

Moral judgment of high school students in the context of an evaluation process

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Abstract

Ethics in education should consider objective and subjective dimensions of the evaluation process, in addition to the human and cultural factors that influence the behavior of students. This study examined the moral judgment of 242 students, ages 14 to 18, in a secondary school, about the subject of copying or not the schoolwork of a classmate without his consent. The act of copying a schoolwork of a classmate was considered in three different contexts. Data collection was done through the articulation of two methodological strategies: presentation of cases involving justice and human dignity issues, followed by discussion in focus groups. Dilemmas promoted from hypothetical situations provided a high involvement of the students. In a general way, they were able to describe their feelings and take a decision about the act itself. Results showed that moral identity of the questioned students is compatible with school rules. The ability to relativize imposed school rules in an evaluation process depended on the student's age. However, moral judgment of students has changed with the presentation of unfavorable contexts, especially on situations involving economic and social risks.

Keywords: evaluation process; autonomy; ethical dilemmas; moral judgment.

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Introduction

The evaluation of student performance is based on the premise of meeting the pedagogical objectives and the syllabus of each course. It is also essential to understand how students stand in relation to the evaluation process so that they can meet educational goals satisfactorily. Basically, it depends on the cognitive and moral development in its two phases: the heteronomous and autonomous (Piaget, 1984). The child's first phase is marked by understanding a rule as an external reality, authoritative and unchangeable. In this case, the belief is that authority is correct and should not be disobeyed. With the development facilitated by cooperation experiences among peers at school, high school students begin to be autonomous and form their moral identity.

Blasi (1983) considers the moral identity as a source of moral motivation. The moral obligations, according to the author, are integrated in the self-definition of a person. Then, moral judgment would always be consistent with the maintenance of the integrity and unity of moral self. From adolescence, there is a gradual integration of the moral self and development of the moral identity.

Moral autonomy can be verified from student placement in relation to institutional rules. In this case, he is able to relativize the evaluation process and question it. When considering the context of evaluation, students start to face dilemmas regarding the ethics proposed by school. There may be a conflict between an attitude that is considered correct by the student and one that is convenient to him at the time of the evaluation. Dilemmas that are reinforced by school pressure for performance and by the fear of evaluation can hinder the student's achievement and contribute to unethical actions. The construction of a moral identity is necessary but not enough for the individual to feel strongly motivated to act in a moral way. Studies about motivation for moral action show that it has a dual nature, because the individual can have the appropriate moral knowledge (cognitive dimension), but this knowledge can be affected and inhibited by needs (affective dimension) that induce to a moral transgression (Ferreira, 2013).

Turiel (2002) emphasized the relation between the construction of social knowledge and cultural systems in moral judgment. In a social constructivist perspective of moral, economic inequalities induce a moral behavior that conflicts with authority patterns imposed on society. In fact, people's behavior is strongly influenced by the context in which they are embedded (Palazzo, 2012).

Gilligan (1997) proposed real adolescents dilemmas of life that valued local contexts and personal narratives about the abortion issue, in order to propose an ethic of care or affectional orientation and responsibility. Moral judgment, according to the author, would be based on levels that would evolve

from the search of survival and self-protection to internal principles of kindness and concern about the well-being of people.

The context in which the evaluation process occurs can be characterized by strong pressure for students to get the results. An inappropriate use of the language by the teacher (Thibodeau, 2011) or pressures present in the school environment may also accentuate the fear of students and may impact their performance. Both external social and economic pressures can also contribute to make students vulnerable in the evaluation process.

Therefore, analyzing the moral judgment of students, most of them being in his moral identity consolidation stage, or adolescence, is a task that requires considering cognition, emotion and motivation.

The purpose of this work was to investigate the influence of institutional and social contexts in the evaluation process. The hypothesis is that pressures can influence student behavior and should be considered by teachers and school administrators. The research helps in understanding the development of autonomy and consolidation of moral identity of secondary and technological students in a Brazilian school.

Methodology

A study with 139 male and 103 female students aged between 14 and 18 of different technical courses integrated to the high school was proposed. The school is recognized by the quality of education offered. Data collection was done by presentation of situations that required student's judgment and the subsequent formation of discussion groups. The groups were formed by students that belonged to the same class, in order to facilitate interaction between the subjects during the analysis of dilemmas and enable the conduction of studies from a discursive perspective. It was proposed to each participant of the focus groups a possible dilemma that was in accordance with the general expectations of the students of this educational institution.

The proposed dilemmas referred to an evaluation process in a context of pressure for results that commonly cause fear of disapproval by the students. Three situations were presented, from which each interviewed student would reveal his/her feelings when being in a place of a fictional student. The student in this situation would have copied the schoolwork of a supposed classmate without authorization. Three situations or different contexts were then proposed.

