Full length article

Making meaning of children's social interactions: The value tensions among school, classroom, and peer culture

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine prosocial and respect value tensions among three school stakeholders (the school mission, teachers, and students) to understand how values are created, maintained, and shared within the larger school socialization process. Utilizing dynamic narrating across three data sources, the school mission statement, teacher interviews, and children's written narratives, we focus on (1) what respect and disrespect values did each group of stakeholders (i.e., the school mission, the teachers, and the students) endorse and (2) what respect value congruencies, incongruences, and tensions exist across and within stakeholders? The findings of this study substantiate that within an elementary school within the United States value socialization among teacher and student stakeholders is not solely hierarchical, but reciprocal. The present study found that although the school, teachers, and students, held some congruent values about social interactions including respect, tensions exist in how respect should be enacted. These tensions may reflect developmental differences in social, cognitive, and metacognitive awareness in students across a wide variety of developmental ages within a given school. Overall, the findings shed light on the congruencies and tensions of prosocial value socialization in an elementary school.

1. Introduction

How should children behave in the classroom? This question is important, as children's prosocial behaviors are related to positive social and academic outcomes over time (Gerbino et al., 2018; Wentzel, 1991) and across cultural communities (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Carlo, White, Streit, Knight, & Zeiders, 2018). One such important, but understudied prosocial behavior is respect. Behaving in a respectful manner is associated with positive peer (Audley, Hsueh, & Zhang, 2019; Cohen, Hsueh, Zhou, Hancock, & Floyd, 2006) and teacher relationships (Davis, 2003). However, simply telling children to behave in a respectful manner may not necessarily bring about positive outcomes for *all* children (Audley & Ginsburg, 2018); what it means for children to be respectful or respected within a school context is nebulous. Children receive messages about social interactions, like respect, from their families (Garner, Dunsmore, & Southam-Gerrow, 2008; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994), but they also receive messages from within the school itself: the school culture (Henry, Farrell, Schoeny, Tolan, & Dymnicki, 2011), the classroom culture (Gest & Rodkin, 2011), and the peer culture (Corsaro & Fingerson, 2006). Notions of respect are also embedded within larger cultural and societal contexts (Li & Fischer, 2007) and are based on values that are contextually dependent. These differences and incongruities among stakeholders make it likely that children's respectful classroom interactions may be misinterpreted, undervalued, or de-valued by others.

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Although school stakeholders' prosocial and respect values may be congruent due to the socialization process that occurs in schools (Wentzel, 2015), there are likely tensions among the endorsed and enacted values from these varied sources (Daiute, 2008). These tensions can be heightened for students from non-dominant backgrounds (e.g. racial/ethnic minorities, immigrants, lower socioeconomic status), since the system of formal education privileges culturally dominant ways of knowing and doing, and promotes values and practices that may be incompatible with minority youth's ways of knowing and being in the world (Bell, 1994; Chavajay & Rogoff, 2002; Crago, Annahatak, & Ningiuruvik, 1993). The values promoted at school may complement or contradict the values promoted in the children's community, at home, or in their peer groups. The diversity of, and possibly, the tension among, values promoted by different social contexts in children's lives raises an important question of how to create and maintain shared values within the larger school context.

This study examines prosocial, including respect and its corollary disrespect, value tensions among three school stakeholders – the school mission, teachers, and students – to understand how values are created, maintained, and shared within the larger school socialization process. Schools are settings of interdependence where the interests of each actor can only be realized by reliance on others within the school context (Flanagan, Stoppa, Syvertsen, & Stout, 2010). For the school institution to function effectively, there must be a shared meaning about desired and expected ways of *knowing* and *being* among its different stakeholders – administrators, teachers, parents, and students. In order to examine the desired and expected subjectivities from the perspectives of different school stakeholders, the present study utilizes narrative analyses (Daiute, 2014) to examine the value tensions that arise among the school mission and the personal narratives of children and their teachers as they navigate through peer interactions and expectations in the classroom. First, we will briefly highlight how values are conceptualized and socialized, then we will next focus on the value of respect and its central role in children's lives and finally highlight our methodological approach of *dynamic narrating* (Daiute, 2010, 2014) before we present our current study.

2. Values and value socialization

Values help guide the behaviors, attitudes, and evaluations of those who hold them, and serve as standards to judge thoughts and behaviors of the self and others (Fischer & Boer, 2016). This connection between the self and others highlights that in addition to appropriated beliefs, values are also "culturally-specific goals, ways of knowing, experiencing, and acting in response to environmental, cultural, economic, political, and social circumstances" (Daiute, Stern, & Lelutiu-Weinberger, 2003, p. 85). In that sense, values are individual, but also deeply socialized propensities that shape how we make sense about the world around us and our place in it.

The nature of values should be flexibly understood as ranging from relatively enduring moral codes to situational norms; they are context-dependent and change over time and across situational and other factor contingencies (Daiute, 2014). Thus, what values are socialized (and enacted) depends on one's place in time, history, context, and culture, as the socialization and enactment of values is a multi-directional and interactive process, facilitated by an individual's interpretation of the value, and followed by an individual's choice to accept or reject, and finally act upon, that value (Barni, Ranieri, Scabini, & Rosnati, 2011).

Although successful transmission of values is considered imperative for socially expected behaviors, values are transmitted successfully only when the value is interpreted as intended by the socializer (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). This makes value creation and alignment in schools difficult, as different stakeholders within schools (administrators, teachers, parents, and peers) have different purposes and ideas about the values they want enacted. Take for example, the value of being socially competent. A school might want children to be socially competent to be a valuable member of society (Dewey 1916/2004) while a teacher might want children to be socially competent so they can work in groups to facilitate learning (Wentzel, 1991), and peers may facilitate social competence around values of group acceptance or popularity (Cillessen & Rose, 2005). Although the value expressed, social competence, is the same across all three stakeholders, the ways in which the same value can be enacted may create tensions in the classroom; behaviors that facilitate learning, such as cooperation, may not align with behaviors that promote peer popularity, which can be hierarchical (Cillessen & Rose, 2005). These differences in value enactment across stakeholders, although potentially problematic, can also provide starting points for discussions about the fairness of rules and expectations about peer interactions at different levels across the school ecosystem, thus giving students and teachers from non-dominant backgrounds a place for their own values to be incorporated and socialized within the larger school culture.

The transmission and application of values is further complicated by different contexts that have discordant values, such as a home that espouses values very different from those accepted in an individual's workplace or school. Arguably, once individuals reach adolescence and are capable of reflection and first-order cognition, they should be able to navigate "trans-contextual value systems" (Daniel et al., 2012). In other words, once one is capable of identifying disagreements between values in different locations, one should be able to effectively navigate social interactions while applying the appropriate values, especially with respect to social functioning. However, elementary school students are not necessarily capable of this, and may apply uniform values to different contexts. For example, elementary students may apply friendship values, which may include exclusivity (Berndt, 2014), to group work in the classroom, and thus may intentionally leave certain children out of groups. This behavior will likely contradict both the teachers' and school's values for peer interactions in the classroom, and will be the cause of distress and misunderstanding within and across classrooms. It is important to note that although values are context specific, and thus, never completely adopted, children can simultaneously hold contradictory values.

2.1. Respect values

Despite a remarkable cultural diversity of the North American context, values prescribed in formal educational settings still heavily draw from the Euro-centric world-views defining the normative expectations from how one should be in the world. Academic