

Being a Teacher

Professional Challenges and Choices

Section Six | Teachers, values and society

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Being a Teacher

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SECTION SIX

Teachers, values and society

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As the headlines suggest, maintaining an orderly learning environment is not the only value issue that teachers have to grapple with. This section will provide you with some 'tools' to help you meet the moral and value-related challenges you are likely to encounter in today's schools.

Learning and teaching as social and moral issues

Compulsory schooling means placing vast numbers of learners behind desks approximately 170 mornings a year. We know that the content that we teach is a selection from many things that could be taught. Under such circumstances, this selection has economic, social and even moral consequences for the learners and for society. And because knowledge is always linked to power, as we saw in Section Five, we should be even more concerned about the values built into the selection.

For example, will a schooling experience tend to prevent learners from poor backgrounds from repeating a cycle of poverty, or will it tend to reproduce such a cycle? Do we teach learners to value society's inherited traditions of knowledge, or do we teach learners to question these?

Everything to do with teaching is tied up in some way with values and social issues. Put another way, nothing in teaching is ever concerned purely with facts, just as nothing in teaching is ever entirely an individual concern.

We point this out because of the tendency today to think about teaching independently of these issues. We have already shown (in Section 3.5 of this Learning Guide and in Reading 13 on page 87 of your Reader) that teaching policies are often governed by the sort of technical reasoning that deliberately ignores value questions, seeing them as irrelevant to a 'scientific' management of learning. And we have mentioned (in Section 5.4) how dangerous it is to give little or no attention to values in schooling.

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The central question that this section addresses

So far in this module we have argued that teachers need to embrace a vision of professionalism based on an overriding concern for the growth and development of learners; professional development; democratic authority; and a balanced and well-informed mediation between systematic knowledge and the learner.

In Section 5.6 we affirmed that this sort of mediation implied the need to balance propositional and procedural knowledge with dispositional (value-based) knowledge.

In this section the central question we will explore is: what role can you as a professional teacher play in helping young learners to develop a healthy disposition and sound values?

This will involve examining such underlying questions as: what are values, and in particular, moral values? Should teachers attempt to teach moral values, or should they attempt to remain neutral? How should they make moral decisions in handling behavioural problems?

Learning outcomes for this section

When you have completed this section, you should be able to:

- explain the nature of values, and moral values in particular, and their importance in teaching and learning;
- critically discuss objections to the idea of teachers involving themselves in the development of learners' moral values;
- explain your own role in learners' moral development, and justify your standpoint on how that role should be exercised;
- identify key principles relating to the development of learners' moral values, and some strategies for achieving this; and
- make sound moral decisions and resolve moral dilemmas that you face in the learning environment with increased confidence.

What are values?

6.2

ACTIVITY 34:

Take a look at the photographs below and answer the questions that follow them:



You will need about 5 minutes for this exercise.

- 1 What do you think might be a common theme in these three photographs?
- 2 In what way does the behaviour of the antelope in the photograph differ from that of the humans in the other two photographs?

In Section Five we concluded that human beings, unlike most animals, are not locked into instinctive behaviour patterns. The human brain allows far more scope and flexibility of action and choice than instinct allows to any other species. This flexibility of decision, choice and action requires human beings to be effective learners.

Human choice

In the photograph above, the male antelope are fighting to determine who will lead the herd. Though the younger 'challenger' will no doubt watch for the most promising moment to attack the established leader, his urge to attack, and the particular time of the year when he feels this urge, are determined by instinct.

On the other hand, although the soldiers may be fighting and the boss may be exhibiting aggression and dominance, their behaviour is not bound by instinct. Bosses may *choose* to treat their subordinates more pleasantly, and soldiers may *choose* to become conscientious objectors. The fact that human thought and action are not bound by instinct, but involve choice, decision, and purpose, has an extremely significant implication in addition to our need to learn.

It creates the possibility that out of the range of actions we may choose, we may judge some to be better, and some worse, than others. In other words, we attribute a greater *value* to some choices than we do to others. We judge the action itself to be more, or less good in a moral sense.

A **conscientious objector** is a person who refuses to serve in the armed forces because of moral or religious beliefs.

Different kinds of value

If we take the soldiers as our example, we will see that we could attach *different types* of value to their actions. We could evaluate the competence of the soldiers, the quality of their fighting skill. In doing so, we would use criteria such as the ability to foresee the enemy's movements, and a knowledge of weapons (knowledge how and knowledge that). We would call these military values *practice-oriented values*, and they would fall into much the same class of values as the 'professional values' we discussed in Section Three.

But we could also judge the soldiers' actions in another way. We could ask whether the cause for which they are fighting is a just one (defensive), or an unjust one (aggressive). In other words, we could evaluate the soldiers' actions on moral grounds. The criteria would then be justice and a reverence for human life, and we would refer to these as *moral values*, even though they appeared in a military context. So while there are values and virtues *specific* to every field of human activity, moral values are what enable us to judge whether an action is a 'good' or 'bad' action *in itself* – whatever the field of human activity.

Both of the above types of value come into the picture because human actions are not controlled by instinct, and we can judge them as 'better' or 'worse' in the two rather different senses we have just explained. Choice is part of the picture in both cases because the soldiers can choose both how and why they will fight.

So for now, we can define *values* (both practice-oriented and moral) as beliefs about the merit or relative importance of different experiences and actions. They provide the criteria by which we judge human action, and the reasons for choosing to act in particular ways. *Moral values* are not beliefs about, or standards of, competence in a particular field of human activity; rather they relate to actions or personal qualities that may be considered good or bad in a more general sense. In this section we focus mainly on moral values.

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Teachers and moral values

In the face of what many perceive to be a moral crisis, especially in our schools, what should teachers be doing? For a start, the professional mandate of teachers requires them to avoid assuming the role of the victim, especially if they are to help learners 'become something in the world'. Maxine Greene's contention is that teachers cannot expect to 'stir others to define themselves as individuals' if they themselves are content to be defined by others and their actions (quoted in Bolin and Falk, 1987: 8). They therefore need to become **moral agents** in the learning environment – to take an active, not a passive, role in developing learners' values and attitudes.

However, this does not imply a moral crusade or any kind of authoritarian moral instruction. What is important is that learners develop a **personal** commitment to a set of values that they themselves have helped to construct.

What, then, is the appropriate role for you to take as a professional teacher in developing sound values and healthy attitudes in learners? We have just argued that this is an active role, and in Section Four we argued that the teaching of values and attitudes needs to be integrated with the teaching of content knowledge and skills.

To answer this question, we need to look at the teacher's role as twofold, even though in practice these roles overlap:

- First, in the role of teaching itself, a teacher needs to understand what moral values are before deciding whether to incorporate or avoid them in teaching.
- Second, the teacher as active moral agent needs to model a principled approach to life that takes moral action seriously (without being gloomy, 'stuffy' or self-righteous about it) as well as make morally justifiable decisions in the learning environment.

In the field of disposition and values, the teaching of content without a corresponding demonstration of a principled approach to life, is especially futile. And to demonstrate such an approach *is* to teach values.

We now examine some of the difficulties that teachers face when they are concerned about exercising an influence on a learner's moral development. Let's get some help from the teachers at Mountain View Primary.

Professional mandate here refers to the right, responsibility and authority to act according to the wishes of those who employ them.

“
The teaching of content without a corresponding demonstration of a principled approach to life, is especially futile.
 ”

6.4

Are moral values subjective?

'I don't feel comfortable about the idea of formally teaching values to the learners,' said Gillian to her colleagues in the staffroom.

At the previous PTSA meeting, some parents had suggested that all the teachers try to include some element of values education in whatever they taught. This was in response to the moral crises they were reading about in the press. Gillian's colleagues pressed her to explain her doubts.

'Well, values are such a subjective area,' she said. 'I mean, they're not written in the stars; they're not visible, like trees or frogs. I don't think it's right to impose our own views and preferences on the learners. But if you don't, you can end up going round in circles.'

'I agree,' said Andy. 'Yesterday my Grade 7s had a class debate on whether it was better to be competitive in life, or co-operative and helpful. It was quite a good debate, and in the end I myself couldn't decide which was better. I think the kids voted in favour of competition only because Paul was so funny when he proposed the motion. How do we teach values when they're so difficult to decide on?'

*'Hmm,' said Lerato, 'I think I would feel uncomfortable if we were **not** allowed to teach or discuss values. When I decided to become a teacher, I had a picture of myself helping kids in some small way to live better lives.'*

'But when you come down to it, aren't values just a matter of preference?' said Gillian. 'You may think competition's better for people and society; I might feel co-operation's better – who's to say I or you are right? I think values just express what people feel about things.'



