Fostering Moral Competencies in Schools – An Alternative to Values Education[1]

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1. Preface

This paper is about moral *competencies* rather than about moral *values*. Most curriculum developers in the field of values or moral education seem to assume that moral behavior and moral development is mainly, if not exclusively, determined by adolescents' moral values. They almost completely neglect the role of moral competencies, partly due to a common belief that the moral domain of human behavior is to be *separated* from the cognitive domain. Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues (1956) suggested this separation in their influential taxonomies of educational goals in the Fifties, although they did not intend to do so. Recent research demonstrates that morality and cognition cannot be seen as *separate domains* of behavior — though we can *distinguish* between them as two different aspects of human behavior. It seems that it is not easy to understand the nature of this special relationship and, in particular, the difference between "distinguishing" and "separating." Only if we consider both aspects — the affective or value aspect and the cognitive or competence aspect of moral behavior — simultaneously, we can obtain new insights into the nature and development of individual moral development. These insights have, as we will see, immediate relevance for schooling and curriculum development.

In this paper I shall give a short overview on recent findings of moral psychology and moral education, and outline their implications for curriculum development in the domain of moral and democratic education. But first let me clarify majors concepts used in this field of study.

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2. Introduction

Moral research is handicapped by conceptual confusion. Most conceptual confusion stems from an inconsistent use of such important terms as "behavior" and "disposition," and from a vague definition of their relationship. The term "moral behavior" is used to mean basically two different things: 1. a singular act as seen from the perspective of an external moral judge, and 2. a pattern, or sequence, of acts as seen when taking the person's own moral point of view. In the first case, a person is judged to be moral (or immoral) if his or her decision is in agreement (or disagreement) with some external standards of rightness or wrongness. In the second case, a person is estimated to be highly moral when in the long run his or her pattern of decision making is in accord with his or her own moral principles — principles which are most likely universal and agreeable to everyone else. 3. To make things even more confusing, a person's verbal description of his or her affects and cognitions (i.e., his or her meta-cognition) is also a kind of behavior though many authors seem to deny it. Hence, when we talk of moral behavior we must make clear which of these three kinds of behavior we mean.

In modern moral education we are primarily interested in fostering adolescents *moral dispositions* to behave well. Only secondarily we are interested in people's singular acts like a particular act of violence, rule transgressions, or criminal offense. It is impossible to anticipate every situation that might trigger singular acts, and also very difficult to make value judgments about them. A particular act might be completely immoral and unlawful in one situation but might be partly, or even totally, justified in another situation. For example, the use of violence might be completely unjustified when used as a means to oppress other people but be acceptable when used in self-defense.

A moral disposition, as any behavioral disposition, means an individual´s readiness, or competence, to act in a certain way given a certain kind of situation or task. The most basic moral disposition is the readiness, or ability, of a person to base his or her decisions on moral values at all. This cannot be taken for granted, nor be denied, in general. Whether people are (morally) good or not, is not a question of philosophical dispute but is a question that can only be answered for individual cases on the basis of experimental analysis.

Take, for example, the moral disposition to use if that kind of situation is not present we cannot not tell whether or not this person has that moral disposition. That is, to have a moral disposition does not mean that a person acts in a certain way all the time but only if certain situations demand these acts. of some sort means The psychological dispositions manifested in the behavior, that is, its moral quality, rather than its physical appearance are important and are the major object of our educational endeavors.

Imagine this situation. You are interested in watching a particular TV program, that is, your favorite soap opera, a sports event, or a discussion about values education in Europe. Exactly when the program is about to begin, your TV breaks. How will you react? What steps of action will you take? Many people first react in a similar way, but as time goes by, their courses of action diverge. With almost everybody, the first reaction is a feeling of anger because a desire has been frustrated. This feeling of anger will be the more intensive the bigger the desire has been. Sometimes anger may become so big that people feel inclined to react violently, for example, to hit the TV. But this does not necessarily imply that they put their initial emotional response into practice.

