Children's epistemic reasoning about social inclusion of aggressive peers in a culturally diverse school

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Abstract

Moral reasoning in values education can promote a democratic way of life. It involves addressing behaviour expectations in responses to violence or bullying. There is increasing interest in how children make moral judgments about social inclusion within diverse cultural settings. Critical research highlights the relationship between epistemic cognition (views about the nature of knowledge and knowing) and reasoning. In this paper, we argue that this relationship is likely to be important in reasoning about moral values for inclusion in culturally diverse schools. However, we know little about how children in diverse educational settings reason about and enact school values for inclusion. Our study addresses this gap by examining primary school children's epistemic reasoning about social inclusion of peers with a focus on justifications for inclusion/exclusion of aggressive peers. Twenty-six children (10-11 years old) from one culturally diverse school community in Australia were asked to illustrate (drawings) and reflect on (15–20-minute interviews) a conflict situation involving exclusion from play. Findings showed most children reasoned about including/excluding others based on a 'one right answer' pattern which reflected an explicit focus on following the school rules. Fewer children moved 'beyond right answers' to show transition towards perceiving multiple perspectives in their reasoning about inclusion/exclusion. Implications for values education are discussed.

Keywords

moral reasoning; values education; epistemic cognition; social inclusion; aggressive peers; culturally diverse school

Introduction

In an era of increasing cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity the capacity for children to interact positively with diverse groups is essential for creating inclusive and cohesive school communities (UNESCO, 2013). Australia, like many countries, is experiencing increasing cultural, religious and ethnic diversity with government initiatives placing new immigrants in pockets of communities with designated areas for migration purposes (Parliament of Australia, 2020). This approach aims to keep cultural groups together with associated social norms highly influential in shaping individual behaviour, including attitudes towards aggression and inclusion/exclusion of others (WHO, 2009).

How schools respond to growing cultural diversity has a significant impact on the well-being of children, teachers and the members of the communities they serve (OECD, 2018). A focus on promoting values by teaching about the ideals that a society deems important (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2005) is especially significant for intercultural understanding, community cohesion, and social inclusion. Values education, focused on fostering common understandings around social and moral expectations, is now embedded within many Western countries' educational agendas. For instance, values education is now a legislative requirement in Britain where there is a focus on respect for democracy (Janmaat, 2018), and in Australia, where there has been a national framework for values education since 2005 (DEST, 2005).

The common values included in Australia's national framework include care and compassion; doing your best; fair go; freedom; honesty and trustworthiness; integrity; respect; responsibility and understanding, tolerance and inclusion (DEST, 2005). The value related to *understanding, tolerance and inclusion* in the Australian framework includes being aware of others and their cultures, accepting diversity within a democratic society, and being included and including others (DEST, 2005). A focus on values related to inclusion is important as exclusion can have negative lifelong ramifications for those who are marginalised (Abrams & Killen, 2014) through, for example, bullying (Thornberg et al., 2016). As part of values education, the development of moral reasoning is important. Here we refer to reasoning about moral choices that are related to social behaviours considered right and wrong according to the conventions of society (Smetana et al., 2014). In this way, effective moral reasoning in values education is an explicit goal of schooling to promote Australia's democratic way of life and includes addressing behaviour expectations and responses to marginalisation such as through violence or bullying (DEST, 2005).

Appropriate responses to behaviours associated with aggression and bullying are an important part of teachers' work (Sokol et al., 2016). While the teaching of moral reasoning may be an explicit goal for education, it can be problematic for both teachers (Keddie, 2014), and children, who may prioritise their localised identities over national norms (Maylor, 2010). Cultural and social norms are highly influential in shaping individual behaviour, attitudes, and moral reasoning, including beliefs about the appropriateness of aggression and perceptions of what constitutes bullying (WHO, 2009). Cultural acceptance of aggression as a normal method of resolving conflict or as a usual part of rearing a child, is a risk factor for all types of interpersonal violence including bullying (WHO, 2009). Diverse cultural norms mean that peer groups in schools reflect many different types of normative expectations, including norms supporting aggressive behaviour (Mulvey & Killen, 2016) that may relate to bullying. Increased cultural diversity can highlight issues associated with what constitutes aggression and at times, interactions deemed to be bullying (UNESCO, 2013), with bullying behaviours representing a moral transgression (Thornberg et al., 2016). Taken together, norms can influence moral judgements related to aggression and unsanctioned behaviours by influencing an individual's understanding of fairness and human welfare (Smetana et al., 2006).

