

# Moral Education:

## Building on Ideals and Fostering Competencies\*

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### Abstract

*Moral education is usually conceptualized on the assumption that youth needs foremost moral values and orientation, and, therefore, most methods of moral education focus on the teaching of moral values and orientations. In contrast, great moral educators like Socrates and Lawrence Kohlberg, as well as modern moral psychology, argue that we can build upon the moral ideals of students, and, instead, have to foster moral competence, i.e., the competence of moral judgment and moral discourse. How moral competencies can be effectively fostered is discussed in the following article, focussing on the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (KMDD).*

**Key words:** Moral education, moral values, moral competencies

Socrates: But if this be affirmed, then the desire of good is common to all, and one man is no better than another in that respect?

Meno: True

Socrates: And if one man is not better than another in desiring good, he must be better in the power of attaining it?

Meno: Exactly.

Socrates: But if this be affirmed, then the desire of good is common to all, and one man is no better than another in that respect?

Meno: True

Socrates: And if one man is not better than another in desiring good, he must be better in the power of attaining it?

(From the dialog among Socrates and Meno as reported by Plato)

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## What should moral education do; what can it achieve?

Before we talk about the nature of moral education we must clarify its goals and tasks and ask what it can and what it cannot achieve. Teaching methods are not values in themselves but only one value in relation to the learning and teaching goals at issue. A problem frequently encountered in moral education is that although its goals mostly take the knowledge gained from moral psychology into account, the methods used are often ineffective or even run counter to these goals. It can happen that an attempt is made to teach morality in a way which contradicts the declared goals. If, for example, human rights are taught as if their validity depends solely on the weight of state authority, this approach fails to recognize that these rights are individual and not the rights of the state or its institutions, including the schools. Moral education in a democracy must, therefore, start from the bottom, from the individual. Moral educators must be willing and able to promote the responsibility and autonomy of the individual by using these fundamental moral principles themselves in the teaching of their students, just as a mathematics teacher must be able to solve the tasks he presents to his students or a sports teacher to demonstrate the exercises he wishes his stu-

dents to perform.

In a democracy, moral education has the task of *enabling* young people to respect the rights and freedom of others as much as their own. Just like the Christian commandment to love one's neighbour *like oneself*, this maxim focuses on the topic of justice as the basis for living together peacefully, on giving the other the respect one wishes to enjoy oneself. Nowadays, in the age of global traffic, economic networks and communication technology the demand for peace and democratic cooperation can no longer be restricted to the family, the ethnic group or the nation alone, but must be just as global as traffic, the economy and communications. In the year 1948, shortly after the end of the Nazi terror regime and the horrors of the Second World War, the United Nations enacted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which Article 26, 2 runs as follows: "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace." This declaration has found its way into most democratic constitutions. The Danish educationist and family therapist Jesper Juul (2001)

puts these basic rights in a nutshell with the concept of “equal dignity” (*Gleichwürdigkeit*). A person must know how to defend his own dignity just as the dignity of the other, if he is to be able to cooperate sustainably and productively with other people.

Here we deliberately place the concept of *capability* or *competence* in the forefront of our considerations. Moral competence has long been overlooked as a topic of moral education, although Socrates – in his dialogue with Menon – already pointed out that all people wish for the good and that there is no difference between them in this respect, but that they do not all possess the same ability to achieve the good. If, then, moral education has the goal of preparing young people for life in a world whose shape we cannot foresee and for challenges which are beyond our imagination, it must promote the *competence* of students to orient themselves morally in this world and to take well-considered, morally justified decisions. It cannot be satisfied with ready-made solutions, abstract value concepts and ethical-philosophical theories as a substitute for moral competence. Nor should it confuse moral competence with the “ability” to reproduce the dominant solutions, concepts and theories for the purposes of grading school performance. Three reasons can be suggested. Firstly, moral education cannot teach

morally correct behaviour, because experts and lawmakers cannot know what the “right” decision is in any conceivable conflict situation. It is the responsibility of each individual to find out which moral ideals should be applied in a specific case and which decision is the best. It is often the case that there is no single decision which is clearly “right”. Then we must accept compromises and choose those decisions which seem to us to be the *best* or the *least mistaken*. Sometimes we have sufficient time to weigh matters up and to seek the help and advice of other trustworthy persons. But mostly we are pressed for time and have to take these decisions from one moment to the next, even when no-one is at hand to give us advice. On the basis of personal experience and the experience of our ancestors model solutions have of course been developed for many conflict situations, which can be learned and taken over. However, the changes in our environment confront us with ever new moral questions for which there are no such model solutions. Before the human DNA was decoded nobody had to ask whether it was permissible to win stem cells from embryonic tissue or whether interference with the genotype is morally acceptable. Before remotely piloted “drones” existed we did not have to ask whether the “elimination” of “target subjects” by

means of a “joystick” is in conformity with human rights.

