

Role of Empathy in Early Child Development

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One of the most important theoretical changes in the viewing early child development is an *image of a child as a competent and moral oriented person*:

“Between children and adults, an emotional exchange develops as early as the first few months, as a form of “protoconversation” (Trevarthen 1993); this is followed by the understanding of other people by analogy with oneself (Tomasello 1995) and by friendly (peer) cooperation, also when conflicts arise (Hartup 1993). The same findings are confirmed by Hoffman’s research on empathy (1987, 2000). The latter is shown as a concept which, arising from emotional exchange, gradually includes the development of cognitive capacities.”

(Krofljic 2003)

So earlier psychoanalytic and cognitivist conceptions of a child as an amoral being, incapable of full responsible and cooperative relations to adult persons or peers, are shown as inappropriate! But to understand deeper this theoretical turn, we must have in mind *two other historical events*:

- In the age of enlightenment when Kant’s thesis of men’s autonomous morality connected with our mind prevailed over Hume’s thesis of existence of sympathetic orientation to the other human being, moral education in child’s early years of living was reduced to discipline his/her selfish nature, because his/her nature is determined by the lack of cognitive capabilities, that are urgent for moral relations. So the kantian anthropological paradigm prevailed over Hume’s one!
- Recognition of a child as a competent moral agent was connected with observation of his relations in concrete familiar and stimulative environment that supports child’s pro-social orientations.

This change in theoretical view had enormous rich consequences to moral education and identity development in pre-school period. They are supported with *new ethical and psychological theories*:

- Relations between ethics of justice (which is more cognitive oriented), ethics of care (based on the importance of care relations), virtue ethics (which most important feature is that ethical orientation is connected with personal virtues that come into being as an output of committed personal involvement) and communitarian ethics (which stresses out the importance of connection of individual with basic social space for the development of his/her identity).

- New theories of empathy, like Martin Hoffman's, which show new possibility of early moral education as promotion of (inductive) empathic relations which also supports early development of pro-social motives and social cognition of a child.

Basic theses of Hoffman's theory of empathy are:

- Empathy is an emotional, cognitive and motivational force for moral action, which encourages moral development in the pre-school period when a child is not yet capable of the appropriate rationalisation and conceptualisation of moral rules.
- It is shown as a basic "personal tool" which promotes child's pro-social behaviour, his orientation to care relations and sense of justice.
- Although we can not answer to the question if empathy is a genetically determined mechanism or not, we know that it can be developed during one's upbringing.
- Basic developmental stages of empathy are:
 - o global empathy (a child is not yet capable to see the difference between him and the other, so he is automatically forced to feel distress of the other like his own distress);
 - o egocentric empathic distress (there the tendency to pro-social activity arises but a child is still not capable to distinguish between himself and the other, so he reacts to distress of the other as himself would be in the same position);
 - o quasi-egocentric empathic distress (a child is already capable to recognize distress of the other and first real pro-social motives to help the other appear, but the way how child helps to the other is the one that would help him in the same situation);
 - o veridical empathic distress (when a child is capable to overtake the role of the other, to engross in his position and to recognize his needs, and of course to find a way to help him in an appropriate way).
- The most problematic deficiencies of empathy are: empathic over-arousal, empathic bias, paternalism and the concept of pity.
- The basic pedagogical model that can promote this empathic development, is called by Hoffman inductive method and has two advantages over classical discipline method:
 - o it calls attention to the victim's distress and make it salient to the child;
 - o it points up the role of the child's action in causing that distress. This creates the condition for feeling empathy-based guilt, which is a feeling of intense disesteem for oneself for wrongfully harming another.

It is easy to point out *the importance of empathy development in the processes of identity development*. From the social constructivist point of view individual identity “grows” from the committed relations with important others in a social environment. Those relations should promote child’s ability to recognise position of the other (empathic element) and enforce sense of his individuality (autonomy element). And as Cooper, Callan, MacIntyre, Strike and some other theorists stress out, only promotion of autonomy element through classic kantian paradigm of discipline is not enough; so contemporary pedagogy should also promote development of authenticity:

“For Cooper, the essence of authenticity lies in the discovery that a person is a being characterised by care for oneself, therefore, he reflects his own character, evaluates situations in which he is involved, thinks about the goals he pursues, researches the language he speaks.”

(Kroflic 2005)

So the concept of empathy contains two important features for pedagogy:

- It shows us the way of moral development in the earliest stages of child development.
- It’s universal value is that it strengthen personal morality because enlightenment concept of autonomy is insufficient to stress out pro-social motives specially in the global world of diversity: “...although education should endeavour for autonomy as an ability to get familiar with the truth about the conditions of a good life with critical reasoning, it must also endeavour for people with strong altruistic tendencies, which autonomy does not ensure and, therefore, autonomy is just one of the educational values.” (Callan 1998)

Integration of this approach to “Multiple choice identity” project is based on this theoretical idea:

“According to Iris Murdoch one of the traditional factors of individuals' humanisation, i.e. art, must regain its value. For art is the very field of human creativity that warns us from slipping into egocentric fantasies by revealing to us, through artistic imagination, the truth of our own story and the personal stories of other people surrounding us (Murdoch 1983). Or, in the words of Kratsborn and Kramer: ‘Music is an (authentic, R. K.’s note) interplay of autonomy and contingency. “Autonomy is about universality and the sublime transcendence of specific meaning. Contingency is about historical concreteness and the intelligible production of specific meaning” (Kramer 2003)” (Kratsborn 2005). Thus art, and music especially, is a sense-opener, enables the critical treatment of reality, is an ideal means of communication and a media of connecting cultures, and simultaneously strengthens an individual's reflexive consciousness (idem).” (Kroflic 2005)

The concrete use of music and other arts in pre-school identity development processes is based on two didactical models that are connected with Hoffman’s theory of empathy:

- The youngest children (2-3 years old) are playing musical games called “bibarije”, which enable teacher to make closer personal relation to a child and later the same relation between children

themselves (“bibarija” is a game with rhythmic singing/declamation of a simple child song and fingers, walking through different parts of a child’s body).

- The older ones (4-6 years old) are listening, singing and expressing meanings of a child song “Circus”, that uncovers them different social roles, emotions and inter-relations. The outputs of the performances will be shared between children from four quadrants of Europe (Netherlands, Denmark, Latvia, Portugal and Slovenia) so they could get a feeling of a wider social space, the “connecting similarities” and “unthreatening differences” between the children of Europe.

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