

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION WITH MORAL-BASED POSSIBILITIES: INQUIRIES IN AN AMERICAN FIFTH GRADE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Moral growth of students can become neglected due to schooling's focus on intellectual growth. In this paper, I explore the value of "imaginative engagement" and "empathetic understanding," theoretically conceptualized, as a way to address the issue of a more flexible curriculum in fiction literature for conscientious citizenship education. After a brief review of moral education factors, I indicate a conception of democratic citizenship. Next, I demonstrate specific examples and situations for moral-based experiences related to fifth grade curriculum—namely, literature in the classroom. I conclude with a detailed exploration of the value of moral-based possibilities within the school context for development of democratic citizens.

Keywords: Citizenship Education, Democracy, Curriculum, Moral Education, Literature.

INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately, American schooling frequently focuses on intellectual growth and neglects educational components regarding students' moral growth. How can teachers prepare students for active participation in the creation of a more just and ethical society? One possible approach includes explorations of moral issues, which rely on nonfiction literature. These moral-based experiences require communication and reflections, according to educational philosopher John Dewey (1916). This interpersonal communication lies at the heart of intellectual and moral growth. Furthermore, emotions and personal stories become critical for student involvement (Meier, 1995; Paley, 1992; Sizer & Sizer, 1999). In this paper, I explore the value of "imaginative engagement" and "empathetic understanding," theoretically conceptualized, as a way to address the issue of a more flexible curriculum for conscientious citizenship education.

Moral Nature of American Classrooms

My investigation is empirical in nature as I draw upon my own experiences of events and dialogues revolving around literature in an American fifth grade classroom. Fiction literature can educate students about human existence through a novel's characters, settings, and ideas. Students' mastery of this knowledge in the classrooms, and how they actively use it will become critical for our society (Whitehead, 1967). Classrooms, moreover, can be ideal place for these moral discussions because students should be able to interact in a safe community.

One way to effective moral experiences is to utilize true dialogue, (Freire, 1970, 92) which builds connections with other people and the world. This dialogue of problem posing and reflections can lead to social action. In Paulo Freire's view, dialogue is necessary. He explains, "Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true

education” (92-93). Through social dialogues of the classroom, students can have transformative learning experiences that produce moral change (Mezirow, 2000, 8). Citizenship education through exploration of moral development and moral-based possibilities (Kohlberg, 1981; Rest, 1999; Noddings, 2000; Martin, 2011) encourages students to participate and take ownership of their beliefs in order to make improvements to school which can be morally formative institutions. For that reason, imaginative engagement and empathetic understanding can be used to support compassionate ways of knowing in a democratic society.

As schooling affects the lives of people more than any other American institution, there is a critical need for effective citizenship education. Many educational issues exist concerning superficial learning and short-term memorization by students; the rushed schooling atmosphere promotes hurried and impersonal student work. School tasks may be considered hurried and impersonal work because these assignments are typically due the next day without further personal exploration. Indeed, students and even teachers are attempting to study many concepts in a brief amount of time. These schooling experiences create shallow learning conditions (Smith, 1998) and disconnected communities (Putnam, 2000). In particular cases, I analyze how aspects of narrow-mindedness, greed, and especially apathy can hinder the development of empathy. The development of empathetic understanding is necessary for democratic life so we can be caring and compassionate citizens. We, as democratic citizens, need empathy in order to have supportive, cooperative communities. Therefore, students should be encouraged to develop this empathetic engagement and leave their schooling with the desire to participate in democratic life.

Meaning of Citizenship Education

After having identified some educational concerns and having touched upon a role for moral discussions in public school education, I would like to focus on the meaning of citizenship education as viewed in this paper. This section will also define the terms “imaginative engagement” and “empathetic understanding” through the educational theories of Robert Kunzman (2006). This explanation of terms will provide a basis for the exploration of moral-based implications for education. By explaining “imaginative engagement” and “empathetic understanding,” I will show potential moral experiences for students as they explore content with a moral perspective.

Due to multiple contending perspectives, I am not trying to put a single definition to the phrase of citizenship education; for the purposes of this paper, I am simply considering citizenship education as any type of study that ethically, critically, and meaningfully examines civic responsibility within our communal society. In brief, community duties are valued in citizenship education. Although some examples may include schools that draw on subjects like history or literature, the conception of citizenship education is not limited to any particular discipline.

