CHAPTER 6

SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS DEALING WITH MORAL DILEMMAS IN THE CARE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE: AN EVALUATION OF MORAL CASE DELIBERATION AS AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

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Social work professionals face moral dilemmas. Evidence-based guidelines only partly help them to deal with these dilemmas. Recently, moral case deliberation (MCD) as a bottom-up aid has been successfully introduced into Dutch health-care to help strengthen professional moral competence. This research investigates whether MCD can help future professionals caring for children and young people to deal with their dilemmas.

Research questions are: 1) How do students evaluate two series of four MCD sessions related to moral dilemmas in cases they experienced in practice; and 2) Does MCD contribute to students’ ability to justify their decisions?

Applying a mixed-method evaluation study, we found that students consider MCD highly important. They feel supported in their ability to justify decisions ethically. Most students value the challenge of thinking critically in MCD. However, some do not appreciate the uncertainties which come with this. One-third of the students proves able to justify their decisions ethically after attending MCD sessions. Robust conclusions about MCD as the cause of these results cannot be drawn on the basis of the study design. Suggestions are made for future research regarding the contribution of MCD to the development of competence in dealing better with moral dilemmas.

Keywords: moral education, care for children and young people, moral case deliberation, evaluation, moral competence
Introduction

Social work professionals face moral dilemmas (Banks & Williams, 2004). They have to choose between two alternatives, both of which involve more or fewer feelings of remorse, regret or guilt (Nussbaum, 1986; Macintyre, 1990). Specialized social workers care for children and young people from birth to 23 years old (and for their families) in different domains ranging from coercive to voluntary, from residential to out-reach care, and from prevention to care institutions. In the last decade evidence-based practices (EBP) have been developed to guide professional action and to help social workers to deal with their dilemmas, following the example of evidence-based medicine in the medical sciences.

EBP helps professionals caring for children and young people to deal with moral dilemmas by formulating guidelines, in line with scientific evidence and generally accepted professional morality, as laid down in the Youth Care Act7 and in the code of professional conduct as reformulated in 2013. However, EBP is the subject of debate for several reasons.

In response to authors who emphasize that EBP in its broad form encourages attention to ethical obligations (e.g. Gambrill, 2007), others assert that EBP principles are not absolute, but are value-loaded and normative themselves (Longhofer & Floersch, 2012; Webb, 2001). Moreover, principles can conflict with each other. Respect for autonomy, for instance, may be incompatible with other, equally important, professional values. Professionals should therefore focus on the ethical8 question: what is morally desirable here (Biesta, 2007)? EBP would prioritize rational reasoning, thereby neglecting the role of emotions in decision-making (e.g. Damasio, 1994; Haidt, 2001; Nussbaum, 1986). Finally, despite the fact that EBP guidelines can help professionals to justify their actions instrumentally, they can at the same lead to a bureaucratic attitude that prevents professionals from taking true responsibility (Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010).

Social work curricula followed the above-discussed developments. In the last decades of the twentieth century, social work education focused on (ethical) theories, methods and skills. In the twenty-first century EBP has become part of the curriculum.

Despite this focus on EBP, professionals still face moral dilemmas. In 2012 (Commissie Samson, 2012), child abuse incidents led to government recommendations regarding reflection and multidisciplinary consultation for professionals. Social work education aimed at care for children and young people had to be adapted accordingly. In the meantime, empirical research threw light on ethical dilemmas in social work (Keinemans &

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7 Youth Care Act of 2005 (revised in 2015) prescribes client-centred care, in which empowerment of clients is the key value.
8 ‘Ethical’ and ‘moral’ are seen as concepts that, although not synonymous, both refer to expressions on or reflections upon the good life. In the following section, both terms will be used, depending on the reflective (ethical) or practical (moral) issues at stake.
Kanne, 2013) and students’ moral competences (e.g. Sanders & Hoffman, 2010). Recently, Keinemans (2014) pleaded for attention to the emotions in social work ethics by means of, for instance, moral reflection tools. Applied ethics gained attention: students had to be taught to apply the agreed principles and to make use of ethical decision-making aids (e.g. Edwards & Addae, 2015; Gough & Spencer, 2014). Arguing that EBP cannot be the only way to guide professionals’ actions, some authors advocate strengthening professionals in the dialogical process between deductive and inductive reasoning about what actions are morally right (Abma, Molewijk, & Widdershoven, 2009). This is consistent with virtue ethics (e.g. Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010) and approaches inspired by Aristotle (Nussbaum, 1986) and hermeneutic stances (Clark, 2011; Gadamer, 2010).

