

TOPIC FOR “HEALTHY“ MORAL EDUCATION

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Abstract: *Social development demonstrates that the contemporary moral education is the critical point of the school of today. Teaching practice confirms the fact that in education, space is missing for the formation of positive moral features of the pupil's personality. This work presents one of the possibilities of the stimulation of the moral growth, development of moral competence of those who are being educated by means of a specific method called analytic discussion. We were interested in knowing in which manner an analysis of a specific moral problem influences in the moral reasoning of the individuals. Research in which 44 university students participated ($AM_{(age)}=21.18$), was carried out in the course on the psychology of moral development. Results obtained indicate important differences in the moral reasoning of the students, both at the beginning and the end of the above-mentioned course, and as compared to a control group of students (who did not participate in the course); in both cases, the difference manifested itself in an increased tendency towards the application of higher moral principles and values. This may lead us to a conclusion that moral reasoning may be influenced, and at the same time we think that the analytic discussion method could be one of the possible tools for moral education.*

Keywords: *moral education; school; analytic discussion method; moral reasoning; pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional levels.*

Theoretical Bases

In recent years, due to wider social contexts, the topic of the moral has been discussed more frequently; education towards values has been addressed and the character of one's personality has been stressed. Such topics are related to moral education, which every time more frequently becomes a key issue not only for theorists but also practitioners. Several professionals (Bendl, 2001; Piššová, 1991; Prunner, 2002; Vacek, 1996 a i.) agree that the contemporary school has given up activities focused on the development of moral characteristics of pupils and students. Education in school does not pay enough attention to a systematic positive formation of the moral. Such activities are absent which would offer pupils the possibility to co-operate, discuss, justify, argument, promote and confront their own opinions with opinions of the others. The status of the development of moral consciousness, moral education, is alarming.

When evaluating the traditional moral education in schools, Bull (1973) identifies its multiple critical points. He says that moral education is based on abstract principles which completely neglect specific experience of the pupils and students. It is reduced just to abstract schemes and structures of ideas, which are so abstract that they divert from real, common, everyday life.

According to Bull, another problem is the fact that the emphasised values, stressed principles and accentuated standards are implemented in practical application by means of deduction, which means in the direction from the general to the specific. As a consequence, principles, standards and rules are strongly perceived as something external, strange and irregular.

Bull's critic also points out to the passivity of the individual who is being educated. In the educational process, a space is absent in which the pupil or student could assert her/himself – participate actively in her/his own moral development.

On the basis of the above-mentioned declarations, it is possible to resume that moral education is based on abstract principles, ignoring conflicts existing in specific moral situations.

Moral education focuses on the development of moral consciousness, which according to Lickon (1992) includes moral knowledge – this means the learning of standards, laws and rules – which should help to distinguish between the correct and the incorrect. The angle of view is another important part of the moral consciousness – ability to view events with eyes of other people, to acquire their point of view of the given situation. Moral reasoning as a subsequent component of moral consciousness includes knowledge of moral standards and a manner of thinking about moral problems – the manner in which an individual perceives moral problems and attempts to solve them.¹ Finally, moral consciousness includes its last component – moral decision-making – an ability to make a decision taking into account the existing possibilities and also considering possible impacts following from such a decision.

Considering a broad definition of the moral education, it also covers the issue of moral attitudes, which mostly stands for a critical relationship reflecting a partial rational cognition, but mainly a subjective emotional evaluation of moral problems.

Moral education motivates an individual towards a moral behaviour – a behaviour which is in compliance with moral standards and values. Moral behaviour is reflected in our real actions and in the manner in which we present ourselves externally.²

In the educational practice, objectives of moral education should be identified. Its content should focus on the creation of positive moral features of the personality different from its current focus – searching for and finding of defects, negative deviations from what is permitted and prescribed.

Critical judging and evaluation of standards and principles in relationship to specific experience are the basic conditions of moral development.

¹ Moral reasoning and its development was addressed especially by J. Piaget (1932), whose concept was further developed by L. Kohlberg (1978), who created the theory of the development of moral decisions.

² However, harmony may not necessarily exist between moral behaviour and moral reasoning. Moral behaviour is influenced by the level of moral reasoning and situation factors.

The Analytic Discussion Method

The analytic discussion method creates an environment for the discussion and confrontation of contradictory standpoints and attitudes – analysis of a moral problem, solution of a moral dilemma. This may be one of the possible ways towards a positive influencing in the moral character of individuals.