Other examples could include schools that are willing to critique dominant learning methods or the narrowed academic emphasis (Meier 1995), or even primary education classes that are willing to confront patterns of bullying and exclusion (Paley 1992). In an increasingly globalized world, youth should have the skills to be accountable and active citizens. Social studies can be viewed as a subject conducive for evaluating civic responsibilities. On the other

hand, all subjects have rich histories and can be questioned for ethical meanings and implications. “Childlike acceptance” should not be encouraged in any subject, despite the complicated questions (Noddings, 1993, 27). Citizenship education can happen in any environment or discipline, and it is important to acknowledge meaningful issues of civic life.

Kunzman’s educational theories revolve around building environments in which students can discuss ethically diverse beliefs about living harmoniously in a pluralistic society. According to Kunzman (2006), “imaginative engagement” is the ability to think outside one’s own beliefs (59). This process involves the combination of the heart and head. It is the capacity to respect unfamiliar ethical perspectives. This understanding is necessary for courteous classroom discussions.

Hence, teachers should endeavor to develop respect and care for other students’ perspectives. Compassionate feelings, as well as the ability to be open to those feelings, can be considered at the foundation of moral behavior (Noddings, 1984) because emotions are strong components of “empathetic understanding.” Dialogues can help young, questioning students to try to find a common ground or at least develop the capacity for empathetic understanding. Kunzman (2006) expresses that hope this way:

While Piagetian constructs assert that it is not until about age seven that children can both recognize that others have their own perspective and adopt the viewpoint of another, other researchers have suggested that it may happen earlier, perhaps as young as age three. One survey of current research on ethical education concludes that the major advances in our capacity to understand others’ point of view occur between ages four and twelve—accordingly, elementary and middle schools play a crucial role in the nurturing of this capacity. (64)

Ethical dialogues are necessary at a young age. Empathetic understanding and imaginative engagement are critical skills for thoughtful, caring citizens. If these are not practiced in the classroom, there are limited places for students to participate and watch these conversations. The classroom might be considered the most conducive place for safe and exploratory discussions; my investigation aims to contribute to teachers’ understanding of how to facilitate moral discussions. Students are able to comprehend acceptable moral behavior by simply listening and observing teachers’ conduct during these ethical discussions (Sizer and Sizer, 1999). This public discourse can lead to a respectful understanding across ethical frameworks, which helps students to understand how more than one path exists or at least a more global viewpoint.

What is the idea or nature of this public democracy related to moral-based citizenship education? As democratic citizens, we live in communities and would be required to look out and share with our neighbors, including shaping the young. Democracy is a shared responsibility according to the Deweyan idea. Indeed, every member has gifts and talents to contribute for the greater good of the community. As Dewey (1916) sees it, “Hence a democratic society must, in consistency with its ideal, allow for intellectual freedom and the play of diverse gifts and interests in its educational measures” (305). Democracy would become more than just a form of government; rather, it becomes a way of life, in which members mentor the young and seek ways to help all members of the public community.

Moral-Based Citizenship Education in Literature Examples

I would like to begin our exploration by describing situations where imaginative engagement and empathetic understanding are strong components of intellectual discussions. Although moral-based conversations can exist across the curriculum, I would like to share some explorations related to specific fifth grade literature. I contend that literature helps students to learn without undergoing the actual experiences. Consequently, students can develop a deep understanding because they are vicariously reading about the characters and situations.

A Book about Friendships, Bullying, and Abuse

Many classes read the classic novel *Bridge to Terabithia* (Patterson, 1997). This book is based upon actual events. The genre is considered a bildungsroman, as the plot focuses on the moral growth of the protagonist. The exposition introduces a lonely fifth grade boy who grudgingly becomes friends with the new and different fifth grade girl. The boy, Jess, ends up admiring Leslie's athleticism, free spirit, and creativity. They create an imaginary world of fun-filled adventures and call it Terabithia. It is a secret place where only the two of them share the magic. No bullies or troubles exist in Terabithia. At school, on the other hand, the bully, Janice Avery, steals money and food. She is big and mean; the kids know to stay out of her way. When Janice steals Jess' sister's Twinkies, Jess and Leslie mastermind a forged love letter from Janice's real crush. The fake love letter breaks Janice's heart, and the novel's characters, as well as the readers, start to see a vulnerable side to the character.

