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Can Teachers Teach Children How to be Moral?

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between the authors as a part of their joint research project. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Research Article

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ABSTRACT

Aims: In this article, we will consider the possibility of raising children to be good and moral people and what kinds of ethical challenges this aspiration involves. We will discuss these issues, the problems that arise when raising children to be good—including its moral dimensions—by, first, introducing the core concepts and then focusing on the issue from the perspective of teachers' work.

Study Design: The select perspective here is a mixture of educational–philosophical and educational–psychological approaches: on the one hand, we contemplate the nature of influencing children and transmitting ideologies to them; on the other hand, we can observe children's developmental processes through children's identity formation. Ultimately, our concern is the ethical issue of raising children according to a pre-determined goal. Special focus is put on teachers and their actions. Relevant literature and research were reviewed when writing this contemplation.

Results: Reflective teachers set a moral example rather than put ideas in children's heads. An analysis of the issue will be introduced in this article, resulting in a conclusion that goodness can be something quite practical in nature as it manifests through one's choices and action.

Keywords: *Moral education; reflective teacher; ethics; rearing; education; character development; child's self.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Nothing so needs reforming as other people’s habits.” (Mark Twain)

Mark Twain’s quote above illustrates the idea that people desire to influence others. In fact, this is an important part of teachers’ everyday work. However, it also raises an interesting question regarding how other people’s habits should be reformed. Daniel Putman (1995) says, “Anyone who conscientiously raises children has some model of an excellent human being in mind.” We, as educators, are particularly interested in the possibility of ethicality in raising children to be good people. In addition, we are interested in what that “good” is and in what kind of an educational objective that aspiration makes.

Indeed, there are a variety of opinions concerning the purpose and realization of moral education. Kristjan Kristjansson (1998) talks about self-respect as virtue that should be at the core of today’s moral education. He describes the post-modern time as a time of missing values and of uncertainty about what is ultimately good and worth pursuing. Robert M. Hutchins (2002) claimed already almost a decade ago that the objective of education is to produce virtue because virtue makes people good and, therefore, makes people happy. His eventual conclusion is that happy people are good citizens.

In addition to thinking about the conflicting arguments regarding what is ultimate goodness, the way in which goodness can be manifested by children is worth considering. According to Kohlberg and Mayer (1972, p. 449), “the most important issue confronting educators and educational theorists is the choice of ends for the educational process.” They claim that the cognitive-developmental or progressive approach can satisfactorily combine a psychological theory of development with a rational ethical philosophy of development: the approach considers not only value-relativity, the problem of defining some general ends of education whose validity is not relative to the values and needs of each individual child or to the values of each subculture or society but also the problem of relating psychological statements about the actual characteristics of children and their development to philosophic statements about desirable characteristics, the problem of relating the natural *is* to the ethical *ought*. Dewey (1909) referred to the *ideas* of moral behavior that should be transmuted into good character or good conduct by education and rearing.

Piaget et al. (1965) proposed that it is necessary to consider the child’s ability to moral judgment instead of moral behavior or sentiments. The child’s moral judgment develops from thinking just the consequences of action toward greater understanding of the purpose of action and finally to the level of internalized moral principles. However, Dewey (1909) argues that judgment is not enough: the consciousness of ends must be more than merely intellectual. Therefore, in order to act upon judgment, there must be an emotional reaction as well. Unless there is a prompt and almost instinctive sensitiveness to conditions, to the ends and interests of others, the intellectual side of judgment will not have proper material to work upon.

More recently, Robert Straughan (2000) asks what being “good” means and how a child’s behavior might manifest moral goodness. Does being good mean that the child always does what he or she is told and never argues back, or does it mean that the child never gets into trouble? By asking these questions, Straughan highlights the difference between immoral and non-moral action. If a child, for example, always does what as he or she is told, his or her obedience as such is not immoral but non-moral because the action has nothing to do with moral behavior. Therefore, it is the child’s awareness of what is moral and what is not

that ultimately determines whether the child behaves as a moral human being. Straughan's notion implies that it is necessary first to consider the possibility of raising children to be good and moral people (Määttä and Uusiautti, 2011). Indeed, moral education can be seen as successful if children become aware of the idea of moral goodness (Straughan, 2000). A more problematic question is how to make them adopt a pattern of behaving and making decisions according to the principles moral goodness.

