Ethics: Also for young people? Exploring the explicit imparting of ethics as a possible approach in social education

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Abstract

This article deals with an approach by which ethics are imparted to young people by way of a written text. The theoretical basis for such an approach, the preparation of an adjusted text, and an initial evaluation are presented. After formulating a manuscript in which the wording and content are adjusted for young people, a sample of eight secondary school students have read and assessed the text. The examined approach is based on the belief that young people are able to acquire and apply theoretical knowledge in the field of ethics much in the same way as adults. Such an assumption challenge prevailing positions in cognitive psychology. The findings made in this pilot study indicate that an explicit imparting of ethics may provide a viable new approach in professional social education.

Key words: Ethics; Professional Social Education; Secondary School Students; Norway

Introduction

In recent decades there has been increasing interest in ethics. Many people apply normative ethics to handle dilemma situations, both in their everyday life and in their professional life. Many academic textbooks presenting ethics have been published, and on several study programmes at universities students attend courses dealing with ethics. In addition to a presentation of descriptive ethics, meta-ethics and normative ethics, the students are given the opportunity to apply the theories derived from normative ethics on imagined cases in the field of professional practice. In general, the presentations in lessons and textbooks have an explicit form: the theories are presented as distinct models and approaches that can be applied to concrete moral issues. The students also learn who formulated the different theories, so that they can refer to relevant philosophers such as Aristotle, MacIntyre, Kant, and Rawls.

The inducement put forward for initiating students in the field of ethics is an optimistic belief that these insights will improve students' ability to deal with dilemma situations

(Beauchamp & Bowie 2004; Davis et al. 1997). Normative theories are claimed to be a kind of linguistic and cognitive toolset that can be used to identify and clarify moral problems[i].

Also in ordinary upbringing of children one can identify focus on moral reasoning and an imparting of normative ethics. However, this imparting is less explicit than the one taking place on courses for adult students. The theories are not introduced with a designation, and the directions each theory holds are not presented explicitly through a text or a lecture. Instead imparting is realized through a series of advice and requests. Utilitarianism is imparted when the adult calls the child's attention to the consequences of different actions, and the importance of considering these consequences before acting. A special kind of utilitarianism, rule utilitarianism, is imparted through utterances like "What do you think would happen if everyone acted like that?!" Heteronymous duty ethics is imparted when it is said to be one's duty to follow regulations and laws. Virtue ethics is imparted when the grown-up speaks about the reasonable in middle-positions: the golden compromise. Juveniles are requested to be courageous, not cowardly or foolhardy; they are requested to be modest, not subservient or arrogant. Civil right ethics is imparted when young people are told to respect the rights of others. Value ethics is imparted when the parent, the teacher, or the youth organizer speaks about values one should try to realize by one's actions.

Another implicit approach often applied in ordinary upbringing consists of letting young people read or hear narratives about philanthropic heroes, human beings who act in an exemplary way in difficult situations. Exponents of this approach claim that children at an early age are able to interpret moral narratives and extract content concerning virtue and character (Bennett 1993; Honig 1987)[ii].

If we turn to professional social education, research reviews suggest that a number of different factors may contribute to the production of pro-social behaviour (Eisenberg et al. 2006; Roth & Fonagy 2005). Therefore, social pedagogy as an academic and applied field must hold several different paradigms with respective approaches. However, if one reviews contemporary textbooks for practitioners it is hard to find texts advocating explicit imparting of normative ethics as a viable approach. Within the moral-cognitive paradigm there is certainly a focus on the correlation between rationality and pro-sociality. Moral reasoning is claimed to be a precondition for pro-social behaviour. Therefore, several scholars and practitioners working within this paradigm have been engaged in the task of promoting children's and juveniles' ability to reason about moral issues. However, this paradigm is heavily influenced by the workings of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg and consequently has a bias towards nativism.

