



Critical values education in the early years: Alignment of teachers' personal epistemologies and practices for active citizenship

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Used personal epistemology as the conceptual framework to investigate teachers' personal epistemologies and practices for promoting values education
- Identified four personal epistemology-teaching practice patterns in values education.
- Patterns have implications for professional learning experiences.

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ABSTRACT

To date, little research has explored teaching values education for active citizenship in which young children are supported to express their own ideas and opinions and take moral responsibility for their actions. Using personal epistemology as the conceptual framework, this study investigated the nature of, and alignment between, teachers' personal epistemologies and practices for promoting critical values education in elementary education. The study drew on interview and observational data from 29 teachers in Australia. Findings showed that four patterns could be discerned, showing complex relationships between teaching practices and beliefs. Implications for preservice and inservice professional learning experiences are discussed.

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1. Background

Schools have traditionally been expected to take responsibility for children's moral learning, with a view to producing adults who become socially responsible citizens (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2014). Such values education is not only about helping children to engage with moral values, but also assisting children to express their own ideas and opinions and take moral responsibility for their actions. This is similar to what Grieshaber and McArdle (2014) described as ethical identities. They argue for "early childhood institutions as places of identity construction where through play and activities, children engage in the formation of ethical identities" (p. 111).

However, research related to active citizenship for young children is sadly lacking, even though there is growing evidence that the early years are pivotal for promoting tolerant and cohesive societies (Howe & Covell, 2009; Invernizzi & Williams, 2008). In particular, little is understood about the role of teaching in elementary classroom contexts to support values education for active citizenship.

Thornberg (2014) reminds us that values education is an overarching concept in which ideas for active citizenship can be embedded. Active citizenship refers to the values, norms, dispositions and skills that relate to being a good citizen, and are negotiated among children (Johansson & Thornberg, 2014a). This includes teaching moral values for right and wrong (Giddens, 2000) in addition to processes of negotiation, justification and prioritization to (re)construct and question such moral values. These processes require that children participate through active engagement in critical reflection, and also engage in social action to reduce oppression and inequality (Sigauke, 2011) which reflects a focus on

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democratic values of participation. This paper will explore teaching values for active citizenship by investigating a) the nature of teachers' personal epistemologies and practices for values education and b) the alignment between such personal epistemologies and practices in elementary education classrooms. The next two sections address research foci (a) by exploring theory and research related to teaching practices for values education (section 1.1) and teachers' personal epistemologies (section 1.2). The final section (section 1.3) addresses research foci (b) by reviewing research and theory that explores the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practice.

1.1. Teaching practices and paradigms for values education

Even though moral values for democracy are understood to be an essential underpinning of active citizenship, values education is not always focused on supporting children to reflect critically on oppressive and exploitive conditions and take action to enact these moral values. Grieshaber and McArdle (2014) suggested that a common approach has involved viewing ethical or moral behaviour as "knowing the difference between right and wrong" (p. 111) from a developmental view of children's behaviour. This developmental paradigm has often driven approaches to values education, although recent research tends to take more of a social contextual view (Emilsson & Johansson, 2009; Killen & Smetana, 2006).

Such developmental views of children's moral learning hold perspectives of children as egocentric, less capable of empathy and in need of direct teaching. This behavioural view of teaching also advocates for role modelling and extrinsic reinforcements (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2014). Thornberg (2014) describes this as a traditional paradigm which involves cognitive and emotional approaches that build upon children's abilities and moral development. Basourakos (1999) refers to these approaches as conventional moral pedagogy. Here children are not supported to be active citizens who engage in active decision making about issues that are of consequence to themselves and broader society (Moss, 2006). It promotes a conservative ideology (Thornberg, 2014; Thornberg & Oğuz, 2013; 2016) which is reflected in transmissive, teacher-directed approaches to teaching and learning that marginalise children's voices (Sigauke, 2013).