The above considerations have prompted the question of how the moral competence of future social work professionals caring for children and young people should be strengthened. Professional moral competence is understood as the ability to justify decisions ethically and is assumed to be a precondition for dealing with moral dilemmas. The pedagogy of starting from concrete moral dilemmas can possibly help future professionals to deal with dilemmas in a responsible way (Kessels, 2009).

Moral case deliberation (MCD), a structured method to help deal with dilemmas, fits in with this approach. MCD is based on the assumption that decision-making is a moral activity in which emotions, knowledge, thoughts, judgements and values play their role (Molewijk, Kleinlugtenbelt, & Widdershoven, 2011). MCD aims at helping participants to recognize, reflect upon and answer their moral question. MCD stimulates dialogue and critical reflection on overt or hidden values and seemingly fixed presuppositions of various views. A question to be considered in MCD is, for example, should I advise withdrawing support from a client who needs help but at the same time does not adapt his behaviour to the regulations of the institution?

Experiences with and evaluation research focusing on Socratic dialogue (a method used in MCD) in education are promising (Goldstein, 2006; Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010). More generally, evaluation of MCD in various health-care domains has been positive (Molewijk, Abma, Stolper, & Widdershoven, 2008; Weidema, Molewijk, Kamsteeg, & Widdershoven, 2013; Dam, van der Schols, Kardol, Molewijk, Widdershoven, & Abma, 2013; Janssens, Zadelhoff, van Loo, Widdershoven, & Molewijk, 2014). Professionals report that they feel strengthened in dealing with dilemmas, learn from the view of others and feel empowered in moral reasoning.

Former evaluative studies in an educational context were based on experiences of students themselves (Goldstein, 2006; Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010). However, little is known about the real contribution of MCD to students’ measured ability to justify decisions ethically, especially in education for social workers caring for children and young people.
The central questions in this article are therefore: 1) How do students evaluate two series of four MCD sessions related to moral dilemmas in cases they experienced in practice; and 2) does MCD contribute to students’ ability to justify their decision?

Context of Study

The research was conducted in the Netherlands with students in the final year of the educational programme leading to the Bachelor’s Certificate in social work with children and young people at the Leiden University of Applied Sciences. In addition to (earlier) education in state-of-the-art knowledge such as psychological, ethical and other theories, and skills focused on solution-seeking and promotion of good communication, a project assignment was developed. MCD was introduced into the project to help students to justify decisions ethically. The students were required to present and to justify instrumentally and ethically the next step in treatment in a written multi-problem family case. Instrumental justification uses state-of-the-art knowledge and methodology. Ethical justification requires reflection on the right way to act when dilemmas point in the direction of clashing values. In total, 90 students (45 in each of two cohorts) were assessed twice for their ability to justify their decisions: once in groups (performance assessment in the form of a multidisciplinary meeting) and once individually in a written report.

Method

Design (See Figure 1)
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Mixed Methods

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used in an emerging, sequential and concurrent design, using mixed methods with the purpose of triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation and expansion (Greene, 2007; Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Mertens, 2010). Important ingredients of the study were: iterative formulation of new questions (development); adaptation of content and scheme of methods used (development); and data validation by member checks (initiation, expansion). In mixed methods research, each method represents its own value-loaded perspective. The perspectives together aim at providing a valid view on the object of research (triangulation, complementarity) (Greene, 2007). The research process was thoroughly described, providing the thick description necessary for the transferability of research findings and conclusions to other contexts (Mertens, 2010).

Procedure

MCD sessions were organized with two different conversation methods: the dilemma method and the Socratic dialogue. The dilemma method is a structured and the Socratic dialogue a more open form of deliberation. Both are aimed at reflection on presuppositions in normative reasoning (Kessels, 2009; Nelson, 1994). The MCD sessions (with a maximum of 12 participants) lasted on average one and a half hours. Students brought in their own cases, most of them related to situations in multi-problem families. The study was carried out between 2011 and 2013, with two groups of students in different years (cohort 1 and cohort 2). MCD sessions were facilitated by three teachers, of whom one was the first author. They were trained as MCD facilitators during ten half-day meetings at the VU University Medical Centre (VUmc) of Amsterdam (Plantinga, Molewijk, de Bree, Moraal, Verkerk, & Widdershoven, 2012; Stolper, Molewijk, & Widdershoven, 2014).

