Doing the right thing in the early years of primary school: A longitudinal study of children's reasoning about right and wrong

Abstract

Doing the right thing at school involves moral reasoning about right and wrong that interplays with a sense of responsibility as children move towards being active citizens. In the current study we investigated how 124 Australian children's understanding and reasoning about doing the right thing changed over the early years of primary school (age 5-6 years through to age 7-8 years). This study included children's ideas about how they knew what was right and wrong and how they worked out for themselves what was right and wrong at school. The main finding suggests that children did not believe they were engaged in personal decision-making or reflections about what was right and wrong at school as they progressed through Year 1 to Year 3. Instead of developing autonomy and personal decision-making, children came to rely more on external authorities for knowledge. The implications from these findings point to the need to support children to become active citizens through participatory pedagogies and a focus on democracy.

Keywords: Active citizenship, School rules, Primary education, Participatory pedagogies

Introduction

Understanding what it means to do the right thing at school is a moral concern for young children (Johansson 2009). These moral concerns are often associated with learning about right and wrong and obeying rules implemented by adults (Johansson 2009). Following the rules, as part of doing the right thing at school, involves moral learning that interplays with a sense of responsibility, or obligation, as children move towards active citizenship. However, education for active citizenship, and pedagogies for teaching moral values for understandings of right and wrong, can be either liberating or oppressive depending on how they are facilitated (Sigauke 2013). For example, when pedagogical practices are teacher-centred, and students are positioned as passive learners, conformity to the rules becomes the focus. Students are subordinated, their voices silenced, and their opinions devalued. We argue in this paper, along with Tupper (2009), that learning how to do the right thing at school should be based on active citizenship. We understand active citizenship as involving children being active and responsible members of society (Lunn Brownlee et al. 2017). As active citizens, children reason about and act on moral and social issues in their environments (Lunn Brownlee et al. 2017).

Unfortunately, too often, democracy reflects an aspirational goal rather than authentic participatory processes (Mouffe 2000; Tupper 2009). Indeed, Tupper (2009) contends that democracy does not exist for many individuals despite living under what might be considered the universal rights of a democratic state. To investigate children's active citizenship, we draw on longitudinal interview data to explore changes in Australian children's ideas about thinking about right and wrong in the early years of primary education.

Our theoretical perspective draws on the work of Schütz (1972) by acknowledging that children's understandings of doing the right thing are situated in specific school cultures and in a certain time, space and societal culture. These often taken for granted understandings

are built on and contribute to a stock of knowledge, developed over time, which is both individual and collective (Schütz 1972). This situated perspective aligns with more recent research which views moral reasoning as influenced by domains of thinking and social contexts rather than developmental perspectives (Killen 2007; Scholes et al. 2016). As part of this specific school culture, teachers may influence the extent to which children become active, agentic, and responsible participants in the community and the extent to which they critically reflect on inequities within the world around them (Lunn Brownlee et al. 2017). Therefore, we argue that children's understandings of doing the right thing are likely to change as they experience the specific culture of schooling (Johansson 2009). In this study, we explored how Australian children understood and reasoned about right and wrong at school as they progressed from Year 1 to Year 3 of primary school.

Doing the right thing: Democracy and active citizenship

It is important to conceive of doing the right thing through a lens of democracy and citizenship, which involves the capacity to make informed choices (Tupper 2009). Decisions about the right thing to do need to reflect a focus on broader issues to do with equity and justice, rather than children simply making individual choices and obeying school rules. The ability to make individual choices and for children to make their own decisions is often promoted as a key part of early education. However, several authors (Kjørholt 2001, 2005; Penn 2009) have critiqued the provision of individual choice in early education because this often promotes decision-making that is not authentic, nor related to the broader community. Further, Kjørholt (2001, 2005) and Penn (2009) argued that while some teaching practices may purport to promote children's decision-making, they are in fact merely developing children's advocacy skills rather than encouraging children to develop as responsible members of a community. Thus, if we are to make progress towards more meaningful and genuine democracy in early childhood education, teachers must understand and challenge the

3

existing power relations of dominance and inequity (Tupper 2009). Thornberg (2009) also noticed a lack of decision-making and opportunities for children to think about the rules and doing the right thing at school. It is important then for children to have opportunities to think about different perspectives and for teachers to make visible the inequities and privileges that are embedded within the lives and experiences of some young children.