In situation 1, the emphasis in the narrative was the need of the fictional student to copy the colleague's schoolwork in order to obtain a passing grade. Situation 2 presented, in addition to the

conditions of situation 1, one aggravating condition to the need of coping the schoolwork and one mitigating to the victim's damage. Situation 3 showed, in addition to the conditions of the situation 2, an aggravating socioeconomic condition. The three situations are described below:

Situation 1: A student of the final year of a reputable public school should deliver a schoolwork that his teacher asked to be done at the end of the year. The teacher, known in the school for being rigid and severe, warned that, if there were similar jobs, students would receive zero notes. The student had not done the task until one day before the scheduled date, but he found a classmate's task under the desk after a class. He then decided to copy it, trying to modify the content, even knowing that some similarities could be detected by the teacher.

In the next day, the student gave back the work to his colleague without informing that he had copied it, because he knew that his colleague would not take the risk of receiving zero. How would you feel if you were the student who copied the schoolwork?

Situation 2: The student of the previous situation did not inform to his classmate that he has copied his work because he needed many grade points be approved, and these points would be enough for him to pass. His colleague had already enough points to pass. The student copied the classmate's work without informing him. How would you feel if you were the student who copied the schoolwork?

Situation 3: The student in the mentioned situation was also poor, had no father and did not have time to study in that week because his mother became very ill and he was taking care of her alone. He would lose his place in school if he did not pass and could not enroll in that school anymore. His colleague was the richest student of the class, had a very comfortable situation and always had the best grades. The student copied the colleague's work, without informing him. How would you feel if you were the student who copied the schoolwork?

In each situation students should select one of the alternatives about what he would feel when in the situation of copying the schoolwork: very bad, bad, would feel nothing, well or very well. There was also the alternative "others" with a blank space for justification in this case.

Results

Being in situation 1, 206 students (85%) showed a negative feeling about the act of copying someone else's schoolwork without permission, and 24 students (10%) showed to be indifferent. These answers and the subsequent analysis of students' opinions in focus groups showed that this context was not able to change the moral judgment. This was consistent and coherent with institutional ethics that is known and accepted by the students. When in situation 2, 156 students (64%) revealed negative feelings and 56 (23%) showed to be indifferent. Therefore, there was a change in the judgment of the action, and the act of circumventing the rule of not copying schoolwork is relativized by a considerable number of students. However, there was a predominance of negative feelings for this action. During discussions, it became clear that for most of the students it was not a case of heteronomous obedience to the rules, but an autonomous attitude to decide and feel righteous to be able to value "who is approved by their own efforts". The most significant change in the action judgement, however, occurred in situation 3, when there was an evident change in the profile of answers because 143 students (58%) showed to be indifferent or even approved the act of copying the schoolwork without authorization. In this case, most of the students found that the socioeconomic factor prevailed over the imposition of institutional ethics. They brought the important consideration of the prevalence of affective components on the cognitive components of moral motivation in the evaluation process.

Graph in Figure 1 shows how students feel when they were in the fictional student position in the three hypothetical situations.