In the mid-20th Century Piaget (1953) launched logical constructivism as a theory of cognitive development. According to Piaget, biological maturation and the process of accommodation are the prime movers in the child's development towards a coherent and realistic conception of nature and society. Accommodation involves one's schema[iii] structure being more consistent with new experiences. Piaget claims that development is genetically prefigured, and then prompted by sensations that challenge the child's acquired schema structure. Perception, the process of attaining understanding of sensory information, depends upon an adequate schema structure. According to Piaget, the child

has an inborn need to experience coherence between the different parts of the schema structure, and between the schema structure and sensations. Therefore, when the child experiences the acquired schema structure as being insufficient, the child is confused and motivated to improve or extend the structure. Piaget proposes that the child's cognitive development moves through a series of stages whereby reaching a new stage implies mastering a number of new skills. In his description Piaget has a focus on the limitations in the child's reasoning compared to the skills grown-ups possess. According to Piaget, there are substantial qualitative differences, in addition to quantitative differences, between the reasoning of children and the reasoning of grown-ups.

Several contemporary researchers have put forward critiques of Piaget's work reasoning that it underestimates young children's cognitive competence and lacks attention being paid to the impact coming from the social world (see Donaldson 1978; Rogoff 1990).

Kohlberg (1984) grounds his theory of moral development on Piaget's position and describes a developmental movement through a universal, hierarchical series of stages which mark distinct changes in the underlying structure of moral reasoning. The three main stages in Kohlberg's model are named as the pre-conventional stage, the conventional stage, and the post-conventional stage. In some texts the latter is named the principled stage. Each of these main stages holds two sub-stages.

Pre-conventional reasoning is described as a kind of naïve hedonism oriented towards consequences affecting the person him-/herself. An act is perceived as morally wrong if the person who commits it gets punished. Acts that are rewarded are perceived as morally right. As the designation conventional expresses, the moral reasoning at the second main stage is oriented towards rules and expectations. Those who have reached this main stage have an in-group reference. At the first sub-stage there is an orientation towards current rules and social roles in one's family and one's peer group. Acts that imply living up to role expectations and result in approval from family members or friends are perceived as morally right. At the second sub-stage the focus is expanded from the local to the state and to formal legislation. Laws are perceived as necessities to maintain a functioning society. Therefore, to violate the law is morally wrong. Compared to the theories of normative ethics, the reasoning at the conventional stage holds elements of heteronymous duty ethics. Post-conventional reasoning has a universal reference with a profound realization of individuals as entities separate from society, and of each individual possessing inviolable rights. At the first sub-stage the moral reasoning is similar to rule utilitarianism. Laws are regarded as social contracts that should promote the greatest good for the greatest number of people. At the second sub-stage the moral reasoning is similar to that described in Kantian duty ethics, value ethics and Rawlsian civil rights ethics. According to Kohlberg, access to post-conventional reasoning implies moral autonomy because one is able to carry out critical reflection on existing rules, and to reach valid conclusion regarding the most complicated moral issues.

By ranking different kinds of moral reasoning in a hierarchical stage model, Kohlberg (1981) claims an isomorphism between mental maturity and philosophical validity. This makes him a meta-ethical cognitivist and naturalist[iv].

According to Kohlberg one can improve young people's ability to reflect on moral issues by letting them discuss hypothetical dilemma situations, and by asking questions revealing the limitations of their conclusions. At the end of last century, many child care professionals came to know the Kohlbergian approach through the program called ART, Aggression Replacement Training (Goldstein et al. 1998). This is a multimodal programme applied to help juveniles with severe behaviour problems. The programme consists of three different courses that are run parallel during the intervention period. The purpose of the first course is to equip the juveniles with a number of new social skills. In the second course the participants learn how to control anger. The third course in ART is designed to promote young people's capacity for moral reasoning. Here the juveniles are invited to discuss a number of dilemma situations. The discussions are orchestrated by professional social educators to maximise peer interaction and cognitive conflict, and thereby accommodation. When the young people have reached a conclusion which reflects their developmental level, the professional applies the Socratic[v] method advocated by Kohlberg, asking a question which elucidates the limitations of the juveniles' accustomed way of thinking. The young people are then expected to experience a cognitive conflict that will work as an incitement to re-think the problem and the proposed conclusion. According to Kohlberg, this re-thinking will lead to accommodation and consequently to more sophisticated moral reasoning[vi].

To sum up, the implicit imparting of normative ethics carried out in ordinary upbringing, and in professional social education, represents a contrast to the explicit imparting of ethics taking place at universities and in textbooks for grown-ups. While grown-ups get concrete descriptions about how to use philosophical methods to identify morally correct actions, children and young people have to deduce from a variety of impacts how to reason about right and wrong.

