

Comparative Discourse Analysis of Moral Dilemmas of Students Attending Hungarian Schools of Three Models

Abstract

The culture of inquiry in moral thought had already introduced the method of eliciting judgement about images and stories through open-ended questions in the first third of the 20th century. In our research, we investigated the moral reasoning of students. We sought to answer how pupils in public, Catholic, and Waldorf schools judge moral dilemmas in fictional stories. Students' (N=1144) responses to single-choice selective closed-ended (yes or no?) and open-ended (why?) questions about the reason for their choice were used to judge the decisions of the characters in three realistic, believable, age-appropriate stories. In the first story, taking unlawful advantage was accepted most by public school students and least by Catholic school students. In the second story, the actors' solution method was rejected mainly by Waldorf students, with social justification. In the third story, there was no significant difference between the perceptions of the school models' pupils, with a similar pattern of rejection. The results are only valid for Hungary.

Keywords: *moral dilemma discussion, comparative study, Catholic schools, Waldorf schools, state-run schools*

Introduction

From the ancient notion of virtue to the 21st-century notion of moral competence, morality has always been discussed in philosophy, psychology and pedagogy as the essence of mankind and human behaviour (Gray & Graham, 2018). The topic is discussed remarkably, in a social and educational context, by Georg Lind,

a representative of the Kohlberg school (Lind, 2019, pp. 7–42), and in a psychological and social-psychological approach by Ellemers et al. (2019). The relevance of moral education and character formation for school pedagogy is clear and well-explored (Zhou et al., 2021), with the moral formation being primary among teachers' conceptions of their educational tasks (Metcalf & Moulin-Stožek, 2021). Moreover, although teachers' value orientation and students' moral reasoning may be culture- and situation-dependent (Lo et al., 2020; Thornberg & Oğuz, 2016), internationally, education policy documents reveal culture-independent socialisation goals and educational values (Brown et al., 2021).

Since the end of the 20th century, with the rise of research on the understanding of organisational (workplace) ethical behaviour (Jennings et al., 2015) and the weak link between moral reasoning and behaviour, the moral self has also become increasingly prominent in models of human moral functioning (Conway, 2018) and its relationship with pedagogy (Lapsley & Stey, 2014). Moral judgement has also become an increasingly popular research area. Research questions from 1278 empirical studies published between 1940 and 2017 have been used to identify five research approaches: moral reasoning, moral judgement, moral behaviour, moral emotions and moral self-concept (Ellemers et al., 2019). These studies mostly focus on understanding moral reasoning, but the literature also registers the relevance and increasing importance of measuring moral identity (Yusoff et al., 2022) and the role of emotions. From a pedagogical point of view, studies of moral self-image (Christner et al., 2022; Sticker et al., 2021) are also relevant in the context of emotion theories (Niedenthal & Ric, 2017, p. 19).

In the investigative culture of moral reasoning, the judging of images and stories (McGrath, 1923) with open-ended questions appeared already in the first third of the 20th century. The questions were age-appropriate for the group under investigation, and in the case of stories, they typically concerned the decision or judgement of a person or persons in a decision-making situation.

What should you do if your playmate broke your checker-board? Is it a sin to talk about someone you do not like? Is it a sin to throw snowballs when forbidden to do so? What would you think if you heard a little boy say, 'There is no God'? Would it be wrong to say a swear-word when no one is around? (McGrath, 1923, p. 167)

Mamma and papa have told Mary who is eight years old that she must not lift baby John who is three, as he is too heavy, and she will hurt herself by doing it. One day while Mary and John were playing on the street in front of their house an automobile came along very fast. John ran out almost in front of it when Mary caught him in her arms and carried him to the sidewalk. Was Mary disobedient? Answer YES or NO. Why? (McGrath, 1923, p. 21)

Our research looked at students' moral reasoning in the Hungarian context. Our research question is how public, Catholic, and Waldorf school students judge moral dilemmas in stories. Accordingly, we compare and contrast moral reasoning across three school models in Hungary – the public, Catholic, and Waldorf schools. In Hungarian lay public discourse, the concepts of school type and school model are often confused, and the difference in meaning is rarely clarified. Correctly, the type of school is determined by the performance of the various basic tasks of public education (in Hungarian terms, see § 4, 14a of the Public Education Act), while the educational impact of the institution determines the model of school, irrespective of the basic tasks performed.