For this activity you will need about 5 minutes.

ACTIVITY 35: ARE OUR VALUES MERELY SUBJECTIVE?

- 1 Do you agree with Gillian? Are values really just expressions of the way people feel about things?
- 2 Think carefully about the following statements that a teacher might make. Do you think that the value expressed in each statement exists independently of our feelings or opinions, or does it simply reflect the way the speaker feels? If possible, discuss these statements with a fellow student or friend.
 - a 'South Africa needs to be a strong competitor in the global economy. Our children need to learn to work together, but they also need a good dose of old-fashioned competition as part of their schooling.'
 - b 'All South Africans must learn to value and care for our natural environment.'

By the time you have worked through this sub-section, you should have a set of concepts that you can use to help you decide whether you agree with Gillian's view that values reflect feelings.

The problem with subjectivism

Many people, like Gillian, believe that values are really nothing more than expressions of what individual people *feel* or *think* about issues. Because they hold that all values, including moral values, are purely subjective in this way, their belief is called 'subjectivism'.

Imagine a Foundation Phase teacher saying to a young learner who has refused to let the girl next to him use one of the pile of crayons in front of him, 'But Davy, you know we always share things with our friends'. According to the subjectivist view, what the teacher is really saying is something like, 'I think everyone should share, and that's what I want you to do.'

There is indeed some sense in this argument, as the above example demonstrates. As a Foundation Phase teacher, the speaker probably *feels* that sharing reflects a spirit of co-operation and unselfishness that is a worthwhile value to encourage in young children.

By putting moral pressure on Davy, the speaker probably also *hopes* that these words will have the effect of preventing a looming squabble. But many teachers would question this assumption, and point out that in practice the sharing of certain personal items often leads to more squabbles than it prevents. Although they might not outlaw sharing altogether, they may discourage it in respect of certain possessions, and they would disagree with the 'absolute' character of this teacher's statement ('we *always* share things with our friends').

We need, however, to examine the arguments in support of subjectivism carefully because if they are correct, then there can be little point in discussing moral values or values education any further. If *all* values come down to people's *preferences*, on what basis could we argue that learners should be encouraged to embrace one value rather than another – showing consideration for others, for instance, rather than selfishness?

All we would be able to base our arguments on would be our own preferences, and these may not, of course, be in agreement with others' preferences. If we failed to agree, and individual preferences or feelings were *all* we had to base our arguments on, there would be *no other way* to reach any conclusion. It is not difficult to see how this kind of thinking leads to the sort of goalless, 'anything-goes' attitude that we described in Section 5.5.

To weigh up the subjectivist argument, and at the same time deepen our understanding of values, it is helpful to distinguish between moral value statements and two other kinds of statements – factual statements on one hand, and statements of preference on the other.

Values are not facts: descriptive versus prescriptive statements

First, consider these two statements:

- a** 'The earth is round, like a ball.'
- b** 'People should be honest with one another.'

Statement **a** is factual: it describes the earth, and is therefore what we would call a *descriptive* statement. On the other hand, statement **b** does not describe anything. It does not say anything, factual or otherwise, about the way things are. Rather, it says something about the way things *should* be. We call this a prescriptive statement, since it offers a 'prescription' of how things should be.

We can say that description **a** is true because human beings have observed the earth to be spherical from outer space. You may also consider statement **b** to be true, but this would not be because it describes anything correctly. If someone acts dishonestly by cheating in an exam, that person disregards a moral principle, but the moral principle does not become false just because things turn out to be different from the way they ought to be.

All this means is that values are true or false in a different way from the way factual statements may be said to be true or false. Descriptive statements of fact, and prescriptive statements of value, serve different human purposes. We do not decide on the truth or falsity of prescriptive statements by observing the world carefully to check whether they correctly describe things as they are. Rather, we decide whether they are true or not by the use of *reason*.

The distinction between descriptive and prescriptive statements is a well-known one. The particular way in which we have explained it above is based on the account by Strike and Soltis (1985).

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If the reasons given are sound, then we must acknowledge that the moral statement is true, and that it applies to us.
 ”

Moral values are different from preferences

We now need to shift our attention to the second distinction that we set ourselves to examine – the distinction between moral values on the one hand, and more general judgements of value such as preferences, personal taste, or appraisals of better or worse performance on the other. Consider the following value statements:

- a** ‘There’s nothing as good as a cup of coffee to get me started at the beginning of the day.’
- b** ‘Mandisa is very good at getting learners to co-operate.’
- c** ‘A good teacher will never lie to learners.’

All of these statements claim that some thing, or some action, is ‘good’. The first statement **a**, however, is quite different from the moral statement **c**. It simply expresses an individual’s preference for something that that person finds positive. It implies no duty, and imposes no obligation on anyone: no-one is expected to feel the same way about coffee. Therefore we could not reasonably expect the speaker to ‘defend’ his or her liking for coffee by supplying logically persuasive reasons for it. All we could require of the speaker is to be sincere for the statement to be acceptable.

The exact opposite applies to moral statements like **c**. This statement implies an obligation on all teachers never to lie to learners. Because of this implied obligation or ‘duty’, we are entitled to ask *why* it would be wrong to act in this way. In other words, we have a right to expect that moral statements or principles, which seek to get us to act in certain ways, be backed by logically convincing reasons. If the reasons given are sound, and acceptable to reasonable people, then we must acknowledge that the moral statement is true, and that it applies to us. On the other hand, if no good reasons can be given, we would be justified in rejecting the statement as subjective and having no hold over us.

The importance of reason in moral issues

Notice here that it is not enough to have strong *feelings* about a moral issue to make something wrong, or right. Pointing out that moral issues often arouse strong feelings, and that these may often be admired as a sign of taking such issues seriously, the American philosopher James Rachels nevertheless warns (1995: 10):

An **impediment** is a hindrance, a person or thing that gets in the way of something.

But [feelings] can also be an impediment to discovering the truth: when we feel strongly about an issue, it is tempting to assume that we just know what the truth must be, without even having to consider arguments on the other side. Unfortunately, however, we cannot rely on our feelings, no matter how powerful they may be. In the first place, they may be [...] nothing but the products of prejudice, selfishness, or cultural conditioning [...] Another problem is that different people’s feelings often tell them exactly opposite things.

Thus if we want to discover the truth, we must try to let our feelings be guided as much as possible by the reasons, or arguments, that can be given for both opposing views. Morality is, first and foremost, a matter of consulting reason: the morally right thing to do, in any circumstance, is determined by what there are the best reasons for doing.

Later (p. 39), Rachels goes on to say:

It is not merely that it would be a good thing to have reasons for one’s moral judgements. The point is stronger than that. One must have reasons, or else one is not making a moral judgement at all. This is part

of what moral concepts mean. To say, 'It would be morally wrong to do X, but there is no reason why it would be wrong,' is a self-contradiction.

Value statements that may be prescriptive but not specifically moral, often refer to competence or performance – statement **b** ('Mandisa is very good at getting learners to co-operate') is an example. We call these statements *appraisals*, because they may include a degree of personal preference. They are often subjective, but this is not necessarily the case. Some appraisals based on practice-oriented values are sound, accurate, and objective evaluations. But, as with moral values, we will only be able to judge whether this is the case or not if good reasons are given. So appraisal statements lie somewhere between mere preferences (they can be subjective) and moral value statements (they need to be supported with reasons).

The key point about the arguments surrounding subjectivism is that, just because moral values and preferences both involve valuing, it does not mean that they are both subjective. As Strike and Soltis (1985) put it:

The tendency to lump moral judgements under the general class of 'value judgements', and then to treat all value judgements alike, is the source of much confusion about morals. People tend to assume that value judgements are subjective matters [...] a matter of free choice on our part. It is then assumed to be wrong to impose our values on others.

This, of course, is exactly the assumption that Gillian made with regard to teaching values at Mountain View. What is it that makes the difference between moral values and preferences? It is, as we have seen, a basis in good reasons, and the use of reason that looks impartially at *all* sides of a case.

Of course, people may give poor reasons to defend statements of value and moral advice, but this does not mean that all moral values are based on similarly poor reasons. Fortunately, if people are allowed the freedom and scope to reason and debate moral issues without privileging their own interests, then poor, unconvincing reasons tend to give way to good reasons. This is probably the strongest argument in favour of providing opportunities for learners to '*exercise*' moral reasoning in group discussions.

Finally, then, the subjectivist argument itself collapses because it cannot provide good reasons. If all values are merely preferences, then the moral values of the child molester or the drug merchant must be considered just as valid as the moral values of Mother Theresa.

