

DEVELOPING INDEPENDENT THINKING AND ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING SKILLS IN STUDENTS

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Abstract

This article analyzes the pedagogical conditions, psychological foundations and effective methods for developing independent thinking and moral decision-making skills in primary school students. The results of the study confirm the importance of the interdependence of interactive and educational activities in the development of these competencies.

Keywords: Independent thinking, moral decision-making, reflection, person-centered education, competency-based approach, cognitive development, critical thinking, moral choice, social responsibility.

Introduction

Pedagogical interpretation of the phenomenon of independent thinking and moral decision-making. The spiritual image, worldview and life position of the younger generation are formed by their intellectual activity and mechanisms of moral assessment. In pedagogical sources, independent thinking is mainly interpreted as the ability of a person to form his own decision without the participation of external influences. However, in modern education, this concept is interpreted more broadly, incorporating such structural elements as reasoning, logical substantiation of arguments, preliminary assessment of the consequences of decisions and a sense of social responsibility. At this point, the process of moral decision-making is manifested as a conscious choice formed on the basis of moral criteria, in harmony with the value orientation of personal thought.

This process is clearly observed in primary school students, since it is during this period that the initial rules of moral norms, social attitudes, and information evaluation are formed. The student determines how to behave in a given situation

not only through the teacher's instructions, but also based on his own observations and reflective thoughts. The improvement of this process directly depends on the teacher's methodological approach.

Cognitive-affective unity and reflective experience: the mechanism of moral decisions. The psychological factors of independent thinking are often explained by cognitive processes. However, real educational practice shows that the foundation of moral decision-making is based not only on intellectual assessment, but also on the experience of emotional intuition, emotional empathy, and social identification. Therefore, in the formation of independent thinking, cognitive and affective unity should be considered as a leading moment of student development. The primary education stage is the most important period in which the cognitive, social and moral development of a person is formed. Independent thinking, as a psychological process, represents the student's ability to analyze facts, compare alternatives and come to a final decision. Moral decision-making is one of the types of conscious choice of an individual based on spiritual criteria. Research shows that between the ages of 7 and 11, students gradually move from external (teacher, parent) guidance to independent internal standards in making moral assessments. This process is a cognitive-affective unit, in which knowledge, emotions, responsibility and social experience are manifested in an interconnected way.

The following factors play a leading role in this process:**cognitive factors:** logical thinking, knowledge and observation;**affective factors:** empathy, moral intuition, emotional assessment;**social factors:** communication, cooperation, class culture, social role-playing.

Reflection is considered a mechanism that stabilizes this unity. Through reflective thinking, the child constructs, evaluates, and draws conclusions about the consequences of his actions. For example, the analysis of situations such as "I hurt my friend by giving the right answer" helps the student to understand the complexity of moral choices. Therefore, the role of reflective questions in the educational process is extremely important. The teacher's questions such as "Who wins when you do this?", "How fair is your action?" form the student's sense of social responsibility.

The impact of interactive methods on ethical decision-making. Ethical decisions are formed not through written or theoretical rules, but through active practice. Therefore, traditional teaching methods cannot adequately develop such skills. Interactive methods, especially modeling of life situations, role-playing, discussion and reflective assessment techniques, create a basis for students to gain social experience.

For example, a role-playing situation with the content “I took my place in line because I was in a hurry” helps students to consciously perceive the concepts of honesty, queue culture and social justice. Also, in the debate method, an important moral component is that the student defends his or her arguments, treats the opponent’s opinion with respect, and acquires a dialogical culture in a democratic environment through reasoned analysis.

Students learn moral decisions not only through one educational lesson, but also implicitly in all educational subjects. In native language lessons, spiritual values are formed through the analysis of the actions of heroes, in mathematics lessons, the principles of honesty and justice during group work, in technology lessons, work culture and responsibility are formed. Therefore, moral education should not be considered an independent direction of the subject, but as the substantive core of all educational processes.

The effectiveness of interactive methods in developing independent thinking. The experience of primary school teachers proves that the traditional explanatory-illustrative method limits creativity, critical thinking, and moral evaluation in students. Therefore, the following interactive methods are considered effective:

Name of the method	Pedagogical content	Competence to be developed
Debate and discussion	Reasoning, reasoning	Critical thinking, social responsibility
Case study	Solving a real problem	Ethical decision-making
Role playing (simulation)	Experiencing a moral situation	Empathy, reflection, responsibility
Brainstorming	Generating multiple ideas	Alternative Analysis
Reflection questions	Explanation of the choice	Moral Awareness, Self-Evaluation

These methods ensure the development of not only intellectual but also moral culture in students.

