

UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS
UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

A STUDY OF MORAL REASONING AND CHARACTERISTICS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS IN MELAKA

BY

NURULHUDA BINTI MD HASSAN

**A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirement
for the degree of Master of Education
(Educational Psychology)**

Institute of Education

**International Islamic University
Malaysia**

MAY 2011

UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS
UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS UNIVERSITI PENDIDIKAN SULTAN IDRIS

ABSTRACT

Year by year, increasing number of at-risk student who enter schools has been found in Malaysia. Various studies on at-risk students had been conducted by researchers; however, none of the studies focused on the moral reasoning of such students. This study investigated the moral reasoning and the characteristics of at-risk students in two welfare institutions which are situated in Melaka. The theory of moral reasoning by Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) became the theoretical foundation in this study. The participants were three male students from *School 1* and three female students from *School 2*. The study employed focus group discussions and individual interviews as data collection methods. The moral reasoning of the participants was explained by their responses to six hypothetical moral dilemma scenarios, while their characteristics were explained by their responses to semi-structured interview questions. In general, the findings revealed that the participants in this study 1) reasoned at conventional morality; 2) belonged to either the stage of interpersonal conformity orientation or the stage of law-and-order orientation; 3) exhibited intermediate level of internalization based on their responses to the moral dilemma scenarios. In terms of the characteristics of at-risk students, the findings indicated that the participants 1) experienced healthy and unhealthy family relationship; 2) experienced various types of family problems; 3) experienced good and bad friendship; 4) had ever been in adolescent groups 5) experienced positive and negative teacher-student relationship; 6) expressed positive and negative perception towards school; 7) stated that they had bad experiences while staying in school; 8) described themselves based on individual, relational and collective self; 9) yielded that the most important factors that influence their moral judgment were the school, their family, their teachers, their peers, and their moral cognition; and 10) attended school due to one's intention, family report, under court order, or record of police cases. Suggestions in terms of number of interviewer and presentation of moral dilemma scenarios had been made for future research. In conclusion, this study was consistent with the theory of moral reasoning as proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg (1984).

خلاصة البحث

إن عدد الطلاب المعرضين للخطر عند دخولهم للمدارس قد تزايد في ماليزيا، وقد أُجريت دراسات مختلفة على الطلاب المعرضين للخطر من قبل الباحثين، ولكن لم تركز أي من الدراسات على التفكير الأخلاقي هؤلاء الطلاب. لذلك ركزت هذه الدراسة على التفكير الأخلاقي وعوامل الطلاب المعرضين للخطر في مؤسستين للرعاية في ملقا. واعتمدت الباحثة في الإطار النظري لهذه الدراسة على نظرية التفكير الأخلاقي من قبل كولبرج لورانس (1984). والمشاركون في هذه الدراسة هم ثلاثة طلاب من المدرسة الأولى، وثلاث طالبات من المدرسة الثانية. وقد ركزت الدراسة على المناقشات الجماعية والمقابلات الفردية لجمع البيانات. ومن خلال إجابات المشاركين اتضح بأن التفكير الأخلاقي جاء على ستة سيناريوهات افتراضية أخلاقية معضلة في هذه الدراسة، منها،⁽¹⁾ بسبب الأخلاق التقليدية⁽²⁾ الانتماء إلى مراحل التوجه المتفقة مع الشخصية أو مرحلة التوجه إلى القانون والنظام،⁽³⁾ إظهار المستوى المتوسط من الاستيعاب المترتب على الردود من سيناريوهات المعضلة الأخلاقية. ومن العوامل التي تعرض الطلاب للخطر، فقد استنتجت أن: ⁽¹⁾ العلاقة الأسرية الصحية وغير الصحية ⁽²⁾ أنواع مختلفة من المشاكل الأسرية، ⁽³⁾ خبرة الصداقة الجيدة والسيئة، ⁽⁴⁾ إنشاء مجموعات للمراهقين ⁽⁵⁾ العلاقة الإيجابية والسلبية بين المعلم والطالب ⁽⁶⁾ إظهار تصورات إيجابية وسلبية تجاه المدرسة ⁽⁷⁾ إبراز التجارب السيئة في المدرسة ⁽⁸⁾ وصف أنفسهم على أساس الفردية، والجماعية ⁽⁹⁾ أهم العوامل التي أثرت على سلوكهم الأخلاقي هي: المدرسة والأسرة، والمعلمين، والزملاء، وإدراكهم المعنوي ⁽¹⁰⁾ الحضور إلى المدارس بناء على الرغبة الشخصية، وبسبب التقرير للأسرة، أو بموجب أمر محكمة، أو محضر الشرطة. وتقترح هذه الدراسة إجراء عدد من المقابلات تتعلق بمحاور، وسيناريوهات المشاكل الأخلاقية المعضلة في المستقبل. وأخيرا، فإن هذه الدراسة تتفق مع نظرية التفكير الأخلاقي على النحو الذي اقترحه كولبرج لورانس (1984).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Abstract in Arabic	iii
Approval Page	iv
Declaration	v
Copyright Page	vi
Acknowledgments	vii
List of Tables.....	xi