While there is increasing interest in how children make moral judgments (Author et al., 2017), we know little about how upper primary school children in culturally diverse school settings think about and enact school values for inclusion that are reflective of their school ethos.

Critical research points to the relationship between children's views about the nature of knowledge and knowing (epistemic cognition) and reasoning in general (see Author et al., 2011), and we argue that such a relationship is likely to be important in reasoning about moral values of inclusion in diverse settings. Our study addresses this gap in the research by examining children's epistemic cognition for reasoning about social inclusion of peers. We are interested in children's justifications for inclusion/exclusion of an aggressive peer in a school with high cultural diversity in Australia. We present a case study focused on Year 6 (10–11-year-old) children from one school – St Patricks Primary (pseudonym) – situated in a culturally diverse community.

In the following sections we first consider the utility of a social-cognitive domain model to understand how social reasoning about aggressive behaviours varies by context (Killen, 2007). Next, we explore how moral reasoning about aggressive behaviours might be informed by children's epistemic cognition – their cognitions about knowing and knowledge. Third, we describe the research design and methods used in the study, followed by findings which report children's reasoning about inclusion and exclusion of aggressive peers at school. Finally, during the discussion of findings, we point to some implications for teaching values in culturally diverse primary schools.

Moral reasoning about aggressive behaviours: a social-cognitive domain model

Moral reasoning is a complex, coordinated endeavour. It involves the negotiation and co-ordination of values, cultural norms related to behaviours, relationships in schools, as well as cognition (Thornberg, et al., 2016). Children's values, influenced by cultural and social norms such as school rules, impact on their moral reasoning as they make judgments about interpersonal actions such as bullying or aggression which have consequences for relationships in schools and the welfare or rights of others (Nucci & Ilten-Gee, 2018). Such judgments are based upon the effects of the actions (e.g., unprovoked hitting would hurt) with moral judgments structured by the person's underlying conceptions of fairness and harm (Turiel, 2002). Children are not passive recipients in the socialisation process but actively interpret their experiences and subsequently reflect upon them. As part of their reasoning within a school context with highly visible community values, children interpret and then accept some school and classroom expectations and rules while questioning, doubting or even rejecting others (Thornberg et al., 2016; Wainryb, 2006).

Recent work by Thornberg (2017) highlighted the importance of classrooms that support warm, caring, supportive, friendly, and respectful student–student relationships for increased defensive behaviours in supporting peers in school-based bullying situations. Surprisingly, teacher–student relationship quality was not as significant as class climate; however, it is possible there is a link between teacher–student relationship quality that might mediate student–student relationship quality (Thornberg, 2017). Bullying prevention should promote supportive classroom relationships and moral reasoning in which children's moral cognition and emotions (such as empathy, sympathy for the victim, transgressive guilt and guilt for bystander inaction) are co-ordinated to help all children to recognise and reason about bullying as a moral transgression and to be morally motivated to defend victims in bullying situations (Thornberg, et al., 2016).

In addition to co-ordinating emotions and cognition, moral reasoning about aggression or bullying requires children to coordinate thinking about values and decision making. This integration of values (associated with rights and fairness) and decisions about personal choice and social conventions is complex (Killen, 2007). The coordination of emotions, relationships, values and cognition means that children's reasoning about exclusion is context-specific with exclusion evaluated differently in situations that vary in terms of relationships and social expectations (Killen et al., 2002).

