

ACQUISITION OF BASIC ETHICS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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General rules and behavioral norms determining our life are already acquired in early childhood, in kindergarten, even though in latter life stages individual progress may overwrite some of these rules. In Hungary from school year 2013/14 parents may decide for their children to learn Religion or Ethics in primary school. The name of the subject 'Ethics' may sound too strict, and could recall the old ages for some people; depicting an old teacher reading endless paragraphs of rules, commands and obligations from a thick book to the little students in uniform, sitting straight, with their hands at their back in the classroom. But the aim of Ethics classes is not making children scared, but to help them learn playfully, how they should behave in everyday life. It is important for them to understand why they should behave so, and make these patterns interiorize by time. Ethical education has three basic pillars, which are built and based on each other: knowledge of concepts and norms, thinking and ethically correct behavior. In our previous researches we examined the knowledge of primary school students about ethical concepts via questionnaires; and we also made a research on whether they apply it in real life as well. Relying on these results the current situation of the education of 9-10-year-old students will be introduced, including their achievements and deficiencies. Patterns of behavior, which are forced on young individuals always imply resistance, therefore at this age more sophisticated tools should be used for education, keeping experience and active learning in focus. Pedagogues need to provide an opportunity for students to experience the situations and find the socially preferred solution on their own. With the help of stories, simulations and the indirect guidance of pedagogues, children can build up their own value system. Discussions and debates provide a platform to get acquainted with expectations, express individual desires, diminish fears and build up a vision for the future. Interactive methods enhance the development of ethically correct thinking.

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Ethics

Traditional Christian ethics regards knowledge as an important value – however, draws attention to the fact that knowledge is only an asset, and cannot be understood as an individual value or final aim *Beran* (2007). Knowledge will work on the use of humanity only if it is 'matched with ethical values' (Brandenstein, 1938:189). Ethics have been created by the society, therefore its birth is dated back to the birth of society. Ethical norms and rules are continuously being formed and modified (Páll, 2013).

Ethics mean the human behavior towards other people and society; it is a set of laws and rules, which everyone has an obligation to follow (Burai, 2013). Ethics evaluate and control human behavior from the point of view of 'good' and 'bad'. It controls the practical side of human relationships, and act as a set of values, which should be held by the members of the society. Morality or ethics of a human being mean their relationship towards ethical values. Only those ethical norms become part of the ethics of a society, which are widespread enough, and are generally accepted. The most important task of education of ethics is to protect the traditional ethics, common values; and to enhance the forms of behavior necessary for everyday life in human society. Ethical norms and proper forms of behavior are crucial in every society. According to the researches of Paul Bloom, even infants have a sense of ethics; however, it is still discussed, whether this sense is born or learnt ability. In education of ethics the first 'teachers' are the parents, the family and the environment surrounding the children. In this process of education kindergartens and schools have both enhancing and obstructive role (Páll, 2013).

Education of Ethics

Nowadays educational institutions put a huge emphasis on cognitive development of their students; however, social and ethical development is equally important for the proper development of personality as a whole (Péter & Deák, 2013).

Development of social competences may happen in direct or indirect manner. According to *Fisher* (2008) under direct development we understand the specified improvement of social abilities and skills, and social problem-solving thinking. During this process we may apply the methods of modeling, problem solving, cooperative learning and role-plays or dramatizing. Indirect development happens via processing learning material, with the methods of analyzing tales, poems, pictures, photos, articles and other artifacts (Fisher, 2008).

Patterns of behavior, which are forced on young individuals always imply resistance, therefore at this age more sophisticated tools should be used for education, keeping experience and active learning in focus. Parents and pedagogues have to be consequent and sophisticated in this process of education. Teaching of ethical norms and rules starts in the moment of birth, the arrival to the family. Via continuous repetition, norms will be acquired; their application will become a habit. During this learning-teaching process it is crucial to make the knowledge conscious, to always give children evaluation, and answers to the 'why's. The person, who teaches, and the whole teaching process will become authentic only if the whole process is based on personal leading by example, which children may imitate (Burai, 2013). Ethical development is a complex procedure, which lasts a lifetime.

Measuring knowledge of ethical concepts in primary school

In our previous researches in 2010-12 we examined the knowledge of primary school students about ethical concepts via questionnaires; and we also made a research on whether they apply it in real life as well.

