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Epistemic beliefs and beliefs about teaching practices for moral learning in the early years of school: Relationships and complexities

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Abstract

While investment in young children is recognised as important for the development of moral values for a cohesive society, little is known about early years teaching practices that promote learning of moral values. This paper reports on observations and interviews with 11 Australian teachers, focusing on their epistemic beliefs and beliefs about teaching practices for moral education with children aged 5 to 8 years. The analysis revealed three main patterns of thinking about moral education: **f**Following others, **r**Reflecting on points of view, and **i**nforming reflection for action. These patterns suggest a relationship between epistemic beliefs and beliefs about teaching practices for moral learning which have implications for teacher professional development concerning experiences in moral education.

Key words

Personal epistemology; epistemic beliefs; moral education; beliefs about teaching practices for learning moral values; early years; elementary education

Word count

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Introduction

Over the last decade, strong social and political interest in values education has been developing across the world (Cooley, 2008; UNESCO, 2004) and in Australia (DEST, 2003a, 2003b; MCEETYA, 2006). Experiencing and constructing moral values for human rights and actively participating as a morally responsible member of society (Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, 2000) are important characteristics ~~for~~ of successful community participation. Moral values are socially constructed qualities (positive or negative, good or bad) that we experience and express through our own and others' behaviours, acts and attitudes. These include ideas, understandings, beliefs and reasoning about good / bad behaviour that are expressed and impact on us and others (Johansson, 2009).

Appropriate investment in young children is critical for positive social outcomes, including the development of moral values for a tolerant and cohesive society (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2007). While this important focus on the early years is gaining increasing international attention (Millei & Imre, 2009), this does not seem to be the case in Australia, with policy attention focussed more on primary and secondary levels of schooling (Ailwood et al., 2011). We know that one context in which children learn about moral values is the classroom (Johansson, 2011; Thornberg, 2009), however little is understood about teaching practices that support learning about moral values (Greenberg et al., 2003). One way to understand more about how teachers support learning moral values in early years classrooms is to focus on the relationship between teachers' epistemic beliefs and their beliefs about their teaching practices. Epistemic beliefs, which are the beliefs individuals hold about the nature of knowledge and knowing, have been shown to influence teaching practices in a range of domains such as science education and inclusive education (see Yang, Chang & Hsu, 2008 and Jordan & Stanovich, 2003 respectively). This paper focuses on understanding the relationships between teachers' beliefs about teaching moral values and epistemic beliefs in early years education classrooms (5-8 years; Preparatory – Year 3), which to date has been an unexplored area of research.

Teachers' epistemic beliefs for teaching moral values

There has been a long tradition of teaching moral values based on an understanding that children's moral values are developmental and stage-like (e.g., Piaget's theory of moral development in children). More

recently, however, there has been a shift towards considering how the child's environment and relationships impact on their moral learning (Killen & Smetana, 2006), which moves beyond the view that moral learning is developmentally simply an intrinsic development. This shift in thinking acknowledges the important role played by social contexts in how moral values are experienced and expressed (Emilsson & Johansson, 2009), which reflects a social constructivist perspective of teaching and learning. Palinscar (1998) similarly argues that social constructivism focuses "on the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge" (p. 345). Social constructivism, therefore, acknowledges the significance of teachers' beliefs and practices in how children construct knowledge about moral values (Tomanovic, 2003). Teachers' beliefs, in particular their beliefs about knowing and knowledge (or epistemic beliefs), have been shown to mediate teaching practice in a range of fields, however, little is known about how teachers' epistemic beliefs might be related to teaching practices for moral learning specifically.

A substantial body of research spanning the last 30 years shows that we hold core beliefs about knowledge and knowing, known as epistemic beliefs (Briell et al., 2011) that are considered to filter all other knowledge and beliefs (Schommer-Aikens, 2004), including the knowledge enacted about teaching and learning. In seminal research, Perry (1970) and Belenky et al., (1986) suggested that the range of epistemic beliefs may be described along a continuum from dualism, to multiplism and finally relativism. Individuals with dualistic epistemic beliefs view knowledge as received; absolute and unchanging. Multiplistic beliefs involve a view of knowledge as based on personal experience without the need to support these views with evidence other than personal experience. Here personal opinions count as knowledge. Finally, individuals, individuals with relativistic beliefs are more likely to view knowledge -as not only personally constructed but also able to be critiqued and supported with wider evidence. More recently, a similar continuum of beliefs has been described by Kuhn and Weinstock (2002): *absolutism* (similar to dualism - facts exist and can be transmitted to others), *subjectivism* (similar to multiplism - personal opinions constitute knowledge), and *evaluativism* (similar to relativism - a more nuanced perspective that knowledge is changeable and judgments are made based on evaluation of broadly based evidence). These developmental theories about epistemic beliefs are based on psychological frameworks in which beliefs are individually constructed (Pintrich, 2002). More recently, researchers like Kang and Wallace (2005) describe epistemic beliefs from a social constructivist

framework and argue that such beliefs are socially constructed in various teaching contexts. This paper explores teachers' epistemic beliefs using a social constructivist framework and examines such beliefs in the specific teaching context of moral education.

