styles (ILS) and Sex (Mann-Whitney Test: Ranks)	116
Table 7.5 Index of Learning Styles and School Types (Kruskal-Wallis Test: Ranks).....	117
Table 7.6 Learning Preference Inventory (LPI) and Age (Kruskal-Wallis Test: Ranks)	118
Table 7.7 Learning Preference and Class/grade (Kruskal-Wallis Test: Ranks)	119

Table 7.8 Learning Preference Inventory and Sex (Mann-Whitney Test: Ranks)	119
Table 7.9 Learning Preferences and School types (Kruskal-Wallis Test: Ranks).....	120
Table 7.10 VARK and Age (Kruskal-Wallis Test: k-independent samples).....	121
Table 7.11 VARK and class/grade (Kruskal-Wallis Test: Ranks)	122
Table 7.12 VARK and Sex (Mann-Whitney Test: 2 Independent Samples).....	123
Table 7.13 VARK and School Type (Kruskal-Wallis Test: k-independent samples)	124
Table 8.1 Correlation coefficients used	130
Table 8.2a.Strength of Association between DIT 5A, DIT SP and ATFR scores.....	131
Table 8.2b Strength of Association between DIT S5A, DIT SP and the ATFR subscales	132
Table 8.3a Performance of High School Students in DIT_S5A, DIT-SP and ATFR Levels	133
Table 8.3b DIT_S5A and Cognitive Levels	134
Table 8.3c DIT_SP and Cognitive Levels	134
Table 8.4a Relationship between SP, S5A and the Active reflective (ACT_ref) category of the ILS.....	136
Table 8.4b Relationship between SP, S5A and the Reflective active (REF_act) category of ILS	137
Table 8.4c Relationship between P and level 5A and Sensing intuitive (SNS_int) category of ILS	138
Table 8.4d Relationship between SP, S5A and Intuitive sensing (INT_sns) category of ILS	139
Table 8.4e Relationship between SP, S5A and Visual Verbal (VIS_vrb) category	140
Table 8.4f Relationship between SP, S5A and the Verbal visual category (VRB_vis) of ILS	141
Table 8.4g Relationship between SP, S5A and the Sequential global (SEQ_glo) category of ILS	142
Table 8.4h Relationship between SP, S5A and the Global sequential (GLO_seq) category of ILS	143
Table 8.5a Relationship between SP, S5A and Sensing Thinking (ST) scale of LPI.....	144
Table 8.5b Relationship between SP, S5A as measured by DIT and the Sensing Feeling (SF) scale of LPI.....	145
Table 8.5c Relationship between Moral Reasoning (SP and S5A) and Intuitive Thinking (NT) scale of LPI.....	146

Table 8.5d Relationship between moral reasoning (SP and S5A) and the Intuitive Feeling (NF) scale of LPI	147
Table 8.6a Relationship between Moral Reasoning (SP, S5A) and the Visual Perceptual (V) Mode categorised by VARK.....	148
Table 8.6b Relationship between Moral Reasoning (SP, S5A) and the Aural (A) perceptual Mode as categorised by VARK	149
Table 8.6c Relationship between Moral Reasoning and Read/Write (R) perceptual Mode of VARK	150
Table 8.6d Relationship between Moral Reasoning and the Kinaesthetic (K) perceptual mode of VARK.....	151
Table 8.6e Relationship between Moral Reasoning and the multimodal perceptual mode of VARK	152
Table 9.1 Descriptions and thresholds of goodness-of-fit indices used in the assessment of both measurement and structural models.....	160
(Vieira, 2011, p.14, Table 2.1).....	160
Table 9.2 Values associated with the Direct Effects of ATFR_Scr → ATFR_Val → DIT_SP	162
Table 9.3 Values associated with the Direct Effects of ATFR_Scr → ATFR_Val → DIT_5A.....	164
Table 9.4 Values associated with the Direct Effects of ATFR_Scr → ATFR_Val → DIT_SP/DIT_5A.....	166
Table 10.1 LISREL Analysis of selected moderators as predictors of DIT_SP.....	174
Table 10.2 Direct and moderating effects on DIT_SP using sex as a moderator	176
Table 10.3 LISREL Analysis of selected moderators as predictors of DIT_5A	180
Table 10.4 Direct and moderating effects on DIT_5A using sex as a moderator.....	181
Table 10.5 LISREL Analysis of class interactions with of DIT_SP	185
Table 10.6 Direct and moderating effects on DIT_SP using class as a moderator.....	186
Table 10.7 LISREL Analysis of class interactions with of DIT_5A.....	193
Table 10.8 Direct and moderating effects on DIT_5A using class as a moderator	194
Table 10.9 Direct and moderating effects on DIT_SP using school as a moderator.....	199
Table 10.10 Direct and moderating effects on DIT_5A using school as a moderator	204
Table 11.1 Mediating effect of LPI-ST on the direct effect of ATFR_Val →DIT_SP....	216
Table 11.2 Mediating effect of LPI-ST on the direct effect of ATFR-Val →DIT_5A	217

