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Exploring the Link between Moral Reasoning and Behavioral Action among Young Children in Zimbabwean

ABSTRACT: This study explored the link between moral reasoning and behavioral action among young Zimbabwean children aged between 9 and 13 years (grade 3 – grade 7). The ultimate aim of the study was to see if sound moral reasoning leads to sound behavioral action. Such a study takes lofty significance given moral ills, such as child sexual abuse currently pervading and disintegrating the Zimbabwean society. The survey research design was used. Participants, who completed a questionnaire on moral reasoning and behavioral action, were 120 at grade 3 – grade 7 pupils randomly selected from one school in one of Harare’s high density suburbs. The results of this study showed that for the majority of the pupils (83.3%), moral reasoning was not linked to behavioral action. While the majority (90%) reported that it was strong to talk during the teacher’s absence, most of the pupils (83.3%) said that they would not tell the teacher the truth, arguing that it was wrong to betray fellow pupils. More 12-13 years old (20.8%) than 9-11 years old (9.7%) felt it is necessary to tell the teacher the truth. The study helps those individuals and institutions dealing with children to be cautious about children’s testimonies since some of them lie. Furthermore, the results of this study task the society with the responsibility of ensuring that high moral values such as justice, fairness, truthfulness, trustworthiness, and so on are not only understood by children, but are also practiced by children if society is to remain habitable.

KEY WORDS: Moral, children, teacher, behavioral, reasoning, justice, fairness, truthfulness, trustworthiness, action, and Zimbabwean society.

INTRODUCTION

The study investigated the link between moral reasoning and behavioral action among 9-13 years old, randomly selected from a school in one of Harare’s (Zimbabwe) high density suburbs. The ultimate aim of the study was to see if sound moral reasoning leads to sound behavioral action. Such a study takes lofty significance given moral ills, such as child sexual abuse currently pervading and disintegrating the Zimbabwean society.

While such a study not necessarily be an antidote to the societal ills presently being experienced in Zimbabwe and in other countries, it may presumably throw some light

on issues such as, for example, why significant people in society such as teachers, parents, and pastors are sometimes accused of physically and sexually molesting children. To the present writers, the incongruence between what some individuals are supposed to stand for and what those individuals do in practice should be real cause for concern that warrants investigation.

Furthermore, apart from the fact that, to the writers’ knowledge, no similar study has been conducted in Zimbabwe; this study is also critical in that, focusing on young children as it does, it helps the society to think about the best ways of bringing up children. For T.D. Mushoriwa (2014), what society must

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remember is that a crab will find it extremely difficult to teach its young ones to walk straight because itself cannot walk straight.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study premised on L. Kohlberg's work on moral development and reasoning. L. Kohlberg (1969 and 1973) demonstrated an ordered acquisition of moral reasoning from early stages characterised by concern about rewards and punishments (stages 1 & 2) to the highest stages (5 & 6) characterised by the use of abstract principles. These abstract principles are used independently of societal rules to determine the most appropriate course of action in problematic situations (*cf* Pasupathi & Standinger, 2001; and Mikhail, 2010).

Several studies have shown that moral reasoning as a *function of cognitive skills* (Kohlberg, 1973; Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; Walker, 1989; and Armon & Dawson, 1997); *educational level* (Armon, 1984; Walker, 1986; Colby & Kohlberg, 1987; and Markoulis, 1989); and *age* (Armon & Dawson, 1997; and Pasupathi & Standinger, 2001). Given this argument, the present study assumed that older pupils (11-13 years old) who are in grades 6 and 7 were more likely to demonstrate higher moral reasoning than younger pupils (9-11 years old).

Generally, theories of morality suggest that a person with high moral reasoning should engage in acceptable moral actions. This is so because, according to M. Pasupathi & U.M. Standinger (2001), moral reasoning, which indicates which course of action is moral in problematic situations, should be by definition a necessary and sufficient condition for acceptable actions. Thus, in principle, moral reasoning should be a behavioral guideline (Greene *et al.*, 2009).

However, in practice, moral reasoning does not seem a sufficient condition for choosing and engaging in acceptable moral actions as demonstrated by a number of people who fail to be honest, principled, sincere, loyal, or trustworthy in situations with competing goals. People may know the right thing, but they go on to do the wrong thing. This suggests

that moral reasoning is perhaps not linked to behavioral action.

According to researches as those by M. Nisan & L. Kohlberg (1982) and L.J. Walker (1986), a number of people fail to attain L. Kohlberg's highest moral reasoning stage as a result of, among other things, one's environmental experiences and level of education. If these research results are accepted, it may mean that people with poor/wrong environmental experiences and those with little or no education often make wrong choices due to their failure to attain L. Kohlberg's principled moral reasoning. However, what is baffling is that even people with "appropriate" environmental experiences and high educational qualifications sometimes make wrong moral choices (Paxton & Greene, 2010).

