Chapter #23

CHALLENGE IN CLASSROOMS: MORAL REASONING AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the first fruits of research focused on pupils in their first year at Secondary School. Its main aim is to explore the possible relationship between moral development, as understood by Kohlberg, and the impact that the components of emotional intelligence described by Baron-Cohen (e.g. self-concept, empathy, flexibility and control) have on moral detachment. At a cooperative school in the province of Alicante (Spain), following Kohlberg's method and through an action-research design, we presented 11 dilemmas and a BarOn questionnaire (EQ-i YV-S) to be resolved by a small group of 25 boys and girls (ca. 12-14 years old) during their tutoring session. The obtained results show that the whole group was at the same level of moral reasoning, but at different sublevels. We also found that the same individuals who are at lower sublevels obtain lower scores (below the group average) in the four analysed emotional components (intrapersonal level, interpersonal level, stress management and adaptability). Use of moral dialectics in the classroom promotes cognitive progress, social responsibility and decision-making at a critical developmental moment.

Keywords: secondary school, moral development, emotional intelligence, early teenage.

1. INTRODUCTION

The news constantly bombards us with reports of the disruptive behaviour of boys and girls at secondary schools, young people between the ages of 14 and 18, in whom a certain moral disengagement seems to have set in (Ortega, Sánchez, &Menesini, 2002). By pursuing this idea, based on the concept of moral disengagement proposed by Bandura in 1991, which links the learning and internalisation of social standards with a certain ability to regulate how our emotions behave, our aim is to explore the possible link between moral reasoning and emotional competencies. There is an increasing number of studies which aim to further explore the impact that emotional awareness has on moral behaviour and how the development of moral behaviours encourages individuals to control their primary, reactive and egocentric responses. It may therefore be assumed that this increases the ability to reason and judge one's own actions and those of others. Emotional intelligence, in other words emotional awareness, and managing emotions can have a positive effect on the prosocial use of psychological resources, which belong not only to an individual but also other people and even groups (Hakkak, Nazarpoori, Mousavi, & Ghodsi, 2015).

2. BACKGROUND

Our theoretical framework is supported by biological contiguity and Piagetian psychology (Piaget, 1948) and the proven connection, which Kohlberg established in 1984, between intelligence (capacity for reasoning) and the ability to argue logically in relation to

a situation that creates some kind of conflict or dilemma (Gibbs, 2013). We take a position on an eclectic evolving theoretical framework, in which biological contiguity is as important as interaction with the environment and the experience that this leaves in each person, defending ethical contextualisation (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan,2013) in that experience, so that it is possible to compare ethics of justice with ethics of equity.

For Kohlberg (1984), development occurs in a complex interaction of active self-reflexive processes based on knowledge of oneself and experiences of interaction with the social environment. He structures the development of moral reasoning into three major levels, namely the Pre-conventional, Conventional and Post-Conventional levels. In each level, he establishes two types of sub-phases or stages. The biological development of boys and girls in interaction with their family, at school and with their peers opens up the path from one cognitive and moral structure to another, from a capacity to perceive and interpret reality to another more mature and complex one. Kohlberg links moral reasoning with the quality of cognitive stimuli, experience and role-taking, in the sense that Mead gives to this type of experience. This entails highlighting both the cognitive and emotional aspects in the structural and organised construction of social relationships in which people are involved. One of the keys to moving from one moral reasoning to another is promoting dialogue, dialectics: giving boys and girls the opportunity to take on different roles, passing on experiences to them and allowing them to participate in judging and assessing them (Hersh, Reimer, & Paolitto, 1984).