Recent theorisation about active citizenship has focused more on "identity, voice and the recognition of difference", with Devine (2002) further arguing that "a change in their rights and status will only come about by challenging the structural positioning of children and adults within the society at large" (p. 305). Power relationships between adults and children are inscribed in schools' values and norms. These values and norms are reflected in the types of rules deemed important, who decides the rules, to whom they apply, and the reasons used to justify their existence (Devine 2002; Thornberg 2009). In a cross cultural analysis of the interplay between educators and children (3-6 years) in Nordic preschools, Johansson and colleagues (Johansson et al. 2016) found that the children were afforded the right to (express) their opinion and they were listened to. However, if these opinions transgressed school rules, children's rights were often diminished. Processes supporting children's empowerment and collective claim for rights were in general limited and teachers' right to prioritise seemed to dominate (Johansson et al. 2016).

Children as responsible, active and agentic participants in school

A range of international research points to the significance of children as responsible, active and agentic participants, although less research of this nature has taken place in Australia. Investigating children's moral development for doing the right thing, Taylor, Ogawa and Wilson (2002) found that Japanese kindergarten children believed they needed to take responsibility. In their study they interviewed 28 children, their teachers, and the director of a kindergarten. As part of the study the children were given scenarios based on moral dilemmas

in various social contexts and asked what they would do and why. This led to the identification of three "themes" surrounding moral development: social system morality, emotions, and responsibility (Taylor et al. 2002).

One of the few Australian studies to explore children's reasoning about doing the right thing in school was undertaken by Johansson and colleagues (Johansson et al. 2014). In a study of 100 Australian children's (aged 4-8 years) moral development, Johansson et al. (2014) found that children described 'doing the right thing' as relating to care for others and school social order. This social order comprised conventions, rules and discipline. Rules and obligations connected with the value of others' wellbeing were also important. Doing the right thing was also about needing to share with others, to make friends and be inclusive of other children. They also talked about school discipline and behavioural expectations with a focus on doing what teachers told them to do (Johansson et al. 2014). Emilson and Johansson's (2009) research, in Sweden, similarly revealed that discipline and caring values were expressed in terms of obligations. Johansson et al. (2014) had similar findings in their study. The children they interviewed seemed to be cognisant of school rules, which were enforced by teachers through consequences such as exclusion (time out) or loss of rewards.

In Norway, Skreland (2015) also found that teachers in early childhood education and care settings were responsible for establishing rules for doing the right thing at school. The study identified a complex network of rules, obligations, prohibitions, routines, rituals and values, which the children and adults shared, negotiated and sometimes changed. Even though the children could resist the rules, it was the teachers who were responsible for establishing the system of rules. Skreland also noticed that the rules were ingrained in routines and rituals, for example, rituals for greetings, circle-time and mealtime. According to Skreland, rituals serve as subtle pressures for conformity on the individuals. In elusive ways, rules for doing the right thing are implemented and integrated in everyday rituals for practice.

While research often shows that children relate rules and doing the right thing to teacher authorities, rules can also be challenged by children (Björk-Willén 2012; Cobb-Moore 2012; Danby and Theobald 2012; Johansson 2009; Skreland 2015; Thornberg 2010). When everyday interactions in school, to a large extent, aim to strictly uphold rules, it is likely that children and teachers will be involved in discourses for how to uphold and follow these rules. This does not necessarily mean that children follow the rules without reflection. Children both relate to and sometimes choose to transgress the rules (Björk-Willén 2012; Cobb-Moore 2012; Danby and Theobald 2012; Johansson 2009; Skreland 2015). If rules are more implicitly embedded in everyday practice, however, there might be more possibilities for various interpretations, disputes and possible ways of acting and even questioning the rules (Johansson and Emilson 2016; Johansson 2009).