Further, if *all* our ideas of value are entirely subjective, these would include the moral value of *truth*. And if the principle 'Truth is better than untruth or error' were merely subjective, there would be no grounds for claiming that any argument is valid – including the subjectivist argument itself.

Many people tend, like Gillian, to accept the subjectivist argument because they think that there are only two possibilities where the status of moral values is concerned. Either:

1. moral values must be 'things' – matters of 'objective fact' like stars and frogs; or
2. moral values are nothing more than expressions of our subjective feelings.

They forget that there is a third possibility, that:

3. moral values may be true if they are supported by better reasons than the alternatives.

As Rachels points out (1995: 40), the truth of moral values is:

objective in the sense that they are true independently of what we might want or (our opinion) – we cannot make something good or bad just by wishing it to be so, because we cannot merely will that the weight of reason be on its side [...] Reason says what it says, regardless of our opinions or desires.

“
Morality is, first and foremost, a matter of consulting reason.

”

We may have 'buried' the idea of subjectivism, but unfortunately there is another popular form of thinking, which, in a more reasoned manner, and from a quite different starting point, also leads to relativism in the field of moral values. Let's return to Mountain View to see how teachers might experience this.

Are moral values relative to culture?

6.5

At the Mountain View PTSA meeting, which represented a wide range of cultures and religious beliefs, the parents supported a proposal to investigate the possibility of implementing the recommendation that all teachers try to include some element of values education in whatever they taught, without tying themselves to any particular creed.

Gillian, as we can guess, had accepted this policy with some reluctance. But her own Life Orientation class dealing with 'respect for others' had gone fairly well. Her class had scoured the newspapers for reports of people showing respect and disrespect for others' rights and had produced some insightful collages.

While the posters were being displayed, Themba, who at 14 was two years older than most of his classmates, and whose group had produced one of the best posters, told the two girls in his group to pick up the mess of paper scraps lying on the floor beneath their table. One of the girls had grumbled, and Themba, feeling that he had both right (tidiness) and authority (as a male, and an older male at that) on his side, had scolded her loudly.

Gillian, whose attention was caught by the squabble, asked Themba whether there was not a contradiction between the sentiments implied in the poster that his group had produced and his treatment of some of his classmates more or less as servants. Themba looked angry at this criticism, and as Gillian put it later in the staffroom, 'went into a sulk'.

Eventually one of the other boys explained why Themba could not accept that he was in the wrong. As far as Themba was concerned, in his community girls, and particularly younger girls, were inferior to him socially, and as such it was the duty of the female members of his group to clean up, not his.

Somewhat indignant about this display of sexism, Gillian took the occasion to engage the class in a discussion about gender discrimination. However, she was aware that throughout the rest of the lesson, Themba's look grew more and more sullen.





For this activity you will need
60 minutes.

ACTIVITY 36: A CLASH OF VALUES

- 1 Spend about 10 to 15 minutes thinking about the following set of questions (or discussing them, if you're working with fellow students):
 - a Does Gillian have a right to correct Themba? On what grounds?
 - b If she does, is she not guilty of imposing her values (or those of her culture) on him? It may be that these are deeply held beliefs in his culture.
 - c Whose values should prevail in the classroom? Does a girl's right to equal treatment with boys override the right to have one's cultural norms and values respected? On what grounds would you answer yes or no?
- 2 Read the chapter 'The challenge of cultural relativism' by James Rachels (Reading 17 on page 111 in your Reader). This reading, while not difficult, is not suited to a quick read in, say, a group tutorial session. Give yourself about half an hour to read it, preferably in one sitting.

The writer presents cultural relativism as an idea with strong appeal, and as one from which some valuable lessons can be learnt, but he rejects it on logical grounds. He also presents reasons why it might be harmful. What dangers are present in the idea that all values (including moral values) are merely relative to one's culture?

Gillian *does* have a right to challenge Themba in terms of her professional mandate to maintain a safe, ordered learning environment. She is also acting as a role model in protecting the rights of others, especially of the less powerful. But isn't this disregarding Themba's right to have his culture respected? If different cultures have different values, what right has the teacher to interfere?

Different cultures, different values

Cultural anthropologists have put forward the idea that our values, far from being *subjective* in origin, are the result of our being socialized into the beliefs and practices of the culture we grow up in. These collective values define what a particular society considers to be desirable or worth preserving.

In various societies, collective values might include, for example, the pursuit of material wealth, competition and ambition, co-operation and collective effort, and so on. But it's obvious that different societies, or different social groups within a single society, may hold very different values.

For example, in Papua New Guinea (in the East Indies), much of what we in South Africa would consider private property is shared. Different persons may actually hold different rights on the same land. There is no 'owner': one person may hold ceremonial rights, another fishing rights, another hunting rights, another dwelling rights, and so on.

In 1983, young men in one Papuan village were killed after developing export businesses for their own personal profit. They were viewed as being too individualistic and as no longer contributing to the common good. This example reminds us that what is valued in one society – being very well-off financially – may lead to a death sentence in a different culture (Ellis and Ellis quoted in Schaefer and Lamm, 1992: 80–81).

Values in conflict

The members of traditional, close-knit societies like the Papuans are generally in agreement on single sets of values. But under the impact of colonizing powers, or in complex societies in which many 'sub-cultures' exist side-by-side as a result of immigration and colonization, values may come into conflict. This is the situation Andy

Hargreaves referred to in Reading 14 as a multicultural situation bringing different belief systems into contact, and leading to the questioning and even the collapse of long-held belief systems that claim to be universal.

Cultural relativism

This diversity of values between cultures and within societies raises challenges for teachers like Gillian, who are preparing children for life in increasingly multicultural environments. But cultural diversity has also given rise to the idea that what we think of as 'right' or 'wrong' is *simply relative to culture*. In other words, actions are not right or wrong in themselves, they're simply considered right if they 'work' within a particular cultural belief system.

Does the treatment of girls as servants constitute a valid cultural practice, or does it amount to an unenlightened practice wherever it occurs, a practice that might therefore require reform (see Reading 17)? Would condoning Themba's treatment of girls encourage him to develop an even more exploitative attitude to women?

On the other hand, would a 'reform' in this area lead to the crumbling of Themba's culture as a whole? Anthropologists have observed that all cultures undergo change, whether gradually or rapidly. Do all the male members of Themba's culture still adopt the 'traditional' attitude to women, or have some distanced themselves from such values? If some have, what has been the effect on their culture as a whole?

Rachels' argument effectively provides us with a tool for refuting the cultural relativism argument, and helps us to resolve dilemmas like Gillian's. Remember also that the dangers of an 'anything goes' relativism in propositional knowledge are just as relevant when we consider dispositional knowledge (values). And that in making moral judgments, it is also true that 'good reasons give way to better reasons'.

So we have grounds to pause before rushing to accept the cultural argument put forward by Themba. We might also realize that many members of Themba's culture *have* in fact distanced themselves from such beliefs, with prominent members of the South African government leading the way. And while Themba or his supporters might argue that to challenge a principle of his culture is to insult his dignity, when weighed against the direct slight to the girls' human dignity, the 'insult' to his dignity seems to be of a lesser order.



Think back to what you read in Section 5.5 about the potential dangers of relativism in the realm of knowledge as situated. Notice the parallels with relativism in the realm of moral values.



We are pointing here to the parallel between relativism in the realm of (situated) knowledge and relativism in the realm of moral values, based on the fact that norms vary from one culture to another.

6.6

Are moral values absolute?

A value would be **absolute** if it allowed no doubt or exception and was binding for all people in all circumstances.

We've established that the arguments for an 'anything goes' view of moral values are weak. But how far do we have to go in the opposite direction? Is there one set of values with which we can, and should, all agree? Are moral values absolute in the duty they impose on us, allowing no exceptions, to be followed without question, and valid for all times and people, regardless of culture or circumstances?

At this point, we shift our focus from arguments in favour of moral values as 'teachable' to examine the use of moral thinking in the day-to-day decisions that teachers have to make in their classrooms.

Dealing with a learner's plagiarism

Linda was marking class projects in the Mountain View staffroom when she realized that one of her most promising learners had copied almost everything in her assignment out of a book, without acknowledging that the passages were not her own.

'This girl has so much potential too – she could produce a good assignment without plagiarizing. Oh well ... I suppose she'll have to get zero. I've warned her class that they could get nothing for plagiarizing. It's a pity, though. Pumzile could fail the year because of it – she's missed quite a lot of assessment work through being absent.'

'Ja, it's tough,' said Mmapule, 'but rules are rules, and she's broken the rule on cheating. Passing off somebody else's work as your own is cheating. Don't be put off by the fact that she might fail. We've got to be consistent in applying the rules on dishonesty, and not make exceptions for this and that. Other learners have got naught for cheating before – it would be unfair to allow Pumzile to get away with it.'