Given the fact that the development of moral reasoning is not prefigured to the extent claimed by Kohlberg and his successors, it can be argued that implicit imparting of ethics is an insufficient approach in social education. It is then unlikely that someone who has not been taught ethics explicitly, or who has not read books presenting ethics in a systematic way, is able to distinguish between the different perspectives and give an account for each of them. And furthermore, it is unlikely that perspectives which we only have a vague conception of, will work as cognitive tools.

This claim is supported by Mark Tappan (1997, 1998, 2006) who has launched a socio-cultural perspective on moral development extending the position of Kohlberg. Tappan is influenced by the pioneer work of Lev Vygotsky (1986) and the works of successors such as James Wertsch (1998). Vygotsky emphasizes the role of language as a tool of thought. He claims that all kind of higher psychological functioning must involve the use of language, and that the child at an early age applies acquired words and syntactical forms in his/her reasoning. He thereby opposes Piaget's description of 'egocentric speech' which can be observed in early childhood as simply an epiphenomenon of the child's egocentric thinking. Vygotsky claims that these monologues are verbal reasoning voiced out loud, and not directed towards others. Later the child's thinking becomes soundless, but it continues to be formulated in words and sentences.

Vygotsky proposes that the syntax of inner verbal reasoning differs to some extent from the syntax of external social speech. Compared to external speech inner speech appears incomplete, holding several abbreviations and short-cuts. However, the words, concepts, syntactical forms, and discourses of social language are pre-requisites for inner verbal reasoning. According to Vygotsky, human mental functioning is shaped by how physical and social reality are categorised and described in the particular language we acquire. Therefore, followers of Vygotsky's theory claim that 'path' is a better metaphor for development than 'stair'. Cognitive development implies following one of several possible paths (Rogoff 1990).

Compared to Piaget's theory the Vygotsky tradition represents an optimistic focus on children's capacities, and also an optimistic focus on what is possible to accomplish through pedagogical efforts. Particular focus is given to what is called the 'zone of proximal development', that is the range of tasks slightly too difficult for a child to do alone, but possible to accomplish successfully with guidance. According to researchers in the Vygotsky tradition, development is best promoted when children are exposed to this zone of tasks and at the same time guided by more competent persons (Rogoff 1990).

Tappan acknowledges the importance of maturation. However, he claims that the theories of normative ethics should not be regarded as maturation stages, but instead as artefacts; descriptions formulated by human beings, and imparted from person to person:

> Moral development, therefore, must not be understood simply as the result of a constructive process undertaken by a transcendental epistemic subject, but rather must be seen as the outcome of a complex developmental process that includes both maturational influences and the experience of social communication and social integration between speaking persons, engaged in ongoing dialogue with others – dialogue that occurs in specific social, cultural and historical contexts (2006: 14).

According to Tappan, young people who acquire insight into normative ethics will recognize these theories as tools to use in resolving dilemmas they are confronted with in their everyday lives. As an example, he describes an interview with an 18-year old student taking a moral philosophy course. When she is asked to describe and elaborate on a real-life dilemma she has experienced, she uses words and forms of discourse from the texts she has read. As an example, she puts forward what she refers to as her 'Kantian point of view' (Tappan 2006:1). According to Tappan, the student's response to moral dilemmas has become more complex and sophisticated, because she is able to apply normative ethics. By learning several ways of moral reasoning she has gradually appropriated a variety of cognitive tools to alternate between and has gained proficiency in dealing with different dilemma situations.

When it comes to the question of the age at which children are able to acquire philosophical insights, the workings of scholars in the Philosophy for Children-tradition gives reason for optimism concerning children's capacity. Matthew Lipman and colleagues have demonstrated how pupils even in primary school are able to acquire, apply, and enjoy insights into epistemological topics. In their research they focus on how such

insights promote children's discernment and meta-cognition, which involves the ability to monitor and detect inconsistencies in thinking (Lipman 2003).

An adjusted text

To be able to examine the hypothesis that explicit imparting of ethics is an adequate approach in social education I wrote a 'textbook' presenting ethics in an adjusted way. I decided to try to adjust the text to young people in their mid-teens. Working out the texts took several months and the draft went through a large number of revisions before a version that could be assessed was ready. Young people are not a homogenous category and several times during the writing process I was in serious doubt as to how to formulate the account of certain topics, and what kind of examples to present. I am not a trained writer of texts for young people. Therefore, a more skilled author would undoubtedly have done better.