Overall, this corpus of international research suggests that children often are the receivers of teachers' instructions and rules, with restricted space to engage in reasoning for active decision-making about doing the right thing. This reasoning is an essential characteristic of active citizenship. While much of the research points to the limited role of children in decision-making in school, there is little research that explores how children's reasoning about right and wrong changes over the early years of primary school.

As already indicated, we regard children`s reasoning to be situated in specific school cultures and in a certain time, space and societal culture. As part of the specific school culture, teachers may influence the extent to which children become active, agentic, and responsible participants in the community and the extent to which they critically reflect on inequities within the world around them (Lunn Brownlee et al. 2017). Therefore, we argue that children's understandings of doing the right thing are likely to change as they experience the specific culture of schooling (Johansson 2009). In the current study, we explored how Australian children in South East Queensland understood and reasoned about right and wrong

6

at school as they progressed from Year 1 to Year 3 of school. This study included a focus on how they knew and how they worked out for themselves what was right and wrong in school contexts.

Method

The study draws on child interview data from children attending Year 1 and Year 3 across Australian primary schools in a three-year longitudinal study of children's personal epistemologies for moral reasoning (Australian Research Council Discovery Project 2013-2015). The research question was "What changes take place over the early years of primary school regarding how children know what is right and wrong?"

Participants

This paper reports data from a cohort of 124 children interviewed in Year 1 (female = 67, male = 57), between the ages of six and seven (M = 6.7, SD = 0.32), and 107 children (female = 56, male = 51) who were interviewed again in Year 3 as part of a three-year longitudinal study. The sample included four Indigenous children and 25 children from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE). There was approximately 10% attrition between Year 1 and Year 3 due to children leaving the schools. The sample of children came from ten schools — four independent and six state primary schools — in South East Queensland, Australia. Permission was granted by principals, teachers, parents/guardians and children prior to data collection (QUT ethics approval number: 1300000134).

Procedure

Written consent was obtained from the teachers and parents (or guardians), while children were asked to express their willingness to participate by colouring in a smiley face or alternatively, a frowning face if they did not wish to take part. Individual children were interviewed by a member of the research team that included the researchers and research

assistants. Extensive interview training was facilitated by the Chief Investigator for research assistants prior to data collection. All research assistants either held or were a considerable way through completing a PhD in education and were experienced in qualitative research methods. The research team (including research assistants and researchers) were aware of the need to make children feel comfortable and engaged in casual discussions before the interview process. Thus interviews took place close to each child's classroom and within view of the classroom teacher in most cases. In Year 1 and Year 3 children were asked how they knew what was right or wrong at school and how they worked out in their own head what was right or wrong at school.

Data analysis

To understand changes that took place over the early years of primary school regarding children's thinking about right and wrong we explored children's explanations. We used template analysis as a means of thematically analysing the children's interviews (King 2012). The development of a coding "template", described in Table 1, reflected literature in the field around children's reasoning about doing the right thing at school. The template codes were refined and additions made as required based on the data. In this way the broad themes were identified prior to coding and then the categories were modified and developed after reading and examining the data (King 2012). The categories describing children's thinking about right and wrong in this study applied to both interview questions (How do you know what is right or wrong at school? How do you work out in your own head what is right or wrong at school?). Their responses were coded as subjectivity, truth, external authority, decision-making and moral/social consequences. These are described and exemplified in Table 1.

