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CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACHES TO MORAL EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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Constructivist approaches to early childhood education focus on developmentally appropriate practices for children from birth to eight years of age (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). The goal of constructivist education is to promote children's development in all areas of the curriculum (science, mathematics, language and literacy, social studies, and the arts) and in all developmental domains (intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral) (DeVries, Zan, Hildebrandt, Edmiaston, & Sales, 2002; Fosnot, 2005).

The term “constructivist,” as it will be used in this chapter, comes from Piaget’s theory of development. According to Piaget, children construct their knowledge and intelligence through interactions with their physical and social worlds (Kamii & Ewing, 1996; Piaget, 1970). Constructivist education is deeply rooted in the progressive education movement and draws inspiration from John Dewey (1909, 1913/1975, 1916, 1938) as well as almost a century of action research in the classroom (DeVries, 2002; Goffin & Wilson, 2001; Mayhew & Edwards, 1936; Read, 1966; Tanner, 1997; Weber, 1984).

In their book, Moral Classrooms, Moral Children: Creating a Constructivist Atmosphere in Early Education, DeVries and Zan (2012) state that the first principle of constructivist education is to create a sociomoral atmosphere where mutual respect is continually practiced. “Sociomoral atmosphere” refers to the entire network of interpersonal relations in the classroom—child–child relationships, adult–child relationships, and adult–adult relationships observable by children.

The main goal of constructivist education is for children to become autonomous, lifelong learners. Autonomous people do not act through blind obedience. Their thoughts and actions are guided by reason, conviction, and commitment. A major premise of constructivist education is that children cannot become autonomous intellectually or morally in authoritarian relationships with adults. According to Piaget (1932/1965):

If he [the child] is intellectually passive, he will not know how to be free ethically. Conversely, if his ethics consist exclusively in submission to adult authority, and if
the only exchanges that make up the life of the class are those that bind each student individually to a master holding all power, he will not know how to be intellectually active.  

(p. 107)

Similarly, Dewey (1938) writes:

[Teaching] is a co-operative enterprise, not a dictation; development occurs through reciprocal give-and-take, the teacher taking but not being afraid also to give—the essential point is that the purpose grow and take shape through the process of social intelligence.  

(p. 72)

In constructivist classrooms opportunities for learning about moral issues and behavior are based, whenever possible, on direct experience. This is consistent with the idea that children must construct their moral understandings from the raw material of their day-to-day social interactions (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987/1990). The classroom is seen as a community of learners engaged in activity, discourse, interpretation, justification, and reflection (Fosnot, 2005). Constructivist teachers facilitate children’s social and moral development by engaging them in resolving their conflicts, making decisions (even decisions about rules), voting, and discussing social and moral issues that are relevant to them. As with other areas of the curriculum, constructivist teachers’ aim is to appeal to children’s interests and purposes, to promote reasoning, and to foster cooperation between all members of the classroom community.

In this chapter, we begin by providing an overview of the theoretical and historical bases of constructivist moral education. We then turn to a description of the components of constructivist moral education with children aged three to eight years. Next, we review empirical research on the effects of constructivist early education on children’s social and moral understandings and behavior. Finally we discuss common misconceptions about constructivist education as well as criticisms of constructivist theory and practice.

**THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Throughout the history of constructivist moral education there has been a dynamic tension between traditional education, where instruction is primarily teacher-centered and morality is defined by the rules and dictates of authority, and progressive education, where the classroom is primarily child-centered and moral development is seen as the gradual construction and application of principles of justice, equity, and compassion. In this section, we provide an overview of the work of major theorists in the area of constructivist moral education and contrast them with traditional educators of their time.

**Piaget’s Theory of Moral Development**

Piaget believed that social life among children is a necessary context for the development of intelligence, morality, and personality (DeVries, 1997; Piaget, 1948/1973). According to Piaget, all development emerges from action and reflection. Children construct and reconstruct their knowledge of the world in order to make sense of it, eventually arriving at more and more adequate forms of reasoning and behavior.
One of Piaget’s most influential works in the area of social and moral development is *The Moral Judgment of the Child*. Written in 1932, between the two world wars, it is a landmark work in the area of developmental psychology. Although not aimed directly at educators, the book provides a strong theoretical basis for current practices in moral education.

The main question of the book is “How do children’s moral judgments develop?” Piaget was well aware of the deep social and moral implications of this question, especially for Western Europe at that time. With the rise of fascism and other totalitarian forms of government, it was important to determine how children’s moral reasoning and behavior could be nurtured and developed so that the actions of future generations could be based on justice and reason rather than on blind submission to dictatorial rule.

Using naturalistic observations and semi-structured clinical interviews, Piaget studied children’s understanding of rules governing childhood games, property damage, lying, stealing, and retributive and distributive justice. He chose these topics because they occur, in one form or another, in all cultures. Following a stage in which the child is unaware of the existence of rules, Piaget found a gradual shift from heteronomy (reliance on rules given by an external authority) to autonomy (understanding that rules can be generated through a process of mutual consent). In this gradual shift from heteronomy to autonomy, children become increasingly capable of taking other people’s perspectives into account and making their own judgments about moral issues.