'You're sticking very strongly to principle, Mmapule,' said Lerato. 'Shouldn't Linda weigh up the consequences? If she gives Pumzile naught, she may fail – and failing at this stage might mess up her academic future. Imagine what that would do to her mother. She's a single parent and Pumzile's her hope for the future. In fact Pumzile might have been tempted to take a 'short cut' in her assignment because she has to look after her brothers and do housework every day until her mother gets back from work.'

'I've heard about that, and I know her mother's not very well either. That's why she's missed quite a bit of school. But we can't just allow cheating to go unpunished, otherwise the whole assessment system will mean nothing,' said Linda.

'I agree,' said Lerato, 'but if you call Pumzile in and explain the seriousness of what she's done – and then give her a chance to rewrite – she might pass. Of course, there's quite a risk that others may be encouraged to take a chance and try to cheat. Maybe you could give her some other form of punishment to make an example of her conduct for others' benefit. What I'm saying is that I don't think we should just judge questions like this in terms of a principle only. I think we need to consider the circumstances and weigh up the consequences.'

ACTIVITY 37: PRINCIPLES OR CONSEQUENCES?

Consider carefully what you would do in the situation described above. In your workbook:

- 1** Write down what decision you would make. Give the reasons for your decision. Explain why you think that these reasons are stronger than the reasons that would have led you to a different decision.
- 2** Mmapule's approach is based on the strict application of a principle. Carefully read again the paragraph where she speaks, and jot down her reasons for advocating this approach.
- 3** Lerato suggests working towards a decision by considering the consequences of each choice. This leads her to look in some detail at the situation of the persons concerned. Read her argument again, and write down some of the difficulties that you think Linda might have in considering these consequences.



For this activity you will need about 25 minutes.

The right and the good: Two frameworks for moral decision-making

Teachers are faced daily with many choices that involve moral values in practice – and some may have serious consequences. Sometimes we feel that doing the 'right' thing is not always a good thing to do, or the best thing to do. And sometimes what seems to be the best thing to do is not necessarily the 'right' thing. So the right and the good might not always be the same thing.

- Mmapule believes that moral decisions should be considered strictly in terms of principle, without regard for the consequences of our choices. A moral principle will tell us what is right, and how we should act, even if the consequences do not look promising. Mmapule regards moral principles as *absolute* in the duty they impose on us, allowing no exceptions, valid for all circumstances, and to be followed without question.
- Lerato, on the other hand, believes that moral choices should be made by weighing the consequences of each choice, and choosing the action that promises to produce the best consequences. The focus here is on producing good outcomes or consequences, not on whether the choice is strictly right in terms of an absolute principle.

The right

It can be argued that the '*right*' thing to do here would be to give Pumzile zero for her assignment. She has violated a moral principle on which all human communication and interaction are dependent in society – that of honesty. Serious dishonesty undermines the whole system of assessment, on which the worth of all our qualifications depends. According to this argument moral rules are universal (they apply to everybody, everywhere), and people should themselves act in a way that they would expect everybody to act – in this case to act honestly and not plagiarize work.

The generally-applied rule is that serious dishonesty of this sort is to be punished appropriately. Being given zero for work that is handed in as one's own when it is not one's own seems appropriate enough, and the learners have been warned. If this rule is not applied consistently to all, people's respect for the rule (and the moral principle it supports) will be undermined. The right thing to do would be to act impartially, without making an exception for Pumzile, and punish her offence with a zero mark.

“
*The right and the good
might not always be
the same thing.*
”

The good

It can also be argued that the *good* thing to do would be to offer Pumzile another chance, given her situation, and the strong possibility that there might be what seem excessively harsh consequences for her and her mother. Notice, however, that this approach does not in itself simply signify a more lenient, forgiving approach. Lerato tries to weigh up the consequences for 'society' as well as for Pumzile and her mother. So she acknowledges that if Pumzile is seen to 'get off lightly', others may be encouraged to cheat, and she suggests that other (less destructive) forms of punishment could be tried. The words Lerato uses ('may', 'might' and 'there's quite a risk') indicate that she is also aware that consequences are never 100% predictable – there's a risk attached to whatever one does or doesn't do when moral values are the issue.

Often the right and the good do amount to the same thing. But often they do not, as is the case here. The difference between the right and the good when they do not correspond has given rise to two different approaches to making moral decisions:

- emphasizing what is '*right*', or acting strictly according to an *absolute moral principle*; or
- emphasizing what is '*good*', or focusing on the best likely outcomes or *consequences*.

Understanding the difference between these two approaches can be useful when you face tricky moral decisions, and may enable you to approach them with greater skill and confidence.

Kant's moral principle-as-absolute approach

A **rational** human being has the ability to reason.

The moral principle-as-absolute approach was formulated most clearly by the important eighteenth-century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, although elements of his theory, such as the 'golden rule' (see below) have been around for many centuries.

His theory argues that because we are rational beings, we have an inescapable moral obligation to make decisions and act in such a way that the principles guiding these choices and actions could be treated as universal rules of human conduct. For a moral rule to be universal, there can be no exceptions (including ourselves), and it needs to be applied impartially and consistently to everyone.

“
We should behave
towards others as we
would like them to
behave towards us.
”

Kant's rule probably sounds more complicated than it is. Let's look at a simple example. Imagine you are faced with a choice between plagiarizing or not. According to Kant, you should consider the principle underlying the choice – honesty, in this case – and consider whether you think all human beings ought to act in terms of this principle or not. Would you like people to be honest in their dealings with you? If you would, then you would want everybody to act according to a universal principle of honesty. And that would have to include you.

Reduced to its simplest form, Kant's argument gives strong logical support to the so-called 'golden rule', which suggests that we should behave towards others as we would like them to behave towards us. This is not far from a moral principle that is associated with some of the world's major religions. However, Kant does not derive his rule from a religious source; he reasoned it out logically on the basis of human experience. In the process, he provided us with a clear understanding of the reason why the 'golden rule' is such a compelling idea, and of how we can apply the 'golden rule' in making any moral choice.

In addition, the fact that Kant's principle is based on logical reason and human experience rather than on any particular religious belief, means that it can be

accepted by people of different religious beliefs. It is not likely to offend particular groups in multicultural situations, but it does not achieve this acceptability by suggesting that moral values are simply relative to cultures.

How does Kant base his moral rule on human experience? Because we can never have certain knowledge of what the consequences of our actions will be, he argued that in deciding moral issues we need to ignore consequences, and pay attention only to what *motivates* moral acts – that is, a sense of obligation, or ‘oughtness’. It is this, he held, that makes humans different from animals. Only human beings experience this sense of obligation, and this is because humans as a species are free to obey the promptings of this sense of obligation, or not, as we saw earlier in Section 6.2. Only human beings, because they are capable of choice and reason, can escape the chain of cause-and-effect that determines everything else that happens in the world of nature.

Another important part of Kant’s theory relates to punishment. Because our reason enables us not only to choose how we act, but to choose on the basis of a rational understanding of what it is we are doing, we are in the end *responsible* for our actions. For this reason we can be held *accountable* for what we do. In Section Three we examined responsibility and accountability in connection with professionalism. Now we can see how these two ideas are rooted in what it is to be a human being. Animals, who cannot reason, cannot be held responsible for their behaviour in the way that human beings can.

So when a rational human being cheats (like Pumzile), or treats other rational human beings as if they are there for the purpose of serving him or her (like Themba) – then he or she is in effect ‘declaring’ that in their judgement, this is the way human beings *should* act, or treat other people. Therefore if we punish them accordingly, we are doing nothing more than treating them as they have in a sense *decided* people are to be treated. This amounts to allowing people, as rational beings, to decide for themselves how they will be treated.

So we can see that it is Kant’s theory of moral principles as absolutes that Mmapule expresses when she urges Linda to give Pumzile’s assignment a zero, even if she has never actually heard of the philosopher himself. Let’s turn now to the second framework we are considering here, the consequences approach.

“
In deciding moral issues we need to pay attention to what motivates moral acts.
”

Bentham and Mill’s consequences approach

Probably the most influential moral theory based on the consequences of actions is called utilitarianism. It was developed by the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and today it characterizes many social institutions such as the justice system in many modern democracies.

Utilitarianism argues that the way to make moral decisions is not to apply principles that are seen as good in themselves, or inflexible. It is rather to judge according to what produces (or aims to produce) the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Utilitarianism therefore requires us to look carefully at the different sets of consequences that have arisen or could arise from different decisions, assess which set of consequences will be likely to produce the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people, and approve that decision or choose that option.

