

Social justice education with very young children

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Abstract

Social justice education is seen as a worthy and important goal of schooling; however, the explicit development of social justice attitudes and beliefs in early childhood programs has in practice received less consideration. In the Australian context, a small body of research has recently emerged which articulates the role early childhood education can play in raising issues of justice in an effort to develop socially just dispositions and even political activism in very young children.

In this paper, the importance of developing understandings which underpin attitudes to social justice will be discussed. The discussion will focus on one understanding, namely *equality*, and more specifically, *equal moral worth*.

The author will illustrate how the foundations of social justice and inquiry learning can be developed in early years programs with 3-5 year olds and possibly even younger children, through the use of carefully selected picture books which invite inquiry into the notion of equal moral worth.

Part A - Introduction and background

Tace: What makes children happy?

Child: Chocolate

Tace: Do you think that makes all children happy?

Child: Yes!

Dialogue from a discussion on how people are similar and different in a reception class¹ (5 year olds).

Fostering an understanding of our common humanity and of values such as compassion, respect and dignity for others is a widely held goal of education for social justice. It is only when children come to

¹ In South Australia reception is the first year of formal schooling.

believe that all people are in relevant and important ways the same, that they matter equally or, to put it more formally, that they are of 'equal moral worth', that they will be able to ascribe dignity and respect to their fellow humans and learn to act with compassion. I want to argue here that a well developed or sophisticated understanding of the concept of *equal moral worth* underpins attitudes to social justice. Very briefly, an in depth consideration of *equal human worth* requires an understanding that (1) humans share a common capacity for suffering and wellbeing and (2) that this capacity is to be considered of equal importance, or to put it in other words, that all individuals matter equally. These understandings form the basis of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and are foundational to the work of philosophers writing in the area of justice and social justice including Will Kymlicka, Thomas Nagel, Martha Nussbaum, Peter Singer, Raymond Gaita.

I want to argue too, that these understandings are necessary in all social education programs where an aim of the program is for children to consider the equal worth of all people, and moreover, that the development of such understandings depends on drawing attention explicitly to them. As notions of equality and equal worth underpin most, if not all, topics we teach within the social education curriculum, the explicit teaching of this concept is of crucial importance, a view which is reflected in key policy and curriculum documents relating to education for the early years.

The *South Australian Curriculum Standards and Assessment Framework* (for ages birth to 5), for example, makes explicit the aim of addressing prejudice and promoting social justice within a specific learning area devoted to the concept of 'diversity'. Similarly, the framework's *Society & Environment* documents (for Reception – Year 2), aims in part to '...recognise and counter prejudice, racism, sexism, discrimination and stereotyping' (Department of Education and Children's Services, 2000 p290). The *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, too, refers to the educator's role in delivering outcomes related to respect for diversity:

Educators think critically about opportunities and dilemmas that arise from diversity and take action to redress unfairness. They provide opportunities to learn about similarities and difference and about interdependence and how we can live together (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009 p13).

These aims for social justice education are important when we look to research in the area of children and racism which highlights that children begin to develop ideas of difference, race and racism as early as the age of 3 (Lane, 2008). A study by MacNaughton & Davis (2001) for example, reports that very young children see Aboriginal people as being different rather than similar to themselves: following interviews with 37 Anglo-Australian children aged 4-5 years in relation to ideas of similarity and difference, they reported that, 'Not one child shared any information that

suggested that Aboriginal Australians and Anglo-Australians have anything in common' (MacNaughton & Davis , 2001 p88).

Very little research has been undertaken, however, to assess the effectiveness of social justice or anti-prejudice programs in early childhood education settings. One notable exception is the recent work of Lousie Phillips who evaluated a social justice program aimed explicitly at fostering active citizenship. Her research showed that children of 5 and 6 years of age, who were made aware of social and environmental issues purposely raised through 'transformative story telling', chose to take action (that is, chose to engage in political discourse) in the form of raising money for particular causes, writing letters and organising petitions (Phillips, 2008; Queensland University of Technology, 2009; Queensland Government, 2009). Also worth noting is the research of Aboud & Doyle (1996) who demonstrated that talking with 10 year old children about race, or more specifically, engaging them in peer-to-peer discussions in which they were required to explain their beliefs about people from differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds, did not increase levels of prejudice among participants, but rather reduced prejudice in the 'highly prejudiced' group. Such findings should be helpful to teachers concerned about raising and discussing matters of race and social justice with young children.