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.0 Introduction	1
1.1 Moral Reasoning	1
1.2 The Nature of Adolescents	5
1.3 Background of the Study	7
1.3.1 School 1	10
1.3.2 School 2	12
1.4 Statement of the Problem	13
1.5 Purpose of the Study.....	15
1.6 Research Questions	16
1.7 Significance of the Study.....	16
1.8 Definition of Terms	16
1.9 Limitations of the Study	17
1.10 Delimitation of the Study	17

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	18
2.0 Introduction	18
2.1 Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Reasoning.....	18
2.2 At-Risk Students.....	23
2.3 Characteristics of At-Risk Students under Study	24
2.3.1 Family Relationship	24
2.3.2 Family Problems.....	26
2.3.3 Friendship	27
2.3.4 Adolescent Groups	28
2.3.5 Teacher-Student Relationship	29
2.3.6 Perception toward School.....	30
2.3.7 Significant Experience in School	31
2.3.8 Self-Concept.....	32
2.3.9 Factors Influence Moral Judgment.....	33
2.3.10 Causes of Entering Welfare Institution	34
2.4 At-Risk Students in Malaysia.....	34
2.5 Empirical Studies on Moral Reasoning.....	36
2.6 Empirical Studies on At-Risk Students.....	38

2.7 Empirical Studies on At-Risk Students in Malaysia	40
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	43
3.0 Introduction	43
3.1 Overview of the Study	43
3.2 Research Questions	44
3.3 Research Design	44
3.3.1 Focus Group Discussion	45
3.3.2 Individual Interview	46
3.4 Participants	46
3.5 Instrumentation	48
3.5.1 Moral Dilemma Scenarios	48
3.5.2 Individual Interview Questions	48
3.6 Data Collection Procedures	49
3.6.1 Focus Group Discussions	49
3.6.2 Individual Interviews	51
3.7 Data Analysis Procedures	52
3.7.1 Multimethod Strategies	53
3.7.2 Participant Verbatim Language	53
3.7.3 Mechanically Recorded Data	53
3.8 Data Analysis Technique	54
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS	55
4.0 Introduction	55
4.1 Research Question 1	56
4.2 Research Question 2	56
4.3 Research Question 3	56
4.4 Moral Dilemma Scenarios	56
4.4.1 Scenario 1	56
4.4.1.1 Explanation	58
4.4.2 Scenario 2	59
4.4.2.1 Explanation	60
4.4.3 Scenario 3	62
4.4.3.1 Explanation	63
4.4.4 Scenario 4	64
4.4.4.1 Explanation	65
4.4.5 Scenario 5	66
4.4.5.1 Explanation	68
4.4.6 Scenario 6	70
4.4.6.1 Explanation	72
4.5 Summary of Research Findings	75
4.5.1 Research Question 1	75
4.5.2 Research Question 2	75
4.5.3 Research Question 3	76
4.6 Research Question 4	77
4.6.1 Family Relationship	77
4.6.1.1 Explanation	77