Studies have shown that teachers, like other populations, also hold epistemic beliefs that range from absolutism through to evaluativism (Feucht, 2009) and that research into teachers' epistemic beliefs provides insights into teaching practices (Chan & Elliott, 2004; Fitzgerald & Cunningham, 2002). For example, Chan and Elliott's (2004) research showed that Singaporean pre-service teachers' epistemic beliefs influenced: (a) how they judged which knowledge was important for different teaching situations; and (b) how they learnt certain information necessary for teaching. In other research, epistemic beliefs have been found to be related to the level and nature of reflection in teachers. Brownlee and Berthelsen (2008) showed that early childhood teachers who espoused evaluativist beliefs were more reflective about their own learning and talked about engaging with young children in ways that promoted active thinking and learning. Such teachers are also likely to be more adaptable, demonstrating a capacity to approach teaching in a variety of ways to suit the learner (Schraw & Sinatra, 2004). Teachers who were found to hold more absolutist epistemic beliefs were more likely to take an adult-centred approach with children, and provide learning experiences in which children were expected to observe and model teachers (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2008). Overall, this growing research evidence suggests that we need to explore what teachers believe about knowing and knowledge in order to better understand their teaching practices.

While our understanding of the relationships between teachers' epistemic beliefs and teaching practices across a range of educational settings is growing, there is limited research about epistemic beliefs in the context of teaching for moral learning in the early years. Brownlee et al. (2012) used case study methodology to investigate teachers' epistemic beliefs, moral pedagogies and children's epistemic beliefs ~~for~~ with regard to moral values. They found that one teacher held evaluativistic epistemic beliefs and used moral pedagogies that enabled children to engage in problem solving while the other teacher held subjectivist epistemic beliefs with teaching practices that were focussed on children modelling correct moral values in class. In other research Walker and her colleagues (2012) investigated teachers' epistemic beliefs and their beliefs about how children learn moral values. They used the *Personal*

Epistemological Beliefs Survey to examine the relationship between epistemic beliefs and beliefs about how children learn moral values with 379 early years teachers in Australia. These quantitative data showed that teachers who described epistemic beliefs as a process of evaluating evidence (evaluativism) were more likely to believe that children learned moral values by taking responsibility for constructing their own learning about moral values. On the other hand, teachers who reported that knowledge was more absolute and objective in nature (absolutism), tended to describe children's learning of moral values as a process of following distinct moral rules. While this research did not report on teachers' teaching practices as such, beliefs about how children learn moral values might be helpful for considering beliefs about teaching practices because such beliefs about learning are linked to beliefs about teaching (Pratt, 2002). Pratt argued that "a perspective on teaching is an interrelated set of views and intentions that gives direction and justification to our actions. It is a lens through which we view teaching and learning." (p. 6). In order to find out more specific teaching practices, 11 teachers from the original sample of 379 teachers volunteered to be part of the current in-depth study of epistemic beliefs and teaching practices. These interviews are the focus of this paper.

There is already a growing body of evidence that epistemic beliefs are intertwined with beliefs about teaching practices in a range of teaching disciplines (Chan & Elliott, 2004; Fitzgerald & Cunningham, 2002); it is therefore possible that the same relationships may exist with teaching practices for learning moral values. The work of Basourakos (1999) sheds light on this likely relationship. According to Basourakos, moral pedagogies can be described in terms of contextual and conventional moral pedagogies. The first, *Conventional moral pedagogy* reflects the teaching of abstract moral reasoning using direct instruction or modelling of appropriate moral values (Basourakos, 1999). In this approach to teaching, moral values are absolute and able to be transmitted to another. In particular, the transmission of rules, known as organisational morality, does not promote the sharing of decision making and so the perspectives of others are not valued to the same extent as the teacher's views. Such teaching practices reflect an absolutist epistemology described earlier in this review (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002).

The second approach, *Contextual moral pedagogy*, involves encouraging children to construct their own understanding about moral values and practices. They are supported by teachers to see moral issues from a range of viewpoints and to reflect on these viewpoints as they construct understanding. These

approaches reflect evaluativist epistemic beliefs (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). Teachers with evaluativistic beliefs are more likely to promote respectful interactions with others, including children and their families. These respectful connections also promote a sharing of knowledge and power with children and their families, referred to as relational morality. Such practices are based on a view of knowledge and knowing as constructed rather than given, with no one person holding ultimate authority on moral truth. It seems likely that teachers' epistemic beliefs might be related to their moral pedagogies, although we would argue that the binary of contextual versus conventional moral pedagogies may be too simplistic.

While Earlier research has highlighted links between epistemic beliefs and practice in general, and Basourakos' (1999) descriptions of moral pedagogy suggest there may be an association of teaching practices and epistemic beliefs in the context of learning about moral values.

The study

The current research investigated the following research questions: *What is the nature of epistemic beliefs and beliefs about teaching practices for moral learning in the early years of primary school education? Is there a relationship between epistemic beliefs and beliefs about teaching practices for moral learning, and if so how can this be characterised?*

The study used a stimulated recall interview methodology to investigate how teachers' epistemic beliefs and beliefs about classroom practices were constructed in the context of moral education. The sample was chosen through an on-line survey completed in 2008. Early years teachers in Australia were invited to participate after completing this survey and selection was made based on those consents. The survey consisted of questions relating to teachers' epistemic beliefs and beliefs about children's moral learning (Walker et al., 2012). A total of 379 teachers responded. The respondents were located Australia wide and had from 1 – 46 years teaching experience. Teachers were invited to agree to be contacted in relation to further participation in the study in 2009. One hundred and ninety-three teachers agreed to be contacted. Of these, many were no longer teaching in the early years in 2009, many were not from Queensland, and some had retired. The remaining teachers from the list were contacted and invited to participate in the follow-up interview study. Eleven teachers from seven schools in Queensland, Australia agreed to participate. The teachers were primarily from white-middle class backgrounds. The teachers were drawn from both state funded (government schools) and independent Schools. In

