

Gifted Students as Citizens for the Future¹

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that gifted students need holistic education that prepares them for their role as citizens for the future. This kind of education promotes global citizens that accept shared responsibility for humanity's common future. The development of moral domain is a key component in this kind of citizenship education. The Finnish educational system has shown to be effective in the academic domain with great achievements in comparative international studies. In cross-cultural comparisons gifted students all over the world ask more moral questions about the future than average-ability students. The concept of spirituality has introduced to the discussion concerning linkages between citizenship education, moral education and religious education (Tirri, 2007). The spiritual point of view emphasizes that in spite of our cultural, religious and political differences we are enmeshed in the same human experience together. We all struggle to discover deeper meaning and transcendent purpose in life. The search for ultimate meaning is common to human beings in all times and places. Empirical studies have shown that more and more people prefer to call themselves spiritual rather than religious (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Furthermore, adolescents all over the world ask spiritual questions as important issues concerning the future of humankind (Tirri, Tallent-Runnells, & Nokelainen, 2005). In

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the World Conference of Gifted Children in Warwick, UK August 8, 2007.

the discussion on global citizenship the spiritual aspect on life is an important dimension to explore in our search for beliefs and values that guide our life. Moral, spiritual and religious questions are part of moral and citizenship education for gifted students.

The concepts of citizenship and morality

In this paper I argue that gifted students need holistic education that prepares them for their role as citizens for the future. This kind of education promotes global citizens that accept shared responsibility for humanity's common future. The development of moral domain is a key component in this kind of citizenship education. Historically, citizenship has been connected to nationalism and the nation state. In the nation state citizenship has been associated with rights and obligations. The notion that there could be "a citizen of the world" has long been part of the utopian view of the citizenship tradition (Isin and Turner, 2003). In recent years, this dream has re-emerged in the idea that globalisation will make world governance and a cosmopolitan democracy possible. The revival of cosmopolitan idealism is closely connected with the classical idea of virtue, including a commitment to the commonwealth that embraced a love of humanity. An important virtue of a cosmopolitan citizen is respect for other cultures (Held, 1995).

Cosmopolitanism is a philosophy developed during the period of Enlightenment, notably by Immanuel Kant. Sihvola has discussed the ethics of the world citizen as one possible implementation of Kant's categorical imperative (Sihvola, 2004). Osler and Starkey (2005) identify cosmopolitan citizenship informed by human rights as a goal of citizenship education. This kind of citizenship is a worldview that celebrates human diversity. Cosmopolitan citizens act locally, nationally and globally. They

accept shared responsibility for humanity's common future. They need to learn which values are culturally specific and which are universal. Citizenship is also defined in terms of practice, associated with democracy and with human rights. The practice of citizenship involves solidarity. Within this definition, moral values like justice, care, and truthfulness have an important contribution to citizenship. The development of sensibility, commitment, responsibility, involvement and competence in the moral domain are part of this view.

According to Bebeau, Rest, & Narvaez (1999), morality is built upon four basic component processes. These processes include moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation and moral character. The components of moral sensitivity, moral motivation and moral character have been studied less. Moral judgment is the component that has been studied the most of all these four. Most of the studies in the area of moral development have based their theory on the cognitive-developmental theory of Lawrence Kohlberg (e.g., 1969). The Defining Issues Test is a well-documented measure of moral judgment that has been used all over the world (Rest, 1986). The index most frequently used is the "P score," which reflects the principled reasoning (Stages 5 and 6 in Kohlberg's theory) of a person. Kohlberg's procedures have been criticized for lack of diversity in the moral dilemmas that have been used in the interviews (Yussen, 1977).

The hypothetical dilemmas can also be seen as being too abstract and removed from the daily experiences of most people (Straughan, 1975). Recognition of these aspects of hypothetical dilemmas has led educational researchers to study real-life moral problems identified by people (Walker et al., 1987).

Andreani & Pagnin provided a comprehensive review of the literature in their article (Andreani & Pagnin, 1993, 539-553). According to these authors, the gifted are presumed to have a privileged position in the maturation of moral thinking because of their precocious intellectual growth. Terman's (1925) sample of gifted children showed superior maturity in moral development in choosing socially constructive activities and in rating misbehaviour. In the 1980's, Karnes and Brown (1981) made an initial investigation on moral development and the gifted using Rest's DIT. Their sample included 233 gifted students (9-15 years in age) who were selected for a gifted program. The results of the DIT were compared to the students' results in a test that measured their intellectual ability (WISC-R). The empirical results of the study showed positive correlation between the two tests. According to researchers, intellectually gifted children appear to reach a relatively high stage of moral reasoning earlier than their chronological peers (Karnes & Brown, 1981, 54).