Secondly, moral education cannot (and does not need to) teach values. In regard to moral ideals, values or orientations (and other descriptions of this aspect of morality) the task of moral education is often easier than it seems, as the most important moral ideals – the sense of justice, the estimation of cooperation and mutual respect – are available to all people from birth as a biological adjustment mechanism (de Waal, 2007; Hamlin et al., 2007). Studies carried out world-wide, in which people are asked to evaluate the arguments for and against certain decisions, have shown that the procedural principles of justice and respect possess almost universal validity (Rest 1969; Lind 2009a).

The demand for “mediation of values” is based on a distorted idea of man. Contrary to the clear evidence of research many people believe that most of their fellow men are less guided by moral values than they themselves. The discrepancy between the image that most people have of themselves and the image that they have of other people is referred to scientifically as “pluralistic ignorance”. This concept was coined by F. H. Allport in order to describe a situation in which individuals personally accept or reject a certain norm and at the same time assume the op-

posite for other people (see Bierhoff, 1990, p. 118). It is not surprising that teachers and students often suffer from pluralistic ignorance. A study has shown that although teachers knew quite precisely, at least in part, how students saw themselves, they nonetheless judged them completely wrongly in regard to other matters. Most teachers believed, for example, that the “typical student” did not want to learn, that he had little interest in a good class community and that he did not want to participate in decisions in the classroom. The questioning of students, however, revealed a completely different picture. They placed great value on a good education, a good class community and participation in decisions (Lind 2002, p.211).

Students also often have a false image of each other, which sometimes makes it difficult for them to act the way they would like to. Many believe, for example, that the other students would let them down if they needed help (Higgins et al., 1984). However, almost all people declare their readiness to help others (McNamee, 1977; Kohlberg, 1984). Of course pluralistic ignorance reduces the willingness to help others when help is needed. Why should I help someone else when he – as I mistakenly *believe* – is not willing to help me? It can thus happen that false expectations are confirmed simply by

the fact that one believes they are true. That this vicious circle can be broken is shown by the success of dilemma discussions and democratic learning communities (*just communities*). Higgins, Power and Kohlberg (1984) demonstrated that as a result of their programme the communication between students improved and the number of students who believed in the readiness of their fellow students to help them increased continuously, so that the gap between assumed and genuine willingness to help visibly closed. It should, therefore, be an important task of moral education to correct the distorted image of other people, as it assumes that they lack moral awareness. This distortion results last not least from the tendency to draw hasty conclusions from the behaviour of other people, when one does not have the opportunity to get to know them better. To enable people to understand the motives behind their own behaviour better and to communicate successfully with others it is, therefore, important to provide them with opportunities for a free and unburdened exchange of ideas. In the course of this development they will then discover - perhaps to their own surprise - that their moral ideas are similar to those of others and that the reason for differing approaches to a moral problem is not to be sought in a lack of moral principles or values.

Thirdly, moral concepts and moral theories are ideally suited to promote reflection on one's own behaviour and to question it critically. But first of all the capacity to take moral action itself must be placed in the centre of moral education. As a glance at teaching and educational curricula reveals, the subjects which deal with moral education (such as ethics, religion or even also German) are one-sidedly biased towards increasing the knowledge of moral concepts, which can be easily examined, but has little to do with the behaviour of people towards each other.

Moral ideals are surely an indispensable condition for moral behaviour, even though moral ideals often fail to correlate with certain concrete behaviour decisions. But this is not because they lack relevance. It is for two other reasons: first because *everybody* possesses moral ideals (if a variable shows no substantial variation it cannot correlate with anything) and second because they are not a *sufficient* condition for morally mature behaviour but "something else" is needed, too, namely *the competence to make judgments which are in agreement with one's moral ideals and principles and to act in accordance with these judgments* (Kohlberg, 1964, p. 425; see also Lind, 2002; Lind et al., 2010). A person who lacks this competence usually does not even notice that his ac-