For P.B. Baltes, J. Smith & U.M. Standinger (1992 and 2000), by definition, one's moral reasoning capabilities should dictate and direct one's social and moral responsibilities, obligations, and actions towards oneself, others, and society at large not for now, but also for the future. Following this logic, moral reasoning should therefore be an important definer of behavioral action yet; in some cases this is not what obtains, causing increasing conceptual difficulty regarding the link between moral reasoning and behavioral action. It is against this backdrop that the present study set out to explore the link between moral reasoning and behavioral action to see if they are in any way related.

METHOD

The present study was premised on the work of the researchers in this field such as L. Kohlberg (1969 and 1973), where subjects were presented with a moral dilemma as a way of assessing their level of moral reasoning. To this effect, the present research owes much to the pilot studies in this field, in terms of both methodological procedures and instrumentation.

The survey research design was employed in this study. Surveys have the advantage of allowing the use of relatively large sample as was the case in this study (N = 120). For D.B. Van Dalen (1979), surveys also have

Table 1:
Pupils' Responses to be Questionnaire Items by Age and Grade (N = 120)

ITEM	RESPONSES					
	9 – 11 Yrs Old (G 3-5) N = 72		12-13 Yrs Old (G 6-7) N = 48		Total N = 120	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1. Pupils who talked during the teacher's absence did a wrong thing.	67 (93.1%)	5 (6.9%)	41 (85%)	7 (15%)	108 (90%)	12 (10%)
	N = 72		N = 48		N = 120	
2. (a) I will tell the teacher that some talked, but I will not reveal their names.	22 (30.6%)		8 (16.7%)		30 (25%)	
(b) I will tell her that nobody talked.	40 (55.5%)		30 (62.5%)		70 (58.3%)	
(c) I will tell her that some talked and I will reveal their names.	7 (9.7%)		10 (20.8%)		17 (14.2%)	
(d) I am not sure of what I will tell he teacher.	3 (4.2%)		0 (0%)		3 (2.5%)	
Total	72 (100%)		48 (100%)		120 (100%)	

the advantage of allowing the collection of detailed descriptions of phenomena and trends in order to see and assess how they can be improved. To this end, it was the intention of the current study to explore the extent to which moral reasoning relates to behavioral action with the ultimate aim of improving this relationship for the benefit of society.

The study sample comprised 120 pupils (9-13 years old) randomly selected from one school in one of Harare's high density suburbs. These pupils, randomly drawn from grade 3 to grade 7 (24 from each grade) were placed into two groups: middle junior (grade 3-5) and upper junior (grade 6-7) in order to see if age and level of education would influence one's moral reasoning and choice of action.

A questionnaire based on a moral dilemma originated by D. Brugman *et al.* (2003) was the instrument used to assess how the pupils' level of moral reasoning was linked to their choices of action. A questionnaire instead of the L. Kohlberg type interview procedure was preferred in order to reduce the influence of the investigators on the subjects' responses. The questionnaire was first pre-tested in a pilot study and after the pilot-testing and adaptation, it was administered to the target sample (N = 120). The questionnaire basically asked the subjects to respond to a story that contained a moral dilemma as shown below. Through the subjects' responses, the investigators were

able to identify the subjects' level of moral reasoning and how it related to their choices of action.

The Story:

A teacher known for her strictness had to go out from the classroom leaving her pupils writing a test. She asked the class-monitor, who was loved by both the teacher and the pupils, to ensure that his classmates did not talk. During the teacher's absence, some of the pupils talked.

Tasks:

1. Pupils who talked during the teacher's absence did a wrong thing. Yes/No.

Give a reason for your answer:

.....

.....

.....

2. If you were the class monitor, what would you tell the teacher on her return?

- (a) That some pupils talked, but I will not reveal their names.
- (b) That nobody talked.
- (c) That some pupils talked and I will reveal their names.
- (d) Not sure of what I will tell the teacher.

Give a reason for your answer:

.....

.....

.....

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Collected data were key-punched for analysis and the results are shown in table 1.

Table 1 and figure 1 indicate that more 9-11 years old (93.1%) than 12-13 years old (85%) felt that it was wrong to talk during the teachers' absence, especially when writing a test. Though the difference between 9-11 years old and the 12-13 years old was marginal (figure 2 and figure 4), the greater percentage among the 9-11 years old could be a result of the fact that, according to L. Kohlberg (1969), young children tend to take rules as divine-given and as such they should not be broken.

