

Thoughts on the Psychology of Moral Education in Chinese Primary and Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The moral cognitive developmental theory, inspired by Dewey's research on progressive moral education and Piaget's theory on children's moral cognitive development, is proposed by American moral psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg in the early 20th century. It is proven to be the most influential and effective theory in moral education, which is still widely applied in the contemporary western schools. The current moral education in primary and secondary schools in China is characterized by low efficiency. This article, combined with Kohlberg's moral cognitive development theory, analyzes the status and causes of inefficient moral education in primary and secondary schools in China since the reforming and opening up policy was adopted, and puts forward the feasible measures to improve the effectiveness of moral education in primary and secondary schools.

Keywords

Virtue, Moral Cognitive Development, Moral Education, Primary and Secondary Schools

1. Ethical Perspective of Morality

What is good? How to make people good? How to cultivate virtue? Philosophers and ethicists have never stopped questioning the meaning of goodness at all times.

Socrates asserts that virtue is knowledge. Wisdom (knowledge) benefits people. All human efforts and talents will lead to a positive outcome if they are under the guidance of wisdom. If they are influenced by ignorance, the outcome will be unfortunate. Therefore, normal people must do what they think is right, and do not do what they think is wrong. Man does what he believes is right. Virtue is knowledge.

Socrates emphasizes the rationality of good. It points out the connection between morality and knowledge and affirms the “taughtability” of morality. However, it equates goodness with knowledge, emphasizing only the object, and ignoring the inner tendency of human beings—motivation, emotion, attitude, and will of the moral actor—the subject of moral behaviors.

If, as it says, morality is only regarded as the knowledge that can be taught, it will naturally lead to a conclusion that the person who acquires more knowledge of goodness, is the most noble one, and vice versa. However, reality tells us that it is quite common to see people who are equipped with knowledge about goodness, may behave immorally, and vice versa.

Aristotle pointed out that virtue is not accessible by books and preaching, and that virtue, like skills, must be acquired through practice. A good example is swimming. You would never know how to swim unless you jump into the swimming pool and practice. Likewise, one becomes just by doing justice; honest by keeping the word; tolerant by forgiving.

Therefore, virtue, like skills, the first thing is not the teaching and learning of knowledge, but the cultivation and acquisition of behavioral habits. Virtue can only be taught by demonstration, training and practice, rather than the explanation of knowledge in the class.

Kant attributes morality to human will, believing that morality is a sense of obligation to obey the absolute command of the good will, which has nothing to do with one’s emotion or feeling. For example, when a person sees a neighbor in danger, he should save him, whether or not the neighbor has good relationship with him; a teacher should be responsible for his students whether or not he likes them; a doctor should try his best to save patients whether or not he likes them.

The above opinions, which either points out the rationality of moral object, or emphasizes the subject’s social studies, cognitive capability or kind will, agree unanimously that rationality should be regarded as the core part of moral education, and emotional factors should be excluded.

Since 1960s and 1970s, the theory of moral cognition and development, founded by Piaget and Kohlberg, absorbing the reasonable core of the predecessors’ understanding of virtue, combined moral emotions with moral cognition. It points out:

1) Human, by essence, is rational. Therefore, moral principles and norms can be constructed based on human’s understanding about morality. In this sense, morality is not only teachable, but also acquired through education. Due to that, promoting moral education at school, is quite necessary for students’ development; 2) Human’s moral rationality is the outcome of the interaction between the subject and the object in practice instead of the direct instillation from outside. Therefore, we need to pay enough attention to the interaction between one’s cognitive development and social objects; 3) It is primary to emphasize the subjects’ status in moral education and cultivate one’s moral cognitive capability,

that is, moral judgment, including one's capability of understanding, evaluating and choosing a moral act; 4) Pay attention to the developmental process of one's moral cognitive capability, based on which we can design contents and choose the adequate ways of moral education at school.

This theory shows the following points: 1) Morality is teachable because moral principles and norms are rational; 2) The rationality of morality is highly contextual so that it can only be acquired by interaction between moral subjects and the world through practice. Compulsory instillation and teaching by texts would not reach that goal; 3) Moral cognition is developmental by its rules, therefore, moral education needs to follow the rules; 4) Moral cognition is equivalent to moral judgment.