Another paradigm is described as constructivist values education (Thornberg & Oğuz, 2016; Thornberg, 2014). Johansson argues that this approach to values education has a cultural focus with the child viewed as an active participant (Johansson, 2006; Johansson & Thornberg, 2014b). It involves teachers and children learning and reasoning together about value conflicts (Howe & Covell, 2009; Nucci, 2008; Snarey & Samuelson, 2008). Children are viewed as active and competent in the process of constructing and enacting moral understandings, which includes taking responsibility for their moral actions. Basourakos (1999) referred to these approaches as contextual moral pedagogies.

A third tradition, critical values education, helps children to reflect on what might be considered to be dominant, sometimes marginalising moral values (Thornberg, 2014; Thornberg & Oğuz, 2013; 2016). This approach to values education supports children to reflect critically on conflicting views about oppression and social injustice, thus potentially diminishing the negative influences of social inequality (Elmeroth, 2012; Thornberg, 2014). Winton (2007) suggests that it is important for children to see value conflicts as important for moral learning, not something to be avoided. Therefore analysing conflicting points of view may provide the means for children to develop understandings of inequality and social justice. Johansson and Emilsson (2016) also suggested that value conflicts may provide useful learning experiences in early education. Sigauke (2013) argued that critical values education

serves as a conduit for raising awareness of inequality and injustice which can lead to taking action. This involves critical reflection which requires children to reflect on "the very premises on which problems are posed or defined in the first place" (Billett & Van Woerkom, 2008, p. 338), such as inequality, violence or power imbalances (Reynolds, 1998 in Billett & Van Woerkom, 2008). The idea of reasoning and critical reflection as a core incitement for the promotion of values has been questioned with some research proposing other human resources (for example emotions) as important in the development of values (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2010). We agree with this understanding, however in this study we have focused on critical reflection and teacher personal epistemologies as a new way in which to understand teaching for moral values in the early years.

In sum the research above indicates how developmental, constructivist and critical, traditions for values education impact on the lived practices for values education in the early years. It may be important to understand teachers' personal epistemologies because there is growing evidence to suggest that such beliefs are related to teaching practices in classroom contexts (Brownlee, Schraw & Berthelsen, 2011; Fives & Buehl, 2012; Lunn Brownlee, Walker & Mascadri, 2015) and subsequently how children engage in classroom learning (Hennessey, Murphy, & Kulikowich, 2013). In this paper we argue that paradigms and teaching practices for values education may be underpinned by teachers' personal epistemologies (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). The focus here is two-fold: to explore the nature of teachers' personal epistemologies and practices for values education in elementary school contexts, and to explore the extent to which such beliefs and practices might be aligned.

1.2. Teachers' personal epistemologies and teaching practices

In order to engage in teaching practices that eschew traditional values education, it may be important for teachers to move away from "accepted ways of knowing, being and doing to imagine and create what we might become, and opening and enacting opportunities for children to do the same" (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2014, p. 113). Changing accepted ways of knowing may involve understanding teachers' personal epistemologies, which are the core beliefs they hold about knowing and knowledge (Burr & Hofer, 2002) and connected to moral pedagogies within the domain of moral values.

The beliefs individuals hold about the nature (certainty, stability) and processes (justifying and sourcing knowledge) of knowledge are known as one's personal epistemology (Burr & Hofer, 2002). A rich research tradition has emerged since the 1970s and 1980s when Perry (1970) and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) first noticed shifts in people's beliefs about knowledge from black and white, transmissive views through to beliefs in knowledge as constructed, evidenced-based and emergent. An understanding of these epistemological positions has endured throughout the last four decades, and can be summarised in three main positions which emerge from a developmental tradition. First absolutism involves a view of knowledge as right or wrong and able to be transmitted to others. There is little need to engage in critical reflection, because there is a right answer which does not need to be disputed. Next, subjectivist beliefs support a view of knowledge as based on personal opinions, with little need to reflect on other sources of knowledge, because one's own beliefs count. Finally, evaluativism refers to a view of knowledge that is based on the evaluation of multiple perspectives/ideas and the evolving and contextual nature of knowledge (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). In order to weigh up and adjudicate a range of perspectives, critical reflection is required to arrive at an informed perspective.

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