This is the perfect opportunity to let the students analyze Janice's behavior in connection with their own thoughts and experiences with bullying. Have they ever been intimidators, victims, or bystanders? Although Janice is a secondary character, her life is intriguing. A good question to ask the students is why would someone want to be mean to other students. This helps the kids to stop seeing her as a static character and wonder what or why she behaves so cruelly. This is the imaginative engagement to understanding a person's thoughts or behavior that might be different than initially perceived.

Students begin by questioning and exploring what could make a person want to take out anger on others. We talk about how hurt is usually the cause of anger. Most people are not mean until unfortunate circumstances happen. Eventually, Janice shows vulnerability about the fake love letter and embarrasses herself by believing her crush likes her back. The students glimpse other emotions besides Janice's usual cruelty. Many students begin to hypothesize that Janice has a tough life at home. A student surprised me when he reflectively mused, "You never know what people are really going through." Many students will relate and remember the popular cliché: never judge a book by its cover. The poignant reflections related to a student's personal background and knowledge is a feature of imaginative engagement (Kunzman, 2006); this background sharing allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints. The concept in brief is this: people and situations may be different than the original perception. Thus, students will usually infer Janice the bully has her own personal reasons for transferring her anger onto others if given the time and opportunity to think critically.

Later in the novel, Janice is crying in the bathroom. Jess and Leslie worry that their fake love note is the reason for her sadness. At Jess' urging, Leslie goes in and comforts Janice. The two girls form a bond when Janice explains the real reason for her tears, and Leslie can relate with a similar experience of students teasing and acting haughty towards her. Janice ends up confessing that she is severely beaten by her father. She says that her crying is not because she's been abused; she is accustomed to being beat badly. Janice is distraught because her trusted, closest friends told the entire school about Janice's cycle of abuse at home.

Students can now understand more clearly the reason for Janice's motivation to bully people who are smaller or weaker than she. Imaginative engagement helps students to value perspectives. Obviously, it is "wrong" that Janice's dad beats her. It is also "wrong" that Janice bullies the other students to deal with her anger. If this alone were the conversation in a classroom, imaginative engagement would be destroyed. When teachers shut off the freedom to question and explore possibilities and solutions, the path to apathy can be triggered. Students do not feel their power to ask and explore. Their abilities to problem-solve with different responses are limited.

In addition, educators should allow substantial time for students' questioning. Students will usually ask why Janice does not contact the police to report the abuse. Also, my students will speculate and reason why a father would beat his own child. The children can question many ethical aspects like the whereabouts of Janice's mother and does she know about the abuse, and even the possibility of Janice's father having a sickness. This brings an opportunity to talk about responding to situations. Janice's friends tell the whole school about her secret. Students are able to discuss different ways that Janice could receive help without the embarrassment of everyone knowing her private life. Fifth grade is also the perfect age to open conversation up to what can be considered gossip, and how empathetic engagement might also require helping in appropriate ways.

With the character of Janice Avery, the students can develop empathetic understanding. This process is completely visible as Janice is introduced in the beginning of the story as the big bully. Students initially dislike her and have no sympathy. As the story unfolds, they begin to realize she does have feelings. Despite her wrong doings, most students feel compassion for Janice's situation. When Leslie forms a strange friendship with her, many students also start to open their hearts; they express sadness about Janice's tumultuous relationship with her father. When Leslie dies at the end of the book from hitting her head and drowning in a river, the students glimpse the power of Leslie's friendships with multiple, unlikely people. This is another opportunity to develop empathetic understanding about relationships.

Frequently, students will admit that they would not want to be considered a bully. Students will acknowledge ideas of popularity, cross-gender friendships, and healthy friendships. Spontaneous learning becomes key to the imaginative engagement. The students' questions guide the thoughts and direction of the conversations. I would consider this inquiry as subject-centered learning because teacher and students take turns speaking about the subject ideas when needed. The environment should be inclusive and friendly. It is the teacher's duty to facilitate respectful language for everyone. Through respectful interactions, the subject can be analyzed from different perspectives and experiences. The conversations unpack ideas about the subject

from the communication and reflections. This book is one of my favorites to study with students because of its ability to generate meaningful, open dialogue and create a capacity for empathetic understanding.

