

USING MORAL AND ETHICAL STORIES TO INCULCATE VALUES AMONG PRESCHOOLERS

Vishalache Balakrishnan,
Nadarajan Thambu,

ABSTRACT

Early childhood education is the essential head start for children to develop and become holistic. One method of educating and inculcating values among children is by using stories. Using stories to teach children values have been in practice for generations in all walks of society. This research aimed to study the use of moral and ethical stories in inculcating values among preschoolers. Story-telling has been used in this study in three phases. Phase I is where the preschoolers listen to the story. Phase II is reading the story and phase III is activity conducted after the story telling session. This study is conducted using the qualitative approach, using case studies. Research participants are preschoolers between five and six years of age. A focus group consisting of seven preschoolers was formed for the purpose of data collection. Data was collected using techniques such as focus group discussions, observation, document analysis (creative drawings of the children). Data collected was analyzed using the thematic analysis method. The data analyzed showed that physical elements of the story books, language, plot, story line, characters and pictures as well as illustrations influenced the choice of story books favored by preschoolers. Other than that, the method of storytelling also is capable of becoming a pedagogical tool to develop moral character among preschoolers.

Keywords: moral, ethical, stories, preschoolers, pedagogical tool

Introduction

Early childhood education is becoming more and more popular in many developing nations. Developed nations are already transforming their existing preschool education from time to time to suit the current early childhood needs and holistic development. A solid and happy head start at early childhood education equips children with ample life skills, experiences, self-confidence and a positive outlook in life. They start as “happy souls” and create a positive environment where ever they are. According to Dewey (1947), creating a conducive learning environment has to be led by a teacher within the teaching and learning context. Thus multiple approaches, strategies and techniques needs to be utilized to provide a holistic character to our young ones who are undergoing different types of 21st century challenges which we the older generation would not even have dreamed about. According to Tappan and Brown (1989), stories as an approach to develop and form moral sensitivity among children is slowly dying in our modern education system. Bruner (1986) agrees that story-telling and use of stories is an effective way to transform moral experiences to moral knowledge.

Theory Used

One of the contemporary approaches to moral education is the use of stories and narratives to teach values and virtues (Bennett, 1993; Vitz, 1990). Stories provide powerful models for the moral formation of the young (Tappan, 1998). This research is based on Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1986) explains that what a child can do in cooperation today he can do on his own tomorrow. It is based on his theory that learning is, at its core, a largely socially mediated activity, and that real learning takes place in a student’s ZPD. Vygotsky (1978) claim that in order to match instructional strategies to a child’s developmental capabilities accurately, we must determine not only her “actual developmental level”, but also her “level of potential development”.

Two levels of development are involved here. First is the level where a child is able to understand and resolve problems without anyone’s help. Then comes the potential developmental level. This is where Vygotsky (1978) focused on mostly in his research. Vygotsky (1978) conceptualized ZPD as a way of viewing what children are coming to know. He argued that the actual level of development finally provides an inadequate measure of the state of the child’s development. The state of development is never defined only by what has matured. Vygotsky (1978) uses the analogy of a garden and a gardener. A meaningful story to explain ZCD. He says that a gardener, who decides only to evaluate the matured or harvested fruits of the apple tree, cannot determine the state of his orchard. He says maturing trees must also be taken into consideration. Meaning, a psychologist also must not limit his analysis to functions that have matured but also consider those that are in the process of maturing.

Vygotsky (1978) claimed that what must be confirmed is what the children know and whether they are able to resolve problems beyond their actual developmental level if they are provided with guidance in the form of prompts or leading questions from someone more capable. Vygotsky (1978) defined the zone as: “... the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p.86). ZPD here aims to aid the preschool children to develop from social development to individual development and vice versa. Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) named these distances the “buds” or “flowers” of development to differentiate them from the “fruits” of development that are the functions and abilities that the child can produce independently. Vygotsky’s framework indicates that after a student receives instructional support from someone

more capable in that particular situation, the student internalizes the new idea, knowledge, or skill and is more able to perform without help in the next similar conflict or problem solving situation.

Narratives and stories are likely to be accepted when applying Vygotsky's ZPD. Exposing moral and ethical stories without probing and problem solving would be towards inculcation of values. However, by using ZPD which has been extended to Zone of Collaborative Development (ZCD) by Vishalache Balakrishnan (2010) to suit a multicultural learning and growing environment in Malaysia and other parts of the globe is also taken into consideration.

