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# **Neither Play Nor Politics – Developing Democratic Competencies in the School**

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**Psychology of Morality &  
Democracy and Education**

# Neither Play Nor Politics - Developing Democratic Competencies in the School<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Competence has become a new issue in moral education. The importance of cognitive factors for democratic and moral behavior, aside from verbal knowledge and affective orientation, has been discovered by Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, who have first succeeded to measure adequately the competence aspects of morality, and show its relevance for education. Socially mature behavior does not only require knowledge of, and positive attitudes toward, socio-moral principles but also the competence of *applying* norms and principles in everyday decision making, e.g., the (cognitive) competence of solving conflicts between competing norms and principles. Longitudinal and cross-cultural research underscores the importance of the competence aspect. It shows that almost everyone prefers high stages of moral reasoning but many people lack the competence to apply ethical principles to social, moral or political tasks.

Such findings imply that, in line with the optimism of the Enlightenment, the school should concentrate on fostering adolescents' moral judgment competence rather than on changing their moral attitudes. By doing so, education would escape the problem of indoctrination. Yet, the concept of moral-democratic competence raises another problem. Like John Dewey, Kohlberg claimed that democracy is not only an aim of education but also a means of education. This claim may be criticized from two sides. On the one side, it may be argued that education precludes real democracy, and, unless we give up the concept of education altogether, democracy in the school may mean nothing but "play." On the other side one may object that democracy would undermine education since it would let political positions and controversies from outside enter the school.

In this presentation, I shall try to show that both types of criticism are based on the assumption that education and democracy are incompatible, and that this assumption is neither philosophically nor practically tenable. Communicative ethical theorists like Habermas, Apel and Oser, have shown that both concepts are not only compatible with one another but are also mutually dependent. This mutual interdependence is supported by recent empirical research into, and by practical examples from, just community programs. Thus, democracy in school means neither play nor politics, but it intimates a new form of pedagogy. It means that teaching of moral-democratic competencies must be *practical*, that is, it must engage students and teachers in the solution of really important, if not real, human problems. But moral-democratic education must also be conceived of as *education*, and thus be clearly demarcated from politics and jurisdiction.

## Content:

- "German perspective"
- Recent debate about "Good Schools"
- Klafki (1990): Democratic school must provide experience of new forms to solve rationally problems ...
- Philosophic debate: Universalist vs. relativist ethical theories
- Rorty: Democracy above philosophy/ethics; Viz (1990)
- Apel: Ethics as foundation of democracy and education
- New insights from experimental psychology into morality give way to a "universalistic pragmatism"
- The DES Project
- Preliminary findings
- The role of democracy in education
- "Legalistic" view: (Grundgesetz)
- "Pedagogical" view:

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at the AME meeting, November 1990, Notre Dame University. Authors' address: Dr. Georg Lind, Universität Konstanz, Sozialwissenschaftliche Fakultät, Postfach 5560, D-78457 Konstanz.

The availability of empirical data on the process of moral-democratic development has changed our way of thinking about moral-democratic education:

Although, there had been numerous studies into the relationship between (level of) education on the one side and moral development on the other side, the findings were inconclusive, if not contradictory for a long time. Alike, definition and measurement of moral development was problematic. The prevailing attitude-conception of moral judgment felt short of defining the direction of development. Moreover, attitude measurement is based on methodological rules (i. e., rules for assessing reliability and validity) which prevent the measurement of the cognitive-structural aspects of moral development (Wakenhut 1978; Krämer-Badoni & Wakenhut 1979; Lind 1985a). When cognitive-developmental theory of moral and democratic competence emerged from the research by scholars like Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, a new understanding of morality was gained. The new methodology led to a paradigm change in psychological measurement. It has brought about new methodologies for assessing the relationship between moral development and education. With this new methodology, as imperfect as it may be, it was possible to clearly show that education has a great impact on adolescents' moral development. Regrettably, this finding is often overlooked, or reported only in footnotes. I have recalculated some figures in order to get an estimate of the effect size (expressed in terms of the correlation coefficient<sup>2</sup>):

- $r = 0.66$  in Kohlberg's (1958) first study in the Fifties;
- $r = 0.71$  in the study by Candee, Graham and Kohlberg (1978);
- $r = 0.62$ ,  $r = 0.67$  und  $r = 0.69$  in drei Studien von Rest (1979, S. 100);
- $r = 0.77$  in einer Studie von Kitchener und King (1981).

## Methods

Two sets of data are used. The first set of data stems from *lower grade* ("young") students who participated in ongoing research associated with the educational intervention project "Demokratie und Erziehung in der Schule" (DES) in Nordrhein-Westfalen.<sup>3</sup> In the years 1987 to 1989, approximately 650 secondary school students were surveyed. The second set of data stem from *upper grade students*; these data were collected as part of a study on the development of social responsibility.<sup>4</sup>

The teacher data have been collected by the present author on various occasions in the years 1987 to 1989, involving  $N= 129$  teachers of various school types, with ages ranging from 21 to 63 years, and teaching experience ranging from 2 to 33 years; 44 percent were male and 56 percent female. Since our aim was to find out about teachers' *general* knowledge of students' views, no direct matching of students and teachers was undertaken. The teachers and students were in fact sampled from different schools.

For assessing students' desires and observations concerning democratic school life, seven questions will be looked at:<sup>5</sup>

## Findings

### Teachers

In a recent study, we have investigated teachers' perceptions of students' desire for democratic school life. In this study teachers substantially underestimated students' commitment to a democratic school. Students generally attach greater importance to democratic participation than the teachers seem to imagine. Many teachers underestimate students' desire for democratic participation in making, and enforcing, school rules. Regardless of age, most students assign great importance to wishes like "students having a say in school's decision making," and "democratic principles of voting." They also say that students participation in school decision making is right, though older students seem to be more hesitant about considering the demand for more democratic participation in school to be a *right* (Fig. 9).

Teachers tend to misunderstand what students mean when they desire democratic participation in school. Analysis shows that

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<sup>2</sup> See Glass et al. (1986).

<sup>3</sup> The DES-Project has been initiated by the Nordrhein-Westfalian Minister of Education in 1985, involving three schools (see Lind & Raschert 1987). The DES project comprises the just community model by Kohlberg and his associates (Kohlberg, 1987; Power et al. 1989) and Oser's (1986) discourse perspective. I wish to thank the Landesinstitut für Schule und Weiterbildung, Soest NRW, for making the data available. A report on the DES research is forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> Link & Lind 1988.

