

Research on the development of children's moral values

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Exploring the development of children's moral values through a qualitative study focusing on courage and empathy

Introduction

This report examines values, and after briefly defining this concept explores the role of values in children's moral development by focusing on the values of empathy and courage. After an overview of academic debate, this report draws conclusions from the findings of a small-scale qualitative study of children's interactions in a variety of school settings.

The role of Values in Education

Values can be defined in a variety of ways, for example as things which are considered 'good' in themselves, such as love, honesty, courage, loyalty and empathy. (Raths, Harmon, & Simon, 1966) describe values as "beliefs, attitudes or feelings that a person is proud of, is willing to publicly state as true ... and is acted on repeatedly". Values are central to both the theory of education and the practical activities of a school. Schools reflect and embody the values of society; they owe their existence to the fact that society values education and tries to exert influence on the pattern of its own future development through education (Halstead, 1995). School can be seen as important transmitters of commonly held values and can educate new generations away from old, harmful prejudices. The values of schools are apparent in their organization, curriculum and discipline procedures, as well as in the relationships between teachers and pupils.

Which two values are you focusing on and how do you define these?

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The two values which will be focused on throughout this report will be empathy and courage. Contemporary approaches conceive of empathy as a social interaction between any two individuals wherein one individual experiences the feelings of a second individual. The model proposed by Feshbach, (1975) (1978) emphasizes the cognitive ability to discern affective states in others, the more mature cognitive ability to assume the perspective and role of another person, and the affective ability to experience emotions in an appropriate manner. In courage, particularly moral courage, the major fear is loss of ethical integrity or authenticity, but moral courage is also tied to dealing with social disapproval (Martin, 1986). In acting courageously, the individual maintains moral integrity while at the same time overcoming the fear of being rejected by friends.

How do children develop as moral agents?

Scholarly debate around children's moral development is rooted in the work of Jean Piaget, particularly his (1968) *The Moral Judgement of the Child* and research psychology. Proponents of moral development (theory?) believe that there are predictable stages through which this kind of reasoning develops and that children move upward most readily when they are assisted in moving through these stages one at a time (Kohlberg, 1981). Children grow and learn through experiences. Out of experiences may come certain general guides to behaviour. Darwall (2006) proposed that young children's moral sentiments and actions are based mainly on their direct interpersonal interactions with other specific individuals, not on group-wide social norms. This second-personal morality is then followed by a more norm-

based, agent-neutral morality in middle to late preschool years. Children's early sensitivity to others' distress surely plays some role in their developing understanding of specifically moral transgressions of different kinds, and children make these discriminations long before they are able to articulate moral rules. (Strawson, 1966). Children's early capacity for empathy, their discrimination between moral and conventional domains, and their differential attributions of emotions to various types of agents and patients in scenarios involving moral and immoral behaviour indicates that their focus in the early stages of development is on the outcomes or consequences of action rather than the psychological antecedents of action. Taken together, research on conscience provides developmentalists with a portrayal of young children as intuitive moralists who become responsible moral agents as they develop social-cognitive capabilities and self-referential understanding in the context of supportive relationships.

How do values develop and how does the behaviour of children vary across space and time?

The fact that the behaviour of children, which can legitimately be presumed to be guided by their developing moral values, is contingent on both the spatial and temporal contexts, suggest a number of factors may have a material influence on how moral values develop. This report explores the differences in children's moral behaviour in different locations or contexts. This fact raises a number of interesting questions. One such question is whether schools should instil values in pupils or teach them to explore and develop their own values? Moreover, do the values which are currently

taught in schools necessarily reinforce (intentionally or otherwise) the privileged position of certain social classes or religious or cultural groups?

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data was collected through an organised trip to a local primary school to document the interactions between different children of different ages, within the school. Observations were made throughout the day in various different school settings, such as the classroom, the dining hall, the playground, and in a whole school assembly. These observations allowed for the study of the dynamics of a situation. Researchers within the group used different settings to observe and record behaviour relating to each child's moral development. This method was geared to focusing on the meaning of different aspects of students' values, and on their accounts of how they understand their own and others' behaviour and beliefs. When conversations with students were had, clarifying responses were used as these avoid moralizing, criticising, giving values or evaluating, while still prodding the student to clarify their thinking and to examine their behaviour to see if it is consistent with their ideas. Data was analysed by being collected into one big document and then sorted into different variables, e. g. as data that showed strong levels of courage, and strong levels of empathy.

Findings

Many children showed courage in breaking through their own barriers and trying new things, such as attempting to eat their lunch with chopsticks, threading a needle for the first time and reading new words aloud to the

class; a particularly daunting task for young people, who could potentially face mocking from their peers if such bouts of courage lead to failure. Additionally, children exhibited courage in the way they stood up for themselves and their beliefs, especially when talking to fellow students. Courage involves making good choices in the face of fear or obstacles. While disagreeing with points a friend made in discussions, one boy politely and respectfully disputed her and offered his own opinion on the matter. Another boy challenged a friend for talking over the teacher “ you shouldn’t do this, it’s rude”. It shows real courage to be able to expose yourself like this to others, especially when combined with a fear of failure and fear of rejection from your friends. Moreover, at the end of class, most pupils eagerly approached the teacher individually to show their work. This ability to be vulnerable, and to be okay with the possibility of being wrong is another mark of courage. Bravery does not mean fearlessness. It means we do not let fear hold us back from exploring new opportunities, developing our skills, and doing what is right. Admitting when you are wrong also takes courage, as was exhibited by a Year 2 girl, who when called out in front of the class and asked how to say “ hi” in a language, the girl admitted that she did not know, and asked for help. In the final class of the day, Year 5 pupils had to make formal presentations in front of the class. Fear of public speaking is common, especially among young children. These pupils showed courage when persisting despite their fear. One particular boy spent his lunch time preparing and practicing so he could sound confident and poised. That’s courageous.