After the family, school is the second level of socialisation, and it is where most children around the world learn concepts, standards and values that help them to function appropriately in the society in which they are growing up. At school teaching and learning is a continuous and overall process. Since the nineties, the importance of socio-emotional education has been explicitly stated in the description of goals, procedures and evaluation of the knowledge, competencies and attitudes shown at school. Authors such as Salovey and Mayer (1990), who follow the tradition of Thorndike (1920), Wechler (1949), Maslow (1943), Payne (1985) and Gardner (1998), try to incorporate emotional intelligence into human cognitive abilities. This incorporation of emotional abilities and skills, which are developed in the social and personal spheres, has provided an important stimulus for change and renewal in education, both from a methodological and conceptual point of view. This new approach involves incorporating affective and emotional aspects as variables which have a positive or negative impact on performance at school (Alzina, 2013; da Silva, 2017) and on social and personal success (Hakkak et al., 2015).

Every emotion predisposes us in a different way to an action; the major emotional structures are built as we experience the external reality through our body (Wallon, 1975). Fear, anger, laughter or sadness are emotions that are universally recognised by people belonging to different cultures (Levenson, Ekman, & Friesen, 1990). But most emotional expressions are learnt in a specific sociocultural environment (Fernández-Abascal & Palmero, 1998). Positive emotions, such as happiness and the pleasure of social recognition, also improve the ways in which we use our cognitive resources, equip us with social resources and active strategies for coping with emotional dilemmas; in general, understanding and being able to manage them help the personality to mature (Fernández-Abascal, 2015). Emotions can suddenly activate a significant amount of psychological resources. These adaptive processes are activated every time the body detects danger or a threat to its balance. Therefore, they are not static but change according to the demands of the surroundings, through action based on experience. The work of Daniel Goleman (1996) marks a turning point in the consideration of Emotional Intelligence as a key factor in achieving social success. According to Goleman (1996), EI has two facets:

the intrapersonal dimension requires a person to perceive and express their own emotions correctly, while the interpersonal dimension requires people to correctly interpret the emotional expressions and reactions of others, thereby achieving appropriate or empathetic interaction.

Baron-Cohen (1997) detaches himself from the cognitive-developmental construct and suggests studying Emotional and Social Intelligence from a multifactorial approach that relates more closely to aspects linked to personality (Alzina, 2013; Pacheco & Berrocal, 2015). He defines it as a set of personal, social and emotional abilities and skills that influence one's ability to meet the demands and pressures of the environment, as well as overall well-being and emotional health (Ugarriza, 2001). BarOn defines the components of Emotional and Social Intelligence using five major factors – intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, stress management and general well-being. Each of these major factors refers to certain abilities and skills. Therefore, emotional self-knowledge, self-expression, emotional regulation, self-development and independence define the intrapersonal factor; this factor refers to the ability to be aware, to understand and to relate to others and one's environment. The interpersonal dimension refers to the ability and skill to handle strong emotions and control our impulses. Social relations and social commitment define this interpersonal factor. The Adaptability factor is defined by developing the ability to resolve conflict in a flexible and realistic way; finally, controlling stress and impulses is defined by the diversity of strategies to cope with stress.

Using this theoretical model, BarOn designed the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i), a self-report with 133 statements to respond to on a five-point Likert-style scale, ranging from 1(=Agree) to 5(=Disagree). (For example, "What happens to other people matters to me", "Some things make me very angry", "I can give good answers to difficult questions"). The test gives a total score as a Quotient (EQ), which reflects overall emotional intelligence. It also provides a specific score for each of the five major factors, as well as an individual score for each of the 15 subscales. It is simple to interpret; the higher the score, the better a person responds to the dilemmas which they face on a daily basis or suddenly and unexpectedly. However, the length and wording of the questionnaire make it difficult to obtain and interpret the data, and, in 2002, BarOn and Parker (2002) developed the emotional inventory for young students aged between 6 and 18 (EQ-i:YV), comprising 60 Likert-style statements for responses on a scale from 1 to 4 (1= Never and 4= Always). Both scales have been translated in more than 30 countries, and many validation studies (Parker, Keefer, & Wood, 2011) have verified the factorial structure of the Baron-Cohen (1997) theoretical model by means of confirmatory factor analysis. The study conducted by Ugarriza, in 2001, is particularly noteworthy; it includes an abbreviated EQ-i: YV- S scale with 30 statements for response on a 4-point Likert scale and a factorial structure in accordance with the theoretical model described by BarOn (Ugarriza & Pajares, 2005). This study has been validated in Spain (López-Zafra, 2014, p.31; Esnaola, Freeman, Sarasa, Fernández-Zabala, & Axpe, 2016), and we decided to use it as it is a short version with adequate consistency indices It is recommended for use particularly in situations where there is a lack of time, when researchers do not want to tire out the participants and if it is going to be used in combination with other tools. All these features make it well suited to our study.