<sup>5</sup> These questions have been asked as part of a larger questionnaire for the study of the moral atmosphere of the school, the "Moralische Atmosphäre Fragebogen" (MAF), by Lind & Link (1986). The MAF has been developed in collaboration with Fritz Oser, University of Fribourg, Switzerland, and the Harvard Center for Moral education (cf. Power, Higgins & Kohlberg, 1989). Many questions have been directly adapted from the questionnaire that has been used in evaluating the just community programs in the United States. Major modifications pertain to the structural design of the MAF.

their meaning structure in regard to democratic participation poorly matches students' meaning structure. Students' valuing of democratic decision-making is positively correlated with all other domains of moral wants. Students who want democratic decision-making also say that good and fair rules are very important. Both questions correlated  $r = .37$  in the student sample. Many teachers, however, seem to be unaware of this highly positive association, and seem to believe that student advocates of democratic government express little concern about good and fair rules. The correlation is considerably lower ( $r = .15$ ). *In particular, educators with long teaching experience misconceive students' connotations. In this group the correlation is even negative ( $r = -.12$ ). Older teachers also seem to believe that, for students, a desire for democratic rule connotes opposition against teachers who enforce rules ( $r = -.25$ )*, whereas students' responses indicate that this is not the case. Young teachers have a more accurate knowledge about students' democratic desires. In this respect, long teaching experience does not seem to improve accuracy of perception.

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**Appendix:**  
**Questions on Students' Moral Wants and Worries<sup>6</sup>**

How important are the following things for you... (Please endorse "1" for not important, "2" for little important, and so on, and "5" for very important.)

**Student–student interactions**

1. Students being friendly with one another.
2. Students helping each other even when they are not friends.
3. Students getting along with one another even when they belong to different cliques and groups.
4. Having a group which members hold together against others.

**Student–teacher interactions**

5. Teachers treat students justly and respectfully.
6. Teachers and students discuss openly problems and conflicts with one another.
8. Teachers being dedicated to enforce school rules.

**Student–school relationships**

7. Students having a say in decision making processes in their school.
9. Important decisions in school being made democratically; every student and teacher having one vote.
10. Students being proud on their school and feeling to be a member.
11. School being a community in which students and teachers care for each other.
12. School providing a good training; students being able to learn much.

**Rule breaking**

13. Less competition among students.
14. Less cheating.
15. Less fighting.
16. Less playing truant.
17. Less stealing.
18. No vandalism.

**Democratic decision–making**

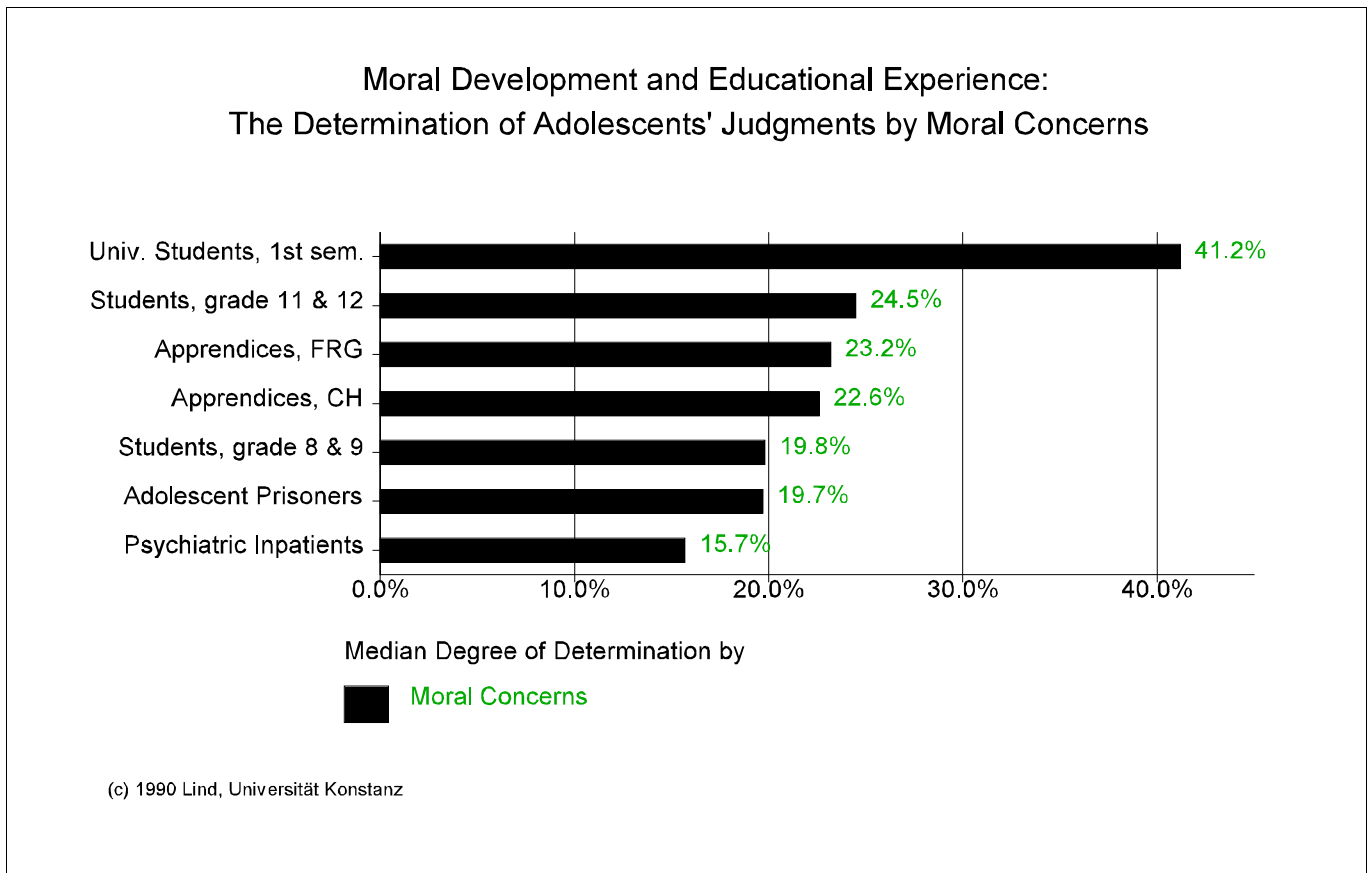
What do you think about... (Please, endorse "1" for completely wrong, "2" for somewhat wrong, and so on, and "5" for completely right.)

19. that students decide what should be allowed in school, and what should be forbidden?
20. that students, together with teachers, conceive sanctions against rule breaking.
21. that students, together with teachers, decide about how someone should be punished who breaks the school's rules.