What is the role that teachers play in raising children? When starting to contemplate the abovementioned questions, it is worth noting that moral education can be analyzed from various points of view. For example, Fallona (2000) distinguishes between four approaches to moral education. The first, value clarification, proposes that teachers use non-indoctrinating and nonjudgmental methods to help students discover and refine their values. For the second, cognitive development, teachers function as collaborators, facilitators and guides, with issues of fairness or morality being analyzed profoundly. The third approach looks at caring that is focused on care for one's self, for intimate others, for associates and acquaintances, for distant others, for nonhuman animals, for plants and the physical environment, for the human-made world of objects and instruments and for ideas (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1988). For the fourth, character education, virtues are considered qualities of a good character and teachers are responsible for creating a moral community that supports virtues. Already, the abovementioned four dimensions give insight into how sensitive is the issue of moral education and that the way it is realized needs to be constantly discussed in today's changing world. This, too, is an intended contribution of this article.

In this article, we will discuss the problems and moral dimensions of raising children to be good. First, this paper will introduce the core concepts and then will focus on this issue from the perspective of teachers' work. The perspective used is a mixture of educational-philosophical and educational-psychological approaches: on the one hand, we discuss the nature of influencing children and of transmitting ideologies in them; on the other hand, we recognize children's developmental processes through their identity formation. These approaches are interconnected because moral maturity in psychology concerns character formation in children's development (Putman, 1995). According to Putman (1995), a good character is the most fundamental objective: developing a basic moral character should be the primary goal behind all conscientious child raising and thus it is directly related to virtue theory in ethics (Putman, 1995). Moreover, given that relational contexts carry ethical implications, morality may be more than a domain of knowledge, namely that of a context of development (Vandenberg, 1999). This is how the educational philosophy and development psychology are intertwined and worth discussing.

2. WHAT IS (MORAL) GOODNESS?

According to an online dictionary at Dictionary.com, the noun "good" means "profit or advantage, worth, or benefit; excellence or merit; kindness; and moral righteousness and virtue." The last two sets of this definition correspond to our definition used in this article. Namely "good" refer to the principle of actions that aim at doing or being good. Still, there is disagreement over what is "good" or "goodness" exactly and whether it has any universal or common definition.

Moreover, it is relevant to ask whether there is some feature that can be considered morally good. Sigrún Adalbjarnardóttir (1999) points out what a challenge it is for human beings to respect each other's attitudes and feelings and to solve socio-moral conflicts together.

According to Markku Ojanen (2001), the existence of a good human being can be considered problematic or even impossible because “good” is confused with “perfect.” However, being a good human being does not mean that one should be totally irreproachable and faultless; such a goal is non-human and likely impossible. People can be good, even if they are not perfectly good, can do mistakes or other than just good, and can have flaws. The fundamental goal, however, is to pursue goodness by accepting the imperfect nature of human beings (Ojanen, 2001).

Often, human goodness is compared to humanity or altruism (e.g., Batson et al., 1995). Seligman et al. (2005, p. 412) have created a classification of universal virtues and strengths. Their definitions of human virtue of humanity and its strengths (kindness, love, and social intelligence) might be considered to be one aspect of goodness. According to Seligman et al., “humanity” refers to “interpersonal strengths that involve ‘tending and befriending’ others” (Seligman et al., 2005, p. 412). Altruistic people act in order to benefit others.