Australia, an independent school is a non-government school that is governed and managed at the level of the individual school. Its governing body is autonomous. Four of these teachers were teaching in one independent school, two were teaching in a separate independent school with a specific democratic philosophy ~~community-run school~~ and there was one teacher in each of the remaining independent Christian and sState schools. All schools were in a metropolitan area, except for the independent school which was in regional Queensland. Before commencing data collection in the classrooms, relevant permissions and consent were obtained from principals, teachers, parents and children. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic details of the teacher participants.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Data procedures

Empirical procedures consisted of two main stages. First, a period of observation took place in each teachers' classroom. These observations were not designed to provide evidence of teaching practices but rather to function as a stimulation for later discussions about beliefs about teaching practices during the interview with the teacher. Teachers were observed and photographed for approximately one hour as they interacted with children in their classrooms. The teachers were not required to explicitly teach about moral values; the aim was to examine teacher-child interactions during the course of a normal morning period. These included interactions such as maintaining relationships, dealing with conflicts, taking care of one's environment and resources, and engaging with school rules. For example, during classroom teaching sessions, one teacher was observed discussing with children the importance of taking-turns or showing consideration for others. These observations reflected understandings, beliefs and reasoning about good/bad behavior that impacts on others (Johansson, 2009). This definition enabled us to consider both explicit moral values lessons and general interactions between teacher and children which exemplified ideas about good/bad behavior and how this behavior impacts on others. Interactions such as these were photographed.

To supplement the photographs, detailed field notes were taken by the observer about the interactions, including a record of the comments made by the teacher and children. Field notes protocols were decided upon by the research team prior to data collection. Details such as the setting, time, participants, context

and the participants' words and actions were recorded in field notes and a photograph of each interactional episode was taken. If the interaction was prolonged, several photographs were taken at various stages during the interaction.

The second stage of the data collection involved interviews with the teachers in two parts. The first part of the interview included a stimulated recall interview. Stimulated recall elicits thoughts that reflect teachers' knowledge, as well as general beliefs and principles of teaching and learning (Dunkin et al., 1998). All of the photographs taken during ~~the a~~ period of observation were reviewed ~~as stimulus to stimulate discussion concerned about to elicit discussion about~~ actions and interactions. In the first part of the interview, these photographs were used to ask teachers to discuss their teaching practices and their role in teaching children moral values. Approximately six photographs were shown to the teacher during the interview. These photographs were not meant to provide evidence of practice, rather to provoke discussion throughout the interviews.

In the second part of the interview, teachers were asked about their beliefs about knowing and knowledge (epistemic beliefs) in the context of moral education. While the same questions were asked in each interview, the interviewer at times would use prompts to clarify points or encourage the interviewee to expand upon an area of interest (see appendix 1 for a list of these interview questions).

The teachers were interviewed directly after the observations. The interviews were conducted by a member of the research team, usually the member who had carried out observations of the teacher's practice. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis process

In order to understand teachers' epistemic beliefs and beliefs about teaching practices in moral education contexts, an inductive approach was used to derive themes from the data. This involved a three stage process of a) organizing the data, b) creating categories, c) and then developing general patterns or themes from these categories (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). See Table 2 for a summary of the categories and patterns that emerged. Each stage of this data construction process is now discussed in more detail.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

First, *organizing the data* was the initial process of becoming sensitized to the transcripts through repeated readings (Creswell, 2005). Here attention was paid to the aspects of the transcripts that related first to epistemic beliefs and then beliefs about teaching practices for learning moral values. In the second stage of *creating categories*, meaning was attributed to portions of interview transcripts (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). This part of the analysis was about “comparing and contrasting” segments of meaning with others to establish these categories (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 366). Specifically, categories were developed to describe teaching practices that teachers reported engaging in, as well as their epistemic beliefs. The category labels were derived by using key words and concepts used by the participants in the interview transcripts. Examples of categories for teaching practices included modelling, discussion, rewards, explaining, reflection, encouraging children to take ownership, problem solving and so on, as described in Table 2. The categories of epistemic beliefs, as summarised in Table 2 included the following:

- focus on personal opinions - no explicit reflection on practical or theoretical evidence
- evaluation of practical strategies - reflection focused on self
- evaluation of practical strategies - reflection focused on self and others
- evaluation of practical strategies - reflection focused on self, others and community
- evaluation of theories and practice - reflection focused on research and practical perspectives

In the third stage, *developing general patterns or themes*, we derived patterns by looking at relationships between categories of beliefs about teaching practices and epistemic beliefs across each individual transcript (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). These patterns, described in Table 2, included “Following others”, “Reflecting on points of view” and “Informing reflection for action”.

Rigour in the analysis of these data analysis was informed by a process known as dialogic reliability in which disagreements in coding are resolved through discussion and negotiation (Åkerlind, 2005). One researcher and two research assistants coded six interviews, negotiating the themes. Once codes had been established through this process, the remaining five interviews were coded by the two research assistants. Next, all eleven interviews were interrogated by two principal researchers in the project. One researcher

had expertise in examining transcripts for teaching practices for learning moral values whilst the other had expertise in investigating epistemic beliefs using interview transcripts. The two researchers worked through each interview checking the credibility of the quotes in the context of the whole interview and making sure that any disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Findings

The analysis of the interviews revealed three main patterns of thinking in the context of moral education: *Following others*, *Reflecting on points of view*, and *Informing reflection for action* (See Table 2). It can be seen that from *Following others* through to *Informing reflection for action* there is a change in teaching practices from a focus on modelling and rewards through to problem solving and children theorising. ~~The teachers' e~~Epistemic beliefs ~~of individual teachers also ranged from also changed from~~ knowledge based on personal opinions through to a view of knowledge based on reflections on theory and practice.