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<sup>6</sup> The items were presented in the order as indicated by the question numbers on the left. The subdivisions were not presented. These question numbers are also referred to in the tables and figures in this paper.

## Abbildungen



**Figure 1** Moral Competence and Educational Experience.

Group/ sample size/ year of study/ source:

University students, 1st semester:	n= 1288, 1978, Forschungsgruppe Hochschulsozialisation.*
High school students <sup>7</sup> , grades 11 & 12:	n= 42, 1987, Link & Lind (1988).
Apprendices, Switzerland:	n= 579, 1983, Lind (1985).
Apprendices, Fed. Rep. of Germany:	n= 256, 1978, Heidbrink (1985).
High school students <sup>8</sup> , grades 8 & 9:	n= 87, 1987, Link & Lind (1988).
Adolescent prisoners:	n= 26, 1981, Wischka (1982).
Psychiatric inpatients in prison:	n= 15, 1981, Wischka (1982).

Measurement instrument:

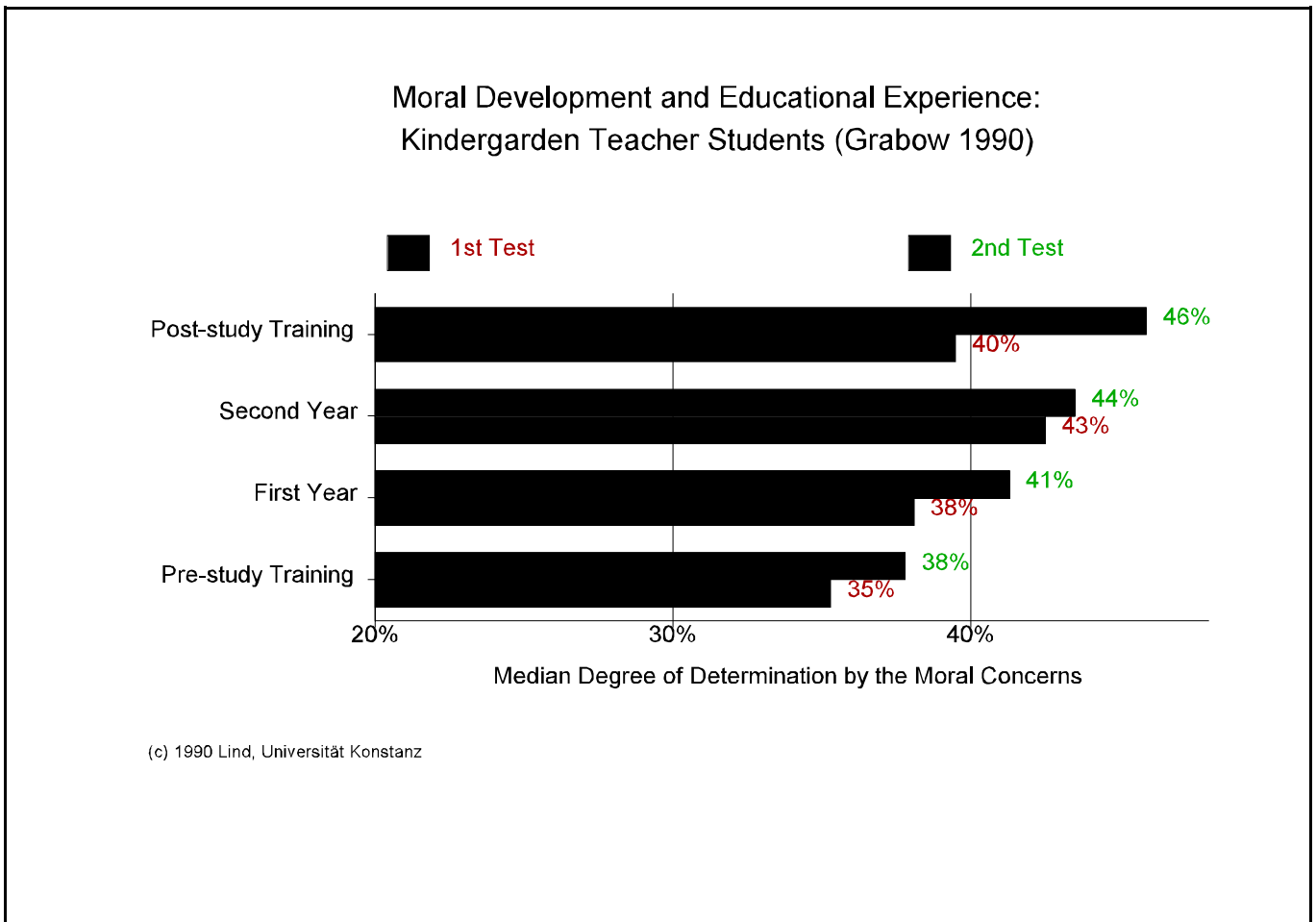
MUT, Version 2 (1977); 5-point response scales, (\*) 9-point response scale.

Median Determination by Moral Stage:

The degree to which the subjects' evaluations of arguments was determined by the stage of moral reasoning (sensu Kohlberg) they represent, in contrast to the determination by the arguments' agreement with the subjects' opinion about the right dilemma solution, or by other non-moral psychological factors.

<sup>7</sup> Students in the college-bound type of high school ("Gymnasium").

<sup>8</sup> See footnote 7.