However, the point of being good and acting morally is not that simple. Christina Hoff Sommers (2000) discusses the fact that when it comes to morality, every aspect seems to be controversial and therefore no one can define what exactly is good. Yet, she does come to the conclusion that there must be some characteristics or way of action that is fundamentally good that can be discussed through the concept of “moral common sense.” According to Sommers, good moral habits enhance one’s capacity for rational judgment. Sommers’s idea that people can become good by adopting common, moral habits is interesting and comforting. It suggests that moral goodness can be learned and/or taught to others. This is where a teacher’s work becomes relevant.

3. THE MORAL ASPECT OF TEACHERS’ WORK

Given that there is some common basic assumption of what is good and moral human behavior, it is necessary to discuss how it can be taught children in an ethically sustainable manner. Vandenberg (1999) points out that young children may not yet be capable of being ethically responsible for others but that their exchanges with adults are nonetheless ethical because the presence of children calls others to be responsible for their welfare. In school, this responsibility is given to teachers.

However, do teachers have the right to give pupils moral direction? According to Carr (2005), it is this conception of a teacher’s moral role that gives rise to awkward questions about precisely whose values the teacher should exemplify, thus resulting in others’ fears of indoctrination. Sommers (2000) states that

it is obvious that our schools must have clear behavior codes and high expectations for their students. Civility, honesty and considerate behavior must be recognized, encouraged and rewarded. That means that moral education must have as its explicit aim the moral betterment of the student (Sommers, 2000).

In the previous quote, Sommers highlighted the fact how the objectives of moral education must be explicitly made clear for everyone. Certainly, children do need guidance, and schools should cultivate students’ natural moral sense (Damon, 2010). This starting point already argues for a deliberate moral dimension in teachers’ work.

Preparing teachers to teach and reflect on ethical issues begins, at the latest, during teacher education. For example, already 80 years ago, Hutchins named wisdom, science and understanding—the three speculative virtues—and prudence—the good habit of the practical intellect—as the ultimate foci of a university educational (Hutchins, 2002). More recently, Daniel (1998) called for teachers to have ability to develop higher-order thinking skills, meaning that they should be able not only to clarify principles and educational goals but also to analyze them in a critical manner. Teachers should have the capacity to recognize and question the role of a teacher and the existing structures and power relationships. Indeed, according to Boyd and Arnold (2000), very little is known about how teachers think about the aims of education. Yet, the success of education depends on how teachers present their understanding about morality.

Broström (2006) points out that it is beneficial to distinguish between care, teaching, and upbringing activities because doing so can contribute to the process of understanding and planning the educational process. Moreover, it is equally important to remember that care, upbringing, and teaching do not always result in learning. Broström (2006) employs the concept of tact-full care, which can also be defined and discussed through the concept of “pedagogical love” and how it manifests in teachers’ work. The core of pedagogical love is expressed in pedagogical tact (van Manen, 1991; Määttä and Uusiautti, 2011, 2012), which refers to the ability to handle relations between theory and practice, to be sensitive and understanding, to take the child’s perspective and to respect the child. On the other hand, pedagogical tact also involves challenging the child, informing the child and opening his or her eyes to new experiences.

Saevi and Eilifsen (2008, p. 11) note that pedagogy itself is ethical and requires thoughtfulness toward the child. Hence, a special relationship between a teacher and a student is generated. Therefore, teaching is also concerned with the ethics of caring and efforts (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1988; Burns and Rathbone, 2010). A teacher’s ethical caring is that of genuine caring, aspiring to understand students, and making an effort to protect, support, and develop students. A teacher’s love for a student reflects a continuous trust that there is more to a learner than is shown on the outside—in other words, wishing happiness for other people for their sake (Aristotle, 1981). Thus, pedagogical love means loving students wholly without expecting any rewards or services in return (Skinnari, 2004).

Berkowitz and Grych (1998) introduce eight aspects of moral functioning: four meta-moral characteristics (social orientation, self-control, compliance and self-esteem) and four components of psychological morality (empathy, conscience, moral reasoning and altruism). They also describe parenting processes through which the abovementioned aspects are positively related to these so-called building blocks. These parenting dimensions—using induction, expressing nurturance and support, using demandingness and limit setting, modeling socio-moral behavior and implementing a democratic and open family discussion and conflict resolution style—may play a significant role in shaping the moral development of children.