4.6.2 Family Problems.....	79
4.6.2.1 Explanation.....	79
4.6.3 Friendship.....	80
4.6.3.1 Explanation.....	80
4.6.4 Adolescent Groups	82
4.6.4.1 Explanation.....	82
4.6.5 Teacher-Student Relationship	84
4.6.5.1 Explanation.....	84
4.6.6 Perception towards School	86
4.6.6.1 Explanation.....	86
4.6.7 Significant Experience in School	87
4.6.7.1 Explanation.....	87
4.6.8 Self-Concept.....	88
4.6.8.1 Explanation.....	88
4.6.9 Factors Influence Moral Judgment.....	90
4.6.9.1 Explanation.....	90
4.6.10 Causes of Entering Welfare Institution	92
4.6.10.1 Explanation.....	93
4.7 Summary of Findings	94
4.7.1 Research Question 4.....	94
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	99
5.0 Introduction	99
5.1 Summary.....	99
5.2 Contribution of the Study	101
5.3 Implication for Practice	102
5.4 Recommendations for Future Research.....	103
Conclusion.....	104
BIBLIOGRAPHY	105
APPENDIX A	110
APPENDIX B	111
APPENDIX C	112
APPENDIX D	115
APPENDIX E.....	117
APPENDIX F	121
APPENDIX G	122
APPENDIX H	126
APPENDIX I.....	143

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table No.</u>		<u>Page No.</u>
1.1	Kohlberg’s Three Levels and Six Stages of Moral Development	3
4.1	Scenario 1	58
4.2	Scenario 2	60
4.3	Scenario 3	62
4.4	Scenario 4	65
4.5	Scenario 5	68
4.6	Scenario 6	72

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the researcher will present the overall overview of the study. This chapter will begin by explaining the concept of moral reasoning and the nature of adolescence. Next, the researcher will give details about the background of the study as well as the statement of the problem. Further, the researcher will present about the purpose and significance of the study through the formation of research questions. Finally, the researcher will conclude this chapter by stating the definition of terms, limitations, as well as delimitations of this study.

1.1 MORAL REASONING

“Moral development refers to the process by which children adopt principles and values that lead them to evaluate given behaviors as right and others as wrong and to govern their own actions in terms of this principles” (Crandell, and Vander Zanden, 2009, p. 308). In other words, it involves the rules of ethical conduct people bring to bear on a problem to explain what they think is the right thing to do (Steinberg, 2005). Two prominent cognitive developmental theorists in psychology, Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg believed that moral development has occurred in stages (Hetherington et. al, 2006).

Due to its attempt to tie together maturation and experience on the one hand and cognitive and social development on the other, Piaget’s theory has inspired many

developmentalists with various interests, including Lawrence Kohlberg (Kail and

Cavanaugh, 1996). Lawrence Kohlberg referred to Piaget's cognitive theory as a basis of his theory of moral development (Hetherington et. al, 2006; Kail and Cavanaugh, 1996; Crandell, Crandell, and Zanden, 2009). While Piaget presented moral development occurs in two stages called heteronomous and autonomous morality, Kohlberg extended Piaget's theory and suggested that there are six stages of moral development and categorized those stages according to three major levels, namely the pre-conventional level, the conventional level, and the post-conventional level (Santrock, 2004; Crandell, Crandell, and Zanden, 2009). The summary of Kohlberg's level and stages of moral development is presented in the table below.