According to Piaget, changes in children’s moral reasoning and behavior are due to changes in their cognitive structures. Piaget characterized the thinking of young children as predominantly egocentric. Egocentric thinkers have difficulty coordinating their own views with those of other people. In fact, they may not even realize that other people have thoughts and feelings that differ from their own. In social situations, egocentrism sometimes leads young children to project their own thoughts and feelings onto others. Conversely, it can also lead to a unilateral view of rules and power relations, in which they accept the rules of others without question.

Egocentrism can also lead to various forms of “moral realism,” such as “objective responsibility.” Objective responsibility can manifest itself in a number of ways, such as valuing the letter of the law above the spirit of the law, or focusing on the consequences of actions rather than the intentions behind them. Moral realism is also associated with a belief in “imminent justice,” or the expectation that punishments automatically follow all acts of wrong-doing, either immediately or at some later time. Egocentric children often believe that the amount of punishment should correspond to the amount of damage, regardless of extenuating circumstances or intent. They also have difficulty thinking about the fair distribution of goods and services in terms of equality or equity. The relative powerlessness of young children, coupled with childhood egocentrism leads to a heteronomous orientation toward morality. However, through social interactions with peers and supportive adults, children can construct increasingly autonomous ways of thinking about rules based on general principles of justice, welfare, and the rights of others.

Piaget’s findings provided evidence against French sociologist Emile Durkheim’s views of moral development and education (Durkheim, 1925/1961). Durkheim, along with Piaget, believed that morality resulted from social interaction and immersion in a group. However, Durkheim believed that moral development is a natural
result of an emotional attachment to the group which manifests itself in respect for the symbols, rules, and authority of the group, along with a “spirit of discipline” that helps channel and control behavior. In contrast to Durkheim, Piaget demonstrated that morality was not simply a set of internalized symbols, rules, and norms. He characterized the child’s moral development as a progressive construction of increasingly more powerful and inclusive ways of thinking about justice, equity, and respect for persons. He showed that children construct their understanding of morality through struggles to arrive at fair solutions to everyday problems, particularly in the context of interactions with peers.

Piaget advocated a progressive approach to moral education involving cooperative relationships between children and between children and adults. He warned parents and teachers against the use of coercion and indoctrination as a means of moral education, stating that it reinforces the young child’s natural tendency toward a heteronomous reliance on external regulation. When adults minimize the exercise of unnecessary authority, it opens up more possibilities for children to construct their own reasons and feelings of necessity about rules and other social relationships.

Piaget emphasized the importance of children’s social interactions with peers because social and intellectual equality is often easier to attain in relationships with age-mates than with adults. In particular, Piaget saw clashes with peers as fruitful because they confront children with perspectives other than their own and thus contribute to the overcoming of egocentrism. Piaget concluded that schools should emphasize cooperative decision making and problem solving, and nurture moral development by requiring students to work out common rules based on fairness. Piaget’s focus on cooperation and mutual respect continues to be an important component of constructivist early moral education today.

John Dewey’s Philosophy of Moral Education

Constructivist early moral education also draws extensively from the work of American philosopher and educator, John Dewey. His goal was to educate children so that they could become productive members of a democratic society (Dewey, 1916). To this end, children “must be educated for leadership as well as for obedience” and “must have the power of self-direction and power of directing others, powers of administration, and ability to assume positions of responsibility” (Dewey, 1909, p. 54).

Dewey emphasized the role of experience, experimentation, purposeful learning, and freedom in education (Dewey, 1938). He saw education as a scientific method by which the individual studies the world, reconstructs knowledge, meanings, and values, and uses these as data for critical study and intelligent living. He believed that activities in early childhood should be familiar, direct, and concrete in character—rather than synthetic, artificial, and symbolic. Moral education should be fully integrated with other areas of the curriculum and should deal with real-life issues that are important to children. In Democracy and Education, he writes,

Moral education is practically hopeless when we set up the development of character as a supreme end, and at the same time treat the acquiring of knowledge and the development of understanding, which of necessity occupy the chief part of school time, as having nothing to do with character.

(Dewey, 1916, p. 411)
Like Piaget, Dewey warned against the use of coercive methods of instruction. Commenting on the enforced quiet and acquiescence demanded by teachers in traditional classrooms, he writes:

They place a premium upon preserving the outward appearance of attention, decorum, and obedience. And everyone who is acquainted with schools in which this system prevailed well knows that thoughts, imaginations, desires, and sly activities ran their own unchecked course behind this façade.

(Dewey, 1938, p. 62)

According to Dewey (1938), the need for coercion on the part of the traditional teacher is often because “the school [is] not a community held together by participation in common activities” (p. 56). He describes traditional education as “an imposition from above and from outside.”

It imposes adult standards, subject-matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity. The gap is so great that the required subject-matter, the methods of learning and of behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the young. They are beyond the reach of the experience the young learners already possess. Consequently, they must be imposed; even though good teachers will use devices of art to cover up the imposition so as to relieve it of obviously brutal features.

(p. 18)

He goes on to write that, “the gulf between the mature or adult products and the experience and abilities of the young is so wide that the very situation forbids much active participation by pupils in the development of what is taught” (pp. 18–19).