120 students of 4th grade participated in our research. We chose this age group, because these children are already starting to think individually, but are strongly influenced by adults as well. The research covered variables such as gender, social situation, place of living, and differences caused by these variables as well. In the first part of the research, schoolbooks of the fourth grade were examined from ethics point of view, which was followed by two rounds of questioning; with the help of a unique questionnaire.

During the examination of schoolbooks we found that indirectly most of the subjects deal with the basic concepts of ethics, necessary in primary school. Reading books, and the ones about the environment discuss the issues of ethics directly, just like the planned subjects of current affairs; therefore after the research was made, we collected all the concepts discussed in these books, which may be connected to ethics. The first questionnaire contained 50 concepts in connection with ethics, all in alphabetical order; and the children were asked to choose ten, which they regard as the most important ones to follow. According to the ranking of children, the concepts Honest and kind were on the first place (71%); followed by friendly (62%), brave (61%), good and trustworthy (53%), persistent (50%), sincere (38%), frank (37%), clever (36%), helpful and benign (34%).

It is an interesting question, where children meet with these concepts. They have not only heard these in the school, but also at home – which means that the concepts might bear with different meaning for children from various background (Kulcsár, 2011). Probably due to this reason, the concepts boasting, dishonest was chosen by 7% of the children; immoral and teasing by 3%, hostile, liar and bad by 1%. We assume, that those children, who chose hostile, irresponsible, bossy, liar, complaining and bad (1%) are more aggressive than their fellows. They find integration usually harder than others. According to the experiences of our research, some concepts were unfamiliar to the children; or they could not define the meaning of them, even though they were all collected from their schoolbooks. In these cases there is a huge emphasis on the pedagogues, who need to realize the children, who find it hard to integrate, and help them in the process.

In the second part of the research, we examined the conscious level of the concepts, practical application, behavior and moral thinking. Children were asked about the ten concepts, which they regarded as the most important: they could define it properly, what the exact meaning of the concepts was,

and were able to describe the necessary behaviors in different situations – however, they admitted that in real life they do not often do so. This research has shown, that the children’s knowledge of concepts is satisfying, even though there are some gaps in it; however, the process of interiorization is not yet fully complete at this age. This is why the education of ethics is highly important.

Ethics in school

Ethics may not be taught as a separate subject in schools; it is more effective, if the basic concepts are integrated to other, common subjects – but for this a greater creativity of pedagogues is required. According to the National Curricula, ethics may be integrated into the content of the following subjects: arts, Hungarian language and literature, environmental studies, crafts, lifestyle and practice. Education will be more successful, if the basic ethical norms are part of the life in school, and are integrated into the educational material and system, matching to different topics (Páll, 2013).

Forms of behavior, which are enforced, may generate resistance in children. For the students of primary schools new, unique methods should be applied, which are based on experiential learning. Pedagogues need to help children in order to be able to discover values in their own lives. Children do not acquire ethical norms via speech, but via actions. In this age the aim of education is to develop the basics of value consciousness, which can be facilitated by taking care of each other and living the moments of life together. Children and adults both need rules and boundaries, which coordinate their life (Stöcklin-Meier, 2005).

An important pillar of education of ethics is good manners. All the people living in a society are expected to learn the ethical rules, which make the basis for living together, both in legal and ethical mean. These rules influence behavior and human relationships as well; therefore for children it is crucial to not just acquire these rules, they should also be able to apply them in real life (Kulcsár, 2011). Development does not solely depend on education; parents and family also play a crucial part in this process. Families provide children with a virtual guidebook for life, even before they enter the educational system; which means that the guidance children receive may differ in important questions. This can mean advantage for some, but disadvantage for others. Mother tongue is a highly important basis for the process of learning ethics: children may have knowledge of different set of words, rules, behave differently in some situations and solve problems in unique ways.