Morality is fundamentally a "practice" or a form of "conduct" an activity (Oakeshott, 1975). From a Vygotskian (1978) perspective, moral and ethical stories helped children to attain new and higher levels of moral functioning, with the help by teachers and more competent peers. This attainments occur initially within the ZPD, as a new forms of moral thinking, moral feeling, moral action and moral values. This is the essence of moral learning from Vygotskian perspective and it sets the stage for moral development. Moral functioning, like all forms of higher mental functioning, is mediated by words, language and forms of discourse (Tappan, 1998). Moral development occurs in the ZPD, among preschoolers by listening, reading and drawing a character from the story. Story telling enable them to internalize gradually moral values as their habits. When students are actively engaged in listening the story and involved in a story telling, then a values and virtues is most likely to occur (Berkowitz & Gibbs, 1983). Internalization of moral values, occurs only in the context of social interactions mediated by story books, as teacher and peers assist children in moving through the ZPD.

Methodology

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2012) in a form of a single case study (Yin, 2009). Qualitative method is applied because this method is the most appropriate method to be used for sociological study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data was collected from various resources such as observation, group interviews, individual interviews and document analysis for the triangulation process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2005) to make sure the validity and reliability of the data. The research design took into consideration children psychology as all participants were below seven years of age. Each research instrument chosen was modified and simplified to suit the young respondents. The duration for data collection was also different and suited the mental capacity of each child as well as their moods and attention span.

Research participants were chosen based on purposive sampling as advocated by Creswell (2012). The gatekeepers of the preschool who were the principal and the teachers teaching the preschoolers had a meeting with researchers and understood why we requested for a mix group of boys and girls and of different ethnic children. Seven participants were selected between the age of five and six. The responses from the participants were transcribed and analyzed by using *Nvivo version 11*, as a tool to store and manage the data (based on themes and sub-themes), establish the relationship between the data and finally present the findings based on the key themes. Notably, since this paper applied the qualitative approach, the findings of this paper only applicable to this particular preschoolers; thus, the findings of this paper cannot be generalized to other preschoolers in Malaysia.

Table 1: Respondents Profile

No	Name (Pseudonym)	Sex	Age	Ethnicity	Father's Occupation	Mother's Occupation
1	Afi	Boy	5 years	Malay	Lecturer	Surveyor
2	Ariz	Boy	6 years	Malay	IT Officer	Post doc student
3	Aiman	Boy	5 years	Malay	Administrator	Nurse
4	Ruby	Girl	6 years	Indian	Engineer	Radiation Therapist
5	Nancy	Girl	5 years	Indian	Engineer	Radiation Therapist
6	Man	Boy	6 years	Malay	Consultant	Lecturer
7	Zah	Boy	5 years	Arabic	Senior Lecturer	Housewife

Ethics in research

As our research involved young participants, we ensured that all aspects of ethics were safeguarded. Guillemín and Gillam (2004) differentiate between ethics in practice and procedural ethics. Procedural ethics are linked to compliance processes in conducting research whereas ethics in practice refers to daily issues that emerge when research is being conducted (Israel & Hay, 2006). The main focus here is ethics of care as proposed by Gilligan (1977, 1982) and later extended by Baier (1985), Held (1993), and Noddings (2003). The emphasis is on care, compassion, and relationship. Ethics of care was central throughout the research, which according to Gilligan (1977, 1982) refers to care for, emotional commitment to and willingness to act on behalf of persons with whom one has significant relationship with. The preschoolers were vulnerable group who needed much support from the research team. Quite a bit of time was spent to build the rapport and obtain trust from them.

Table 2: Research Structure

Research Process	
Phase	Brief Explanation
1	Permission to conduct research (Procedural ethics)
2	Rapport building with participants (Ethics of care)
3	Data collection procedure Introduction of story - Orally/story-telling - Through question and answer - Acting out the story
4	Reflection and small talks

Table 3: Research Output

Research Objective	Research Instrument	Data Collection Method	Research Participants	Data Analysis Method	Emerging Data
Types of stories that attracts preschoolers	Interview protocols Observation protocols Document Illustration	Interview Observation Focus group small talks Children illustrations	Seven preschoolers between five to six years old	Thematic analysis	Stories on flora and fauna Fantasy and imaginative stories Stories on adventure
Story telling methods that attracted the preschoolers	Interview protocols Observation protocols Audio and video recording	Interview Observation Focus group small talks	Seven preschoolers between five to six years old	Thematic analysis	Two-way approach Interactive Filled with action Multi-tasking Activities within the story telling