In Dewey’s Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, moral education permeated every aspect of the curriculum and school life (Tanner, 1997). In an issue of the *Elementary School Record* devoted to kindergarten, Dewey (1900) wrote that the school’s primary responsibilities were to teach children to live in cooperative and mutually helpful ways, to use educational activities and games as “foundational stones of educational method,” and to reproduce on the children’s level “the typical doings and occupations of the larger maturer society” of which they will finally become a part (p. 143). The Laboratory School was organized as an informal community in which each child felt that he or she had a share in the work to do. The spirit of the school was one in which teachers were there to help if a child had a problem, with the aim of guiding the child toward solving his or her own problems in the future. The school sought to develop the kinds of habits that lead children to accept responsibility, cooperate with others, and engage in creative and practical work. Dewey believed that every method that fosters the child’s “capacities in construction, production, and creation marks an opportunity to shift the center of ethical gravity from an absorption which is selfish to a service that is social” (1909, p. 26).

**Lawrence Kohlberg’s Legacy**

Among researchers who studied moral development in the twentieth century, perhaps none are more well-known than Lawrence Kohlberg. His landmark research on stages of
moral development has profoundly influenced all subsequent work in the field of moral education. Kohlberg extended Piaget’s theory by proposing a six-stage sequence of moral development progressing from heteronomous to increasingly more autonomous reasoning and behavior (Kohlberg, 1984). Although Kohlberg’s research focused primarily on the development of older children (ages ten and above), it continues to have important implications for early childhood as well.

In addition to his basic research outlining stages of moral reasoning, Kohlberg conducted applied research in the area of moral education, primarily at the high school level (for a summary, see Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Kohlberg’s Just Community approach to moral education draws heavily from the work of both Piaget and Dewey. Although Kohlberg’s research made use of hypothetical moral dilemmas to draw out and assess individuals’ stages of moral reasoning, he maintained that children (and indeed, people of all ages) develop morally through a process of struggling with issues of justice and fairness that arise out of their everyday life experiences. His Just Community approach took advantage of spontaneously-arising situations to engage children in reasoning about what is right and wrong, fair and unfair.

Kohlberg recognized that within every school is a “hidden curriculum”—a system of norms and values that regulates behavior and discipline at the school. Kohlberg’s aim was to transform the hidden curriculum into a curriculum based on justice and fairness. Describing Kohlberg’s approach, Power et al. write that “to learn ‘to understand and feel justice,’ students have to be both treated justly and called upon to act justly” (1989, p. 25).

Kohlberg and his colleagues used a small “school-within-a-school” model to create a sense of belonging among members of the group. Regular community meetings were conducted in which moral issues related to school life were discussed and democratically decided, with equal value placed on the voices of both students and teachers. Teachers played a crucial role in guiding group discussions, creating a delicate balance between letting students make their own decisions and advocating higher-level reasoning and behavior. The overall goal was to establish collective norms that were fair to all members of the community.

Although the Just Community approach was designed primarily for high school students, many of the same principles can (and have been) used at the early childhood level (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987/1990; DeVries & Zan, 2012). Although some constructivist early childhood educators might argue with Kohlberg’s characterization of young children’s developmental strengths and limitations, few would deny the importance of his work for constructivist early education.

The Domain Approach

Turiel and his colleagues extended Piaget’s and Kohlberg’s research by distinguishing three domains or developmental systems of knowledge: moral, social conventional, and personal (Smetana, in press; Turiel, 1983). Moral issues are those pertaining to justice, welfare, and the rights of others. Examples of moral issues in a preschool classroom are physical harm (e.g., hitting, pushing), psychological harm (e.g., teasing, name-calling), and justice or fairness (e.g., stealing, destroying others’ property, failing to share common goods). Social conventional rules pertain to uniformities or regularities serving functions of social coordination. In a preschool classroom, examples of social conventions might be table manners, forms of greeting, or modes of dress. Personal issues pertain to
actions that do not entail inflicting harm or violating fairness or rights, and that are not regulated formally or informally. Examples of personal issues in a preschool classroom might be choices of friends, recreational activities, and other activities designated as “free choice” (Nucci, 1996, 2001, in press). The personal domain, in particular, is important in forming a sense of moral agency or autonomy. Consistent with the work of Piaget and Dewey, domain theorists believe that “personal freedom is not in opposition to morality. A sense of identity and personal agency contributes to the nature of social relationships, including those of reciprocity and cooperation” (Turiel, 2001, p. xiv).

According to domain theory, moral, conventional, and personal concepts form distinct systems of knowledge which follow different developmental trajectories. Domain theory differs from other structural-developmental theories which describe the process of moral development as entailing the gradual differentiation of principles of justice and rights from non-moral concerns with conventions, pragmatics, and prudence (Smetana, in press). Studies in the United States and in other countries show that children, adolescents, and adults judge moral issues to be obligatory, not contingent on authority dictates, rules, or consensus (e.g., the acts would be wrong even if no rule or law exists about it), and not contingent on accepted practices within a group or culture (e.g., the act is wrong even if it were an acceptable practice in another culture). This finding has been demonstrated across a wide range of regions and cultures, including North and South America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, as well as in urban/rural, and high/low SES settings (Smetana, in press; Wainryb, 2006).

