The Role of Virtue Ethics in Training Students' Environmental Attitudes

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Abstract

If we are to achieve an education based on quality standards, the constant ecological education must determine the building up and the development of a responsible ecological attitude in all students. But the existence of some confusions and contradictions at the level of the relationships between the three components – the cognitive, the motivational -emotional one and the volitional one – of the attitudes towards the environment, can create disbalances. Valuing some new virtues (e.g.: the respect towards nature, prudence, the practical wisdom, compassion in building up the human behavior towards nature etc.) would help improve the relationship between man and nature.

The role of contemporary school becomes fundamental in the context of future environmental issues. It must play a more boldly role by putting into practice the ecological education and by focusing on attitudes towards values rather than knowledge. Ecological education must be implemented on a profound level in the preschool and primary education. It must be based on a curriculum whose strategy is to make children become more sensitive towards the environment.

This study aims to conduct a thorough analysis of how the theories of virtue ethics can infuse the Romanian curriculum at the level of the primary school, and an analysis of the practical parts of the environmental awareness training for students.

Keywords: Virtue education; respect towards nature; ecological education; educational strategy;

1. Introduction

The ecological education can be found in the Romanian curriculum at all school levels. One of its purposes is that of developing the ecological conscience, the sense of responsibility and of solidarity between the
individuals so as to preserve and improve the environment (M. Momanu, 2002). Three components are involved in the building-up and development of ecological conscience, as in the case of moral conscience: the cognitive, the affective and the volitional/acting one. Therefore, the ecological attitude alongside with the moral-ecological representations, notions, feelings, beliefs, and judgment, are very important for the building-up and development of the ecological conscience, even from a small age, beginning with the children attending the kindergarten. It represents the moment of passage from an ecological conscience to an ecological behavior.

2. Theoretical background

This attitude constitutes the external reflection of an inner feeling. It represents the ability of an individual to choose and to determine one’s own actions not as a result of what is happening around, but according to what is happening inside one’s own soul, to perceive the maturity of one’s feelings and moral convictions, as a reaction to external stimulus.

The issue of dominance between the internal and the external in the building up and the development of the ecological attitude is opposite to the age growing. It means that the smaller the child is, the greater is the dominance of the society, because he is observing and mimicking what the ones around him are doing; as the time passes, he gets convinced of the necessity of those actions. Ecological knowledge generates ecological convictions only through actions. At a small age, the child initially explores the attitude and behavior of adults towards nature, then those of the children (same or closer to his age), and finally of his own, analyzing the positive and negative learning experiences, both his personal ones and of others. In most cases, confusions and contradictions may arise at the level of the relations between the three components – the cognitive one, the motivational-emotional one and the volitional one – of the attitudes towards the environment (Caciuc, V., 2008: 78-86). The use of the elements of virtue ethics in performing activities related to ecological education may help prevent some ruptures that may occur at the theoretical or attitudinal level. So, “the moral virtues are powers, abilities, human inclinations towards doing good. Therefore good is obtained by practicing virtues, and virtues can only manifest in a tight relation with good” (Sarbu, T., 2005: 178). If to protect nature represents a good thing, than a virtuous person will struggle to prevent vandalism and the destruction of nature by theft.

In the opinion of Rosalinda Hursthouse, the ecological ethics are protecting “the green belief”, regarded as “a radical change in the way we engage with nature”. From the perspective of the virtue ethics, it is in opposition with utilitarianism and deontologism. “I consider them to be two significantly different versions of the same aspect. First, we might have an environmental virtue ethics that seeks to articulate and defend the green belief in terms of old and familiar virtues and vices that are given a new interpretation when applied to the new relations we have with nature. The second version goes beyond the first by introducing one or two new virtues, explicitly concerned for our relations with nature”. Out of the older virtues, she named the virtue of prudence or practical intelligence, the virtue of compassion – and the author talks about J. Passmore – and out of the newer virtues she presented the virtue of being able to feel the emotion- presented by the esthetician R.W.Hepburn – and the respect for nature – a virtue introduced in the literature regarding ecological ethics by P.W.Taylor. In her opinion, there is no need for new ecological ethics, but the use of the old and new virtues and vices in the building up and improvement of the human behavior towards nature.

P.W. Taylor regards the care for nature based on the idea of respect, but allows a minimum exploitation of it, as the minimal bad, which means that the attitude of respect towards nature must not be understood as one that does not allow absolutely any intervention on it. Taylor wanted to pin point the fact that there are some actions performed by humans that do not defy the rights and interests of men, but are causing a serious damage to the welfare of the living things from nature. He was hoping that his bio-centrist theory would cause changes at the level of ethical ideals, which at their turn would produce changes on the psychological and behavior level of men in what regards their relation with nature (Taylor, P. 2011).
The use of these elements in the educational practice will help both smaller and older students to observe the negative consequences of human actions against the environment, done either out of negligence or intentionally. There is a great difference between having an attitude of respect towards nature and showing it in a concrete manner. This is why, during the educational process there needs to exist an inter-conditioning between knowledge, convictions, attitudes and behavior. In order to create a conscience and a moral-ecological behavior in pre-adolescents and adolescents, there is a need to go over all these components. They will later on reflect in the appropriate behavior of the young people in their life and social activity, in their relations with their peers, but also with nature, expressed through the attachment to plants and animals, to everything it represents.