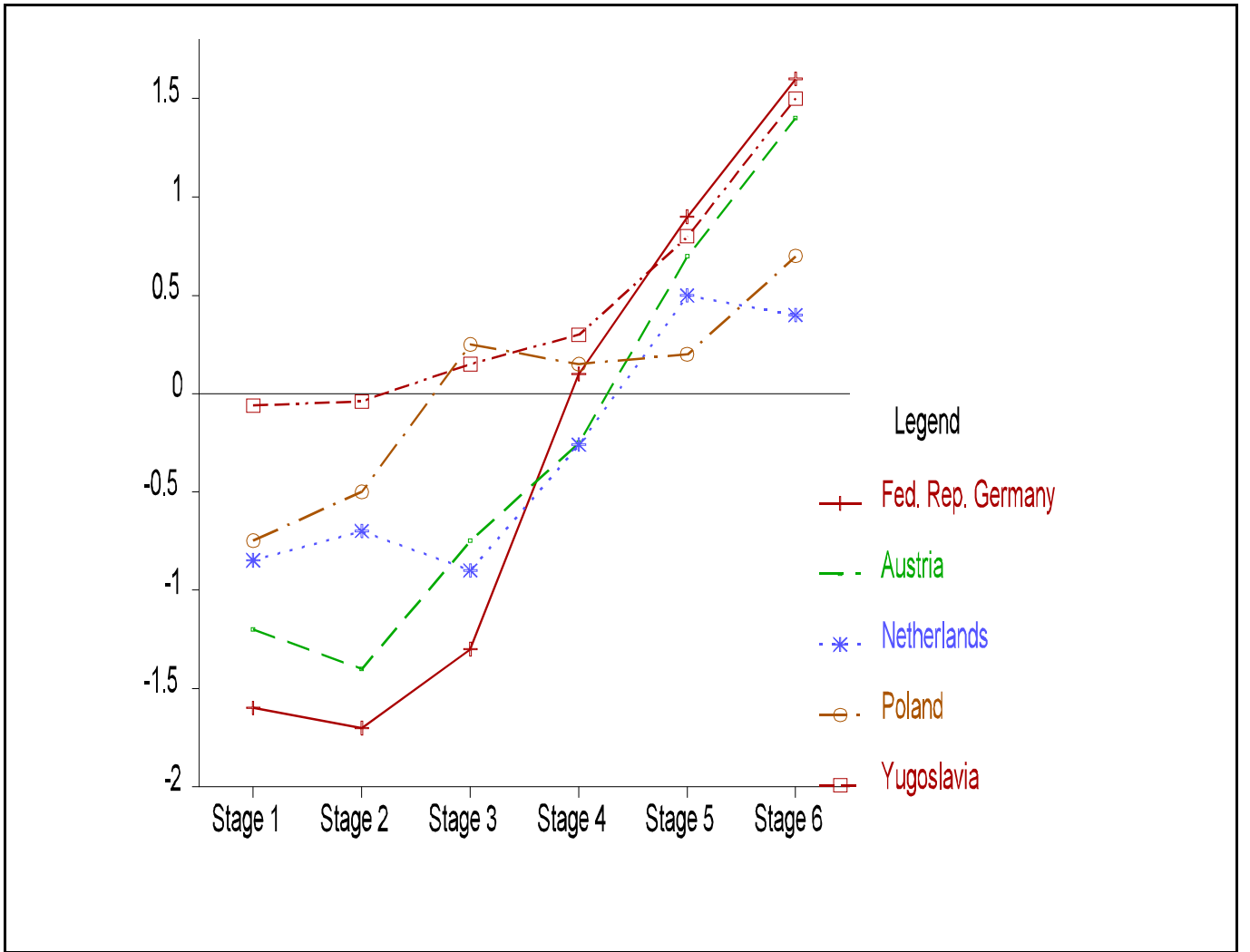
**Figure 2** Moral Judgment Competence and Education: Longitudinal Study.

All data stem from Grabow's (1990) study on kindergarden teacher students. The study was conducted in the years from 1985 to 1987. The two testing times were one half year apart. The first three groups were tested longitudinally, the fourth group was tested cross-sectionally.

Group (level of education)/ sample size/ testing time:

<i>Post-study training ("Berufspraktikum"):</i>	n= 32 (1st), n= 29 (2nd)
<i>Second year of study ("Oberstufe"):</i>	n= 59 (1st), n= 59 (2nd)
<i>First year of study ("Unterstufe"):</i>	n= 60 (1st), n= 58 (2nd)
<i>Pre-study training ("Vorpraktikum"):</i>	n= 27 (1st), n= 25 (2nd)

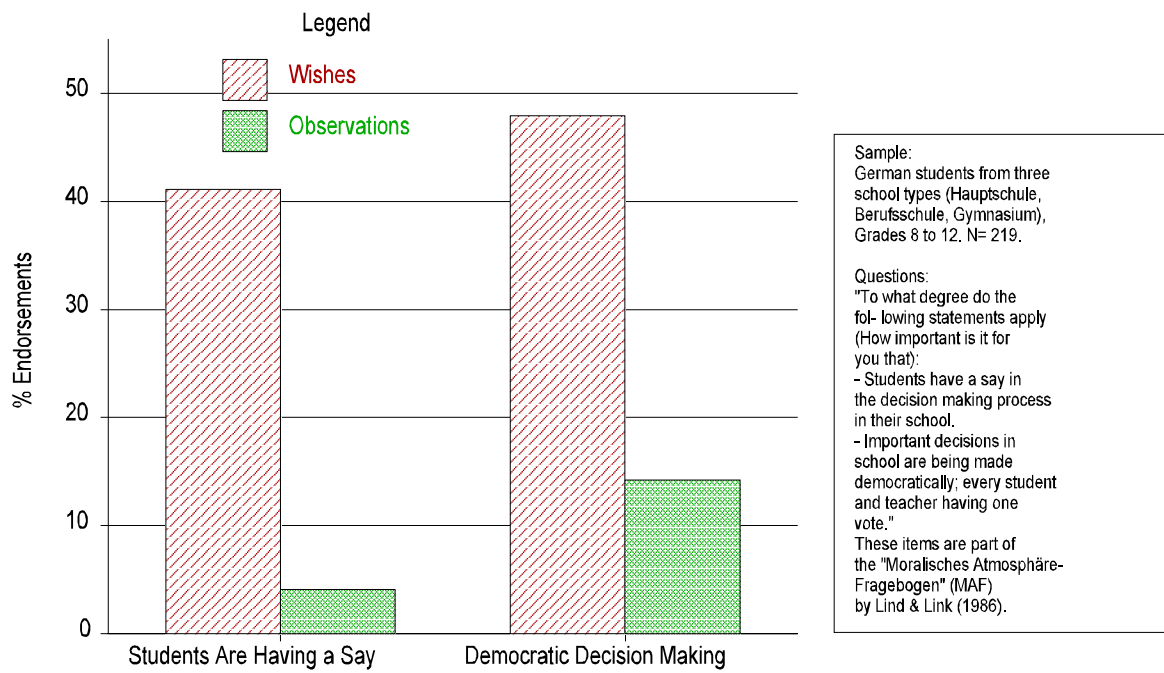
Measurement instrument: MUT, Version 2 (1977); 5-point response scales.



