

Assessing Values Education: A Tentative Exploration

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Abstract

While the introduction of the 'National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools' (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005a) and its companion publication, 'Values for Australian Schooling Professional Learning Resources' (DEST, 2005b) signalled a resurgence of interest in values education, relatively little attention has been paid to how it might be assessed. This article argues that a more satisfactory solution than attempting to assess the attainment of specific values, like those specified in the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools, is to base the development of assessment instruments on a synthesis of the different premises of the commonly practised approaches to values education. Thus method rather than content drives assessment. A tentative example of such an instrument is provided.

Introduction

The *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005a) argued the need for a more committed vision of values education in schools, and defined nine values for schooling: (1) care and compassion; (2) doing your best; (3) freedom; (4) fair go; (5) honesty and trustworthiness; (6) integrity; (7) respect; (8) responsibility, and (9) understanding/tolerance and inclusion. *Values for Australian Schooling Professional Learning Resources* (DEST, 2005b) provided teachers with resources to promote an understanding of the nature of values, and suggested classroom learning and teaching strategies. The Australian States were also active in their advocacy of values education, either in specific or substantive documents such as *Values in NSW Public Schools* (2004), or in more inclusive curriculum offerings like the Queensland Department of Education's *Strategic Plan for 2004-2008* (2004); South Australia's *Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework* (2001); Western Australia's *Curriculum Framework* (1998); and Victoria's *Essential Learning Standards* (2006).

More recently, *Building Values Across the Whole School*, a Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2009) publication containing teaching and learning units and a professional learning program for primary and secondary teachers, was distributed

to all school principals in Australia, and the *Values in Action Schools Project* (2008-2009) consolidated the work undertaken by schools since the *National Framework* by funding schools to design, implement and evaluate high quality values education.

There is arguably an increasing understanding in schools, as reflected in the case studies reported by Lovat and Toomey (2007) as part of the *Values Education Good Practice Schools Project*, that values education is the “missing link” in quality teaching, and “needs to become a core part of the curriculum in order that the transforming work of teachers and schools can be achieved with greatest effect” (Lovat & Toomey, 2007, p.166).

Yet despite the growing emphasis on values education, the prescription of values in the national framework, the supplementary suggestions for teaching them, and a growing pool of resources, the information provided about the assessing of values is at best modest.

Developing appropriate assessment strategies for the affective domain in general is problematic, and while values have a cognitive component (Hill, 1991), their acquisition is not as easily demonstrated as most gains in knowledge and skills. A value is arguably less defined, and is variable in terms of its attainment and the commitment of the person involved. For instance, Pascoe (2002) argues that values include ideas, rules, activities, practices, and procedures that people treasure, cherish, agree to or merely incline towards. So a value may be nascent or deep and complex. It may be clearly defensible by its owner, or more typically, it may be difficult to demonstrate or articulate.

Yet schooling increasingly mandates accountability. Teachers and systems are required to demonstrate that gains have been made in school programs. The first national curriculum of the early 90s introduced outcomes or performance-based objectives to address the increased demand for evidence of achievement, and there has been a growing emphasis on quality assessment ever since.

One *prima facie* approach to the assessment of values education is to focus on teaching the nine core values in the *National Framework*, and to develop instruments that assess each of

them. Various components of each specified value could be developed and rated either by teachers or the students themselves, or scenarios that exemplify each value could be created for student response and scored in some way. Imagine though the difficulty of developing such an instrument for 'integrity' or 'compassion'! Such an approach is also problematic because it directs attention at prescribed values (implicitly ignoring the scope and interaction of values), and tends to focus on content rather than process.

This article argues that a sounder approach to assessing values education is to examine the theoretical underpinnings of the commonly practised approaches to values education, and to develop an instrument that is generic (that relates to all values), and that embodies understandings espoused by all of the approaches. While such an instrument may not assess specific curriculum outcomes, it may well satisfy the general need for a more teacher-driven form of accountability. Four basic approaches practised in Australian schools are identified for this examination, and the assessment implications are identified and synthesised in a sample instrument. The approaches are the trait approach typically taught through moral biography; values clarification, taught through the provision of valuing strategies; the cognitive developmental approach, typically taught through moral dilemmas; and role-play, practised in spontaneous unrehearsed verbal exchanges.

The approaches

The trait approach. This approach is based on the principle of moral absolutism or the view that certain prescribed values are more worthwhile than others. It therefore involves the teaching of predetermined qualities or traits that traditionally include those of honesty, loyalty, consideration, compassion, service, sharing and perseverance. Kohlberg (1975, p.673) referred to the approach pejoratively as "the bag of virtues approach" because everyone espouses their own "bag". So Aristotle's "bag" was liberality, temperance, pride, truthfulness and justice; and that of the Boy Scouts is honesty, loyalty, reverence, cleanliness and bravery. Of course such an approach is subject to the critical questions of 'what values'

and ‘determined by whom.’