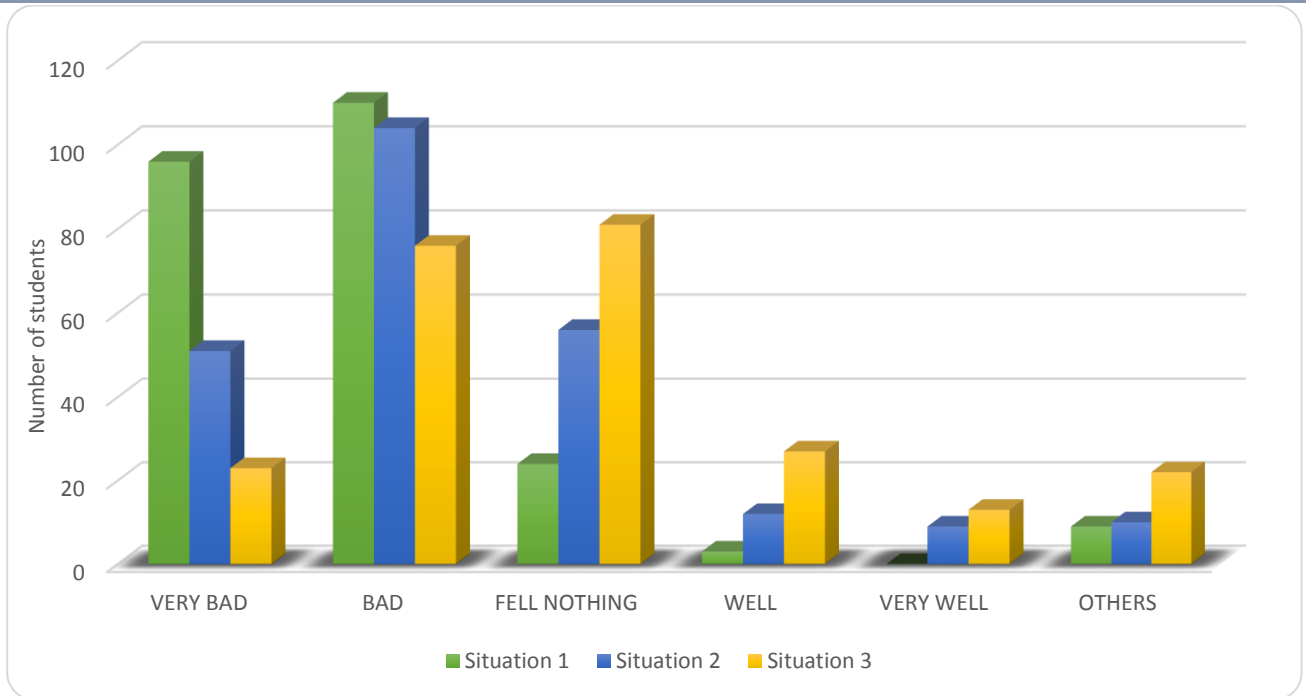


Figure 1 – Feelings expressed by students in different context situations. The x-axis shows the types of feelings of the students after copying the work of the colleague (feels very bad, bad, feels nothing, good, very good and other feelings). The y-axis shows the number of students who answered to each situation according to a specific feeling.

Younger students (who are in the beginning of the course) kept negative feelings to the answers of the dilemmas in the three situations. For these students, the components of moral heteronomy are more evident, and this was verified after the narrative analysis of the discussions in these classes. Most of the answers did not show components of autonomy as deceleration, perspectivism or operative reversibility in their contents. The ability to relativize the infraction in situation 2 occurs more

frequently in students of 17 years or more. Many students aged 17 or more justified their behavior by putting themselves in the place of the colleague who would not be harmed because they already had the necessary points to pass.

The influence of student’s age in moral judgment in situations that present most critical dilemmas can be seen in the comparative graphics present in Figures 2 and 3.

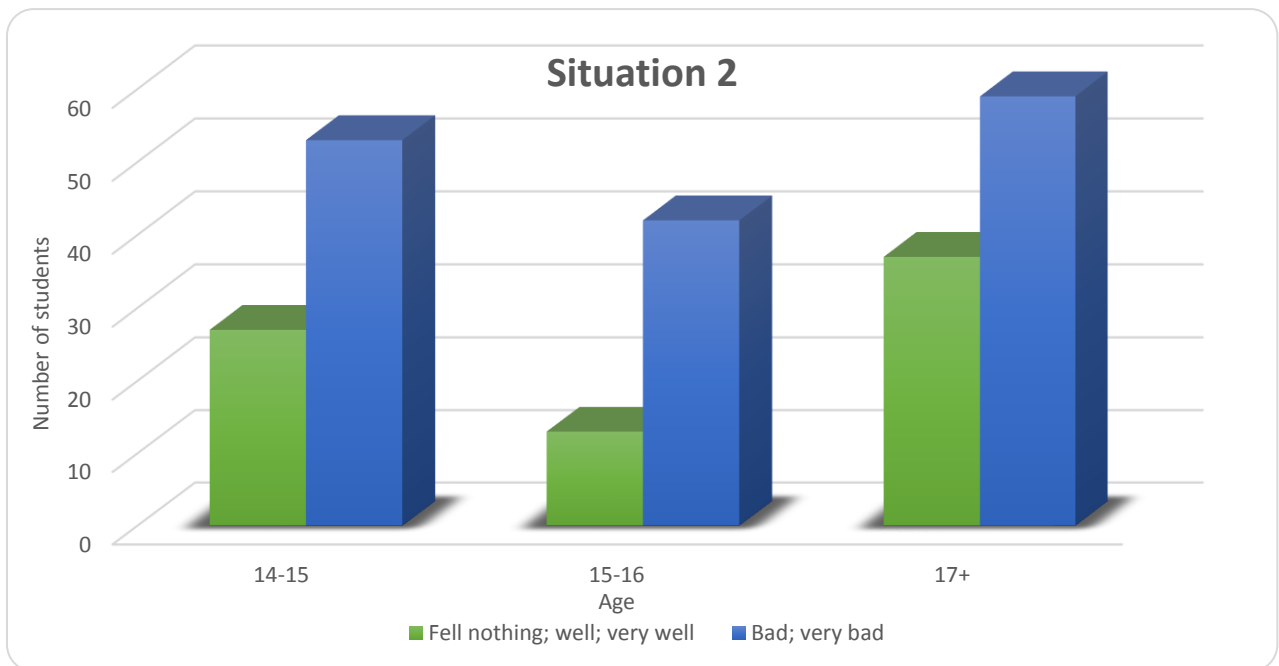


Figure 2 – Age’s influence in situation 2. The x-axis shows student’s ages. The y-axis shows the number of students who answered “feels nothing”, “feel good” or “bad” after copying the work of the colleague in situation 2.