Other studies of moral judgment using DIT scores have shown that gifted adolescents scored higher than their peers as a group (Tan-Willman & Gutteridge, 1981; Janos & Robinson, 1985; Narvaez, 1993). However, the data with high-achieving adolescents has indicated that the relationship between apparent academic talent and moral judgment scores is more complex. According to Narvaez's study, high academic competence is necessary for an unusually high P score, but it does not necessarily predict it. The high achievers can have average to high moral judgment scores, whereas low achievers cannot be high scorers in moral judgment (Narvaez, 1993).

Morality includes other components besides moral judgment as measured by DIT scores. Real-life moral dilemmas also require moral sensitivity and moral motivation (Narvaez, 1993). Before an individual can make responsible moral judgments, he or she needs to identify real-life moral dilemmas in different contexts. A broad conception of morality requires more than just skill in abstract reasoning. Affective and social factors play a vital role in moral conduct.

The few empirical studies available have contradictory results on the relationships between general intelligence, social competence, and altruism (Abroms, 1985). Earlier studies on deviant behavior and crime among the gifted have also shown that there is no necessary relationship between morality and intelligence (Brooks, 1985; Gath, Tennenth, & Pidduck, 1970). The real-life moral dilemmas gifted adolescents have identified include conflicts in inter-personal relationships (Colangelo, 1982; Tirri, 1996). Furthermore, empirical studies show qualitative differences in the moral reasoning of gifted adolescents (Tirri & Pehkonen, 2002).

The case of Finland

The Finnish young people live in the society in which education is highly valued. In the Finnish welfare system, the guiding principle in educational policy making has been to provide equal educational opportunities to all children regardless of sex, economic status or social class. Of the age-cohort completing the nine years' compulsory education, 95% receive upper-secondary education. Students can then choose either a vocational training line or a three-year upper secondary school leading to matriculation examination required for university admission. In the beginning of

the new millennium, close to 60% of those completing their compulsory education are expected to take this matriculation examination (Helander, 2005, 139-140).

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2001 and 2004, Finnish 15-year-olds score above the OECD average in their performance. Furthermore, the Finnish students score highest in all tests measuring mathematics literacy (OECD, 2001, 78). Finland has a history of achieving high standards in academic literacy. According to IEA (The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) study of reading literacy, Finland ranked number one of all participating 32 countries. Finnish students showed the highest reading literacy levels at both 9 and 14 years of age in almost all domains (Elley, 1992). One logical reason for the success in international comparison studies is the Finnish governments “equal opportunities and high quality education for all” principle. The first practical implementation of the principle is that education is free in all the levels. The second implementation is government’s strong financial support for the public sector educational institutions. This has led to the situation where there are no appreciable differences in teaching quality or premises between the public and special schools. Partly for this reason only small minority of the schools in Finland are special schools with entrance examination and financial support from private or corporate sources. Furthermore, Finnish teacher education has received very high evaluation in international reviews (Buchberger et al., 1994, 9).

Curricular redesign characterizes all the levels of education in Finland. It is closely connected to other megatrends, such as decentralization and deregulation, both also

visible in some other countries of the European Union. Decentralization implies that decision-making, concerning both the organization and the contents of general and vocational education, has mostly been transferred to the municipalities. At the national level, only general guidelines provide the framework for steering education. The new framework curricula for the comprehensive schools and for the senior secondary schools were approved in 2004 (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2004; National Core Curriculum for Upper Secondary School, 2003).

Educational policy in the 2000s stresses individuality and the freedom of choice. As a result of the current trend of individualism, schools have been encouraged to draft more individual curricula. The curricular redesign allows teaching in schools to be more differentiated. This differentiation of education can be seen as an advantage especially for the gifted and talented pupils. In Finland the new trend of individualism allows flexible decisions in acceleration. It is possible for parents to decide whether their children will begin school at the age of six or seven (earlier the age was seven). Another possibility for acceleration is the ungraded school which allows pupils to advance in their studies with a flexible schedule. This ungraded system has been in use in most of the upper secondary schools. The possibility to attend ungraded school in the elementary grades as well is being experimented within some schools. In Finland pupils usually attend the local elementary school in their neighborhood. However, the current trend of individualism has advocated the right of the parents to choose the school which their children attend.

