



into the Melting Pot

the question is more important than the answer

Sunday 23 April 2017

What do we teach our children? (Summary)

Setting the scene

Before the age of 6 a child will learn more easily and efficiently than at any other time in their life.

6 out of 10 adults in the USA held literal views of the Bible (2004).

80% of children up to the age of 12 possessed full literal or near-literal beliefs in Bible stories (1964).

Childhood Developmental Theory

Psychologists and developmental researchers have proposed various theories each focussing on a key aspect of development.

Piaget's (1929) Cognitive Stages theory remains the basis of most western early educational programmes, media and common-sense beliefs of adults despite little supporting research. Crucially, Piaget massively underestimates the abilities of children.

Reality Status Decisions

The distinction between reality and non-reality is basic to human cognition. Children as young as 3 years are able to make various reality status decisions.

Prominent reality status decision hypotheses, each favouring initial credulity, are now being disputed by recent research which demonstrates that children are inherently sceptical towards the reality status of new entities and events due to their over-reliance on experiential knowledge.

Overall current research shows that initial scepticism at age 4 shifts to increasing acceptance at age 6 before later returning to scepticism – a bell curve and not a downward trajectory as previously thought.

New entities and events are exposed to children in western culture through books, television and films. Evidence shows that young children are sceptical of the reality status of media information, especially television eg March of the Penguins.

Up to now, books have been the most common form of media to which children are exposed therefore research has focussed upon reality status decisions from stories.

Woolley and Cox (2007) presented 3-5 year old children with realistic, non-realistic and religious stories - both non-realistic and religious stories contained scientifically impossible events.

- 60% thought characters didn't exist and couldn't represent real people, only 30% responded that characters were real.
- All children differentiated real from non-real stories, but 5 year olds showed increased belief in the reality of characters and events in the religious books.
- This demonstrates that children are inherently sceptical and that with age, children remained sceptical of non-real stories but accepted realistic and religious stories as real.

Over the age of 4 years the development of a child's cognitive abilities causes their scepticism to decrease as they use testimony, evidence, context and cultural support such as engagement in rituals to make reality status decisions. However children take a while to assimilate teaching into their belief systems eg the shape of the earth.

- A scientific context increased belief in a new entity.
- If an impossible event is explained by science or religion children are more inclined to reconsider their beliefs.
- The story context affected the reality status decision of a character, eg character did an impossible event = non-real, same character did real event = real.

Religious Reality Status Decisions

Children understand God has different perceptual abilities to humans.

Religious stories are often a mixture of realistic and scientifically impossible content.

Key study: 4 and 6 year olds heard religious and non-religious versions of the same four stories. Overall there were low to moderate levels of belief in characters and events, however higher levels of belief of reality were shown in characters and events of the religious stories, this relationship strengthened with age (Vaden and Woolley 2011).

God

- Children who cited God showed significantly higher levels of belief in the factuality of both events and characters.
- Children aged 6 accepted the reality of physical violation events if God played a role whilst 4 year olds were sceptical of the reality status of characters and events in both story types (with or without God).

Familiarity

- Hearing a story in multiple contexts, read by multiple people, in multiple places and formats confers reality.
- Familiar rather than unfamiliar characters have increased reality for children even when God is involved. This trend increased with age.

Familial religiosity

- Christian parents don't appear to make strong efforts to convey their religious convictions to their children.
- The higher familial religiosity was scored, the higher a child's belief in the reality of characters and events.
- Yet parental belief and communication about literalness of Bible stories has been found to have no effect on children's beliefs.

Religious education

- Instruction in church confers reality status on events otherwise classed as non-real and increases belief.
- Children with higher religious education held stronger beliefs about the reality of characters and events despite showing they understood the events were scientifically impossible.

Other interesting discoveries

The effect of emotion on reality status decisions.

The unknown effect of a higher fantasy orientation on reality status decisions.

Is there a western bias? Are non-western children more credulous about entities and events unavailable to experiential knowledge? Are non-western adults more supernatural in their thinking than children?

Children (up to age 10) in survey data show consistency high levels of belief in specific non-real entities (Santa and the Easter Bunny) that to adults are unambiguously non-real.