During early childhood, moral concepts focus primarily on concrete physical harm and concerns about welfare. Concepts of psychological harm develop in middle childhood along with concepts of fairness as equality and equal treatment. Concepts of fairness as equity develop in early adolescence along with increased ability to coordinate reasoning within and across domains (for reviews, see Smetana, in press; Turiel, 1998). Although young children’s thinking about moral issues is more limited than that of older children, it is not entirely heteronomous (Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, 1981, 1985). Smetana and colleagues (2012) showed that young children’s understanding of moral transgressions as wrong independent of authority increased over time. In responding to hypothetical stories, young children do not generally accept the legitimacy of an adult’s directive to engage in acts judged to violate moral precepts such as commands to steal or cause another harm. Damon (1977) found that with acts entailing theft or physical harm to persons, young children (aged 4–7 years) judge the act itself rather than the status of the authority allowing or forbidding it. Laupa (1994) found that preschoolers (aged 4–6 years) accept peer and adult authorities based on the type of act commanded rather than their position in the school. They accept persons who lack authority attributes as legitimate when they give commands directed toward preventing harm (telling children not to fight), and reject persons who possess authority attributes when they give commands that could lead to harm (allowing children to fight).

As children’s ability to make their own moral and social conventional judgments increases, they also begin to judge authorities on the basis of how well they make such judgments. For example, Killen, Breton, Ferguson, and Handler (1994) found that preschool-aged children prefer teachers to use interventions that are consistent with the domain of the transgression (e.g., telling a child who has hit another child, “You shouldn’t hit because it hurts the other person”) rather than ones that are inconsistent with the
domain (e.g., “You shouldn’t do that; it’s against the rules to hit” or simply saying, “That’s not the way a student should act.”)

Interpersonal conflicts can stimulate children to take different points of view in order to restore balance in social situations, to produce ideas as to how to coordinate the needs of self and others, and to consider the rights of others—especially claims to ownership and possession of objects. For example, research by Killen and her colleagues (Killen, 1989; Killen & Naigles, 1995; Killen & Nucci, 1995; Killen & Sueyoshi, 1995; Rende & Killen, 1992) have demonstrated that in the absence of adult intervention, young children are often quite capable of addressing social conflicts with peers in ways that take the needs of others into account. In one study, approximately 70% of preschool children’s disputes during free play were resolved by the children themselves, either through reconciliation by the instigator or through compromising or bargaining (Killen, 1991). In another study, Eisenberg, Lundy, Shell, and Roth (1985) found that preschool children justified meeting the requests of peers with references to the needs of others and to one’s relationships with others while reasons for meeting the requests of adults were justified with references to authority and punishment. This suggests that preschool children are already capable of reciprocity or its precursors in many situations, and supports Piaget’s claims that children best develop reciprocity in interactions with peers.

In light of this research, it is clear that children gradually construct moral understandings and convictions along a continuum from egocentrism to reciprocity, from heteronomy to autonomy, and from early intuitions about harm to conceptions of fairness based on moral reciprocity and considerations of equity (Damon, 1977; Nucci, 2001). They do so in the context of both peer and adult interactions, through their own experiences and observations, and through direct teaching from peers and adults. Because young children generate their initial understandings of morality out of direct experiences in social interactions, one of the primary contributions of schools is to help children frame these experiences in moral terms.

**Constructivism Compared to Other Approaches**

Tension between traditional and progressive approaches to moral education has existed for over 100 years and continues to this day. One of the most vocal proponents of the traditional approach is William Bennett, whose books (*The Book of Virtues* and *The Children's Book of Virtues*) are compilations of stories to be used in children’s moral education (Bennett, 1993, 1995). Bennett criticizes constructivist educators who encourage children to judge, examine, and critically evaluate moral matters on their own. He disapproves of such programs because of their emphasis on children’s choices, decisions, deliberations, and judgments. Instead, he advocates the use of stories with clear moral lessons. Although most constructivist early educators believe that telling children stories can be useful, they caution that children must be able to actually understand the story and moral principles involved (Narvaez, 2002). Here, again, the debate is over whether the acquisition of morality involves primarily the direct transmission of societal norms and values or whether it is based on children’s understandings of justice, rights, and the welfare of others (for a further critique of traditional approaches to moral education, see Turiel, 2001).

Contemporary versions of traditional moral education include programs such as Character Counts. In Character Counts, moral conduct is learned through direct instruction about the Six Pillars of Character: Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness,
Caring, and Citizenship. Children are presented with examples of good acts associated with each virtue, listen to stories about decision making, and engage in school-wide contests with awards for learning the virtues and applying them to their daily lives. Although there is a balance between rote memorization and the application of reasoning and problem solving, Character Counts is a predominantly “top-down,” “teacher-centered” approach to moral education. For a review of several commercially available character education curricula, see Goodman and Lesnick (2004).

In addition to traditional approaches to early moral education, there have been a number of “blended” approaches that combine elements of traditional, adult-centered, or “sociocentric” models of socialization and moral development (e.g., Durkheim, 1925/1961) with the more autonomous developmental emphasis of constructivist theory (Piaget, 1932/1965). For example, the Child Development Project combined constructivist theory, social learning theory, attribution theory, and attachment theory to create a broad, evidence-based approach to children’s prosocial development involving classroom, school-wide, and home-school activities (Brunn, this volume). The Character Education Partnership is also a broad-based, blended approach to social and moral development based on 11 principles of effective character education (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2003).