Table 11.3a	Mediating effect of VARK-A on the direct effect of ATFR_Val →DIT_SP	219
Table 11.3b	Mediating effect of VARK-R on the direct effect of ATFR_Val →DIT_SP	219
Table 11.3c	Mediating effect of VARK-MM on the direct effect of ATFR_Val →DIT_SP	219
Table 11.4	Mediating effect of VARK-MM on the direct effect of ATFR-Val →DIT_5A	220
Table 11.5a	Mediating effect of ILS: ACT-ref on the direct effect of ATFR_Val →DIT_SP	222
Table 11.5b	Mediating effect of ILS: REF-act on the direct effect of ATFR_Val →DIT_SP	222
Table 11.5c	Mediating effect of ILS: SNS-int on the direct effect of ATFR_Val →DIT_SP	223
Table 11.5d	Mediating effect of ILS: VIS-verb on the direct effect of ATFR_Val →DIT_SP	223
Table 11.5e	Mediating effect of ILS: VRB-vis on the direct effect of ATFR_Val →DIT_SP	223
Table 11.5f	Mediating effect of ILS: SEQ-glo on the direct effect of ATFR_Val →DIT_SP	224
Table 11.5g	Mediating effect of ILS: GLO-seq on the direct effect of ATFR-Val →DIT_SP	224
Table 11.6a	Mediating effect of ILS: ACT-ref on the direct effect of ATFR-Val →DIT_5A	226
Table 11.6b	Mediating effect of ILS: REF-act on the direct effect of ATFR_Val →DIT_5A	226
Table 11.6c	Mediating effect of ILS: VIS-verb on the direct effect of ATFR-Val →DIT_5A	226
Table 11.6d	Mediating effect of ILS: VRB-vis on the direct effect of ATFR-Val →DIT-5A	227
Table 11.6e	Mediating effect of ILS: SEQ-glo on the direct effect of ATFR-Val →DIT-5A	227
Table 11.6f	Mediating effect of ILS: GLO-seq on the direct effect of ATFR-Val →DIT-5A	227

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework for Study	9
Figure 3.1 Construct ↔ Indicator ↔ Measure Interrelationship (adapted from Alwin, 2007, p.7)	43
Figure 3.2 Graphical representation of the multiple imputation procedure, undertaken through LISREL. (de Goeij, et. al., 2013, p.4)	50
Figure 5.1 Moral reasoning and increasing ages	74
Figure 5.2 Moral Reasoning at different class	77
Figure 5.3 Moral Reasoning as measured by DIT and Distribution by Sex	79
Figure 5.4 Moral Reasoning as measured By DIT and Distribution by School Type	81
Figure 6.1 ATFR Mean scores and Age	89
Figure 6.2 Cognitive Reasoning Levels and Age	90
Figure 6.3 ATFR Mean Scores and Class	94
Figure 6.4 Cognitive Reasoning Levels and Class	95
Figure 6.6 Mean ATFR Scores and Sex	98
Figure 6.5 Cognitive Reasoning Levels of Males and Females	99
Figure 6.8 Mean ATFR Scores and School Types	103
Figure 9.1 Direct effects between ATFR_Val and DIT_5A and DIT_SP respectively ..	158
Figure 9.2 ATFR_Scr → ATFR_Val → DIT_SP Effects	161
Figure 9.3 ATFR_Scr → ATFR_Val → DIT_5A Effects	163
Figure 9.4 Direct effects between ATFR_Val and DIT_5A and DIT_SP respectively ..	165
Figure 10.1 A mediator variable influencing the relationship between Independent variable (IV) and Dependent variable (DV)	168
Figure 10.2 Moderating effects of sex, class and school-type	169
Figure 10.3 Moderating effects (Hartmann & Moers, 1991, p.294)	170
Figure 10.4 Interaction effect (when the moderator is a dummy variable). (Hartmann & Moers, 1991, p.295)	170
Figure 10.5 Moderation/Interaction effects of Sex on the ATFR_Val → DIT_SP direct effect	178
Figure 10.6 Moderation/Interaction effects of Sex on the ATFR_Val → DIT_5A direct effect	184
Figure 10.7 Moderation/Interaction effects of Class on the ATFR_Val → DIT_SP direct effect	190
Figure 10.8 Cognitive development profiles (Endler, 2004, p.102)	192
Figure 10.9 Intellectual Growth - Mean abilities for age group (Andrich & Styles, 1994, p.339)	193

Figure 10.10 Moderation/Interaction effects of Class on the ATFR_Val → DIT_5A direct effect.....	198
Figure 10.11 Moderation/Interaction effects of School on the ATFR_Val → DIT_SP direct effect.....	203
Figure 10.12 Moderation/Interaction effects of School on the ATFR_Val → DIT_5A direct effect.....	207
Figure 11.1 Path diagrams for the single-moderator model.	210
Figure 11.2a ATFR_Scr → ATFR_Val → DIT_SP Effects	215
Figure 11.2b ATFR_Val → DIT_SP Effects with mediating LPI-scales.....	215
Figure 11.3a ATFR_Scr → ATFR_Val → DIT_5A Effects	216
Figure 11.3b ATFR_Val → DIT_5A Effects with mediating LPI-scales	217
Figure 11.4 ATFR_Val → DIT_SP Effects with mediating VARK-constructs/scales...	218
Figure 11.5 ATFR_Val → DIT_5A Effects with mediating VARK-constructs/scales...	220
Figure 11.6 ATFR_Val → DIT-SP Effects with mediating ILS-constructs/scales	221
Figure 11.7 ATFR_Val → DIT_5A Effects with mediating ILS-constructs/scales.....	225