From this point on, people's further courses of action show considerable differences due to various situational and personal factors. Let us consider the second, personal, factor more closely. Psychologists used to call these factors "temperaments." Modern psychology has discovered that these so-called temperaments to a large degree represent different levels of *moral-cognitive development*. On a low level most people follow their initial inclination and hit the TV, unless they are prevented from doing so by an external force. In accord with the theory of moral-cognitive development, created by *Jean Piaget*, *Lawrence Kohlberg* and others, we call this the *pre-moral* level of cognitive-moral development.

Whereas, on this early level, anger and violence is, like a reflex arc, closely tied together with the frustrating experience, on higher levels cognitive processes succeed in controlling a person's behavior shortly after the first arousal of anger. From these levels onward, people can stop and "think." On level two, the cognitive processes are *heteronomous*, that is, they consist mainly of recognizing the social sanctions connected to certain behavioral acts. For example, the person may realize in time that other people watch him or her, and, therefore, resist his or her violent impulse.

On level three, the level *moral autonomy* (see Oser & Althof, 1992), the cognitive processes are of a higher order. They aim at consistent and integrated moral judgments about what is the right thing to do in a certain situation. On the level of *autonomy,* behavior is guided, or determined, by the person's *own* moral principles and moral judgments rather than by others' orders and interpretations of the situation. The individual has adopted standards of right and wrong, of fairness and injustice, of human dignity and human suffering, as his or her own and has developed the ability to apply them to everyday decision making. "Own standards" do not mean "doing whatever one pleases to do." This would mean an absence of any moral standard or moral principle, and can thus not be called a sign of having moral autonomy. Neither does autonomy mean that individuals chose arbitrarily among moral standards, or put them into an accidental order (see below). On the level of morally competent

autonomous behavior, moral feelings and emotions do not disappear. On the contrary, they still determine most of a person's every day behavior.[3] But the moral feelings have become "educated," that is, they have become changeable through individual thought and social interaction.

Educated moral feelings are descendants of, and may in some ways resemble, inherited instincts and socially conditioned moral reactions. But they represent a qualitatively distinct level of moral-cognitive development. They make it possible for us to cope with emotions like anger, shame, or guilt, and to inhibit rash actions and thus create the opportunity for rational reflection about the next steps of action: First we may urge ourselves to calm down in order to give further considerations a chance (count to ten, postpone action until tomorrow, etc.). Second, we might roughly estimate the (social) consequences of expressing feeling of anger and of violent reaction: Does it make other people in the room feel uncomfortable when I scream and hit the TV? Third, we may start to consider more far-reaching implications of the present situation: How can I prevent such unpleasant situations in future? I may get out the TV manual and read it. Or I may call a repair shop to get the TV set fixed, or buy a new one. Each of these thoughts in turn arouses new feelings, maybe feelings of excitement, maybe again feelings of anger: I don't have the time to read TV manuals! Why aren't they built more reliable? Fourth, we may even philosophize about it. We start to deliberate on how we have reacted, and how we would like to react in the future if similar things happen. We may begin to talk to our partner, friends, colleagues, or psychological experts about this when we feel that we do not fully understand what has happened, or how we should behave in such situations.

In sum, human behavior is a rather complex process involving different levels of interplay between affects and cognitions which we have defined as different levels of morally competent behavior: The first level of behavior is called *premoral* because it is merely determined by inherited instincts. The second level is called *heteronomous* because here behavior is mostly determined by unreflected moral feelings. Mostly, these feelings are adopted from the social environment and, on this level, have not been submitted yet to own critical or rational thought. The individual is largely dependent on social interpretations of moral principles, and cannot yet make differentiated and integrated judgments himself or herself. If a person has become capable of own moral judgment he or she has reached the level of autonomous moral judgment, or of *moral competence*.