Findings and discussion

All research respondents enjoyed the use of stories in the research. The data triangulated from observation, focus group talks and interviews showed that several factors attracted the preschoolers in knowing the moral or ethics of each value based stories. They include:

- (1) the physical elements of the story books
- (2) language,
- (3) plot
- (4) story line
- (5) characters
- (6) pictures and illustrations
- (7) method of storytelling

The physical elements of the story book

All seven participants liked books which were big and not too small. They liked hard cover books which had pages which were thick and not easily tear. Based on our observations, they loved to turn the pages frontward and backward so that could be their rationale for wanting pages which did not easily tear. They did not like very thick story books or story books which had too many pages.

Below is part of a dialogue with one participant:

Aiman: I like big books..the bigger the better.

Researcher: Why do you like big books?

Aiman: Big books have big pictures...does not tear, friends like to tear books...

Researcher: Don't you like small story books?

Aiman: Like..but like big books more...like my big house...I like big books.

(TBKF/Vis/07.3.16)

A thick book made is easy for the participants to turn the pages easily. Observation also showed that out of the seven participants, not even one chose small sized books when it was free reading time. But they also did not choose too big books which might be a bit difficult for them to handle with their small fingers and hands.

One other interesting observation we made was the young participants chose books that had “tactile” features. These include “pop-up” features, and aspects of characters which they could feel. Like the lion’s mane of the dinosaur’s tail which in 3-D forms on the book cover.

Language

All participants liked books that have simple and short sentences. They also chose books that had words which repeated and linked with the pictures shown. The word font also influenced their choice of story books. They chose books with big fonts. When listening to researcher telling the story, participants liked language that had rhythm. It also made them want to repeat such rhythm words and sentences.

Plot

All participants liked stories that had simple plot, not too long and not too complex. This could refer to their focus or attention span which is quite short at this stage. However, with interactive story telling method (which will be explained later), they become very curious and keep expecting for more. The participants like action oriented stories with suspense and surprises in between.

Story line

All participants like story lines that were exciting and gave surprises. They enjoyed stories where characters repeatedly did a certain action and finally succeeded in their objectives. Like how the dinosaur’s friends made his silly and finally all had a laugh because they too felt silly for making their friend look silly. A good laugh or some action in between the story line was most welcomed by the participants.

Characters

All participants liked characters linked directly to nature such as flora and fauna. They drew characters which they liked most and these characters are as below:



Picture 1: Mother dinosaur and baby dinosaur

Participant explained that the illustration was of a mother and a child, flowers, and all love one other. Thus nature became the essential element when characters are portrayed by the young participants. The participant was creative in adding the same number of spikes for the mother and child but making the child’s spike smaller and the mother’s spike bigger. The sign of love in the upper space was later explained that there was so much love between the mother and the child which they participant could relate to himself and his mother.

