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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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The ethical basis of education for tolerance and multi-cultural values in pre-school and primary education

Robi Kroflič
Univerza v Ljubljana (Slovenia)

> *An ethnographical note:a change of playing corner*
> Since children no longer play with dolls, we decided that we would change the babies' corner into a beauty parlour. When I told them this ('motivation to act'), Saša reacted: 'Leave the babies' corner as it is, Marija plays there every day. She loves babies, she loves them so much she'll have nine of her own when she grows up.' We left the nook as it was, and arranged a beauty parlour elsewhere.
> (Kroflič 2000, p. 117)

This note was written by the teacher of a group of six-year-olds and describes a spontaneous event during a one-year project to develop a process model of moral education for public nurseries in 1996-97 in Nova Gorica, Slovenia. I described the model figuratively as *Between obedience and responsibility;* in today's terminology it could be described as an attempt to encourage a just and caring environment which enables children a quality moral development.

From the standpoint of existing ethical paradigms (ethics of justice, ethics of virtues and ethics of care), we can ask ourselves what thinking and what views were the basis for Saša's reflection on the moral responsibility to protect the particular interests of Marija, a handicapped girl? Rawls would probably emphasise that in spite of the principle of equality of all members of the just society, morality presupposes the primacy of the benefits of the weakest individual (Rawls 1999, p. 266) Kohlberg would ask if, and to what extent, the girl was capable of explaining her situation-sensitive and highly moral act in relation to the general moral principle. The advocates of an ethic of virtue would recognise in the act a strong character feature of the girl which not only enabled her to empathise with the particular needs of her fellow student, but also led her to the decision that the particular need is more important than the majority interest of her social group, and add that in this case '…turning to a principle when natural (spontaneous) caring is already operating (or could be operating) is indeed having one thought too many' (Noddings and Slote 2003, p. 345). Gilligan and Noddings would attribute the act to a situation-related care relationship enabled by exceptional engrossment into the position of the handicapped girl, and would add that they cannot agree with Kohlberg when he says that 'direct caring concern for other people is morally less advanced than conscientious concern for principles of justice and human rights' (ibid., p. 344).

Before we return to the judgement of whether or not these explanations are convincing, I would like to note how much I agree with Strike when he says that 'moral pluralism says that moral goods are irreducibly many and often conflicting… Moreover, there is no grand theory in which all moral goods are synthesised, weighted, and ordered' (Strike 1999, p. 21). The following hypotheses arise from this statement:

- that despite the essential differences, the prevailing concepts of ethics of care, ethics of justice and ethics of virtues can be combined, and on the basis of such combination a consistent concept of moral education can be developed;

- that every moral development, and any concrete moral dilemma, is a conflicting one, and one of the main tasks of encouraging moral development is to enable an individual to act in conflicting situations as a moral subject;
- that regardless of the complementary nature of the above ethical orientations, it is sensible in selecting methods of moral education in early childhood (family education, nursery and primary school education) to favour those ethical models which are better suited to the nature of the child's first entry into social interaction, to gradually strengthen the child's ability to reflect on ethical dilemmas, and his or her awareness of the complexity of universe of personal and societal values;
- that - particularly when the issues of tolerance and multiculturalism are at stake - engrossment in the other as different, and a life in a situation of caring and just heterogeneity, are the only ways to ensure an early entry into ethically appropriate models of multicultural coexistence.

While institutional moral education before the twentieth century was dominated by the concept of character education based on ethics of virtues, the criticism of its ineffectiveness (e.g. Hartshorne and May) and indoctrination (e.g. Kohlberg) gave rise to a number of new approaches with more or less developed ethical paradigms (Noddings and Slote 2003, pp. 350-352). After a period of conflict between advocates of different ethical orientations (between the advocates of ethics of justice, ethics of care and ethics of virtues, between the advocates of liberalism and the communitarians), the appeal to find a 'common voice' came to the fore. Such a voice should retain the moral pluralism and the right of individuals, particularly the members of different cultural, ethnic, racial and other minorities, to have their different voice heard in the world of majority culture (Callan 1998, p. 51; Noddings 1999, pp. 14-15; Strike 1999, pp. 28-29; Katz 1999, p. 73). But to unite different ethical approaches into a whole, certain common views must prevail in the interpretation of individual ethical theories. We can only arrive at such views by reading mutual criticisms by the advocates of different theories.