More practically, an effective strategy used to develop complex philosophical ideas (such as equal moral worth) in school settings, is the dialogue-based 'Philosophy for Children' program, developed and pioneered by philosopher and educator, Matthew Lipman, in the early 1970s (Sharp & Splitter , 1995). Typically the approach begins with the reading of a specially written story highlighting one or more philosophical idea. The students are then invited to raise questions they would like to discuss and try to answer together. Teachers facilitate the discussions with the assistance of a discussion plan consisting of a series of questions designed to help children probe deeper and make progress in answering the question (see for example, curriculum materials by Matthew Lipman & Philip Cam). Others working in the area of Philosophy for Children have applied the same approach using existing picture books (Murriss , 1992; Murriss & Haynes, 2000; Sprod, 1993).

Philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, also stresses the importance of stories and story-telling in developing philosophical concepts such as equal moral worth:

When a child and parent begin to tell stories together, the child is acquiring essential moral capacities...[t]hey learn to attribute life, emotion and thought to a form whose insides are hidden. ... As time goes on, they do this in an increasingly sophisticated way, learning to hear and tell stories about animals and humans. These stories interact with their own attempts to explain the world and their own

actions in it. A child deprived of stories is deprived, as well, of certain ways of viewing other people. For the insides of people... are not open to view. They must be wondered about. And the conclusion that this set of limbs in front of me has emotions and feelings and thoughts of the sort I attribute to myself will not be reached without the training of the imagination that storytelling provides'. (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 89)

It is this foundational understanding of seeing others as similar to ourselves, that can be harnessed through the use of carefully selected picture books which invite inquiry into the notion of equal moral worth.

That even junior primary children can participate in sophisticated philosophical discussions is not a surprise for those who work with the Philosophy for Children curriculum materials. Indeed, such teachers continually witness the ability of junior primary and primary children to delve into and make progress in answering complex philosophical questions that matter to them (Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, accessed 2009). While it seems less clear how philosophical inquiry (or at least the foundations of it) can be embedded in the curriculum for 3 to 5 year olds, and less obvious still how an idea as complex as equality could be introduced to the children of birth to age 3, the use of picture books seems an ideal place to start.

Exposure to picture books which provide young children with an awareness of others and other ways of living, that include themes of tolerance or appreciation of difference, and that focus on the commonalities of being human, can be powerful and effective learning experiences. Well chosen stories can help to make children aware and appreciative of other ways of living, and assist them to attribute feelings, thoughts and emotions to others even though they may look or act in seemingly very different ways from themselves. The learning experience is strengthened too, by talk around these themes, talk which models the thinking and ideas underpinning the concept of equal worth.

Such explicit talk of equality and commonality can, of course, be initiated through the use of alternative educational resources including, for example, 'persona dolls' designed to stimulate interest in such ideas. It seems the benefit of using picture books, however, is that they are very familiar to most children and are already routinely read by educators for a variety of learning purposes.

Whatever resource is used to stimulate children's interest, talk relating to the concept of equal worth needs to be a of an inquiry-based nature in which the children are actively engaged in dialogue, listening to the teacher and their peers and reflecting on what is said. My experience of using picture books in this way in reception classrooms where children have not been encouraged to

participate in discussion is that they do not appear to be actively listening and thinking but rather, are waiting to be told the answer.

In line with curriculum and educational policy documents, many early learning programs are designed to encourage children to 'appreciate diversity'. However, appreciation and celebration of diversity will surely be insufficient to develop an understanding of the concept of equal worth; an understanding that humans share a common capacity for suffering and wellbeing and that all individuals matter equally. This point is often recognised to be a weakness of multi-cultural education which avoids explicitly raising aspects of prejudice and discrimination deemed necessary for education which aims to promote social justice and equality (Brown, 1998).

With all this in mind, during the last few months I have been exploring the ways in which the concept of equal moral worth might be explicitly taught in early years settings including child care centres, kindergartens², pre-schools and the early years of school. More specifically, I wanted to investigate how ideas relating to notions of similarity and difference might contribute to an appreciation of the equal worth of others.

I began the process by selecting a number of picture books that highlight some shared aspects of being human, and focussed my questions and our discussions on ideas about happiness and pain. My primary goal in the discussions was to encourage children from the ages of 3-6 to think about the differences and similarities that exist between people. More particularly, I wanted to encourage the children to reflect on the idea that, although humans are different in many ways (appearance, and culture for example), such differences are not relevant to how we ought to treat others. Conversely, I wanted to foster the understanding that what we as humans have in common, the capacity to feel pain and happiness, *is* indeed relevant to how we ought to treat others. In short, I hoped that the development of such understandings would lead to the belief that we have an obligation not to discriminate and treat others in a way that is hurtful. I found that while it is not always easy to engage young children in this kind of talk, the process seemed to be enjoyable and worthwhile for all concerned.

Part B – The picture books and discussions

In road testing this approach to fostering an understanding of equal moral worth I used three picture books: *Playtime*, and *Hair*, both by Kate Petty (2006), and *Whoever You Are* by Mem Fox (1998).

