Moral Judgement to Moral Action:
Implications for Education

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Declaration

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

Arini Rosalee Beaumaris
The writing of this thesis, while challenging and difficult, has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I am so grateful for the opportunity to explore an area of education that has become one of my passions. Dealing with so many behaviour management issues in children and youth, while an initial source of irritation, ultimately became a source of joyful learning in exploring new dimensions of values and character education. I now thank all those challenging children for every lesson I learned from them about the human condition.

The completion of this research would not have been possible without considerable support along the journey of discovery. This journey has been one of crisis and victory. My former husband, Peter Beaumaris, who was born in a Nazi Labour Camp, of a Jewish mother and Polish father, did not give up on encouraging me until I accepted the challenge of enrolling in a Doctoral Program.

Finding an initial supervisor was a challenge in itself, granted I was exploring a new field of study. It was through a relative of one of my staff members in Canada that I was advised about a unique and open-minded man, Dr. Bernard Mageean, from Flinders University in South Australia. He was prepared to take on students who wished to explore topics that ranged from the psychological to the religious. I would like to acknowledge and thank Bernard who was courageous enough to take me on as an external student while I was living overseas, despite his misgivings in supporting a student from a distance. His open and flexible approach supported my academic inquiry to explore a complex and challenging field in order to understand more about the process of moral functioning and moral learning. Unfortunately, he retired, and very sacrificially supported me for a further three years, almost to the final stages of the completion of my thesis.

I was now faced with finding a supervisor in an area in which it was difficult to find university expertise. Fortunately, the Australian Government had seen fit to explore this new field of endeavour through the Australian Values Education Framework and its related projects. I had heard of Professor Terence Lovat, so on finding his name on the Australian Government’s Values Education website, I was able to communicate with him about my dilemma. He kindly accepted to take me on as a transferee into The University of Newcastle. I was delighted to have been fortunate enough to have the
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To my brilliant children, my son Anton Jones, his wife Marjan, and my daughter Nicholle A-Khavari and her husband Afshin, my deep appreciation for their love, constant feedback and encouragement. Finally, to my four grandchildren, Naysan, Kian, Lachlan and Zoe, who have been a living laboratory for application of the many insights gained from this doctoral thesis.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents who have both passed away, my Father at age 94 in October 2008. First, I dedicate it to my mother, Iva, who was one of the first teachers in South Australia to train as a teacher of graphic arts. She imbued me with a love of learning and a fascination with the educative process. Her delight in my ability to perceive patterns encouraged me to continually pursue understanding patterns in all aspects of life. Her high level of creativity, capacity to explore the unknown and her courage to venture into the new spiritual domain of accepting the Bahá’í Faith, provided an invaluable legacy to our family. Her unerring guidance has enabled me to live a meaningful life and to contribute to the advancement of humanity.

Second, I dedicate this thesis to my father, Eric Leedham, who always believed in my capacity to make a difference, who always loved to hear of any new area of learning I was pursuing, and his constant encouragement to achieve any goal I undertook. He would say of me that my most notable quality was determination, which I am sure I learned from his sterling example.
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Abstract
Recent educational research has pointed to the potential for values education to enhance student wellbeing by helping to develop their pro-social behaviours and effective work habits. Most crucial to the process of values education is understanding more about the ways in which children learn to consistently act-on-moral judgement and so function in the moral or ethical domain.

This study focuses on appraising, with the use of research literature and the lived experience of 22 adults from diverse cultural backgrounds, ‘what works’ in translating moral judgement to moral action. It explores, from scientific, religious and educational perspectives’, elements of success in moral functioning, with the goal of shedding greater light on the processes of moral learning and moral functioning.

On the basis of the study, it is postulated that moral functioning is a competency, based on acting out of the highest stages of the domains of knowing (cognition), loving (affect), and willing (conation). Hence, it is proposed that a person who develops the capacity to reflect on emotional feedback and the consequences of their actions (knowing), to consider the needs of others (loving), and who is prepared to take responsibility in a situation (willing), is more likely to act-on-moral judgement.