“Following others”

In the first pattern, “Following others”, epistemic beliefs are subjectivist in nature and do not focus on evaluating different points of view. This pattern also included beliefs that teaching practices should mostly involve the teacher modelling appropriate moral values and using rules and rewards to promote moral behaviour.

Epistemic beliefs

Sarah talked about epistemic beliefs for moral education as based on one's personal opinions and perspectives. Such a focus on personal perspectives, without the need to weigh or reflect certain competing claims, is referred to as subjectivist epistemic beliefs by Kuhn and Weinstock (2002). Sarah explained that as individuals we have different ways of teaching, that there is no “right and a wrong way” to teach and that “we all interpret things differently”:

We will have different opinions. Like I say, I don't feel that is right in my classroom, but the teacher next-door may allow it, but as a school we have certain morals and values in a school. Swearing is not tolerated. So if I can put it, teachers have their own right way, but as teachers we

still have to abide by, if I can put it, rules or expected behaviours. I don't know whether that impacts on that sort of thing. Our opinion may be this, but because we're in that school setting, we're expected to do certain things and behave in certain ways.

Knowledge about teaching moral values was clearly a personal choice because "teachers have their own right way". This suggested that Sarah did not weigh up or evaluate competing ideas in constructing knowledge about teaching moral values in the classroom.

In addition to this notion of relying on personal opinion, Sarah also believed that sometimes she needed to observe or "follow" other teachers' practice in order to gain knowledge about how to teach moral values.

...in my early years of teaching. I think observing more mature teachers at that stage in my life, it did influence as in, oh that would be a nice way to speak to the kids or that would be a better way to model, if I can put it, modelling the things. I think that has, through my years of playing sport it's influenced or **watching my kids' coaches**, coached their kids, has changed my perspective on how to teach PE or how to involve, because again it's a different set of morals and values, I think, when you're on the sports field. It's not a different set, you always have the same set, but different things come up... so I think yeah, watching other people do that has definitely, just the different ways. I think it's different methods. I don't think it's influenced my personal morals or values.

Her way of knowing about teaching morals was clearly practical in these quotes because she did not refer to theories or research in her construction of knowledge. The quote [above](#) also suggests that she did not evaluate her own or others' perspectives in this process. [While she may have reflected on the practices she observed, she does not describe the analysis of a range of perspectives.](#) However, she did acknowledge that different situations (such as playing sport) may provide different contexts for consideration.

Beliefs about teaching practices for learning moral values

The pattern described as "*Following others*" involved a focus on modelling moral behaviours using rules and rewards. Sarah also explained the need to explicitly teach and model moral behaviours when asked

about her teaching practices:

...we can still teach the gender because they work with ladies all the time. So it's, 'let the lady out first' ... 'you need to respect mums'. We talk about mums or when we have parents coming in for help, we thank them, 'thank the helping mums' and that type of thing.

She also mentions some classroom rules, such as welcoming people when they enter the room, thanking peers for listening and sharing in show and tell (a time in which children can bring in objects or relate experiences to their class as a whole).

I think it's modelling. I think if I'm modelling correctly and talking to them correctly, they're going to be doing the same. If I use my please and thank yous, they're going to use their please and thank yous. If I have respect for them, I think they all build-up respect for me. Even though they're young, you have to teach them. In the beginning of the year we do a lot of how we greet people. Like every afternoon when they go home, they shake our hand. We shake hands, they look at us in the eye and then they go off to their mob. People come in, we welcome them. You know, in show and tell, good morning, we say their name, thank you for listening, thank you for sharing, those sort of things.

The focus on rewards, and following what others do, was also discussed in her explanation of a photograph taken of children participating in group work in the classroom. The facilitator asked Sarah to tell her more about a photo in which the children in groups were rewarded with gold coins for taking turns effectively.

... everybody has to have a turn throughout the day of taking boxes, taking things, and if we see that they're talking to each other or I had a turn now, it's your turn now, respect one another... that they would then get the reward, ~~and at the end of the week the boys with the most coins in their treasure chest actually—so, you know,.....~~ sSometimes we reward with a sticker.

Sarah explained that rewards can be used as incentives to promote what is viewed in the classroom as positive behaviour, such as listening to fellow peers, taking turns – behaviours that can relate to the moral value of respecting others. She also acknowledged that children have different personalities, some

more dominant. In order to encourage turn-taking and respect for each other, Sarah uses the strategy of providing children with the opportunity to take the role of captain for a day as indicated in the following quote:

What we started off with in the classroom was we had rewards for groups working together, listening carefully. Because you often find kids, your strong one wants to do everything. So this was a way of trying to make everybody have turns, respecting each other, giving each other turns. So we initially had a leader, a captain for each table, and they'd have a day to be a captain. So they would then take turns.

Beyond modelling and extrinsic motivation, Sarah also talked about teaching moral values through games and discussions about behaviours. It seems, for her, that children do not just learn through modelling, but sometimes need to actively discuss or participate in games in order to learn moral values.