A Book about Loyalty and the Virtue of Justice

Another book, *Shiloh*, prompts multiple questions and thoughts from students about ethics and justice (Naylor, 2000); the main subject of the book naturally initiates conversations regarding empathetic understanding and imaginative engagement. This novel's main characters are a boy named Marty and a dog called Shiloh. Shiloh escapes from his abusive owner, Judd. Marty must face many difficult choices, and this book directly explores what a person must do when faced with no "right" answer. Marty realizes an enigmatic life truth about morality, and so do most students as they read the novel. In fact, students are surprised that sometimes ethics are confounding. Marty has to choose between lying and stealing to save Shiloh, or he must give Shiloh back and feel responsible in a way for Shiloh being abused. Students grapple with personal conscience when the law might consider justice differently. Thus, this novel allows our classroom to question possibilities for responding to difficult situations.

In particular, Marty feels like he has to lie and steal from his parents to protect Shiloh. He knows his parents will make him return Judd's dog back to him. Students debate ways to protect Shiloh and find a way that Marty can avoid being dishonest. Some of students' ideas include Marty reporting the abuse or giving Shiloh away. This is significant lesson in the classroom: how to make the best possible choice with what you know at the time. Marty might feel his choices are limited, but the students are encouraged to look outside just an either-or situation. Students are reminded to be open-minded because a person might have a valid reason for dishonorable behavior.

At this point, I would remind students that patience could be an important characteristic in order to make well-informed conclusions. My decisions, as a teacher, include the best way to pose problems to stimulate students' communication and reflective thinking (Dewey, 1916). In this example, how can I promote conversations where students grapple with imaginative engagement about suspending judgment? This trait of thinking before acting helps a person refrain from being hasty to size up a person or situation, and students can start examining a world full of possibilities when judgments are withheld. Classrooms are considered "morally charged environments," (Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen, 1993), and a student could be sparked to act with moral condemnation. It might be impossible to avoid judgments for some students, and different ethical ideas should be shared. However, narrowed thinking or condescending attitudes are not permitted for this setting to be successful. This issue of judgmental attitudes is dangerous to the classroom's academic community, and teachers need to be aware and proactive.

As Marty grapples with his own ethical dilemmas, the students become enthralled with his snowballing problems. Students typically develop empathetic understanding quickly for this protagonist because his main motivation is his strong love for Shiloh. The class questions how motivations and intentions might be more important than the actual result in the end. Students also get to question animal-human and nature-human relationships. We analyze the extent of responsibility humans have for their environments, including the organisms inside those

environments. Since there are no concrete “right” answers, students always enjoy sharing their opinions.

When Marty lies to protect Shiloh, it causes more problems. Throughout the novel, he tells lie after lie as his stories snowball over time. He risks losing his best friend because he has to decide whom he can trust. Students are always willing to examine this theme because they want to better understand healthy, positive relationships. Marty risks his family and friends to save a life. Student forms different perspectives about why he is taking the difficult path. Some say the love and trust of an animal is worth protection. Others have even decided that rules or laws may not always be morally right for the situation. However, empathetic understanding is almost always felt for the fifth grade boy. Many students speak of their own animals as friends and treasured family members.

One year a student was reflecting on ethical questions in congruence with the story, and he asked me, “Do you want what I would really do?” I said, “Yes, I value that you will be honest.” He responded, “It is not the right answer.” It was an interesting conversation because he realized that the morally-right response, the altruistic answer, was not what he would do. His question was not unjustified, and he recognized that his real actions might have some self-seeking motivations. Perhaps in some circumstances, self-seeking actions with different, good intentions could also be moral. This student was also asking me if he had the freedom to write his real thoughts.

In this hypothetical situational question, endangered trees were threatened to be cut down. The trees were not known to grow anywhere else in the world, but lots of money was sure to be made from the property alone. The boy took the courage to say that he would cut down the trees because he valued being successful with money. He was the only student to voice that opinion. This provided an interesting conversation about what is valued in the real world. In fact, this begs the following question: should everything we value be considered valuable? Morality is not about what we want; morality examines what should we do. The students acknowledged the classroom made it easy to give the morally-right response, but the classroom did not hold the pressures of the real world.