As children's reasoning is understood to vary across a wide range of social contexts this shifts the focus of the study of morality to how individuals coordinate different forms of reasoning, values and emotions and allows for examination of contextual and cultural variation

in moral and non-moral social reasoning (Killen et al., 2002; Smetana, 1995). The context specific nature of children's reasoning about exclusion and coordination of such thinking can be informed by the social-cognitive domain model. From this theoretical perspective, individuals apply three domains of knowledge across a range of social situations – specifically, children evaluate transgressions (e.g., contravention of a moral code) by coordinating the psychological domain (autonomy, personal choice and personal identity), the societal domain (social-conventional concerns and customs) and the moral domain (fairness, justice and rights) (Killen, 2007). This model progresses traditional stage theories of moral development from the 1980's (e.g., Kohlberg, 1984) to account for multiple forms of reasoning.

Moral reasoning about aggressive behaviours: an epistemic cognition framework

While we recognise the complexity of moral reasoning which involves negotiation and co-ordination of values, cultural norms, relationships, and cognition (Thornberg, et al., 2016), in this study we focus on one aspect of cognition that, to date has received little attention in the research literature. We propose that the extent to which children weigh up and navigate different social expectations in moral reasoning is informed by their epistemic cognition, that is, the cognitions children engage in with respect to the nature of knowledge and knowing.

In this study, we draw on the work of Kuhn and Weinstock (2002) who describe epistemic beliefs that range from objectivism through to evaluativism. This model describes an increasing capacity to attend to, and weigh up, multiple considerations. From their perspective an *objectivist* stance is evident when a child believes there is only one right answer and competing ideas are not considered. A *subjectivist* stance is evident when personal opinions are considered important and many ideas may be valid without the need for evaluation. When a child takes an *evaluativist* stance they believe that knowledge is changeable and that ideas can be evaluated from a range of perspectives and new ideas can be constructed. We argue that the epistemic beliefs of a child relate to their reasoning about exclusion and inclusion, which may also reflect the contextual, particularly in terms of attitudes towards issues such as aggression and what constitutes grounds for exclusion of peers in school contexts.

A range of research supports the value of focusing on epistemic cognition with respect to reasoning about moral and social issues (cf. Krettenauer, 2004; Reznitskaya & Wilkinson, 2017). Krettenauer (2004) showed that metaethical (moral) reasoning was structurally equivalent to levels of epistemic cognition identified in the literature (e.g., objectivism, subjectivism, evaluativism). He argued that levels of metaethical reasoning enabled metacognition for moral reasoning to be explored. Reznitskaya and Wilkinson (2017) also argued for evidential reasoning (evaluating competing value claims and making a judgment based on the evaluation of such claims) about values as children engage in argumentation. This argumentation, they suggest, is essential for children to reason effectively and respectfully about a range of moral and social concerns. Like Krettenauer (2004) and Reznitskaya and Wilkinson (2017), we take the view that epistemic cognition enables reasoning about social inclusion to be explored from a cognitive and metacognitive perspective. To think about, and to make a stand on, inclusion in school and classroom contexts may require a focus on epistemic cognition as a way to support reasoning. However, little is known about how epistemic cognition relates to moral reasoning with respect to inclusion of aggressive peers. In this study we explored children's epistemic beliefs with respect to moral reasoning about inclusion in a school with high cultural diversity in Australia.

Research design and methods

This study utilises qualitative data collected from children in Year 6 to explore their reasoning about inclusion of aggressive peers as they approach the end of their primary school education. The following research question was addressed "How do Year 6 (10-11-year-old) children reason about including/excluding others with a specific focus on including aggressive peers?".

Participants and school context

Participants in this research included 26 Year 6 children (9 boys and 17 girls) from three classes in one faith-based school (St Patricks Primary School) located in a metropolitan capital city. St Patricks[1] is a Catholic, co-educational primary school located close to a metropolitan city. It has a current student population of 524 children enrolled from Preparatory Year (aged 5 years) to Year 6 (aged 11 years). The school is situated in a highly ethnically diverse community, with nearly 40% of the student population coming from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE), and 6% of children identifying as part of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities. Languages spoken at home included Samoan Vietnamese, Tagalog, Swahili, and Spanish. Participants represented a broad range of ethnic backgrounds.