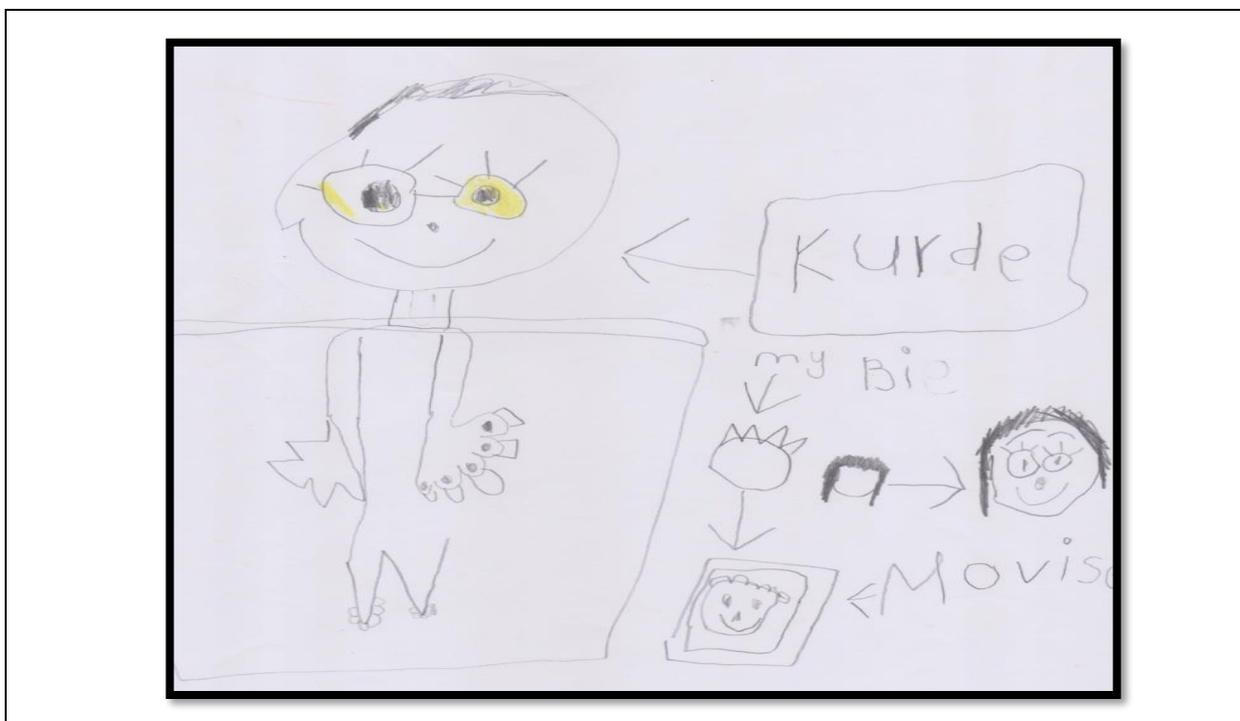
Another illustration shows:



Picture 2: Participant in a beautiful garden

The participant portraying herself as part of nature and how the flowers, the butterfly and even the clouds are showing love to each other. The stories had such characters but to blend them all to show love to nature is indeed a very creative way of how the participant is liking characters of flora and fauna.

Another participant emphasized on human character and drew this picture when asked about what characters he liked in the story books.



Picture 3: Participant with his family at the movies

He drew himself as the main character and linked others like his siblings, his parents and the activities he enjoyed doing with them. This child shows an importance to relationship and how care and compassion is shown to siblings through story characters.

Pictures

All participants liked story books with big clear pictures filled with bright and cheerful colours. It did not matter if pictures were real or in cartoon form. They were curious about every picture that appeared on each page. As only two of them could read well, the other five participants understood the stories from the illustrations and pictures in the story books. Every time there was free reading slot, the participants quickly chose books which were colorful and the “pictures” spoke to them.

Our observation also showed that the young participants believed that the pictures explained the text. They were telling their own stories to their peers and the researchers based on their understanding of the pictures. They linked the pictures to their “own plot” and enjoyed their own stories.

Method of Story-telling

All participants loved the research sessions which were conducted for several days in their kindergarten. They were practically waiting for us at the doorway or waiting to come out of their classroom to join us in our research classroom. That enthusiasm showed that they enjoyed the story telling sessions and the activities that were conducted within the research period.

Based on the participants’ responses, we found that the students’ love stories told in a two way approach, interactive and action-oriented. They also like multi-tasking during the story-telling and expected activities to be conducted while stories were being narrated.

When stories are told with intonation, with changes of voices for different characters, the participants eagerly gave their own version of voices for good or bad character. Good characters have sweet soft voice where else bad characters were given loud harsh voices.

Observation also showed that if participants had to passively listen to a story, even though it has earlier interesting elements such as pictures, characters they like etc, they become bored after sometime. Thus research showed that young participants need to use their different senses like doing the action of the characters, for example, jumping like a frog or flying like a bird for them to be in the story rather than just listening to the story.

The inculcation of moral and ethical values happen naturally when the participants are immersed in the stories and they could relate their own real-life experiences based on what they hear and what they do after the story telling session.

The values come from them and there was no need for researchers to begin with “The moral of the story is...” as in conventional methods of storytelling.

Part of a small conversation with participants shows the above:

- Researcher: What did you learn?
Afi: Cannot shout when answering to a question.
Researcher: Good answer. What else?
Ruby: Yes...slow down your voice when talk to teacher. Then teacher like us.
Researcher: Anything else?
Zah: Cannot disturb your friend...cannot fight...
Azri: They are our friends..we cannot fight..
Researcher: Great answers.