² In South Australia children are eligible to start school at 5 years of age. Kindergarten and pre-school programs provide educational programs for children aged approximately 3-5 years of age.

Initially I visited four educational settings for one 45 minute session in each, 3 junior primary classes (either Reception or Reception/1), and a kindergarten group in a childcare centre. Two of the settings were in very disadvantaged contexts and included children from diverse backgrounds, while the others were in middle class suburbs, one of which was comprised of children from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Two of the groups had teachers who had practiced philosophy for children discussions with the groups while the other two had not. All of the teachers were friends and colleagues of mine so I was introduced as a visitor; I usually began my visits by talking with the children about myself, my family and my work at the university.

I began by reading *Hair* (Petty, 2006). All of the groups were very engaged as we read this picture book together. I started by explaining that this is a book about children from around the world and the different ways in which they wear their hair. Not only did this book describe how children around the world wear their hair, but it also raised other issues relating to the common needs and feelings of humans. When we reached pages 10 and 11, a boy from one of the reception classes asked, 'Why is that boy having a shower outside?' I responded by saying 'Because some people don't have a lot of money and they don't have a shower in their house. It says he gets water from a well outside. So he would get all of his water for drinking and cleaning from the well outside.' This prompted another child to say, 'That would be cold'. I asked the group 'Would any of you like to have a shower outside?', to which many in the group responded 'No'. When asked 'Why?', one child replied '..if it snows'. When I commented that it doesn't snow here (in Adelaide), another child, trying to help make sense of the earlier comment about snow, said 'But it would be cold'. I then asked 'Is that what you mean, that it would be cold to shower outside?' A different child then responded by saying 'And the wind would be cold' to which we all agreed!

After I read *Hair* I asked the children to form a circle and then to describe their own hair to others in the class, a task that, on the whole, they found difficult. I then asked them to describe my hair and asked whether they could think of anyone who doesn't have any hair. This resulted in many responses about babies and one girl in the kindergarten class spoke about her grandpa who was losing his hair. Unfortunately, for one of the male teachers, it was quickly pointed out that he too had very little hair!

We then turned to reading *Playtime* (Petty, 2006). I started by reading pages 6 and 7 and then asked the children who they thought would win the tug of war game. The kindergarten group looked perplexed at this question and many of the younger ones, the 3 year olds in particular, wanted to tell me who they thought would win, but when I asked them for their reasons they found it quite difficult to explain their choice. For the reception classes, however, this prompted a lively discussion,

especially when I requested their reasons for nominating one team over the other. This type of questioning, demonstrates how inquiry and the beginnings of explicit thinking skills can be introduced with 3-5 year olds. It sets up an expectation with even very young children that their thinking and voice is valued and necessary to make progress in answering questions. Moreover, even when they do not manage to find answers, the teacher can model how an open inquiry question can be answered by providing possible reasons and responses. For example, when one of the younger children pointed to the bigger girl at the end of the tug of war rope, the teacher responded by asking, 'Do you think that team will win because that girl is bigger and stronger?' and then go on to ask, 'But this team has more people, so could that mean they are a stronger team?'

After reading *Playtime*, I asked the groups to think about what they like to do at play time. I also asked the children how they feel when they play and why they think they do play. The aim of this line of questioning was to encourage the children to consider playing and play time as a common and favoured pastime for all children and to realise that a central motivation for play is fun and happiness. Although happiness is subjective in nature, the theme of 'play around the world' seems helpful in presenting happiness as a shared human capacity.

I also read Mem Fox's picture book which highlights differences in people but also explicitly emphasises our commonalities, particularly in relation to pain and joy. In this case pain was the shared capacity in focus. The questions I asked the children revolved around feeling pain and were adapted from Matthew Lipman's 'Lisa' Ethical Inquiry Manual (1983). The children sat in a circle again and I asked them the following question: 'If you fall over, does it hurt?' At first, there was no response, so I went around the circle-asking each child the same question. 'If you fall over does it hurt?', to which each individual responded 'Yes'. I then asked the group 'Now, I want you to think about this: If your friend falls over will it hurt him or her?' The kindergarten group in particular were getting very restless and up until this point I had thought the session had gone pretty badly. Only about half the children were engaged at any one point in time and lots of children were wriggling around, perhaps reflecting the challenges of discussion based learning with young children. Still, I persisted, asking 'Do you think it would hurt the children in the book if they fell over?; What about this girl?' (pointing to the girl from Sudan on the front cover of *Hair*); 'Would it hurt her if she fell over?' After some time a quiet child at the back answered 'Yes', so in an effort to uncover her reasoning, I asked 'Why?', and the child responded 'Because we all have a heart'. This sparked a reiteration of the aspects we as humans have in common that had been emphasised in Fox's picture book. Another child confirmed her reason by adding 'Yes they would have blood too'.