“Reflecting on points of view”

In the second pattern, “Reflecting on points of view”, teachers described epistemic beliefs that were focused on reflection on perspectives. This pattern comprised three variations in reflecting on points of view: namely reflecting on *self*, reflecting on *self and perspectives of others*, and reflecting on *self, perspectives of others and perspectives of the community*. While all three variations showed evidence of reflection on points of view, the beliefs about teaching practices varied in interesting ways.

Reflecting on self

Epistemic beliefs. Two teachers, Penny and Debbie, described the need to take on board others’ strategies about teaching for moral values - if they suited them, then they tried them out with a clear focus on what was right for them - a focus on *self* (See Table 2). For example:

(I) take what **suits me** and what **I think is right** ...I try it. I might get ideas from them about how to handle a situation. I will certainly **try it and give feedback** (to other teachers). (Penny)

Here opinions about teaching practices were considered to be more valid than others if they were practical in nature and could be shown to work in the classroom. This demonstrated the strong practical

focus of these epistemic beliefs.

Beliefs about teaching practices for learning moral values. Penny and Debbie also described using other teachers' ideas for teaching for moral values, and reflecting on how these strategies fitted with their personal beliefs, before trying them out in practice. See Table 2. These two teachers also discussed a range of teaching practices for moral learning including observing, promoting empathy and limited discussions with children about behaviours. Each of these teaching practices can be seen respectively in the following quotes from Penny:

You've got to **model** it in the early years... They copy what you do is the most important thing so it's really important for teachers to apologise when they get something wrong. (Penny)

I was talking to him today about the way he behaves and how other people see his behaviour and **how it affects them** and they make it hard for them to want to be with him so. (And) ... certainly through **discussions** about why we do things and make decisions for not doing things because of the safety angle or being kind or thoughtful so they're discussions but this age group you keep it fairly short. (Penny)

In these excerpts Penny described teaching practices that were focused on instruction and modelling the right moral values, while children's learning was focused on observing these behaviours at home and at school. She also talked about teaching strategies that involved children in discussions, with children discussing and reflecting on these moral values to promote empathy, and how it affects them. However this focus on discussions seemed to be more about making ideas clear to children rather than inviting children to discuss different perspectives. She also comments on the need to limit such discussions due to the children's age.

Reflecting on self and perspectives of others

Epistemic beliefs. In the next variation, where teachers *reflected on points of view (self and others)* (Abigail, Dave, Jill and Libby in Table 2), there is a similar focus on evaluating practical knowledge without the need to reflect on theory or research. What is different in this variation, however, is that reflection involves a broader range of perspectives - strategies need to fit with their personal beliefs, and

the perspectives of others. For example, Jill indicated that the school's philosophy needed to be also considered in this evaluation:

you are constantly looking at your practice... and how I can improve or better. If I see something that **I believe** is beneficial to my philosophy or teaching practice or best practice, I'm fairly open to doing those kind of things... (When I make judgments) I guess I use my own **sense**. I look at the **philosophy** of what the school believes, I wouldn't cross that. And the **bible**, if it comes from a Christian point of view. (Jill)

These teachers also talked about taking on board others' strategies about teaching for moral values, weighing up these views and then trying them out in practice. There was no discussion of how theories or research informed the construction of this knowledge. However, these views differed from the previous variation (*self only*) because a range of perspectives were taken into account other than simply linking to their own beliefs. In the example above Jill reflects on her own beliefs and those of the school community.

Beliefs about teaching practices for learning moral values. The four teachers seemed to describe similar strategies to Penny, however, they also discussed how children could learn about moral values through thinking and negotiation:

Talking and role playing... can negotiate ... need to ... express what that problem is... to deal with really tricky issues like social and emotional stuff and active citizenship, at this level it's about them knowing who they are, being able to express their needs, accepting that sometimes they can't always get their needs met and accepting that maybe even though talking about negotiation. (Jill)

This focus on thinking and negotiation indicates that children are constructing meaning within the context of moral learning, which was not evident in the two teachers who reflected on only "self".

Reflecting on self, perspectives of others and perspectives of the community

Epistemic beliefs. The practical nature of evaluation of knowledge was also evident in the final variation, *Reflecting on points of view – a focus on self, others and the community* (See Table 2) as described by

one teacher. However, Janice expressed views that were different to the previous two variations, because she extended the analysis of perspectives to include an understanding of how the broader values of society shape knowledge about moral values and thinking:

(How do you handle difference of opinions?) You make a judgment and you talk to people about it... (and) I suppose morals and values are sort of community and socially set.

In this conception it seems that while self and others' perspectives are important in constructing moral knowledge, broader societal values are also important. This extension of perspectives to include the broader social context brings with it intersubjectivity, or, "agreed upon morals and values that are community and socially set". She recognised the role of constructed rather than absolute moral knowledge, and that some opinions about teaching practices may be better justified than others:

(Are some opinions better than others?) I don't know if better is the right word... some people are better at justifying their opinions. So that makes them seem better but I don't know if better... I suppose an insight into their **reasoning** or why they do something... Like me trying to justify why I teach a certain way. Because I think that... what I'm doing is good practice. I don't know what other people think but... at some level you've got to have **a belief in your own values** and your own – what you choose to do... developing that in kids is important to realise, that yes, you're allowed to have some of those decisions and if that's the way you feel that's okay. And not everyone will agree with you and think that what you're doing is necessarily the best thing to do but... if you back yourself and that's the way you want to do it, well then go for it. (Janice)

There is an indication in this quote that knowledge is constructed, and more valid, if based on some sort of evidence about reasoning. Janice does not provide a clear picture about what such reasoning would involve, but it seems that she would not simply accept others' "truths" nor does she indicate that anyone's opinions is as good as another's (subjectivism). She comments on the importance of being able to 'back' yourself suggesting the importance of justification.