To this extent, a very significant percentage (93.1%) of the 9-11 years old felt that it was wrong to talk during the teacher's absence. Most of them wrote that nobody is allowed to talk in a test. In this sense, therefore, results established by early researchers in this field such as those by L. Kohlberg (1969 and 1973) and M. Nisan & L. Kohlberg (1982) hold up well in this study.

From table 1, the results of this study also show that overall, 86.1% of the 9-11 years old would not tell the teacher the truth; while 79.2% of the 12-13 years old felt the same. Thus, in keeping with findings from previous research, for example L. Kohlberg (1973), these results indicate moral thinking as representing qualitative shifts in modes of moral reasoning. Older pupils (20.8%) felt it necessary to tell the truth than the 9-11 years old (9.7%).

From figure 4, some of the 12-13 years old wrote that telling the truth was necessary not only for maintaining the trust by both the teacher and other pupils, but also for showing other pupils that it is morally wrong to lie. These results suggest that some children, just like some adults, lie (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2007).

Figure 3 shows that 58% of the students will not tell the truth as compared to 14% who will say exactly what had happened. An in-depth

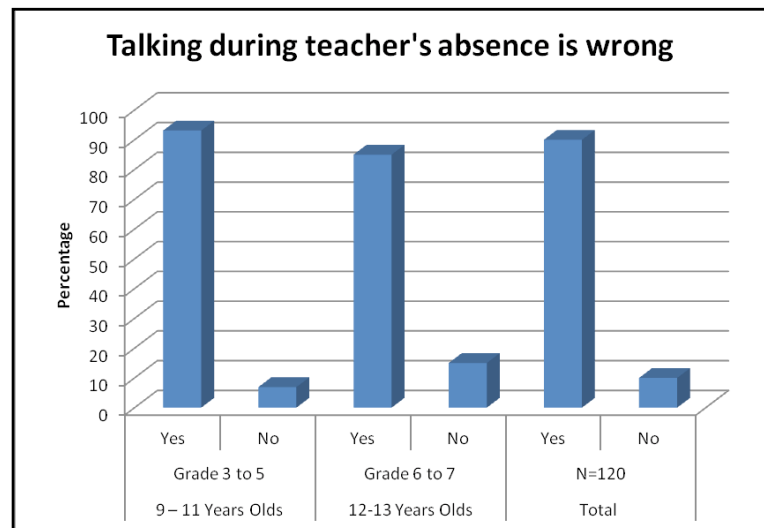


Figure 1:
Pupils' View of Talking in Class during the Teacher's Absence

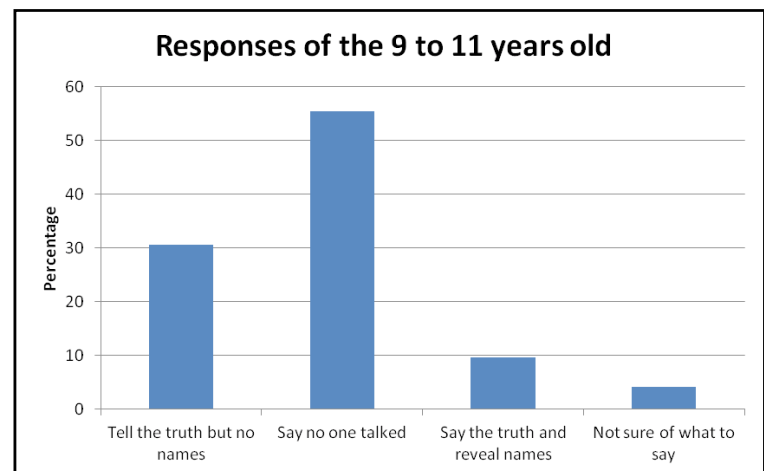


Figure 2:
Responses of the 9 to 11 Years Old

analysis of the results (table 1) indicates that, taken together, 90% of the pupils in this study acknowledge a wrong (talking in a test during the teacher's absence) but what is disturbing and indeed chilling is the fact that in item 2, which required the respondents to indicate what they would say to the teacher on her return, only 14.2% indicated that they would tell the teacher that some pupils talked and would reveal their names. While 25% said that they would tell the teacher that some pupils talked but without revealing their names, 2.5% were undecided and as high as 58.3% felt that they would simply tell the teacher that nobody talked.

The above results suggest that in many people, there is virtually no link between moral reasoning and action. Ninety percent of the pupils said that it was wrong to talk; yet, an appallingly high percentage of the same pupils (83.3%) deliberately chose not to tell the teacher the truth. This supports N. Paharia *et al.* (2009)'s suggestion that while people may know what is morally right wrong, when it comes to action, as shown by the reasons given by the pupils, considerations such as protecting one's friend, oneself, one's interests, and so on tend to take priority. Some of the pupils wrote that since the teacher is reported to be strict, telling her the truth would put the pupils into trouble. Others even argued that it was morally wrong to betray a friend.