At this point, somewhat relieved, I thought that the exercise had had some effect after all and so we continued for a little longer with another question: How are children all the same? The following responses given by children are an indication of how difficult the concept of the commonalties shared by humans is to begin to articulate and understand, compared to the idea of the diversity among people, a seemingly easier notion to explain and maybe understand.

Child B: We all have hearts.

Child F: We have different hair.

Tace: So we have different hair, how else are we different?

Child B: We all have different skin.

Tace: Yes.

Child C: In Africa they are black.

Tace: So we have different skin colour?

Child G: We have different hair.

Child H: We wear different dresses.

Tace: Yes we wear different clothes.

Child H: We have different bands.

Tace: O.K. we listen to different music.

Child A: We speak different.

Child H: We have different houses.

Child C: And beds.

Child I: And bedrooms.

Child D: Different voices.

Tace: So our voices sound different?

Tace: O.K., but how are all children the same?

No response

Tace: What makes all children happy?

Child E: Playing.

Tace: So how do children feel when they are playing?

A different child: Happy.

Child at the back of the circle: I know, all children like lollies.

Child A- And all children need a bandaid to help get better.

Tace: Yes, so if they hurt they need a band aid.

To which a child to my left wrapped up the finally flowing dialogue with: 'Tace can you stop talking now?' An indication, I think of how tiring these dialogues can be for the children (and the teacher!).

On the whole, the dialogue played out much the same for all three groups, the exception being the reception class, who like the kindergarten class, had not participated in dialogue-based learning before and seemed to be waiting for me to tell them the answers.

Two of the reception classes had more in-depth discussions and both focused more on the line in the book that referred to us all having hearts and blood. Children in both of these groups questioned this statement and wanted to discuss the fact that although we all have hearts and blood, our hearts and blood are in fact different from person to person, that is, they are not identical with each other.

An example of this follows:

Tace: In what ways are we different?

Child : Different sized hearts.

Tace: So our hearts can be different sizes, big or small depending on whether you are big or small?

No response

Tace: O.K., so the author said we all have a heart, but why did the author say that hearts are the same, what did she mean?

Another child: That they all have blood.

Tace: O.K . What do hearts do in our body?

Child A: They pump blood.

Tace: (In response to original statement.) So do you mean the hearts might be different sizes but they all do the same thing, they all pump blood?

Original child: Yes.

All the groups found it quite easy to describe characteristics in which all people differ. They all found the concept of characteristics which all people have in common to be much more difficult. After realising this I went back for a second session to one of the reception classes.

In this class, the first session's discussion had included questions about whether we choose what we look like (our appearance). I talked briefly about our appearance being inherited from our family genetics. They were very interested. So in the next session I did an activity with them from Matthew Lipman's early years instructional manual *Elfie* on the topic of 'Family Resemblance' (page 114). I then engaged the children in an activity on the topic: *Can one person be alike?* (page 205). We then re-read *Whoever You Are* and discussed the ways in which people are alike. I asked the children to draw a picture of how we are alike and how we are different.

The illustrations coupled with the children's comments describing their drawings indicated to me that many children still found it difficult to express how people are alike, although some did show an understanding of some of the characteristics that are common to all humans. Descriptions which accompanied the student's illustrations, emphasising the differences in people, however, were more frequent than those about commonalities. For example, comments by the children referring to different skin colour and culture and other physical characteristics such as height, demonstrate their focus on difference and an appreciation of diversity. Yet, some children did portray a more sophisticated understanding of the capacities shared by humans in the group discussions, however, the complexity of the ideas and questions surrounding the concept of similarity observed in the discussions was less evident in their drawings. Never the less, the following comments which accompanied some children's pictures are an indication of the beginnings of an understanding of the ways in which humans are alike:

'Their blood is the same. Their skin is different (colour)' (6 year old);

'They both have hair' (5 year old) and

'They have different skin colour but both have blue clothes' (5 year old).

I think this illustrates that the concept of equal moral worth is a difficult concept to come to understand. It is not as easy as saying 'we are all the same', and yet we do not want the focus of our teaching to be on the celebration of difference alone. In spite of the challenges, I think the underpinning concepts of equality and the foundations of inquiry learning can be fostered in early childhood education programs. An important aim of social education is to have children come to act in a way that is compassionate, respectful and promotes the dignity of others. To be capable of this children need to begin to develop an in depth understanding of equal worth and this concept can be

highlighted through the use of carefully selected picture books within a dialogue-based 'program such as 'Philosophy for Children'.

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