Beliefs about teaching practices for learning moral values. Like the previous variation, Janice also described modelling, discussion, thinking, problem solving in learning and negotiation (taking ownership) as strategies for teaching children moral values. However, the difference was that Janice also

talked about how children need to be open to other perspectives:

They learn a lot outside of school and I suppose school gives them the opportunity to test them a little bit particularly as they get older and I suppose maybe look at their own values in different ways or here I suppose for them it is hearing other peoples' perspectives and things and learning how to cope with that. (Janice)

In this excerpt there is a focus on constructing moral meaning and problem solving, but also allowing children to make their own decisions. The teacher seemed to understand the role played by weighing up others' perspectives and saw this as a necessary skill for children to develop. This was not evident in the previous two variations, where teachers focused their evaluation on the perspectives of self and other's, and not the broader community.

Summary

Overall, in the final two variations teachers described reflection on perspectives that went beyond a focus on self to include others' perspectives and this was linked to beliefs that teaching practices should help children to construct meaning through problem solving, taking responsibility, and making decisions. This was not evident in the first variation *Reflecting on points of view – self*, which was clearly centred on beliefs about teaching practices that involved the teacher modelling the right moral values and rewarding appropriate moral behaviour.

“Informing reflection for action”

In the third pattern of thinking about moral education, Alice, Cynthia, and Melissa described evaluativistic epistemic beliefs in which knowledge construction involved an analysis of both research and practice. These epistemic beliefs went beyond a focus on the practical - what works for me - to include reflection on research perspectives to construct knowledge. These beliefs were connected to teaching practices that promoted children taking ownership and solving problems as well as working with families

Epistemic beliefs. Alice, Cynthia and Melissa described a broadening of the role of reflection on multiple perspectives to include reflections on theoretical perspectives (see Table 2). For example, Melissa talked

about taking on board others' strategies for teaching of moral values, evaluating these views and then trying them out in practice. She reflected on how some opinions hold more weight if backed by research and training. Some knowledge is absolute, while other knowledge can be changeable.

We do a lot of talking as a team, but (Teacher A) particularly, because she's a more experienced teacher than I am. (Teacher A)...has taken on the principal role at the moment, but she has also been an early years teacher in the past. So we have a lot of dialogue with her... There are people's opinions who have more weight... People who have educated themselves in issues; people that have read and researched and thought. People who are trained, such as teachers, who went to colleges; counsellors and professionals. Then they need to have a bit more weight because they've actually done some independent and external thinking, research and thought about things; rather than just an emotional reaction to one particular case, but larger, broader kind of ideas. (Melissa)

This excerpt reflects Kuhn and Weinstock's (2002) notion of *evaluativism*, where knowledge, is viewed as a construction. This involves actively evaluating a range of sources of evidence or perspectives (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002), which we describe here as complex evaluativism to differentiate it from practical evaluativism described in the previous pattern.

Beliefs about teaching practices for learning moral values. While the three teachers mentioned teaching practices that involved teacher explanations and modelling, the focus was more on strategies that promoted active learning and independence as well as showing: (a) concern (empathy); (b) reflection; (c) children taking ownership and solving problems; and (d) working with families. Extending from this notion of working with families was a set of teaching practices that one teacher, Melissa, described as relationships-based teaching:

It's very relationship-based teaching. We're very involved in all the children's lives and the children are very involved in our lives... It's not parenting per se, but it comes back to some of those same sorts of experiences and values. (Melissa)

Strong relationships-based teaching relies on a sense of respect for both children and their families. Melissa described children as both competent and powerful. She also indicated "there's a responsibility for everybody to care for everybody else". In the next quote she describes a democratic approach to

teaching moral values:

It's to do with **growing good people**. Moral values... is teaching children and adults to be good citizens and good people who are compassionate and care about others... **Democratic values** are very important... to that citizenship.... being able to have an opinion, discuss an idea, make a vote, be heard, and also to listen to the ideas of others and have a voice in processes that concern you. And to stand up for other people too... is a part of democracy that's really important; standing up for people who might not be able to talk for themselves. (Melissa)

These issues of democracy and being mindful of relationships to promote a focus on children's perspectives were evident in the complex evaluativist epistemic beliefs described in this study.

Discussion

The first research question related to describing the nature of epistemic beliefs and beliefs about teaching practices for moral learning in early years classrooms. In terms of epistemic beliefs, this study has contributed to a more nuanced understanding of evaluativism to the epistemic beliefs field of research. Evaluativism is described in the literature typically as a view of knowledge that involves personal construction, which is informed by the evaluation of various perspectives (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). This study has contributed two main findings in regard to evaluativism:

1. Evaluativism in this study can be characterised in two broad ways: *practical evaluativism*, in which knowledge is constructed by weighing up different perspectives related to practical knowledge (strategies); and *complex evaluativism*, in which knowledge is constructed by weighing up different perspectives related to both practical and theoretical knowledge. These two dimensions of evaluativism were also described in earlier research by Brownlee and Berthelsen (2008) and represent a more complex way of understanding evaluativism.
2. Practical evaluativism can be further differentiated by considering the range of perspectives that are attended to when constructing knowledge. As teachers describe a broader range of perspectives that are reflected upon (self, others and the community), there is a corresponding shift towards teaching practices that are focussed on helping children to problem solve and construct understanding in the process of

learning about moral values. This fine-grained understanding of evaluativism has not been previously considered in the epistemic beliefs literature and offers insights into how evaluativistic beliefs might evolve over time.