Participants

Each year, 45 students (90 in total) participated voluntarily in a series of four MCD sessions.

All students filled in questionnaires after each MCD session. Ten students were interviewed individually and four students in pairs (i.e. two interviews) in order to better understand the results of the questionnaires.

Students in cohort 2 were asked to hand in voluntarily first intuition reports at the beginning of the project; 22 out of 45 students did so. All 45 students were assessed on their ability to justify their decisions instrumentally and ethically, both individually (written assignments) and as a group in one of the eight group performance assessments after attending MCD.
Recruitment of interview respondents was based on their reflective capacities. In addition, seven students who were critical of MCD were asked to collaborate; six were willing to do so (one in cohort 1, five in cohort 2).

**Measures, Data Collection**

**Research question 1: How do students evaluate MCD?**

*Questionnaires:* To answer question 1, quantitative data were gathered by a survey questionnaire (SQ 1: 42 questions, SQ2: 43 questions) after each MCD. The questionnaires were slightly adapted versions of a non-validated questionnaire developed by the VUmc, already used in other evaluation projects. In SQ2, one question was added to explore students’ feeling of involvement in MDC. The questions were answered on a Likert scale of 1–5. Students could also give open comments in both SQ1 and SQ2. Topics covered by both questionnaires were experience of the importance of MCD; learning aspects; quality of group conversation; and quality of the MCD facilitator. Data also functioned as input for temporary evaluation. They gave facilitators the opportunity to improve their facilitating competences and to adjust their role where necessary. Quantitative data were used as input for formulating interview questions (qualitative data).

*Interviews:* Topics covered by the interview questions were experience of the importance of MCD; understanding of moral concepts (cohort 1); experiences with MCD (including the degree to which students felt safe to share their experiences and opinions with others); importance of MCD; and understanding of moral concepts (cohort 2). In the cohort 1 interviews, content and scheme were constant. In the cohort 2 interviews, content and scheme emerged after each interview because new questions arose. The first author carried out all interviews, using a Socratic interview style in order to avoid socially desirable responses (Brinkmann, 2007).

In the last two interviews, pairs of students took part. One of these students belonged to the group that was critical of MCD. We gave them the opportunity to interview each other in order to minimize the effect of an asymmetric power relationship (Mertens, 2010). An important recruitment criterion was their ability to listen to each other and their courage to be critical of MCD, which was checked by the MCD facilitators during the research project.

**Research question 2: Does MCD contribute to students’ ability to justify their decisions?**

*Assessments:* Question 2 was investigated in cohort 2 by analysing students’ shown ability to justify ethically their decision, both in initial individual reports before attending MCD and in group performance assessments (multidisciplinary meetings with five to seven students).
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and individual reports after attending MCD. The ability to justify a decision ethically was subdivided into: 1) the ability to identify moral dilemmas, questions and conflicting values (moral awareness), 2) the ability to investigate and discuss conflicting values in dialogue with other perspectives (for classification of abilities: see analysis). These abilities were assumed to be required conditions for dealing with moral dilemmas. Voluntary reports of students’ initial justification of their decision (22 out of 45) in the written multi-problem family case at the beginning of the project were analysed for the purpose of baseline assessment. Findings were compared with outcomes of the compulsory individual written reports and outcomes of the group performance assessments at the end of the project. Twelve individual reports and three group assessments were investigated in detail.

Analysis

Questionnaires: Quantitative data from SQ1 and SQ2 were analysed with SPSS 20. Outcomes >3.4 were considered as important, those between 2.5 and 3.4 as moderate, <2.5 as low.

Assessments: In order to assess the ability of students to justify their decisions, the first author coded the first intuition reports (cohort 2). Codes were discussed with two groups of seven students each for the purpose of validation (member check). Coding and classification (low, medium, high, see Table 1) of initial reports, group assessments and individual final reports (cohort 2) were fixed in discussion with the other tutor/assessor.