Research Methodology

General Background of Research

Through moral imagination, like critical reflection, the individual examines a situation from different perspectives and then makes a decision. The ethical dilemmas can focus on any actor. Empathy-based storytelling involves writing a moral dilemma story (Hry-Beihammer et al., 2022), and the influence of incidental emotions on moral dilemma judgements has been investigated to show the context-dependent nature of moral decision-making (Gawronski et al., 2018). Negotiating life-death dilemmas is also common in the culture of inquiry (Engelmann & Waldmann, 2022). Judgements of decisions made by others in concrete life situations are still part of the investigative culture (Lind, 2019, pp. 51–68) and are a reliable and valid (Choi et al., 2019) measurement method.

In the current study, characteristics of moral judgement were sought in the following way. Students' responses to single-choice selective closed-ended (yes or no?) and open-ended (why?) questions about the reason for the choice were used to judge the decisions of three realistic, plausible, age-appropriate story characters. The fictional stories were arranged according to the themes of (1) individual gain through norm-breaking; (2) the impact of the illegitimate gain on the situation of norm adopters; and (3) the impact of norm-breaking on the personal character development of the rule breaker.

Dora's father was a director of a large company and wanted his daughter to go to the best business school after graduation. But Dora was only an average student, so she had little chance. But the father, who was a very hard-working, persistent and determined man and loved his daughter, decided one day to use his contacts

and money to help Dora with her admission. Dora was admitted to the university, and, although with poor results, she did graduate. Was the father right? Yes or no? (underline) Why?

At school, a class was given the task of decorating the school hall together for a celebration. After class, everyone wanted to go home, but the decoration was delayed and had to be worked on for three more hours after the last class was dismissed. Nora and Peter did not attend any extracurricular activities, but after the bell rang, they told their teacher that they had a paid after-school activity in the afternoon, so they had to go. The teacher let them go, and the others didn't even notice that they had left, and they were able to finish the assignment without them, but in four hours, not three. Did Nora and Peter do the right thing? Yes or no? (underline) Why?

Denis was able to get the teacher's password to gain access to school records. He could input good grades for himself every month, for all four years before graduating, without anyone ever noticing or harming anyone. Many years after leaving school, Denis was still pleased with his achievements and always spoke proudly of his excellent secondary school results in the company and with his family. Did he do the right thing? Yes or no? (underline) Why?

Research Sample

A sampling algorithm developed for the comparative study was used to ensure the validity of the results. With the sampling algorithm, we took into account the results of the National Competency Measurement of the National Board of Education in reading comprehension and mathematics, averaged over five years, as well as the educational added value of schools and the family background index of pupils, also defined by the National Board of Education. The sampling algorithm reduced the initial 2852 (100%) sites to 31 (1%) to ensure comparability of educational value added.

The survey was carried out on 30 premises of 29 institutions. The research was approved in advance by the Research Ethics Committee of Eszterházy Károly University, and the heads of the schools in the sample gave their written consent to the data collection. The parents signed an active informed consent form. Students with active parental and informed consent were given general information about the purpose of the research, both verbally and in writing, prior to completion and were given the opportunity to decide whether or not to complete the questionnaires. Students and parents were not compensated for participating in the research. The data collection was conducted in a standardised classroom setting for 2 x 45 minutes, in compliance with ethical standards.