Abstract

Moral reasoning involves making value judgements and decisions on a particular course of action, specifically with the rightness and wrongness of that action. Through programmes in moral education, such as problem solving on moral and ethical dilemmas, the moral reasoning skills and abilities of students can be stimulated and developed. Although much research has been done with moral reasoning, there has been little research that has explored the relationship between moral reasoning and cognitive reasoning.

The present study examined the effects on moral reasoning by cognitive reasoning levels and learning preferences of high school students. The study also investigated the effect of student variables (age, class, sex and school types) on the stages of moral reasoning, cognitive reasoning levels and the learning preferences of these students.

The study involved 227 students from Years 9 to 12 with ages ranging from 14-18 from government, catholic and independent schools in South Australia. In order to identify the moral reasoning stages of the students, the Defining Issues Test (DIT) was administered. The cognitive reasoning levels of these students were ascertained using the Arlin Test of Formal Reasoning (ATFR) and students' learning preferences were assessed using the Index of Learning Styles (ILS), the Learning Preference Inventory (LPI) and the Visual, Aural, Read/Write, Kinesthetic (VARK). The authors for DIT, ILS, LPI and VARK have posited that reliability indices reported are accurate as they have been tested with large sample sizes across a number of countries. Validation of ATFR was undertaken through multi trait, multi methods reported elsewhere and through the Rasch analysis.

It was evident from the results that scores on DIT increased with age with a steady increase in moral reasoning stages from year nine to 12. In terms of sex, females outperformed males in the DIT scores but there were no differences in moral reasoning stages from the different school types. It was also found that that in the ATFR test, scores increased with age and class and although males and females fared differently in different subtests of ATFR, there was no overall significant difference in their performance.

Non parametric statistics were used to identify learning preferences of these students. While there were no differences in the learning preferences between boys and girls or

among the different school types, there were some differences among the different age groups. Older students had a preference for more innovative and creative type of learning as compared to younger students as measured by ILS and students in the higher grades also had a preference for different sensory modalities as compared to their younger counterparts as measured by VARK.

Furthermore, it was evident from the study that DIT had strong positive associations with the ATFR Cognitive Levels as described by Arlin (1984) and the ATFR subscales. Students who had higher scores on DIT were operating at the formal reasoning level and the DIT questionnaire evoked reasoning skills around the eight schemata (Volume, Probability, Correlation, Combination, Proportional Reasoning, Mechanics and Frames).

There were also interesting results from the Learning Preferences Instruments where students who were categorised as Intuitive versus Sensing learners had strong associations with DIT. The results provide evidence that DIT has some strong reasoning and critical thinking component as Intuitive Sensing learners are described as analytical and reflective learners.

Structural Equation Modeling through the LISREL software was used to examine the moderating effects of sex, class and school types on the direct effects of cognitive reasoning levels on the moral reasoning stages. Through LISREL it was confirmed that girls performed better than boys on moral reasoning skills. Although the moderation effect in the performance of years nine and 10 was minimal, there was a significant relationship between cognitive reasoning levels and moral reasoning stages in senior high school. When the schools were separated using LISREL, students in catholic and independent schools performed better than students in government schools.

Furthermore, LISREL was used to explore the mediating effects of students' learning preferences on the direct effects of cognitive reasoning levels on moral reasoning stages. Moreover, this study found a number of mediating effects that were significant.

Although the findings of this study may not be generalisable due to the small sample size and necessary convenience sampling they have important implications in assisting programs in schools that promote both cognitive reasoning and moral reasoning among students in the junior and senior high schools through specific professional development and teacher education programmes. Importantly, the moderator and mediation analyses

present to those entrusted with developing curriculum around cognitive reasoning, moral reasoning, and the delivery of instructions in classrooms, pertinent factors and variables that need to be taken into consideration.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institutions and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Professional learning of teachers can be manifested through a number of ways, and a research thesis provides the ability to link theory with practice and directs practice-informed research. However, balancing a full-time teaching responsibility in a Special School, a full-time family and parental obligations, and a part-time research passion does challenge the 24 hours per day availability in wanting to excel in all three facets of work-life balance is a major challenge.

Passion for teaching and learning and a moral obligation to the teaching profession saw me perform academic acrobatics. This education endurance was set alight by the late Professor Kevin Marjoribanks in September 2004, who provided my first supervision to the research study into cognitive and moral reasoning, supported with a University of Adelaide Scholarship. His sound advice was that “you should continue your role as a Special Education teacher, and extend your professionalism though research.” I am greatly indebted to him for urging me to undertake this part-time study on moral reasoning.

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