The predetermined traits may be taught directly by exhortation, involving the teacher in extolling and perhaps exemplifying the virtues of a particular trait, or indirectly through the use of moral biography. The rationale for the latter is that students, when exposed to an exemplary character reported in a biography, and required to deduce that quality in class discussion, will adopt his or her values as their own. Typical fare in Australian schools has been Florence Nightingale, Lord Shaftesbury, Ghandi, Henry Ford, Carolyn Chisholm and Adrian Curlewis. This ‘traditional’ approach has often been poorly taught, sometimes because the biographies are simply a bald chronology of events abridged to one or two pages, and designed to elicit the ascribed value label to describe the character’s action (bravery, service, self-sacrifice, compassion), and sometimes because the teacher did not conduct a probing discussion requiring quality student deduction.

More recently, such chronologies have been supplemented by extracts that provide defining moments in the lives of worthy role models, typically taken from their own writings or speeches, and that reveal motives that prompted particular actions (see Rowan, Gauld, Cole-Adams & Connolly, 2007).

The implications for assessment include the need for teachers to identify:

- Ability to articulate beliefs (and acknowledge changes) after direct or indirect exposure to desirable traits.
- Changes in student behaviour when students have transferred information from accounts of behaviours exemplified or exhorted.
- Competence in deduction, notably when it involves deducing personal qualities from action.

These outcomes need to be interpreted more modestly for infants and early primary age children. Whereas secondary students may be capable of quality deduction and ‘hypothetico-deductive’ reasoning (formal operations), younger students are more egocentric and

interpret behaviours within a limited frame of reference (for example, the early work of Ward (1969) revealing that children perceived Florence Nightingale as ‘a naughty girl’ because she disobeyed her parents in going to nurse in the Crimea). Furthermore, for transfer to be apparent from models exemplified in biography, the opportunities for such transfer need to be consistently demonstrated. This view is given further credence by the cognitive developmental theorists who argue that it is only at the higher stage levels (older students) that a demonstrable relationship exists between reasoning and subsequent or consequent behaviour.

Values Clarification. While the trait approach is based on moral absolutism, this approach is based upon the principle of moral relativity (that we should strive to clarify those values that are personally meaningful, and that no one person’s values are superior to those of another). It enables students to interpret, construct and co-construct their own personally meaningful values, and saves policy makers from the criticisms of over-prescription and indoctrination that run counter to the prevailing ethos of collaborative learning and teaching (see Brady, 2006). Proponents regard the purpose of values clarification as helping people to be more purposeful, productive, socially aware, and better critical thinkers.

Students typically work in small groups, on strategies provided by the teacher, and report their decisions later to the full class. The variety of strategies is virtually unlimited. For example, students may develop a ‘priority ladder’ (listing things that they love, fear, that are a challenge to faith, or that they generally value, and rank or code each item); create a family shield or personal crest, placing symbols in each of the six segments (for example, what you do to help others, what your family thinks is important); rank statements on a particular issue in order of importance or commitment (bullying, sharing or pollution); develop a ‘consequences chart’ recording the likely consequences of decisions and actions based on the values that individuals or groups hold; or complete a concentric circle matrix in which they record who they would tell personally sensitive or disclosing sets of presented information

(father, mother, best friend, friend, teacher, priest, acquaintance, stranger). One common strategy that is used in schools and in business training is the fall-out shelter, or desert island problem for which thumbnail information is provided about ten hypothetical people and four have to be excluded (which implicitly means their death). The information descriptions can be massaged to relate to age or issues, and to challenge stereotypes and prejudices.

The authors of the approach, Raths, Harmin & Simon (1966, p. 128) claim that a value needs to satisfy seven elements, grouped according to three broad criteria: (1) *valuing* (freely, from alternatives, and after reflection); (2) *prizing* (cherishing and being willing to publicly affirm the choice); and (3) *acting* (acting on the choice, and acting repeatedly if necessary). They suggest that in facilitating the approach, teachers ask questions of the small groups and full class that follow the seven elements sequentially. For example, the teacher, in addressing the first criterion of ‘valuing’ may begin with ‘Is that your own value/belief?’ ‘Has anyone told you that you must believe that?’ ‘Have you considered other possibilities?’ and ‘Have you given this a lot of thought?’ In all likelihood, teachers would rarely follow such a formal process. They would provide the strategy, and subject the responses to scrutiny through general questioning.

