

Moral Early Education – The Pedagogy of Classic Stories

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the moral education at preschool age, focusing on the particularities of teaching moral and social values very early. It starts by rendering problematic the social and moral dimensions of education nowadays in a volatile context in which ideals and values need to be redefined. Learning and teaching are considered in relation to age characteristics and purposes of education. It draws on the ideas of Maria Montessori on the absorbent mind and on the discipline and independence issues. The reflective process has its starting point in two research studies conducted with two groups of preschool children which aimed at investigating the preferences for modern or classic stories, the characters children are fond of and the reasons for their attachment. Surprising results determined us to reflect again on how children learn personal, social and moral ways of being and behaving, on the way traditional and alternative education address this area, and finally on the reasons classic stories are regarded as highly effective on teaching moral and social values to very young learners. It concludes that in order to accept and follow moral rules children need to understand them first. Classic stories offer teachers/parents/educators the chance to present these in an attractive manner, without being scholastic or dogmatic. Characteristics of the stories make them respond to children's psychological needs, turn into effective tools for moral education and tranced time.

Keywords: Early Education, Moral Education, Classic Stories

1. Introduction

1.1. The Social and Moral Dimensions of Education

Since we consider education in relation to guiding and assisting children through the process of continuous learning and development [1], when taking into consideration its social and moral dimensions, we refer to the values, attitudes and behavior in social human contexts that children learn actively to recognize, accept and adopt [2].

The contemporary society has been characterized in the last decades by challenges, change, insecurity and unpredictability, but at the same time this volatile environment opened to new possibilities and alternative models of interpretation and acting in all fields, education included. There is a constant need in education to redefine ideals and values that are promoted in schools according to the evolutionary demand of the society. In this context, education is required to consider now, more than ever, its present social and moral dimensions: multiculturalism, inclusion, protection and preservation of the environment, in other words to assist children to become

aware and understand their acts and their consequences, and how to make possible the personal contribution to the creation of better communities [3]. School education is considered to play an important part.

Teaching has always had various social and moral implications: self-discipline, racial and gender issues, praising, encouraging, teaching stories, etc. In this process, teachers act to promote personal, social and moral ways of being and behaving, with a focus on values, attitudes and common understanding [4]. In other words, children are guided through a set of beliefs and values regarding what is right or wrong, acceptable or not in a society, in order to develop a disposition to act accordingly.

Despite the fact that most educational systems consider that moral education is important as it teaches diversity, tolerance, mutual respect and pluralistic values, its approach is regulated differently. Some educational systems treat moral education as a separate discipline or connected to personal, social or health education, or integrate concepts of social and moral development in a more holistic approach, using specific principles across the curriculum. For the purpose of this paper,

we will make reference to early education and the curricular aspects related to moral education at young ages.

1.2. The Curriculum for Early Education in Romania

An example of an integrated approach is that of the newly adopted Romanian Curriculum for Early Education from 2019, which does not refer specifically to moral education as one of its components. Still it considers holistically the development of children from birth to 6 years of age and makes reference to different areas connected to this topic.

It focuses on the child as an individual, but also on the child in relation to the surrounding environment. Therefore, it proposes activities for personal development, discovery of personal aptitudes and abilities, development of self-esteem. The areas of experiential learning focus on exploring the human nature, on personal beliefs and values, on personal health, family, friends, community, but also on the world outside: cultures around, rights and responsibilities in relation to the others, vision of personal and professional development, the nature and the value of play, learning and work personal and social values. These are complemented with activities that children can access willingly from areas of ecologic, religious, financial, children's rights or road safety education. All these contribute to building a context of respect and understanding for norms and values shared in the families and the communities they live in.

One main constant of the Romanian Curriculum for Early education is the development of conscious discipline through regulated playing, namely the didactic games with numerous benefits, researched extensively in the literature, for the social and emotional dimensions of learning, promoting respect for rules and others, communication and interrelating.

2. Moral Early Education

2.1. Learning Moral and Social Values at a Young Age

One important condition for assisting the development of an individual that is self-confident, fulfilled and capable of making moral decisions without fear or dependence on the opinion of others is freedom. When given to the child, it creates the premises for a relationship of mutual respect and understanding between the child and the adult, based on individual initiative, independence in observation, critical thinking used in predicting consequences and creativity used in adjusting to them. At the same time, this relationship is important as making decisions when living in a community requires taking into consideration the needs and the interests of others. It is necessary for children to become aware very early of the consequences of their actions in the development of their lives, but also in the lives of others [3].

