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Kohlberg: Implications for High School Programs

By Robert R. Newton

The recent interest in the moral development theory of Lawrence Kohlberg has attracted widespread attention among educators in both public and religiously oriented schools. Many schoolmen see Kohlberg as "the answer" to the confusion that has long dominated their thinking about moral education. His developmental theory seems to provide a comprehensive approach which permits diagnosis of an individual's level of moral maturity and simultaneously supplies both a blueprint and method for further moral development. The popularization of the Kohlberg theory has produced a flurry of articles, conferences, teaching strategies and learning materials.

Though Kohlberg's theory and its popularization has had a positive effect on moral education, I also think that the almost desperate desire of educators for a systematic approach to moral development has prompted many to commit themselves to the theory, almost without reservation, and without either examining the underlying principles of its method or its relationship to the rest of the curriculum. My own view is that Kohlberg has raised issues which take us beyond the narrow task of adding a moral development class to the existing curriculum and which have important ramifications for the whole educational program. What follows is an attempt to explicate several of these more general implications of the Kohlberg theory of moral development.

Kohlberg's Contribution: Application of General Learning Principles

Kohlberg's theory is founded on ideas which are not significantly new nor totally unfamiliar to most teachers; rather his approach is fundamentally the application of more general learning principles to the area of moral...
growth. Out of the concept of readiness for learning he constructed a theoretical and practical framework which he proposed as the basis for both understanding and promoting moral development.

Starting with the cognitive-developmental theory of Dewey and continuing the work of Piaget, Kohlberg, through longitudinal and cross-cultural studies, redefined and validated the Dewey-Piaget levels and stages of moral development. Over a period of 20 years of exploration, he discovered that 1) an individual is consistent in his moral reasoning, i.e., he makes moral decisions with the boundaries of the moral stage at which he is located, 2) the stages are invariant, i.e., movement is always forward and persons never skip stages, and 3) a higher stage incorporates the thinking of the stages below it.

In his research Kohlberg used the problem-solving method both to identify a person's level of moral development and to stimulate further growth. Through the use of moral dilemmas — situations where the right or wrong moral decision is not apparent — Kohlberg was able to lead his subjects directly into the realm of moral reasoning. In the process of seeking an adequate solution in the dilemma, the learner not only explicitated his current level of moral reasoning but frequently was also exposed to a higher level of reasoning as possibly a more adequate solution to the dilemma. Through the disequilibrium created by the moral problem and exposure to a higher level of moral reasoning, Kohlberg found that a person could move towards a more adequate and just framework for solving future dilemmas.

Though Kohlberg did not originate these two principles — readiness and problem-solving — he did make a significant contribution 1) by applying them systematically to the process of moral development, and 2) by performing research which enabled him to describe and demonstrate both the content of the different stages and the general principles which govern passage from one stage to another. Through his work Kohlberg redirected attention to fundamental principles and provided an explicit framework in which moral educators could begin to take more seriously the importance of readiness and problem-solving in moral development.

Teaching Students “How To Think”: Moral Problem-Solving

Kohlberg’s moral dilemma method is an interesting approach to what should be the primary academic goal of formal education — teaching students “how to think.” In the context of a simulated situation, a student is
expected to comprehend the facts of a dilemma, analyze the important 
issues, apply past learning to the problem, generate alternative courses of 
action, evaluate the correctness or suitability of these alternatives, and 
decide on the best solution to the problem.

The inner structure of the dilemma method used by Kohlberg in the 
development of moral reasoning parallels the paradigm of cognitive skills 
described by Benjamin Bloom in his *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: 
Cognitive Domain*.\(^1\) Bloom’s model suggests six categories of cognitive ob-
jectives, beginning with the lower levels and proceeding to the higher levels 
of intellectual functioning.

**LOWER:**
- Knowledge — recalling information from memory
- Comprehension — demonstrating understanding

**HIGHER:**
- Analysis — breaking a problem into its components
- Applications — using principles or concepts learned in one context 
  in a novel situation
- Evaluation — making judgments on the appropriateness of a solu-
  tion on the basis of external criteria or internal 
evidence
- Synthesis — combining known elements into new arrangements

In Bloom’s model students are expected to know and comprehend the facts 
of a problem, to analyze the situation to determine the basic issues, to apply 
previous knowledge and learning to the problem, to evaluate alternatives in 
the light of both their consistency with general principles and their effects, 
and to devise a solution which best meets the needs of the situation.

The Kohlberg methodology seems consistent both with the overall goal 
of the educational program—teaching students the cognitive skills or “how 
to think.” It is a method which has application in every high school subject. 
For example, in English or physics or mathematics, students are expected 
to develop skill in recall and comprehension of the essential facts and con-
cepts, and then to analyze, apply, evaluate and synthesize. What Kohlberg 
is suggesting by his moral dilemma approach is the explicit application of 
the intrinsic structure of cognitive functioning to the process of moral devel-
oment.