These new understandings of what it means to view knowledge as evaluativism can help teacher educators to re-think how we interact with pre-service and in-service teachers during professional development experiences. There is a substantial body of research that suggests that interventions which help students to focus explicitly on their own epistemic beliefs may assist in the development of evaluativistic beliefs over time (Brownlee, Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2001; Cano, 2005; Schommer, 1994; Stacey et al., 2005). These sorts of interventions focus on helping students to think about what it is they believe about the nature of knowing and knowledge ~~with a view to helping them to~~ and reconstruct their beliefs ~~that sometimes~~ with a view to recognising that evidenced-based thinking is needed to think critically and deal with ill-defined problems in teaching (Kardash & Scholes, 1996; Kuhn & Udell, 2001). This is also the case for moral education.

The outcomes of this study suggest that, in order to develop evaluativistic epistemic beliefs, teacher educators may need to encourage students to explicitly reflect, not only on what sort of perspectives they are reflecting on (referential dimension - practical or theoretical), but also on a variety of perspectives-self, others, community- and how they might be related to each other (structural dimension) (see Brownlee, 2001). A focus on the referential (nature of epistemic beliefs) and structural (the variety of different perspectives) dimension has not been evident in the epistemic beliefs literature to date. Most research simply reports that it is important for students to ~~actually think~~ explicitly ~~think and generally~~ about their own epistemic beliefs ~~in general~~ (Brownlee, Shraw & Berthelsen, 2011). This is a new area of research into epistemic beliefs that requires further research attention in the context of moral pedagogy.

In terms of beliefs about teaching practices for moral learning, the study has also provided a more nuanced characterisation of moral pedagogies that go beyond the simple binaries of contextual and conventional pedagogies presented by Basourakos (1999). Basourakos' description of moral pedagogy as either contextual or conventional did not reflect the teaching practices described in our study. The in-depth interviews showed that while these two types of moral pedagogy could be broadly observed in the

teachers' responses and in the observations of their interactions with children, in reality their moral pedagogies were more complex than this. For example, the teacher who reflected a pattern of *Following others* talked mostly about conventional teaching practices related to the teacher modelling values and children following moral rules although she commented, in passing, that children should be able to learn about moral values by playing games and participating in active discussions. On the other hand, the teachers who reflected the *Informing reflection for action* pattern foregrounded teaching that was focussed on children constructing meaning and problem solving, and occasionally suggested that teaching might also need to involve modelling moral values although this was not the focus of their responses. These complexities in the description of teaching practices provide a more nuanced understanding of contextual and conventional moral pedagogies that go beyond the simple binaries presented by Basourakos.

In response to the second research question: *(is there a relationship between early years teachers' epistemic beliefs and beliefs about teaching practices for learning moral values in moral education?)*, the patterns of thinking that emerged in this study suggested a link between epistemic beliefs and beliefs about teaching practices. Epistemic beliefs that were focused on *Following others* were linked to teaching based on modelling moral values to children. The *Reflecting on points of view* patterns showed epistemic beliefs that knowledge was constructed by reflecting on multiple perspectives related to practice and these beliefs were related to beliefs that teaching practices promoted children's reflection on moral values, that is constructing meaning and problem solving. In the *Informing reflection for action* pattern of thinking, teachers went beyond this epistemic focus on the practical - what works - to reflect on theory and research. They also talked about teaching practices that were based on problem solving and relationship-building. These relationships were not surprising given that epistemic beliefs have long been considered to represent core beliefs that filter all knowledge and beliefs (Schommer-Aikens, 2004).

The relationship between epistemic beliefs and beliefs about teaching practices was also suggested in Basourakos' (1999) discussion of conventional and contextual moral pedagogies, although the binary nature of these pedagogies is challenged by our research. Conventional moral pedagogy, which is characterised by direct instruction or modelling of moral values (Basourakos, 1999) was mostly evident in the first pattern "*Following others*" where the teacher described a subjectivist epistemic framework,

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and referred to a view of knowing based on personal opinions that could not be questioned or evaluated as better or worse. The teaching practices involved modelling and the use of extrinsic rewards. Basourakos indicated that this approach typically involves the teacher transmitting the rules to children, without sharing decision making. Here teaching practices reflect epistemic beliefs that are not focused on reflection in the construction of knowledge (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). On the other hand, contextual moral pedagogies involve strategies to help children to reflect on a range of perspectives in learning moral values (Basourakos, 1999). These approaches reflect evaluativist epistemic beliefs which view knowledge as a personal construction. This process of constructing such knowledge involves not simply accepting moral values but actively evaluating a range of sources of evidence or perspectives (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002). Teachers with evaluativistic beliefs are more likely to be respectful and considerate of a range of perspectives including those of children and their families, which can promote a sharing of knowledge and power. This was suggested in the *Reflecting on points of view* and *Informing reflection for action* patterns of thinking described in this study. Such an approach reflects the notion of the “rich child” who plays a role in “shaping their own childhoods” (Woodhead, 2008, p. 21), where children’s voices are considered. Emilson and Johansson (2009) noted that children’s voices are often not heard because of teachers’ attitudes, rules and use of power. It is important that teachers are mindful of their relationships with children in order to listen to children’s voices effectively (Rhedding-Jones, Bae & Winger, 2008).

