Synthesis of Research on Moral Development

Even young children can distinguish between rules and moral principles. By discussing moral dilemmas in a cooperative classroom environment, teachers can enhance students’ understanding of human rights and justice.
We have known for some time that the overwhelming majority of parents expect teachers and other school authorities to contribute to children's moral development (Gallup 1976). There is, however, considerable confusion and discord among people about what it is they mean when they talk about morality. In such a context teachers who want to provide moral education have difficulty even deciding what parents want them to teach, let alone how best to teach it.

One aim of this review is to help clarify what constitutes the moral domain. Recent research suggests that the apparent public confusion is not about what is moral but about what is "proper." Both children and adults generally agree about what is moral; this overall agreement can be seen by differentiating the sphere of action governed by moral precepts from that governed by consensus or social convention. I have attempted to pull together research and theory on children's social development that helps clarify the distinction between the moral and conventional domains. In light of that distinction, this review presents a synthesis of research findings on how to foster moral development.

The Distinction Between Morality and Convention
Children in any society should learn to conform to a number of social rules and expectations if they are to become participants in the culture. In our society, children need to learn that certain classes of adults (such as teachers and doctors) are addressed by titles. They are also expected to learn that it is unacceptable to be naked in public even if it is 90 degrees and sunny outside, and so forth.

Actions of this sort are examples of social conventions. Conventions are shared, uniform behaviors determined by the social system in which they are formed (Turiel 1983). Over time, through accepted usage, these standards serve to maintain social organization. While conventions are important, they are arbitrary. This is be-
on moral education (Piaget 1932, Kohlberg 1984). Within those earlier views, it is only at the higher stages of moral development that morality (justice) is differentiated from and displaces convention as the basis for moral judgments. Over the past decade, however, 27 published accounts have reported research demonstrating that morality and convention are differentiated at very early ages and constitute distinct conceptual and developmental systems. These studies are summarized in several recent reviews (Nucci 1982, Turiel 1983, Turiel et al. in press). In brief, these studies have found the following.

- Moral transgressions are viewed as wrong, irrespective of the presence of governing rules, while conventional acts are viewed as wrong only if they violate an existing rule or standard.
- Individuals view conventional standards as culturally relative and alterable, while moral prescriptions are viewed as universal and unchangeable.
- The forms of social interaction in the context of moral events differ qualitatively from interactions in the context of conventions. Specifically, children's and adults' responses to events in the moral domain focus on features intrinsic to the acts (such as harm or justice), while responses in the context of conventions focus on aspects of the social order (rules, regulations, normative expectations).
- Individuals tend to treat moral transgressions as more serious than violations of convention and tend to view prosocial moral acts as better and more positive than adherence to conventions.

While the majority of these studies were conducted in the United States, essentially the same results have been obtained in the Netherlands (Turiel in preparation), Nigeria (Hollos et al. in press), Taiwan (Song et al. 1985), and the Virgin Islands (Nucci et al. 1983).

Finally, a series of studies involving several hundred Catholic, fundamentalist Christian, and Jewish children showed that children make distinctions between matters of morality and religious doctrine similar to the distinctions secular children draw between morality and convention (Nucci 1985). Most agreed that moral transgressions such as stealing, hitting, or slander would still be wrong even if there were no religious rules against them, because they are harmful to others. However, work on the Sabbath, women preaching in church or synagogue, and the use of contraceptives, for instance, would be all right in the children's view if there were no religious rules or scriptural injunctions concerning them. This research indicates that conceptions of morality (justice and beneficence) are independent of religion.

**Development Within the Moral and Conventional Domains**

While a young child has an intuitive grasp that actions such as hitting and stealing are prima facie wrong, the child's moral concepts do not reflect a fully developed moral system. For example, although young children view it as wrong to keep all of the classroom toys to oneself and not share any of them with the other children (Damon 1977, Nucci 1981, Smetana 1981), preschoolers think it is quite all right to keep all of the favored toys to oneself as long as one shares the remainder (Damon 1977, 1980). Thus, while the young child's morality is structured by concepts of justice, it reflects a rather egocentric moral perspective.

With development, the child's moral perspective gives way to progressively more objective and inclusive notions of equality and reciprocity. With respect to sharing, for example, the four-year-old's premise—whosoever wants the most should get it—is replaced by the idea that distributive decisions should be based on strict equality or reciprocity—everybody should get the same. This strict reciprocity is re-
progressively more adequate forms of restatement that precedes the adolescent's view of convention as important to the maintenance of the social system.

**Fostering Moral Development**

If even very young children differentiate between actions in the moral and conventional domains and reason differently about the two, then moral or values education should clearly reflect this distinction. Moral education should move students through progressively more adequate forms of restatement that precedes the adolescent's view of convention as important to the maintenance of the social system.

**Moral Development and the General Curriculum**

Moral education should be integrated within the curriculum and not take the form of a "special" program or unit. A program that is simply inserted into the curriculum carries with it an inherent artificiality and discontinuity that renders such interventions incompatible with the more general aims of teachers and students. The life of such programs is generally brief. Regarding one of his own early programs of this genre, Lawrence Kohlberg (1985) quipped.

While the intervention operation was a success, the patient died. When we went back a year later, we found not a single student present. The life of such programs is generally brief.

**Moral Discussion: The "Plus One" Myth**

As the Kohlberg quote implies, the central method used to generate moral development has been moral discussion. The use of discussion acknowledges that social growth is not simply a process of learning society's rules and values, but a gradual process in which students actively transform their understanding of morality and social convention through reflection and construction. That is, students' growth is a function of meaning-making rather than mere compliance with externally imposed values.
Despite the widespread and longstanding use of discussion of moral dilemmas as an educational method, it is only in the past five years that careful research of the mechanism underlying the effectiveness of moral discussion has been conducted (Berkowitz 1982, Berkowitz and Gibbs 1983, Berkowitz et al. 1980, Gibbs et al. 1983). On the basis of that research we can discern some long-held notions about moral discussion and focus our efforts on more effective interactional patterns.