**Figure 3**



Students' Wishes and Observations Concerning Democracy in School  
 Percentage of Highest Score ("5" with a scale from "0" to "5")

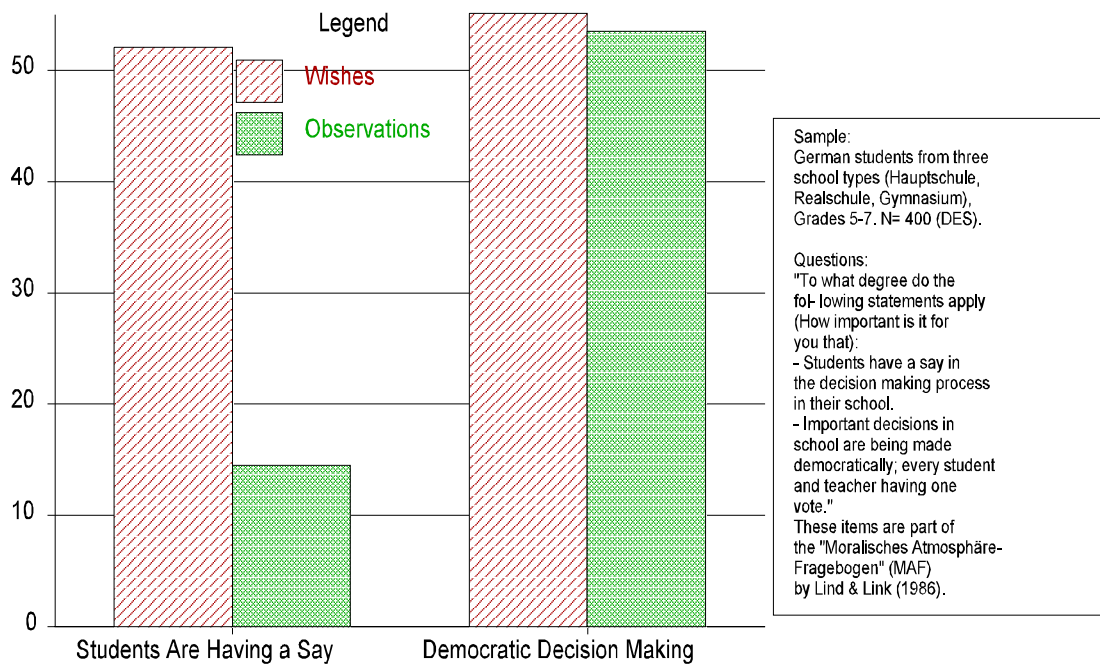


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**Figure 4** Students' Wishes and Observations (Grades 8-12)

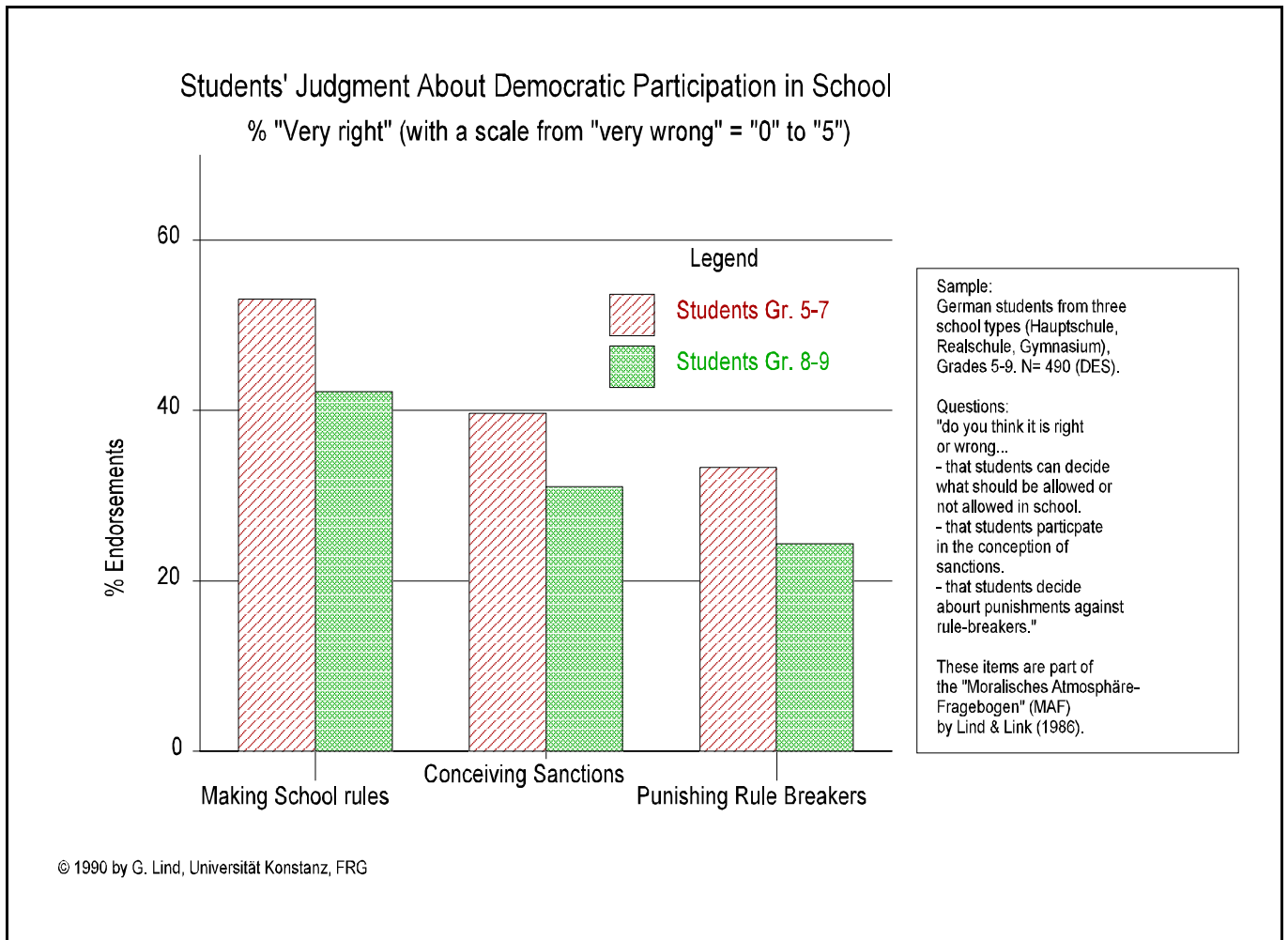
### Students' Wishes and Observations Concerning Democracy in School

Percentage of Highest Score ("5" with a scale from "0" to "5")