This study has shown [that](#) an interesting relationship exists between epistemic beliefs and beliefs about teaching practices, with complex epistemic beliefs linked to beliefs about teaching practices that encourage children to take an active part in constructing their own understandings of moral values. It is important now to consider such relationships in the context of research that investigates actual teaching practices, not just beliefs about teaching. This research could help to provide clearer indications of the significance of assisting teachers to reflect on their own epistemic beliefs as part of professional development aimed at promoting contextual moral pedagogies in elementary classrooms.

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Appendix 1 Interview questions

Using the photos

- Can you tell me about this situation? What were your goals for the children to learn about social and moral values?
- Can you tell me more about this activity and why it is important?
- What are your expectations of the *children/child* to learn in this situation?
- Were you satisfied with the way the experience went or would you have preferred different outcomes and if so what?
- What do you believe is good practice in teaching for moral values? How do you see your role in this process?
- Can you tell me about the school context and broader policy that influences teaching for social and moral values?
- How do you help children develop equality according to gender, race? Could you give an example? What are the dilemmas?
- What are your ideas about children's participation in school/class? (e.g. decision-making)

Epistemic beliefs

You are the teacher of a prep class in a small school. You are the only adult present – there are no other teachers around. David has been upset all morning and suddenly runs out of the classroom crying. You can see that he is heading for the front gate.

- How would you handle the situation?
- What options did you have? How did you make the decision? Why did you make this decision?
- What went through your head when you found yourself in this situation?
- How might others help or hinder you in dealing with it?
- Can you think of any other situations where you have had to make a difficult moral decision?
- Are there people who have had a significant influence on your role in teaching moral values? Who are these people and how have they influenced you? (answers reflect expectations of parents, advisors, and others in authority).

- Why are these people's opinions important to you? (answers reflect reasons for valuing someone's opinion reflects views about knowledge and criteria used to judge knowledge claims) . Do other people's opinions influence your practice? In what ways?
- Sometimes people talk about there being "right answers" or "truths" in teaching moral values. What are your views?
- Do think that anybody's opinion is as good as another when it comes to teaching social and moral values?
- If people had different views about what you do in relation to teaching moral values how would you handle these different viewpoints? (how teachers resolve competing knowledge claims- offers insight into views of their own role in decision making)

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Table 1. Overview of teacher participants

| Pseudonym | Gender | Qualifications and teaching experience | Class | School type |
|------------------|---------------|---|--------------|--------------------------------------|
| Abigail | Female | 4 yrs (early years) Qualifications: Bachelor of Education, Major in Early Childhood | Prep | Independent, holistic approach |
| Penny | Female | 30 yrs (early years) Qualifications: Brisbane kindergarten teacher's college | Year 1 | Independent, holistic approach |
| Libby | Female | 2 years (early years), 5.5 years (other age groups), 1 year supply and contract Qualifications: Bachelor of Arts & Drama and a Bachelor of Education & Secondary | Year 2 | Independent, holistic approach |
| Janice | Female | 1.5 years Qualifications: A Bachelor of Education majoring in physical education, Primary Education | Year 3 | Independent, holistic approach |
| Melissa | Female | 8 years (early years) Qualifications: Bachelor of Arts in Theatre and a Graduate Bachelor in Early Childhood Education | Year 1-3 | Community funded, non-denominational |
| Dave | Male | 1.5 years (early years) 2 years (older children) Qualifications: Bachelor of Education and a Bachelor of Visual Art | Year 3-5 | Community funded, non-denominational |
| Debbie | Female | 4 yrs full-time (early years), part-time relief work Qualifications: Dip Ed Early Childhood, Bachelor of Education | Year 1 | Private, Christian |
| Alice | Female | 23 years Qualifications: Early childhood, Bachelor of Education | Prep | State, non-denominational |
| Cynthia | Female | 25 years Qualifications: Masters in Early Childhood Education | Prep | Private, Christian |
| Sarah | Female | 24 years Qualifications: high diploma junior primary (Africa), focus on Junior primary (early childhood from years one to three) | Prep | Private, Christian, all-boys |
| Jill | Female | 4 years (prep), 13 years teacher aide in preschool Qualifications: Bachelor of Education | Prep | Private, Christian |

Table 2. Teachers' epistemic beliefs and moral pedagogies: categories and patterns of thinking

| Patterns of thinking | “Following others” | | “Reflecting on points of view” | | “Informing reflection for action” |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|--|---|---|
| Moral pedagogy categories | modelling, extrinsic rewards, discussions | model, develop empathy, discussions | model, explain reflect, children take ownership, problem solving, children make choices, negotiation | problem solving, thinking, children take ownership, take on children's perspectives | problem solving, children theorise, co-teaching relationships, children take ownership and have power, children competent and responsible |
| Epistemic Beliefs categories | focus on personal opinions - no reflection on practical or theoretical evidence | evaluation of practical strategies - reflection focused on self | evaluation of practical strategies - reflection focused on self and others | evaluation of practical strategies - reflection focused on self, others and community | evaluation of theories and practice - reflection focused on research and practical perspectives |
| Teacher/ Year Teaching | Sarah / Prep | Debbie / Yr 1 Penny / Yr 1 | Abigail / Prep Dave / Yr 3-5 Jill / Prep Libby / Yr 2 | Janice / Yr 3 | Alice / Prep Cynthia / Prep Melissa / Yr 1-3 |