tions contradict his own moral ideals or he represses the contradiction. People with low judgmental competence often do not even experience a situation as problematic when others do. But this does not mean that they are in a happy situation. People with low judgmental competence often find it difficult to correct themselves when the facts cast doubt on their opinion. They also need more time to make a decision when they are confronted with a dilemma, as a brain study carried out at the Charité Hospital, Berlin, has shown (Prehn et al., 2008). Black and white thinking, refraining from reflection and discussion, inevitably leads to a violent solution of the dilemma (Lind, 1998) and the subjection to an external authority, as the famous Milgram Experiment (Milgram, 1972) has shown. In this experiment subjects were instructed to deliver electrical shocks to their (supposed) subjects if they made a mistake in a learning experiment because, as the “scientific authorities” told them, this would lead to better learning results. Although they would have suffered no disadvantage from refusing to participate in the experiment, two thirds of the subjects went to the maximum of 450 volts when delivering the shocks. (The “victims” were in fact actors but the subjects did not know this). Unfortunately, a repetition of this experiment by Kohlberg (1984) got no

recognition by Milgram. Kohlberg showed that “torturers” who were submissive to authority among the subjects were usually characterized by lower levels of moral judgmental competence and that with increasing moral judgmental competence the tendency to obey the authority blindly disappeared. Kohlberg’s experiment indicates that we need not accept blind obedience to authority - such as the holocaust, the Gulag Archipelago or the torture orgies in Abu Ghraib - as fate, but that we can “immunize” people against blind obedience by fostering their moral judgmental and discourse competence. As experiments have confirmed, this competence also contributes to reducing lawbreaking, promoting helpful behaviour (and not just the willingness to help!), strengthening commitment to basic democratic values and improving learning behaviour and the capacity to take decisions (Kohlberg 1984; Lind 2009a; Lind et al., 2010).

Not every method is a suitable means of fostering the capacity for moral judgment and discourse among young people. Some of them (such as the strict practice of behavioural rules) strengthen the obedience of young people towards authorities and thus prevent the development of moral judgmental and discourse competence. As several studies have confirmed, young people need a certain

the fact that one believes they are true. That this vicious circle can be broken is shown by the success of dilemma discussions and democratic learning communities (*just communities*). Higgins, Power and Kohlberg (1984) demonstrated that as a result of their programme the communication between students improved and the number of students who believed in the readiness of their fellow students to help them increased continuously, so that the gap between assumed and genuine willingness to help visibly closed. It should, therefore, be an important task of moral education to correct the distorted image of other people, as it assumes that they lack moral awareness. This distortion results last not least from the tendency to draw hasty conclusions from the behaviour of other people, when one does not have the opportunity to get to know them better. To enable people to understand the motives behind their own behaviour better and to communicate successfully with others it is, therefore, important to provide them with opportunities for a free and unburdened exchange of ideas. In the course of this development they will then discover - perhaps to their own surprise - that their moral ideas are similar to those of others and that the reason for differing approaches to a moral problem is not to be sought in a lack of moral principles or values.

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is rooted in communicative ethics (Habermas, 1983; Apel, 1990), natural law (Nussbaum, 2006), and comparative justice (Sen, 2008). It is based on the idea of “one man one vote” in the classroom. (Power et al., 1989). The legal scholar Gustav Radbruch, who played a decisive part in shaping the democratic legal system in Germany after World War II, already pointed out in his “Educating young people towards a sense of rightness”: “Of course mere school teaching will not be able to mediate such a sense of rightness. It must be made visible in school life itself. (...)The teacher only needs to allow his students to experience what they live through daily and hourly, to make them conscious of what they unconsciously feel, to think through consistently with them what they feel in an elementary way and to present them with a lively view of the questions of right and righteousness” (Radbruch, 1987, p. 213; see also Dewey, 1916). Those who experience democracy as a form of life, who discover that it is possible to argue about issues without resorting to violence, that sensitive questions can be discussed openly and that others listen to one although one expresses different opinions - such people see democracy with different eyes than those who only know it as an abstract theory or as participation in political institutions. (Lind, 2000b; 2008a).

Many participants in dilemma discussions report in fact that they enjoy them and that it was important for them to reflect in peace and quiet and to be able to present their point of view without feeling any external pressure or suffering personal attacks. Some remarked that they also profited from the arguments of the other side, because, as one ten-year old girl put it, she had the opportunity to “think over her own point of view again”.

The teaching of subjects also benefits from the transformation of the classroom into a pressure-free and anxiety-free discourse community. As everyone knows, fear – of derogative comments by teachers, of teasing by fellow students, of grades – reduces the ability to learn. In a comprehensive meta-analysis of the effects of various measures undertaken in teaching, Fraser et al. (1987) found that grades not only have little effect, but even have a negative effect on school performance ( $r = -0.07$ ). The highest positive effect (out of a total of eight measures analysed) derived from short breaks of a few seconds, which enabled the students to focus on the instructions ( $r = + 0.41$ ). In the dilemma discussions of the KMDD the participants are provided with such short breaks by the “ping-pong rule”. It is astounding that only a few KMDD sessions in a pressure-free and anxiety-free atmosphere fos-

tering thinking and discussion are sufficient in order to improve the judgmental and discourse competence of the students to a remarkable degree. (Lind, 2009b).

