

Moral Intelligence in the Schools

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Abstract:

Moral intelligence is newer and less studied than the more established cognitive, emotional and social intelligences, but has great potential to improve our understanding of learning and behavior. Moral intelligence refers to the ability to apply ethical principles to personal goals, values and actions. The construct of moral intelligence consists of four competencies related to integrity, three to responsibility, two to forgiveness, and one to compassion.

Morally intelligent leaders and teacher in schools will be supporting, respecting and caring, and engender those qualities in their students. This paper will explore what moral intelligence looks like and how it can be taught to leaders, teachers and children. Its relationship to character and ethical behavior, as well as the other intelligences will be discussed. By developing greater moral intelligence, benefits to the schools and the society will result in organizations that are more positive, improved relationships and students who are both smart and good and value universal human principles and rights.

Intelligence

The concept of intelligence generally refers to the ability to think and learn, and has been predominately used to describe the learning and application of skills and facts. Ask twenty friends or twenty experts to define intelligence and you may come up with twenty different definitions, though most will agree that it is a general mental ability to reason, think, understand and remember that draws upon the powers of learning, memory, perception and deciding.

People vary in their intelligence, which is generally attributed to a variable combination of innate, inherited and acquired characteristics. For many intelligence is considered a general unified concept, largely related to cognitive ability, and, in the West, mostly the mathematical and verbal ability that IQ tests measured (Sternberg, 1990). It is increasingly being recognized as consisting of various related but semi-independent functions. Gardner popularized this idea in his theory of multiple intelligences (1983) in which he identified seven distinct “intelligences”. Gardner has since added an eighth and recognized potentially two more candidates--existential and spiritual intelligences (1998). Though he does not feel the eight criteria he uses warrants existential and spiritual intelligences being designated as separate yet, his evidence and others suggest they deserve further study and serious consideration in present day circumstances.

Moral intelligence is not one of Gardner’s multiple intelligences, but it is related to two of his original seven--intrapersonal and interpersonal--as well as one of his possible candidates--spiritual intelligence. Though moral intelligence contains aspects of Gardner’s interpersonal (ability to recognize the intentions, feelings and motivations of others) and intrapersonal (ability to understand oneself and use that information to regulate one's own life) intelligences and to the related constructs of social and emotional intelligence, it is different. A key difference is that emotional and social intelligence are value free, whereas moral intelligence is value centered.

Others have further studied the constructs of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences under the terms emotional and social intelligences (Mayer and Salovey, 1993; Goleman, 1995; Bar-On and Parker, 2000; Riggio, 1986). Salovey and Mayer (1990) categorized emotional intelligence into five domains: 1) self-awareness, 2) managing emotions, 3) motivating oneself, 4) empathy and 5) handling relationships. Goleman’s (1995) definition of emotional intelligence honors the above domains: “to refer to a feeling and its distinctive thoughts, psychological and biological states, and range of propensities to act (p. 289).” Social intelligence is the ability to relate to others effectively with friendliness, openness and supportiveness (Riggio, 1986).

Spiritual intelligence addresses meaning, motivation, vision and value, places our actions and lives in meaning-giving contexts and assesses which path is more meaningful (Zohar, 2000; Zohar & Marshall, 2001). They identify twelve qualities or principles of spiritual intelligence: self-awareness, spontaneity, being vision and value led, holism, compassion, celebration of diversity, field independence, humility, tendency to ask why, ability to reframe, positive use of adversity and sense of vocation. It includes the capacity for transcendence, heightened consciousness, sanctification, spiritual problem-solving and virtuous behavior (Emmons, 2000). As such, spiritual intelligence also shares several characteristics with moral intelligence, but is a different construct.

Moral Intelligence

Moral intelligence refers to the ability to apply ethical principles to goals, values and actions. It is the ability to know right from wrong and behave ethically. Moral intelligence is newer and less studied than the more established cognitive, emotional and social intelligences, but has great potential to improve our understanding of learning and behavior (Coles, 1997; Hass, 1998).

Lennick and Kiel define moral intelligence as “the mental capacity to determine how universal human principles —like those embodied by the “Golden Rule”— should be applied to our

personal values, goals, and actions” (2005, p. 7). Their construct of moral intelligence consists of four competencies related to integrity, three to responsibility, two to forgiveness and one to compassion (Lennick and Kiel, 2005). The four competencies of integrity are 1) acting consistently with principles, values, and beliefs, 2) telling the truth, 3) standing up for what is right, and 4) keeping promises. Responsibility’s three competencies are 1) taking personal responsibility, 2) admitting mistakes and failures, and 3) embracing responsibility for serving others. Forgiveness involves 1) letting go of one’s own mistakes and 2) letting go of others’ mistakes, and compassion is actively caring about others.

The Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Panel on Moral Education defines a moral person as one who respects human dignity, cares about the welfare of others, integrates individual interests and social responsibilities, demonstrates integrity, reflects on moral choices and seeks peaceful resolution of conflict(1988). Linnick and Kiel’s list and the ASCD list have much in common.