[TBKT/Nad/08.3.16] & [RV2/08.3.16]

Based on the responses of the young participants, we can conclude that stories are a powerful tool to shape characters. Their illustrations showed how their understanding of the stories is transferred to their own lives with illustrations of good and bad character, nature, love and compassion.

Way Forward

Among the overall aims and objectives of the research was to identify types of moral and ethical stories that attract preschool children, physical features of the book, and to what extend stories enable preschool children to relate to their own lives to develop societal regulations, etiquette in communication and respect for self and others. This research bring back the awareness about the wonders and effectiveness of stories which have moral and ethical elements in inculcating values among preschoolers. In recent development, in Malaysia, parents are busy and they do not have time to tell bedtime stories. So tales and stories with moral content are still read by teachers to their pupils in kindergarten. Thus, this study resolve that, moral and ethical stories play an important role in children’s moral education. Practice of reading moral tales and stories have an important role in inculcating moral values among preschoolers. These story books is useful source that provides various arguments for solving moral dilemmas (Vitz, 1990).

In the first place, stories used in this study contribute to develop children’s moral understanding and values. In fact, narrative become a starting point for their moral discussion. The result of this study also indicate that, moral and ethical stories have a role in building the moral identity of the children, especially when they are identifying with the heroes of those tales and stories. In the second place, stories also influence children’s moral reasoning such as a “good man”, “pity girl”, “bad lady”, “nice friend”

and so on. Tappan and Brown (1989), support the same view, considering that, children's storytelling creates authorship of moral choices when the story told is able to lead to a real moral experience. This study proven that, reading a moral narrative able to promote moral reasoning, moral values, ethics, and moral behavior. Therefore, moral and ethical stories is a good pedagogical tool to inculcate moral values among preschoolers.

Young children can understand the world through stories and story books. Tell them the right story and they learn to imitate appropriate social characters. Tell them the wrong stories and they start imitating characters that seem to misfit into the social structure. Any direction chosen will proof consequences of the stories and storytelling. As Vygotsky in ZPD (1978) puts it, what a child learns today from capable peers which are the stories and the story telling pedagogy is used to resolve the child's own issues later in other situations.

It is important that selection of stories for preschoolers is prioritized. Based on research completed, children showed that they enjoy relationship stories which are simple in nature but told in interactive ways. They want to connect stories to their own feelings and make meaning out of them. Moral and ethical values can be naturally inculcated when stories are used to teach either in formal or informal setting to the young children.

Acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge the Ministry of Education, and National Child Development Research Center (NCDRC), Sultan Idris Education University [File No: 2015-0156-107-04] for the research grant enabling this study to be carried out.

References

- Baier, A. (1985). What do women want in a moral theory. In A. Baier (Ed.), *Moral prejudices: Essays on ethics* (pp. 118). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bennett, W. (1993). *The book of virtues*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Berkowitz, M., & Gibbs, J. (1983). Measuring the developmental features of moral discussion. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 29, 399-410.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2005). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and methods* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bruner, J.S. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Pearson.
- Dewey, J. (1947). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Gilligan, C. (1977). In a different voice: Women's conceptions of the self and of morality. *Harvard Educational Review*, 47, 481-517.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity and "ethically important moments" in research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(2), 261-280.
- Held, V. (1993). *Feminist morality: Transforming culture, society and politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Israel, M., & Hay, I. (2006). *Research ethics for social scientists*. London, UK: Sage.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. A. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Noddings, N. (2003). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education* (2nd ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Oakeshott, M. (1975). *On Human Conduct*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Tappan, M.B., & Brown, L.M. (1989). Stories told and lessons learned: Toward a narrative approach to moral development and moral education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59 (2), 182-205.
- Tappan, M.B. (1998). Moral education in the Zone of Proximal Development. *Journal of Moral Education*, 27 (2), 1998.
- Vishalache Balakrishnan. (2010). *Real-life dilemmas in moral education*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.
- Vitz, P. (1990). The use of stories in Moral Development. New psychological reasons for an old Educational model. *American Psychologist*, 45, 709-720.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological process*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Vishalache Balakrishnan, PhD
Faculty of Education, University of Malaya,
50603, Kuala Lumpur.
Email: visha@um.edu.my

Nadarajan Thambu, PhD
Department of Social Studies & Citizenship
Faculty of Human Science,
Sultan Idris Education University,
35900, Tanjung Malim, Perak.
Email: nada@fsk.upsi.edu.my