The implications for assessment include the need for teachers to identify:

- Competence in nominating and articulating personally meaningful values.
- Willingness to defend and act upon those values.
- Capacity to interpret and evaluate evidence.
- Ability in selecting from a variety of alternatives and competing claims.
- Awareness of oneself and others.

While younger students may not be as proficient at articulating meaningful values, and interpreting evidence, they can certainly nominate preferences or strong inclinations (see Pascoe, 2002). Teachers need to ensure that before assessing, students have an initial ‘moral’ foundation, and that the selection of choices is not too bewildering. Even the authors of the

approach, Simon, Howe and Kirschenbaum (1972) argue the absurdity of teaching children to decide for themselves with no initial 'moral' foundation. Given the egocentricity of younger students, the selection of teaching and assessment material is of the utmost importance. It is also critical in assessing older students that assessment involves identifying personally meaningful and considered values, and not just matters of personal taste (like a choice between cosmetics or drinks).

The Cognitive Developmental Approach. This approach regards values education as movement through stages that are defined by the quality of moral reasoning, and not its content. For instance, two people may be diametrically opposed in terms of what they believe, for example one supporting and one condemning abortion (different content), and yet be reasoning at the same stage (identical structure). Kohlberg (1980, p. 31) views the stages as 'structured wholes' or 'total ways of thinking'. The approach therefore focuses on enhancing the quality of moral reasoning that can be traced through the stages, rather than distinguishing between right and wrong.

Kohlberg (1975, 1980) identified six stages of moral reasoning, and claimed that they form a fixed sequence; that transition is always forward; that people can fixate at any stage; that the stages relate to all cultures; that while there are fluctuations governing stage location, people are 'modal' in that they tend to reason at a particular stage level; and that the stages are 'hierarchical integrations' (reasoning at higher stages incorporates lower stage thinking).

According to Kohlberg (1975), exposing people to hypothetical conflict scenarios is the means of promoting development through the stages. He used the moral dilemma story (also dubbed the conflict story or unfinished story) to engender conflict. These stories conclude with the general question of how the protagonist should solve a student-centred conflict ('What should Alan do?'). So the approach is driven by the strategy of applying reasoning to values-laden, student-centred scenarios that generate conflict through discussion of solutions.

The teacher presents the dilemma and facilitates a full class discussion, ensuring that there is

appropriately challenging conflict, both by asking questions that relate to the substantive issues of the dilemma, and questions that are generic (‘ Might someone be hurt as a result of that?’ , ‘Can you suggest another course of action?’ , ‘What would the consequences of that be?’), and by refraining from presenting his/her own view (lest perceived teacher authority or wisdom diminish the conflict for some students).

The implications for assessment include the need for teachers to identify:

- Ability to reason about moral issues.
- Maturity in moral thinking or stage-appropriate reasoning.
- Capacity to predict and evaluate the causes and consequences of action.
- Proficiency in resolving problematic moral situations and avoiding overly simplistic solutions.

Although it is necessary to interpret these assessment outcomes cautiously for younger students, infants and early primary age children are certainly capable of discussing moral dilemmas, though their reasoning may be confined to the initial stages. Some immature students may still be limited in taking intent into account in evaluating the morality of particular behaviours (and therefore limited in assessing the causes of action). One virtue of the approach however is that students reason at their own stage level whether it be an obedience and punishment orientation or a universal ethical principle orientation. Early secondary age students may also be limited in their ability to resolve problematic moral scenarios as their intellectual stage imposes a ‘ceiling’ on the moral stage that can be attained. So whether they are ‘concrete’ or ‘formal’ thinkers is a further assessment consideration.

Role Playing. Role play is a spontaneous and unrehearsed verbal exchange in which students explore solutions to a problem or dilemma. Students are selected to ‘play’ the roles of characters in hypothetical conflict, and seek a solution through transactional dialogue with each other (the responses of each are complicated by the unpredictable responses of the

other). By 'climbing into another's shoes', both players are forced to see things from another perspective, and as a result, they learn both about themselves and the other player.

Proponents argue that role-play develops sensitivity to the feelings of others; helps students empathise with and understand others; enables students to express latent feelings; assists students to clarify their own values; helps students to release tensions and feelings (catharsis); promotes an understanding of the causes and consequences of behaviour; and enables students to learn social behaviour.

Brady (2010, p.221-2) identifies six steps in conducting a role-play lesson: *solution confrontation* for which the teacher explains the role to be played; *briefing* for which the teacher sensitises the players and audience to the roles; the *actual role play*; *debriefing* if the characters need help in exiting the roles; *reflection on transaction* for which the teacher seeks analysis of the transactional nature of the exchange from the players and audience; and *further enactments*.