“

The morality or immorality of a choice or an action is determined by the practical consequences of that choice or action.

”

Look again at the reasons Lerato gives for considering the consequences before making a decision. She believes that when we make decisions we should aim at the best outcome – that we should be concerned with what is *good*, rather than what may be the right principle in theory. It may be wrong to plagiarize because it is dishonest, but would the strict application of the zero mark penalty produce the best outcome in this case?

The probable consequence of failure could have further consequences for Pumzile's life. If these came about, they would seem rather out of proportion to her offence in the eyes of many people. Perhaps she did not appreciate the seriousness of her offence. Should she not be given another chance? What would the consequences for all concerned then be? Lerato mentions the possibility of other learners being encouraged to cheat.

This is a good example of the utilitarian approach, which argues that we cannot decide on the morality of actions (including punishing people) without weighing up as many of their consequences as possible. Morality is not decided according to absolute (inflexible) and abstract principles of right and wrong. The morality or immorality of a choice or an action is determined by the practical consequences of that choice or action. Whatever action produces the most good for the most people (the greatest 'utility') is then considered to be the most moral action.

Of course, judging *past* actions according to their consequences is usually a lot easier than weighing up consequences when deciding how to act. In determining how to act morally *before* acting, consequence theories, including utilitarianism, depend on our predicting what the consequences of our choices and actions will be. They also depend on our being able to compare different sets of possible consequences in order to work out which would be the best.

How many of the consequences for Pumzile, her mother, or her fellow learners can we predict with certainty? By what yardstick would we assess which will be the better consequences? These are some of the problems of the consequences approach: the difficulty of knowing what the consequences of our actions will be, including their impact on everybody concerned; and the difficulty of determining which consequences would be best.

In addition to these problems, utilitarianism in particular involves other difficulties. One of these is that it is possible to act in ways that *do* produce the greatest good for the greatest number, but that *discriminate* against a minority at the same time.

Consider the example of how you as a teacher 'pitch' your lessons or activities, and their pace. Perhaps you design them so that they can be understood by the majority of learners in your class, which is good in utilitarian terms. But are you not discriminating against the slower learners, who may need you to explain more slowly – or build the 'scaffolding' you provide for their learning from a different starting point? At the same time, are you not discriminating against the more capable learners, who may be bored by a pace and level suited to the majority?

Absolute principles or consequences?

When we have to make moral decisions or judgements, is there any reason to favour the view that holds that moral values are absolutes, or the view that consequences are what we should be looking at?

We would argue that *neither* view is sufficient – each view to some extent provides what the other view lacks. Whereas we have drawn attention to some of the problems in the consequences approach, in particular utilitarianism, so far we have mentioned only positive points about the idea of moral values as absolutes, in particular Kant's theory. However, these too have flaws. We will mention two here:

1. **Because Kant held that we can never know for certain what the consequences of our actions will be, he tended to regard the consequences and circumstances of actions as being of *no significance at all*, and as a mere distraction when we make moral decisions or judgements.**

Yet in practice, whenever we try to resolve a real-life moral dilemma in which two or more moral alternatives make claims on our reason, it is inevitable that we will ask ourselves what the *likeliest* results of each alternative will be.

Furthermore, is it not true that the absolute principles mentioned above (that it is wrong to cheat, to let dishonesty go unpunished) are in the end both linked to undesirable consequences themselves? Cheating cannot be accepted as a universal rule for everyone precisely because it would have undesirable consequences – the whole assessment system would become meaningless if cheating were universal.

2. Another weakness in the thinking of Kant and some other ‘absolutists’ is related to the first. This is the insistence that there can be *absolutely no exceptions* to moral rules.

Imagine the following scene: A teacher was confronted during school hours by the large and angry stepfather of one of the learners in her class. He stood with his belt in his hand, insisting on being told the young boy’s whereabouts. She had sent a message to the mother because the boy was always getting involved in fights at school – fights that he often started but did not always win because he himself was not very well-developed physically.

Instead of the mother coming to the school, the stepfather had decided to take things into his own hands. The teacher now realized that he probably abused the child physically on a regular basis, and that he had already had a few drinks that morning. He was in no mood to discuss anything with the teacher, and wanted only to make a demonstration of how he was capable of ‘disciplining’ the boy. He insisted on the boy being fetched. It was clear to the teacher that there was no point in even trying to engage in a useful discussion with the stepfather while he was in this state, and in an effort to bring the situation under control, she told him that she had sent the message because his step-son was beaten up by some older boys who had picked on him for no reason – though she knew this not to be true.

This story is adapted from Strike and Soltis (1985).



“

No reasonable moral approach can entirely ignore consequences, neither can any reasonable moral approach argue that consequences alone are enough to consider in making moral choices.

”

Can we really argue that the teacher should have told the truth, exposing the child to yet another cruel beating? Kant would argue that she should not have lied. Since one cannot know for certain what the consequences of lying might be, it is after all possible that the lie might have made matters worse if the boy's story did not line up with the teacher's. This may of course have happened, but the point here is that if the teacher had told the truth, a beating on the spot would have been almost certain.

Surely there is something wrong here. The morals-as-absolutes approach seems very rigid, and it seems to put an abstract principle, and the teacher's comfortable conscience, above the (admittedly short-term) good of a child. Perhaps we cannot sensibly will lying to be a universal rule for human conduct, but what about lying to prevent a child from suffering? Surely that could be willed to be a universal rule? A lot depends, then, on just how specific or general we choose to make our rules.

The importance of reason and impartiality

Two important characteristics of moral values are common to both these apparently opposed points of view:

- ***the insistence on using our reason, and backing our actions with good reasons*** – whether thinking through the universal dimension of actions, or thinking of the circumstances and consequences of actions, and weighing up the latter;
- ***the insistence on impartiality*** – no individual or group can claim superior right to favoured treatment, either when considering whether individual conduct could be made a universal rule for *all* human beings, or when considering consequences and what might be the greatest good for the greatest number of people. In making such decisions, reason provides us with no justification for saying we should benefit one group and not another.

These two principles, then, which are associated with both of these major (but very different) moral approaches, surely provide us with the basics of sound moral thinking. What about the approaches themselves (absolutism and the consequences approach)?

We need to decide for ourselves, avoiding the pitfalls of an exclusive attachment to either theory. No reasonable moral approach can entirely ignore consequences, neither can any reasonable moral approach argue that consequences alone are enough to consider in making moral choices.

We are not simply advocating a 'middle path' for the sake of avoiding extremes: there are elements in the two theories themselves that seem to support such an approach. Moral values as absolutes have the well-being of people as an intended consequence beyond themselves. Likewise, thinking about consequences when making a moral decision has a similar objective: the well-being of people.

What role should teachers play in developing sound values?

6.7

At a Mountain View staff meeting, teachers were discussing the implementation of values education into the curriculum. Some were still uncomfortable with the idea, others were cautiously enthusiastic, and others adopted a 'wait and see' attitude. Here is an extract from Mmapule's minutes of the 'brainstorm' part of the meeting:

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE STAFF OF THE MOUNTAIN VIEW PRIMARY SCHOOL, HELD IN THE STAFFROOM AT 14:30 ON 22 MARCH 2001

The staff were given 25 minutes to put forward their concerns and points of view before breaking into smaller groups to discuss particular issues. No comment or argument was allowed in this session. The following points were made:

1. Some staff still think the policy will mean imposing values on children whose families may hold very different views. Should teachers not remain neutral to avoid upsetting learners or parents from different cultural backgrounds?
2. Some think the area of values would be too controversial, even if all the children were from the same culture.
3. We should be careful to avoid making learners feel excluded because of their religious beliefs – teaching must be inclusive.
4. Values education has a bad name in South African schools because in the past Christian National Education tried to impose Calvinist Christian values on everyone.
5. We should be careful to avoid 'preaching' to the learners; this didn't work anyway.
6. Can moral values really be taught? Is it not true that they should be 'caught', not taught? How should we approach values, if this is the case?
7. What are 'sound values'? What values should we be imparting?
8. Many parents are looking to teachers to provide some education in values, especially those who do not get to see their children much because of work.
9. But some parents are wary of values teaching in the hands of teachers – they say this is the role of parents.
10. Children don't automatically develop moral values on their own as they grow. They learn them from their environment, which includes some very bad influences. Teachers need to do something to counteract this.
11. Young people often don't know how to choose, especially if they are faced with a choice between things that both seem right.
12. Values may be controversial, but most people in our society agree on a lot of basic values like being truthful, and not living only for yourself.

A small committee met some days later to plan how to take these questions forward. They decided that the most fundamental points were contained in Questions 1, 6, and 7, and that answers should be sought before the staff would feel happy to move forward.