## **The Second Rule: Learning as (Re-)construction**

Socrates proposed the thesis that we as human beings know from birth what is morally right and wrong and that an “educator” consequently only has the task of helping young people to bring forward their (latently) existing moral knowledge. Indeed, core moral principles are already present from birth as moral feelings or ideals and as such always have an effect on our behaviour (de Waal, 2007; Hamlin et al., 2007). But because they are at first very vague and undifferentiated they are scarcely in a position to guide us in dealing with the complicated moral problems we encounter in the course of our lives. They have to be linked to our understanding. (Lind, 1989). They must be (re-)constructed at the level of oral and written communication so that the young people can communicate their moral feelings adequately and understand the feelings of others. “Construction” also means that “morality” is a product of the human intellect, although we are not always aware of the fact. Consequently moral dilemmas *lie in the eyes of the individual beholder*. To

be able to exchange ideas and to understand each other in spite of their individual constructions people must be capable of aligning their constructions. To this end shared experiences and cooperation are necessary (Piaget, 1965), which are both the means and the goals of moral education (Dewey, 1964). This is similar to the situation in sport, where swift movement requires well-trained musculature, which can however only be achieved by means of frequent swift movement.

## **The Third Rule: The Regulation of Affects.**

As we have seen, strong moral affects are a necessary precondition for moral behaviour, but they are also potentially contrary to reason (Damasio, 1994). In order to maintain affects at an optimal level for learning phases of challenge and support alternate in the KMDD. The course of a KMDD session is described in detail in the teacher’s manual (Lind, 2009a). By means of a fine adjustment of these phases an experienced KMDD teacher can successfully maintain the emotional state of the students in his class at a level which provides an optimal “window” for learning. It has never been observed that students fall asleep or are inattentive over long periods of time during KMDD sessions or that they become over-ex-

cited or aggressive, even in the case of “difficult” students and in the treatment of difficult dilemmas. But it cannot be excluded that untrained teachers experience failure. Consequently a thorough training to be a KMDD teacher is essential.

### **The Fourth Rule: Self-determined Evaluation of the Efficacy of Instruction Method**

How can a teacher know if his teaching has been effective and his endeavours have been worthwhile? Scarcely anyone is capable of maintaining motivation, thoroughness and attentiveness at a *constant level*, if he receives no feedback on the success of his work. Unfortunately scarcely any valid instruments have existed hitherto for the measurement of the effects of teaching on moral education. Most of the tests refer only to concepts of moral knowledge or moral attitudes. With the *Moral Judgment Test (MJT)* an objective instrument for the ascertainment of moral judgmental and discourse competence has been developed for the first time (Lind, 2008a). With the help of data collected with the MJT before and after a teaching session the positive effects of the teaching can be reli-

ably established and continuously increased (Lind, 2002; 2009b; Mouratidou et al., 2008).<sup>1</sup> In the KMDD every significant change in before-and-after measurements was tested with the MJT before inclusion as a fixed part of the method. With the help of MJT data it has been possible to prove that seminars (in college and university) have a powerful moral educational effect if they are carried out in accordance with the four rules for shaping dilemma discussions (Lind, 2009b). To date no studies exist for the school context. But we assume that similar effects can be achieved in the teaching of school subjects if the units are designed in accordance with the four rules for dilemma discussions (Lind, 2009a).

### **Implementation problems**

With the help of the KMDD moral judgmental and discourse competence can be very effectively fostered in every subject, in every type of school and at almost every age level (from the third year on). In practice, however, its use sometimes gives rise to problems. The biggest problem seems to lie in the lack of training opportunities. But the acceptance of the method during the implementation phase and the question of giving

<sup>1</sup> See also: [http://www.unikonstanz.de/itseprojekt/itse\\_home.htm](http://www.unikonstanz.de/itseprojekt/itse_home.htm)

grades in moral education can also become problems.

## Training

The application of the KMDD requires thorough training of the teachers. If the teaching is to have the desired effect, they must not only be acquainted with the theoretical foundations of the method but also have had preparatory practice in its implementation, in order to adapt it to the requirements of the class and the curriculum. Dealing with moral feelings also places high demands on the teachers. Especially when dealing with highly controversial dilemma discussions KMDD teachers must be in a position to understand and control their own feelings in order to avoid taking sides unconsciously through their body language. A good training in the "subject" of moral education must therefore include intensive behavioural training and should for obvious reasons be designed in accordance with the rules the teacher will later use in his teaching. Such training programmes are however a rarity<sup>2</sup>.