COMPONENTS OF CURRENT APPROACHES TO CONSTRUCTIVIST EARLY MORAL EDUCATION

The central feature of current approaches to constructivist moral education is the establishment of a sociomoral atmosphere based on mutual respect. This sociomoral atmosphere permeates every aspect of the child’s experience at school. Recognizing that children’s convictions about fairness and justice develop when they have the opportunity to reflect on social and moral problems in their lives, constructivist teachers strive to provide children with a safe environment in which they can make mistakes, experience the consequences of their actions, and develop their own reasons for behaving in particular ways. Constructivist teachers also recognize the power of the “hidden curriculum.” Teachers constantly convey moral messages—messages about what is right and wrong, good and bad—and these messages, conscious or unconscious on the part of the teacher, influence children’s moral development in profound ways. Therefore, constructivist teachers recognize that they engage in social and moral education throughout the school day.

According to DeVries and Zan (2012), teachers can create an atmosphere of mutual respect by cooperating with children, minimizing the exercise of external authority to the extent possible and practical, and sharing power with them as appropriate. The components of constructivist education that are most salient to children’s moral development include encouraging children to make classroom rules and decisions, providing children with opportunities to play group games, assisting children in resolving (and learning how to resolve) their conflicts, and supporting children in reflecting on social and moral issues in literature and in the classroom.

Minimizing the Exercise of External Authority

One of constructivist teachers’ primary aims is for children to become increasingly able to regulate their own behavior in the absence of adult authority. In order to promote autonomy and prevent an overbalance of heteronomy, constructivist teachers consciously
monitor their interactions with children. Authoritarian demanding, emotional intimidation, and arbitrary punishments have no place in a constructivist classroom; neither do passive permissiveness or “letting children run wild”—that is, failing to take action when children engage in unsafe, aggressive, or defiant behaviors.

Constructivist teachers strive to support children in constructing internal feelings of necessity about behaving in socially acceptable ways. One way they do this is by refraining from punishing children, and instead looking for opportunities for children to learn from the natural consequences of their actions. For example, when a child splashes water out of the water table, rather than lecturing and/or punishing, a constructivist teacher may point out to the child the problem that the wet floor poses for others in the classroom and require the child to clean up the water.

Young children are not naturally self-regulating, and so the exercise of adult authority is sometimes necessary, especially when children’s safety is involved. However, even in these situations, constructivist teachers try to find ways to promote children’s autonomy as they exert authority over them. They do this by explaining to children, in language that children can understand, the reasons why they must take certain actions. For example, if a child behaves aggressively on the playground, the teacher may insist that the child play apart from the other children for the remainder of the outside time. The constructivist teacher will take the time to explain to the child that his or her actions hurt other children and that it is the teacher’s job to keep all of the children safe; because the child continues to hurt other children, he or she cannot be allowed near them. The teacher will also actively support the child in learning how to take the perspective of others, find alternative ways to negotiate with others, and develop satisfying peer relationships.

Sharing Power: Rule Making and Decision Making

Constructivist teachers consciously seek opportunities for children to exercise authentic power in the classroom. Given the ages of the children they teach, this can sometimes be challenging. Young children lack the knowledge and maturity to make many decisions concerning life in the classroom. Yet, some decisions (such as what to name the class pet, where to go on the next field trip, how to arrange the classroom, what to display on the walls, or what project to undertake as a class) are within children’s capabilities. When children are supported in making decisions that affect their common life in the classroom, they gain in experience, maturity, and confidence; they learn that their actions can have a positive effect on their environment; and they gain experience in participatory democracy.

Young children are quite capable of making rules that dictate how they wish to be treated in the classroom. DeVries and Zan (2012) describe several instances of young children suggesting rules for their classroom, such as a rule made by four-year-olds prohibiting name calling—“Call them your name. Don’t call them naughty girl or naughty boy” (pp. 150–151)—and rules made by kindergarteners concerning safe treatment of the class guinea pig—“Don’t squeeze, drop, or throw him. Hold him gently. Hold him like a baby” (p. 147). DeVries and Zan stress that teachers should assist children in thinking about the reasons for rules, and that they should encourage children to include the reason in the statement of the rule. A teacher at the constructivist laboratory school where DeVries and Zan conducted research reported on a rule made by her first graders one year that stated: “Don’t laugh when people pass gas. It might hurt their feelings”
This rule reflected an issue that was important to them because many of them had experience with just such an embarrassing situation. When children make rules concerning problems they care about deeply, they tend to remember these rules and insist that others follow them.

**Group Games**

Group games are a vital part of the constructivist curriculum, both because of the opportunities for academic learning (number, logical reasoning, literacy, etc.) and also because of their implications for moral development. Games provide a unique opportunity for children to voluntarily submit to a system of rules that govern their behavior in a specific context. In order to play a game successfully, children must agree to the rules, abide by the rules, and accept the consequences of the rules. Therefore, even if a game is competitive, children must cooperate in order to play it (Kamii & DeVries, 1980; DeVries, Zan, & Hildebrandt, 2002; Hildebrandt & Zan, 2002; Zan, 1996).