Moral competence is a wide category embracing many different specific abilities. *Moral judgment competence* is at its core. According to Lawrence Kohl-

[3] For a very profound discussion of the role of feelings for moral behavior see Montada (1993).

berg, moral judgment competence may be defined as "the capacity to make decisions and judgments which are moral (i.e., based on internal principals) and to *act* in accordance with such judgments."[4] We have defined it more specifically as

> the degree to which a person's judgments in a decision making process are determined by *moral* dispositions, that is, moral considerations, rather than by other psychological dispositions like the disposition to defend one's decision by choosing post hoc supportive reasons — what S. Freud called "rationalization".[5]

The three levels of judgment competence correspond roughly to three different brain regions or functions: 1. the hypothalamus, 2. the frontal lope and 3. the cerebellum corte (see Fig. 2). The hypothalamus is mostly responsible for the arousal of emotional responses and for the general activation of the body. It may receive its messages directly from any of our senses, or through other parts of the brain which in turn may be activated by impressions from our eyes, ears, taste, smell or skin surface. If this arousal of the hypothalamus

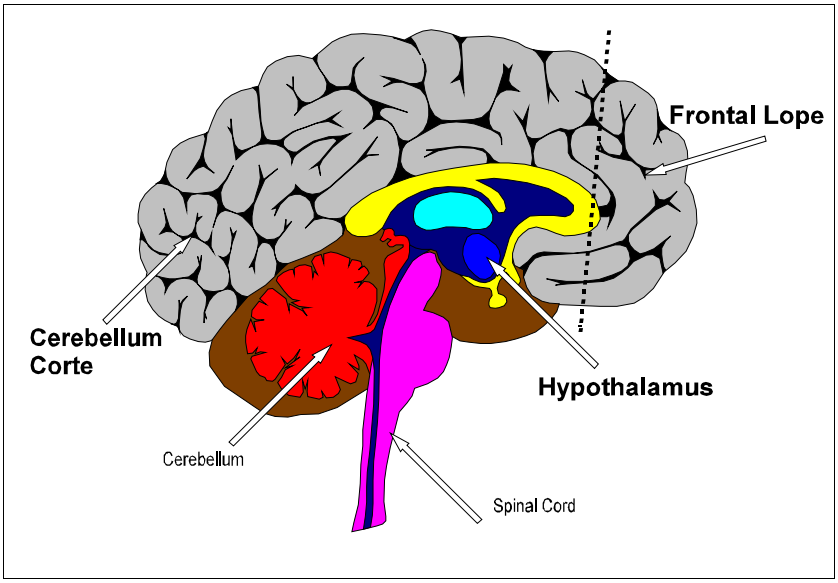

Fig. 2 Human brain

[4] (1964), S. 425.

[5] See Lind & Wakenhut (1985); Lind (1993b).

triggers a specific behavior directly, without being "interpreted" by higher brain functions, we speak of an reflex-arc. If our sensations first pass through the *frontal lope*, they become evaluated emotionally. The arousal turns into negative or positive feelings. On the third level of development, our sensations and feelings are passed on further to the *cerebellum part* of our brain — we start to "think." Time and resources may not always allow us to thoroughly investigate the true causes of an arousal. Sometime we have to decide quickly whether we should flee or fight. In such instances the organism is dependent on very quick judgments based on so-called mental sets, beliefs or feelings located in the frontal lopes. But gradually the cerebellum corte gains more and more control over the other parts of the brain, hence making it possible for us to suspend our opinions, feelings and believes in favor of thorough analysis and judgment.

It should have become clear by now that moral "behavior" on the one hand and moral "dispositions" on the other hand are not separate "things" somehow causally related to one another but are just different ways of looking at things. Both can be observed. But in everyday life the perspective of observation is different for both. When we speak of "moral behavior" we usually mean singular acts as judged by their social agreeability or rightness. If we judge from an external point of view, we say that a child *behaves well* if he or she does something which agrees with our judgment of morally right behavior. If we take, like Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) or Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), an internal point of view, we call a child's behavior *moral* if his or her decision was socially unacceptable but his or her intentions or values were morally good. Finally, from a modern psychological point of view, we call a person's behavior *morally competent* if his or her pattern of behavior shows that he or she is highly able to apply moral principles to everyday decision making in a consistent and integrated way.