Such a research topic is necessary because of the increasing tendency and preoccupation to assimilate the ecological education, but the gap between the recommendations, the resolutions and the studies made at the international level is still great.

3. Research hypothesis, objectives and research methodology

Both the organizations that militate for animal rights and the newest philosophical currents (the animals centered ecological ethics) plead for the recognition of the intrinsic value of the non-human beings and for the extension of the moral sphere over them. But most of the times, these conceptions and theories are accessible only to certain categories of people and specialists, because the common people allow their behavior to be influenced by religious or scientific, anthropocentric mentalities and conceptions that place man above all. This type of behavior has had quite severe repercussions over the balance of the planet’s ecosystem. The starting hypothesis focuses on the idea that there is an influence of the educational environment, i.e. the anthropocentric attitude and mentality towards animals and their rights, promoted by school curricula and implicitly by adults, be they teachers or parents, on children’s attitude of respect for nature. Also, a supposition was made that the level of development of the students’ ecological conscience is higher in the urban area than the rural one. Another hypothesis was that with the passage of time, the level of ecological conscience is decreasing. As part of an exploratory type of research, based on the questionnaire method, the objectives of the paper are assessing the level of development of students’ ecological conscience in the rural and urban environment. Another objective is identifying some of the psycho-pedagogical implications of the presuppositions confirmed by the results obtained, providing a better grasp of the relation between humans and animals, and improving teenagers’ attitude towards animals.

The research sample consisted of primary school, secondary school and high school students from the urban and rural environment, being stratified according to criteria such as: school level – primary school, secondary school, high school; environment – urban and rural; the class, as follows: from the urban environment – 1st class – 11 subjects, 2nd class – 21 subjects, 3rd class – 23 subjects, 4th class – 26 subjects, 5th class – 30 subjects, 6th class – 26 subjects, 7th class – 26 subjects, 8th class – 18 subjects from “Ștefan cel Mare” and “Calistrat Hogas”, primary schools of Galați, 9th class – 21 subjects, 10th class – 20 subjects, 11th class – 17 subjects, 12th class – 21 subjects from “P.Dimo” Industrial high school and “Virgil Madgearu” high school of Galați; from the rural environment - 1st class – 11 subjects, 2nd class – 21 subjects, 3rd class – 23 subjects, 4th class – 45 subjects, 5th class – 30 subjects, 6th class – 26 subjects, 7th class – 26 subjects, 8th class – 18 subjects, coming from the schools in Piscu, Pechea and T. Vladimirescu from the county of Galati, and 9th class – 21 subjects, 10th class – 20 subjects, 11th class – 17 subjects, 12th class – 21 subjects from the Industrial high schools in Pechea and T. Vladimirescu from the county of Galați.

The questionnaire was made up of 7 items referring to moral-ecological features: respect towards nature, discipline, responsibility towards nature, moral-ecological conscience, initiative, moral attitude in the relationships towards others and nature, humanitarianism. Each one of these items was calculated based on the answer to a great number of questions concerning the behavior of an individual in different concrete situations.
For each one of them were given several examples of attitudes that an individual may manifest on that specific situation. For each attitude or position taken for the given situations, the students had the possibility to choose one of the three options given: the attitude might be true for him, partially true or false. From the questions and concrete situations presented for each item, there were 8 attitudes that resulted – the moral obligation grounded in the fear of punishment, moral obligation as a result of respect towards people, moral obligation as a result of respect towards non-human beings, compliance with the rules, moral decision, ungrounded decision, the consistency of moral conscience, the inconsistency of moral conscience.

4. Results and discussion

The present paper focuses on the third attitude - the moral obligation as a result of respect for non-human beings – due to the fact that it is considered to be the most representative for the subject debated. After analyzing the data, the following results were registered regarding the students from the primary school: the average values are similar both in the urban and rural aria, with a slight increase in the urban aria. Here it can be registered a slight decrease with the passage of time (from 4.78 to 4.62), while in the rural aria there is a slight variation in the growth of this attitude (from 4.27 in the 1st class, to 4.39 in the 4th). This is a result of the fact that the student from the rural aria is directly involved in the relationship with the non-human beings due to the responsibilities established by the family in order to assure the living conditions, while in the urban aria the child does not have a direct contact with them because he is not in the position to assure or to have responsibilities towards the non-human beings. From the theoretical point of view, both those from the urban and the rural aria are well prepared, but at the practical level only those from the rural aria have the possibility to practice this, while for those coming from the urban aria, these are only abstract notions, without any possibility to interiorize some feelings and positive experiences towards nature and the non-human beings. The build-up and developed, both in school and in the family, of the abilities to take care of, to durably exploit and protect nature and the non-human beings – as it happens in the urban aria – make the rural aria children’s attitude of respect towards the non-human beings grow or to remain relatively constant, comparatively with that of the children from the urban aria that is decreasing with the passage of time.