Maria Montessori [5] speaks about the absorbent mind of a child whose learning is different of that of the adult. The child seems to be very sensitive to all stimuli in the environment and acquire, process and integrate information he/she "absorbs" without effort. There is a continuous exchange between the child and the environment that shapes and transforms the child,

in a continuous process of development [6].

In the context of this interaction with the environment, she also discusses discipline as an approach to freedom and limitations that lead to self-respect, respect towards others and towards the environment [7].

Choosing freely the desired activity is the key to the engagement and the perseverance of the child, but also to self-discipline, very difficult to achieve when everything is imposed from outside. In this context children will adopt a new attitude towards learning and work, more responsibility for their own acts [5]. Children learn to make their own decisions without adult intervention within the accepted limits of the group. Working can be an enjoyable endeavor when there is free choice, but when imposed it can lead to opposition, rebellion or even laziness as the adult is the one subjecting the child to getting involved into different activities. The discipline gets to be defined as freedom within the limits of the social norms of the group and results in accepted order and organized psychic. Child learning is more effective when boundaries are clear and the environment is organized.

Helping each other – children of different ages in Montessori classrooms learn together and from one another. It is easier to relate to peers and to understand or accept from them rather than from adults, at the same time they tend to become more empathetic and communicative, learning to relate to different ages. Different studies show that peer mediation has multiple benefits [8]. There is solidarity resulting from this process, elder children develop self-esteem and compassion, while the younger ones become enthusiastic because they feel included and worthy, necessary ingredient in developing as an important member of a community [6].

Studies have shown that children can readily meet minimal standards for moral understanding and engagement. In early stages, moral education should introduce gradual appreciation of and sensitivity to normative demands that apply in a variety of social contexts [2].

2.2. Teaching Moral and Social Values During Early Education

Children are in search of personal identity, meaning and life values. As they grow, they develop a personal value code and patterns of behavior due to the experiences and the interactions they have with the peers and adults around them, mostly by undertaking or rejecting the models of moral behavior they are exposed to. In other words, what we teach is what we do. By showing care and acceptance of the child, by warmth, joy and commitment, respect and understanding for the child's needs, potential and abilities, the adult sets a framework for values and behavior according to these values [3].

The way educators/parents/teachers can approach this is to guide and lead the process of continuously questioning of values, attitudes and behavior in social human contexts, as education means assisting the development (to educate > Lat. *educare* "bring up, rear", which is frequentative of Lat. *Educere* "bring out, lead forth", from *ex*- "out" + *ducere* "to lead").

The process of education should offer the young people numerous opportunities to learn to recognize values that represent prosocial behaviors, engage in actions that are beneficial to the community they live in and appreciate ethical and compassionate conducts. If they are put in the context of doing good deeds, such as talking part in service learning, are given clear directions and good role models, this will eventually lead to moral habits. I believe that education can shape the behavior of young people by inculcating in them the proper virtues [9].

Teachers model moral behavior and set clear boundaries so children may absorb a way of being that respects the individuality of each member of the community and the environment of the school. Though, this is an individual achievement each child makes during life through personal exercise and personal experience and cannot be taught or learnt through imitation [7].

Children have little life experience that they can use when making judgements and stories are one option to be used to overcome this gap. Respect for others, friendly interactions with peers, awareness and acceptance of moral norms and rules governing behavior and relationship cannot be lectured to children. Knowledge of these is constructed and understood by each child individually. In the case of stories, the norms of morality will be obtained in the process of identification with the characters and of drawing personal conclusions from the experiences they have [10]. For example, the classic moral stories have been used extensively to teach children about the consequences of lying and the virtue of honesty [11, 12, 13]. Results suggest that the reason for the difference in honesty-promoting effectiveness between stories was the focus on the positive or the negative consequences of honesty or dishonesty, respectively. The stories emphasizing the positive consequences of honesty by comparison to the ones focusing on the negative consequences of dishonesty, seem to be more successful in promoting honesty with young children [14]. This example proves that not all stories have the same impact on the audience as they are not preferred/enjoyed nor received/interpreted in the same manner.

3. The Pedagogy of Classic Stories

Much contemporary social theory has emphasized the key role that narrative plays in any human understanding of moral self and agency [15]. In this context, classic stories address both the cognitive and the affective dimensions of human nature which makes them an irreplaceable medium of moral education. There are stories that approach important life themes: what makes us human (in Pinocchio), love and immortality (The Little Mermaid, friends and mentors (Bambi) evil and redemption (The Snow Queen), faith and courage (Prince Caspian) [16].