Moral Intelligence in the Schools

In view of the apparent increasing lack of morality in business and public affairs that has brought the United States and the world to the brink of economic collapse, the need to develop moral intelligence in the general population is of growing concern. Developing moral intelligence in the schools becomes problematic in a society that identifies morality with religion and believes that religion should not be taught in schools. In the United States, as the more overtly Christian influences in the schools were being banned because of First Amendment challenges, some schools either ignored moral education or turned to more values-free approaches such as values clarification and character education.

Education is a moral endeavor (Goodlad, 1990; Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990). The role of the teacher is to create a just and caring environment (Tom, 1984). Teachers are to be models of moral education, exemplifying the virtues they seek to inspire in their students. To do so, teachers need knowledge and competence to foster morality in others. Educational leader and administrators are to model these same behaviors towards the faculty, staff, students, parents and others. Moral intelligence is highly associated with leadership effectiveness (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Lennick & Kiel, 2005).

Education influences both individual and collective moral development. The classroom is saturated with moral meaning (Hansen, 1995). What takes place in the classroom can either encourage or discourage the ability and desire to seek truth and serve the greatest good. Creating an appreciation for the oneness of humanity, unity in diversity, open mindedness, understanding, tolerance, honesty, fairness, courage, wisdom, trustworthiness and caring sets the stage for morality and moral intelligence to emerge.

Piaget (1932) suggested a cognitive-developmental approach that was further elaborated by Kohlberg (1976), emphasizing the application of thinking skills to develop higher moral reasoning based on stages of cognitive-moral development. As morality develops in stages, younger children will respond differently from older children to ethical dilemmas.

Hersh, Paolitto and Reimer (1979) developed techniques of moral education based on the work of Piaget, Kohlberg, Hartshorne and May that highlight the moral issue to be discussed, ask "why" questions, complicate the circumstances and use personal and naturalistic examples. Oser (1986) suggests a moral discourse between teacher and students that should be directed toward moral conflict at higher levels of moral thought, analysis of the student's beliefs and positions, role-taking and moral empathy, understanding shared norms and moral choice and action. The values clarification approach based on Dewey's recommendation that reflective thinking serve as the main method of moral education requires students to make value decisions based on reasoning (Raths, et al, 1978; Simon, Howe, & Kirschenbaum, 1972).

The Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) panel on moral education stated schools should define and teach the universal moral values and their sources, including religion. The ASCD recommended that moral education be a powerful unifying and energizing force in the curriculum. They encourage educators to create social and cultural contexts to support the development of morally mature persons. Moral education needs to include socialization of appropriate conduct, critical thinking and decision-making and educators should ensure that school climate and policies contribute to moral growth. As schools establish and convey clear expectations about their roles as moral educators, educators can give more attention to moral education (1988).

Borba defines moral intelligence as the capacity to understand right from wrong, to have strong ethical convictions and to act on them to behave in the right and honorable way (2001). She identifies seven virtues children need to develop related to moral intelligence—empathy, conscience, self-control, respect, kindness, tolerance and fairness. These virtues loosely correlate to Lennick and Kiel's four competencies of integrity (conscience and fairness), responsibility (self-control and respect), compassion (empathy and kindness) and forgiveness (tolerance) as well as the ASCD's recommendations.

Borba's plan for teaching children moral intelligence can easily be adapted to the schools and classrooms. To teach children empathy--the ability to identify with and feel other's concerns--she suggests fostering awareness and an emotional vocabulary, enhancing sensitivity to the feelings of others and developing empathy for another's point of view. To help students develop conscience--to know the right and decent way to act and to act in that way--teachers can create the context for moral growth, teach virtues to strengthen conscience and guide behavior and foster moral discipline to learn right from wrong. Self-control is the ability to regulate your thoughts and actions to stop pressures from within or without and act the way you know and feel is right. Teachers can model and prioritize self-control and encourage students to self-motivate, deal with temptations and think before acting.

Educators and educational leaders show respect by modeling how they value others by treating them in a courteous and considerate way. They can teach respect, enhance respect for authority and emphasize good manners and courtesy in the classroom. Kindness is taught by demonstrating concern about the welfare and feelings of others through teaching its meaning and value, establishing a zero tolerance for meanness and encouraging and pointing out its positive effect. By teaching students to respect the dignity and rights of all persons, even those whose

beliefs and behaviors we may disagree with, we teach tolerance. We engender it by instilling an appreciation for diversity, countering stereotypes and not tolerating prejudice. We can teach fairness by treating others fairly, helping them learn to behave fairly and to stand up against unfairness and injustice.