To the present writers, results of this study can be legitimately extrapolated to the wider society. If this is accepted, then these results perhaps explain why, for example, many people, including highly placed people such as teachers, parents, and pastors, are involved in acts of rape or child abuse. Morally, they know what is right but when it comes to action, they make the wrong choice, especially if one does not give a second thought to intended action (Bucciarelli, Khemlani & Johnson-Laird, 2008).

For A. Colby *et al.* (1983), people should realise that the most critical features for any problem situation tend to be removed from moral considerations. If this be true, then it is a mistake to over-trust anybody for they may make wrong choices in their actions. In fact, studies such as those by J.R. Rest (1986) and A. Colby & W. Damon (1992) have demonstrated that in temptation situations, many people fail to apply acquired moral principles unless they have strong person qualities such as a strong sense of justice and fairness.

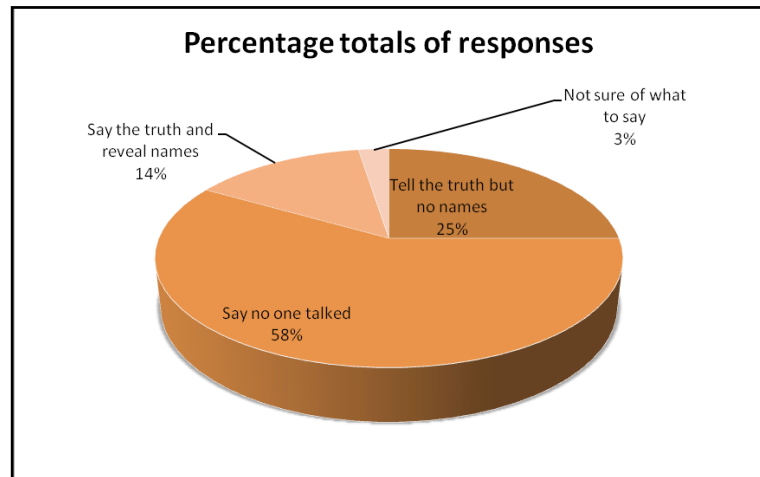


Figure 3:
Responses in Total Percentage

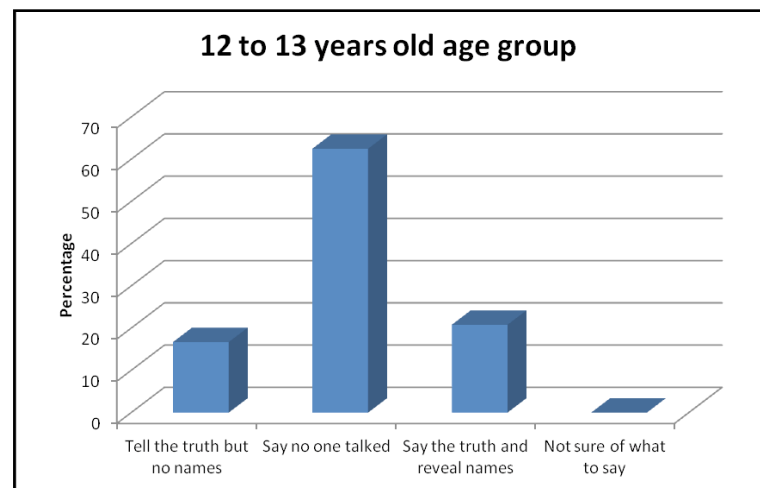


Figure 4:
Responses from the 12 to 13 Years Age Group

The results reported above seem to be inconsistent with notions of moral reasoning as cognition about more values, ethics, and situations in which individual interests and desires are sacrificed for collective good (Rest, 1983 and 1986; and Pasupathi & Standinger, 2001). This means that moral reasoning should result in desirable behaviour patterns, not in merely judging issues and events as good and bad, but also in choosing a course of action that respects human dignity (Dolph & Lycan, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The results of this study showed that for the majority of pupils (83.3%), moral reasoning

was not linked to behavioral action. Although there is some conceptual overlap between moral reasoning and behavioral action, to many people, moral reasoning does not necessarily invoke feelings of fairness and justice, hence they may engage in immoral actions. While the majority (90%) reported that it was wrong to talk, many of the pupils (83.3%), especially the 9-11 years old indicated that they would not tell the teacher the truth.

By extension, the results of this study also suggest that children lie, hence, individuals and institutions such as schools and courts that deal with children, should take and use children's testimonies with caution. Furthermore, the results of this study task the society with the responsibility of ensuring that high moral values such as justice, fairness, truthfulness, trustworthiness, and so on are not only understood by children, but are also practiced by children if society is to remain habitable.

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