Games also provide opportunities for children to take the perspective of another person. A simple game such as Tic-Tac-Toe includes opportunities to play using both offensive and defensive strategies. In order to do the latter, children must think about where the other player is likely to place the next marker. Card games also provide children opportunities to take the perspective of another. Basic concepts such as keeping one’s cards hidden so another cannot see them reflects the ability to understand that if another player sees one’s cards, that person will have an advantage (something that is not obvious to the egocentric child).

Games also present unique opportunities for children to learn what happens when someone does not follow the rules. When players cheat, other players become upset and protest. When children consistently cheat at games and find that no one wants to play with them, the teacher takes the time to explain that the other children’s reactions (refusing to play the game with them) are due to their cheating, and that if they want other children to play with them, they will have to stop cheating. The teacher also works with the child to overcome the circumstances that lead him or her to feel the need to cheat.

**Conflict Resolution**

Conflicts are part of the constructivist curriculum and contribute to children’s moral education. When children work to resolve their conflicts with others, they develop their ability to take the perspective of another and negotiate with others. Constructivist teachers take an active role in supporting young children in resolving their conflicts. They help children learn how to speak their minds and listen to each other. They sometimes serve as translators, clarifying and stating the problem so that all of the participants have a shared understanding of what happened. They support children in thinking of possible solutions, and when children cannot think of solutions themselves, they make suggestions. Perhaps most importantly, they help children repair broken relationships without forcing children to be insincere (for example, by requiring apologies, no matter how meaningless or unfelt).

**Moral Discussion**

Discussions of social and moral dilemmas, both real-life and hypothetical, are important means of helping children take the perspectives of others. Each type contributes to children’s moral development.
Real-life events in the classroom are valuable because of their relevance to children. Children are very familiar, for example, with how it feels when a group of children takes all of the blocks in the block center and does not allow others to use any of the blocks. A discussion about how it feels, and how they might come up with a fair way to share the blocks, is likely to elicit considerable discussion concerning the rights of others. As children hear others describing how they experience the situation, they have the opportunity to take the perspectives of their friends and classmates and feel empathy for their experiences.

Hypothetical dilemmas also have a role to play. Sometimes real-life events are so highly charged emotionally that children cannot talk about them without falling apart. In such cases, teachers can use fictional situations to explore classroom dilemmas. It is amazing how children can enter into a problem acted out, for example, by the teacher using puppets, and generate ideas concerning how the puppets might feel, what they should do, and why.

Children’s literature provides opportunities for children’s experiences to be broadened even more. Good literature has the potential to transport children into the lives of others and experience emotions that they might otherwise never experience. For example, hearing books about the experiences of recent immigrants to the United States can give native-born children a chance to understand what it might feel like to look and sound completely different from everyone else in the culture. The Developmental Studies Center (Developmental Studies Center, 1995) has developed an entire curriculum (grades K–8) around the use of literature to support children’s ethical development (Brunn, this volume).

**RESEARCH ON CONSTRUCTIVIST EARLY MORAL EDUCATION**

Research on the effects of constructivist moral education on young children’s social and cognitive development is relatively sparse. Studies of most relevance to the evaluation of constructivist education are those that compare constructivist and non-constructivist classrooms, and those that compare democratic and authoritarian teaching styles.

DeVries, Haney, & Zan (1991) and DeVries, Reese-Learned, & Morgan (1991) studied the effects of classroom atmospheres of three kindergarten classrooms—a direct-instruction classroom, a constructivist classroom, and an eclectic classroom—on children’s sociomoral development. The teacher in the direct-instruction classroom provided a program of small- and large-group instruction that used primarily recitation, fast-paced drills, and worksheets. Learning centers were never used, and children rarely left their desks. The teacher’s interactions with children were highly authoritarian. The teacher used punishment, threats of punishments, and rewards to control children’s behavior. The constructivist teacher implemented a program similar to the constructivist approach described above. The curriculum was child-centered and interest-driven. Children engaged in freely chosen activities. Instruction was embedded in learning centers and naturally occurring events. The teacher established a classroom atmosphere based on mutual respect, minimized her own exercise of authority, cooperated with children as much as possible, and engaged children in conflict resolution. She did not use punishments, threats of punishments, or rewards, but instead worked to help children learn how to regulate their own behavior. The eclectic teacher (the label came from her) provided a program that contained elements of both the other two programs, including some direct instruction and some child-centered activities. The sociomoral atmosphere
of the eclectic classroom was slightly less authoritarian than the direct instruction classroom, but not as cooperative as the constructivist classroom. The teacher used some punishments and rewards, but her control of the children was not as absolute as that of the direct-instruction teacher.

Analysis of the sociomoral atmospheres of the three classrooms focused on the levels of interpersonal understanding reflected in the teacher–child interactions that occurred during two complete days in each of the three classrooms. Using an adaptation of Selman’s (Selman, 1980; Selman and Schultz, 1990) conceptualization of Enacted Interpersonal Understanding, over 20,000 teacher–child interactions were micro-analytically coded from transcripts and video.