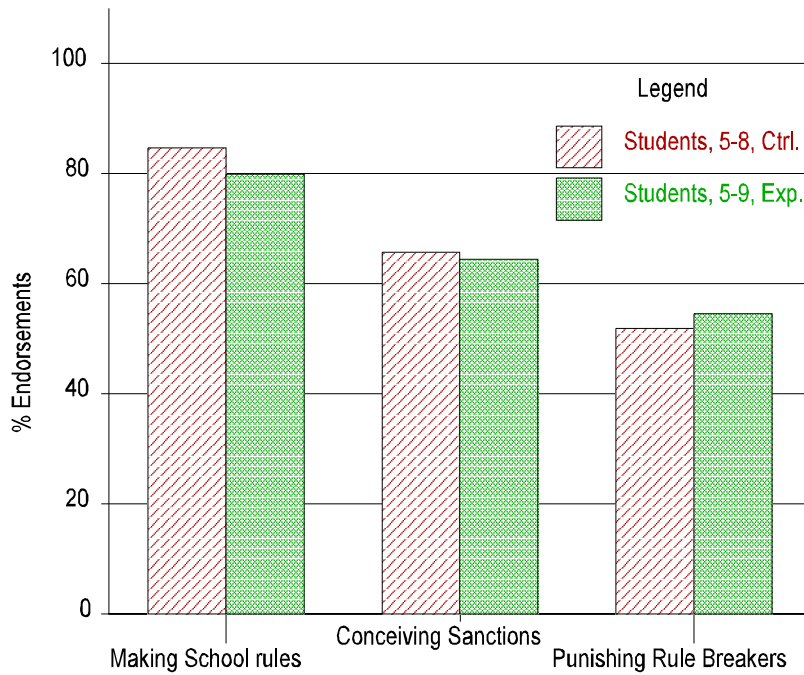
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**Figure 5** Students' Wishes and Observations (Grades 5-7).



**Figure 6** Students' Judgments About Democratic Participation.

**Students' Judgment About Democratic Participation in School**  
 % "Right" (scores 4 and 5, with the scale from 0-"very wrong" to 5)

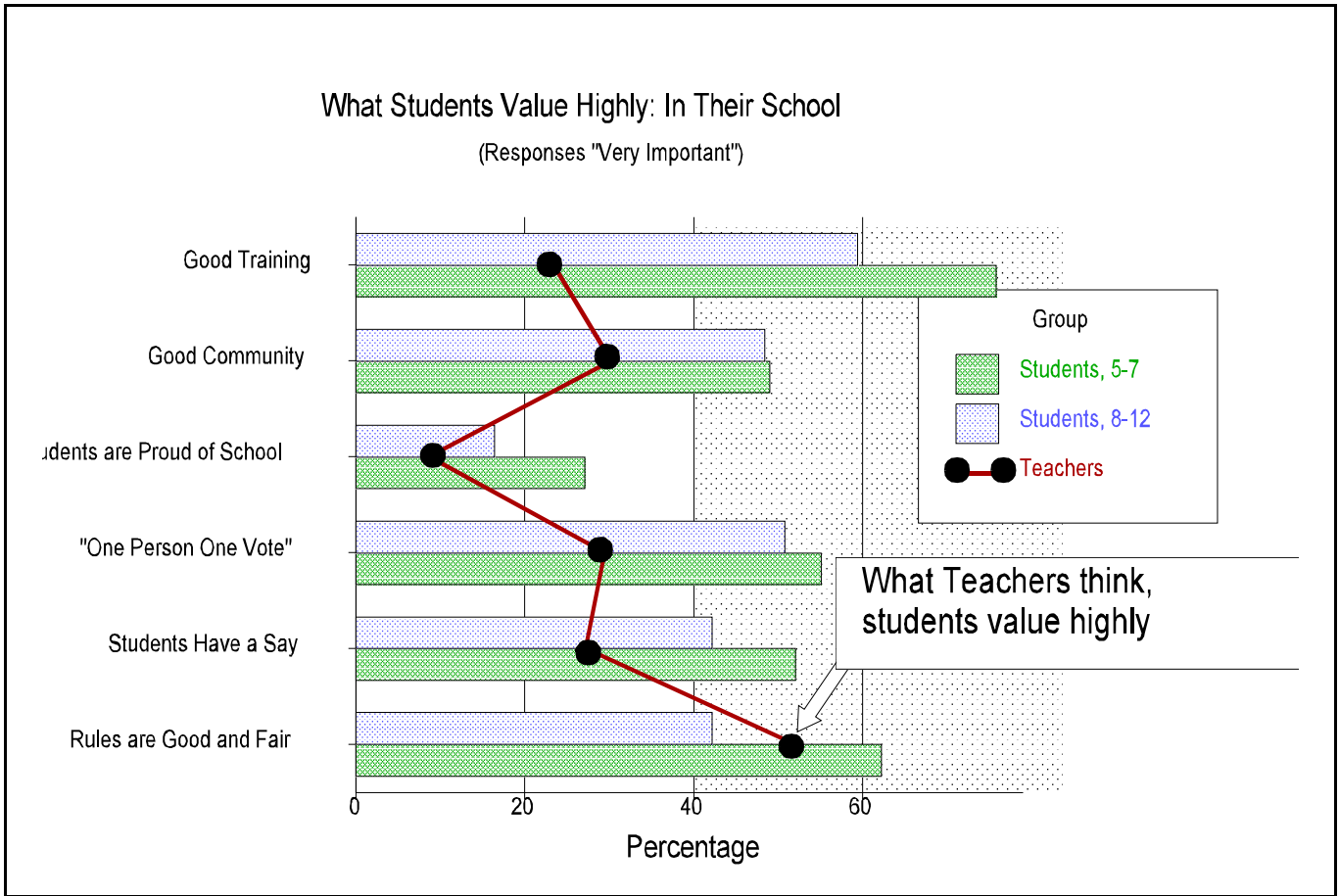


**Sample:**  
 German students from three school types (Haupt-, Real-  
 schule, Gymnasium),  
 Grades 5-9, N= 490 (DES);  
 1st group: before program,  
 2nd group: after 1-2 years..