Andy's suggestion of another professional development programme won support, so he decided to approach Vusi Masondo, who had done some interesting work on values teaching. Vusi thought that the questions provided a useful start, and decided to use them as the basis for a first workshop.

Questions about moral values education

The reading that Vusi set in preparation for the workshop was from Clive Beck's 1990 book, *Better Schools: A Values Perspective*. Vusi decided to start with the part of the reading that deals with the question of the teacher taking a neutral role.



You will need about 45 minutes for this activity.

ACTIVITY 38: IS THERE A PLACE FOR MORAL EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS?

Read the extract by Clive Beck, 'Moral and values education' (Reading 18, page 121) and answer the following questions on the section headed 'Whose values?'

- 1 Summarize the writer's arguments – in the last section of the extract – against the teacher remaining neutral.
- 2 What are some of the things that have been wrong with moral education in the past, according to the writer?
- 3 Summarize the reasons Beck gives in favour of attempting some form of moral education in schools.

Let's see what the Mountain View teachers made of this reading:

Andy Villiers opened the discussion by saying that he agreed with the writer's reasons for rejecting neutrality in the classroom: 'We couldn't run this or any other school without promoting some values, as Beck says – the value of knowledge, fair treatment, discipline and so on. We "teach" values through direct discussion, through the school rules, and through the way we conduct ourselves in the classroom. It's an implied teaching as much as it is an explicit one.'

'Yes,' said one of the teachers, 'but does that mean we have to teach values explicitly in, say, Environmental Studies? Everybody expects a school to have rules, and talks on values.'

'I think what Beck is saying is that even in the classroom, you are already teaching values, even if you are not doing so consciously. So it's not as if you can really avoid it. And if that's the case, shouldn't we be imparting some sound values? With all the influences out there over which parents don't have much control, a lot of parents look to us to play this role.'

'Yes,' said Mmapule. 'This idea that values are just subjective comes across in many public media these days. Because we have a democracy, some people think every point of view is just as valuable as any other. That cannot be right. Racism is supported by some people, but that doesn't make it right.'

At this point Vusi added, 'And if teachers try to remain neutral and silent, they are simply giving greater force to those ideas – and allowing free rein to powerful influences like drug-use or brand advertising, which try to turn children into captive consumers. The English historian Edmund Burke once said a great thing: "For evil to thrive, it is necessary only that good men do nothing."'

'But there are also other reasons that Beck gives for attempting moral and values education. Can you help us identify them?'

Various staff members identified reasons from the reading:

- *Some values, and the knowledge that supports them, are not usually 'picked up' through everyday experience.*
- *Teachers could have an important effect on the further development of learners' basic dispositions.*
- *Learners could benefit from learning how to approach moral decision-making: for example, weighing up the consequences of an action, or asking whether they would like to be treated in the way they are treating others.*
- *Learners could learn how to use reason, how to make exceptions in complex situations and how to weigh up one consideration against another, particularly in areas of mistakes in moral decision making, for example, treating moral values as a matter of authority ('Because I said so').*

Vusi then asked the staff what they thought of Beck's ideas about moral values being controversial, or the idea that teaching such values meant imposing one group's ideas on another's.

Lerato answered, 'He seems to be saying that the differences between various theories and religions are exaggerated – that they actually agree on many basic values, even though they may approach them from different points of view.

'And in the last paragraph the writer says that the way to avoid imposing values on learners isn't to try to be neutral and hold back from promoting any values at all. Rather it is to establish a climate that encourages learners to discuss ideas freely, including disagreeing with ideas you put forward, or proposing alternatives.'

'That's right, and I think what he's trying to tell us about teachers in that last paragraph is that they should model conviction rather than "good behaviour". They should be able to reveal that values are important in their own lives, without imposing them on others.'



Think back to the terms of appointment once required of teachers in the contract on p. 58. Did those terms refer to conviction or 'good behaviour'?

How not to help learners develop values

Clive Beck describes how **not** to approach values education; by teaching values:

- as though they were absolutes, without any exceptions;
- without backing them up with persuasive reasons, and without encouraging learners to use their reason in making moral decisions;
- aimed at indoctrinating learners or imposing certain values on them.

The main reason why moral education has a bad reputation with many people is probably because it is associated with what could be summed up as 'preaching', which simply does not work. Right back in the late 1920s, an experiment by researchers Hartshorne and May conducted with Boy Scout groups and Sunday School classes showed that learners who had been given what might be called traditional lessons on morality, including honesty, were no less inclined to cheat during an examination than those who had not undergone such lessons.

A further problem with moral instruction is that its success depends to a large extent on learners submitting themselves to the teachers' social control, rather than on their wrestling with moral problems themselves and taking on the moral values as their own. This means that when the teachers or others in positions of social control are not around, the learners may well feel less obligation to comply. Furthermore, it sometimes comes as a surprise to teachers to learn that morality in fact has little to do with obedience to some authority, as we see in the following quote from Straughan (1982: 6–7).

“

Doing something just because you are told to do it has nothing to do with acting morally.

”

Teaching children to be good is not the same as teaching them to do as they are told; obedience to authority is strictly irrelevant to the business of making moral decisions. [An] example should make this clear.

An American psychologist conducted a series of experiments in which members of the public volunteered to take part in what they thought was a study of the effects of punishment upon learning (Milgram, 1974). The ‘learner’, who was in fact an actor, was strapped to a chair and told to learn a list of word pairs. The ‘teacher’, who was one of the unsuspecting volunteers, was seated in front of what appeared to be an electric shock generator, and was told to administer increasingly severe shocks to the ‘learner’ each time he gave a wrong answer. The ‘learner’ in fact received no shocks at all, but pretended to react and protest more and more frenziedly as the level of the shocks apparently increased.

If the ‘teacher’ protested at any point, the person in charge of the experiment would say things like ‘Please continue,’ or ‘The experiment requires that you continue,’ or ‘It is absolutely essential that you continue,’ or ‘You have no other choice; you must go on.’ In some of the experiments 65% of the ‘teachers’ obeyed the experimenter, and went on to inflict what they thought were highly dangerous shocks of 450 volts. It appears, therefore, to be surprisingly and frighteningly easy to induce people to obey an authority, but surely we would not want to say that the 65% of subjects who did as they were told were morally better and more mature than the 35% who refused. Doing something just because you are told to do it, then, has nothing to do with acting morally.



It seems, then, that there is much truth in the idea that moral values cannot be taught, if teaching means a direct form of instruction. If learners are to acquire, not just a knowledge of what values are acceptable to authority, but a set of values that will guide and shape their actions even when they are 'out of range' of teachers and other authority figures, then something more than instruction is needed.

How can teachers help learners to develop values?

We have already made the point that teachers are called to be *moral agents* in the learning environment, both as teachers and as models of a principled approach to life. We have also seen that one of the most important moral 'skills' that teachers need to promote is the use of *reason* and logical thinking, because feelings can be very deceptive when making moral decisions. So as teachers, you should also challenge your learners to provide persuasive reasons when they make value claims or arbitrary judgements.

The use of reason also involves the principle of *impartiality*, or the idea that each individual's interests are equally important. Kant's principle that you treat others as you would be treated, strongly supports this argument. Take for instance a teacher who decides to take two days' 'leave' in the middle of the school term. She should ask herself, without making any exceptions in her own case, whether she would like her own lecturers to do this. She should also weigh up the consequences for her own learners.

A learning environment in which moral values count

As a moral agent, a teacher should have a classroom in which prejudice and partiality (against race, gender, social class) are analysed, and their dangers are brought out into the open. Teachers need to develop learner capacity to use reason and impartiality in practical situations, because these do *not* just develop unaided. Debates and discussions in which learners defend their values, test out principles for themselves, and use their reasoning skills in moral problems that include conflicting values should be a regular feature.

Teacher 'neutrality', the 'preaching' of moral values, and the idea that morals mean obedience, do not promote a learning environment in which values count. The freedom to undertake moral action does promote such an environment. Here teachers are fair and just in dealing with behaviour issues among the learners. They balance absolutes with a concern for circumstances and consequences. They never adopt a 'soppy', laissez faire approach from which children learn that 'anything goes'.

Being fair and just also means that when contradictions do arise in the classroom between the values of learners from different cultural backgrounds, teachers avoid imposing their own, or a dominant, point of view, unless other learners' rights are threatened. In a supportive environment, learners are encouraged to respect cultural and other differences, and to celebrate human variety.

Rules are necessary, as we have seen in Section Four, but they should be seen as a means to the end of supporting good learning for all, not as absolute ends in themselves. Let the learners be partners in drawing up class rules, and if possible school rules. This will afford them a practical opportunity for moral decision-making, with real consequences that they will have to live with.