Although this theory is criticized by overemphasizing the role of moral cognition in one's moral development, it is quite reasonable to point out the developmental stages in the process of forming one's morality and morality is the natural outcome of the interaction between an individual and a specific moral context, which is of great significance to guide our moral education, reform the existing education system and improve students' moral cognitive capability.

2. Causal Analysis of Inefficiency of Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools in China

Throughout the moral education of primary and secondary schools in China, it is not difficult to see that it is still adopting the class teaching mode, since moral education is regarded as a subject listed in the Entrance Exam for College. Due to the pressure of the Entrance Exam for College, both teachers and students are striving to get high scores in paper tests. Moral education is taught through teachers' instructions in the classroom. Students are the passive listeners in the process. It is, to a great extent, influenced by the controlling mode in the past years.

Before the reforming and opening up policy, China strictly adopted planned system in economics and highly controlled education system in politics. Citizens were lack of independent personality and thoughts.

The goal of moral education, in primary and secondary schools in China, at that time, was achieved by conveying systematic and logical knowledge to students. The notions recognized by schools were consistent with the mainstream social ideology, and the behaviors advocated by schools were those helping to protect the existing educational system. The social environment in China was, comparably speaking, simple and people reached agreement in perceptions, without many social conflicts. The confined moral education in Chinese schools kept in line with the confined controlling mode in society.

However, since the reforming and opening up policy, especially in the past two decades, with modernization process, China has made tremendous changes in politics, economics and culture, which was reflected in social changes.

Firstly, there emerged different societies representing different economic ben-

efits and value orientation, which unavoidably, collaborate, clash, even conflict with each other.

Secondly, the 21st century is a highly developed information age, which is characteristic of the information spreading at an unimaginably fast speed in various ways to the farthest corner. It requires value orientation and interest demands with high transparency. Information can no longer be controlled by one single institute, and the mainstream criterion is no longer the only standard. The value orientation inconsistent with mainstream ideology cannot be flatly denied but accepted with its reasonable components.

Thirdly, people's mind also takes big change, with new characteristics of great initiatives. People gradually realize that the value orientation and norms taught in classes cannot perfectly solve the new problems in real life. Faced with complicated new problems, relations and values, people ask for independent thinking, justification and solutions, question all the mainstream values which control every aspect in the society, conduct discussions about whatever is opposite to the mainstream in the society and make judgment about different moral values and make independent choice.

When the society is making a transfer from confinement to opening, moral education in primary and secondary schools are still maintaining a state of constraints and soleness, which can be fully shown in the poor efficiency in the past 20 years. It is lagging behind the development of society, which is mainly shown as follows:

Firstly, the narrowness of the subject of education. The main body of moral norms is still the schools and teachers. As passive receptors, students have no autonomy to choose or make judgment about what is morality in the whole process of moral education. They are regarded as the unconditional identification and compliance of the established moral orientation and moral norms. They have no right to doubt the rationality of the established moral orientation and moral norms, nor do they have any right to put forward new moral orientation and moral norms. Different from the students before reforming and opening up policy, the students in the new era, especially those post-1980s, are more independent and have a stronger sense of participation. They express their wishes more clearly, advocate for their own rights, and are not satisfied with being the passive receiver of moral norms.

Secondly, the closure of contents in moral education. Reforming and opening up policy brings Chinese society into market economy from planned economy. Globalization has brought about not only diversification in economy, but also in political culture and ideology. Market economy requires people to pursue their own rights and interests in a reasonable way, cultivate and highlight their own personality.

However the current moral education still stays with the traditional ideas of the past, overemphasizes collective interests than personal interests, which deprives people of the opportunities of their personal development, and therefore fails to improve the mode of moral education with the change of times. This

conflict, in Tuergan's theory, can be regarded as a conflict between the moral standards or principles that overemphasize collective interests and commonalities in the past and people's pursuit of their own value in the current era brought about by the market economy. Chinese society has witnessed many new phenomena and new views inconsistent with the traditional mainstream values. What's more, the influx of western values has also posed a new challenge to Chinese traditional culture and concepts, all of which puts very strong impact on the traditional educational concepts.

Thirdly, the simplicity of educational mode. The existing moral education is still limited to indoctrination and moral preaching, which blindly emphasizes the mastery of basic theoretical knowledge, emphasizing the establishment of lofty ideals while ignoring the interests and needs of students. Teachers become the knowledge providers, the authoritative representative of social will and judges of value; students are lack of sense of identity and urgency, and only act as the passive receptor of moral knowledge.