Over the past 10 years, St Patricks School has seen an increase in the number of children from a Sudanese cultural background. In 2018, 25% of children identified as having English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) were Dinka first language speakers. These families and their children face challenges to accessing the curriculum based on a number of factors which may include language barriers, socio-cultural differences, social/emotional difficulties as a result of previous experiences and few opportunities for social and community engagement. In 2018, the school employed an African liaison person and implemented an early literacy program to enhance foundational literacy skills while simultaneously providing an opportunity for Sudanese parents/carers to engage in the school community. The unemployment rate in the area is 4.3%, compared to the Australian average of 6.9% with just over half (54.2%) of the residents born in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

In keeping with the National Safe Schools Framework and the school motto of Kids Who Care, the school supports an anti-bullying policy which aims to create a school that is a place where all members love and care for one another and where there is responsibility for actions and acceptance of the consequences. St Patricks School strives to provide an enriched learning environment which fosters and integrates elements of many cultures to create a safe and secure platform for their children's education. The school is governed by the Catholic Church. Catholic Parish schools are owned in canon law by the relevant Parish, however, certain responsibilities are delegated to the Catholic Education Office for their operation (Collaborating for Mission: The Parish and the Catholic School, 2014, p13). Catholic diocesan schools are those operated and governed by diocesan Catholic Education/Schools Offices. Other Catholic School Authorities, those which are not operated by diocesan authorities, are operated by Catholic religious institutes or public juridic persons, which began delivering education in this metropolitan city in 1845 and currently teaches over 74,000 children in more than 150 schools. The school implements the national curriculum and they are proud of the way their community blends the best from these cultures to develop and reflect the motto of the school, 'Kids Who Care'. To support the high cultural diversity in the school they have a strong whole-school Behaviour Management policy which aims to provide a safe and happy environment in which children can learn and grow.

Procedures and measures

Prior to data collection, written consent was obtained from the principal, participating teachers, and parents and carers of participating children. The children provided written consent by colouring in a smiley face if they wished to take part, or alternatively a frowning face if they did not. They were then asked again if they were happy to participate before beginning the recorded interview. Interviewers (including research assistants & researchers) were aware of the need to make children feel comfortable and engaged in casual discussions before the process. Researchers and assistants engaged in extensive interview training led by the key researcher. All researchers who were responsible for interviewing children and teachers had a background in early childhood education, held doctorates in education, and were experienced in qualitative research methods in education.

[1] Pseudonym

Children's ability to reason about and engage with different perspectives (epistemic cognition) in the context of social inclusion/exclusion was assessed through a newly developed protocol which involved pictorial and interview methodology designed to capture children's reasoning in realistic situations involving a variety of perspectives. During a group time involving all children, teachers were asked to identify and describe to children a common conflict situation involving exclusion from play. Children were then asked to represent this conflict situation in a drawing. Each classroom was observed for the duration of the lesson by a member of the research team, to ensure any differences in style of implementation by the individual teachers were noted.

Immediately following the group discussion and drawing task, consenting children were interviewed (within close proximity of their classrooms) by a member of the research team. The 15-20-minute audio-recorded interviews consisted of two parts. First, children were asked to reflect on their drawing related to the exclusion scenario, by responding to questions about whether both the excluder and the excluded child could both be right in some ways, or if one could be "more right" than the other. The use of everyday scenarios relevant to the children's school lives is innovative, although we drew on Wainryb et al. (2004) and Wildenger et al. (2010) to pose the following interview questions:

- Let's talk about your drawing- can you tell me what is happening here? Who is not allowed to play? Who is telling them they can't play?
- Can they both be right or can only one of them be right? Who is right? Why? If one right, then why? If both right, then why?
- If both right could one (person, decision?) be better than the other, why?