From at least the Senior Phase (Grade 8), consider giving learners a 'judiciary' role too. Learners should be represented on a disciplinary committee, and in class, misdemeanours should sometimes be discussed. This encourages learner accountability and responsibility.

Since values always have a social dimension, teachers as moral agents need to show that morals and values also matter to them *beyond the confines of the classroom*. They therefore need to inform themselves of the important issues of the day, in their community and in the broader society.

Teachers should also not be afraid to show enthusiasm and participate in particular causes (women's issues, ecological issues, community issues and broader political issues). This provides some balance in their lives, demonstrates that values are to be *lived* in the 'real world', and helps to forge valuable ties between school and community.

Two approaches to values education

To help learners to develop sound values, we look briefly at two well-known approaches to moral education: values clarification, and stimulation of natural development.

The first approach, values clarification, aims at developing confident, integrated learners with a strong awareness of and commitment to their own values. It sees the role of the teacher as being to help learners to get a clear idea of the nature and consequences of their own values, and to build learners' commitment to those values, without passing judgement on them (Beck, 1990: 154).

The teacher typically takes the role of a 'neutral chairperson' in discussions of moral issues and dilemmas, carefully avoiding any negative judgements of learner opinions, which the teacher is encouraging. Despite its obvious merits, values clarification can veer towards moral relativism if followed strictly. Learners still need to be shown that one can make inappropriate or wrong value and moral choices.

The second approach, stimulating natural development, was advocated by Lawrence Kohlberg, who based his theories on the work of Jean Piaget. This approach emphasizes the natural development of moral judgement in children as they interact with the world and other children.

Kohlberg describes six stages of moral development through which individuals may pass, though he points out that many *adults* never progress beyond some of the early stages. These stages are divided into the Pre-conventional level, the Conventional level, and the Post-conventional level (or the Level of Principle), indicating how the individual relates to the broad moral conventions of the community, or of society as a whole.



For more information about values clarification, and about Kohlberg's theory of moral education, we would recommend that you consult Jarrett, 1991 (see 'Further Reading' at the end of this Learning Guide).

Kohlberg's stages of moral development

The Pre-conventional level

Stage 1: Unquestioning obedience based on the power of authority figures (usually parents). Rules are accepted without question, and right or wrong are whatever is rewarded or punished. Moral judgements are made on the basis of observable consequences, not the doer's intentions. Therefore a young child will think that it is worse to make a big mess while trying to help his or her mother than it is to make a small mess while just 'fooling around', whereas adults would tend to be more forgiving of the first act.

Stage 2: The child is still focused on his or her own needs, and right or wrong are seen as what satisfies those needs (and sometimes the needs of others). You behave well in order to get what you want, or to avoid the unpleasantness of punishment.

The Conventional level

Stage 3: Right behaviour is what pleases other people. The notion of what is seen as a 'good child' or 'bad child' operates at this stage. The individual is now capable of judging good or bad actions according to the intentions behind them.

Stage 4: The 'law and order' stage, in which right is seen as doing one's duty according to the conventions of the community or society, as showing respect for authority (not just obedience), and as following rules not just because breaking them will be followed by punishment, but because they are seen as 'right'.

The Post-conventional level (or Principled level)

Stage 5: Right is seen not so much as a matter of social rules and laws, but rather as a matter of personally-held values. (Kohlberg does not see these values as just personal preferences, but as values that may be recognized by society, such as fair play and equality.) Laws, for that matter, may be changed as society and governments change, so they are not seen as absolute.

Stage 6: Right conduct is determined by self-chosen moral principles such as justice and respect for the dignity of human beings (individuals and groups) and for human rights. The individual applies these principles impartially and may keep to them even if they clash with the laws of the day, or other social conventions – thereby risking society's censure or punishment.

To risk **censure** is to risk strong criticism or disapproval.

Kohlberg advocates stimulating this process of natural development from one stage to the next by providing moral dilemmas that learners are required to try and resolve in an atmosphere where moral questions are taken seriously but do not have 'real' consequences.

His description of evolving stages is based on a powerful insight into moral judgement as something that grows and deepens, and it makes a good deal of sense to anyone who reads it, but it presents a rather neater picture of uniform development than we usually experience in reality. Therefore even a morally mature person may well respond at quite different 'levels' to various moral situations at different times in a single day. For example, I may make a courageous moral decision in the morning (at work), and act in a way that I later regret in the evening (at home).

6.8

What are 'sound values'?

How can teachers judge what sort of values they could justifiably encourage in the course of their teaching? What sort of values should they promote in the management of their classrooms? In fact, what are 'sound values'? What criteria do we need to make these judgements? These would be values that:

1. can stand up to the tests of reason and impartiality;
2. can enable teachers and learners to become fully human and to develop as moral agents, not just passive recipients of whatever comes our way;
3. we (teachers or learners) would be happy to apply as a universal rule, which included ourselves;
4. lead us always to view and treat other human beings as ends in themselves, and never merely as a means to an end;
5. recognize other human beings as indispensable to our own humanity, and direct us to promote the well-being of other human beings and enhance their humanity; and
6. enable us to make good use of our human and democratic freedom of action, taking responsibility for our actions and their consequences.

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Act so that you treat humanity as an end and never as a means.

”

The first three criteria need no further explanation, though we will take the point about becoming more fully human further in Section Seven. But following the principle of supplying reasons for moral claims, we need to motivate criteria 4 to 6.

Treating others as ends in themselves

Our second criterion, to encourage moral agency, is based on one of Immanuel Kant's key principles. From this he developed another key principle, which we again use as our fourth criterion:

Act so that you treat humanity, in your own person and in the person of everyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means.

This is how the philosopher James Rachels explains Kant's moral law:

Human beings have **intrinsic worth** if we view them as valuable in themselves, as opposed to what they might produce.

[According to Kant] humans have 'an intrinsic worth', i.e. dignity, because they are rational agents – that is, free agents capable of making their own decisions, setting their own goals, and guiding their own conduct by reason. Because moral law is the law of reason, rational beings (human beings are the only ones we know of in our world) are the embodiment of the moral law itself. The only way that moral goodness can exist at all in the world is for rational beings to recognize what they should do, and, acting from a sense of duty, to do it. This, Kant thought, is the only thing that has 'moral worth'. Thus if there were no rational beings in the world, the moral (and value) dimension of the world would simply disappear.

[Since it is rational human beings who thus make the world a place of value and morality], it makes no sense to regard [them] merely as one kind of valuable thing among others. They are the beings for whom mere 'things' have value, and they are the beings whose conscientious actions have moral worth. So Kant concludes that their value must be absolute, and not comparable to the value of anything else.

If their value is thus 'beyond all price', it follows that rational beings must be treated 'always as an end, and never as a means only'. This

means, on a superficial level, that we have a strict duty of beneficence toward other persons: we must strive to promote their welfare: we must respect their rights, avoid harming them, and generally 'endeavour, so far as we can, to further the ends of others.'

But Kant's idea also has a somewhat deeper implication. The beings we are talking about are rational beings, and 'treating them as ends-in-themselves' means respecting their rationality. Thus we never manipulate people, or use people, to achieve our own purposes, no matter how good these purposes may be.

Kant thus teaches us not to treat other human beings as 'instruments' (means) to achieve our own purposes (ends), in effect turning them into 'things'. This rule is grounded in the idea of the infinite worth of all human beings, who, like ourselves, should not be manipulated or treated as 'useful things'. As a benchmark for judging the sort of values that should be promoted in our classrooms, this principle has considerable value.

ACTIVITY 39: TREATING PEOPLE AS A MEANS TO AN END, OR AS AN END IN THEMSELVES

Try to think of an example of someone 'treating another human being as a means to an end', and of someone in the same situation choosing to treat the other as an end in him or herself.

Beneficence refers to an active goodness or good will.



You will need 5 minutes for this activity.

Ubuntu

Recognizing other human beings as indispensable to our own humanity (criterion 5) fits well with Kant's principle of treating others as ends in themselves. It also echoes a central idea in African philosophy, which is captured in the isiXhosa expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* – a person is a person through other persons. This idea, which is often reduced to the concept of 'ubuntu', is mentioned in one of the important learning outcomes in the Life Orientation learning area. As a central principle shaping much of African life, in South Africa and other parts of the continent, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* merits a closer examination.

Similar to Kant's principle of treating human beings as ends in themselves, ubuntu is based on the idea of the infinite value of other persons. Also similar to Kant's principle, ubuntu rejects relationships between persons that in effect reduce one of the parties to the status of a 'thing' to be used. If the principle of ubuntu is at work in a community, such relationships are unnecessary and absurd because sharing and community solidarity make available to us most of the things we need without having to 'use' other people.