With the change and development of the society, the moral perceptions in the past and the social reality currently collide. In many cases, the moral norms and value orientation in the past are so old-fashioned that they cannot explain the new social phenomena and social problems. Students have doubts about the moral norms in the past, which is quite normal. The contradictions and conflicts in the society offer us an opportunity to improve people's moral capability. As Tessey said, "Morality is the product of personal conflicts of interest. If there is no conflict in life, there is no need for any ethics" (Thierry, 1987). This statement clearly shows the importance of conflicts in moral education. However, in elementary and secondary schools nowadays, we do not create such a "conflict" situation for students to discuss in classroom, instead, we deliberately avoid guiding students to face the contradictions and conflicts between people and society, which is against the primary purpose of moral education. Morality is originally produced to solve various contradictions and conflicts in the society. Ignoring these conflicts makes morality lack of practical operability and effectiveness. Empty talking and moral preaching make students lose interest, and therefore leads to the low efficiency of moral education in China.

Moreover, in an era with increasingly frequent and profound changes, teachers' understanding of many moral problems also needs to be improved and clarified gradually. In many aspects, teachers are actually facing some common moral problems with students. As the receiver of moral norms, the teacher himself may not fully accept these so-called "golden rules". All these need to be clarified in the discussion. If we stick to compulsory indoctrination and "extrapolation" education methods, it can only "get half the results with double the efforts".

3. Change the Road of Reforming the Inefficiency of Moral Education in Primary and Secondary Schools in China

As Kohlberg said, one's moral reasoning is the result of the interaction between

the subject and the object in practice. Different from abstract scientific knowledge, morality cannot be measured without consideration of a person's character and the character can never be measured by how much knowledge he/she has (Colberg, 2004).

Moral cognition cannot automatically generate moral capability, and people with profound moral knowledge are not necessarily noble. Linde pointed out that moral judgment capability is a bridge between moral cognition and moral behavior, and the effective way to improve one's moral judgment capability is not simple indoctrination, but the practical activities of the subject (Wan, 2009).

To change the current state of the existing moral education, schools, as the main responsibility of moral education, should always take human as the center, letting moral education walk into the specific situation, into the real life of flesh and blood, encouraging students to actively participate into the society by discussing about the moral events, clarifying their moral confusion and putting forward their moral claims. Moral norms can only become a virtue when they are completely accepted by people.

Studies at home and abroad have shown that the school moral atmosphere has a great impact on the students' moral competence and norm behavior.

In 1970s, Kohlberg first put forward the theory of group morality atmosphere (Just Community) based on the concept of "community of justice". He believes that in schools with the characteristics of a righteous community, students, teachers and administrators jointly formulate rules, take responsibilities and obligations to observe and maintain the rules on education, especially moral education activities, and make the school moral atmosphere become a situation conducive to the development of individual morality (Yang, 2007).

After Kohlberg, more scholars study and more and more realize that the school moral atmosphere is necessary to improve the students' moral awareness and behavior, and the students' perception of the school moral atmosphere greatly affects the students' moral judgment ability and normative behavior.

The Dutch scholar, Brugman, using the self-compiled questionnaire of school moral atmosphere as a tool, conducted a series of studies related to school moral atmosphere. Studies show that students' perception of moral atmosphere varies significantly between different schools. Moreover, the school moral atmosphere is significantly associated with students' moral capability (Lu, 2000).

By using the Chinese version of Brugman's questionnaire, Taiwan scholar Li Qiming conducted research about the moral atmosphere of primary and secondary schools in Taiwan, which showed that students' perception of school moral atmosphere significantly varies by schools (Qiu, 2009).

Li Weiqiang, a scholar from the mainland of China, conducted research about students' perception of school moral atmosphere with a questionnaire, the result of which shows that students' perception of school moral atmosphere greatly affects students' moral cognition and moral judgment capability. Situational discussions and role play help teachers effectively improve the students' perception

of school moral atmosphere and their moral judgment capability (Wang, 2009).