Second, children were presented with a scenario where a child was asked to make decisions about whether to include or exclude a new boy in play at school who is bossy and pushes other children around at school based on the child's aggressive actions. They were also asked a branching set of questions about whether they would change their mind if pressured by either friends or the classroom teacher. This same scenario had been given previously to the children who participated in the prior longitudinal study in Years 1, 2, and 3 at the same school (see Author et al., 2017). The scenario was adapted from Park and Killen's (2010) interview protocol based on personality (aggression) as a basis for peer rejection (Joe is bossy and pushes around his classmates and often gets into fights). It also builds on Author et al.'s (2012) previous work that examined reasoning about exclusion in early childhood with children aged 5-8 years. The scenario presented in our current study described two children, Michael and Jack. Visual images of the children in the scenario (Michael and Jack) were used and responses audio-taped for later verbatim transcription. The children were read the following scenario:

> *Michael is in Grade 6. Jack is a new boy in the class. Jack seems very bossy and pushes other kids around. Jack wants to make friends with Michael and asks Michael to play with him at lunch time. Michael does not want to play with Jack because he pushes other kids around.*

Next children were asked:

1. Do you think Michael should play with Jack even though he is bossy and pushes other kids around?
2. Why do you think he should/should not?
3. What if Michael's friends said he should/shouldn't play with Jack. Do you think he should/shouldn't play with him then?
4. What if Michael's teacher said he should/shouldn't play with Jack. Do you think he should/shouldn't play with him then?

Year 6 children were asked to reason about inclusion or exclusion based on the child's interpersonal actions (bossy and pushes) within a social context which reflects school expectations about how to interact in a particular situation (new boy in class who wants to make friends). Taken together, the creation of a drawing, interview reflections on drawings and the scenario-based interview responses were designed to explore children's thinking about inclusion and exclusion, and to discover whether their thinking about moral social situations was related to epistemic cognition at this final stage of their primary school education.

Data Analysis

Prior to data coding and analysis, researchers read and re-read interview responses. Ongoing meetings were conducted to consider the range of responses, to refine the definitions of the categories and to ensure clarity. To understand children's reasonings about inclusion and exclusion, we explored their justifications for their responses. We utilised template analysis to thematically analyse the children's justifications (King, 2012). Two separate coding 'templates' were used for the two sections of the interview (drawing and scenario responses); the development of these templates reflected literature in the field around epistemic cognition and children's moral reasoning for inclusion or exclusion at school. The coding categories describing children's thinking about right and wrong applied to the interview questions about the child's drawing (e.g., Do you think both the excluder/s and the child being excluded could be right, or could only one be right? Why?). Drawing on our previous coding template (see Author et al., 2017) these responses were coded as subjectivity, uncertainty, truth, fairness, prosocial, personal choice, diverse experience, consequences, recognition of different perspectives, or not codable. Table 1 provides an overview, description and example of categories related to how children justified why either the excluder/s or the child being excluded could be right, or both could be right.

Table 1 [Here]

The next set of coding categories described children's thinking about moral reasoning for inclusion or exclusion that applied to the interview questions about the scenario (e.g., Why should/shouldn't Michael play with Jack? What if Michael's friends tell him to/not to play with Jack?). Drawing on Brenick et al. (2010), Killen et al. (2002) and Park and Killen (2010), these justifications were coded as prosocial, inclusion/fairness, group functioning stereotypes, cultural stereotypes/personal characteristics, external influences, personal choice, and play is conditional. Responses that did not fit into a category or did not satisfactorily answer the question were coded as 'other'. Table 2 illustrates the codes used in analysis of the interview scenario.

Table 2 [Here]

The next stage of coding involved exploring children's justifications across both parts of the interview (drawing and scenario responses), to examine patterns of overall reasoning about inclusion/exclusion. Interviews that only included one part but not the other (often because the child had not participated in the lesson and creation of a drawing) were excluded at this stage of coding ($n = 4$). Table 3 provides an example of the coding patterns that emerged across the drawings about exclusion and interview scenario.

