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PEDAGOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FEATURES OF FORMING SPIRITUAL AND MORAL QUALITIES IN PRESCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

Bobomurodova Sevinch Abdug'aniyevna
Student, Termez State Pedagogical Institute
sevinchbobomurodova@gmail.uz https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1506-6414

Abstract

The article analyzes the pedagogical and psychological features of forming spiritual and moral qualities in preschool-aged children from theoretical and regulatory-legal perspectives. The relevance of the study is determined by the state policy adopted for developing the preschool education system until 2030, the significant expansion of enrolment, and the fact that the foundation of personality is laid at an early age. The paper comparatively examines the moral development theories of J. Piaget, L. Kohlberg, L. Vygotsky, A. Bandura and M. Hoffman, and describes the early formation mechanisms of empathy, prosocial behavior, self-regulation and conscience. The research employed systemic analysis, the comparative-historical method, analysis of normative legal documents and generalization of the results of international empirical studies.

Keywords

moral education, preschool age, moral development, empathy, prosocial behavior, play-based learning, social-emotional learning, family–kindergarten partnership, national values, teacher role modeling.

INTRODUCTION

World pedagogy and psychology increasingly hold that the foundation of personality is laid in the first six or seven years of life. Empirical evidence presented by the Nobel laureate J. Heckman shows that investment in early childhood is among the most effective investments for society and that not only knowledge but also character, self-control and social skills play a decisive role. [1] Purposeful formation of spiritual

[1] Heckman J.J. Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children // Science. – 2006. – Vol. 312, No. 5782. – P. 1900–1902.

and moral qualities from preschool age is therefore recognized as a pedagogical and a social-strategic task.

The relevance of the topic is determined, first of all, by the legal framework of Uzbekistan. The new edition of the Constitution, adopted by referendum on 30 April 2023, recognizes human dignity as the supreme value, places the family, motherhood and childhood under state protection and guarantees everyone the right to education.[2] The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Uzbekistan is a party, states that education should develop the child's personality and abilities and instill respect for parents, cultural identity and values.[3] The Law "On Education" of 23 September 2020 affirmed the unity of education and upbringing and defined preschool education as the first stage of continuing education,[4] and the Law "On Preschool Education and Upbringing" of 16 December 2019 (No. O'RQ-595) regulates the legal basis of preschool organizations, the child's all-round development and cooperation with the family.[5]

Recent reforms are expressed in the Concept for the Development of the Preschool Education System until 2030 (Resolution No. PQ-4312 of 8 May 2019), which treats expanding coverage together with adapting the content and quality of education to modern standards as a long-term priority,[6] and in the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026, which places human capital development, including the quality of preschool and school education, among state priorities.[7] Karimov interpreted spirituality as an invincible force of social progress,[8] and Avloni regarded upbringing as a question of life and death for a people.[9]

[2] Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan (new edition adopted by nationwide referendum on 30 April 2023). – Lex.uz
[3] Convention on the Rights of the Child. Adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989. – New York: United Nations, 1989.
[4] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. O'RQ-637 of 23 September 2020 "On Education". – Lex.uz
[5] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. O'RQ-595 of 16 December 2019 "On Preschool Education and Upbringing". – Lex.uz
[6] Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PQ-4312 of 8 May 2019 approving the Concept for the Development of the Preschool Education System until 2030. – Lex.uz
[7] Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PF-60 of 28 January 2022 "On the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026". – Lex.uz
[8] Karimov I.A. Yuksak ma'naviyat – yengilmas kuch [High Spirituality Is an Invincible Force]. – Tashkent: Ma'naviyat, 2008.
[9] Avloniy A. Turkiy guliston yoxud axloq [Turkic Rose Garden, or Morality]. – Tashkent: Ma'naviyat, 1992.

The quantitative results are also significant. According to UNICEF, preschool enrolment rose from less than 30% in 2017 to more than 70% in 2023,[10] and according to the Statistics Agency, at the end of 2024 coverage of boys aged 3–6 was 74.9% and of girls 69.6%.[11] Preschool organizations have thus become a principal institution shaping children's moral development. The aim of this study is to analyze theoretically the pedagogical and psychological features of forming spiritual and moral qualities in preschool-aged children and to develop practical recommendations.

