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THE TEACHING OF SOCIAL STUDIES THROUGH HYPOTHETICAL MORAL DILEMMAS

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Introduction

The importance of the development of desirable attitudes and values in a society such as Singapore cannot be underestimated. Emerging from the value paths taken by our forefathers in an agrarian and pre-industrial society, we now stand at a cross-road. We have to choose a value set for ourselves and for our children.

The teaching of Social Studies in primary schools is one of the means by which we can imbue our children with values and precepts which are commonly considered 'good'. According to the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education, the Social Studies programme "aims to enable pupils to understand their social world and to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to participate effectively in the society and environment in which they live."

Social Studies may be taught by a variety of methods. This article presents one way of teaching social values: the use of hypothetical moral dilemmas.

Lawrence Kohlberg and Stages of Moral Reasoning

One of the best known psychologists in the field of moral development is Lawrence Kohlberg. His main contribution has been the determination of the level of moral reasoning through the use of hypothetical moral dilemmas.

Kohlberg has divided moral reasoning into three levels:

- (1) Pre-conventional, where judgement is based solely on a person's own needs and perceptions.
- (2) Conventional, where the expectations of society and law are taken into account.
- (3) Post-conventional, where judgements are based on principles that go beyond specific laws.

These levels are further divided into stages.

Pre-conventional Level

Stage 1: Actions are motivated solely by fear of punishment and deference to power.

Stage 2: Actions are motivated by meeting own's needs and making 'fair exchange'.

Conventional Level

Stage 3: Actions are motivated by the desire to please others, help others or live up to their expectations; that is, be a 'good boy or good girl'.

Stage 4: Actions are motivated by a respect for authority and a feeling that one must do one's duty for its own sake and to promote law and order.

Post-conventional Level

Stage 5: Actions are motivated by principles based on social consensus that go beyond specific laws or the authority of the people that make the laws. Greater value is placed on individual rights agreed upon by the whole society.

Hypothetical Moral Dilemmas

In numerous studies, Kohlberg has evaluated the moral reasoning of different subjects by presenting them with hypothetical moral dilemmas.

These dilemmas are traditionally open-ended hypothetical problems involving a conflict between the rights, responsibilities or claims of fictional characters. These characters are embedded in a situational context without reference to any specific time, place or personality. The characters are faced with a pressing decision which the student is asked to solve.

Although these classical dilemmas are hypothetical, they do not lack drama and emotional appeal. They are sometimes highly charged life- and death situations as in the case of the most commonly used dilemma, the Heinz Dilemma. This is summarised below.

A man's wife is dying. There is one drug that can save her, but it is very expensive and the druggist who invented it will not sell it at a price low enough for the man, Heinz, to buy it. Finally Heinz gets desperate and considers stealing the drug for his wife. What should he do, and why?

Kohlberg believes that the teacher should help the student to:

- (1) focus on genuine moral conflicts.
- (2) think about the reasoning he uses in solving such conflicts.
- (3) see inconsistencies and inadequacies in his way of thinking.
- (4) find means of solving such inconsistencies and inadequacies.

Hypothetical moral dilemmas can be used effectively to teach Social Studies. In writing Kutty's dilemma, which is based on the story of Narayana Pillay, the writers of this article think that it can be effectively used to make students cast their fertile imagination back through the years to the dramatic and tragic night of the great fire that reduced Narayana Pillay to a pauper. Students can recreate the event through dance, mime, sketch, art, poetry, prose, music and song.

More specifically, they are asked to use their moral imagination to discuss Kutty's dilemma: What should Kutty do? As they wrestle with Kutty's dilemma of conflicting values (friendship, truth, property) they will be sharing their own values with their classmates and challenging each other's viewpoints.

Through the use of a hypothetical moral dilemma, social studies can become an experience in historical imagination, logical thinking, empathic posturing and value formation.

Kutty's Dilemma

Imagine a dark and quiet night. Suddenly there are shouts of "Fire!". People rush around shouting and screaming. They are frightened because they do not know what to do. All around them the wooden walls and attap roofs are burning . . .

In the end, everything is burnt and black. Many people have lost everything – their homes, their shops, their money and their clothes. They have nothing left . . . One of them is an Indian man. His name is Pillay. (Adapted from Social Studies, Textbook 2, p 14.)

Pillay saw a beggar, Vinod, running away with Pillay's cash box. He chased Vinod but lost him because of the confusion. Vinod ran to his best friend Kutty's hut, which was far away from the scene of the fire. He told Kutty about the cash box and begged him to keep it a secret.

The next day, Pillay came to Kutty's house with a policeman. The policeman asked Kutty if he knew whether Vinod had stolen the cash box.

SHOULD KUTTY TELL THE POLICEMAN THAT VINOD HAD STOLEN THE CASH BOX? WHY OR WHY NOT?

Conclusion

Hypothetical moral dilemmas are an innovative approach to teaching in the Singapore context because it departs from the traditional emphasis on acquisition and regurgitation of knowledge. Its focus on the students' own moral reasoning heightens their interest in learning and makes it more meaningful. The levels of moral reasoning put forward by Kohlberg provide teachers a framework within which they can guide the moral development of their students. This approach to teaching can be applied to as many subjects as a creative teacher can think of. The next issue of Teaching and Learning will carry an article on how to write hypothetical moral dilemmas.