In order to ensure ongoing consensus, quality checks and cross checking of coding were conducted by the researchers. Coding queries were circulated and discussed among all researchers and the research assistant throughout the process of data analysis. Certain responses were double coded as the response was seen to fit closely with two different categories. In these circumstances, both codes were included in the final coding.

Findings

Four patterns were found in children's responses to both the questions about their drawing and the given scenario. Of the 26 participants, our interpretations illustrated that half of the children (n = 13) displayed a 'one right answer' pattern of thinking, five children justified that there could be 'multiple right answers', four described 'beyond right answers' and one child described a pattern in which 'personal opinions count'. Three children were removed from the analysis as they did not complete enough of the interview or their responses were non-interpretable.

Table 3 [Here]

One right answer

The 'one right answer' pattern of responses can be characterised by reasoning in which only one type of behaviour can be 'right' or 'correct' with respect to another. Half the children responded using this type of reasoning (n=13). In response to the drawing task, these children generally said that in a social exclusion situation, only one child could be 'right' implying that the other would be wrong, for example "Because like it's not, it's just not right to exclude people. You should always let people in. No matter how they look, what their expression is. No matter how they are. You should always treat them how you want to be treated" (10108). This reasoning may well reflect the way rules about treatment of others become ingrained, particularly in relation to moral transgressions in early school settings (Thornberg, 2010).

Some children (n=7) in this pattern indicated that both could be right but went on to describe a justification more consistent with reasoning that only one could be right, for example "The little kid could be injured, so he couldn't play. And, the big kids are saying, it might be a bit too rough for you. Cause he's in the lower grades. And, like health and safety stuff for it" (10307). In this way, children's justifications were used to confirm coding decisions as fitting with a one right answer response pattern. Threats of injury, and health and safety concerns are often related to accident prevention directives, when transgression of school rules may relate to unintentional harm – providing justification for exclusion. Here, moral reasoning may include judgments about consequences of actions that the children identified (Feinfield, Lee, Flavell, Green, & Flavell, 1999; Turiel, 2002).

Next, when provided with the play scenario about Michael and Jack, children who reasoned on the basis of one answer being right indicated that Michael should not play with Jack (n=10), often citing Jack's personal characteristics of being aggressive as a reason, for example "I think no, because then Jack might be worried that Michael might push him over or something" (10103). When asked if they should change their minds about playing with Jack because their friends wanted them to play with Jack, all but two (n=11) did not change their minds, primarily justifying this as a personal choice. However when asked to change their minds by the teachers, a majority of children then changed their minds (n=9), citing external influence or providing conditions for playing with Jack, for example "Michael should give it a try and then if it's a bad game, he shouldn't play with Jack. … I think he should play with him like once and then yeah" (10204). Here, deferring to the teacher may also relate to abiding by school or classroom rules, whereby children learn the expectations at an early age. However, as peer group cultures become more influential this deferment may be challenged by negotiation of social norms and peer group cultures (Thornberg, Wänström & Pozzoli, 2016).

Taken together, children's responses to both the drawing and the scenario task suggest that when they reasoned on the basis of one right answer, they showed a limited awareness of other perspectives in thinking about social inclusion. They also did not believe Jack should be included. This suggests an objectivist epistemic stance with respect to ways of knowing, which is further reinforced by their willingness to change their minds and do what the teacher asked of them.

Multiple right answers

The 'multiple right answers' thinking pattern in the drawing task is characterised by reasoning on the basis that both children in an exclusion situation could be right. So, similar to the one right answer pattern, children still reasoned on the basis that a particular stance or action can be identified as correct or right. The justifications offered by the children reflected an understanding that reasoning might depend on different situations or contexts in which one child or the other could be right. For example, "Because maybe there's some event that you need to be fast in, like maybe relays. And some games it doesn't really depend on how fast you are" (10303).