It should also be clear that the term behavior means quite different things depending on what kind of behavioral disposition we are studying: If we want to study reflex-arcs it suffices to observe single acts (in relation to certain stimuli). If we want to analyze affects and cognitions we usually need to observe complex pattern of behavior, that is, whole courses of action. If we want to assess a person's meta-cognitions we have to observe his self-descriptions. Dispositions are as *real* as any other behavior because they must manifest themselves in a person's behavior to be observed. Moral judgment competence is real though it cannot be observed in any situation but only when certain moral tasks require the person to apply this competence. It is real though is mostly tacit, or unconscious, since persons are often not aware of their moral cognitions or have only a biased perception of them.

Fig. 3 Different layers of human behavior and dispositions.

Conscious perceptions or believes about one's own behavioral dispositions are called "meta-cognitions." Meta-cognitions may be more or less accurate representations of (tacit) affects and cognitions. They are *real*, too. Meta-cognitions are the basis for moral reflection, social discourse and education. It seems that they are essential for developing and stabilizing moral feelings, and help to develop a person's moral identity.

These definitions of behavior and disposition have immediate consequences for their measurement (see Fig. 3). Since singular acts, complex dispositions and meta-conditions are different views about, or categories of, human behavior each category of behavior must be observed and measured in a different way. In particular, moral dispositions can only be studied by observing whole patterns of behavior in well defined situational contexts, that is, by multivariate experiments.[6] Our inference then is based on the comparison of a real pattern of behavior with an ideal-type pattern of behavior. For example, if a person behaves consistently in regard to particular moral principles – even though other inclinations may be strong – then we call this a highly *moral* person. Moral competencies cannot be validly inferred either by observing singular acts or by obtaining self-report data. A person's self-report data usually do not allow valid inferences about his or her tacit dispositions because they may be strongly biased. Some people strongly overestimate, some grossly underestimate, their ability to effectively solve a certain moral problem. Self-report data however are the most adequate base for studying a person's meta-cognitions.

3. Findings from Psychological and Educational Research

Recent psychological research of people's moral behavior and development has brought about four major findings:[7] First, as some moral philosophers have presupposed, there are at least some moral standards or values — they call them "moral principles" which are universal and agreeable to most people. Almost all people (regardless of age, gender, socio-economic status, or culture) agree that some moral principles, like justice, human dignity and democracy are the most adequate basis for solving moral or social problems. People also agree that social laws come next. They are judged as less fundamental than moral principles but that they are much more acceptable than premoral instincts as a basis for solving moral problems. Second, although people

[6] Accordingly we have designed a general model for measuring behavioral dispositions, the Experimental Questionnaire approach (see Lind 1993b).

[7] For overviews see Kohlberg (1984), Rest (1986), Lind (1986; 1993b).

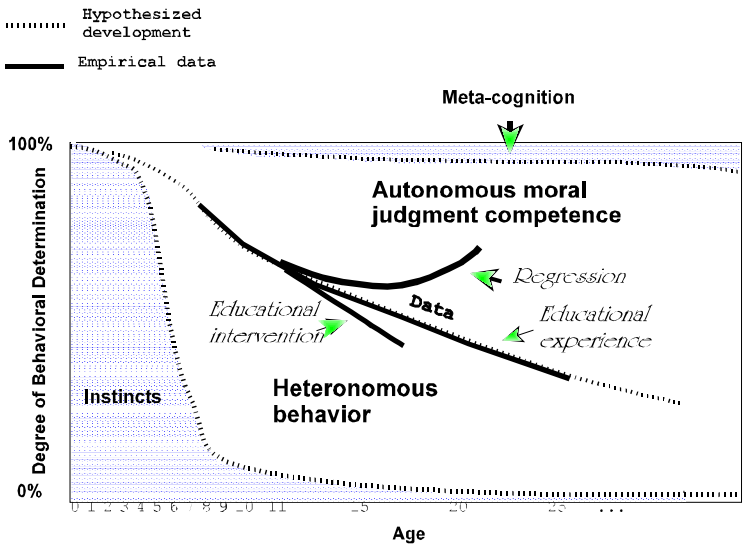

Fig. 4 The development of moral judgment competence

hardly differ with respect to their moral values they greatly vary in regard to their moral judgment competence and that this competence determines the quality of a person´s moral behavior more than his or her moral values do. Children learn moral values at a rather early age but it takes many years, if not the whole life, to learn how to apply these values to concrete situations when conflicting moral principles are involved. problems. In complex, pluralistic, democratic societies like ours, there are many moral values to be observed and hence there are many situations in which these moral values may conflict, that is, in which they may suggest opposite courses of action. Hence, the members of these societies need a specially high level of moral or democratic competence in order to cope with everyday life in a constructive way rather than in a destructive, violent way.