The key points of ethics of justice are:

- to maintain a difference between justice as a common value, and justice as particular political, economic and social rights;
- to renounce efforts to reach universal ethics and to emphasise Rawls's principle of difference; to understand the reasoning behind the veil of ignorance in the original position;
- to encourage moral judgement which strives to recognise and tolerate differences, and to respect the other in regard to moral distress;
- in addition to rational judgement, the sense of justice and the concept of good should be recognised as motivational forces.

Young democracies such as Slovenia are typically fascinated by the consistent discourse of human rights and the rights of the child; many believe that this discourse actually replaces the need to develop a moral education concept in schools. In doing so they neglect certain theoretical predictions which caution against equating the general concept/value of justice and particular legal approaches. In practice, the care approach provides for a larger contextual flexibility and respect for differences, as well as the

respect of existing rules (Strike 1999, p. 26); nobody in his or her right mind conceptualises family education using the courtroom as a model (ibid., p. 28). Noddings and Slote emphasise that the discourse of rights sees people as separate individuals, since rights protect us from interference by others, while women think more in the context of community of people (Noddings and Slote 2003, p. 344). Finally, Noddings provides an important political warning that particular models of equality, including ethics of justice, are popular because of the political and economic tradition of liberalism, adding: 'I include myself among those belonging to the liberal tradition. It may well be that we will have to move beyond liberalism. However, until we develop a way to do this without losing some of liberalism's great strengths, we should at least be aware of its weaknesses' (Noddings 1999, p. 18).

That the principles of ethics of justice can be understood beyond the ideal of universalism, and can thus reconcile it with other ethical orientations, is convincingly argued by Strike. According to him, the dilemma of Heinz described by Kohlberg (the theft of a drug to help a loved person) does not presuppose any universal prohibition of theft or universal prescription of theft to save life. All it demands is consistent argumentation. Even more: 'Here the universality recognises the connection between two people as a reason. It does not reject the caring justification. It universalises it… It insists only on consistency - that any reason for me to steal or not to steal the drug is also a reason for you if you are similarly situated' (Strike 1999, p. 24). A similar interpretation of Rawls's ethics of justice is advocated by Callan, who says that the essence of ethics of justice is the concept of justice as reasonableness, and this 'devolves into a cluster of mutually supportive habits, desires, emotional propensities, and intellectual capacities whose coordinated activity requires contextually sensitive judgement; … the idea captures no simple master-rule rule for moral choice' (Callan 1997, p.8).

This is an answer to a (the) the most frequent criticism, that ethics of justice is restricted to rational judgement and therefore requires an emotionally detached individual who may have problems reaching beyond her/his own individuality and with motivation to act ethically. We should now examine the request for a moral reasoning oriented towards recognising and tolerating differences. Since we live in a world of differences 'we can learn the most from the most adverse situations, situations we would never create for ourselves. …crisis may be one of the climates where education flourishes...' (Katz 1999, p. 72). Moral conflicts can be ideal educational situations, of course (Kroflič 2000), if we are capable of developing communicative tools for their solving. As the fundamental dimension of justice, Callan provides the concept of moral distress: 'By 'moral distress' I refer to a cluster of emotions that may attend our response to words or actions of others or our own that we see as morally repellent' (Callan 1997, 200). Callan notes that moral distress can lead to pathology, which means that 'there can be no risk-free morality, and no risk-free moral education' (ibid, p. 201), but he adds that the concept of offence-free school 'would oblige us to eschew dialogue. But to avoid offence is to suppress all that might arouse other-regarding moral distress' (ibid, p. 202). A conflict dialogue is, in addition to mutual trust and attachment, a precondition for pluralist school (ibid).

That a combination of the postulates of ethics of justice, ethics of care and ethics of virtues could lead us to a consistent basis for an educational concept of a public educational institution, we must also critically examine ethics of care and ethics of virtues.

- Ethics of care must accept both interpersonal relationships and the position of a fellow-human as fundamental values;
- regardless of ethical appropriateness, care must be rationally founded; it is also clear that long-term success can only result from care which is supported by the feeling of justice in all involved;
- we must also consider a caring attitude in a conflict environment, when it is not easy to recognise the object of care as a friendly person;
- care is not a necessary a quality of strong character, nor is it revealed only as care for a fellow-person; it encompasses also care for oneself, for foreigners and distant others, for the environment and for the tradition of ideas.

Criticisms of the crucial role of a caring attitude in Noddings' ethics of care is voiced by Strike (1999, p. 176) and Callan, who claims: 'Persons have a worth that is not reducible to the relationships in which they are embedded, even when the relationships are constituted by bonds of unselfish caring' (Callan 1998, p. 55).