Table 1.1
Kohlberg's Three Levels and Six Stages of Moral Development

Level 1: Pre-conventional Moral Reasoning (No Internalization)	
Stage 1	<p><i>Heteronomous Morality</i></p> <p>Children obey because adults tell them to obey. People base their moral decisions on fear of punishment.</p>
Stage 2	<p><i>Individualism, Purpose, and Exchange</i></p> <p>Individuals pursue their own interests but let others do the same. What is right involves equal exchange.</p>
Level 2: Conventional Moral Reasoning (Intermediate Internalization)	
Stage 3	<p><i>Mutual Interpersonal Expectations, Relationships, and Interpersonal Conformity</i></p> <p>Individuals value trust, caring, and loyalty to others as a basis for moral judgments.</p>
Stage 4	<p><i>Social System Morality</i></p> <p>Moral judgments are based on understanding of the social order, law, justice, and duty.</p>
Level 3: Post-conventional Moral Reasoning (Full Internalization)	
Stage 5	<p><i>Social Contract or Utility and Individual Rights</i></p> <p>Individuals reason that values, rights, and principles undergird or transcend the law.</p>
Stage 6	<p><i>Universal Ethical Principles</i></p> <p>The person has developed moral judgments that are based on universal human rights. When faced with a dilemma between law and conscience, a personal, individualized conscience is followed.</p>

Source: Adapted from Santrock (2004) Life-Span Development 9th ed., p. 342)

Piaget suggested that children about 10 years of age and older are considered as moral autonomists who are able to recognize that punishment is socially mediated and occurs only if a relevant person witnesses the wrongdoing and that, even then, punishment is not inevitable (Santrock, 2004). On the other hand, Kohlberg provided

a more detailed explanation of moral development by including stages of moral reasoning beyond Piaget's final stage (Kail and Cavanaugh, 1996).

In this study, the range of age of at-risk students was between 12 to 19 years old. This range of age is comparable with what most developmentalists believed as the period of adolescence (Santrock, 2004). Thus, the moral reasoning of the participants is used interchangeably with the moral reasoning among adolescence as suggested by moral development theories.

As compared to Piaget's theory of moral development, Kohlberg's theory of moral development was believed to be more relevant to be used in order to examine the moral development among adolescence (Stienberg, 2005); in this case, the at-risk students. This is due to the fact that Kohlberg compensated Piaget's work who exclusively concern with children under the age of 12 by including adolescents in a series of studies (Rice, 1996). Kohlberg asserted that majority adolescents reason at stage three, which is characterized by mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships, and interpersonal conformity, whereby they consider trust, caring, and loyalty to others as a basis of moral judgments (Santrock, 2007). The goal of their moral reasoning is to obtain the approval from other people and this is done by behaving as "good boys" and "good girls" (Steinberg, 2005).

Kohlberg's theory of moral development was developed after 20 years of using a unique interview involving a large number of moral dilemmas with children, adolescents, and adults (Santrock, 2007; Kail and Cavanaugh, 1996). In the interview, Kohlberg was more interested in the reasoning that the individual used to justify the decision rather than the decision itself (Steinberg, 2005; Kail and Cavanaugh, 1996).

Based on the interviewees' responses, Kohlberg suggested that there are three levels of moral reasoning: pre-conventional moral reasoning, which is dominant during most

of childhood; conventional moral reasoning, which is usually dominant during late childhood and early adolescence; and post-conventional moral reasoning (sometimes called principled moral reasoning), which emerges sometime during the adolescence or young adult years (Steinberg, 2005; McCown, Conger and Galambos, 1997; Driscoll and Roop, 1996; Scarr, Weinberg and Levine, 1986). Hence, in this study, the participants were believed to engage in conventional moral reasoning as suggested by Kohlberg's theory.

Kohlberg had proposed an important concept in understanding moral development known as internalization. It refers to "the developmental change from behavior that is externally controlled to behavior that is controlled by internal standards and principles" (Santrock, 2004). Children incorporate others' beliefs into their own self-concept which gradually lead to the development of their personal standards of conduct through the process of internalization (Hetherington et. al, 2006). Through maturation, children begin to regulate their own behavior by means of internalized principles instead of using external factors.