Third, on the basis of many – cross-sectional, longitudinal, representative, experimental – studies it has been demonstrated a) that educational experiences provided by the society is much more influential in stimulating a person's moral-cognitive development than any other factor like socio-economic class, gender, or cultural background, b) that special educational interventions may double this effect, and c) that without a sufficient amount of educational experience moral judgment competence tapers off. These findings fit into the more comprehensive, "educational theory" of moral development which we have ad-

vocated elsewhere.[8] A rough summary of this theory is presented above, and is graphically depicted in Fig. 4.

Fourth, morality can be taught. There is now an overwhelming amount of evidence that certain methods of moral education (especially the methods of Dilemma Discussion and Just Community)[9] can foster children's moral judgment competence. Several hundred studies have addressed this question with different variations of the method, and under different circumstances. The *total length of the intervention* varied greatly: some investigators administered only two dilemma sessions only a few days apart, others conducted a dozen or more dilemma sessions extending over one or two years. The *intensity of intervention* also differed from study to study: some limited these sessions to a 45 minute period, others asked their subjects to discuss moral dilemmas for am 2 hour period and longer. Many experiments included a unique *mixture of methods*: some focused on one special pedagogical techniques, others used a combination of methods. An example for a rather comprehensive, multi-method moral education program is the project "Democracy and Education in the School" (DES), in which Fritz Oser, Heinz Schirp and I were involved.[10] Finally, these studies included a wide range of age groups, adolescents as well as young adults.

All studies have shown that the Dilemma Discussion Method has considerably sized and lasting effects. No intervention program produced zero or negative effects. To my knowledge (I have surveyed several meta-analyses, and about one hundred single studies) no other method in the domain of moral, value or civic education has shown such a consistent result. There are new and promising methods like the Real-Life-Dilemma and Just Community method though their effectiveness has not yet been confirmed as well. For example, in our DES project, which incorporated the Just Community Approach, we have found a strong developmental effect. The size of the DES effect was about double as high as of the standard curriculum. But we cannot be sure which of both methods, Dilemma Discussion or Just Community, contributed most to the overall effect. However, the size of the effects differed. This variation gives us some interesting hints as to which variant of the Dilemma Discussion me-

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[8] Lind (1993b).

[9] The Dilemma Discussion method has been conceived by Lawrence Kohlberg and Moshe Blatt in the late Sixties. The Just Community approach to moral education was created by Kohlberg, Clark Power, Ann Higgins and others in the Seventies. For more details about these methods see Power et al. (1989) and Oser & Althof (1992).

[10] For a description of the aims and outcomes of the DES project see Lind & Raschert (1987), Oser & Althof (1992), and Lind (1993), and also the contributions to this conference by Heinz Schirp and Fritz Oser.

thod and which side-conditions increase or decrease its pedagogical effectiveness:[11] (a) Astonishingly, the best age in which children may be taught this way, is the age between 11 and 16. Some authors say that Dilemma Discussion is more effective with young adults. This is true only for the change of moral attitudes but not for the development of moral judgment competence.[12] (b) The optimal total length of intervention seems to be three to ten hours. Shorter interventions have also measurable effects, but these hardly last long. (c) Low intensity programs, that is, 45-minute discussions, are effective but their effects do not last as long as the effects of 2-hour programs. (d) Other moral discussion programs, using ethics courses and role playing also have only short term effect. The classic Dilemma Discussion Method proves to be superior in regard to lasting effects.