Results of the analysis (DeVries, Haney, & Zan, 1991) showed great differences in teachers’ enacted interpersonal understanding. The direct instruction teacher’s interactions with children were primarily low level, unilateral interactions, with a few higher level reciprocal interactions, and even fewer mutual interactions. The eclectic teacher’s interactions were much like those of the direct instruction teacher, predominantly at unilateral level, with a few reciprocal interactions, and fewer mutual interactions. The constructivist teacher had many fewer unilateral interactions and many more reciprocal and mutual interactions. The conclusion was that the sociomoral atmospheres were very different in the three classrooms. The constructivist classroom atmosphere was much more cooperative, and the other two classrooms’ atmospheres were much more authoritarian.

The companion study compared the sociomoral development of the children in these three classrooms (DeVries, Reese-Learned, & Morgan, 1991). The results reflected the sociomoral atmospheres of the classroom. Pairs of children (n = 56) were videotaped in two naturalistic situations outside the classroom (playing a board game and dividing up some stickers), and their interactions were coded according to the Selman levels. Results showed that although a predominance of unilateral interactions characterized all three groups and impulsive behavior was about the same for all three groups, children from the direct instruction and eclectic classrooms engaged in less reciprocal behavior than did children from the constructivist classroom. In addition, children from the constructivist classroom resolved significantly more of their conflicts than children from the other two classrooms.

In an earlier study, DeVries and Göncü (1987) used the board game format to compare interpersonal understanding between four-year-old children from constructivist and Montessori classrooms. The pattern of findings was similar to those described above. Children from the constructivist classroom had a significantly higher proportion of reciprocal interactions and resolved a significantly higher proportion of their conflicts than children from the Montessori classroom.

Araujo (1999) conducted a longitudinal study of moral autonomy in 56 six-year-old children in three kindergartens. One center, serving children from low-income families, was constructivist and had a cooperative, democratic classroom climate. The other two centers, one serving children from low-income families and one serving children from middle- or upper-income families, were traditional, and had more authoritarian classroom climates. All children went to traditional authoritarian schools in subsequent years.

Children responded to eight moral dilemmas adapted from Piaget (1932/1965) in 1992 (kindergarten year), 1995, and 1999. Children’s responses were categorized as heteronomous, autonomous, or transitional. Results showed that children from the constructivist center expressed higher personal autonomy in 1992 and 1995 than children from the authoritarian centers. In 1999, autonomy scores of the children from the authoritarian centers were higher
than children from the constructivist center. The author speculates that this finding is due to "values education" in one of the traditional schools during the last two years of the study period. It may also be that many of the children were reaching a ceiling on the dilemmas.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS AND CRITICISMS OF CONSTRUCTIVIST EARLY MORAL EDUCATION

Within the moral domain, we have encountered two common misconceptions about constructivist education: (1) constructivist education is permissive, and (2) constructivist education is spontaneous and unstructured.

Some educators mistakenly believe that constructivist education is permissive, that teachers take an entirely "hands-off" approach to classroom discipline and children do whatever they want to do. This belief has several possible sources. The first is the mistaken belief that Piaget's stages of development are maturational and unfold according to a biologically predetermined plan. According to this view, the teacher's role is to create the least restrictive environment so as to foster children's natural, preordained growth.

The second source of this belief stems from the involvement of children in making classroom rules. Some interpret this to mean that only child-made rules govern the classroom. However, constructivist teachers, like all good early childhood teachers, must make sure children are safe. Based on interviews with constructivist teachers, DeVries and Zan (2012) identified numerous non-negotiable rules that they categorize as safety and health norms (i.e., wearing safety goggles at woodworking, washing hands before cooking, etc.), moral norms (i.e., taking fair turns, not hurting others, etc.), and discretionary norms (i.e., following the daily schedule, wearing a smock at the water table, etc.) (DeVries & Zan, 2012, pp. 158–161).

Finally, some interpret the constructivist emphasis on child initiative and choice as evidence of permissiveness. During activity time, children in constructivist classrooms are free to choose activities that appeal to their interests and purposes. To the uninformed observer, these classrooms may appear chaotic. However, to the informed observer, children's actions occur within a general framework of order, including rules to which everyone has agreed. When conflicts occur, children are encouraged to resolve them, with or without the help of the teacher. If children's engagement with the materials appears to be shallow and unproductive, the teacher redirects the child's attention toward more challenging activities.

Another common misconception is that constructivist education is spontaneous and unsystematic. In the moral realm, there are no lists of character traits to memorize, no "values of the week," and no tangible rewards for good behavior. To an outside observer, the moral curriculum may well appear to be "improvised" based on problems that naturally occur in the classroom. Although there may be standard procedures for conflict resolution (such as rules for the Peace Bench), children are not expected to memorize and follow them exactly. A typical conflict resolution for two four-year-olds might be:

David: I didn't like it when you hit me.
Sam: Well, I didn't like it when you took my truck.

After this exchange, the two boys might choose to jump up from the Peace Bench and resume play without any plan for future action. If the children are satisfied with the
exchange, the teacher might not interfere, assuming that this is the level of discourse that is developmentally appropriate for them at this time. As children develop, they become better able to engage in conflict resolutions involving higher levels of interpersonal understanding and to make plans for future actions that would benefit themselves as well as the other person.

