

MORAL DECISION MAKING IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM: APPLYING KOHLBERG AND GILLIGAN



by

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Introduction

What is virtue? How is virtue acquired? Can virtue be taught? In a recent unit on ancient Greece, my class of highly capable fourth and fifth grade students tackled these questions in the context of the Socratic dialogue in the *Meno*. The following response of a fifth-grader named Zachary, illustrates the level of moral consciousness of which elementary students are capable:

"Well, I don't know that I can define virtue or morality and I don't know that a person can teach it to another person in the way that Socrates wanted; after all, 'you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink!' However, I do know that the Kohlberg/Gilligan chart that we have used in Ms. Fraser's classroom for the past two years has sure helped me become aware of my thinking and that I need to think about doing the right thing for the right reason! I try to always think about taking the 'moral high road' when I have choices of right and wrong to make."

The purpose of this article is to share a method I have used successfully with my fourth and fifth grade students to help them live out good character. Thomas Lickona (1991) defines good character as knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good. In the spirit of this definition, I want to help students set their moral sights on fair and caring ways of thinking and acting. This process of moral development is not just for "gifted students" or for older learners. The moral development of all students must be addressed through the classroom environment.

Applying Moral Reasoning in the Elementary Classroom

I believe that Lawrence Kohlberg's (1984) criteria of reason and justice and Carol Gilligan's (1982) notions of caring and community are essentials for moral functioning. The blending of these theories promises a sense of gender balance as critics have suggested that Kohlberg's theory reflects a male perspective where Gilligan explores a feminine disposition toward moral development. In my opinion, we need to move beyond what is stereotypically "male and female." Many males may approach moral decision making from a more caring/relationship orientation while many females may arrive at moral decisions through the use of reason and the principle of justice. I tell my students that we will practice moving between the horns of a dilemma by affirming the "and" rather than the "or" when assimilating the ideas of both Kohlberg and Gilligan into our moral decision making. We will identify the positive ideas present in both theories and use these ideas to address moral issues, decision making and actions.

Because I teach in the public schools, it is important that my approach to moral reasoning is sensitive to various family value systems regardless of political or religious persuasion. My approach is intended to enhance and support the work of parents as they guide the moral reasoning of their children in the home and in the community. For some students however, positive values are not consistently taught in their homes and my approach to moral reasoning will be their first exposure to morally responsible thinking, decision making and acting.

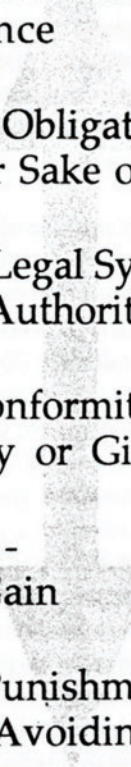
Using the ideas embedded in the theories of Kohlberg and Gilligan, I begin the year by displaying a chart on our classroom wall which provides a framework to help students think and act from a position of moral awareness and internal control (Figure 1). I introduce the chart by discussing with students background information related to both theories. The chart serves as a guide to encourage students to reflect on their decision making and their actions as opposed to thoughtlessly relying on external controls. The chart also provides the common framework necessary to analyze and discuss the issues and circumstances students face as they reflect upon and apply moral reasoning in their daily lives. It assists students to think about the individual's development from external control to internal control; how to be reasonable and caring in a social setting; and how we might create a world shaped by both justice and a sense of community. We also discuss the fact that the theories of Kohlberg and Gilligan are not the only voices in the world of ethics and moral reasoning. However, their theories do provide a starting point, a common language and a place of reference from which to begin.

Following this introduction, small groups of five or six students plan and act out various vignettes drawn from their own personal school experience, incidents in the community or from current events. Students are asked to assimilate Kohlberg's levels of moral reasoning and Gilligan's sense of caring and community as they demonstrate their understanding of these theories. Positive and negative social choices stand in sharp contrast as students articulate a classroom community through the medium of creative drama. Often the skits illustrate a developmental moral progression as students move from "doing the right thing" based on lower level reasons such as fear of punishment,

Criteria for Moral Decision Making

KOHLBERG: REASON & JUSTICE

INTERNAL

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- 6 Universal Ethical Principles -
Conscience
 - 5 Societal Obligations -
Rules for Sake of Agreement
 - 4 Law & Legal System -
Duty to Authority
 - 3 Social Conformity -
Good Boy or Girl
 - 2 Rewards -
Selfish Gain
 - 1 Fear of Punishment -
Trouble-Avoiding

EXTERNAL

GILLIGAN: CARING & COMMUNITY

expectation of an extrinsic reward, or being thought of as "nice boys and girls," to acting upon universal principles of fairness and community commitment.

