

Relationships between a Constructivist
Learning Environment and Moral Perceptions
of Teachers and Students in Israeli Junior-
High and High Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine moral perceptions of teachers and students and assess the degree to which a constructivist learning environment can contribute to understanding differences in moral perceptions. Constructivist learning environment was suggested in this research because it may foster social-ethical-moral interactions both between teachers and students and among students.

The impetus for this research is that we now live in what is referred to in the professional literature as 'the post-modern age', where changes are seen in almost all aspects of life. Post-modern deliberation presents various relativist theories which undermine the moral truths that were accepted in the past. The Israeli culture and society have not escaped this moral crisis, and the ramifications of this crisis on educational practices and moral perceptions of teachers and students are discussed in this research.

On a declarative level, there is a wide consensus regarding morals and values in education. However, these morals and values are not reflected in reality and this issue does not seem to rank high on the priority list of policy makers in the Ministry of Education. Moreover, while many researches have dealt with moral education from its theoretical aspects, few have examined the practicable aspects of moral perceptions of teachers and students and the relationships between them.

Drawing on Schwab's curriculum theory (Schwab, 1964), this study examines for the first time the topic of moral education from the point of view of the four 'commonplaces' (basic elements) suggested by Schwab: The teacher (the teachers' moral perceptions), the student (the students' moral perceptions), the teaching and learning environment (the degree to which the learning environment contains constructivist elements) and the subject matter (its level of constructivism).

In this research, the constructivist learning environment was assessed according to five factors: The **relevance** of the material taught in class to the student's personal life outside school; the student's **skepticism** regarding universalism, cultural unity and reliability of the subject matters taught in class; the student's **criticism** towards teaching and learning activities in class; the **shared control** of teachers and students over the entire learning environment and the **collaboration** among students in the learning process. The perceptions of teachers and students regarding the learning

environment were examined by using the Constructivist Learning Environment Survey (CLES- Johnson & McClure, 2004).

The moral perceptions of teachers and students were assessed according to four factors: **respect and fairness, caring, trustworthiness and responsibility**. The assessment was carried out by using a moral perception questionnaire which was created specifically for the purpose of this research. The practicable aspect of students' moral perceptions was assessed according to three factors: **willingness to contribute to the community, willingness to be recruited to the army and motivation of personal achievement**. The assessment was carried out by using a practicable-moral perceptions questionnaire which was also specifically created for the purpose of this research and was given to students only.

The research was carried out in a comprehensive six-year high-school in central Israel and included 999 students from grades 7-12 and 49 of their teachers. The questionnaires used in the study underwent reliability analyses as well as exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. The research hypotheses were examined using a two-way Manova analysis along with Hierarchical Linear Models (HLM). For the qualitative part of the research, a semi-structured group interview was held with five junior-high science teachers. The content of the interview was analyzed and the results were categorized according to the topics investigated in this research.

The primary findings regarding the students were that the subject matter's level of constructivism contributed to the differences in students' moral and learning environment perceptions but more so among junior-high-school students than among high-school students. In addition, girls scored higher than boys in moral and learning environment perceptions. Findings regarding moral and learning environment perceptions among teachers, showed opposite effects of the subject matter's level of constructivism from those found among students.

Relationships between teachers' and students' perceptions were examined by means of multiple levels analysis in two-level Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM). Findings showed no relationships between teachers' and students' perceptions. Students' academic self-esteem was positively related to their moral and learning environment perceptions. The educational level of the students (junior-high learners vs high-school learners) as well as their parents' level of education were not factors in contributing to differences in students' perceptions.

We therefore conclude that the subject matter's level of constructivism, gender and academic self-esteem are significant factors in students' moral perceptions and that the reasons for lack of relationships between teachers' and students' perceptions have yet to be discovered.

Finally, the findings of this research have been discussed extensively and varied explanations have been suggested. In addition, practical recommendations for future research have been proposed.