Whereas it is true that some constructivist teachers’ approaches to moral education are more spontaneous and improvised than others, this does not mean that they do not plan for moral lessons. Constructivist teachers’ lesson plans often include moral lessons, but they try to keep these plans flexible in case there are “teachable moments” in which children can construct new knowledge within the moral domain.

**Criticisms of Constructivist Early Moral Education**

A number of criticisms of constructivist early moral education have emerged both from within the ranks of constructivist researchers and educators, and from without. Current tensions revolve around the appropriate amount of direct teaching for children of different ages, the appropriate amount of “discovery learning,” what actions should be considered negotiable and non-negotiable, and the amount of coercion coming from the teacher.

In an exchange between DeVries and her colleagues (DeVries, Hildebrandt, & Zan, 2000; DeVries et al., 2002) and Goodman (2000, 2002), Goodman lodged several criticisms against constructivist moral education. According to Goodman, many examples of constructivist early education are developmentally inappropriate for most preoperational children because they are egocentric and incapable of moral reflection. Goodman advocates that teachers should “exploit the child’s natural heteronomy by advancing clear rules” (Goodman, 2000, p. 49). According to Goodman, young children are not ready to make their own rules. Goodman explains that “Encouraging premature autonomous thinking is analogous to giving premature reading instruction—you may get decoding but not understanding” (Goodman, 2000, p. 48).

It is possible that one source of Goodman’s criticism of DeVries’s approach to constructivist moral education rests not in its tenets but rather in Goodman’s understanding of the capabilities of very young children. In fact, some of the practices advocated by Goodman closely resemble DeVries and Zan’s principles of teaching. For example, Goodman and Lesnick, in their book *Moral Education: A Teacher-Centered Approach* (2004), state that moral education programs “should provide opportunities for student participation and student decision making. This participation must be developmentally staged: less for the younger child, in whom the cultivation of habits and compassion takes center stage; more for the older child” (p. 188). Goodman’s criticism of DeVries and Zan’s approach seems to be rooted in part in an underestimation of just how much moral reasoning and deliberation young children are capable of engaging in. DeVries and Zan (1994, 2012) describe numerous examples of preschool-aged children reasoning about fairness, justice, and compassion in their own words. If the moral issues that teachers bring to young children are selected carefully for their ease of understanding, young children are remarkably capable of engaging with them.

In the social domain, where children are notoriously egocentric, incipient decentering can often be found in the classroom. Research shows that young children do not suddenly overcome egocentrism. It is overcome little by little, in thousands of small decenterations that eventually lead to reciprocity (Flavell & Miller, 1998; Wellman & Gelman, 1998). A large body of research by Turiel and his colleagues has shown that young children do
understand the intrinsic negative consequences of hurting others, especially when the harm is concrete and physical (Nucci, 1996; Smetana, in press; Turiel, 1998). Whereas questions concerning justice are understood later in development than welfare, certain issues concerning justice can also be addressed from an early age (e.g., turn-taking). Thus, from a constructivist perspective, the notion of a continuum from egocentrism to reciprocity guides teachers’ thinking about children’s development. In contrast to the waiting approach (laissez faire), or the tell-them-what-to-do approach (authoritarian), constructivist teachers strive to create the kinds of situations in which children gradually come to feel a necessity to treat others in moral ways. Constructivist education offers strategies teachers can use to help children begin to overcome egocentrism and become more reflective, decentered, and autonomous thinkers. These strategies are detailed in DeVries & Zan (2012) and summarized in DeVries et al. (2000).

Piaget argued that authorities’ injunctions (such as not to lie) simply cover up and conceal the child’s egocentric misunderstanding and do not help to change it. Simply enforcing rules when children do not understand them is not likely to change their thinking. Teachers need to make an effort to help children begin to understand why certain behaviors are wrong in terms of the effects of the behaviors on others and on relationships. Children do not need to be concrete operational to begin to understand the reciprocity of sharing, turn-taking, and perspective-taking. It is true that even for some five-year-olds sharing may mean “getting” or “giving up” something. However, in an environment where the adult emphasizes the feelings and rights of others, children even at age three begin to understand the reciprocity involved in sharing and turn-taking and to take the perspectives of others. The constructivist strategy is to create situations in which children will be confronted with the differing ideas and desires of others, and to encourage them to decenter and consider the others’ point of view. It is through these processes that egocentrism is gradually overcome.

Need for Further Research
Creating an optimum balance between direct instruction and discovery learning, spontaneous and planned activities, and actions that are negotiable and non-negotiable is an ongoing challenge for constructivist teachers. Since teaching is both an art and a science, we expect that further refinements of constructivist methods will be developed for many years to come.

Many of these problems are best addressed through systematic research. In this chapter, we reviewed research comparing constructivist with other types of classrooms. There is also a growing body of research conducted exclusively in constructivist classrooms (for example, Zan & Hildebrandt, 2003, 2005). Much more research is needed in order to test and refine constructivist early moral education for all children, regardless of culture and socioeconomic status.

REFERENCES


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