In the scenario task, children who reasoned on the basis of multiple right answers gave varying responses as to whether Michael should play with Jack, for example "I think he should try. And then if Jack does that to him, then I would just step away from him and not be friends" (10303). Here, we see a conditional response, with a default to exclusion if play does not go well. Such judgments are based upon weighing up the effects of the actions (e.g., unprovoked hitting would hurt) with the child's underlying conceptions of fairness (Turiel, 2002).

Children with this pattern of responses also did not change their mind for their friends, but then said either that they would change their mind or were unsure what they would do if the teacher told them differently. For instance, "[For friends] It doesn't matter because it's your own decision, and like it's your own opinion. … [For teacher] He could listen, but mostly like try to play with him, like sometimes, or not play with him most of the time" (10308). In this pattern, children did not automatically default to the direction of the teacher but were more hesitant and perhaps more involved in weighing up complexities of school rules, moral reasoning, and welfare or rights of others (Nucci & Ilten-Gee, 2018).

Across the drawing and scenario tasks, children who reasoned using the multiple right answers response pattern also showed a limited awareness of other perspectives but were able to see that contexts might determine *what was right*. Some thought Jack should be included, and others did not, showing variation in their views about social inclusion/exclusion. This pattern, like the previous 'one right answer' pattern also suggests an objectivist stance with respect to ways of knowing, which is also evident in their willingness to change their minds in response to teachers' requests to do so.

Beyond right answers

Within the next pattern, 'beyond right answers', some children (n=4) also believed that one behaviour is 'right' in the drawing task but indicated a focus on including others and displaying more nuanced understandings of social inclusion. This is reflected in the following example "I think because the boys can't really be right because they haven't actually met him or had a conversation with him" (10111).

With respect to the scenario task, this nuanced reasoning was evident when three of the four children indicated that Michael should play with Jack, for reasons that related to personal choices, showing prosocial understandings. This is consistent with more nuanced understandings about social inclusion. For example, "I would say yes, because it doesn't exactly matter that he pushes around, because as long as they get along, that would be okay" (10106). Here we see indications that the child has some awareness of expected protocols and the excluded child's position which suggests prosocial understandings. They all indicated they would not change their mind for either friends or a teacher, again citing various reasons for this. These responses may reflect a more nuanced understanding of the complexities associated with social norms and when there may be exceptions to the rules (e.g., as long as they get along).

While children's responses to both the drawing and scenario tasks reflected a focus on reasoning on the basis of there being one right answer, their justifications were more prosocial and nuanced, "..because he might be able to teach him how to be good" (10108) and personal

choices ".. if he doesn't like someone, he doesn't have to be pressured". They were able to consider different contextual situations related to the need to include rather than exclude Jack, which is different to those children who reasoned on the basis of one right answer and multiple answers who believed Jack should be excluded.

Personal opinions count

The final pattern 'personal opinions count' was only expressed by one child. This child stated that both children could be right in an exclusion situation, because people can have different opinions: "Is like, they can have like their own opinion and have own saying about..." (10102).

With respect to the scenario task, the child thought that Michael should not play with Jack: "Well, if he doesn't want to play with him I don't think he should if he doesn't feel like it. He's like a good person pushing them around. … Because if he doesn't like what he's doing to other people, he could be another person who are being pushed around." The child would not change his/her mind for their friends but were unsure what to do if the teacher told them differently. The child's reasoning across both the drawing and scenario task suggests that he/she is aware of reasoning based on considering a range of opinions, but this did not impact on the child's reasoning to exclude Jack. In this case, the personal will of the child was highlighted – with reasoning around the consequences for Michael if he were to engage in play with Jack. While school rules highlight issues of right and wrong, good and bad, and are inevitably a part of the moral socialisation of children in school contexts (Thornberg, 2010) as children actively interpret and reflect upon their experiences some social norms or rules will be accepted and others questioned, doubted, or even rejected (Wainryb, 2006). This final pattern of response moves beyond right and wrong or 'one right answer' to illustrate how children can reflect on the way personal opinion counts and people can have different opinions.