The investigation and research in psychology give us an important enlightenment, that is, an effective way to improve school moral atmosphere and students' perception is to put students into the real situation through which, students will learn and accept moral norms and moral concepts. Only in this way, can moral norms or moral perceptions be internalized as what students willingly abide by, rather than the rigid rules received passively, and therefore can be rooted in the hearts of the students, and improve their moral cognition and moral judgment capability (Shi, 2009).

Therefore, as moral educators in the school, we should cultivate a spirit of openness, democracy and reflectiveness.

Firstly, Openness. Who is the main body of moral education in primary and secondary schools? In the past, we regarded schools and teachers as the sole subjects of moral education. Therefore moral education was seen as a kind of top-down unified and coordinated guidance. Students became the containers of morality, and were regarded as the unconditional identification and compliance of the established moral orientation and moral norms. For the established moral orientation and moral norms, students can only accept without any objection; believe without any doubt; obey without any other choice.

Openness requires schools and relevant moral education institutions to bring students into the scope of the main body and give full play to students' positive initiative. At the same time, we should adopt the basic thinking of dialectical development and regard the established moral orientation and moral norms as an open system, rather than unchanging and rigid rules and regulations. We need to allow the students to question the established moral norms, guide them to participate into the activities about moral practice, into which we can test their validity, explain, supplement and even make necessary changes to them, according to the social development and changes.

Secondly, democracy. Schools and teachers should treat their students with a democratic attitude, adopting an equal way to discuss about the moral problems in society or in life, instead of making judgments in admonishment. We should treat students equally in teaching and life, respect individual differences, allow students to express their own views and make independent choices, rather than forcing them to accept the moral precepts. We should also invite students to join into the work of transforming and reflecting those moral norms, rather than regard them as passive recipients of moral laws. Schools and teachers should present heuristic moral evaluation to students, rather than putting themselves in the position of trainees to make unquestionable moral judgments on students.

For what is inconsistent with the established moral norms and moral orientation in the society, teachers should discuss with students seriously, presenting to them the moral events containing contradictions and conflicts in an objective way, and conducting an equal dialogue with the students, so that students can make independent moral judgment. Teachers' role takes a transfer from a judge

to a guide. Guidance does not necessarily mean that we have to return to the traditional moral norms. Instead, we can jointly explore the new moral orientation and moral norms in line with the social development through discussion. Only in a democratic way, can we fully mobilize the students, and we will be willing to receive moral education, rather than resist it, either openly or secretly. Only in this way can we truly improve people's moral capability (Wang, 2009).

Thirdly, reflectiveness. In the established moral orientation and moral norms, schools and teachers act as passive implementers of moral education, which means that teachers and schools seldom reflect on the practice in moral education practice, not to say to reflect on the established moral orientation and moral norms. With the development of society, the established moral norms have also been injected with new content, requiring new explanations, and even transformation. On the one hand, some traditional mainstream moral orientations and moral norms have gradually become not in line with the requirements of the modern society, while on the other hand, some non-mainstream moral orientations and moral norms contain some reasonable components in line with the requirements of social development, which requires schools and teachers to reflect should be included into moral education in contemporary times.

For example, under planned economy system, we advocated for moral education with the country or collective as the core. We encouraged selfless sacrifice and personal sacrifice for the sake of collective interests.

But with the development of society, China has entered the era of market economy which requires to take individual-oriented perspective, that is, we shouldn't only sacrifice our own interests which are quite reasonable, for the sake of protection or realization of the collective interests. For example, when the collective assets are threatened, our past virtue was to sacrifice our own interest, including our precious lives, to protect the collective interests. However, it turns out to be unpractical to prioritize the collective interests over our reasonable individual interests. In this sense, blindly advocating for the collective interests at the expense of others will no longer meet the demand of society in the new era.

Therefore, we should reflect on the traditional moral norms and inject new meaning into "individual interests". We need to please others and at the same time, please ourselves; benefit others and at the same time benefit ourselves. Collective and individual, others and self, all of those must be taken into consideration.

When it comes to the ways to adopt the above principles, human-centeredness means to implement humanistic teaching into moral education, instead of forcing students to accept them unwillingly. Students should be regarded as individuals with independent personality, They are active and creative human beings, rather than passive "articles". We need to change the old unequal relationship between teachers and students into a new equal relationship, therefore we take a transfer from one-way influence into two-way interaction, from indoctrin-

nation to communication in moral education.

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