Table 1

Description of categories related to how children know and how they work out what is right or wrong at school

8

Category	Description	Justification example
Subjectivity	Individuals can have different beliefs; people can believe different things and have different opinions (Based on a view that individuals construct their own understanding and values, etc. – no objective world referred to).	I might ask my friends before I do it. (Yr3_20209) Because that's your answer. That's your opinion, and that's what you think. (Yr3_80107)
Truth	Knowledge is certain; there is a proven or verified principle; there can only be one right answer; child perceives as fact.	When somebody does something naughty that's wrong and when somebody does something good that's right. (Yr1_80114)
External Authority	Refers to authority figures' influence (principal, teachers, parents); or to the authority of the school or school rules.	The teachers tell us and we do the right thing (Yr1_40115)
Decision-Making	Personal preference to believe or act in a particular way; a personal desire or decision; thinking about choices.	Because you think before you do. (Yr1_10315) You stick to what you think; should do what your heart thinks (Yr3_10107)
Moral /Social Consequences	There are external consequences from particular actions or holding particular beliefs; it is important to do the right thing.	I know when you do the wrong thing because someone might cry. (Yr1_70210) When you hurt someone or you're being mean. They start to cry or tell the teacher. That's wrong. (Yr3_10102)

To ensure ongoing consensus, quality checks were carried out throughout the process by researchers who cross-checked coding. Coding queries were circulated between the key researcher and research assistants throughout the process. When there were double-coded differences, or lack of consensus about the appropriateness of a code, an external arbitrator (a partner investigator) with expertise in the area made final decisions for responses to establish

9

validity and reliability in coding. Ambiguous responses were recorded as "not codable". This process involved a dialogic reliability check of the coding process. A dialogic reliability check is "where agreement between researchers is reached through discussion and mutual critique of the data and of each researcher's interpretive hypotheses" (Åkerlind 2012, p. 125). This process was iterative, and comparative, involving the continual sorting and re-sorting of data, along with ongoing comparisons between the data and the developing categories of description, and between the categories themselves.

The next part of the analysis focussed on changes in children's explanations (in Table 1) over the early years of primary school from Year1 to Year 3. We explored changes at both a group and individual level. The *group level* changes were addressed by using the McNemar-Bowker test for significant differences between children's responses at Year 1 and Year 3 (Field 2013). As most children's responses were categorised as either truth, external authority or decision-making, these were the categories used for further analyses related to change. McNemar-Bowker test is the non-parametric equivalent of a paired sample t-test. It tests differences between two related groups when nominal data are used. The current data were two related nominal variables so McNemar-Bowker's test was appropriate (Field 2013). The *individual level* changes were identified by qualitatively analysing changes in individual children's responses between Years 1 and 3.

Findings

The results of this study are presented in two sections to address children's understandings about how they knew, and worked out, what was right or wrong at school and how these understandings changed from Year 1 to Year 3. The first section addresses the whole of group quantitative data for both interview questions. The second section addresses the individual level findings about how children understood how they knew and worked out what was right or wrong by analysing how the same children responded across Year 1 and Year 3.

How children knew and worked out what was right or wrong: Quantitative group data

Children's responses to how they knew and worked out what was right and wrong at school were analysed by using McNemar-Bowker's test for significant differences between children's responses at Year 1 and Year 3 (Field 2013). As most children's responses were categorised as either truth, external authority or decision-making, these were the categories used for further analyses related to change. First changes in responses to *How do you know what is right or wrong at school* are explored followed by responses to *How do you work out in your own head what is right or wrong*?

How do you know what is right or wrong at school?

When asked in Year 1 how they knew what was right and wrong at school, a total of 88 children out of 122 (72.1%) referred to an external authority source, 27 children (22.1%) referred to there being an absolute truth in a right and wrong answer, and four children (3.3%) cited personal decision-making (see Table 2). When asked the same question in Year 3, 70 children out of 107 (65.4%) referred to an external authority source. Meanwhile the number of children referring to truth as their way of knowing what was right and wrong declined to 16 (15.0%), and the number citing decision-making rose to 13 children (12.1%).

Table 2

Question 1 – How do you know what is right or wrong at school? (Years 1 and 3)

	Year 1		Year 3	
Responses	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
Truth	27	22.1	16	15.0
External authority	88	72.1	70	65.4
Decision-making	4	3.3	13	12.1

	Year 1			
All other categories	3	2.5	8	7.5
Total	122	100.0	107	100.0

As illustrated in Table 2, there was a drop of 7% in the percentage of children referring to external authorities between Years 1 and 3. There was also an increase of 8.8 % in children speaking about decision-making as the reason for how they knew what was right and wrong at school in Year 3, and a drop of 7.1% in those referring to truth as the reason. While these data display some shift in answers from external consequences and truth to decision-making, this is not a significant change (McNemar-Bowker = 4.25, p = 0.236). External authority as the way of knowing what is right and wrong at school remained the most common response given by children in Year 3.