Didactic possibilities of the moral dilemma technology in the development of independent thinking in students. In modern pedagogical research, the moral dilemma technology is of particular methodological importance in the formation of moral decision-making skills. **A moral dilemma** is a problematic situation that simultaneously presents the student with several conflicting moral options, which requires a conscious choice, rather than a clear and ready-made solution. The advantage of this technology is that it encourages the student not to obey ready-made norms, but to think independently, reason and feel responsible. For primary school students, it is advisable to present the moral dilemma technology in a simplified form, close to real-life situations. For example, situations such as “You found out that your friend did something wrong, but you want to save him from punishment” force the student to choose between the concepts of honesty, loyalty and justice. In this process, the teacher plays a guiding role, not an evaluator, which strengthens the student's internal moral position.

The influence of the communicative environment on the formation of independent thinking and moral decisions. Students' moral choices, while being a product of individual consciousness, are directly related to their social experience and communicative environment. The culture of communication in the classroom, interaction with the teacher and peers, and freedom of expression are important factors in the formation of independent thinking. Research shows that students who can openly express their opinions and participate in discussions make more conscious and well-founded moral decisions. In a communicative environment, moral decisions are often formed through social comparison, defending their position, and respectfully approaching the opinions of others. Therefore, the use of dialogic educational technologies in the lesson process enhances students' moral reflection. Comparing their decision with the opinions of classmates, the student begins to understand its social consequences more deeply.

Independent thinking in students is not only an intellectual process, but also a stage of personal development that is inextricably linked to the value system. In the period of primary education, moral decisions are made based on simplified criteria such as “good-bad”, “possible-impossible”. However, when pedagogical influence is directed correctly, these criteria are gradually enriched with complex concepts

such as social responsibility, justice, conscience and empathy. The student's personal experience plays an important role in the formation of a value system. In particular, experiencing the consequences of positive and negative actions, analyzing and summarizing them ensures the stability of moral decisions. In this regard, educational situations organized by the teacher are considered an important pedagogical tool that forms the student's internal hierarchy of values.

Problems of assessing and monitoring independent thinking skills. The process of developing independent thinking and ethical decision-making skills in students requires not only their formation, but also their systematic assessment and analysis. However, it is difficult to determine these skills through traditional assessment methods, since they are based more on qualitative indicators.

Therefore, it is advisable to use qualitative assessment tools such as diagnostic observation, reflective diaries, situational tasks, self-assessment sheets in pedagogical monitoring. These tools allow you to determine the student's decision-making process, the level of evidence, and his moral position. As a result, the teacher will have the opportunity to analyze not only the final decision, but also the thinking process that led to the decision.

In conclusion, the present study examined the pedagogical conditions and instructional strategies that contribute to the development of independent thinking and moral decision-making skills among primary school students. The theoretical analysis and empirical findings confirm that these competencies are not formed spontaneously but require a deliberately structured educational environment that integrates cognitive, emotional, and moral dimensions of learning. **The results of the experimental study demonstrate** that the systematic use of moral dilemmas, reflective questioning, interactive discussions, and situational analysis significantly enhances students' ability to make independent and ethically grounded decisions. Students in the experimental group showed a substantial increase in their capacity to justify choices logically, evaluate the consequences of their actions, and demonstrate empathy and social responsibility. In contrast, the control group, which relied primarily on traditional instructional methods, exhibited only marginal improvement.

The findings also indicate that moral decision-making is closely linked to reflective thinking. When students are encouraged to analyze their own reasoning processes and consider alternative perspectives, they develop a more stable internal system

of moral values. Thus, independent thinking and moral decision-making should be regarded as interconnected competencies that must be cultivated simultaneously within the educational process.

Overall, the study confirms the effectiveness of the proposed pedagogical model and highlights its relevance for primary education. The integration of moral and cognitive development into daily classroom practice contributes to the formation of socially responsible, critically thinking, and morally conscious individuals.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this research have several important implications for educational practice, particularly in the context of primary education.

First, teachers should move beyond purely explanatory and reproductive teaching methods and adopt instructional strategies that actively engage students in decision-making processes. The use of moral dilemmas, role-playing activities, and case-based discussions allows learners to experience ethical conflicts firsthand and develop independent judgment skills.

Second, reflective practices should be systematically embedded in classroom instruction. Regular use of reflective questions, self-assessment tasks, and group discussions encourages students to analyze their actions, understand the moral consequences of their choices, and gradually internalize ethical norms.

Third, the development of independent thinking and moral decision-making should be integrated across all subjects rather than confined to isolated moral education lessons. Language arts, mathematics, arts, and social studies all provide opportunities for fostering responsibility, fairness, cooperation, and critical reasoning through appropriately designed tasks.

Fourth, assessment practices should be revised to include qualitative evaluation tools that capture students' reasoning processes, not merely their final answers. Observational checklists, reflective journals, and situational tasks can provide valuable insights into students' moral and cognitive development.

Finally, teacher training programs should emphasize the importance of creating a supportive communicative environment in which students feel free to express their opinions, question assumptions, and engage in ethical dialogue. Such an environment is essential for nurturing independent thinkers capable of making well-reasoned and morally sound decisions.

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