The sample consisted of 1367 primary school pupils in grades 6 and 8. To ensure the validity of the results and to eliminate bias, the study took into account the number of years the student had been in the school model. Therefore, for those analyses that were relevant, only pupils who had spent more than half of their years in the school model (grade 6 \geq 3 years, grade 8 \geq 4 years) were included. The filtering was carried out as follows. Pupils provided data on the number of years spent in school, and parents provided data on the number of years spent in other schools. Parents were asked to provide the name of the other school, which was used to identify the school model.

Taking these two factors together, 155 pupils, which represented 7.7% of the public school population, 10.7% of the Catholic school population and 9.7% of the Waldorf school population, had to be excluded from the sample. For both cohorts, a small proportion of those remaining in the sample did not complete the same number of years in the same school model, so this did not bias the results, nor was there a significant difference between the reduction in the number of elements across schools (χ^2 ($df=2$, $N=1366$)=3.560, $p=.169$, $V=.169$). As respondents could also indicate a sign instead of a name and in several cases, only the parent or pupil provided answers, the linking of pupil and parent could not be completed for the entire sample.

Data were processed using SPSS 25. The datasets generated by the survey during the current study are available in the Dataverse repository, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CQHJIV>.

Data Analysis

Since the open-ended questions were almost exclusively answered with short, concise responses that simply stated a characterised position, the text was coded using a hierarchical deductive coding system, where two main categories (yes/no) were decomposed into 12 subcategories (rejection with cognitive/affective/practical/moral/social/other justification and agreement with cognitive/affective/practical/moral/social/other justification). Despite deductive coding, a reliability index was calculated. The intra-coding met expectations (.93), but we controlled for intra-coding by inter-coding to ensure the validity of the results (.89). We used chi-square tests to look for differences between school models. The coding is illustrated by the following examples:

Rejection with cognitive justification: ‘You have to give the child things, but not like this. You have to let the child develop, even if they stumble.’ Rejection on affective grounds: ‘Because he didn’t think about his own daughter, how difficult

it must be for her.' Rejection on practical grounds: 'Because she was admitted with poor performance and so it would be much harder for her.' Rejection on moral grounds: 'Because it's a mean thing to do.' Rejection on social grounds: 'Because cheating does no good. It destroys his daughter's self-confidence and it's not fair to others.' Rejection on other grounds: 'Because he should have let his daughter decide for herself what she wanted.'

Agreement with cognitive justification: 'Because adults know more about the difficulties of work, about pay, about places like this, and she might even thank him for getting her into a job that was perfect for her because if he hadn't pushed her she wouldn't be there now.' Agreement with affective reason: 'Because the father only wanted to help and it shows that the child is the most important thing for the father.' Agreement with practical reason: 'In the future, it will be good to have a degree.' Agreement with moral reason: 'If it is kept secret then it is absolutely fine. She did go to university so it wasn't that difficult and she certainly got smarter and got a good job.' Agreement with social reason: 'Any other student would have done the same. Denis was not honest but I don't think he was wrong.' Agreement with other reasons: 'I would do the same thing in fact.'

Research Results

The students largely rejected the choice of the main characters in the stories, with a significant distribution of responses across two of the three school models [Table 1].

Table 1. Distribution of yes/no responses to stories

	Decide on the following cases and justify your decision!					
	Was the father right?		Did Nora and Peter do the right thing?		Did Denis do the right thing?	
	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)
Public	65.1	34.9	82.3	17.7	93.2	6.8
Catholic	76.0	24.0	90.1	9.9	95.8	4.2
Waldorf	82.2	17.8	92.4	7.6	94.2	5.8
Total	74.0	26.0	88.2	11.8	94.6	5.4

$\chi^2_{\text{first story}} (df=2, N=1172)=26.118, p<.001, V=.149$; $\chi^2_{\text{second story}} (df=2, N=1,174)=19.035, p<.001, V=.127$;
 $\chi^2_{\text{third story}} (df=2, N=1170)=3.026, p=.220, V=.051$

The least rejected decision was that of a father helping his daughter. Among the school models, the public school pupils were the least and the Waldorf school pupils the most dismissive of the decision, with the reasons for dismissal being mostly cognitive but also affective and moral. The reasons for agreement were mainly practical. The distribution across subcategories is significant ($\chi^2 (df=18, N=1138)=124.915, p<.001, V=.234$), with the effect size being the strongest for this story among the three stories. A striking difference in the distribution of justification across school models is the difference between the public schools and the other two school models in the categories of cognitive rejection and agreement [Figure 1].