\(^{1}\) B. S. Bloom, ed., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational 
Awareness of the similarity between the dilemma approach and the general outline of cognitive development is helpful inasmuch as it allows a teacher to understand that Kohlberg is proposing a process and methodology which should be more familiar than foreign to the teacher’s previous experience and practice. It also allows a teacher to integrate the Kohlberg approach to moral reasoning into what should already be the overall educational goals of any academic program.

The similarity of the Kohlberg dilemma-solving method to the problem-solving approach in general also suggests a way in which teachers other than those involved in religion or moral development classes might focus attention on moral issues in their disciplines. If the moral dilemma approach which Kohlberg has found so effective is similar to the cognitive development paradigm they are currently using in their subject, then the English or social studies or science teacher should be less hesitant to apply the same methodology to moral dilemmas that might arise naturally out of the subject matter they consider. Such a process would have the added advantages of helping the student to see the moral dimensions of activity in every sphere of human endeavor (rather than just in religion or moral development class). It might also give a greater sense of mission to teachers of “secular” subjects who are searching for ways to contribute to the more value-oriented goals of the school.

**Emphasis on Student Activity and Discovery**

Kohlberg’s moral dilemma method promotes student involvement and activity. Teachers do not merely enunciate a set of moral principles and expect the student to understand and accept them. Rather teachers practice restraint and encourage students to come to their own conclusions. Teachers present the dilemma and correctly facilitate student involvement; but they themselves stay in the background, realizing that what the students discover for themselves will produce far more profound and lasting learning than could be effected by a polished teacher explanation of the same matter. Though a dilemma is a simulation rather than an actual situation, it is nevertheless a form of “learning by doing” and students experience learning in an involved, personal way. This experiential approach makes more prob-

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able the student's internalization or personal appropriation of what he/she discovers in the learning experience.

Growth Through Emergence

Adolescence involves a tension between dependence and independence; on the one hand, reliance on supportive relationships and a reaffirming environment; on the other hand, a striving to go beyond this reliance to greater independence and self-affirmation. Growth during this period is not promoted by destroying the organized structure which gives direction to the adolescent's personality. Rather the ideal process of growth is one which does not threaten the structure already achieved but which leads or challenges the person to go beyond what has already been firmly established. Within a supportive structure, the adolescent should be given room for the responsible exercise of freedom.

Kohlberg's dilemma method seems ideally suited to promote adolescent growth. He sees the individual's moral orientation as an organized cognitive structure. The moral dilemma creates disequilibrium by confronting a person with a complicated moral situation and by appealing to reasons slightly above the individual's present level. Solving moral dilemmas stimulates personal reaction, whether it be empathy, disagreement, confusion, etc. Within the adolescent's already established moral framework, the search for a more adequate moral response to the dilemma turns this confusion and disturbance into growth. It leaves intact the organized moral worldview which the adolescent has developed over time and with which he/she is at ease while simultaneously creating the tension out of which growth can emerge. It is growth through emergence, an integration of what is new or newly discovered into what is already there and structured. The person's moral direction is modified rather than replaced.

The Primary Outcome: Skill In How To Grow Morally

It is generally perceived that most high school students function on the conventional level of morality, i.e., on the basis of what is expected of them or out of respect for the social order in which they find themselves. At the same time, though it seems clear that someone can be a good person at any level (assuming that he/she chooses what he/she understands as right), nevertheless it also seems apparent that students should be encouraged to develop to the stage where they operate on the basis of principles which they
have freely accepted as norms for their behavior (post-conventional). This presents high school educators with a problem: though they wish to encourage and develop students to the post-conventional level of moral reasoning, the majority of students will not be capable of understanding or functioning on this level during their high school years. Many students will not continue their education in a formal setting and many others will attend colleges where they are not exposed to explicit opportunities or encouragement to moral development.

The solution to this problem in the area of moral development is similar to the solution that might be offered in other disciplines or areas. Given the tremendous expansion of knowledge and the uncertainty of an emerging technological society, students in today's world must be prepared to confront and solve problems which at the moment are either totally unknown or only dimly perceived. As a result, the attention of today's student must be focused more on the ability to solve problems than to master solutions to problems which have been confronted in the past. Though one might object that this has always been the goal of education and the basis of the forward movement of civilization, it could be argued that it is even more essential today since progress (or at least movement) is occurring at such an accelerated pace.