The analytic discussion method may focus on different topics with a moral content. After an introductory presentation of a moral dilemma (dilemmatic story; conflict micro-story; moral problem), the discussion starts; it should take place in an environment of freedom and creativity. During the discussion, the key approach should be: no moralising, no showing displeasure, no criticising and no offering of solutions. This is followed by a final reflection and a certain summary of pros and contras, and the confrontation of the acquired view of the problem with the opinion formulated at the beginning of the discussion.

The Objective of the Research and Research Hypothesis

Our objective was to research moral reasoning of university students. We were interested in the difference in moral reasoning in two types of situations – before and after the completion of a course on the psychology of moral development. We observed the impact of the analytic discussion method applied in the course on the psychology of moral development on the moral reasoning of students.

We anticipated that the moral reasoning of students would be different at the beginning of the term, before the completion of the course on the psychology of moral development, and at the end of the term, after an active participation in the course.

In terms of the moral reasoning, the students who have completed the course on the psychology of moral development will differ from those who have not completed such a course.

Research Tool

As a research-method tool, we used a questionnaire of the solution of moral dilemmas representing always some personal or social problem (see Rest, 1997).³ (Ráčzová, Babinčák, 2009). The focal respondents were to express their respective opinions on eight justifications of different solutions of the given problem, using for such a purpose a five-point scale, ranging from “I generally agree“ to “I generally disagree“. Four out of the given arguments were in favour of the solution of the described conflict, and four expressed a disagreement with the presented solution to the problem. Justifications of the moral dilemma solution corresponded to three levels of moral reasoning. Such levels represented the basic criterion for the evaluation of the solution of moral dilemmas by the students:

Level 1 – pre-conventional level: egocentric orientation, pragmatic moral; individual immediate interests are the priority; the behaviour is focused

³ A more detailed analysis of such a methodology is performed by two authors, Ráčzová a Babinčák (2009), in their work *Foundations of the Psychology of the moral*.

on the satisfaction of one's needs and its goal is the obtaining of maximum advantages or minimum negative impacts;

Level 2 – conventional level: individual requirements are adapted to the requirements of a social group; attitude of loyalty to social expectations; conformity with standard social behaviour; observance of order;

Level 3 – post-conventional level: one's conscience is the criterion of the moral reasoning; respect for others; responsibility of an individual to universal moral principles; loyalty to one's moral principles.

Data obtained from the research have been statistically processed by means of the SPSS program, version 15.0.

The Course of the Research

The research was carried out in one term during the course on the psychology of moral development. The course included 11 regular weekly group sessions, approximately 80 minutes each.

Research Group

24 university students participated in the research; they studied in the second year of the bachelor studies of psychology. This was an experimental group of an average age of 21.18 years. There were 6 men and 18 women in the group.

A control group was composed of 20 university students of the second year of teaching studies of academic subjects; their average age was also 21.18 years. There were 8 men in the group, the rest were women.

Research Results

Both at the beginning and at the end of the term, all three levels of moral reasoning were observed in the experimental group; the situation is shown in Table 1:

Tab. 1 Levels of moral reasoning observed at the beginning and at the end of the course on the psychology of moral development in the experimental group (N = 24)

Moral reasoning Levels	Beginning (AM)	End (AM)	t-test
Pre-conventional	5.00	2.16	3.32***
Conventional	1.76	1.00	1.20*
Post-conventional	1.02	3.62	- 12.10***

Explanations: * p < .05; *** p < .001

At the beginning of the course, the pre-conventional level of moral reasoning was markedly preferred in the experimental group when solving moral dilemmas. After an active participation in the regular meetings in which the analytic discussion method was applied, a significant drop could be observed in the preference of individual necessities of the students ($t_{(22)} = 3.32$; $p < 0.001$), as well as there was a decrease in the interest in reasoning according to rules and necessities of the group or authority, which is reflected

in the conventional level of moral reasoning ($t_{(22)} = 1.20$; $p < 0.05$). It should be noted that after the completion of the course on the psychology of moral development, the students showed a significant and important tendency towards reasoning in compliance with their own freely chosen moral principles when solving a moral dilemma. At the end of the term, the post-conventional level of moral reasoning became markedly dominant ($t_{(22)} = -12.10$; $p < 0.001$).

It may be stated that moral reasoning of university students is different before and after the completion of the course on the psychology of moral development in which the analytical discussion method is applied. The difference could be seen in a decreased tendency towards reasoning on the pre-conventional and conventional levels and in an increased orientation towards the post-conventional level of reasoning.