How do you work out in your own head what is right or wrong?

When children were asked in Year 1 about how they worked out in their own head what was right or wrong at school, as noted in Table 3, a total of 61 children out of 106 reflected on the use of decision-making. A further 33 children referred to an external authority, and seven children cited an absolute truth in a right and wrong answer (see Table 3). When asked again in Year 3, the number of children referring to decision-making fell to 30 out of 84 children. In addition, the number of children referring to external authority rose to 43, while six children cited truth.

Table 3

Question 2 – How do you work out in your own head what is right or wrong? (Years 1 & 3)

	Year 1		Year 3	
Responses	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
Truth	7	6.6	6	7.1

External authority	33	31.1	43	51.2
Decision-making	61	57.5	30	35.7
All other categories	5	4.7	5	6.0
Total	106	100.0	84	100.0

These data demonstrate a significant change in children's thinking about how they work out what is right and wrong in their school context (McNemar-Bowker = 10.13, p = .017). References to decision-making fell by 21.8% between Year 1 and Year 3; conversely, there was a 20.1% increase in children referring to external authority. There was no distinguishable change in the percentage of children citing truth in their answers. These results present a substantial shift in children's thinking about right and wrong during the early years of schooling, away from decision-making and towards external authority.

Directions of development in how children knew and worked out what was right or wrong: Qualitative individual data

The interview data were analysed to explore changes in individual children's responses between Years 1 and 3 with regard to the questions *How do you know what is right or wrong at school?* and *How do you work out in your own head what is right and wrong at school?*

How do you know what is right or wrong at school?

While Tables 2 and 3 above refer to whole of group data quantitative movement between response codes from Year 1 to Year 3, changes in children's ideas about right and wrong over time were also explored at the individual level. The sample here consisted only of those children who responded in one of the three categories of interest (external authority, decision-making and truth) at both Year 1 and Year 3 (n = 72). The data in Table 4 are a summary of

13

children's views about how they knew what was right and wrong at school at Year 1 and Year 3.

Table 4

Individual trends in response to "How do you know what is right or wrong at school?" (Years 1 to 3)

Year 1	Year 3	N	%
External authority	External authority	26	36.1
External authority	External authority-focus on internalising rules	16	22.2
External authority	Decision-making	3	4.2
External authority	Truth	7	9.7
Decision-making	Decision-making	0	0.0
Decision-making	External authority	3	4.2
Truth	Truth	4	5.5
Truth	Decision-making	4	5.5
Truth	External authority	9	12.5
Total		72	100.0

Note: This table only includes those children for whom data were available at Year 1 and Year 3

Most children (*n*=42) believed they knew what was right and wrong at school based on external authorities at both Year 1 and Year 3 either with reference to the teacher as a source of external authority (*n*=26) or with a focus on internalising rules (*n*=16). There were also 12 other children who described external authorities at Year 3 only. Among the responses coded "external authority" at Year 1, most children referred specifically to their teacher as the authority figure who tells them what is right or wrong at school. Further to this, the children often cited listening to and obeying the teacher's directions as their way of knowing right and wrong.

By listening to what the teacher says. That's what's right. Yr1_10102

The teachers tell us and we do the right thing. Yr1_40115

The teacher appears as the source of truth, or what is right, and also the source of directives as children "do" the right thing. Within the early schooling context children are quickly acclimatised to the distinct roles of student/child didactic evident in the quotes above.

By Year 3, there was an increase in children who referred to school rules as the "external authority" telling them what is right and wrong, as opposed to the teacher. Furthermore, whereas in Year 1 children often cited rules in an externalised way, by Year 3 they appear to internalise and take personal responsibility for the rules (Table 4).