Table 1: Classification of assessments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A (high score):</td>
<td>Moral issues are made explicit (next to instrumental considerations); conflicting values are weighed against each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (medium score):</td>
<td>Considered issues are instrumental. Values are mentioned, but not discussed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C (low score):</td>
<td>No issues are considered, either instrumental or moral. Values are mentioned but not discussed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In cohort 2, all eight tape-recorded group assessments and 45 individual written reports were investigated, of which three group assessments and 12 individual reports were investigated in detail.

Possible congruencies and divergences of the data from the various methods were critically reviewed, compared and evaluated on their merits for final conclusions (expansion, triangulation) (Greene, 2007).
Interviews: Final coding of qualitative interview data was done by the first author, after discussion with the two other facilitators and four colleague tutors/researchers, supervised by the three other authors. Codes selected were: moral awareness; moral concepts; positive/negative comments; student beliefs; importance of interaction; other perspectives; intervention/supervision; involvement; challenge to critical thinking; importance of MCD; need for support; safety; learning; practical suggestions.

Development, Comparison, Expansion, Initiation and Triangulation

Analysed quantitative data were input for formulating the interview questions in the qualitative part of the research in both cohorts (development). Analysis of SQ1, SQ2 and interview data from both cohorts together led to an additional code: understanding of moral concepts. In this way, students’ own reports (as shown in SQ1, SQ2 and the interview data) could be compared with assessment outcomes on this item (i.e. parallel track analysis) (comparison and expansion) (Greene, 2007; Li, Marquart & Zercher, 2000). Parallel track analysis helped also to compare other qualitative and quantitative data (relating to how students valued MCD and their view on the role of other perspectives). Quantitative and qualitative data were validated often and thoroughly in both years by member checks and by consulting critical voices (initiation) (Greene, 2007).

Research Ethics

Since the research concerns educational and learning processes, no formal IRB approval was needed. All research participants were informed orally (MCD participants: questionnaires) or orally and in writing (interviewees and examinees) about the content and the goals of the research. All gave their consent beforehand to the use of the data for research.

The first author played different roles within this research, assuming both dialogical (Greene, 2007; Mertens, 2010) and normative stances as facilitator, researcher and teacher. This could have affected the reliability of the findings. Through member checks with the students the interpretations and conclusions related to the gathered data were critically and openly discussed. Furthermore, potential dilemmas and how to handle these were discussed within the broader research team.

Results

This section first presents the results concerning students’ own evaluation of MCD (research question 1), preceded by a short comment about participation in MCD. The results of the quantitative data are presented (i.e. the evaluation questionnaires), supplemented with

9 Dutch form of collegial peer consultation meant for discussing work issues.
results of the qualitative data (i.e. the interviews). Next, the results concerning students’ ability to justify their decisions (research question 2) are presented with the results of the quantitative data (i.e. questionnaires, baseline assessments, individual reports and group assessments).

**Participation**

Participation in MCD decreased in both years, as the programme advanced (Table 2), a result not different from other voluntary courses.

**Table 2: Participation (45 students each cohort, 90 in total, participating four times in MCD)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MCD: Form</th>
<th>No. of participants</th>
<th>Percentage of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cohort 1</td>
<td>Cohort 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD 1: Dilemma method</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD 2: Dilemma method</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD 3: Socratic dialogue</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD 4: Socratic dialogue</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In both years, one student group struggled with MCD, whilst other groups asked for extra MCD sessions (those extra MCDs were not investigated).

**Students’ Evaluation of MCD**

In answering this research question, the following topics will be covered: reflection, method, importance of MCD for the project, awareness of other perspectives. First we present findings regarding the general evaluation of MCD.

**General evaluation of MCD**

Quantitative data from both years showed that students valued MCD as important, especially for themselves personally, regardless of project assignment or future employment (cohort 1: mean 3.5; cohort 2: mean 3.7). Students felt very involved in MCD (cohort 2: mean 3.9). They felt safe enough to bring in and discuss dilemmas (cohort 1: mean 4.1; cohort 2: mean 4.2).
Within the qualitative data, students reported that they considered that MCD surpasses other modes of reflection (like intervision, supervision) because it helps them to reflect ethically. An interviewee says:

‘...moral case deliberation, that was about dilemmas, [...] and intervision, supervision, that was more about problems we encountered, [...] that did not need to be a dilemma.’ (R8)

Although quantitative data showed no dissatisfaction, this does not mean that there were no critical remarks, as the qualitative data below show.