3.1. Short Account of Two Research Studies on Popularity of Classic Stories and Characters

For the purpose of this paper we will refer to two research studies conducted by undergraduate students at the University

of Bucharest studying for preschool pedagogy degree which we coordinated, investigating children's preference for modern or classical stories and their characters and the reasons for their attachment. Each study was carried on independently, with two groups of 20 preschool children, aged 5-6, from urban and rural areas, their parents and their teachers and employed observation grids, questionnaires and focus group interviews as research tools. The results of these two studies came as a surprise to the researchers. Children were exposed to a wide variety of classic and modern stories during their preschool period, both at the kindergarten they were attending constantly, and at home. They all expressed their preference for the classic stories they were exposed to. It was interesting to notice that the selection of texts was made initially by the adults and children's preferences correlated highly with adults' preferences for the same texts. When it came to name their favorite character, classic story characters were again on top. The reasons offered by children for admiring these classic story characters referred exclusively to their virtues, as presented into the narrative. They were regarded as role models and children made aspirational remarks regarding the resemblance with these characters.

What is surprising about the findings of these two studies is the confirmation of what older research showed. We expected to record a change in children's preferences, a shift towards more modern narratives and different characters that would be closer to contemporary world, with updated preoccupation and interests, subscribing to the trends in education that advocate for the introduction of new stories or alteration of classic ones as being either obsolete, not relevant to nowadays lives, or too violent, just to name a few.

Starting from the results of these studies we came back to reflect on the attractiveness of classic stories that is trespassing generations and their formative value in moral education.

3.2. The Formative Value of Classic Stories

When reflecting further on the formative value of classic stories, we bear in mind our discussion on the way young children learn about norms and values and their role in the society absorbing and integrating what they experience in the environment, and the role of moral education, as approached in the previous sections of this paper.

Classic stories are built on the dichotomy of "good" and "evil". The characters become the symbols of the two clear opposite categories (goodhearted, hardworking, honest, kind, generous as opposed to uncharitable, lazy, dishonest, rude, mean). This opposition is transferred to the inner life of the hero who faces moral dilemmas, fighting against temptation and controlling his/her own weaknesses, in a very similar way to what children experience themselves at different stages of development.

At the beginning of each story, the hero is weak, unexperienced, unknowledgeable about life, but his/her character evolves and strengthens as he/she passes through different challenges that are successfully overcome by the end of this transformative journey. Both positive and negative characters have strong psychological profiles. Their physical strength is not

that important as there is a focus on the moral ones. They succeed because they are wiser, better, more emphatic, more generous, hardworking, good-hearted, kind and honest. The message they send to children refers to self-fulfillment.

Studies confirm both the preference for and the influence which *hope* (given by the happy ending of classic stories) has in children's life. Children's evolution is full of anxieties and stories come to confirm that irrespectively the form their problems take (they associate their problems with those of story heroes encounter during their journeys), they can be overcome through personal characteristics, strengths, involvement and as heroes in stories succeed, they will succeed [17].

There are always aids/helps that heroes come across or benefit from, either people, entities, beings or objects that are magical and fabulous. Children's fantasy land is full of such elements and imagination compensates and accommodates the harsh reality, giving hope for a happy resolution of their problems.

In the end there is a reward for a hero who adopted a moral behavior, made moral decisions and acted accordingly, while the negative characters are punished. The assurance of the reward at the end of a difficult journey comes to strengthen the message the child gets, that there is justice and benefits of respecting moral values. I believe that stories are very efficient in sending this message of moral values as they are introduced as "objective" experiences of different characters, facing similar problems with the children. Children identify themselves with the heroes. They feel lost, stupid, unexperienced, undecisive at the beginning, even their family members do not understand or trust their abilities, but they prove to be capable of great things just because they use their own qualities [17].

Stories also comprise the common moral values of the communities they were created in. Characters resemble typologies of people in these communities (the step-mother, the authoritative father, the oppressive master, the genuine maiden, the religious old man/woman, the rebellious child), life situations described are taken from real life (good mother dies and step-mother is unempathetic, not understanding, quite oppressive in trying to replace the good mother; the rebellious child misbehaves and does not follow parents' rules and advice; wrong love decisions and tragically, etc.).

The mentality of the author, characters in the stories, is that of the communities they connect with, being amended every time it is breaking accepted rules within the community. The values and attitudes promoted by stories are the ones valued in the communities: hard working, honesty, generosity, faith, perseverance, patience, well-breeding, good did.