Because of the rules and I know all the rules so if someone is not doing the rules I would know. Yr3_10103

Knowing and abiding by the school rules seems to become a badge of honour for children who "know all the rules". The rules as a source of truth then becomes a benchmark that children can use to measure their own and other children's right and wrong choices.

Another interesting finding evident in Table 4 relates to the low numbers of Year 3 children who described engaging in personal decision-making processes ($n=3$ moved from external authority and $n=4$ moved from truth). Some children even reverted to a focus on external authorities as the source of knowing at Year 3 after initially believing that knowledge was based on personal decision-making in Year 1 ($n=3$). Personal decision making reflected a preference to believe or act in a particular way, a personal desire or decision, or thinking about choices, for example:

You stick to what you think; should do what your heart thinks. Yr3_10107

Taken together, children's responses to the question *How do you know what is right or wrong at school?* reflect a strong focus on knowing what is right and wrong based on teachers as external authorities (Year 3 *n*=54), with few children (*n*=7) acknowledging their role in personal decision making.

How do you work out in your own head what is right or wrong?

The children were also asked how they worked out "in their own heads" what was right or wrong at school. These data showed a stronger focus on personal decision making, compared with the previous analysis that explored how they knew what was right and wrong at school. Eighteen children believed they worked out in their own heads what was right and wrong based on a personal decision-making process at Year 3 (See Table 5). Of this group, three children had moved from a view in Year 1 that external authorities helped them to work out what was right or wrong, while one child moved from a view about truth to personal decision-making. Taken together, these data showed very little movement overall towards personal decision-making. Another group of children seemed to regress towards reliance on external authorities by moving from acknowledging the role of personal decision-making in Year 1 to relying on external authority in Year 3 (*n*=17).

Table 5

Individual trends in response to "How do you work out in your own head what is right or wrong?" (Years 1 to 3)

Year 1	Year 3	N	%
External authority	External authority	5	10.6
External authority	External authority focus on internalising rules	3	6.4
External authority	Decision-making	3	6.4
External authority	Truth	1	2.1

Decision-making	Decision-making	14	28.6
Decision-making	External authority	17	34.7
Truth	Truth	2	4.2
Truth	Decision-making	1	2.0
Truth	External authority	2	4.2
Total		49	100.0

Note: This table only includes those children for whom data were available at Year 1 and Year 3

Overall these findings show that there was limited movement toward personal decision-making, with children in Year 1 reflecting on personal decision-making more than children in Year 3. The children in Year 3 refer more to external authority (or truth) (*n=31*). Very few children moved from an 'external authority' (*n=3*) or 'truth' (*n=1*) in Year 1 to 'decision-making' in Year 3. More children moved in the opposite direction from decision-making towards external authority (*n=17*) or used decision-making in both Years 1 and 3 (*n=14*).

Discussion

The main finding in this study suggests that children do not consider themselves to be engaged in personal decision-making or reflections about right and wrong at school. Over time children's reasoning moved from decision-making to external authority (for 'How do you work out in your own head what is right and wrong at school') with little movement from external authority towards decision-making for either question. It seems that instead of developing autonomy and personal decision-making through their experiences at school, children came to rely more on external authorities for knowledge and less on their own judgements. These findings suggest that children may have been schooled into conforming to authorities for knowledge over the early years of school.

Our findings also show over time that some children who described a reliance on 'external authority' moved towards an internalisation of school rules. This suggests that children are able to internalise and follow school rules with less reliance on being told what to do by a teacher as they grow older. Some research suggests that education for rules in the early years is characterised by friendly benevolence, aiming to support children to internalise the rules and make them their own (Bartholdsson 2007; Emilson 2018; Johansson et al. 2016). This means that teacher authorities may take more implicit forms rather than presenting as an explicit authority (Skreland 2015). However, these responses still reflect beliefs in authorities, which implies accepting rules without critically analysing them.