In other ways, however, ubuntu is founded on very different views from the European philosophical traditions underlying Kant's principles. In the African view, according to Menkiti (1979: 158), it is the community that defines the person as person, rather than the individual mind or personality. The human self is seen, not as being 'inside' a person so much as existing in the person's relationships with the natural and social environment.

The European idea of a sharp distinction between the 'outside' world and the individual self that controls and changes aspects of that world, is foreign to African traditional thought according to South African philosopher Augustine Shutte (1995: 47). The personality is not as completely distinct from the world or the community as it is in European thought and culture, and it is relationships with other persons that are the most crucial in making the self what it is. Therefore it is a connectedness with the community's sustaining power, rather than a rational principle, that underlies the African rejection of a relationship that views others as a means to an end, or as 'things' that we can use.

The community is seen, not just as a collection of individuals in a certain place,

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A person is a person
through other persons.
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The overall aim is to sustain the community by sustaining the individual.

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but as something that is there before the individual, with a life of its own, that sustains the individual, who would be nothing without it. Community solidarity therefore tends to be seen as more important than the needs and autonomy of the individual, and great attention is attached to achieving consensus and reconciliation in making community decisions and resolving problems that involve individuals (ibid: 50).

Discussion is therefore seen as a central feature of community life (and an ‘art’ in some cultures), and a group of decision-makers may discuss a problem for hours, looking at it from all sides, until a unanimous agreement is reached. The overall aim is not to crush individuality (unless it seriously challenges the long-term solidarity of the group), but rather to sustain the community by sustaining the individual. So a community may punish an erring individual in its own way, but club together to pay the fine that this person has been sentenced to by an official court – at least partly in order to prevent dishonour to the community.

It should be noted that this account describes a traditional ideal, one that is often transgressed by individuals, and one that may have lost much of its force in modern society. Yet it is still a principle that characterizes much that is vital in rural and township life in Africa. As Augustine Shutte argues, there are insights in the ubuntu principle and way of life that offer an alternative to the materialistic and self-centred trends in Western consumer culture today.

Freedom and responsibility

Making use of our freedom of choice and action and taking responsibility for our actions (criterion 6) is a privilege we enjoy in the realm of organized society. It is democracy that provides us with the greatest scope for human freedom, as we saw in Section Four. But we also saw that democratic freedom does not mean freedom from all restraint. Democratic freedom is based on rules, without which there would be no possible social organization.

Therefore we are not talking here of freedom without responsibility. We mean that learners should be given the necessary freedom to develop as human beings, but be required to take responsibility for their actions and the consequences of those actions – and not blame others, or circumstances, for what **they** have chosen.

Responsibility, as we saw in Section Three, is an internal moral commitment to do the right thing, and it goes deeper than formal accountability. It is linked to notions of community and respect for others’ dignity as persons, and to Kant’s idea of linking our actions to universal moral laws. If two students choose to have a loud conversation across the classroom while the teacher is trying to explain a difficult concept to the class, they are not taking responsibility for the consequences of their noise-making for the other learners, nor are they showing respect for them (or the teacher) as fellow human beings with a need to learn (or teach).

Over the course of this section we deepened our understanding of the social dimensions of morality. We saw that many of our values are rooted in our respective cultures, rather than being based on some absolute rational standard. But we also saw that there are moral values common to all societies.

For those of us who are more inclined to see actions as either right or wrong, one of the most useful guidelines in making moral choices is to always act in ways that we would like others to act. This turns out to be an expression of what is central in human social existence: we can choose rationally to do or not to do, and our choices always affect others, as their choices affect us. Hence the further principle derived from this rule: always treat other human beings as ends in themselves, never only as a means to be 'used' for some purpose.

For those who are inclined to consider particular circumstances and weigh up the consequences of their actions, a useful guideline is to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number. Here too, the sense of being part of a network of social relationships is very strong.

We have briefly explored the African notion of ubuntu as a moral pattern for social living. This requires a certain humility in the light of our debt to society for our very personhood, and the importance of respecting the common life force that expresses itself in all of us. Finally, we have touched on the moral values that are built into the democratic social network, and the need for teachers to connect with and participate in the life and moral concerns of the broader community.

This brings us to the end of our exploration of the role of the teacher in developing sound values and attitudes in learners. In the final section of this module, we will examine the notion of 'extended professionalism', which we raised at the end of Section Three.

Key learning points

1. Nothing in teaching is ever free of value questions or social dimensions. Nothing in teaching is ever concerned purely with facts, and nothing in teaching is ever entirely an individual concern.
2. We can attach two rather different types of value to human choices and actions:
 - some values (professional or educational) relate to competence or quality in some field of human activity; and
 - other values (moral values) enable us to judge whether an action is 'good' or 'bad' in itself, whatever the field of human activity.
3. Values not only provide the criteria by which we evaluate or judge human choice and action, they also provide us with much of the motivation and purpose that drive human action.
4. The teacher's role in influencing learners' values is twofold. There is teaching itself: for teachers to feel confident in this area, they will need to have a good understanding of values themselves. Then there is the teacher's active role in modelling a principled approach to life, and making morally justifiable decisions in the classroom.
5. Many people would question the place of values (especially moral values) in education. This is partly because of its association in the past with imposing certain values on learners. Another reason is that many people hold the view that all values are merely relative.
 - Some believe that values are really nothing more than expressions of what

individual people think or feel. This leads them to conclude that it is wrong for teachers to impose particular values on learners.

- Another form of moral relativism is called *cultural relativism*. Cultural diversity gives rise to the idea that what we think of as 'right' or 'wrong' is simply relative to culture. In other words, actions are not right or wrong in themselves; if they 'work' within a cultural belief system of values and practices, they are beyond criticism. Many think this a good reason not to teach moral values – they may offend learners whose cultural beliefs involve different moral codes.
6. However, for teachers, avoiding the topic of moral values and attempting to remain neutral in the classroom is both undesirable and, in the end, impossible.
 7. Yet research suggests that conventional moral instruction does not work. Moral instruction depends for its success on a strong authority that is prepared to back teaching with strong sanctions. It also depends heavily on learners submitting themselves to the teachers' social control, rather than on their wrestling with moral problems themselves and taking on the moral values as their own.
 8. Rather than attempting neutrality, it is more important to establish a climate in your classroom that encourages learners to discuss values and other ideas freely, including disagreeing with ideas you put forward. Teachers should model, not so much 'good behaviour', as the importance of values in their own lives.
 9. Teachers daily face choices that involve moral values in practice, some of which may have serious consequences. The right choice and the good choice might not always be the same thing. A teacher may feel that doing the 'right' thing is not always the best thing to do.
 10. The difference between the right and the good (when they do not correspond) has given rise to two different approaches to making moral decisions:
 - emphasizing what is 'right', or acting strictly according to an *absolute moral principle* (a good example is the principle that we should always act in such a way that our actions could be made the basis for a universal rule applicable to all human beings); and
 - emphasizing what is good, or focusing on the best likely *consequences*.
 11. It seems that neither the absolutist nor the 'consequences' approach is sufficient – each view to some extent provides what the other view lacks. Teachers should therefore be wary of treating either of these approaches as the only approach when making moral decisions.
 12. However, two principles are important if both of these approaches are to be of any use. These principles should form part of the values 'climate' in the classroom referred to in point 9 above:
 - the insistence on *using our reason*, and backing our actions with good reasons; and
 - the insistence on *impartiality* – no individual or group should consider itself as having superior rights to favoured treatment.
 13. *Values clarification* and *stimulating moral development* are two ways to help learners develop sound values.
 14. We suggest some principles to help you judge what values might be sound ones to encourage in your teaching. These include:
 - treating others as ends in themselves;
 - realizing that there can be no democratic freedom without responsibility; and
 - recognizing other human beings as indispensable to our own humanity (ubuntu).

Tutor-marked assignment 4

Discuss the question: is it acceptable for teachers to smoke?

- **Weigh up this apparently simple question from all sides.**
- **Think critically. Don't be content with simple 'common-sense' statements like, 'It's all right in the staffroom' or 'One can't tell learners not to smoke and then smoke oneself.'**
- **Give reasons for the points in your argument.**
- **Examine the question in the light of the key concepts we have introduced in this section – subjectivism, cultural relativism, absolutism, and consequentialism. If you like, you can write this in the form of a dialogue along the lines of the Artis Secondary or Mountain View Primary dialogues.**
- **Be impartial, especially if you have strong preferences for, or against, smoking.**