Developing empathy is a gradual process. As five- and six- year olds become more aware of their own emotions, they begin to recognize them in others, and their emotional vocabulary expands. This is portrayed in some of the younger children's actions witnessed during the visit to the school. Younger children, although recognizing that helping with the setting of the tables before the meal is the right thing to do, could not, when prompted, answer why. A 10-year-old girl however, was able to explain that it would make the job of the kitchen staff easier. Another child showed high levels of empathy when sharing her chopsticks with a boy who had already disposed of his, so he could bring one home too. However, there was one instance witnessed where children were not able to properly implement empathy to another child. One Year 3 boy was sitting alone and clearly struggling during playground play. Other children were able to see this and could have helped if they wished. However, they chose to ignore the boy and leave him on his own. In the classroom, children were able to show higher levels of empathy. This may be because the location demands for it slightly more than the independence of the playground. In one Year 3 lesson, one boy began to cry as " someone said something silly to him". A girl hugged and comforted him and accompanied him around the classroom until the tears had subsided. Another girl assisted a friend with a broken arm as she needed some " extra help". These children were able to put themselves in their peers' shoes and imagine how they might be feeling, and then work on ensuring that their friends felt better by implementing actions that would make them feel less alone. Additionally, when asked by authority figures, children were extra likely to perform empathetic tasks, such as volunteering to help staff

members, and tidying away supplies after lessons end. Empathy is a work in progress throughout childhood. In lessons, the primary school aims to develop children's empathy through the experienced curriculum; for example, children learn about Columbus and how it feels to be colonised.

Discussion

There are variations in children's moral behaviour in different locations. For example, in locations where authority figures were within the same setting – such as the classroom, or the dining hall, children were more likely to show higher levels of moral behaviour. Whereas in situations where their behaviour was less regulated, they were less likely. Particularly in terms of empathy. This shows that to some degree, children's explicit motives for prosocial actions lay in obedience to authority or fear of punishment as Piaget (1968) and Kohlberg (1981) would have stressed. As Youniss (1982) has pointed out, normative prosocial behaviour directed towards adults is not the same as that directed towards same age classmates, which explains the variations in students' moral behaviour when teachers were not around. However, as seen in the research, children do spontaneously engage in prosocial and moral actions because they genuinely care about others' well-being and because they want to do what they consider right.

Contemporary research has provided us with additional information about how young children understand morals. As shown through this report's findings, even six-year-olds are aware that other people have different perspectives, and they are able to empathize with the characteristics they

observe in others. As shown, by eight to nine years of age a child recognizes that people can become aware of others' point of view, and by ten years of age the child can consider a social interaction simultaneously from his own point of view and from that of another person (Killen & Smetana, 2006). Social domain theory has extensively examined children's judgements and evaluations of prototypical moral and conventional transgressions with the general conclusion that one major factor underlying these changes is the child's increasing cognitive sophistication (Smetana, 2006). With increasing age, children become better able to explicate their motives for prosocial-moral action. This finding is reminiscent of the Piagetian notion that children's moral development starts from morality in action and later becomes cognitively (re)constructed (Hammond 2014). It may be misleading to assume a homogenous motivation from which all moral action develops. Moral motivation in childhood and beyond is multi-faceted and much more heterogenous than prominent theories on moral development (past and present) suggest.

Conclusion

Researchers have been emphasizing the importance of moral emotions for the development of young children's moral self. Research on ethical judgement and behaviour remains an important but challenging field of inquiry because of its multidisciplinary nature; its use of multiple methodologies; and its consequences for individuals. We need to know how particular experiences shape the brain for particular types of morality. Are there any ways beyond what we already know through mindfulness and

psychotherapy to help people alter their own mind/brains in ways that facilitate compassionate morality (Hanson & Mendius, 2009)? How do educational environments affect neurobiology? We need to integrate social neuroscience into moral education as others have done for education generally (e. g.,(Cozolino, 2013)). Further, we must discern, beyond theological arguments, why humans are the only animals that purposefully mistreat one another.

It is integral that pupils' moral developments are developed through everyday teaching and whole school rules, routines and practice. Through RE and PSHE, pupils should be taught to reflect on their own values and to respect the values of others. Additionally, children should investigate stories with moral and ethical issues. They should be encouraged to give reasoned views and to appreciate the viewpoints of others. Debating opportunities would be an interesting addition to the classroom, in order for children to fully articulate their point of view and be able to try to understand the views of others. Moral education should be a whole school issue and should be promoted not only through all of the subjects of the curriculum but also through the ethos of the school and through the development of positive attitudes and values. School policy must support and reinforce the aims of the school, valuing all children and staff equally and as individuals.

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