When teachers’ work is taken into account, the same methods can be effective. For instance, induction refers to actions that aim to explain adult behavior and its implications. Therefore, induction enhances children’s sense of empathy, conscience, moral reasoning, and altruism. Modeling means simply learning by observing: adults who express empathy or discuss moral reasoning are also modeling these qualities. Although children do not directly adopt these kinds of behaviors, their beliefs and attitudes about how to treat other people may be shaped by such experiences and observations. Democratic decision making and

discussion—in which stake-holders are given equal power to enter and participate—are likely to enhance compliance, moral-reasoning development, conscience, self-esteem, and altruism in children (Berkowitz and Grych, 1998).

Authoritative parenting consists of nurturing, support, and demandingness, all of which can be aspects of a teachers' authority (Määttä and Uusiautti, 2012). Warmth and support provide children with a sense that they are important human beings who deserve respectful treatment, while demandingness refers to goal setting and requiring certain behaviors from children. The right kind of balance between support and demandingness develops greater self-control, altruism and self-esteem in children (Berkowitz and Grych, 1998). Understanding the nature of the relationship between a teacher and a pupil is essential, given that the teacher has the opportunity to influence his or her pupils. In addition, every teacher has this same opportunity and responsibility.

According to Pauli Siljander (2002), at the core of pedagogical love and pedagogical authority is the educator's trust in the pupil's ability to become civilized and self-determined. Through this teacher-pupil relationship the pupil's individual educational process, the renewal of culture (or the continuation of tradition) and the renewal of culture with the idea of the better future take place. Yet, the relationship between a teacher and a student is asymmetrical because the teacher possesses a quality that the pupil does not. According to Hare, the teacher does not have to think that the student is presently his or her equal but does need to see the student as potentially equal (Hare, 1993). The purpose of the learning relationship is to assist the pupil in developing into an independent and responsible autonomous individual. However, the student does not achieve this goal alone; he or she needs the educator's help and guidance (Pikkarainen, 1994). Thus, the next issue concerns the way that a teacher can guide pupils' moral development toward goodness by simultaneously paying attention to their individuality.

4. THE KEY POINT: HOW TO PAY ATTENTION TO A CHILD'S SELF

As was concluded earlier in this paper, there should be some fundamental idea of what is good and goodness. The moral perspective on how to raise children to be good people involves one essential aspect. Namely, in order to keep "reforming" children's behavior toward goodness, we need to pay attention to the child's self. Kosti Joensuu (2012) contemplated, from a phenomenological point of view, the challenge of caring for another's selfhood, given that caring interconnects two problems: the problematic nature of the idea of man and of selfhood. Thus, the question is problematic because it also relates to a commonly shared ideal that the aim of care and education is to support the other's autonomy, individualization, and possibilities of self-being in the world (Joensuu, 2012).

However, without referring further to the phenomenology of children's being, it is notable that childhood may be the optimal time to promote healthy attitudes, behavior, and adjustment and to prevent problems by, for example, recognizing children's strengths and building on them (Brown Kirschman et al., 2009). It has been shown that children's development is greatly affected by the phenomena that take place in their living environment, including juvenile culture, media and societal values and ideals. Baumeister et al. (2001, p. 323) point out that "at the individual level, temptation and destructive instincts battle against strivings for virtue, altruism, and fulfillment. 'Good' and 'bad' are among the first words and concepts learned by children— and most people can readily characterize almost any experience, emotion, or outcome as good or bad." Therefore, it is not unimportant to consider what kinds of surroundings daycares, schools, or other institutions provide for children's development

and growth (e.g., Hagegull and Bohlin, 1995; Boschee and Jacobs, 1997) in addition to looking at the home (Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen and Määttä, 2011a, 2011b).