Applying this general solution to moral education, the aim shifts from developing knowledge of how others have solved moral questions to training students in the process of solving dilemmas as they meet them. The ultimate goal becomes to equip learners with an internalized method which will permit them to continue to grow. A student who has been exposed over a period of four years to the experience of moral problem-solving seems much more able to face the moral challenges of young adulthood and later life than a person whose education has provided him with a clearly articulated but perhaps less flexible worldview.

Consequently, the Kohlberg approach meets quite well the problem of rapid change mentioned above. Though it suggests that students will probably not develop to the level of principled moral reasoning in their high school years, it does propose a method by which students can continue their growth in later life. By providing them with an internalized method for future growth, the dilemma-solving approach may actually be contributing much more to the growth of the individual than what is actually accomplished during the high school years.
Building an Environment

Kohlberg emphasizes the importance of the environment in moral development. For the adolescent the moral environment must be consistent with the level of moral development and provide a context in which the student feels both secure and challenged. Since most high school students are functioning on the conventional level of moral reasoning, school policies and rules which emphasize the importance of a just social order seem most appropriate. At the same time, to the extent possible, students should be encouraged to move towards an understanding and personal acceptance of the norms of the school community rather than merely to conform to an order which has been externally imposed. Students in the upper years should be encouraged to exercise increasing responsibility over their own actions and should be given carefully measured opportunities to act on the basis of voluntary rather than enforced acceptance of the norms of the school organization. Thus the context or environment of a secondary school should attempt to 1) diminish pre-conventional moral reasoning (punishment-reward), 2) generally embody and promote conventional moral thinking (good order), and 3) provide opportunities for students to respond to and function on the level of principled reasoning. More careful description of the mechanisms, policies and procedures to create such an environment are obviously necessary.

A Framework for Understanding

The Kohlberg model provides the basis for understanding why many past moral development efforts have produced disappointing results. In most cases the lack of impact had less to do with the value of the content or the skill of the presenter than with a lack of understanding or application of the principle of readiness. Moral educators, whether in schools or churches, have regularly neglected to match the level of the material to the level of understanding of the students; rather they have continued to repeat the highest level motivation in the hope that students would eventually catch up to it. Efforts at adaptation have been haphazard rather than grounded in evolving theory and research. Teachers who have attempted to reach students "where they are" have done so on the basis of an intuitive grasp of the level at which their students were able to function. What Kohlberg has done is to research and explicitate for educators in general what a few of the best teachers have always known. In the process he has also supplied them with
a conceptual framework to interpret current strategies and practices in moral development and to evaluate new materials or techniques.

The Kohlberg approach also suggests a way to understand current conflicts within churches and communities concerning moral and religious training, and, more specifically, the tension that exists between stress on communicating traditional morality and an emphasis on developing a capacity for continued growth. The problem-solving methodology is one which encourages people to think for themselves and ultimately to base their moral activity on principles which they freely and personally accept. Though this obviously does not exclude (and many would argue that it definitely promotes) mature acceptance of societal standards or church morality, it does involve a more risky approach. Many hold that it is better to emphasize the necessity of the individual’s acceptance of societal authority and the moral guidance and norms it offers for individual activity. They argue that society or the churches seem better able to solve moral problems and offer guidance; the individual should be responsive to this guidance on the basis of his incorporation within and adherence to societal or religious communities. Others who encourage development along the moral continuum developed by Kohlberg are clearly suggesting that a more autonomous adherence to religious or community values is preferable, and, in the long run, worth the risk (and possible loss) that may occur.

**Implications for Religious Education**

The purpose of this essay has been to explore some of the broader educational applications and implications of the Kohlberg approach to moral development. The focus has not been on Kohlberg as much as certain underlying principles on which he has based his work and their importance both for the general direction of the curriculum and other subject areas.

The implications for religious education itself are perhaps obvious. Anyone planning a religious education program should first make a specific effort to determine the level of readiness of his students. Whether or not one uses a dilemma-solving method, the techniques employed should be aimed at maximum student activity and involvement if personal change is expected and hoped for. The religious educator should be aware that growth should take place through emergence and through a conscious attempt to challenge the student to think and discover within the context of his already established framework of values and beliefs. Whatever the content, the
teacher should always aim at developing in the student the capacity and skill to learn more in the area, to be able to go beyond the content communicated within the course to further learning once the course has concluded. In religious growth the environment or context in which learning takes place and the perceptions and feelings it communicates will be as important as the actual content of the course itself. The medium should reflect the message.

Kohlberg's work has done what should be expected from any theory; it has provided both the basis on which to comprehend more fully our current situation as well as a framework in which we can begin to devise solutions to recurring or emerging problems. Both from its theoretical aspects and its practical applications, the Kohlberg theory offers a stimulating challenge to our thinking and many insights which can be blended into the continually evolving direction of our educational programs.