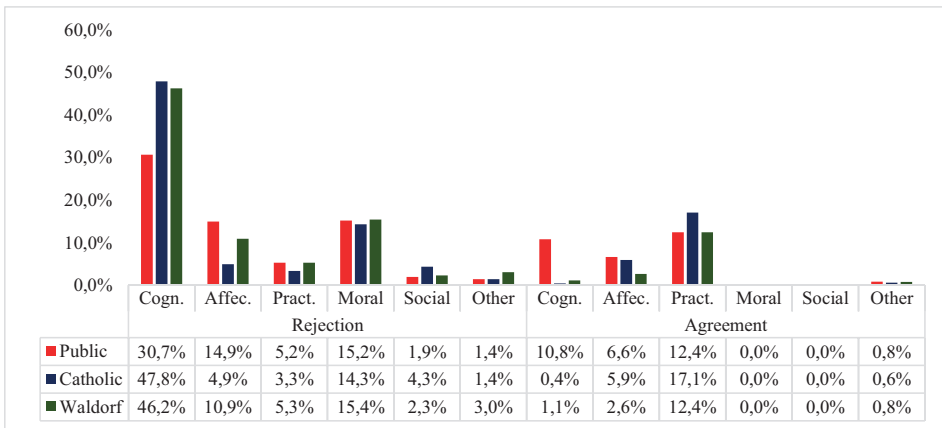


Figure 1. Distribution of the categories of answers to the question ‘Did the father decide well?’

Compared to the other two stories, the most moderately rejected actions were those of Nora and Peter, with a non-significant yes/no split. The rejection was moral and social, and the differences were significant ($\chi^2 (df=20, N=1144)=55.226, p<.001, V=.155$). The solution method was rejected by most Catholic students on moral grounds and rejected by most Waldorf students on social grounds [Figure 2].

The most rejected action was that of Denis, the difference in the degree of rejection between the school models was negligible, and the reason for rejection was also less distributed between the subcategories and was significant ($\chi^2 (df=20, N=1136)=73.038, p<.001, V=.179$). The difference in the reason for rejection between the school models was the smallest of the three stories, with all three school models’ students rejecting the action on moral grounds. Disagreement was also mostly based on ‘other’ reasons. In several cases, it was based on misunderstanding the story [Figure 3].

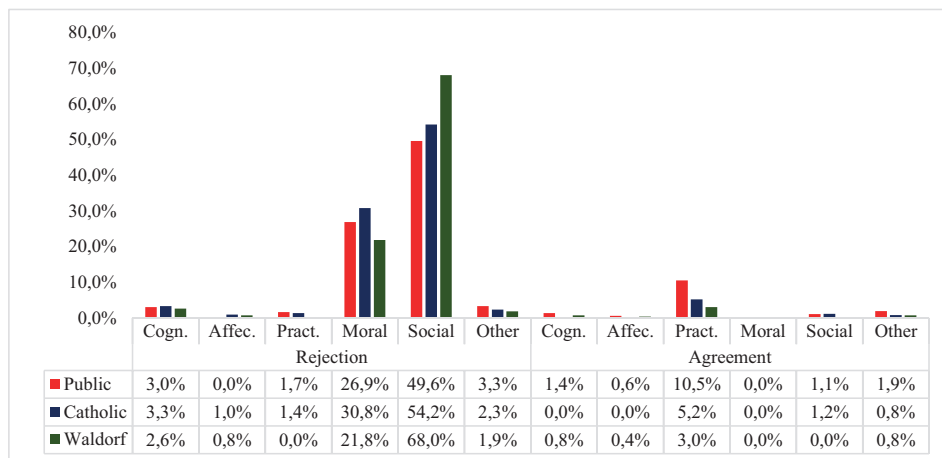


Figure 2. Distribution of the categories of answers to the question ‘Did Nora and Peter do the right thing?’