Discussion and conclusions

In response to our research question, half (n=13) of the year 6 children reasoned about including/excluding others based on the 'one right answer' pattern which seems to reflect objectivist epistemic cognition. Responses reflected children's explicit focus on following the school rules. For these children, there was an absolutist view reflected in their responses such as 'it's just not right to exclude people' (10108). There was also concern for the consequences of moral transgressions because, for instance, 'Jack might be worried that Michael might push him over or something' (10103). In this way there was evidence of objectivist moral reasoning and judgment about interpersonal actions such as aggression that impacts on the welfare or rights of others (Mulvey, 2016; Nucci & Ilten-Gee, 2018).

A more nuanced epistemic stance was evidenced when four children moved 'beyond right answers' in their thinking. In addition, another child displayed thinking that 'personal opinions count', and five children's justifications related to 'multiple right answers'. For these children there was some evidence of thinking about diverse perspectives with respect to the context and the rules. For instance, children who reasoned that there were 'multiple right answers' showed some awareness that contexts might determine what was right. So even though an objectivist epistemic stance (right answers) was still evident, these children seemed to be moving towards reasoning about a course of action in many social contexts which requires weighing or coordinating personal, conventional, and moral considerations (Nucci & Ilten-Gee, 2018; Smetana, 1995). From an epistemic perspective, these children demonstrated some evidence of transitions in epistemic cognition towards engaging with multiple perspectives. While this is not a surprising stance for children of this age (Nucci & Ilten-Gee, 2018), we had not been sure of the nature of children's moral reasoning when we commenced this study due to the high cultural diversity of the school community and population flow associated with shifting immigration settlement policies.

Morals are mediated in classroom conversations, by school rules, how teachers engage with such rules and how they address transgressions (Thornberg et al., 2016). Values education based on policies such as the Australian framework (DEST, 2005) emphasize common understanding to bring individuals together that are often reflected in school rules and expected normative behaviours – with the hope of producing conditions of solidarity. Orellana (2015) points out how promoting solidarity in culturally diverse contexts can bring children to stand together across lines of difference that would normally divide. Solidarity movements offer possibilities for linking democratic citizenship education learned in schools to lived experiences of citizenship, collective organizing, resistance, and resilience (Jaramillo & Carreon, 2014). However, this approach does not necessarily foster moral reasoning based on evaluating multiple perspectives.

Our in-depth exploration of children in one educational context with high cultural diversity has provided new understandings but also afforded ideas about how these children's moral thinking and reasoning might be extended. If we want to support children in culturally diverse communities to push back against social exclusion in socially transformative ways, we need to facilitate their skills in multiple perspective taking, evaluation of diverse values systems, and weighing up of evidence. Moral reasoning requires the development of moral understandings in conjunction with evaluation of broader contextual considerations (Nucci & Turiel, 2009). Children then may apply morality to evaluate social norms and personal goals from a moral point of view. It may take until early adolescence for children to apply morality to evaluate social systems, however they are capable of engaging in a moral critique of their own and their peers' behaviour, as well as the surrounding social norms, in ways that reflect their educational experience (Nucci & Ilten-Gee, 2018).

There are important questions for school leaders in culturally diverse communities that relate to values education and how to develop moral reasoning among children whose families and communities hold different social beliefs. Australia, for instance, is an increasingly multicultural and ethnically diverse society and developing children's intercultural capabilities within inclusive school environments are a priority due to the positive impact on social and learning environments and subsequently student achievement (Arber, 2008; Gillborn, 2008). Values education, then, includes consideration of how to support children's evaluative epistemic cognition for moral reasoning within diverse contexts in ways that support increasing cultural, ethnic, linguistic, economic, political and religious diversity. How schools respond to growing diversity and focus on promoting values by teaching about the ideals of society is especially significant for fostering common understandings around social expectations in Western countries today.

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[1] St Stephens Primary School is a pseudonym.