The power of these reflective experiences is manifested throughout the year as students exercise the opportunity to apply the Kohlberg/Gilligan Chart in many school settings. For example, in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey highlights the importance of establishing a mission statement based upon deeply shared values and vision. When students write their classroom mission statement for the year, moral principles of fairness, caring and community are more thoughtfully and intentionally included after students have role-played hypothetical classroom scenarios. In addition, because I have some students for two years, the "old folks" are very helpful in bringing the "new folks" on board!

Throughout the year, we refer to the chart during classroom meetings and apply it in the context of all areas of the curriculum. We are constantly on the look-out for moral exemplars in all areas of our curriculum. When we identify a particular person, we illustrate their thoughts by creating posters for display throughout the building. These expressive arts experiences often extend to the discussion of questions such as, What are the attributes of a moral person? How do we know a moral person when we see or read about one? What is the right thing to do and for what reasons?

Robert Coles in *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, suggests that literature is a powerful medium for developing moral awareness. In applying literature experiences in my classroom, I read aloud to my students the classic piece of literature, *To Kill A Mockingbird*. From this literature experience we often display in the classroom, quotations from Atticus Finch such as, "You never really know someone until you walk in their moccasins." Former students often return to tell me how powerful the influence of Atticus was in their lives.

In history, students learn that the human drama was shaped by the moral choices of groups and individuals. For example, students ask,

Why did some Confederate soldiers during the Civil War give water to wounded Union soldiers during the bitter cold December night at the Battle of Fredericksberg? Why did Miep Gies and others see a need to fight injustice to protect Jewish people like the Frank Family in Amsterdam during World War II? Again during World War II, Why did Gordon Hirabayashi, a young college student in Seattle, defy the internment orders for people of Japanese ancestry and take his case to the U.S. Supreme Court?

In the context of current events, the shallowness of political behaviors such as "kissing babies" was exposed as students discovered the politician's motive to appear to be "a good boy or girl." In the area of the environment, students ask why lower level moral behavior is often exhibited by industries who will only under the threat of punishment, discontinue polluting the air or water.

Moral questions even appear in the comics. Through an analysis of the cartoons **Peanuts** and **Garfield**, students became aware of how many of the challenges faced by the characters in these cartoons actually revolved around moral issues and moral decision-making. Students saw just how often Garfield succumbed to lower level reasons for doing what was right based on gaining a tasty reward.

In that spirit, an incident occurred in my classroom that illustrates the power of reflective thinking in the area of moral development. The entire school was involved in a community service project to gather rice for a local charity. In order to stimulate classroom participation, the PTA offered a pizza party to the classroom that collected the most rice. As it turned out, the students in my classroom brought in the most rice. However, after a class meeting where the project was evaluated, the entire class agreed that receiving a pizza party as a reward for participation in a service project was a "lower level" moral motivator. The class decided that it wouldn't be right to be rewarded with a party when the purpose of the rice collection was to feed people who were in need--a reward in and of itself.

Conclusions

This article was introduced with three questions, What is virtue? How is virtue acquired? Can virtue be taught? While neither Zachary nor I have absolute answers to these questions, I have acquired clear classroom evidence that students can be taught to reflect upon "the moral high road" and that pioneers such as Kohlberg and Gilligan can be welcome companions in the journey through moral morass to moral confidence.

Over the years I have thought a great deal about Zachary's questions about virtue and morality. Perhaps a teacher can't really teach morality... a horse can indeed be brought to water but there is no guarantee that it will drink. It has been my experience that the Kohlberg/Gilligan chart is an effective way to stimulate both students and teachers to ask questions of their own conscience--what is the right thing to do and why should I do it?

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