Marty eventually confesses to his parents and friends that he has been hiding Shiloh. This novel shows competing interests at the heart of its ethical question: the boy resorts to deceptive behavior to family and friends in order to protect a life. Although the dog was not purchased by Marty, he cannot bear to return the dog to the real owner. Marty is guilty of stealing and lying. The plot of this story is confusing as Marty frequently prays and asks for Jesus to tell him what he should do. There is never an explicit meaning for honesty. The meaning of honesty is usually the same; however, certain situations may make it difficult to know what the most honest decision/act would be. Students have to use imaginative engagement to decide what is ethically “honest” as circumstances apply. If Shiloh was killed, Marty would be in the right to keep him. On the other hand, Judd did pay for Shiloh as part of his hunting dog group. The conflicting ideals of protection for Shiloh and Judd’s ownership of Shiloh add to the confusing, ethical dilemma of the book.

Judd and Marty eventually agree that Marty will work off what Shiloh is worth. Many students express outrage at this negotiation with Judd. This is not “right.” This creates a framework to discuss if life is always fair for all people. Usually a student will say the “life isn’t fair” line. Natural inequality trigger conversations about how life can have luck or different circumstances or even unfair conditions. Students have to acknowledge that past historical events show lack of equality for certain groups of people. I like to have students complete many journal-type writings from this perspective of someone who has experienced an unfair situation. Marty shows hard work is one possibility, but sometimes students realize that is not always enough.

Finally, as Marty is working, Judd shows confusion at Marty’s loyalty and love for another. Judd shares about his own childhood abuse, and he says it made him tough. This book may hold themes that fifth graders should not emotionally touch on if not ready. This relates to the maturity of the students. Judd is so evil that older readers might question how severe was his abusive childhood. There is a strong possibility that Judd will never be rehabilitated to love. Overall, this book is ideal for moral-based spontaneous conversations and realistic possibilities for understanding in a fifth grade classroom.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this inquiry is not to formulate a specific rule by which to direct moral-based possibilities for citizenship education. Rather my explorations are to provide examples that further educational thought for ethical conversations in the classroom. The framework consists of promoting students’ experiences of thinking and communication, which helps develop empathetic understanding and imaginative engagement. My empirical investigation draws upon my own experiences of events and dialogues revolving around literature in a fifth grade classroom. Nonetheless, that being said, the scope for all learning environments to support moral discussions is boundless.

Educative experiences that allow exploration become critical for students to become citizens who think and act (Dewey, 1916; Martin, 2011). Using characters in literature can provide deeper moral explorations than real examples. Students may be defensive or have biases about real cases concerning moral choices. Moreover, these explorations through fictional literature seek approaches that build a capacity for imaginative engagement and empathetic understanding for citizenship education. Students are able to freely and hypothetically explore what can happen with different choices and evaluate the possible results.

Specifically, the fictional characters allow the students to take risks. I believe the characters allow students to take more risks than if I had facilitated similar discussion around real-life situations. Throughout the year, students will reference the characters to explain a day-to-day situation. Frequently, students will mention Janice Avery when bullying is an issue on the playground. They express imaginative engagement regarding a real-life bully about why he might be behaving in a way that intimidates other students. As a result, the student will usually feel comfortable to express feelings to the real-life bully. Students consequently seem more willing to look for the affects of the problem, rather than just the effects of someone’s behavior. The implications from my investigation are that students can think about, relate to, and participate in moral-based possibilities for citizenship education.

School classrooms are full of students and ideas, and this environment can be a catalyst for moral discussions. Certainly, various views exist. Personal interpretations can be expressed and shared across ethical differences. Students are able to learn about differences and thus can intellectually grow by exploring feelings, thoughts, and purposes. In sum, moral conversations within a more flexible curriculum encourage students to examine meanings and develop critical engagement. Conscientious citizenship education through exploration of moral-based problems allows students to participate and take ownership of their beliefs. Imaginative engagement and empathetic understanding, thus construed, can be used to attain compassionate and even loving ways of knowing for citizenship in a democratic society.

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