Empirical studies concerning future perspectives of youth

Life perspectives of youth in Europe

Finland is one of the twenty-five countries belonging to the European Union. Comparative research conducted in different European countries has revealed remarkable differences in perspective for the future of the young people in these countries (Ziebertz & Kay, 2005). The study included nine European countries with the total sample of 8096 young people with an average age of 17-18 who attended good academic secondary schools. The sample is not called gifted but evidently these young people don't represent young people in general. The researchers justified their sample by arguing that they wanted to take into account the views of the future opinion formers. After finishing university, the young people will potentially be part of the most educated and best-paid members of society. The authors argue that the young people in their study are likely to have a social and cultural influence and occupy important positions. These arguments are very much the same as those used in justifying research in giftedness. The research findings show that young people differed in how positive or negative views they had on future. In Germany, for example, pessimism was mentioned most by young people when discussing their life perspective. In England and the Netherlands pessimism also scored in the top three attitudes. This finding means that young people in Europe assess their personal chances for the future quite bad. However, youths from Nordic countries, Finland and Sweden, had a more positive attitude and trusted themselves to master their own futures (Ziebertz & Kay, 2005, 201).

The Finnish young people's view of the future was characterized by a mixture of optimism and cautious realism. They were well integrated in society and positively disposed to the European Union. Religion had a stabilizing and integrative function.

Even though the respondents in the study were not active churchgoers or did not see themselves as being particularly religious, religious worldviews had been transmitted from generation to generation and religion still played indirectly a significant role in shaping young people's life perspectives (Helander, 2005, 149-150).

Spirituality, religion and citizenship

In the current discussion on citizenship education the emphasis has been on the ideal of cosmopolitan citizen with global awareness (Osler & Starkey, 2005; Noddings, 2005). The researchers in both US and Europe agree that moral education should be an important part of citizenship education, even though citizenship education must entail much more than moral education (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Veugelers, 2007). The moral roots of citizenship and citizenship education have recently been discussed in the special issue of the Journal of Moral Education by international authors (Gates, 2006a, 437-441). In this special issue the role of religious education is also brought up as important component in pursuing morally intelligent citizenry. According to Gates, values have received attention in the arena of citizenship education but beliefs have not. However, citizenship without believing, philosophy of life, faith to live by, or religious conviction can be hollow-hearted and perfunctory (Gates, 2006b). Furthermore, values are not necessarily any more universally agreed, since they too are affected by beliefs. Gates lists reasons for making more reference to values and valuing in the current discussion than to beliefs and believing. These reasons include an implicit view that there is greater commonality regarding values than there is about beliefs. However, shared values and common sense morality can be themselves subject to a person's fundamental beliefs and an act of believing. In the survey studies of social sciences the variable of religion is many times undervalued and even ignored

(Gates, 2006b). Furthermore, in US the issues of religion and believing are not openly discussed in classrooms. This ignorance has been realized and suggestions for teaching about religious pluralism in the public schools as important part of citizenship education have been made (Nash, 2005; Noddings, 1993; 2005).

The concept of spirituality has introduced to the discussion concerning linkages between citizenship education, moral education and religious education (Tirri, 2007). The spiritual point of view emphasizes that in spite of our cultural, religious and political differences we are enmeshed in the same human experience together. We all struggle to discover deeper meaning and transcendent purpose in life. The search for ultimate meaning is common to human beings in all times and places. Empirical studies have shown that more and more people prefer to call themselves spiritual rather than religious (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; Mikkola, Niemelä, & Petterson, 2007; Tirri 2007). Furthermore, adolescents all over the world ask spiritual questions as important issues concerning the future of humankind (Tirri, Tallent-Runnells, & Nokelainen, 2005). In the discussion on global citizenship the spiritual aspect on life is an important dimension to explore in our search for beliefs and values that guide our life.

Cross-cultural comparison of preadolescents' questions about the future

Questions about morality, spirituality and religion always reflect the philosophical and religious traditions of the culture. Furthermore, educational systems in different countries vary in the moral and religious education provided for the students. In another cross-cultural study preadolescents' questions about the future were investigated (Tirri et al., 2005). The students (N=975) came from four countries,

namely Finland, United States, Hong Kong and Bahrain. Half of the participants in each country came from special programs or schools that served above average-ability students and the other half came from ordinary schools representing average-ability students. The purpose of that study was to investigate whether there are differences across countries in the amount and nature of preadolescents' moral, spiritual and religious questions. In the study, gifted students from each participating country asked more scientific questions than their average-ability peers. This finding was not found to be dependent on respondent's gender. Furthermore, in each country the average-ability students asked more everyday life questions than did their gifted peers. The scientific and everyday life questions were very much in accord with each other in different cultures. The gifted students in all countries asked more moral questions than the average-ability students. The moral questions dealt with war and terrorism that reflect the global moral concerns we all have after the September 11th attack. We also found cultural differences in the spiritual and religious questions asked by preadolescents. In all the data sets, girls asked more spiritual and religious questions than boys. The Christian influence could be seen in the Finland and United States data. The Bahrain data reflected a clear Muslim influence in the nature of religious questions (Tirri et al., 2005)