Some students had very practical reasons for not being enthusiastic about MCD. They had to work, needed their sleep or thought that deliberation took too much time. Some doubted whether professional behaviour could be justified at all, taking a relativist stance:

‘...what is justified behaviour, it will be different in ten years...’ (R7)

This student also wanted to shake off educational ‘musts’, apparently experiencing MCD as a must, despite the fact that participation was voluntary:

‘...but I don’t want to have to do it...’ (R7)

Stress, inherent in achieving results in education, can also prevent students from decelerating, thus making it difficult for them to think deeply. The suggestion was made to begin MCD with physical relaxation exercise as a means of reducing stress. One student mentioned that shortage of time on the work floor makes it unlikely that MCD will ever be applied in practice. Another student noted that after two MCD sessions she ‘got it’, and needed no more sessions in order to take advantage of it. One student said it is better to deliberate on your own than to do this together.

Interview data indicate that students thought ‘feeling safe’ a very important condition for MCD. Some students mentioned that they felt reluctant to bring in a case because of the lack of this feeling of safety. But MCD can, according to one student, also bring about a feeling of safety by stimulating listening, understanding and taking other views into consideration. Some students expressed a preference for MCD organized in smaller groups than was the case during this research (mostly 7–12 students).
Reflection

MCD gives the opportunity to decelerate, which is indispensable for thinking deeply, according to one student:

‘...I really long for this deceleration...’ (R13)

This deep consideration came from the possibility to think for herself, as another student says. Furthermore, students reported that insights gained in MCD are enduring, much more than presenting or teaching solutions alone could have been. One student mentioned the urgency of questioning, of postponing judgments, when asked to clarify the word depth:

‘...there was no judgment, [...] you think something, [...] transform it into a question and explore it in depth, [...] when someone gives an opinion, then deep thinking stops...’ (R11)

Method

Some students valued the structure of MCD as an aid to focusing on one situation only and investigating that situation. Others welcomed the freedom to investigate, to be critical, to think and reason, especially in Socratic dialogue. It gave the opportunity to deepen insight:

‘...what is the reason for somebody’s behaviour and what is the reason that he feels the need to do that, [...]? Then you reach very fundamental issues, what does someone really need, want, [...] that is depth...’ (R11)

At the same time they stressed that confusion is necessary in order to learn to investigate and to think.

‘...I think confusion is necessary...in assessments, you have to show something, so you have to do that.’ (R14)

Some students did not like the confusion MCD brought with it:

‘...I am someone who just likes to know where I stand and where I am going ...’ (R10)
Evaluation of Moral Case Deliberation in education

**Importance of MCD for the project**

Quantitative data showed that students valued MCD as being of moderate importance for doing the project assignment, although more so in cohort 2 than in cohort 1 (Table 3).

**Table 3: Importance of MCD (1 = low, 5 = high)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cohort 1</th>
<th>Cohort 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation that this MCD will influence the project</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>2.9839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD important for project</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>3.1352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD brought new questions for project</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>2.7208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD MUST have consequences for project</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>2.9344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD brought new ideas for project</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>2.3613</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some students thought MCD was of great value for considering moral issues in the project. One of them says:

‘...I think of it as added value, [...] the nice thing of the whole project is that you learn to investigate, [...] it is through MCD that you learn to investigate...’ (R11)

One student explained how MCD gave the opportunity for better justification:

‘...what I do [......] is better justified and critically questioned [......] because MCD triggers you to investigate the norms and values and how you brought them into practice...’ (R14)

Several interviewees said that the project could have been done without MCD. That would imply, however, that they would miss the in-depth reflection resulting from MCD. Some students lacked points of reference between the discussed case and the assignment case, which made MCD less helpful for them in the project assignment.
Awareness of other perspectives

Quantitative data show that students reported that they became more aware of other perspectives (cohort 1: mean 3.5; cohort 2: mean 3.9). In addition, students stress the importance of seeing other perspectives in order to form their own opinions.