1.2 THE NATURE OF ADOLESCENTS

A central task of adolescents is to search for their identity (Conger and Galambos, 1997). According to Cloninger (1996), Erikson illustrated identity as a sense that one's style of uniqueness is acknowledged by significant others in a way that matches one's own sense of self. In this process, adolescents may develop identities that may be typical or deviant, whereby those who build a typical identity may seek personal, social, and vocational roles that are expected and approved by society, and those who build a deviant identity may adopt more idiosyncratic roles (Conger and Galambos, 1996). Erikson stressed that identity crisis is most pronounced during adolescence,

and those adolescents who fail to search their own identity will experience self-doubt, role diffusion, and role confusion which may influence them to engage in self-destructive activities such as drugs and alcohol (Rice, 1996).

The period of adolescence entails the biological development of human being characterized by the advent of puberty and intense turmoil, which are fundamental in determining their gender identity. Lawrence Kohlberg proposed that adolescents have to develop their moral reasoning in the process of building their own identity. This can be done by using the opportunities to take the perspective of others and experiencing conflict between one's current stage of moral thinking and the reasoning of someone at a higher stage.

"Today's teenagers face more adult-strength stresses than their predecessors did" (Gelman, 1990, p. 10 as cited in Conger and Galambos, 1990). This is due to the fact that adolescents are confronted with an increasingly diverse world in which the opportunities and the necessity for choice are multiplied (Conger and Galambos, 1997). Family, school, peers, intimate relationships, societal expectations, educational opportunities and many other factors has been identified as potential sources of life stress in adolescence (Conger and Galambos, 1997). Thus, adolescents need to adopt or modify their personal values to successfully deal with such stresses (Conger and Galambos, 1997).

Being considered as a period of challenge and change, adolescents' decisions, either deliberate or unintentional, would affect the course of their lives (Rice, 1996). Due to this reason, adolescents need a set of guiding moral principles to lend order, consistency, and meaning to life so that the choices that they make would bring about positive outcome in the future (Conger and Galambos, 1997). Thus, it is important to study the moral judgment among at-risk students who experience the stage of

adolescents' life since this can offer an insight about the factors that influence their judgment. Such factors can be used as a motivator in helping such students in making the best decisions for the betterment of their future.

The issue of whether the schools are responsible for moral education has been debated by educators, parents, religious leaders, and politicians for years (Woolfolk, 1995). The results of the debate yielded that moral education towards children is the collective responsibility of all the people and institutions of a society. In other words, all institutions; the family, the schools, religious institutions, community organizations, as well as the media assume the responsibility of modeling and teaching moral values.

Kohlberg's theory of moral development was the basis for the theoretical framework of this research by explaining moral reasoning within the context of at-risk students. This study aimed at determining the level of moral reasoning of at-risk students in Melaka based on Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The researcher tried to understand the moral decision making based on the responses that had been given by each participant to six moral dilemma scenarios presented to them in this research. The researcher focused on the moral judgment and the process of thought by which each participant make their judgment for each moral dilemma scenario.

1.3 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The national philosophy of education stated that education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysia citizens who are

knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2011).

The school system in Malaysia consists of four types, which are preschool, primary school, secondary school, and special education. The process of such school systems is monitored by the Ministry of Education Malaysia. The objective of pre-school education is to provide opportunities for pre-school children to learn basic communication, social and other positive skills prior to primary education. The primary education, through its Primary School Integrated Curriculum (NPIC), is aimed at producing individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically balanced. The special education schools are established to fulfill the needs of pupils with special needs such as those with visual, hearing and learning impairments. The secondary level education is the continuation of the primary education which aims at a more holistic development of individuals intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. In this paper, the researcher gave a strong emphasis on the secondary school system since the study involved secondary school students in one of the states in Malaysia.