The implications for assessment include the need for teachers to identify:

- Sensitivity to the feelings of others.
- Ability to assume multiple perspectives.
- Capacity to verbally express values.
- Knowledge/appreciation of social behaviour.
- Understanding of both the causes and consequences of behaviour.

While these assessment outcomes should be attainable for all students, the ability of younger students to assume multiple perspectives, and to verbally express them, may be informed by their egocentricity. Many six to nine year olds may be 'heteronomous' (see Piaget, 1932) as their ownership of values involves appeals to significant authority figures like dad, the teacher, priest or policeman ('it's right because mum said so'). More typically, most primary age children are governed by the controls of social praise and social blame as they become increasingly sensitive to others.

A Synthesis

The assessment implications for each of the approaches are obviously not discrete. Whatever the approach, there are generic gains that can form the bases for assessment. For instance, all approaches would purport to developing greater sensitivity to others, greater awareness of oneself, and greater ability to verbally clarify values. As students participate in probing discussion involving deducing from moral biographies; explore their own personally meaningful values from challenging values clarification tasks; consider alternative solutions to hypothetical student-centred moral dilemmas; or engage in unrehearsed transactional verbal exchanges in role play, they are learning about themselves and others. Discussion and/or verbal defence of beliefs and feelings are also at a premium for each of the approaches.

Yet while there are common criteria, there are also some marked differences that may be attributed to particular approaches, and that may inform assessment tasks. Moral biography and values clarification involve significantly different degrees of prescription and relativity respectively; the cognitive developmental approach focuses on stage-related moral reasoning; and role-play is based on decentring (assuming other people's perspectives). So a consideration of the different approaches provides an appreciation of both the generic and particular, and provides helpful data for the development of assessment instruments.

Following is a display of items comprising a rating scale that may be used by teachers in assessing the values education of students. Each of the items can be rated on a five-point scale with 'one' designating 'a little' and 'five' designating 'a lot'. Many of the items are generic, and some are more specific expressions of a particular approach. While the items are drawn from the premises underlying the approaches, teachers need to have at least a general understanding of the approaches. For instance, the item 'reasons at a stage-appropriate level' assumes a broad-brush knowledge of the progression in reasoning that characterises the 'moral' stages (whether those of Piaget, Kohlberg or Bull). Teacher rating of this item does not require a 'clinical' or detailed understanding of each stage. The items follow:

- Decides what values are personally meaningful
- Understands the meaning of defined values
- Perceives that people hold different values positions
- Predicts the actions that might follow from adopting particular values
- Takes different perspectives into account when making a 'moral' decision
- Displays sensitivity to other people
- Identifies the causes of behaviour
- Recognises the consequences of behaviour
- Resolves hypothetical conflict scenarios
- Articulates/expresses values
- Uses moral reasoning
- Reasons at a stage-appropriate level for age
- Deduces values by which people live their lives
- Analyses those values (above) and accepts them or rejects them
- Transfers those values (above) to other situations (their own and others)
- Shows a knowledge of appropriate social behaviour
- Releases feelings/tensions in classroom/group situations
- Acts upon values that are clarified (if appropriate or possible)

Conclusion

Focusing on teaching the nine core values in the *National Framework* is laudable, but attempting to assess them by creating assessments that measure attainment of the individual values is problematic. Apart from neglecting the more general and overriding values and their interaction, there would be significant problems in assessing most of the traits. Integrity is one such example. Rather than focus on the content of values (whether particular values or general values), a plausible alternative is to consider the methodology of the respective approaches. The fact that the four approaches are based on significantly different theoretical underpinnings (moral absolutism and its consequent prescription; moral relativity and its

consequent freedom of choice; moral reasoning that can be located at different stages; and multiple-perspective taking through transactional dialogue), is an argument that endorses, rather than militates against the relevance of a generic instrument to assess values education. The sample instrument provided is an imperfect and tentative beginning that exemplifies teacher-centred accountability.

The salient implication for teacher education is the need to acquaint prospective teachers with the pedagogy of each of the four approaches as a basis for their effective teaching, and consequently to enhance an understanding of how they can be assessed. A second implication is the need to educate teachers about the design of appropriate assessment tools. While the sample provided is a rating scale, and therefore involves promoting an understanding of effective response options (particularly in the provision of options that allow for meaningful discrimination), prospective teachers also need to be skilled in observation and interpreting what might typically be judged as high-inference data, viz the verbal responses and behaviour of students.

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