Skills for Ethical Action: A Process Approach to Judgment and Action

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Described here is one program (SEA) designed to instruct in one aspect of the broad field of moral education.

Tell a child what is the ethical thing to do in a given situation, and you have helped him/her for the day. Teach a child a process not bounded by particular situations that will enable him/her to both know and do what is ethical, and you have helped him/her for a lifetime. It is this latter point of view that characterizes the instructional program, Skills for Ethical Action (SEA). This program seeks to teach seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade students a process that will enable them not only to make reasoned decisions about value questions rising in their own lives, but also to act on those decisions.

This focus on behavior differentiates SEA from most moral/values education programs on the market. The majority of these efforts are aimed at raising the students' level of moral reasoning or helping them to clarify their values. The SEA program is based on the premise that aiding self-actualization through values clarification or teaching how to make judgments about moral or ethical issues is not enough. The students must also be helped to link their values and moral reasoning to their behavior. Unless such a pattern is developed, the students will not be equipped to act in response to the varied ethical questions that arise. They may be able to decide what action they should take, but not make the important connection between judgment and action. Making judgments can become a game if not always seen as a genuine process of deciding what to do.

A Six-Step Process

The program definition of ethical action, "doing something that you have decided is fair after considering the possible effects on self and others," is the core of SEA. This definition is made operative by the six-step process, called a "strategy," which is the basis of the program instruction. The six steps are:

1. Identify the Value Question
2. Think up Action Ideas
3. Consider Self and Others
4. Judge
5. Act
6. Evaluate

These six steps combine ethical decision making, acting on the decisions, and evaluating the completed actions. It is this final part of the process that enables the students to make the strategy their own. As they look back over their completed actions, they see how well they did at judging what the effects of their actions might be. They find out what they did well and what they

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might do better next time. Further, they discover that they can be personally in charge of their behavior. They do not have to follow the crowd or constantly seek direction from others.

The initial emphasis in the SEA instruction is on cognitive knowledge. The students learn the basic definitions of the course and the names and meanings of the process steps. This is seen as the first step in building a pattern to guide personal behavior, the premise being that before a person can act, he/she must know what it is he/she will be doing. In other words, she/he must have a handle on the information that will be applied. This premise was supported by examination of the student responses that showed that cognitive knowledge of the strategy was highly related both to examples students gave of its personal use beyond the course and to their reports of anticipated continued use.

Cognitive knowledge alone, however, is not sufficient for establishing behavioral patterns. Application of the knowledge is also necessary. Therefore, the SEA course requires the students to practice using the six process steps by applying them to real situations in their own lives. They begin by identifying the value that is involved in the situation, the value that they want their eventual action to reflect. This step is important because the strategy is not meant to be a problem-solving device. Rather, using the strategy is intended to enable the students to act in a way that has mostly good effects on everyone and in a way that is consistent with what they say they value. Thus, their value question would be stated
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something like this: In this situation how can I show that friendship (or my family, or whatever the involved value is) means a lot to me?

After identifying their value question, the students then brainstorm alternative actions they might take. They are encouraged to come up with as many ideas as possible in order to learn that a variety of options may be available. Next they think about what the consequences of their proposed actions might be for themselves and for other people, both immediate and further removed, who would be involved. Then they objectively review and weigh those possible consequences in order to judge whether their proposed actions would be ethical, that is, would have mostly positive effects on everyone concerned.

At this point the students have completed those parts of the process that relate to decision making. They are now ready for Step 5: Act. It is this step that brings SEA to its unique position among moral values education programs. To have reasoned with the best of intentions does not provide insight into the accuracy of one's decision. Without carrying out the action, there can be no assessment of whether it would in reality have mostly positive effects on everyone. Therefore, the students are told that just deciding that an action is fair to self and others is not enough; to be ethical, they must also do something about their decisions. They are asked to commit themselves to actually carrying out the action they judged would be ethical.

After completing their actions, the students are then able to assess how skillful they are at judging. They not only examine how their actions actually affected everyone; they also review how well they used the process itself in order to determine how they might improve their judging. Sometimes they find that they did not envision all the consequences carefully enough. For example, one girl said, "Next time I'm going to think more about how my action might affect me. I sure felt weird when I did my action and I
hadn’t counted on that.” Another boy, however, was rather elated by the unexpected consequences of his action, “My action had good effects I hadn’t thought of on a whole lot of other people!”

Continuing Use of the Strategy

Other students are happy to find that they have done a good job of judging the ethicality of their proposed actions. “I really judged well,” one boy wrote. “I was right about how my action would affect my parents.” Then he added, “It’s nice to be able to do something and know my parents won’t worry or get mad.”

Repeated use of the strategy leads to improvement in the use of the steps, of course, and this is immediately evident to the students when they evaluate. It is not uncommon to have a student comment during the last evaluation activity in the course, “I got a lot more action ideas this time,” or “I used more ways to get information about effects on other people so I did Step 3 much better.” Students also discover they have learned more about what they actually value and about how important their values really are to them. As one girl put it, “I’ve always valued my family. But after doing my action (which was to call a family meeting to resolve a problem), I realized my family is even more important to me than I thought.”

Teaching the ethical action process is not the only objective of the SEA program. SEA also aims to dispose the students to use the strategy after the course has been completed. Many students have indicated that they plan to do so and are able to give concrete examples of where they feel it might come in handy. “When I have problems in high school next year,” “The next time my sister bugs me again,” and “When I make two dates for the same night” are some typical examples. Even students who had some reservations about the program admit the strategy can be useful, like one boy who told his teacher, “I didn’t think much of this jazz while we were doing it, but the other day I got in this situation where I used the strategy and you know, it worked!”

It is impossible to predict how often students really will use the strategy and therefore how strongly their behavior will ultimately be affected. As one teacher pointed out, the total impact of the SEA course cannot be assessed immediately; there may be effects that will not appear for months or even years. It is also true that no one-semester or one-year course will provide sufficient input for total moral or ethical development. Programs in this domain need to extend over many years of schooling. Therefore, the developers of SEA do not see the course as the final answer to the schools’ charge to educate their students in judgment and action on moral/ethical issues. Rather, they regard it as an effort to provide instruction in one aspect of the broad field of moral education.

References


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