Boyd (1996) states that a moral relationship is conceived primarily in terms of a direct connection between two individuals as a positive ongoing interaction of one caring for the other. Defined thus, a caring relationship is already positively evaluated (Boyd, 1996). However, according to Noddings (1988), a caring relationship is better because the “one-caring” is focused on the needs, interests, and long-term welfare of the “one-cared-for” and acts with feeling and some degree of self-reflexive desire in order to be a caring person to the “one-cared-for”.

Perhaps the ultimate aim and fundamental problem is how to “activate” moral evaluation in children instead of showing or telling them what is moral and what is good behavior (Straughan, 2000). The only way to develop their autonomous self is to help them understand by having them independently evaluate what is moral behavior. Presumably, they are more likely to behave according to moral principles if they have concluded that some particular behavior is morally good.

Maturity involves a high level of internalized reflection, which the child applies to many different situations (Putman, 1995). Thus, children should be encouraged to autonomous thinking. Instead of trying to directly influence or “put thoughts” into children’s minds, Damon (2010) suggests that children should be exposed to adults who (1) have developed their own abilities and talents to a high degree, (2) are able to act appropriately in varying situations, thus giving them a reputation for practical wisdom; (3) come to grips with problems in their personal life or community and are not procrastinators or weak-willed and (4) are able to focus and concentrate on the practices at hand for the greater good of both themselves and the community.

Willemse, Lunenberg and Korthagen (2008) designed a Moral Analysis Chart for analyzing the moral aspects of teachers’ practices. Their findings showed that within the institution under study, preparing student teachers for moral education was primarily the responsibility of individual educators and that the preparation process was implicit and unplanned. As well, instead of a common understanding, a large number of categories of values that were mentioned by the educators showed that even if the institution as a whole had a shared vision or shared values, these did not form a clear part of the value systems of the educators who participated in the study. In order to improve the professional development of educators, it may be important to encourage them to develop specific attitudes or, at least, to stimulate their awareness of their own attitudes. Educators find it difficult to make their values explicit. Yet, if this issue is addressed from a practical point of view, the value preferences may be easier to discover. Indeed, Korthagen (2004) suggests a simple way of doing so: namely, asking student teachers to reflect on who they considered to be positive and negative role models when they were students.

When it comes to the actual school level, the values appreciated at school should be made explicit and visible. Sommers (2000) names three basic character-developing actions or rules: (1) schools should have behavior codes that emphasize civility, kindness, self-discipline, and honesty; (2) teachers should not be accused of brainwashing children when they insist children to follow basic decency, honesty and fairness; and (3) children should be told stories that reinforce goodness.

Overall, it seems that teachers should develop the ability to contemplate and analyze moral issues and to do so as a part of their everyday teaching practices. In addition, they should use these reflective practices in teaching for practices that lead children to question and contemplate have proven useful. For example, Adalbjarnadóttir's (1999) study shows how an improvement in students' level of understanding moral issues was positively related to changes in their actions. Therefore, through educational intervention, it is possible to make real-life progress in pupils' behavior, not merely in terms of their thoughts regarding what should or could be done. In addition, teachers should make an effort to present admirable examples to students and should regularly discuss with them deep questions of meaning, purpose, and what really matters in life (Damon, 2010). The ultimate goal of all rearing and teaching should be to enrich children's lives by helping them to form habits of internal goods of practices (Putman, 1995). In essence, goodness can be measured through such a practical perspective as the eventual action.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis asks how we can assess whether a child has adopted good behaviors and moral principles. How this manifests can be illustrated by imagining different levels within a larger framework, as illustrated in Fig. 1. Earlier in this article, we described how the moral education begins with educational policy and teacher education; this is presented as the uppermost level in Fig. 1. The next level is the school level, where curriculum is realized and where certain, select values are visible and appreciated in practice. The next important level includes the key actors: namely, teachers. They, in their daily work, not only have to set an example for children but also have to adopt a reflective manner regarding how to teach subject matter and morals. Teachers should be encouraged to act out their values so that children, who form the core of Fig. 1, are not obliged to memorize the values but learn them through their own thinking and understanding; they will adopt the values in their hearts if they find them admirable and worth following. Only in this way can moral and good behaviors turn into life-long habits.