Gifted students' views of future

In the following study we investigated further how gifted students (N=316) view the future (Tirri & Nokelainen, 2006). All the students were asked to write approximately 20 questions they would like to ask someone about the future. The same method was used earlier by Tallent-Runnels and Yarborough (1992) and Tallent-Runnels, Mullen, Tirri and Yuen (2003). All the students in our study came from the same school for

the gifted students. Our aim was to explore how concepts about future develop from preadolescence to adolescence. The preadolescents (N=167) were represented by the same Finnish elementary students (10-12 years olds) than in the previous study. The study also included older Finnish secondary students (13-15 years olds) who represented adolescents (N=149).

The data were analyzed with quantitative content analysis with some examples of students' questions. Students' questions were coded into five main categories. These categories were: scientific concerns, everyday life concerns, moral concerns, spiritual concerns, and religious concerns. Moral concerns dealt with questions about right and wrong, responsibilities and duties. Religious concerns were related to some organized religion or institutions. In another study concerning pre-adolescents, Ubani and Tirri found that most of the meanings given to religion by pre-adolescents belonged to the institutional dimension. Furthermore, in that same study most meanings given to spirituality were related to humanistic dimension without explicit relation to religion. In this study spiritual concerns are defined the same way preadolescents perceived them in our earlier study. The humanistic dimension included expressions referring to different aspects of meaning in human life and culture (Ubani & Tirri, 2006).

In this study the students asked mostly scientific and everyday life questions. However, they also expressed moral, spiritual and religious concerns. This study demonstrated that the amount of spiritual questions about future increase while the amount of moral questions decreased from preadolescence to adolescence. Both preadolescence and adolescence girls asked more religious questions than the same aged boys. The increase of spiritual questions by age can be explained by the

psychological development in adolescence. The struggle for a sense of significance and purpose in life is greatest during adolescence (Fry, 1998). According to Fry (1998, 91) the ultimate problem of adolescent psychology is to understand how the adolescent searches for and finds some measure of meaning in the present, and gains wisdom for the future. This trend can be seen in the developmental process of the concepts about future, as well.

Implications for citizenship and moral education

According to ethical competence theory morality can be taught. Ethical competence theory views moral character as a set of skills that can be honed towards expert levels of performance (Narvaez, Endicott & Bock, 2002). Already Plato believed that the just person is like an artisan who has particular, highly-cultivated skills that have been developed through training and practice.

Persons of good character, then, have better developed skills in four areas: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral action (Bebeau et al., 1999). For example, the skills of moral sensitivity enable one to more quickly and accurately ‘read’ a moral situation to determine what role one might play. The skills of moral judgment include many tools for solving complex moral problems in different contexts. The skills of moral motivation include the cultivation of an ethical identity that leads one to prioritize ethical goals. The skills of moral action include the ability to keep the goal orientation, to stay on task and take the necessary steps to get the ethical job done. Persons of character have specific moral skills that can be divided into these four categories (sensitivity, judgment, motivation, action). The moral

person is guided by a personal moral commitment that calibrates moral perception and awareness.

The moral education for the high ability students should include a deliberative process to determine a just and caring solution to a moral issue in hand. This process should include (a) better and worse interpretations of the moral issues discussed (moral sensitivity); (b) better and worse justifications for actions (moral judgment); (c) expectations for behavior in particular contexts, for example, “the good citizen”, “the just student” (moral identity) and indicators of commitment to moral ideals; as well as (d) indicators to judge courage, persistence, and follow through (moral character) and prototypes for effective responses to problematic contexts (e.g., “just say no”) (Bebeau et al., 1999). According to our empirical findings, the real-life moral conflicts and the interpersonal relationships should be among the topics used in these discussions.

Empirical studies also point to the need for teachers to discuss moral, spiritual and religious questions influencing adolescents’ futures. Furthermore, spiritual and religious questions are among the issues preadolescents and adolescents are concerned. These questions should be addressed in every culture to help the youngsters to find answers to the questions such as: “Who am I? Where do I belong? What is my purpose? To whom or what am I connected or responsible? All the leading religious and spiritual traditions in the world have studied these questions. Our adolescents need the knowledge and wisdom of these traditions in order to grow not only cognitively but morally and spiritually as well. Moral, spiritual and religious questions are part of gifted students’ concerns and the pedagogical task of education.

They are also part of moral and citizenship education. Good and meaningful education for gifted students should address questions like that.

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