Nowadays, nobody doubts that Emotional Intelligence has two dimensions, namely competence and ability. However, in order for this emotional intelligence to be visible, action, and specifically, prosocial action is needed (Wang, Lei, Liu, & Hu, 2016).

3. DESIGN

We proposed conducting an exploratory study following the guidance that Blatt & Kohlberg (1975) gives on the applicability of his theory to education. We chose to carry out the study in a private secular secondary school in the province of Alicante, which is set up as a cooperative in which both teachers and students are part of the company, and it is implied that everyone is concerned with providing and obtaining a good education. We decided, together with the school guidance unit, that our study would have an action research design and that it would be carried out in a tutorial hour shared by two groups (A and B), including half of group A and half of group B, with the aim of maintaining inter-class relationships among students. Our population universe is made up of the pupils from the selected school, and the sample is selected, purposive and non-probabilistic. The total number of male and female pupils who attend the tutorial is 28, and 25, those who brought the informed consent form from home, remained (17 boys and 8 girls). Their ages range between 12 (6 girls and 4 boys), 13 (11 boys and 2 girls) and 14 (2 boys).

4. OBJECTIVE

We have a twofold objective: on the one hand, we would like to explore the possible relationships between moral reasoning and emotional competencies and, on the other, provide the teachers with accessible dialectic tools that are useful for educational psychology intervention.

5. PROCEDURE

During their regular tutorial hour, with their usual teacher, and supported by a voluntary student and the centre's guidance counsellor, the activity was explained to them, and they were given a questionnaire with 10 dilemmas+1. They were presented with a series of situations in which we asked them to state how they would behave and to write an argument explaining their choice. Dilemma 11 was prepared by the tutor and the guidance counsellor, as they had just learned about a case of cyberbullying involving a girl in the group that took part in our study. The dilemma was worded as follows: "Imagine that you are in a class Whatsapp group, and several classmates with whom you get along well insult and belittle another classmate who you do not like. What would you do? (underline the selected response and write an argument to explain your choice)

a) You defend the classmate even though you do not like him/her and your friends will be angry with you?

b) You stay out of it and do nothing, allowing the insults and belittling to continue."

Dilemma 11 was prepared by the tutor and the guidance counsellor, as they had just learned about a case of cyberbullying involving a girl in their year. The 11 dilemmas were prepared following Kohlberg's method, contextualised to suit the interests that scientific literature indicates are relevant for the age group that we are studying and which we could refer to as early adolescence (friendship, social responsibility, respect in romantic relationships, respect for others, relationships with authority, relationships with the forbidden, distribution of time, online bullying, etc.). The ten dilemmas +1 are real dilemmas with the solution limited to two options and at least one argument to justify the stance taken. Students were given 35 minutes to respond. Once they had all finished, they were given the short version of the BarOn questionnaire, considering that it was an excellent tool for preparing a simple and thorough study on the emotional competencies of a small group of early adolescents. Our session finished at this point, but the class group continued working.

6. DISCUSSION

We will now comment on significant aspects that were observed when analysing the results. To solve the dilemmas, 24 of the 25 subjects were placed at the Conventional Level, while only one remained at the Pre-Conventional Level. Similarly, we found that 24 of the 25 subjects reached the average level in the scores on the Inventory, except one, the same 12-year-old boy. We observed how the same person who did not manage to resolve dilemmas properly did not achieve an intermediate score on the inventory, which shows a potential link between an emotional deficit and a deficit in moral/prosocial reasoning.