## Misuse

Teachers who use the dilemma method without having had thorough training achieve scarcely any verifiable or sustainable learning effects among their students. At best they can take advantage of the entertainment value of dilemma discussions but often they do not even manage this. Students frequently fail to react at all to badly introduced dilemma stories or simply talk chaotically about them. Untrained teachers should also take into account that the dilemmas they have chosen can trigger off emotional disturbances among their students, with which they are not acquainted and –on account of their lack of training – cannot counteract.

## Acceptance

When the KMDD is introduced problems of acceptance can arise (as with every innovation). These problems are mostly insignificant as the decision to use the method usually lies within the pedagogical discretion of the teacher. Certain difficulties can result if the teacher has to pass examinations and the use of the KMDD

<sup>2</sup> The author offers workshop-seminars for teachers on the *Konstanz Method of Dilemma-Discussion* (KMDD) in English and German, and a KMDD-Teacher certificate: <http://www.uni-konstanz.de/ag-moral/> Contact: Georg.Lind@uni-konstanz.de

represents a risk for the results of his or her examinations or if colleagues or parents object to the discussion of certain moral dilemmas. But this is very rarely the case. On the contrary, most colleagues, parents and students give positive feedback. This is presumably because the KMDD teachers have been prepared for the implementation of the new method and because the method itself provides for systematic feedback after every session. Invitations to examiners, colleagues and parents to participate in KMDD sessions or even to take on supervisory functions have proved their worth in such situations.

## Grading

If moral education is to be credible and effective, the grading of "moral" performance must necessarily be avoided. In view of the powerful effect of an anxiety-free learning climate without grading, grading represents a dubious interference in the basic right to education and, consequently, a genuine paradox of moral education. As many states – against their better judgment – continue to insist on grading (only very few states such as Finland do without grading until the eighth school year with positive results) it will be necessary to make a compromise here. But the compromise should not go so far as to endanger the success of the moral

education. The behaviour of the participants in a dilemma discussion and their MJT results definitely should not be included in the grading. The use of the MJT as the basis for grading would not only obstruct the moral learning of the participants but would rapidly render the MJT valueless as an instrument for analysing the effects of that learning. The use of the MJT solely for the assessment of identifiable persons, schools or countries is, therefore, forbidden.

## Afterthoughts

We know today that Socrates was right. Moral orientations need not be taught as they already exist inherently in man. But moral judgmental and discourse competence, which are not innate, must be developed – and also fostered. In a small, stable world, the natural development of moral abilities would be sufficient. Yet, in a highly complex and every changing world as ours, most children and adults need help by professional educators for developing an adequate level of moral competence. We have described a psychologically well-founded and intensively tested method with which this can be effectively done. The most urgent task now is to offer teachers good training in this and similar methods so that every student can profit from effective moral education.<sup>2</sup>

## Περίληψη

**Ηθική εκπαίδευση: Με βάση τα ιδεώδη και την προώθηση ικανοτήτων**, Georg Lind, *University of Konstanz, Dept. of Psychology*.

Η ηθική εκπαίδευση συνήθως βασίζεται στην υπόθεση ότι οι νέοι χρειάζονται πάνω από όλα ηθικές αξίες και προσανατολισμό και ως εκ τούτου, οι περισσότερες μέθοδοι της ηθικής εκπαίδευσης βασίζονται στην διδασκαλία των ηθικών αξιών και προσανατολισμών. Αντίθετα, οι μεγάλοι δάσκαλοι της ηθικής εκπαίδευσης όπως ο Σωκράτης και ο Lawrence Kohlberg, καθώς και η σύγχρονη ηθική ψυχολογία, υποστηρίζουν ότι μπορούμε να βασιστούμε πάνω στα ηθικά ιδεώδη των μαθητών και να προωθήσουμε τις ηθικές ικανότητες τους όπως π.χ. την ικανότητα της ηθικής κρίσης και του ηθικού λόγου. Το πώς μπορούν οι ηθικές ικανότητες να προωθηθούν αποτελεσματικά, συζητείται στο παρακάτω άρθρο, εστιάζοντας στην Μέθοδο της Συζήτησης Διλημάτων, *Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (KMDD)*.

**Λέξεις Κλειδιά:** Ηθική Εκπαίδευση, ηθικές αξίες, ηθικές ικανότητες.

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