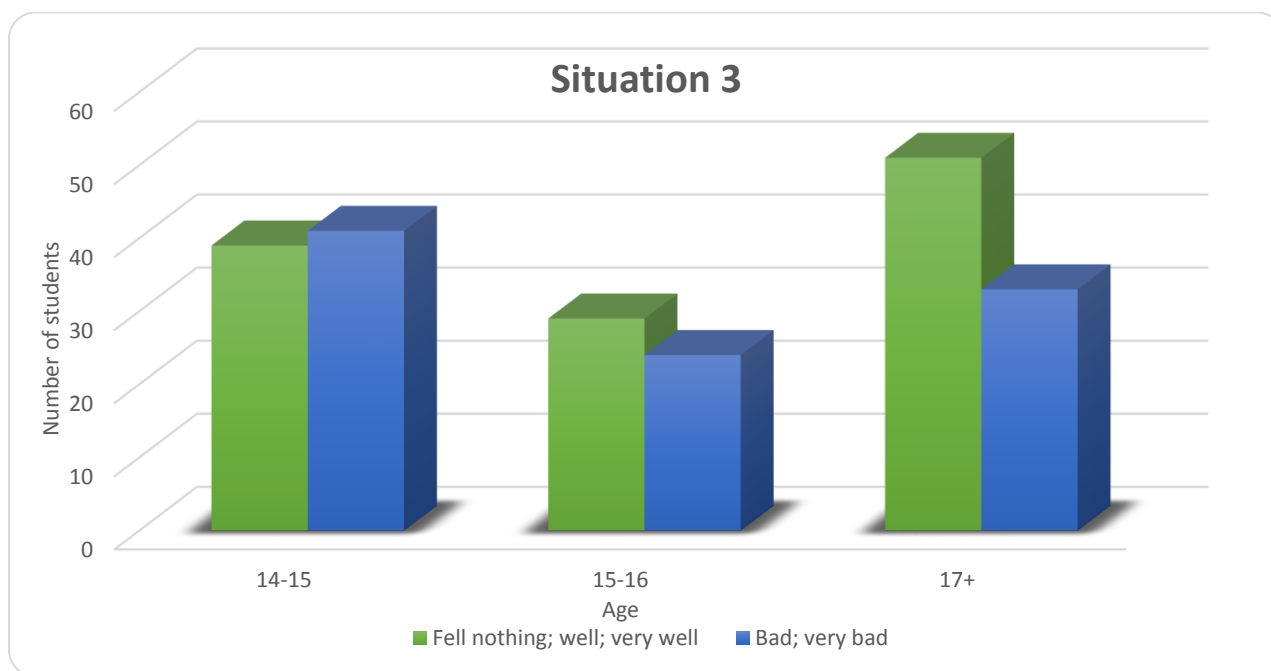


Figure 3 – Age's influence in situation 3. The x-axis shows student's ages. The y-axis shows the number of students who answered “feels nothing”, “feel good” or “bad” after copying the work of the colleague in situation 3.

Other results were obtained from unfinished questionnaires. The comments present in most of them denote the search of an alternative solution to the dilemma that does not pass by the positions proposed in this work. The analysis of the results obtained in the field “others” in the questionnaires showed the student's renunciation to judge the

Conclusion

In a school that reinforces that students must be responsible for their acts, as the one considered in this work, it is expected the prevalence of students with similar cognitive developments. The results showed that the moral identity of the students was also consistent with the ethics of their school environment. However, it is at the same time flexible to emotional and contextual appeals, especially for classes of students with 17 years or more. They seem to have sufficiently developed their moral autonomy, and their judgment has changed significantly according to the context of the evaluation process. The pressure for results and the fear of disapproval by the students served as justification for unethical behavior. The dilemma involving economic and social risks were those that most influenced the changes in the judgment of the infringing act. We expect that these results will contribute to further studies considering the importance of the contexts in education. It is important to consider that the teacher must be aware about the context in which the evaluation process is carried out and consider the factors that may influence both cognitive and moral development of students. This may promote ethical

hypothetical infringing act. There was no significant difference in the male and female student's answers. The changing trends in the judgment of the infringing act, according to the context, were similar for both genders. Thus, the observations made on the age influence on autonomy to relativize the problem can also be applied to students of both genders.

attitudes in the school environment and also a good quality education.

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