Only in 3 of the 11 dilemmas were significant differences observed in the solution. However, within the same level, two big blocks were identified in the group, corresponding to the two stages or sub-phases which make up the Conventional Level. These dilemmas covered cyberbullying, failing, telling on someone and proposing early sexual relationships. These issues are highly relevant in the current context and support the link between reaching a certain level of moral reasoning and proper management of emotional competencies, education about which will undoubtedly be a determining factor in moral reasoning and development (Proroković, Nikolić, & Šimić, 2017).

The direct scores obtained in the Inventory by each of the 25 subjects enable us to position the subjects within the group itself in each of the four evaluated skills (Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Stress management, Adaptability). Thus, we can observe how the whole group, except our subject number seven, obtains a score above the possible average; and, once again, 14 of the 25 young people are above the group average in each of the skills, and 13 below average. Once again, a link between moral/prosocial reasoning and the level of emotional and social intelligence can be seen. We found it relevant that 100 percent of our subjects were at the same stage for role-taking responsibility. All of them, without exception, prioritise their role over their individual position, while when acting without a role, 10 of the 25 (including 5 of the total number of 8 girls) respond in a less empathetic, more selfish way while avoiding social responsibility. It would certainly be interesting to look further into the importance of granting roles and responsibility to boys and girls of these ages, as Kohlberg already stated. The results obtained in our study are in line with the results achieved by Garaigordobil and De Galdeano (2006) on the importance of role-taking in the acquisition of prosocial behaviours by both genders.

In addition, we would like to suggest that it would be worthwhile to further gender differences, since the reviewed scientific literature usually predicts higher results for emotional and social intelligence in girls than boys. However, in our study more than 60% of girls were below the group average in emotional intelligence and obtained lower scores in intrapersonal skills and their acquisition. After evaluating a programme which fostered emotional intelligence in a group of adolescents, Sarrionandia and Garaigordobil (2017) noted that they did not find any significant differences with regard to sex. Perhaps the fact that sometimes gender differences are analysed, while on other occasions sex differences are studied, is creating confusion. Although they are related, sex and gender are not exactly the same.

To conclude, it is worth highlighting that the lowest scores were obtained in intrapersonal skills and adaptability skills, while the highest scores were in interpersonal skills and stress management. This is in line with the evaluated moral reasoning. It could also indicate that it would be worth working on emotional self-awareness, assertiveness and self-actualisation with this group. We think that each subject's personality and optimism influence these scores, as well as the high value given to the social image that we present, or want to present, during this developmental stage. These are all factors to continue studying, which the tutor could certainly draw upon for a more specific and effective intervention.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Moral dilemmas, which are closely connected to reality and contextualised to everyday life, are an excellent educational psychology resource not only for evaluating moral reasoning but also for forming a moral judgement, accounting for and becoming aware of one's own hierarchy of values, in short, to grow in self-knowledge and social responsibility. Debates on the hierarchy of values can provide us with an opportunity to compare the ethics of equity with universal, non-gendered, ethics, at a turning point in the expression of sex and gender differences. Emotional intelligence is an overall term, which is used for both women and men; however, emotions are subjective reactions with three physiobiological, cognitive-experiential and emotional evaluation components. The skills that society demands of males and females are not the same. It would be of interest to continue exploring and enhancing knowledge of gender differences, rather than sex differences, as gender is a social construction, and differentiated emotional education is a key factor to analyse. It is emotional education, education with meaning, which, from childhood, shapes and defines the behaviour that is suitable and permitted for the sex and the situation experienced. In addition, it may be concluded that adopting prosocial roles provides experiences which encourage and motivate girls and boys to gain some perspective on their reality and that of their surroundings, thereby giving them moral reasoning and a tendency towards action with a broader and more positive social resonance.

Attaching importance to student participation in the school community means giving them the opportunity to grow up while feeling that they are part of the school organisation. Morals are not taught they are built in everyday life from daily moral behaviours.

We know that this is a small, exploratory study with many limitations, but as part of the action research design, combining the two tools (solving dilemmas and the BarOn inventory) was very useful to identify the emotional management needs of the group and of each one of its members.

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