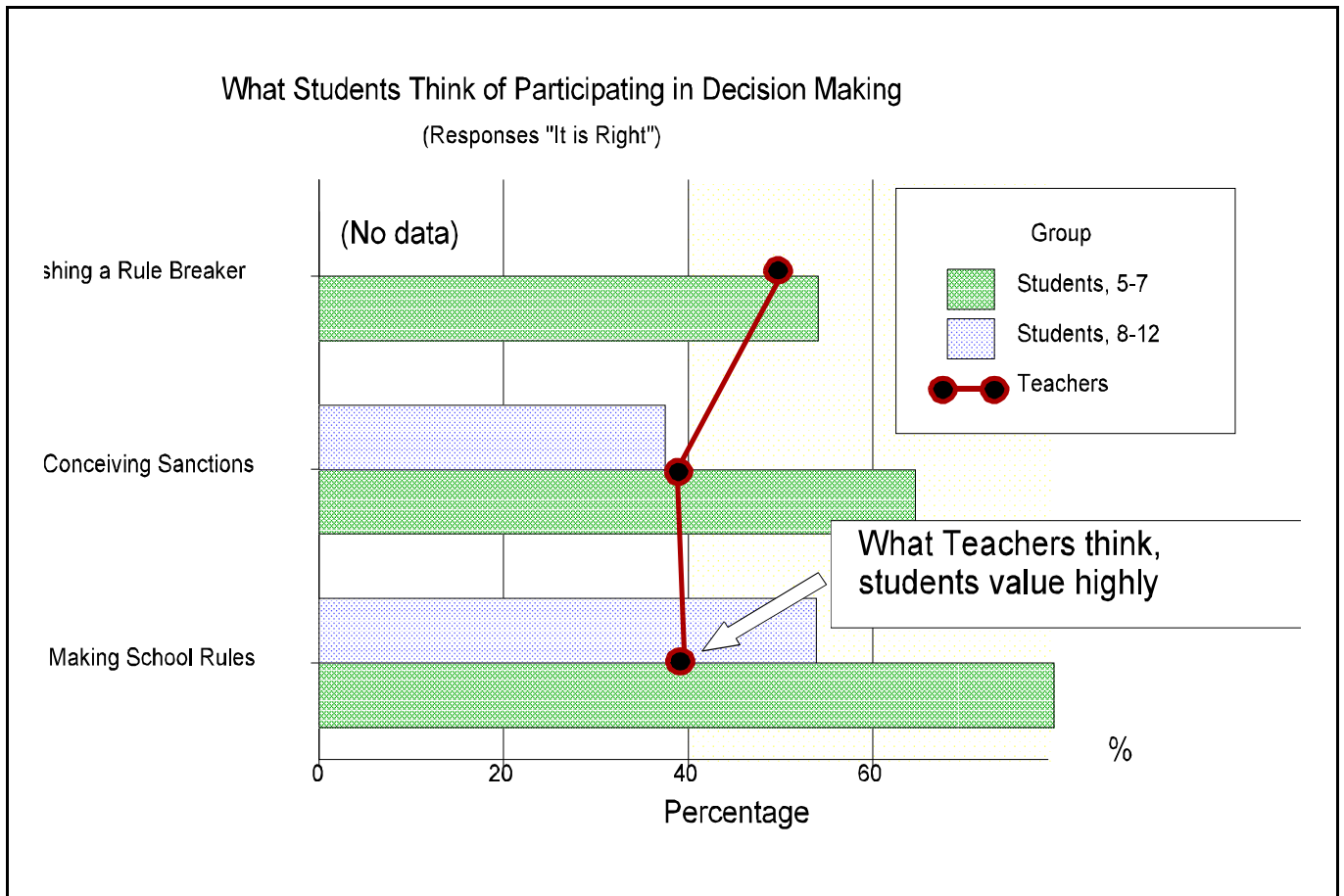
**Questions:**  
 "do you think it is right  
 - that students can decide  
 what should be allowed or  
 not allowed in school.  
 - that students participate in  
 the conception of sanctions.  
 - that students decide  
 about punishments against  
 rule-breakers."  
 These items are part of  
 the "Moralisches Atmosphäre-  
 Fragebogen" (MAF)  
 by Lind & Link (1986).

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**Figure 7** Students' Judgments: Before and After a Just Community Program.



**Figure 8** Student-School Relationship.



**Figure 9** Participation in Decision Making.

In Fig. 8 and Fig. 9, the relative frequencies of the highest response category (“very important”) are depicted for students (bars) and teachers (line). In addition, the region of endorsement rates above 40% is shaded gray.

PEARSON CORRELATION OF VALUING...

10. School: Democratic decision making (“one person one vote”)

WITH VALUING...	<i>Teachers</i>	<i>Students</i>	<i>Deviation</i>
1. Students: Being friendly	-.02	+.19	.++
2. Students: Being helpful	-.05	+.21	.++
3. Students: Groups being open	+.04	+.23	.+
4. Students: Holding together (“cliques”)	-.04	+.21	.++
5. Teachers: Being just and respectful	+.12	+.23	.+
6. Teachers: Having open discussions	+.31	+.29	
8. Teachers: Enforcing rules	+.04	+.15	.+
7. School: Rules being good and fair	+.15	+.37	.++
11. School: Students being proud on their school	+.04	+.25	.++
12. School: Having a good community	+.17	+.27	.+
13. School: Providing a good training	+.16	+.28	.+
14. Problems: Less competition	+.26	+.18	
15. Problems: Less cheating	-.11	+.11	.++
16. Problems: Less fighting	+.07	+.23	.+
17. Problems: Less playing truant	-.11	+.21	.+++
18. Problems: Less stealing	+.03	+.18	.+
19. Problems: Less vandalism	+.02	+.22	.++

+/- = pos./neg. deviation > .10

++/-- = pos./neg. deviation > .20

+++/-- = pos./neg. deviation > .30

**Figure 10** The Meaning of “Democratic Decision Making” for Students and Teachers.

## Perspectives

- A: School as a “democratic playground” = joy, no commitment
- B: School as a place for hardball politics = seriousness, power
- C: School as a place for developing the conditions for ethical discourse and human-centered politics  
Developing the power of reason (Urteilkraft; phronesis)

### 1. Democracy and Education – an Ambiguous Relationship

- a) Education Impedes Political Life (Le Bon, Schelsky)
- b) Democracy Impedes the Process of Education (Brezinka)
- c) Democracy Requires Education (Gramsci, Tocqueville)
- d) Education Requires Democracy (Piaget, Kohlberg)

### 2. The Difference Between Real and Ideal Democracy

- a) Real Democracy as the Most Feasible Way of Establishing a Just Community Within a Particular Historical Context
- b) Ideal Democracy as the Most Defensible Moral Principles that Should Guide Endeavors to Create a Just and Humans Community

### 3. Defensible Moral Principles of Democracy

- (a) Deontological Principles Applied by Philosopher-Kings (Plato)
- (b) Utilitarian Principles of Taming Selfish Individuals – Balance of Power, the Parliament as a Market Place (Hobbes, Jefferson)
- (c) Substantial Ethics (Sittlichkeit): The Reasonable State (Hegel)
- (d) Dialectical Materialism: The Utopian State (Marx, Durkheim)
- (e) Ethical Relativism: The Non-State Society – Radical Individualism (Rorty, Friedman)
- (f) Universal Moral Principles and Pluralistic Values: Discourse Ethics, Human Rights and Collective Responsibility
- (g) Democracy as a Bootstrapping Process: Developing the Conditions for the Self-Maintaining and Self-Enhancing of Democracy Through
  - Distributive Justice (Material Welfare, minimum wages)
  - Procedural Justice (Participation in Decision Making)
  - and Educational Justice (Development of technological and moral-democratic competencies)

### 4. The School as an Important Place for Developing the Conditions Required to Close the Gap Between Real and Ideal Democracy in an Ever Changing World

- a) Preparing for Vocational Life
- b) Preparing for Political Life

### 5. What is the task of moral education?

Answer: To foster people's / future citizens' moral judgment competence.