At the secondary school level, it can be observed that the values of the averages are closer to one another both in the urban as well as in the rural environment. In the rural, the values are growing from the 5th class (4.35) to the 7th class (4.48), but than in the 8th class they drop significantly to 3.98. In the urban environment, the values are higher in the 5th and the 7th classes (4.62, respectively 4.40), and lower in the 6th and 8th classes (3.77, respectively 3.94). This is a result of the fact that the student from the rural aria is directly involved in the relationship with the non-human beings due to the responsibilities established by the family in order to assure the living conditions, while in the urban aria the child does not have a direct contact with them because he is not in the position to assure or to have responsibilities towards the non-human beings. The build-up and developed, both in school and in the family, of the abilities to take care of, to durably exploit and protect nature and the non-human beings – as it happens in the urban aria – are determining slight variations from class to class in the attitude of respect for non-human beings of the students living in rural areas.

When it comes to high school, it can be noticed that the values of averages in the urban areas are under the values of those in rural areas, but it can also be observed a slight increase both in the urban and in the rural areas, between the 9th and the 12th classes. At high school level, the situation is reversing in the favor of the students living in urban areas, one of the explanations being related to the degree of maturity, but also to a more responsible lifestyle than that of the students living in rural areas.
5. Instead of Conclusions:

Being a subtle and difficult process, learning about the moral-ecological values and attitudes is achieved more efficiently by means of the active participation of students in the instructive-educative activity, rather than by teaching them about the moral values separately. “To teach others how to be moral means to teach them how to command the ethical standards, which also implies to develop one’s abilities to assume the perspective of other people, groups, communities, etc. In order to reach the highest levels of assuming other’s perspective, one must expose oneself to and interact with people that have reached a higher level. So, the real life experiences with such persons, teach one how to rethink one’s attitudes towards oneself and how to assume the perspective of others. At this level of moral education, the emphasis lays on a few fundamental elements that must be built up and developed: empathy (to identify with the feelings, the reasons invoked by some other person), compassion (to be profoundly aware of someone else’s pain and of the desire to set him/her free from that pain), altruism (a behavior that implies to sacrifice one’s self in the benefit of another without expecting any reward), all of these leading towards responsibility” (Jeder, D., 2006, pp. 198-199). Alongside responsibility, the respect towards nature must become a positive character feature. Together with conscience and the ecological behavior, they must contribute to the building up of the human personality, and they can also help create a preventive and acting principle in their relationship with nature. To respect the moral status of nature must be part of one’s self esteem, and also part of the respect one has towards other people. This principle should guide the work of all teachers, no matter if they are working in a privileged school or not or if the institution is found in the rural or urban area. In order to achieve a radical change in the development of the young generation, it is imperiously necessary to achieve a good initial and continuous training for the teachers, from the perspective of the ecological ethics and education, just so as to prevent the situations when the teachers must plead for a cause that is against their own mentality and belief. To shape a set of values which should give nature and all its components an axiological character, cannot be done without the implementation in the teachers’ general, specialized and psycho-pedagogical education of the elements of ecological ethics. Only by means of these can the teachers manage to build up personalities that are going to pay respect and attention to nature, that will be capable to make precautious decisions, useful not only for their own generation, but for the future ones as well. This shows the purpose and the relevance of the hidden curriculum in performing ecological education. It makes its presence felt by means of the cultural-ideological options of those involved in a direct manner (authors of the curriculum, of school handbooks, teachers, children/students, parents) or indirectly (the government, etc.). A careful review of the subjects from school handbooks shows the presence of the hidden curriculum and its relevance in the moral-ecological formation of students: the choice in texts, in documents, in examples, etc. is always carrying values, attitudes which are exalting the feelings, creating states of spirit. (Momanu, M., 2002). Unfortunately, all these are left at the teachers’ decision because in Romania they are found at the level of the extended curriculum and only in the case of some classes. For instance during high school, the focus is being laid on preparing for the exams at the expense of a good ecological education. On the other hand, the way in which the curriculum is created and the ecological ethics is implemented, could be considered as a form of discrimination which is reflected in the manner of achieving this education which limits only at knowing the norms and the ecological values, norms that are not assimilated nor transparently transposed in the behavioral acts. Without a new ethics and the use of an adequate educational strategy and some stories that include facts and situations which have as an effect the deterioration of the environment which should allow the practicing of the evaluation and decision taking abilities, education cannot succeed to build up in the young generation an ecological conscience and ethical competences.

References