The manuscript is divided into three parts. The first part starts with a presentation of cognitive psychology concerning how cognition is based on language. The presentation calls attention to the assumption that learning ethics provides access to a kind of cognitive tools made up of words and concepts. It describes how these tools can be helpful when confronted with a moral problem, and one has to reflect on what is right and what is wrong. On the following pages the basic model and the central concepts of existentialism are described. In this presentation unfavourable fatalism and passiveness that can follow given a deterministic view are emphasised.

In the main part of the text five normative theories are presented. Duty ethics, civil right ethics, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, and value ethics are said to be models one can use in moral reasoning in order to decide which action is right and which is wrong. To show the practical usefulness of the theories several examples are applied.

The final part of the text begins with a description of the fact that two different theories sometimes give opposite answers. It is claimed that in these cases one must try to judge which theory and which answer is most adequate, and therefore should be preferred. The utility perspective introduced in the presentation of the normative theories is repeated and underlined. Each normative theory is said to have relevance to some, but not all kinds of situations.

In the final part there follows a brief introduction of meta-ethics. First an account of radical non-cognitivism is given. Then it is described how placing morality outside the realm of rationality may lead to moral relativism and to the problems such a position can bring about. An alternative perspective follows. This alternative perspective challenges the restricted theory of truth advocated by radical non-cognitivists. It is claimed that normative statements may hold meaning even though they cannot be true in an empirical sense. Therefore, rational reasoning and discussions about moral issues are possible. In other words, the meta-ethical position formulated by scholars like Habermas (1990) and Hare (1952) is advocated.

It is a simplified account of a schism between non-cognitivism and cognitivism that is presented, or more exactly a schism between a kind of emotivism and an alternative position. The argument for such a superficial presentation is an assumption that a more complete introduction into positions and schisms within meta-ethics would appear as complicated and confusing. It is believed to be unrealistic to bring young people far into this realm of philosophy. On the other hand, a basic introduction may promote young people's meta-cognition concerning this domain.

As apparent from the description above, the examined approach consists of a condensed, but still quite extensive, introduction to ethics. To some extent the adjusted text resembles textbooks used on ethics courses for adult students. However, several elaborations and complicated elements are omitted. The text is formulated in a language assumed accessible and engaging, and also holds a large number of exemplifications. The number of pages the participants in the study were asked to read was 33, most of these closely written.

Methods and findings

By applying to a secondary school in a Norwegian city a sample of eight 17 year old students, five females and three males, was recruited. All of these were ordinary students without any kind of defined adjustment problems. The students were asked to read the manuscript carefully and present a written evaluation of it. They were asked to express whether they experienced the text as boring or intriguing, as unintelligible or accessible, and whether they learned something new by reading the text. The students were also asked whether they believed they would benefit from what they might have learned from reading the text. Comments referring to sentences or paragraphs were to be written in the margin, and the assessment of the text as a whole should be written on the last sheet. When the manuscript had been handed out, the students had one week to read it and write their comments. They delivered their copies collectively.

The assessments given on the manuscript as a whole concurred quite well. The essence of the data material can therefore be presented in a brief account. The students said that to a great extent they experienced the text as absorbing. Adjectives like interesting, clarifying, and thought-provoking were frequently used in the comments. Some of the students said that they read the whole manuscript without breaks, or with only a few breaks. On the whole the manuscript was described as an easily accessible book. The students described that the adjusted wording conduced to the clarifying of perspectives. Through reading the text they achieved a more solid understanding, and to some extent, an overview. The quotations below are representative selections taken from the written comments:

Here are a lot of thought-provoking issues. A nice guide to how one can reflect and how things are.

This is something we should learn more about in school. I learned a lot by reading the manuscript.

Ethics and morals is a difficult topic, but I think you have managed to make it interesting.

When I first read the table of contents I thought reading the text would be boring and hard. Ethics is something I have never given a thorough reflection, and many of the headings were totally new to me. I was a bit afraid that the text should be on such a level that it simply was too laborious to read it. But fortunately I was wrong. I read the whole manuscript without a break, and found it all very interesting. The text is easy to understand; the content was formulated surprisingly accessibly. After reading the draft I have learned a lot and feel a bit wiser.