‘...and yes, if a classmate is being asked for her opinion […], that stimulates interaction. People think, OK, she thinks something, what do I think of it?’ (R1)

The Contribution of MCD in Supporting Students’ Ability to Justify their Decisions

Understanding concepts

Quantitative data (Table 4) show that students suppose they understand the meaning of moral concepts. MCD helped those in cohort 2 more than those in cohort 1.

Group and individual assignment results for cohort 1 and interview data suggested that the students seemed to confuse instrumental and ethical justification, labeling methodological questions as moral dilemmas.

Students’ ability to justify decisions on professional action ethically was measured from a baseline (before attending MCDs) and from group and individual assessment (after attending MCDs).
Table 4: Moral concepts/questions, importance of MCD, involvement in MCD (1 = little, 5 = very much)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cohort 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Cohort 2</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>STD</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How difficult was the moral question, according to you?</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>3.1000</td>
<td>1.07610</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD helped in understanding the moral question</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>3.4625</td>
<td>1.06345</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it is difficult to recognize a moral question?</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>2.5203</td>
<td>0.97173</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD helped in recognizing a moral question</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>2.9221</td>
<td>0.96856</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How difficult was it to formulate a good moral question?</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>2.9960</td>
<td>0.93217</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCD helped to formulate good moral question</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>3.0766</td>
<td>0.90851</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent have moral/ethical aspects in the case become clear?</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>3.4580</td>
<td>0.95576</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt involved in MCD</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>3.8913</td>
<td>1.01317</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Baseline assessment

Four out of 22 students in cohort 2, who submitted first intuition reports before having attended MCDs, formulated ethical considerations. They identified and considered discrepant values in the multi-problem family case, weighed them and/or explained and argued their choice. Safety for children and parental autonomy were weighed against each other. A 17-year-old boy’s striving for independence and the importance of strengthening the parent-boy relationship were labelled as clashing values.

Eighteen students did not provide any ethical considerations like questioning existing core values or balancing arguments. They justified their decision by referring to existing guidelines and policy, thus reflecting the agreed contemporary principles without
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discussing them. They stressed, for instance, the importance of client centredness, self-determination, safety, stable parent-child relationship, social (family) networks and parenting skills.

Results of group and individual assessments, conducted after the students had attended MCD sessions, are shown in Table 5 (see Table 1 for classification of assessments).

**Table 5: Classification of assessments: results:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Invalid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group assessments (8)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual reports (45)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Group assessment**
High score assessments showed ethical justifications by weighing, for instance, the importance of the values ‘staying together as a family/system’ and ‘safety’ in the light of the all-predominant value ‘son’s well-being’ (assessment 1). The medium score assessment was characterized by emphasizing values (safety), subsequently answering the question of how to guarantee this safety instrumentally (assessment 3). The chosen value was not weighed against other values considered.

**Individual assessment**
Four reports, investigated in detail, showed that students had high competence in ethical justification. The chosen intervention was explained to be in line with existing theory, scientific findings and agreed principles (client centredness, aimed at safety and strengthening the family system). Moreover, students mentioned dilemmas they saw themselves confronted with: should the parent-child attachment at home prevail, or safety by out-of-home placement (assessments 1–4)?

Four students’ reports, investigated in detail (medium score), showed that they were able to justify their decision instrumentally. They meant to mention ethical questions/dilemmas, but gave instrumental questions and considerations instead. They mentioned important values, but did not actively discuss or reflect on them (assessments 5–8).
Discussion

Students’ Evaluation of MCD (research question 1)
Students valued MCD as support for them personally and also, to a lesser extent, for the project assignment. Many felt involved and engaged in the process of deliberation. Some students valued the structure in MCD. The question of how much structure is best for students remains an important one. Some valued both the challenge to think and the associated confusion. Others did not appreciate this confusion. MCD seemed to provide the necessary conditions to help students learn to justify their decisions. Mostly students felt safe enough to bring in a dilemma or moral question. MCD itself can also contribute to a feeling of safety.