Processing movies and online sources

In our modern society media has a strong influencing role as well, which may not be excluded from studies. Mass media may affect children in several situations – computers, internet and television have a stronger, while radio and theatres a significantly smaller influence. Students growing up with weak parental control may experience more negative than positive impressions. Parents and pedagogues need to watch out, which effects they enhance, and which they should try to eliminate. This way they can teach children how to distinguish between good and bad, desirable and not desirable. Negative, unethical behaviors have to be prevented (Bíró, 1976). During classes of ethics movies and online sources matching to the topics may be considered. While talking about movie experiences, children’s

opinions can be confirmed, and wrong interpretations have a chance to be discovered also. The effect of media cannot be overlooked, since negative experiences of children may lead to fear and depression.

Sharing experiences and opinions honestly is not possible without trust among the children and between students and teachers at the same time. A contract signed on the first lesson about the rules and conditions of ethics classes can provide a good basis for creating the necessary atmosphere. The contract should be formed together with the students, but has to include keeping secrets, considering and honoring each other (Páll, 2013).

Opportunities provided by tales

In primary schools tales can provide a good basis for education of ethics. While listening to the tales, children can find answers to their questions concerning ethical issues; and they can express their own views in role-plays and games. When dealing with tales about animals there is a good opportunity to summarize human characteristics; and classes of essay writing provide a platform for applying these concepts as well. It is important to always provide some time to talk, to express the opinions about the cases. In the 'good fairy' exercise children have the possibility to transform bad characteristics into good; and to think their own behaviors over, considering new aspects as well (Burai, 2013). Tales are good means of developing a sense of ethics. The interactive situations between children and the story teller contain the opportunity for education too. Tales affect children via their souls. Using tales takes the age characteristics of children into account, and provides a set of tools for different sizes of groups to solve ethical dilemmas of children. For younger ones simple story telling, playing and drawing are perfect means. Older ones may also read, dramatize and create their own tales. However, pedagogues need to always keep in mind that transmitting ethical knowledge should be an experience rather than a subject, an obligation sanctioned with grades (Péter & Deák, 2013). Finishing and playing open ended tales provides an opportunity to experience different situations and to acquire actions matching the norms.

Location of ethics classes

In Hungary the majority of schools apply the traditional row of desks, where children sit behind each other, and the pedagogue sits or stands facing them. This structure enables the teacher to build eye contact with all the students, but the children cannot interact with each other. It would be optimal to have a corner in the classroom with a round carpet and pillows, where children can see each other too. The framing technique of the sessions provides safety and comfort for the children. Lighting a tale-candle at the beginning of the session, and singing and opening song can form the atmosphere for the following talk. The sessions may be closed by putting the candle out. Colorful sitting pillows can enhance the ad-hoc formation of groups, and the relaxed atmosphere. The lack of desks breaks the boundaries down, and eliminates the strict presence of scholar environment. Likable environment and cozy classroom can create experience for children, and make them more relaxed by the feeling of home. Group talks are facilitated by the round structure, since everyone sees the others, and puts a greater emphasis on metacommunication.

In the lack of such a space, the round structure can still be created by moving the desks and chairs. This can work also with older children,

facilitate personal relationships and relieve fear and anxiety. In good weather the circle can also be created outdoor, which is a much more open space for free talks. Different topics may require different environments; a museum, a park, or a thematic exhibition can be useful for some areas. Talking about a sculpture, a painting, a play or a movie can open up new and interesting questions, which would not come up in scholar environment. A school trip provides a chance to discover different cultures, explore communities, the material world and to analyze complex structures both in social and material manner. Crossing the walls of the school takes children closer to the world, and gives them a better understanding of life as well.

Summary

The studies introduced above clarify, that several methods exist, which makes it possible for children to acquire the social norms and ethics as an experience. Pedagogues need to provide an opportunity for students to experience the situations and find the socially preferred solution on their own. With the help of stories, simulations and the indirect guidance of pedagogues, children can build up their own value system. Discussions and debates provide a platform to get acquainted with expectations, express individual desires, diminish fears and build up a vision for the future. Interactive methods enhance the development of ethically correct thinking. It is useful to apply situations and problems from the everyday life of children for demonstration. In our society with more and more lonely, silent people, talk has a crucial role: children have the opportunity to express their own view and ideas. Lessons built up in this manner help children understand the essence of the basic concepts of ethics. The lessons about ethics normally just start the conversations, which may be continued later on, without the mediation of a pedagogue. With creating situations and real-life problems, we can facilitate the ability of children to solve conflicts, and measure, whether their concepts of ethics are right in fact.

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