To accept a fellow-person as a value regardless of the intensity of personal bonds, we must find a rational base for the principles of ethics of care and adjust them to the principles of justice. Noddings admits that understanding is an essential element in ethics of care, but contends that motivation for ethical action does not arise from rationalised moral principles and the deontological obligation 'I must', but from empathy with and for the other (Noddings 2002, p. 14). A the same time, Strike shows that attitudes can remain permanently caring only if the object of care sees them as just, not as capricious (Strike 1999, p. 28).

And finally, ethics of care and ethics of virtue must relate to the issues of a possible gap between the strength of personality/character and morality, and the issues of ethics outside personal relations with close others. It is a great paradox, hard to reconcile only with ethics of virtues and education of character, that '…some people of otherwise upstanding character have done horrible things to their fellow human beings' (Noddings 2002, p. 152). Even if education involves influencing personality or character, education for morality also entails the development of certain special skills and the development of moral attitudes outside close personal contacts. In this way, the concept of 'caring about', as opposed to the concept of personal 'caring for', can be understood as part of the formation of a general sense of justice (ibid., pp. 85-86). Noddings in her early work established a whole spectrum of caring attitudes. I would particularly like to emphasise the attitude to one's own spiritual development (Noddings 1992, pp. 81-85) and the caring for ideas and cultural tradition (ibid., pp. 150-172). The former deserves special mention because the concepts of 'attitudes ethics' and 'human as a person' only obtain a sound metaphysical foundation in the spiritual dimension: 'We study spirituality because it matters to us individually and collectively; it is a centre of existential care' (ibid., p. 85).

To confirm the hypothesis that, when deciding on the methods of moral education in early childhood, it is good to favour those models which are better suited to the nature of the child's first entry into social interaction, let us consider a few psychological approaches.

Between children and adults an emotional exchange develops as early as the first few months, as a form of 'protoconversation' (Trevarthen 1993; quoted from Marjanovič Umek and Zupančič 2001); this is followed by the understanding of other people by

analogy with oneself (Tomasello 1995; ibid.) and by friendly (peer) cooperation, and also when conflicts arise (Hartup 1993; ibid.). The same findings are confirmed by Hoffman's research on empathy (1987, 2000; ibid.). The latter is shown as a concept which, arising from emotional exchange, gradually includes the development of cognitive capacities.

The closest link undoubtedly exists between the proponents of the theory of object relations and the advocates of the ontogenetic primacy of a caring attitude in moral development in childhood. Through the concepts of symbiosis, mirror stage, primary emotional (imaginary) identification and symbolic identification, the theory of object relations enables the understanding of the importance of an emotionally stable and caring environment, which is gradually upgraded with the adoption of moral rules as symbolic objects of identification. If the emotional blending of object and subject of care (symbiosis) is crucial for the child's development in the first months of life, the later identification with rationalised moral rules helps the child through the time of reduced emotional attachment to the authority of important adults, encouraging the processes of separation and individuation and the growth of social-cognitive competences (Kroflič 2000, pp. 44-84).

Accepting these theoretical bases in the curriculum requires that the educational concepts of nurseries and primary schools include process-oriented planning, which emphasises a combination of crucial direct and indirect educational factors: the development of appropriate peer relations, the child's attitude to the authority of the teacher as the object of identification, the organisation of cooperation and mutual assistance, the encouragement of processes of negotiation of common rules, the interpretation of different opinions and wishes in conflict situations, and discussion of topics in the field of ethics of interpersonal relations (particularly through children's literature) (ibid., pp. 85-144). At the same time, the model presupposes a new interpretation of certain fundamental concepts of theory of education (particularly the linking of the concept of self-limited authority (ibid., p. 65-84) with the concept of pedagogical *eros* (Kroflič 2003).

What is the connection between the model of encouraging moral development presented here and the formation of a tolerant and multicultural environment? Tolerance, including the acceptance of the other – either as a subject or as an object of care – on the principles of justice, is an exceptionally demanding concept (in both emotional and cognitive senses); it requires the overcoming of the feeling of emotional threat from the different, and thus strange, other, the recognition of the other as valuable, and a readiness for communication and coexistence. This can only be achieved in inclusive environments which provide not only for the just integration of different children, but also for engrossment (empathy) in the different other and for gradual understanding of a new quality of existence.

Only such an environment enables a pre-school child like Saša from our introductory story to place the particular need of a weaker child above the consensual interests of the majority. This is therefore an example of the spontaneous acceptance of a particular difference, in which any quotation of corresponding ethical principles would be *one thought too many*...

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