Tab. 2 Levels of moral reasoning observed in the control group (N = 20)

Moral reasoning Levels	Beginning (AM)	End (AM)	t-test
Pre-conventional	3.34	3.18	0.75
Conventional	2.36	2.60	- 0.64
Post-conventional	1.77	2.00	- 0.41

In the control group, no statistically important change was observed in the solving of moral dilemmas (see tab. 2). If comparison is made of the mean values of both measurements, it is evident that in terms of moral reasoning, the students of teaching of academic subjects preferred mostly their respective individual necessities and interests (pre-conventional level). The fulfilment of social expectations and loyal attitude towards the others (conventional level) were the second criteria in the solution of moral dilemma; the tendency towards the evaluation of moral dilemmas according to one's inner moral principles was the least frequently applied approach (post-conventional level).

Tab. 3 Comparison of the observed levels of moral reasoning in the experimental (N = 24) and control groups (N = 20)

Moral reasoning Levels	Experimental Group (AM)	Control Group (AM)	F-test
Pre-conventional	2.74	1.62	0.75
Conventional	1.87	0.76	- 0.64
Post-conventional	2.50	1.75	- 0.41***

Explanations: *** $p < .001$

Table 3 shows that as to the post-conventional level of moral reasoning, there is a statistically important difference between the experimental and control groups. The students who completed the course on the psychology of moral development differ from students who did not attend the course. The difference shows an increased tendency of the students who completed the course on the psychology of moral development towards the resolving of moral dilemmas on the post-conventional level ($F_{(2,42)} = - 0.41$; $p < .001$).

Conclusion

Our objective was to observe the impact of a special method – the analytic discussion – on the development of moral reasoning. Results obtained confirmed what we had anticipated: the analytic discussion method may contribute to the development of moral reasoning and judgement. After the completion of the course on the psychology of moral development, the students used the post-conventional moral point of view when resolving moral dilemmas, which corresponds to the highest level of moral reasoning.

The principle of the analytic discussion method is the fact that the solution of hypothetical dilemmas in the “sheltered” school environment stimulates the same capabilities which are necessary for the managing of real dilemmas encountered in the everyday life. The method of the solution of moral dilemmas may be compared to a vaccine – it stimulates the capability of the organism (individual) to protect itself from the virus due to a previous vaccination with an attenuated-virus doses (Lind, 2002). Many research studies with psychological and educational topics prove its efficiency (see Enright et al., 1983; Higgins, 1980; Leming, 1985; Lockwood, 1978; Schläfli et al., 1985; Lind, 2002), because individuals who have been taught how to solve conflicts of controversial values and principles were capable of finding more efficient solutions to everyday-life dilemmas.

Due to a limited number of participants, it is impossible to come to generally valid conclusions. However, on the basis of the research results we may assume that the analytic discussion method appears to be one of the possible ways towards moral development.

Efficient moral education requires thorough training; it is an art of the creation of a productive teaching environment (Lind, 2002). The analytic discussion method, the method of solution of moral dilemmas, is applicable at primary and secondary schools, at universities and also in adult people education. It has a strong impact on moral development, it stimulates moral reasoning and also moral behaviour, and, as Vacek (1996) affirms, “it continuously inspires to moral self-reflection and contemplation on moral self-perfection”.⁴

NÁMET PRE „ZDRAVÚ“ MORÁLNU EDUKÁCIU

Abstrakt: Spoločenský vývoj ukazuje, že súčasná morálna výchova je kritickým miestom dnešných škôl. Pedagogická prax potvrdzuje, že v edukácii chýba priestor pre formovanie pozitívnych morálnych stránok osobnosti žiaka. Príspevok prezentuje jednu z možností, ako stimulovať morálny rast, rozvíjať morálnu kompetenciu vychovávaných prostredníctvom špecifickej metódy, analytickej diskusie. Zaujímalo nás, akým spôsobom ovplyvňuje rozbor konkrétneho morálneho problému morálne usudzovanie jednotlivcov. Výskum, ktorého sa zúčastnilo 44 vysokoškolských študentov (AM(vek)=21,18), prebiehal počas kurzu psychológie morálneho vývinu. Získané výsledky naznačujú významné rozdiely v morálnom usudzovaní študentov, jednak na

⁴ An interesting solution based on philosophical reflection on such a topic is offered by Kondrla and Blaščiková (2006).

začiatku a konci uvedenej výučby, jednak v porovnaní s kontrolnou skupinou študentov (neabsolvovali daný kurz), pričom v oboch prípadoch sa diferencie prejavili vo zvýšenej tendencii uplatňovať vyššie morálne princípy a hodnoty. Môžeme sa tak domnievať, že morálne usudzovanie je možné ovplyvňovať a zároveň sa nazdávame, že analytická diskusná metóda sa eventuálne ukazuje ako jedna z možných spôsobov morálnej výchovy.

Kľúčové slová: morálna výchova, škola, analytická diskusná metóda, morálne usudzovanie, predkonvenčná, konvenčná a postkonvenčná rovina