The reward measured to the did offers the moral framework of the stories. The greater the did, the bigger the reward. The idea that stories promote is that a good did will be rewarded in the same way. The universal principle of reciprocity works here. Each act of generosity, bravery or honesty is rewarded. The ultimate reward is the final satisfaction, happiness ever after, as the rule of thumb would always apply [17].

Perseverance in the pursuit of one's destiny, in enduring all suffering or injustice for a higher purpose signifies that all hardship is meaningful. Sufferance would strengthen the character and lead the way to the empathy towards

others.

Patience, well-breeding, respect for the elder, for the wiser, are all moral values important in different communities.

All heroes are genuinely intelligent, but their wit is dormant, awaits to be challenged, before they are publicly acknowledged or validated. Heroes defeat the evil due to their wisdom, wit or sharpness of their mind, despite the display of negative traits of the opposite characters that are stronger or in a better position, but that cannot win through cheating, lying or misleading, as these cannot be appropriate tools for success.

Stories are full of proverbs and sayings, known to comprise centuries of common wisdom and wit. They develop independent critical thinking, cultural identity, interest and empathy for other cultures, imagination and creativity through elements of fabulous. Children can imagine surpassing the narrative boundaries, extending or creating different variants of stories, of character lives or choices. It is a challenge for children to decipher the mystery, the meanings behind the symbols, hidden in the allegory of the plot.

A very clear narrative framework helps the teacher use the story as a tool for moral education, for transmitting norms and values. The repetition of patterns (opposition good-evil, the reciprocity principle at work, the promise of the final reward and the punishment of the evil) comes to reinforce the teaching and the moral ideas comprised into it.

4. Discussion

In order to accept and follow moral rules children need to understand them first. Stories offer teachers/parents/educators the chance to present these in an attractive manner, without being scholastic or dogmatic. Situations presented are clear, the characters are well defined (they are either positive or negative – there are no grey confusing profiles), the heroes employing only positive characteristics will always defeat the negative ones, the evil is punished and the good is rewarded at the level of the suffering they caused or they were subject to. In this way it is easy for children to understand that good did results in benefits while bad did are disadvantageous on long term, that the good party is always helped and rewarded, while the bad party suffers defeat and is punished. The plot is always simple and direct, which helps children understand the moral [11].

The story offers the child the context of the safe reality (parent/teacher reading the story) and the projection of a challenging parallel world, separated of the safe reality (the hero and his/her journey) and the chance to be successful surpassing any hardship that life can offer. Stories offer in this way to children a first glimpse of life, with all its good and bad, making sense of their own existence, in the safety of their homes/families/classrooms.

There are some conditions that stories appeal to students/children. Studies show that not all stories have an impact on children, not all of them are remembered. Children sometimes require one particular story over and over again. Stories need to raise their interest, to be catchy, to hook them with interesting adventures or fabulous elements and offer gradual emotional involvement alternating dangerous

situations, mysterious acts, moments of tension and humor. Stories need to involve children affectively, make them empathize with the characters. They can do that only if the experiences are similar and they can identify with the characters and their feelings. For example, a child whose parent remarry and get a stepparent will empathize with all story characters and understand their feelings in the situation.

5. Conclusions

This paper discusses teaching social and moral values during early education in a manner that is appropriate to children's age, interest, but mostly to the way they learn, and introduces classic stories as an effective tool, still preferred by children, parents and teacher alike.

Moral education principles are present in the curriculum for early education as educators understood the importance of teaching children since a very young age values, attitudes and behavior that they will adopt when living in their communities.

Psychology studies have extensively researched the way children learn in general. In this paper we have adopted Montessori stance on the absorbent mind of the child as we have affirmed that awareness and acceptance of moral norms and rules governing behavior and relationship cannot be lectured to children. Knowledge of these is constructed and understood by each child individually.

Classic stories address both the cognitive and the affective dimensions of human nature which makes them an irreplaceable medium of moral education. They have been widely researched for their formative value. Despite their proved efficiency, there are trends in education that advocate modern stories, closer to the reality children live in, to their interests and needs, less violent and realistic plots. We wanted to research the preference of preschool children, their parents and their teachers for modern or classic stories and story characters and results showed that nowadays children are still very fond of classic stories and characters, often influenced by the choices of texts adults expose them to. These surprising results determined us to return to the problematic of the formative potential of classic stories for moral education and revisit the traits of stories that transform them into appealing tools for teaching social and moral values in early education.

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