In the literature, two evaluative studies that included students have also shown the self-reported positive effects of Socratic dialogue in learning (Goldstein, 2006; Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010). Comments from 15- and 16-year-old students following mathematics courses showed that Socratic dialogue in the course resulted in better understanding of mathematical concepts. Some experienced more self-confidence, or welcomed the experience to think for themselves (Goldstein, 2006). Pullen-Sansfaçon (2010), investigating the influence of Socratic dialogue on students in social work education, noted that students valued the Socratic dialogue as a contribution to their theoretical understanding. They considered it to be thought-provoking and felt it challenged their personal perceptions and views. The conclusions of Goldstein and Pullen-Sansfaçon fit the data presented here.

Students’ Ability to justify their Decision ethically (research question 2)
Many students became aware of other perspectives, which can be seen as a necessary condition for the ability to justify decisions. Moreover, they were better able to form their own opinions with the help of other perspectives. This finding seems to justify the conclusion that MCD helped them to justify their decisions.

In general, students say they did not find it difficult to understand concepts like ‘moral dilemmas’ or ‘moral questions’. These results are not confirmed by the assessment outcomes that throw light on their proven ability to justify decisions ethically. Before attending the MCD sessions, only four out of 45 students were able to identify or consider moral issues in a multi-problem family case. Students do not seem to be aware of the meaning of concepts such as moral dilemmas and questions. Only four students could be regarded as morally competent before attending MCD. They were aware of dilemmas and moral questions, were able to recognize the different values at stake and were able to investigate and discuss the importance of values. After attending MCD sessions, more
students (one-third) were able to justify their decisions ethically. However, based on the statements of the students themselves, more than one-third thought they were able to justify their decisions ethically.

As the research was carried out in the Netherlands, the students’ responses would have been influenced by the Dutch legal framework and social contractions. The findings concern the experience and measured effects of MCD are relevant, however, to an international audience.

**Limitations**

Some limitations of this study should be mentioned.

Because questionnaires were filled in anonymously, no information is available about a possible correlation between positive/enthusiastic evaluation of MCD and high assessment scores.

The students in cohort 1 were not the same as those in cohort 2. This may have influenced outcomes and also the validity of the results.

Moral competence as defined in this study does not predict how students will act as professionals. Research concerning the correlation between participation in MCD, acquired moral competence and actual moral behaviour could shed more light on this question.

Students participated in MCD four times and filled in the same questionnaires several times. This may have influenced the answers in each subsequent questionnaire, because students were already familiar with the questions. This was taken into account by member-checking questionnaire results by qualitative research.

Most of the students received their grades before being interviewed. Participation was not compulsory. Conclusions could therefore be distorted, either positively or negatively, by high or low grades, or by analysis only of data from students who attended MCD sessions. To counterbalance the last point, critical students, who often did not attend more than two MCD sessions, were asked to cooperate. One recruitment criterion for all interviewees was their readiness to think along with the process. This may also have distorted conclusions positively.

Taking all the strengths and weaknesses of the study into account, outcomes related to both the evaluation of MCD in an educational context and the impact of MCD on students dealing with moral dilemmas are promising. This indicates that future research (e.g. using control and experimental groups) on the contribution of MCD to students’ moral competence is worthwhile.
Conclusions

This research aimed to investigate whether MCD sessions helped students to justify their decisions better. MCD was seen as an important tool/instrument, next to aids such as EBP, which could also help professionals.

Applying a mixed-method evaluation study, we found that students considered MCD highly important. Most students valued the challenge to think critically in MCD. However, some students did not appreciate the associated confusion. Many students became aware of other perspectives. They felt supported in forming their opinions, and in making ethical justifications in a written multi-problem family case. Before attending MCD, only four students were aware of conflicting values and could formulate ethical considerations. After attending MCD, one-third of the students proved able to justify their decisions ethically. However, robust conclusions about MCD as the cause of these results cannot be drawn on the basis of the study design.

Tutors and managers in education will have to distinguish between providing guidelines (such as EPB guidelines) and allowing for independent reasoning which is more often practised within moral deliberation, such as MCD. Even more important is to help students integrate the two kinds of reasoning within their work and within MCD sessions. We recommend that future research should deal with this more explicitly.

Further investigations, using other research designs, are needed for studying how MCD contributes to the ability of future professionals to justify their decisions ethically when caring for children and young people.
References


Evaluation of Moral Case Deliberation in education


Chapter 6


Evaluation of Moral Case Deliberation in education