Secondary level education in Malaysia, which has two levels known as lower secondary level and upper secondary level, is provided for students between the ages of 12+ to 17+ years old (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2008). Until today, there are 2,248 secondary schools with 2,344,891 students and 175,267 teachers in Malaysia. The curriculum at the lower level is more general than at the upper level since the former is aimed at exposing student to various fields while the latter aims at providing a more specialized education based on the students' preferred disciplines.

Such disciplines can be divided into four types of education, which are technical and vocational education, national religious secondary school, sports school, and arts school. Apart from that, the Ministry of Education Malaysia also provides a continuation of the secondary education known as Form Six program in which students spend about one and a half years before sitting for the *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM)* examination as an entrance requirement to the university.

Each type of upper secondary education in Malaysia serves different objectives. The technical schools aimed at preparing students to pursue technical, vocational and skills based streams by offering core subjects and elective subjects in varying combinations. The national religious secondary schools were established in order to prepare students for profession in Islamic religious affairs, education and law by offering specialized Islamic studies which are not available in other schools. The establishment of sports schools was aimed at nurturing and developing potential athletes by adjusting the students' curriculum timetable to accommodate their training schedules. The arts schools were aimed at developing students' talents and producing students with knowledge, skills and arts in a systematic way by providing opportunities for students who are more inclined towards the performing arts.

Beside Ministry of Education Malaysia, the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (DSWM) is also responsible in monitoring the process of education for students between the ages of 12+ to 17+ years old. The objectives of the department are to provide shelter and rehabilitation for the department's target groups, to develop the community through the process of changing attitude and increasing capability for self-reliance, to create a society with a caring culture, as well as to improve the well-being of society through professional social welfare and social development services

and strategic sharing of responsibilities. One of the target groups under the DSWM's scope is the at-risk students.

In order to achieve its objectives, DSWM has established many children institutions such as *Rumah Budak Laki-laki Tun Abdul Aziz* (Jubilee Boy's Home), *Kompleks Penyayang*, *Rumah Tunas Harapan*, Probation Hostel, Tunas Bakti School, and Children Home. Each institution serves different functions for different target groups. For instance, the probation hostel has been founded to provide care, shelter and guidance to children who involved in crime, children who were out of control as well as children who were under Probationary Order, while the Children Home has been established to provide care, shelter and education for orphans, children who need care, children who have been neglected, abandoned and abused and children of person under remand.

In this study, the researcher selected the participants from two welfare institutions under the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia which are situated in Melaka. The details of each school are discussed in the following sections.

1.3.1 School 1

School 1 is a welfare institution monitored by the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia. It is situated in Melaka and was founded launched in 1935. Due to World War II, the operation of this institution has been disrupted. Thus, it was reconstructed in 1950 with a cost of RM78 000 and was opened by Sir Gerald Templer. The main objective of *School 1* is to provide shelter, care, and learning facilities to less fortunate boys between 10 to 18 years old such as orphans, children who came from poor family, problematic children, and children who has been abused and neglected by their family. The long-term goals of *School 1* are to produce children who are

knowledgeable and may contribute to the society as well as to implement a more effective approach to deal with children in future.

The admission of children into *School 1* is based on two conditions. The first condition is under the court order Section 30(1) (d) under the Children Act 2001 which refers to those children who need shelter and care while the second condition is under the approval from the Director of Department of Social Welfare Malaysia under Section 80 Children Act 2001 which refers to the transfer of children to the place of safety.

There are various services provided for children in *School 1* such as shelter and care, learning facilities, guidance and counseling, as well as sports facilities. In terms of shelter and care, children are provided with hostel, food and drinks, medical services, clothes and daily needs, as well as *surau*. In terms of learning facilities, children are provided with tuition, computer class, library, recreational room, as well as counseling room. In terms of guidance and counseling, children are provided with individual counseling, family counseling and workshops.

In terms of sports facilities, children are provided with street soccer, indoor games, badminton and *sepak takraw*.

