

Practices supporting values education and its assessment in Estonian schools

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Summary

Introduction

Education and the learning process are value-laden (e.g. Haydon, 2006; Sutrop, 2015). Therefore, the main question for education is not whether schools possess certain values, but rather how aware they are of them.

Values education approaches can be divided into three categories. 1) Rational moral education, which has its roots in universal ethical principles, focuses on reflexive discussion and educating the autonomous moral actor (e.g. Kohlberg, 1981; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). One method used in this approach is values clarification (Kirschenbaum, 1977) which provides children a tool to become aware of their own values (Simon & Olds, 1976). Values education has been criticised e.g. by Rokeach (1975, 1979) who considers it naïve with respect to the moral and social context. However, Kirschenbaum (1977) states that values education has never been, or never will be value free. 2) Character education focuses on creating the conditions for moral education, concentrating on the development of virtues. Berkowitz (2002) names seven aspects affecting the success of character education in school: 1) how people treat children; 2) how important people treat other people in the presence of children; 3) the expectation of good character from everyone; 4) supporting positive character; 5) possibilities for practising good character; 6) possibilities for discussion on moral topics and 7) parents' active and positive engagement with character education. 3) Narvaez (2006) offers a third possibility – integrative ethical education, which is a combination of both previously named approaches.

The aim of this research was to analyse activities that support values education and how Estonian schools assess its success.

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Study design and method

The study concentrated on the 39 self-analyses of Estonian schools submitted to contests organised by the Centre for Ethics, University of Tartu. The names of schools were made anonymous by coding, which included the year the self-analyses were written (2010; 2016 or 2019), the size of the school (large or small with a cut-off point of 350 students) and the location of the school (either in a city or rural area). In this article, examples from the self-analyses are presented together with the code of the school.

Self-analyses were examined using thematic content analysis. Because values education depends on certain agents (e.g. head of the school, teacher, student), main categories were derived from the literature so as to be agent-oriented (Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz & Bustamante, 2013; Haydon, 2006; Simon, Howe, & Kirschenbaum, 1978; Sutrop, 2015). Overall 1924 segments were derived, including one main category for methods and seven for agents (school owner, headmaster, teacher, student, member of support system, other personnel and parents). The coded segments we analysed include examples of practices that answer the question: "How is it done?"

Two categories emerged from the perspective of agency: the teacher (240 segments) and the student (196 segments), and these were the main basis for the analysis. The student category includes segments that describe practices in which the student is the active participant.

However, there are several limitations to the study. Firstly, the self-analyses are written by schools which already consider values education a priority; secondly, the schools follow the framework of the Centre for Ethics at the University of Tartu in their self-analysis; thirdly, the results based on 39 self-analyses cannot be generalised to other schools in Estonia. Nevertheless, the analysis does answer questions about how schools themselves give sense to practices supporting values education and what methods they use to assess the effect of these activities.

Results

The results show that practices supporting values education in Estonian schools are correlated with different agents; the two main agents emerging from self-analysis were the student and the teacher. Schools use a variety of methods (from questionnaires to interviews and document analysis) to assess the success of their activities, but they need more support in translating the results.

Teacher-related activities in the category of rational moral education approaches include class teachers' discussions with students about values.

The role of class teachers is also emphasised in the literature, because it affects the students' relationship with the school, as Bonny et al. (2000) have shown. Reflection supporting teachers' professional development and discussions on how they understand school values can also be listed under rational moral education.

An example of character education in the self-assessments is teachers' setting of personal examples, such as in teacher collaboration which is also related to how students perceive the classroom environment (Solomon et al., 1996). Including teachers in management processes supports character education, because it helps create a values-oriented environment; however, teachers' reflection over these activities is better classified under rational moral education. Suyatno et al. (2019) stresses the importance of a teachers' reflection on their personal beliefs and values, since this is crucial in their everyday work life, affecting the behaviour of other teachers, which in turn affects the school environment's support for values education.

Practices related to students that focus on understanding and giving sense to values, as well as noticing conflicting values can mostly be categorised under rational moral education. Activities related to the inclusion of students in management processes and developing a values-oriented environment can be classified as character education. Inclusion of students in the choice of hobby groups increases their engagement with schools, which is considered one of the protective factors in risk behaviour (Resnick et al., 1997).

While values education of teachers takes place in parallel with their everyday work, and one might question the extent of their immediate awareness of the process, values education aimed towards students and developing their awareness is one of a teachers' acknowledged tasks. This highlights the contradiction of teachers' supporting students' values education without experiencing this on the same level.

It has to be noted that schools have presented their examples either from the perspective of the teacher or the overall organisation, which neither gives a full picture of the school, nor does it provide a detailed assessment of every teachers' responsibility and role performance. In self-analyses, schools emphasise descriptions of activities and pay less attention to who does what or the distribution of responsibility. Analysing what schools consider to be the organisation's tasks and how they understand notions related to this category may be a useful point of investigation in the future.

Although schools consider teachers to be the key to values education, our content analysis shows that the actual focus is on students, whose rate of involvement is higher – they are given space to speak; they are listened to; their proposals are taken into account. This supports the idea of the student as

a whole as stated in the Estonian educational strategy and educational vision 2035 (Aarna et al., 2011; Sutrop, Lauristin, Loogma & Eamets, 2019); students' individuality and their competencies are supported by involving them in decision-making.

Therefore, it can be concluded from our research that integrative ethical education, which according to Narvaez (2006) combines developing reflexive reasoning with focusing on certain character traits, has spread to Estonian schools. A range of different practices are used to support values education, the success of which is being evaluated by different social science methods. How do teachers perceive their role as values educators and how it is supported by headmasters? Whether or to what extent do students take the responsibility offered to them? These are questions to be examined in future research.

Keywords: values education, values clarification, aims of education