The proposition above supports brain functioning theories on moral learning and challenges conventional notions of how we learn to function in the moral domain. On the basis of such insights, the study suggests that children would benefit from an intentional process of facilitated reflection upon feeling states and personal moral experiences, in a safe and caring environment. Facilitated reflection supports the creation of new moral prototypes, or exemplars, to help develop moral imagination and to learn how to respond more appropriately the next time a child is faced with a similar moral scenario. It is further proposed therefore that such methodology should be incorporated into values education in schools.
FOREWORD

Arriving on the shores of Vancouver Island, Canada, in 1996 to take up the position of Principal of an independent secondary school, called Maxwell International Bahá’í School, took me deep into the heart of values education, as it is known in Australia, and moral or character education in North America. The curriculum on offer was based on the British Columbian secondary school requirements with an additional mandate of a values based educational program, inspired by the Bahá’í Writings, the writings of the most recent independent world religion, the Bahá’í Faith. Students at the school came from over 35 different countries and from many different religious and non-religious backgrounds. It soon became apparent that the lofty values and goals of the school were more stated than practiced. This was not owing to any lack of dedication or effort, nor from the many apparently effective activities around values education. It was simply that there was a gap between the rhetoric of values and their translation into practice. Time and again, it was seen that students who had committed infractions of the school rules and values were not led to understand the consequences of their actions, either at all or until well after the event. In other words, the explicit and practical end of values education was lacking, in spite of the good intentions that were evident. It was a pedagogical issue as much as anything and so my central question centred on the capacity of the educational process to improve in this regard.

By this stage in my career, I had faced many challenging scenarios as an educational leader and had developed a reputation as a trouble shooter, sorting out difficult educational environments, and taking seven institutions through significant change. I began my career as a home economics teacher in Port Augusta, South Australia, teaching rural industrial students, including a proportion of indigenous students. In this context it soon became apparent that I was dealing with many different value sets and that traditional methods of discipline were relatively ineffective. I later undertook a teaching role in an urban industrial area, leaving me convinced that my vocation in life was elsewhere. I left the school sector largely owing to the inordinate amount of time that needed to be spent on behaviour management. I discovered that I had a preference for working with adults who were interested in developing a body of expert knowledge.

I was fortunate to spend 20 years in Technical and Further Education (TAFE), including the last five as one of the first female College Directors in the TAFE system in South
Australia. I did not escape young people altogether, as high rates of unemployment and changing policy regarding unemployed youth resulted in many angry youth arriving on the doorstep of TAFE. At this time, I was elected as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Australian Bahá’í Community resulting in a departure from traditional education.

After a three year break away from formal education, I once again returned to secondary education, this time as principal of Maxwell International Bahá’í School, having been selected for the role from a worldwide community of applicants. I was now working in an even more complex environment of dealing with teenagers from over 35 different countries, including being face to face with the particular problems of North American youth. I was challenged once again to focus on how to educate in order to support the development of appropriate social behaviour, or what could be termed moral maturity.

Traditionally, the process of discipline has been used as a means of addressing aberrant behaviour, not only on the pretext of what is deemed good for the individual but also to ensure the individual’s social adjustment as a participating member in a family or community. In dealing with adolescent students, I realised that the lack of discipline was often a form of under-developed virtue, brought about by the lack of positive influences. It was not that they wanted to be disobedient necessarily but that they did not understand either the causes or the implications of their behaviour. If this was the case, then traditional methods of punishment were useless in helping a young person develop virtuous action. More often than not, these methods resulted in even more aberrant behaviour and an attitude of “catch me if you can.”

This was very clear with a particular group of students once sent to my office for pushing a student into the lake, opposite the school grounds. This group had been teasing a student in fun, so decided that, as they were standing on the wooden platform over the edge of the quite shallow lake, they would push him in. One of the teachers happened to see this event and sent them to see me. After they had told me what occurred, I said that if anything had happened to the student, how did they think I could explain to a parent that their son had been pushed into the lake, hit his head on a stone and died. They were shocked, they said, “he was all right and nothing like that had happened, it should be seen as being mere fun.” I found again and again with teenagers that they did not, in the spur of the moment, begin to think about the consequences. I realised that, even though this was a developmental stage, we had not prepared them
sufficiently well to understand that any action can have unforeseen consequences and that, in some instances, these will be bound to be unfavourable or harmful to others. I said to this particular group: “what if the student had been hurt; how could they make amends once the hurt had been inflicted?” They were mystified by such an idea but began to understand and feel remorseful. They eventually decided that they would go and apologise to the student.

The lack of understanding of the consequences of actions, and how to change this, was brought home to me when one of the students at this school was found to be wearing a special belt that he had made from a seat belt of a car. Someone in the school had information about the stealing of a seat belt with a special buckle. When she saw the student wearing a belt with a buckle of this description, she reported it to the Dean of Student Services. When she sought my advice, I asked her to organise a meeting with the victim of the theft, and to consult together to see where it led. It seemed that the student needed at least to apologise and to offer to pay for the damage. She carried out this meeting as instructed and reported that the victim was very grateful for the action we had taken. So, some amends were made as far as the victim was concerned and the offending student had had to endure a very embarrassing situation, coming face to face with the person he had offended. The result was that his parents decided he should use the money he had earned during his summer break to pay for the damage. I found out after this event that this was not the first time that this boy had vandalised and that he was awaiting a trial in his home town for a number of similar offences. He had never had to deal directly with the consequences of such violations before. Ultimately, I heard that, after a troubled adolescence, this boy became an outstanding and contributing citizen.