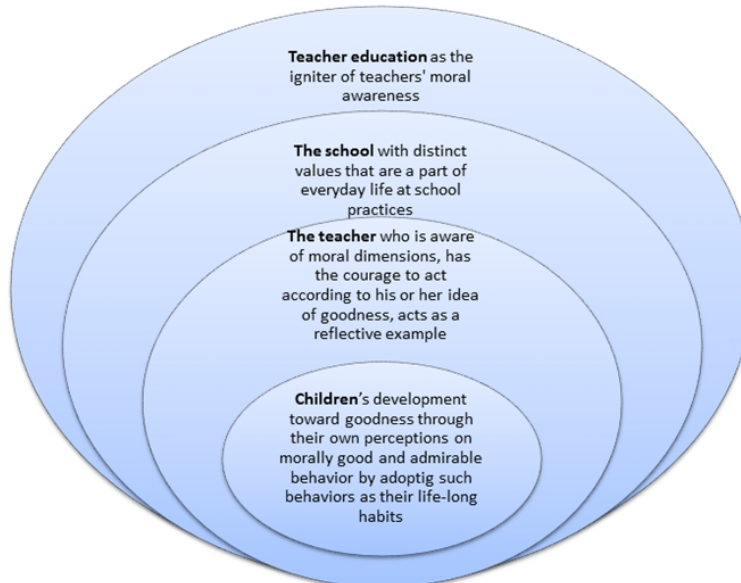


Fig. 1. Factors in moral education

Fundamentally, this idea is in line with Aristotle's virtue ethics. According to this philosophy, it is wise to consider what to do (or not to do) as looking at someone's actions is the best way to judge his or her character and moral behavior. It is action that tells about one's character and moral behavior. Thus, morality is a result of intrinsic virtues. Furthermore, *phronesis*, moral or practical wisdom, is the knowledge that enables its possessor to act well or "do the right thing" in a given situation (Aristotle, 2011)—in other words, reflectivity is also an inherent virtue related to, for example, open-mindedness and perspective (Seligman et al., 2005). Reflective teachers can show their morality through their teaching and overall behavior (being aware of this fact, teachers can act as moral role models) and pupils may, with the help and guidance of a teacher, figure out for themselves whether the teacher's (or anyone else's) behavior is something they consider admirable, valuable, worth adopting, and good (Woodward, 1994). Therefore, being good is very practical, given that intrinsic virtue can only manifest through actions. Developing the skills of virtue must be turned into a life-long habit (Putman, 1995).

According to Keefer (1996), the way we acquire practical knowledge of our own valuable pursuits instructs us in the duties that we owe to others. Being able to identify the duties we owe to others requires knowing what is necessary for living a meaningful and fulfilling life. Keefer suggests that

From this more holistic perspective, the challenge of moral education is to teach children to recognize and be faithful to the values that will aid them in the pursuit of their own well-being as well as help to identify the source of their obligation to others. They should be taught to come to appreciate that if they fail to live up to the value(s) that they have chosen, or if they fail to be guided by them in the conflicts they face, then their own "interests" will suffer and not just those of others. (Keefer, 1996).

Thus, according to Keefer, two sides of pursuits should be present simultaneously: knowledge of our own pursuits of well-being and an obligation to others. Therefore, becoming a good human being means that one has to be loyal to one's own needs and has to find the most suitable ways of self-fulfillment. However, at the same time, one must notice other people and their needs. One should not neglect either aspect—oneself or others. Rather, finding a balance between them is a manifestation of goodness, which reveals itself in our practical choices and in our actions in life.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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