A Board of Visitors has been appointed for *School 1* which consists of locals who are continually interested in welfare institution works. Among the functions of the board are to assist in the operation of *School 1*, to assist in the planning and implementation of *School 1*, and to assist in various activities and programs conducted for children in *School 1*. Children in *School 1* will be released from the institution upon the approval from the Review and Release Panel with certain conditions such as the child has reached 18 years old and the child is able to continue his study to a boarding school or a university.

1.3.2 *School 2*

School 2 was launched by Lady Templer in 1953. It is a behavior rehabilitation school approved for the care of and rehabilitation for children who involved in crime under Section 91(1) (f) and uncontrollable children under Section 46, Children Act 2001. The main objective of this school is to educate the children by instilling positive attitude, developing strong personality and equipping the children with knowledge and skill that shall enable them to live independently within the community. Various services are provided in this school to facilitate the students and the administrator to achieve the objective.

One of the services provided in *School 2* is rehabilitation such as shelter, food, clothes, medical treatment, and daily needs. Besides, *School 2* also provides guidance and counseling services for students which include individual counseling, group counseling, family counseling, psychological tests, as well as motivational programs. Apart from that, religious education is also provided in *School 2* whereby Muslim students may join *Fardhu 'Ain* class, religious programs, and *halaqah* class while non-Muslim students will be brought to temples. In terms of academic, students in *School 2* are provided with academic classes (students between 15 and 17 years old), tuition, library, and computer lab. In terms of vocational training, students may join various vocational training provided in this school such as cooking, sewing, and mechatronic class.

In terms of sports and recreation, students in this school may choose various sports activities such as aerobic, netball, badminton, and indoor games. As for the co-curriculum activities, students may join band, *kompang*, *nasyeed*, or *nazam*.

Children who committed into *School 2* were either ordered by the Court or upon request by their parents through the District Welfare Department Office at the

place residence of the parents. In general, children in *School 2* will undergo the rehabilitation for three years. However, early release may be given upon the approval of the Board of Visitors.

In this study, participants who came from *School 1* and *School 2* were referred as at-risk students since they undergone a special mode of education and care which have been designed to meet their needs and to ensure that they can succeed in school and in their life.

1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Students' activities have been the hot topics of discussions since they are considered as future leaders of the country (Azizi Yahaya et. al, 2009). Even though schools are responsible to develop and inculcate the moral values among students (Chen, 2004), some of the breaking news highlighted in the mass media has portrayed the school with students with disciplinary problems (Azizi Yahaya et. al, 2009 and Mohd Khairil, 2006).

Students with disciplinary cases have been regarded as high-risk students who are possible to be entirely missed out on the education (Syed Mohamad and Amla, 2010). There are various definitions of at-risk students. For instance, Shawn (2010) referred at-risk students to those students who engage in aggressive behaviors, school drop-out, and illegal activities. Habibah et. al (2007) referred at-risk students as those students who have low academic achievement and behavioral problems, while Mohamad Hashim and Sharifah Amnah (2006) stated that at-risk students refer to "students who are academically disadvantaged; are of low socioeconomic status; have disabilities; and are probationary students" (p. 2). Slavin (2009) defined at-risk students as students who are subject to school failure because of their own

characteristics and/or because of inadequate responses to their needs by school, family, or community. Slavin, Karweit, and Madden (1989) posited that there are four situations that need to be experienced by a student before he or she being labeled as at-risk student, namely remediation, retention, dropping out, and substandard basic skills (as cited in Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm, 2003).

Regardless of various definitions of at-risk students, only two definitions of at-risk students were used in this study based on the gender of the at-risk students. Firstly, the definition of at-risk students as given by Slavin (2009) which refers to students who are subject to school failure because of their own characteristics and/or because of inadequate responses to their needs by school, family, or community is used for male at-risk students who came from *School 1*. Secondly, the definition of at-risk students as given by Wan Zah et. al (2009) which refers to those students who had committed crime under the age of 18 and had been ordered by the Court is used for female at-risk students who came from *School 2*.