Why is this important?

Answer: Consider the answers to the following questions:

- Why are politicians corrupt?
- Why is advertisement sexist?
- Why is hardly anything on tv but sex, crime, horror, and soap operas?
- Why does the car industry flourish while the public transportation goes down?
- Why does the industry in democratic countries sell military equipment to dictators who has no scruples to use them.

It's the citizen who elects the politician (or doesn't take part in election), who attends to sexist advertisement, who turns on the tv, who uses his or her car instead of public transportation and who doesn't bother about military exports. – Not because he or she is a bad person but because he or she doesn't know how to make better choices, because he or she refrains from making choices altogether, letting other persons make the decisions which ought to be made by the community as a whole.



Viz (1990)

### Moralerziehung

S. 709 "it is not possible to remove values from education. ... Therefore, the only realistic response is to acknowledge as clearly as possible the values that are going to be taught."

Anm.: "acknowledge" ist zu schwach! "Reason" wäre besser.

### Kohlberg

S. 710 "Kohlberg's model assumes that the moral life is primarily the result of the development of specific, often abstract moral principles that are capable of being expressed in verbal form." (Anm.: keine treffende Umschreibung)

... "In short, the model presents moral development as a process of abstract cognitive development, as a growth in rational competence expressed in increasingly sophisticated principles of moral reasoning."

S. 711 "To the extent that a child's understanding of moral issues is an interpersonal, emotional, imaginistic, and story-like phenomenon, to that extent Kohlberg's model fails to respond to much of the child's mental life."

### The importance of "narrative thought"

J. Bruner (1986): Two modes of cognitive functioning:

(a) "propositional thinking", (b) "narrative thinking".

Robinson & Hawpe (1986): " 'stories are better guides than rules or maxims. Rules and maxims state significant generalizations about experience but stories illustrate and explain what those stories mean. The oldest form of moral literature is the parable; the most common form of informal instruction is the anecdote.... Second, stories can also be used as tests of the validity of maxims and rules of thumb. That is, stories can be used as arguments. Stories are natural mediators between the particular and the general in human experience.' (p. 124)"

Pascal: " 'The heart has its reasons that reason doesn't know.' "

Anm.: If the heart really has reasons then 'reason knows' everything that the heart reasons about; it makes no sense to separate reason from reasons.

### Perelman

"Perelman [1979] rejected formalism (i.e., propositional thought) as the only basis for rationality."

### Coles

S. 716 "For Coles (1986) ... morality is primarily expressed in action, and second, that it is rarely verbalized in terms of abstract principles."

"Coles refused to accept cognitive sophistication as a measure of moral life... He opposed the moral elitism inherent in such cognitive approaches."

### Wynne

S. 717 "all parties of the Great Tradition, until quite recently, agreed on the importance of narrative for teaching morality and building character, especially for children."

### Hypothese:

S. 717 "A clear policy implication and testable hypothesis is that stories should be more effective at teaching morality than the present nonnarrative approaches."

S. 717 "character is complex and context is always important."

### Indoktrination:

S. 718 "There is no way to avoid indoctrination; the best one can do is to consciously acknowledge the problem and openly identify what kind of indoctrination is taking place."

### Die Rolle der Vernunft:

S. 718 "All theorists cited, from Bruner to Hoffman and Coles, would presumably endorse the use of reasoned reflection on the moral significance of stories." Anm.: Das ist, was Kohlberg empfohlen hat!

### Ethischer Relativismus:

S. 718 "There will still remain conflicting moral visions, with their different philosophical and psychological rationales. To accept such differences and to learn to live with them might eventually permit psychology to contribute more than it has thus far to that supreme form of moral knowledge: wisdom."

A mature moral behavior requires not only knowledge of, and positive attitudes toward, moral principles but also the person's competence of applying norms and principles in everyday decision making, e.g., the (cognitive) competence of solving conflicts between competing norms and principles, and between mutually exclusive courses of moral actions. The importance of cognitive factors of moral behavior, aside from verbal knowledge and affective orientation, has been discovered by Jean Piaget and

Lawrence Kohlberg, who have first suggested adequate methods for their assessment. The discovery may please both optimists and pessimists. On the other hand it is in line with the optimistic view of the Enlightenment which states that people can become better through fostering their moral – cognitive competencies: those who (really) know the good will do the good. Therefore, if mankind wants to improve the conditions of life – increasing productive conflict resolution and cooperation and decreasing destructive aggression and power accumulation – moral and democratic education must receive prime recognition. That is, as Tocqueville already stated some 150 years ago, in order to protect its well – being, a democratic society must educate its people at any expense. On the other hand the discovery of a heavy cognitive component (Kohlberg) of moral reasoning and conduct implies skepticism. In the face of many ecological threats, economic conflicts within and between nations, proliferation of drug abuse, and intolerant fundamentalist movements, we may doubt whether people in general could ever obtain the degree of moral competence that would be necessary to cope with all these problems. We may be warned that, in spite of enormous technological progress, illiteracy is increasing rather than decreasing worldwide. Rich countries such as the United States, have sharply cut their expenditure for education, though it has once been believed that all their wealth and public welfare roots ultimately in the quality of their educational system. Nevertheless, the advancement of moral-democratic education worldwide seems to be the only chance we have got.

Recent research indicates that Kohlberg's methods of dilemma discussion and just community provide especially effective models for fostering moral and democratic competencies. In this paper, taking as an example the just community project by Oser, Lind and Schirp in the state of Nordrhein-Westfalia (FRG), I shall discuss the problems and prospects of moral democratic education in schools. I shall argue that, first, schools and teachers colleges need to include the development of moral and democratic competencies as part of their (non-hidden) curriculum. And, second, that the teaching of morality and the teaching of democracy, which are both closely intertwined if not identical, must be practical, that is, it must engage students and teachers in the solution of really important, if not real, human problems. It must not be insincere play. However, moral-democratic education must be conceived of as education, and thus be demarcated from politics and jurisdiction. From its conception, the just community approach is highly practical (and neither political nor judicial). Yet, in real school life this conception is not always readily understood. Moral competence is in a sense "political" as, e.g., mathematical skills are: hopefully, students may use both in real life to enhance rational conflict resolution. But the responsibility for the curriculum remains with the teachers.