Moral Intelligence and the Cognitive, Affective and Conative Taxonomies

Philosophers such as Plato, Kant, Leibnitz, Wundt and May suggested that intelligence includes aspects of knowing and thinking (cognition), valuing and emotion (affection) and volition and ethics (conation) (Johnston, 1994). Snow and Jackson (1993) argue that the distinction among the cognitive, affective and conative domains is one of emphasis, as they each affect and relate to one another, and each should be considered in learning.

Moral intelligence involves a combination of knowledge, desire and willpower. It involves the way we think, feel and act. The knowledge of right and wrong alone may not change our feelings, skills or will to act. Hartshorne and May found that many children who knew the right kinds of behavior in hypothetical situations failed to practice this behavior in real-life and that children who went to Sunday school or belonged to the Boy and Girls Scouts were just as dishonest as children who were not exposed to similar ethical instruction (1928, 1929, 1930). A review of research since their landmark studies confirms their basic finding: "Moral behavior varies with the situation and character training has not been shown effective in developing moral behavior" (Lickona, 1976).

Even when right and wrong is clear, the valuing, internal controls and moral commitment may not be sufficient to translate that knowledge into action. When it comes to moral education, the affective and conative domains must be considered along with the cognitive, as these are necessary aspects of moral intelligence. The ASCD panel (1988) also suggested that if moral education is to be effective and meaningful, it must also address the affective and behavioral domains in addition to the cognitive. By viewing moral education and intelligence through the lens of the cognitive, affective and conative domains and their respective taxonomies, we may gain some insight.

The taxonomy of the cognitive domain (Bloom et al, 1956; Anderson, Krathwohl, et al, 2000) can be used to better understand and develop moral intelligence. For example, we could teach knowing right from wrong, understanding why people do wrong, applying virtues to real problems, analyzing differences among values, evaluating alternative solutions to problems and creating novel approaches that honor moral principles. The guiding moral standard for cognitive development is truth. Helping students to investigate truth independently, courageously and openly using various approaches and methods is fundamental to cognitive development of moral intelligence.

The affective domain taxonomy of five hierarchical levels (Krathwohl, Bloom, and Maisa, 1964) can be used as a lens to develop moral intelligence through such things as sensing when moral situations arise, responding in an appropriate manner, valuing good, developing an evolving value system and behaving consistently with virtues. The affective domain centers on the

principle of love which is the motive force behind the basic emotions (Diessner, 2002). Happiness, sadness, anger, fear and disgust can all be understood as feelings generated by respectively having the loved one or object near, far, unjustly treated, threatened or violated. Sternberg's (1988) three elements of love—passion, intimacy and commitment—can also be considered in looking at moral intelligence in the affective domain.

Conative capacity is "the enduring disposition to strive" (Brophy, 1987, p.40) which involves the qualities of enterprise, energy, determination, decisiveness, persistence, patience and organization (Giles, 1999) and the skills of self-discipline, decision-making, goal setting, planning, reflection and evaluation. The taxonomy of the conative domain's five cyclical stages (Atman, 1982) applied to moral intelligence could include recognizing problems, setting goals, deciding what is the right thing to do, taking action and persevering. Justice is a motivating and guiding principle in developing and using volition. Though one may have the knowledge and feelings to act morally, one must ultimately put those capacities into action using conative capacities.

Conclusion

Being moral is a complex, difficult and lifelong process as is developing moral intelligence. They both require conscious knowledge, guided by positive affect that is carried out in virtuous action. One cause of immorality is ignorance which is sometimes manifested in blind acceptance of others' beliefs without adequately investigating the truth for ourselves.

The various lists of characteristics of moral intelligence can be compared to the moral principles of truth, love and justice to see how inclusive and useful they are. For example, Linnick and Kiels' competencies of acting consistently with principles, values, and beliefs; telling the truth and admitting mistakes and failures can be understood as aspects of the principle of truth. Love encompasses the competencies of actively caring about others, letting go of one's own mistakes, letting go of others' mistakes and embracing responsibility for serving others. Justice includes the competencies of standing up for what is right, keeping promises and taking personal responsibility.

Moral intelligence then can be simply seen as enacting the principles of truth, love and justice. A curriculum of truth, love and justice that respectively helps actualize our cognitive, affective, and conative faculties can serve as the foundation and framework for developing moral intelligence. Each aspect should be considered, balanced and nurtured for educators and their students.

If schools wish to develop moral intelligence in their students, they can begin by creating honest, just and caring environments that help develop moral capacities. The first and most important step is for educators themselves to model and value moral knowledge, virtues, commitment and competencies. Education should foster the integrity, responsibility, forgiveness and compassion identified by Lennick and Kiel, and the virtues of empathy, conscience, self-control, respect, kindness, tolerance and fairness recommended by Borba through the principles of truth, love and justice.

When leaders and teachers model the competencies of moral intelligence, when they exemplifying the virtues they seek to inspire in their students, they play a key role in

transforming their schools, classrooms and students. If we wish to effectively address the manifold problems that face our lives, societies and world, we will actively strive to develop moral intelligence in all.

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