The number of students who have been labeled as at-risk is increasing year by year; and this is evident through the establishment of more than 1000 alternative schools between 1993 and 1998 school year (Shawn, 2010). As a solution, more and more students have been located in alternative schools since such schools put an emphasis on both students' behavioral and academic growth (Shawn, 2010). In Malaysia, various welfare institutions have been established in order to help at-risk students in developing good personalities through the application of various empirical approaches that had been found to be effective to tackle such students (Yusof and Nur Athirah, 2010). However, the responsibility of guiding at-risk students does not lie on such centre only. In fact, it is a shared responsibility of various parties such as family, community, and religion (Wan Zah et. al, 2009).

In general, studies on at-risk students focused on the effectiveness of various programs conducted to help such students. This study deviated from the typical settings by placing emphasis on moral reasoning among at-risk students from their own perspective. It is believed that one way to bring about a decrease in rate of at-risk students is by involving such students in the study rather than asking other people who might not necessarily experience the same problem as they have. In other words, the inclusion of at-risk students as participants in a particular study would bring about a better understanding about their moral reasoning. Eventually, this study would not only become a collaborative effort in decreasing the number of enrolment of at-risk students in a particular welfare institution, but it also might serve as a means to help such students to better understand themselves.

1.5 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to describe the level of moral reasoning among at-risk students in Melaka. Besides, this study also attempted to illustrate the stage of moral reasoning in which the at-risk students were experiencing. In addition, it also aimed to describe the level of internalization possessed by the participants, which is, whether their moral judgment was influenced by external or internal factors. Further, this study also tried to provide information about the characteristics of at-risk students under study. The moral reasoning adopted by the students was determined by their responses to moral dilemma scenarios that had been presented by the researcher, while their characteristics were explained based on their responses to individual interview questions. By conducting this study and gaining a greater understanding about the moral reasoning and characteristics of at-risk students, the administration of the welfare institutions from which the participants were selected could gain valuable

information that may be referred to inspire more pro-social behaviors within the school setting. Consequently, the researcher formulated three research questions for this study.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the level of morality experienced by at-risk students in Melaka?
2. In which stage of moral reasoning the at-risk students in Melaka is experiencing?
3. Is there any sense of internalization exhibited by at-risk students in Melaka?
4. What are the characteristics of at-risk students under study?

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The results of this study provided information about the moral reasoning and the characteristics of at-risk students in Melaka. The literature on moral reasoning discussed the topic by involving participants other than at-risk students, such as teachers and adolescents in general. In addition, most of the literature focused on at-risk students sought to examine the effectiveness of various programs conducted for such students and employed quantitative research designs. However, there was limited literature that directly studied moral reasoning among at-risk students.

1.8 DEFINITION OF TERMS

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined:

Moral reasoning - the thinking process involved in deciding whether an act is right or wrong (Sigelman and Rider, 2009).

At-risk students- students who undergo a special mode of education which is designed to meet their needs and to ensure that they can succeed in school.

At-risk students (male)- male students who are who are subject to school failure because of their own characteristics and/or because of inadequate responses to their needs by school, family, or community (Salvin, 2009) and had been ordered by the Court to be committed into *School 1*.

At-risk students (female) - female students who had committed crime under the age of 18 and had been ordered by the Court to be committed into *School 2*.

1.9 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was limited to qualitative research design, whereby the researcher adopted focus group discussions and individual interviews as the main methods for data collection. Besides, there was only one researcher who involved in the process of data collection.

1.10 DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study focused on at-risk students from *School 1* and *School 2*. All the welfare institutions involved in this study were situated in Melaka and all the participants came from either one of the mentioned welfare institutions. This demographic variable of the participants entailed that the findings of the study were transferrable to the welfare institutions under study only and could not be transferred to other welfare institutions.