Piaget identified two stages of children's moral ideas: up to about five to eight years a child perceives rules as unchangeable obligations set by adults (heteronomous morality), and later understands them as the result of mutual agreement and moves to autonomous morality.[12] Pedagogically, preschoolers assimilate norms mainly through adult authority, so adults' demands must be consistent, fair and comprehensible. Kohlberg distinguished three levels of moral reasoning; the preconventional level typical of preschoolers is oriented toward avoiding punishment and gaining reward.[13] Hence explaining the consequences of an action and demonstrating positive behavior, rather than punishment itself, accelerates the transition to later stages.

Vygotsky showed that higher mental functions, including moral norms, form first in cooperation with adults and then as inner speech and self-regulation, and that play creates a "zone of proximal development" in which the child acts above his or her usual level and learns to obey rules.[14] Role play, dramatization of tales and collective games are therefore effective means of moral education. Bandura's social learning theory shows that children acquire behavior not only through reward and punishment but also by observing, imitating and internalizing models,[15] which explains the importance of the educator's personal example: the child watches what adults do more than what they teach.

[10] UNICEF Uzbekistan. Preschool education: early child development and school readiness.
[11] Statistics Agency of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Preschool education (statistical compilation, end of 2024).
[12] Piaget J. The Moral Judgment of the Child. – London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1932.
[13] Kohlberg L. Stage and Sequence: The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Socialization // Goslin D.A. (Ed.). Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research. – Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969. – P. 347–480.
[14] Vygotsky L.S. Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes. – Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.
[15] Bandura A. Social Learning Theory. – Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977.

Modern research shows that the roots of morality begin even earlier than expected. Warneken and Tomasello experimentally demonstrated that 18-month-old children spontaneously help adults without expecting a reward.[16] Hoffman showed that empathy develops from noticing others' feelings to understanding their perspectives and that inductive upbringing, which explains how the child's action affected others, is most effective.[17] Kochanska showed that a warm, sensitive mother–child relationship develops "committed compliance", i.e., following rules without external control, and a moral self;[18] trusting attachment is thus a condition of moral internalization.

The features of forming moral qualities at this age are as follows. Thinking is concrete and imaginative, so abstract concepts (honesty, kindness, justice) are learned through situations, tales and stories; the moral sphere is inseparable from the emotional one, so situations the child feels influence more than explanation; the leading activity is play, where rules are tested through roles; the source of norms is close adults, whose behavior and speech become the main educational means; and qualities become habits through repetition, so daily habits (greeting, thanking, sharing, respecting elders) matter more than one-off events.

International experience pays particular attention to social-emotional learning. A meta-analysis by Durlak and colleagues of 213 school-based programs found significant improvement in participants' social-emotional skills, attitudes and behavior and an average gain of 11 percentile points in academic outcomes (it covered kindergarten to secondary school, not preschool alone).[19] Lickona views moral education as a unity of knowing, feeling and doing the good, which requires combining conversation, emotional involvement and activity.[20]

[16] Warneken F., Tomasello M. Altruistic Helping in Human Infants and Young Chimpanzees // Science. – 2006. – Vol. 311, No. 5765. – P. 1301–1303.
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CONCLUSION

The analysis leads to the following conclusions. First, the Constitution, the Law "On Preschool Education and Upbringing", Resolution PQ-4312 and other documents have created a firm legal basis for moral education of preschool children, and the growth of coverage from under 30% in 2017 to over 70% in 2023–2024 makes raising the quality of the educational process a pressing task. Second, studies confirm that preschool moral reasoning relies on adult authority, empathy and prosocial behavior appear early, and conscience develops depending on upbringing conditions. Third, its effect depends on the combination of personal example, play, social-emotional skills and family cooperation.

The author recommends: including moral development psychology and social-emotional learning in educator training; introducing in every preschool organization a system of "daily habits" based on national values and adapted to age; regular cooperation with parents (monthly meetings, family projects); inductive explanation instead of punishment; digital tools only within age norms and under supervision; and locally adapted monitoring tools. Future research should experimentally assess this model in Uzbekistan's kindergartens.

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