After this incident, the local police sergeant invited me to serve on a community justice committee. It was a new initiative that had been introduced via New Zealand and Australia into Canada. The strategy was referred to as ‘restorative justice’ whereby, if a youth was convicted of an offence, he or she could choose to follow the path of sitting in a community conference with all the parties concerned, including the victim and the offender. This group would determine an appropriate action in order to make reparation for the committed offence. Using this approach resulted in very low recidivism.
It would seem that, unless we have an opportunity to make amends or to apologise for an offence, guilt remains as an obstacle to achieving closure on such an event. The restorative justice model has continued to demonstrate that closure can be achieved, so allowing both victims and offenders to get on with their lives. Perhaps this works because the offender undertakes a learning process, which enables reflection and to learn from others what would have been more appropriate in the situation. Furthermore, offenders did not enjoy the feeling of embarrassment or shame that they experienced, suggesting that the desire to move away from shameful or sorrowful conditions to more positive outcomes is a powerful motivation in achieving closure.

I was able to see students transform from being self-centred to other-centred when there was an intentional and reflective process used, rather than using traditional punishment and consequence systems utilised by many school communities. Obviously, it seemed that there were approaches that brought greater results than others, so the challenge was to probe into the most effective and demonstrably beneficial processes. My quest became to deliver a systematic process based on research evidence by which educators could address some of the most challenging behaviours in young students.

With the support of key staff at Maxwell, we began the process of looking at best practices in values-based youth programming from around the world. In a four-month period, the school designed an incentives-based World Citizenship Program, *From Copper to Gold*, with four levels of certification based on key moral and ethical leadership capabilities. These capabilities were adapted from a moral and ethical leadership program that had originally been developed at Nur University in Colombia, South America.

Within one year of the implementation of an intentional and integrated program across the curriculum, we began to see quite significant results in spite of the challenges placed on the staff in implementing this new approach. The results were seen in a significant reduction in behaviour management problems, increased student participation in community service activities and, at the year’s end, 64% of final year students being placed on the British Columbia’s Government Honour Roll. It could therefore be surmised that the issue of character development is best addressed through an intentional educational response. What was happening here and why were the results so promising? I wished to understand why this approach seemed to have worked and why
it had resulted in such dramatic differences in student performance. Could it be articulated and replicated in other educational situations?

There were also a number of other newly emerging character education programs in North America that also cited experiences similar experiences to our school. This began my research journey to probe the question concerning what might be some of the key influences and factors that support a person to consistently translate moral judgement into moral action.

Directly following this three year experience, I moved to Prague, in the Czech Republic, to be the Director of an international pre-school, only to discover very similar behaviour patterns I had experienced with the teenage population. It seemed that it would be easier to deal with behaviours at a younger age than to deal with entrenched patterns of behaviour found in the teenage cohort. By this time, I truly wanted to understand better the phenomena surrounding such behaviour and how this knowledge could be translated into an educational program for implementation from the earliest years of life. One of the more significant challenges for character education programs and educational programs in general is in proving their effectiveness. If factors can be identified in the gap between judgement and action, and these can be articulated and quantified, it is hoped that it will help to inform us about what needs to be included or excluded in educational practice. Schooling has been referred to as a ‘graveyard’ wherein we are always adding more to the curriculum but rarely taking anything out.

My personal experiences as an educator, outlined in the Foreword, have left me in no doubt about the value of introducing character or moral education programs into schools. Despite the evidence of improved student results, while I was Principal of Maxwell International Bahá’í School, I was not clear whether the strategies we had introduced had really worked and, even if so, why they had worked. My quest in undertaking this thesis was to gain greater insights into the process of moral functioning and moral learning as they relate to the translation of moral judgment into moral action, as well as the resultant implications of this process for education. I wanted to understand how to articulate this educational process, and to replicate it, in order to assist myself and other educators in the development and implementation of quality character education programs. As we move into the 21st Century, there is a greater need to understand ‘processes’ rather than just focusing on the acquisition of ‘knowledge’ if
our hope is to develop an articulated and replicable educational format that will assist students to translate moral judgement into moral action.