Such conformity and reliance on external authorities for knowing what is right and wrong is at odds with the idea of active citizenship. This means that children in school may learn how to become passive adaptive citizens and to leave decisions to authorities rather than believing in, and enacting, their own capacity for decision-making. The findings from this study resonate with Thornberg's (2009) research, which also showed that children did not engage in decision-making and critical thinking about school rules. Johansson and colleagues also found that children were expected to simply fit in at school, rather than having a say in how elements of the school system were structured (Emilson and Johansson 2009; Johansson et al. 2014; Johansson 2009). The children in Johansson et al.'s studies did not see the rules as their responsibility or seek to question such rules. They also seemed to trust that teachers knew what was best for children. In this kind of community, participating seems to relate to adapting to the rules rather than children taking part in decisions about rules or discussing the relevance of these rules. Johansson and her colleagues argued that children are often not supported to engage in critical reflection on both their actions and consequences of actions with regards to the rules at school.

Implications for teaching

Teachers can help children to reflect critically on inequities and privileges in their lives and in school experiences, and this supports a genuinely democratic approach to education (Tupper 2009). We argue that doing the right thing needs to involve children in active citizenship, which engages children in critical reflection on the nature of conflicts and rules in their contexts, their actions and consequences of their actions. Rules can provide guidelines for action and can also lead to critical reflection and evaluation of what constitutes good and bad, or right and wrong, reflecting an individual's sense of moral values (Thornberg 2008).

Exploring and critically reflecting on conflicts related to school rules can be promoted through meaningful classroom discussions. It seems that if children are supported to understand and critically reflect upon school rules, they are more likely to have positive experiences related to such rules (Thornberg 2010). It is important to consider ways in which children can be involved in such discussions while also attending to their own views about values and rules for doing the right thing. Ensuring a compromise between "conventional values and rules for authority, manners and discipline on the one hand with values for participation, democracy and concern for others on the other hand" is a challenge in supporting children to have an active, critical role in doing the right thing at school (Johansson et al. 2014, p. 19, see also Johansson 2009).

We suggest that a focus on active citizenship for moral values can be addressed through dialogically organised early years classrooms, which are more likely to support engagement and whole of class discussion based on critical reflection. Dialogically organised classrooms, in which there is collaboration between children and teachers, support children to discuss and justify their own opinions in respectful ways within the classroom (Lunn et al. 2018). Such dialogic classrooms are likely to support children to see themselves as agentic and responsible members of a community.

Limitations: Critiquing the interview questions

A possible limitation of this study relates to the wording of the interview questions. The second question, *How do you work out in your own head what is right or wrong*? enabled us to probe children's views about knowing what is right and wrong. However, it is possible that the use of the words "in your own head" may have led children to respond in a way that was more focussed on personal decision-making. The group data showed that many children described decision-making as the way they worked out in their own head what was right and wrong (57.5%) at Year 1. It is possible that the language used in the question led to the increased frequency of the decision-making responses.

However, when the Year 3 data are considered, this pattern of response is no longer evident and indeed children show a clear decline in the use of decision-making (35.7%) as a way of working out what is right and wrong. We think this suggests that the language of the question may not have led children to provide more decision-making responses. In the individual change data reported in Table 5 it is also clear that the wording of the question seems to have limited effect, because children in Year 1 (63.3 % in total) referred to decision-making more than children in Year 3 (37% in total). If the focus of the wording *working out in your own head* was having an impact on responses we might have expected that children at both years to express similar frequencies of responses but instead we see a marked decline over time in responses of personal decision-making.

Conclusion

Concerned with how children become responsible members of the community, this paper examined children's understanding of doing the right thing at school and the nuances associated with the interplay of following the rules and developing a sense of responsibility towards active citizenship. Children's teacher-centred views about conformity to the rules enrich the findings of other important research in this area. They also draw attention to the

need to problematise children's capacity to make choices about doing the right thing at school and developing autonomy in becoming a good citizen. This study contributes new understandings about how children's views about personal decision making develop over the early years of elementary school. Our longitudinal research highlights important evidence that children may not be actively engaged in personal decision making, which provides further warrant for supporting children to become active citizens through participatory pedagogies that focus on critical reflection.

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