After handing in their copies of the manuscript, four of the students were asked to elaborate or adjust their written comments in a group interview. This interview lasted for one hour and took place in a meeting room in a building near the students' school. Methodologists describe the group interview as an approach that can bring richer descriptions, in that it allows for the discussion and development of thoughts between the participants, and because it allows the researcher to ask for more in-depth information (Marshall & Rossman 1995). The interview may work as an open-ended approach bringing forward a number of unanticipated issues. However, in addition to these advantages group interviews implies a risk that group pressure may occur. Therefore, when applying such a method the researcher must try to create a permissive environment so that the informants feel free to express themselves. Also, the composition of groups must be carefully considered. As far as I am able to judge it, the participants felt confident and expressed themselves in an outspoken manner. Even though a number of questions were asked, parts of the interview appeared as a kind of conversation between the students, and not as a structured interview led by a researcher. The students spontaneously confirmed and deepened each other's descriptions. During the interview data was recorded by the use of shorthand notations.

The interview started with an invitation to describe the experience of reading the text. The students confirmed the assessment of the text as accessible and intriguing. They emphasized that, because the accounts in the text were clearly set out, the reading clarified something they had earlier got glimpses of, but not fully grasped. During childhood and adolescence their parents had told them a lot about right and wrong and how to behave in different situations. At school they had learned a number of rules and had taken part in dilemma discussions. The teachers had also tried to teach them about right and wrong through similes and narratives. However, the field of morals had appeared complex and fragmentary, and in a way covered in a veil of vagueness.

During the interview the students also repeated and expanded on the descriptions of normative theories as something they were able to comprehend and to apply in their own reasoning. The normative theories were said to be potentially useful 'perspectives', 'ways of reasoning' and 'mental tools'. Up to now they had not used such theories in their reasoning but after reading the text they had become aware of the potential and wanted to explore this.

Responding to follow-up questions concerning the application of normative theories the students said that, through insight in such theories, ethical dilemmas were clarified, and appeared as something possible to discuss and reason about. They emphasized that learning theories implied learning a number of new words and the meaning of these, and that this in a way gave access to new ways of thinking.

In addition to the positive assessment of the text accounted for above, the students also put forward some critique. This critique dealt, however, only with ambiguities in a few formulations, with the need for additional formulations in some of the paragraphs, and with the need to attach exemplifications to some of the topics. The critique was directed at me as a writer. No objections were made towards the idea of such an adjusted text presenting ethics.

Several methodologists have illuminated the reflexive character of social research, and pointed out the fact that researchers by their presence at the site and in context where data are collected involuntary have an impact on the informants (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995; Patton 1990). The risk of invalid data is especially present when the informants have reason to believe that the researcher has a hypothesis she or he wants to confirm. In this study the informants had reason to believe that I, both as an author of the text in question and as a researcher, would prefer to draw a certain conclusion. This is an argument speaking for some caution to be exercised when drawing conclusions from the study. On the other hand, the fact that the students, in addition to positive evaluation of the text as a whole, also put forward some critique and proposals for change, may be seen as an argument for accepting the positive comments as valid accounts for the students' genuine opinion.

Closing remarks

The findings made in this study indicate that an explicit imparting of ethics may be a viable approach in professional social education and should supplement the current repertoire of methods applied at residential care institutions. However, this is a preliminary conclusion that should be re-examined in a number of follow-up replication studies in residential care settings. Such studies should include the examination of oral presentations as an alternative to, or as a supplement to the use of a written text. Course manuals describing how to present the theories and relevant examples must then be prepared. Also, a training program that qualifies residential care employees in this approach is a necessary remedy for such further exploring. In other words, there is a further agenda for innovation and research.

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[i] This utility perspective is discussed among contemporary philosophers (see Smith 1995 for review).
[ii] Some researchers have questioned the efficiency of this approach (see Narvaez 2002).
[iii] Piaget uses the term schema to designate mental representations.
[iv] Kohlberg's meta-ethical position has entailed serious controversies (for introduction to discussion, see Habermas 1990; Locke 1986).
[v] The philosopher Socrates has given his name to a pedagogical method that consists in asking thought-provoking questions.
[vi] There are several critiques raised against Kohlberg's theory that fall outside the scope of this paper: He is criticized for committing the naturalistic fallacy (Locke 1986), for failing to recognize that children know the difference between social conventions and morality (Turiel 2006), for ethnocentrism (Snarey 1985), and for ignoring the importance of moral emotions (Gilligan 1982).

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