4. Discussion

Many pedagogues mainly deal either with the transmission of moral concepts, or merely with values clarification, but they fail to address a crucial aspect of moral behavior, namely moral judgment competence. While moral or value concepts play an important role in the development of moral behavior, psychological research shows that they can account little for individual *differences* regarding morality. Almost all people hold up the same moral ideals: they almost completely agree on the rank order of different sorts, or stages, of moral consideration. Hence there is also hardly any variation in regard to highly esteemed moral principles due to age, gender, social class, religious background or country or culture. Something else seems to account for differences in moral behavior, and needs to be addressed by values education. This is moral judgment competence. Though many educators may realize this need, they are insufficiently trained to teach moral competencies. In the area of value and moral education they have little that they can rely on. In one of our studies we found, that many teachers' perceptions of their students' moral values is highly inaccurate. Hence we should not be surprised that they find it difficult to communicate with their students and foster their moral behavior.[13] We are now on the position to demonstrate empirically that the neglect of moral and demo-

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[11] For overviews see Lind (1993b), Schläfli et al. (1985).

[12] A good measure of moral attitudes is James Rest's *Defining Issues Test* (Rest, 1986). Moral judgment competence is measured using instruments like Kohlberg's *Moral Judgment Interview* or Lind's *Moral Judgment Experiment* (Lind, 1993).

[13] See Lind (1993a).

cratic competencies in schools and university has detrimental effects on the ability of the members of our societies, as well as of our societies as a whole, to cope with the increasing number and complexity of problems of the modern world: Our educational system has effectively fostered many people's ability to cope with the physical world at least in the so-called First World. But the school system largely neglects the social and moral problems that result from the technological revolutions which the educational system has stimulated by providing the basic skills. What are the moral side-effects of technological innovation? How much do we have to "invest" in the area of moral-democratic education to balance off those moral side-effects? And, how can we find a more balanced model of investment in these two branches of education, so that the results of technical and science training are paralleled by a corresponding training in moral autonomy and responsibility?

I think that the problems implied by these questions cannot be solved by solely fostering individual moral values. They rather imply encompassing efforts on a national and international scale. Something like a *Strategic Education Initiative* (SEI) is needed, which should have at its aim *1. an effective curriculum for moral and democratic education in schools, and an improvement of teacher training in regard to this curriculum, and 2. an equal distribution of high quality education throughout Europe in both domains, in the technological as well as the moral domain.*

Educational inequality is one of the major threats to democracy, peace, and general welfare, since educational inequality largely determines unequal career chances and economic wealth and thus unequal opportunities to understand, utilize, and evaluate the great amount of information circulated by modern mass media. Unequal access to information in turn impedes any form of democratic government as the information process can become corrupted in many ways: On the one hand, government, other political institutions, or the media, which have sophisticated information processing capacities may misuse the fact of educational inequality to "manipulate" ordinary people. On the other hand, the ordinary people may always feel "manipulated" or lied to when they cannot understand the information handed down to them, even if this information is correct but stated in an overly complex manner.

In concluding I like to stress the finding that moral educators have very effective educational methods at their disposal now, namely the Dilemma Discussion method and newer methods like the Just Community method, for fostering moral judgment competence in adolescents. These methods are also compatible with education in a democratic society, because they do not require teachers to indoctrinate students with moral values. The "teaching" of moral values is based on assumptions which have been invalidated by recent psychological research. Most children already have highly moral values and thus do

not need to acquire them.[14] But they greatly lack the competence to apply moral values to everyday decision making. There is only a moderate or low relationship between moral attitudes and rule obeying behavior.[15] The mere teaching of moral values may, at best, mean that we carry coal to Newcastle, or, at worst, that we overburden children with moral responsibilities for which they possess no adequate behavioral competencies. If we ask children to attend to a multitude of moral-democratic principles in their lives then we must also help them to develop all the competencies needed to use them in concrete situations and to solve moral value conflicts which they necessarily will run into. Curriculum development and educational politics should account for this finding by transforming values education into moral-democratic education.

[14] See Nucci (1989), Nunner-Winkler (1993).

[15] Blasi (1980).

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