The central myth uncovered in the research is that advances in the moral judgment of children are aided by teacher statements one stage above the modal reasoning level of the children (Blatt and Kohlberg 1975). Not only are such statements difficult to generate and therefore rare in classroom discussions, including those conducted by trained experts, but they seem far less relevant to changes in moral reasoning than statements by peers. The research by Berkowitz and his colleagues suggests that teachers serve less as instruments for direct intervention than as agents for the facilitation of peer discussion.

From the research we can identify three characteristics of effective moral discussion:

1. Conflict According to Berkowitz (1982), stage change occurred most readily in students who disagreed about the moral solution to a dilemma. Consensus on the outcome reduced the likelihood that students would challenge or otherwise respond to one another’s reasoning and thus reduced the impact of the discussion on students’ existing notions of morality. The educational implication of this finding is that the issues or problems teachers select as the basis for moral discussion should be ones likely to generate disagreement.

2. Stage disparity. The optimal distance in developmental level among students participating in moral discussion is on the order of one-half stage. This stage disparity is about what one finds among students in a typical classroom and implies that normal heterogeneity among students is sufficient for effective moral discussion.

3. Transactive discussion. In their analyses of student discourse, Berkowitz and his colleagues identified several forms of student statements that are related to moral development. They labeled such statements transacts. Transacts are characterized by listeners’ efforts to integrate the speaker’s statements into their own framework before generating a response. Transacts are responses that attempt to extend the logic of the speaker’s argument, refute the assumptions of the speaker’s argument, or provide a point of commonality or resolution between the two conflicting positions. Listener behavior that was not found to be associated with moral development includes forms of discourse in which the listener restates the speaker’s argument (in the style of Carl Rogers) or engages in collective monologue in which the listener’s statements seem not to have reflected those of the speaker.

Cooperative Goal Structures
David Johnson (1981) has suggested that successful moral discussion is more likely to take place in classrooms employing cooperative goal structures in a democratic atmosphere than in the traditional classroom environment. These structures contribute to moral development. In a cooperative goal structure, students perceive that they can obtain their goal (e.g., learn a given body of material, complete a project, obtain a course grade) if and only if the other students with whom they are cooperatively linked obtain theirs (Johnson 1981, p. 280).
“Most children agree that moral transgressions such as stealing, hitting, or slander would still be wrong even if there were no religious rules against them, because they are harmful or unjust to others.”

In addition to being linked to positive social outcomes (such as increased perspective-taking and moral stage, decrease in racial and ethnic stereotyping), cooperative goal structures have been associated with increases in student motivation and academic achievement (Slavin 1980, Slavin et al. 1985). Thus, the use of cooperative education may serve the dual purpose of promoting moral development and linking moral education to the broader curriculum.

Classroom Management

Each aspect of moral education discussed thus far is embedded within the more general social climate of the classroom; the rules, structure, and sanctions that make up what Philip Jackson (1968) calls the “hidden curriculum.” While specific classroom management practices may vary, the overall features of classrooms that contribute to moral development are as follows:

- **Firm.** Classroom rules and expectations are known and upheld by school authorities.
- **Fair.** Rules are limited to those necessary for learning and are evenly applied; consequences are moderate rather than severe.
- **Flexible.** There is room for negotiation between students and teachers regarding the establishment, removal, and enforcement of school and classroom rules.

In addition to the above characteristics of classroom and school climate, practices associated with moral development include the use of reasoning to respond to transgressions (Lickona 1983, Roekemper 1984). Research indicates that students are sensitive to whether teacher responses are concordant with the domain (moral or conventional) of the breach. Students evaluate not only their judgments of teacher responses but also the teachers as respondents. Students rated highest those teachers who responded to moral transgressions with statements focusing on the effects of the acts (“Joe, that really hurt Mike”). Rated lowest were teachers who responded with statements of school rules or normative expectations (“That’s not the way for a Hawthorne student to act”). Rated lowest were teachers who used simple commands (“Stop it!” or “Don’t hit”). As one would expect, students rated highest those teachers who responded to breaches of convention with rule statements, or evaluations of acts as deviant, and rated lower those teachers who responded to such transgressions in terms of their effects on others (“When you sit like that, it really upsets people”). As with moral transgressions, the use of simple commands was rated the least adequate.

This research suggests that students attend to the informational content of teacher responses to transgressions. It also suggests that the domain of teacher responses to transgressions may prove to be an important variable for future studies of the relations between classroom management techniques and social development in children.

The Universal Nature of Morality

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1982) has characterized the current historical period as one of moral dis- sention. Yet in the midst of this moral babel, the majority of parents expect schools to contribute to the moral development of children. The research indicates that morality is centered on a set of universal concerns for justice, fairness, and human welfare that are available even to young children. Those findings provide a basis for moral education that is both nonindoctrinative and nonrelativistic. The universal and prescriptive nature of morality means that educators can do more than merely clarify student values. At the same time, the developmental and constructivist basis of moral knowledge is commensurate with interactive rather than directive educational practices.

References


Gibbs, J., S. Schnell, M. Berkowitz, and D. Goldstein. “Relations Between Formal Operations and Logical Conflict Resolu-
If...

You want students to desire knowledge

You want students to understand the content clearly and quickly

You want students to understand the immediate usefulness of that content

You want that understanding to lead to a further and higher level questioning

Then

Give them a reason

Define the concept

Let them try it themselves

Let the students create the questions

It can be done. It is being done.

Bernice McCarthy's

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