

ON HOW RE TEACHERS ADDRESS

**THE SOMETIMES CONFLICTING TASKS OF
CONVEYING FUNDAMENTAL VALUES AND
FACILITATING CRITICAL THINKING**

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INTRODUCTION

“On the one hand there is an emphasis on habit, tradition and being properly brought up; on the other hand there is an emphasis on intellectual training, and on the development of critical thought and choice (Peters, 1998, 27).”



CONFLICTING RESPONSIBILITIES

- Teachers are expected to balance different roles:
 - as conveyers of values *and* facilitators of critical thinking,
- with conflicting educational aims:
 - that the pupils should become eligible democratic citizens *and* independent rational individuals.
- Avoid to be authoritarian or to indoctrinate children.



AIM

- The conflicting responsibilities has been considered a theoretical problem with theoretical solutions.
- The overall aim of this paper is to draw attention to the conflicting responsibilities as a practical problem that teachers face and are expected to solve in their pedagogical practices.
- The contribution is based on qualitative research interviews with RE teachers, who are considered to have a particular responsibility for moral education, in the Swedish school system.



THE PARADOX OF MORAL EDUCATION

- The conflicting responsibilities is one of several related problems that educational philosophers sometimes refer to as *the paradox of moral education*.
- The attempts to solve the paradox can, in this context, be divided in three broad approaches to moral education.



(1) CHARACTER-BASED APPROACH

- Teachers should lead by example and help their pupils to form good habits and develop desirable character traits:

“integrity, patience, tolerance, honesty, courtesy, reliability, considerateness, [and] good will (Carr, 1983, 48)”.

- Emphasis on the ability to respond emotionally to others as a part of a social group.
- Characteristic of a character-based approach



(2) REASON-BASED APPROACH

- Teachers should challenge their pupils with moral dilemmas on a level above their ability and contribute to their capacity to reason and develop cognitively.
- Emphasis on the capability to think rationally in order to become autonomous individuals.
- Characteristic of a reason-based approach to moral education.



(3) INTEGRATED APPROACH

- Some argue that the division between habit and rational thinking has been overemphasized in the current debate.
- Important to form habits to be able to understand how and why it is desirable to develop certain character traits.
- Use art or literature in order to develop habits of thought, as for instance, an attention to others as human beings that contributes to our moral awareness and autonomy
- Characteristic of an integrated approach of moral education



METHOD

- A series of qualitative research interviews were conducted.
- Participants: seven licenced RE teachers with 9-32 years of experience in the profession (Teacher 1-7).
- The teachers were briefed about the purpose of the study and invited to participate voluntarily under the condition that they could discontinue at any time.
- The interviews were conducted using a protocol with open-ended questions about conveying values and facilitating critical thinking.



TEACHERS WITH A CHARACTER-BASED APPROACH TO MORAL EDUCATION

Some of the teachers who participated in the study emphasize the importance of leading by example in order to convey certain values to the pupils:

“I want to convey that we live in a society that rests on a set of common values. These are the values we have agreed upon and that does not mean that everybody agree with them... I am an important role model, as a grownup, in this regard... to show the pupils how to act to one another in order to make a group or a society to work (Teacher 6).”

These teachers express an interest to lead by example, convey values, and facilitate the pupils’ self-understanding in a social, cultural and historical context.



TEACHERS WITH A REASON-BASED APPROACH TO MORAL EDUCATION

Other teachers who participated in the study emphasized the pupils' ability to think critically, make their own decisions, and justify them to others as an important point of departure for moral education:

“The assignments I have constructed... are focused on rights. The purpose of my teaching is that they [the pupils] shall understand that... [rights] are supposed to protect the weak and vulnerable [in society]. That the ones who cannot make their voices heard themselves, can be heard through the human rights. This is something which have to be considered when reflecting on, for instance, the rights of the child or parent in relation to a given religious activity... or ethical considerations in general (Teacher 3).”

The teacher express that he wants to challenge the pupils with dilemmas, concerning conflicting rights, would not tell them what was right or wrong, and aimed to assess everything critically in order to enable their development into autonomous and responsible adults.



TEACHERS WITH AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO MORAL EDUCATION

Yet other teachers seem to dissolve a strict division between conveying and critically examine ideals, norms and values as they describe their way of teaching – and, for instance, use art:

I introduce the course with Sally Mann's pictures of decaying human bodies during the first lesson. How do we, actually, view our existence? This is why death, as a theme, is always present as the basis of the course whether the pupils perceives it or not. In this individualist society everything is motivated by if it contributes to maximize potential and status in existing hierarchies. Even if much is said about equality and power, there is basically an idea of maximizing the level of consumption whether it is travel, or cars, or anything, really. Then it feels good to have virtue ethics... something which reminds us of that there are things to work on. There is a humility to that. (Teacher 1)

The use of art is a way of letting go of one's self-centredness and develop a deeper understanding of other people and their points of view which is necessary in order to think ethically



CONCLUSION I

The teachers in this study who choose to embrace:

(1) a character-based approach to moral education emphasize the task of conveying values at the expense of a critical assessment of ideals, norms and values.

(2) a reason-based approach to moral education emphasize the task of critical assessment at the expense of conveying ideals, norms and values.

(3) an integrated approach to moral education articulated a more pronounced ambition to balance the tasks to convey values and facilitate critical thinking in their pedagogical practices.



CONCLUSION II

- Since the fundamental values of the curriculum are contingent and subject to political decisions it is important that an educational system, built on a set of democratic values, can and will be subject of critical assessment.
- In this context, we believe that a critical examination need to be informed by an understanding of ideals, norms and values as well as appropriate analytical tools, in order to be relevant.
- Of the alternatives that have been subject of this study, the integrative approach to moral education seem to be the most apt candidate.



THE END

Thank you for listening!



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