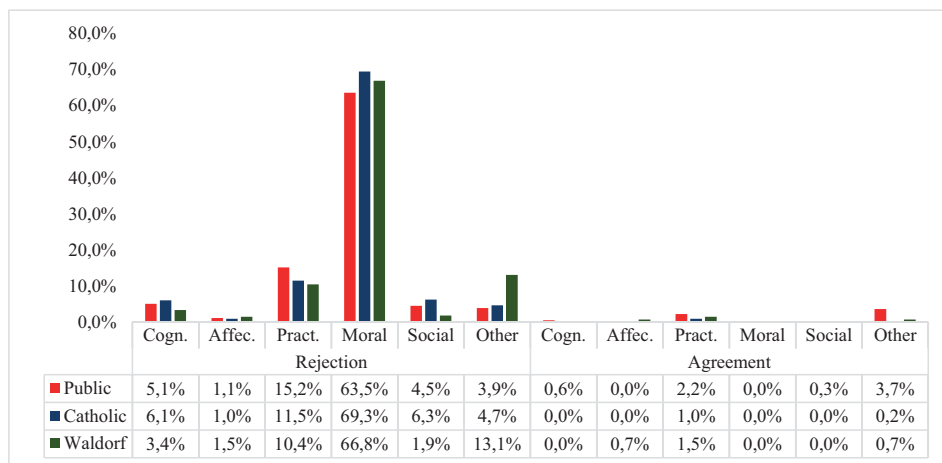


Figure 3. Distribution of categories of answers to the question ‘Did Denis do the right thing?’

Discussion and Conclusions

The survey found that students were least likely to reject individual gain by breaking the norm. Of the school models, public school pupils were the least dismissive of the decision, while Waldorf pupils were the most dismissive. The rejection of

the negative impact of the acquisition of an undue advantage on the position of those who accepted the norm was medium compared to the other two study levels. Catholic schoolchildren were the most likely to reject the method of problem-solving of the characters in the story on moral grounds, and Waldorf students were the most likely to reject it on social grounds. The negative impact of norm violation on the rule breaker's personality development was rated most negatively by all pupils. There was the least variation in the reason for rejection between the school models of the three stories, with all three school models' students' rejection being moralistic. The results show that in the students' perception, the individual gain achieved by norm-breaking is significantly more acceptable than the deficit in personal character development that results from norm-breaking. The results confirm similar findings in other fields (Evstafeeva & Voronina, 2022).

Within the general trend for the first fictional story, with a greater proportion of cognitive justification, public school students were the least dismissive and Catholic school students the most dismissive. In other words, the act of individuals taking undue, unjustified advantage was most accepted by public students and least accepted by Catholic school students. In the second story, the actors' solution method was rejected most by Waldorf pupils on social grounds. In the category of moral rejection, Catholic pupils were the most rejecting. In the moral reasoning category, the public school students were ahead of Waldorf pupils in terms of rejection, while the social reasoning rejection was not far behind that of the Catholic pupils. For the third story, there was no significant difference between the perceptions of the school pupils, with rejection following a similar pattern.

The results show that the moral reasoning of Waldorf pupils is more social, while that of Catholic pupils is more moralistic. The public school is not much behind the other two school models in terms of the level of rejection, but 10% of pupils accepted the act of taking undue advantage even if it negatively affected the position of those who accepted the norm. The proportion is approximately twice that of Catholic pupils and three times that of Waldorf pupils.

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