

Moral Education in the Zone of Proximal Development

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ABSTRACT In this paper the outlines of an explicitly "Vygotskian" perspective on moral education are sketched. I begin by briefly reviewing and critiquing the two most well-known and widely used approaches to moral education—the cognitive–developmental approach and the character education approach—and I suggest that a Vygotskian/socio-cultural perspective has the potential to address many of the problems faced by contemporary moral educators. Vygotsky's ideas about the "zone of proximal development" are then summarised and those ideas are extended to the domain of moral education, focusing on an excerpt from the film, *Boyz 'n the Hood*. Narrative and story-telling are considered briefly as an example of how the zone of proximal development works to facilitate moral development in a way that is markedly different from that described by contemporary character educators, and I conclude with some brief reflections on questions left unanswered, and speculations about future directions for both theory and practice in moral education from a Vygotskian/socio-cultural perspective.

Moral problems and dilemmas, questions about ethics and character and concerns about conflicting values and their effect on individual action are central aspects of contemporary life. Moral and ethical issues have always been at the core of human experience, but escalating problems—ranging from dishonesty and greed to violent crime and the pervasiveness of physical and sexual abuse, to concerns about international relations and protecting the natural environment—have made such issues even more pressing and prevalent in recent years. Hand-in-hand with these concerns, moreover, has come a growing sense that we are living in a time of profound moral crisis, chaos and confusion.

Our confusion and uncertainty about morality, ethics and values is accompanied by widespread questions about the role that social institutions—particularly schools—should play in facilitating the process by which children and adolescents acquire moral and ethical sensibilities. These concerns are not new—every society and every generation decides, either explicitly or implicitly, what values it will attempt to teach to the next generation and how it will raise its young. What does seem new, however, is the sense of angst and urgency that nowadays accompanies these inter-related philosophical, psychological and educational questions and concerns.

It would seem natural that the field of moral development and moral education

would be the place to which many would look for answers to these questions. In fact, in recent years two very different approaches to understanding moral development and practicing moral education—the “cognitive–developmental” approach and the “character education” approach—have gained widespread interest and attention.

The “cognitive–developmental” approach was initially articulated by Lawrence Kohlberg (1969, 1976, 1981, 1984). Following the ground-breaking efforts of Piaget (1932/1965), and informed by the work of Baldwin (1906), Dewey and Tufts (1932) and Mead (1934), Kohlberg argued that moral development proceeds through six specific stages that mark distinct changes in the underlying structure of moral thought. Moral development, in other words, moves from “heteronomous morality” (Stage 1) to “individualistic, instrumental morality” (Stage 2), to “interpersonally normative morality” (Stage 3), to “social system morality” (Stage 4), to “human rights and social welfare morality” (Stage 5) to a “morality of universalizable, reversible and prescriptive general ethical principles” (Stage 6) (Kohlberg, 1984). Morality, from this perspective, is defined specifically as thinking and reasoning about justice and fairness.

The cognitive–developmental paradigm has also given rise to a specific approach to moral education—the so-called “Just Community” model (Kohlberg, 1980, 1985; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). In the Just Community approach, high schools are restructured so that a relatively small group of students and teachers form a democratic community in which, with respect to establishing and enforcing the rules that govern all aspects of the life of the community except curriculum decisions, each member has one vote. Because teachers have no more power or authority than students to set and enforce rules, students are encouraged to tackle issues of justice, fairness and democracy head-on. The idea is to foster a sense of collective responsibility and an understanding of the importance of democratic participation by allowing students to deal with real moral conflicts and dilemmas as they arise in the community.

In spite of its noble intentions, however, the cognitive–developmental approach is currently facing a number of daunting challenges. Not only is it wedded to foundational and universalistic assumptions that are met with mounting scepticism in the contemporary world, but there are fundamental theoretical incompatibilities between the individualistic perspective that characterises its developmental dimension and the collective perspective that characterises its educational dimension (see Reed, 1998; also Kohlberg, 1985). In addition, the amount of time, energy and fiscal resources necessary to keep the Just Community model in operation are becoming increasingly limited in most schools. Consequently, all but a very few of the Just Community schools that were in operation over the past two decades have now been shut down, both in the United States and in Europe (Higgins, 1994; Oser, 1994).

The character education approach, in contrast, is booming. Character educators argue that what had once been a “core set of values” in American primary and secondary education has been eroded in the face of a pervasive “moral relativism”, challenges to authority figures and the “moral timidity” of educators (Wynne & Ryan, 1993; see also Bennett & Delattre, 1979; Wynne, 1986; Lickona, 1991;

Kilpatrick, 1992; Bennett, 1993). They advocate, in response to these problems, "the idea that there are traits of character children ought to know, that they learn these by example, and that once they know them, they need to practise them until they become second nature" (Kilpatrick, 1992, p. 15). Character educators, while generally acknowledging that their approach represents a return to a much more traditional and conservative perspective on moral education, argue that it is to be trusted because it is "tried and true" (see Lickona, 1991).

One of the key components of contemporary approaches to character education is the use of stories and narratives to teach values and virtues (see Vitz, 1990; Bennett, 1993). As such, proponents of character education have adopted the traditional view that stories, myths, poems and other narrative material provide powerful models for the moral formation of the young:

Stories help to make sense of our lives. They also create a desire to be good. Plato, who thought long and hard about the subject of moral education, believed that children should be brought up in such a way that they would fall in love with virtue. And he thought that stories were the key to sparking this desire. No amount of discussion or dialogue could compensate if that spark was missing ... [Stories] allow us to identify with models of courage and virtue ... [they] supply examples of virtue in action; they can supply strength and wisdom as well (Kilpatrick, 1992, pp. 27–28).

Yet here is precisely where the problems arise. Character educators have simply not shown why the programmes they advance—including exposure of students to "exemplary" moral stories, the strict teaching of ethics with "right" and "wrong" answers on examinations of moral thought, a return to dress codes and daily rituals of allegiance to the church and/or state, and the infusion of moral terms into the teaching of other subjects—are more likely to produce moral improvement than other approaches (see Edwards, 1995). This is due, in large measure, I would argue, to the failure of character educators to articulate the developmental assumptions that inform their educational efforts.

It would seem, therefore, given these problems and limitations of the existing approaches to moral education, that it is time for a change; time, that is, to explore a new approach to moral education: one that retains both the developmental focus of the cognitive–developmental approach and the educational focus of the character education approach, but which ensures that its developmental and educational assumptions are both coherent and compatible; one that also offers a sensitivity to context and culture, and an appreciation of the centrality of social interaction in moral development—features that are largely lacking in existing approaches. The approach I have in mind is based on the work of Russian psychologist and educator Lev Vygotsky (1934/1987, 1978)—work that has gained increasing attention among scholars in psychology, education and related fields over the past decade or so (see Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984; Wertsch, 1985, 1991; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Moll, 1990; Rogoff, 1990), but which has seen only very limited application to the field of moral education (see, however, Buzzelli, 1993, 1995).

The aim of this essay, therefore, is to rectify this lacuna by sketching the

outlines of an explicitly “Vygotskian” perspective on moral education. This is done by summarising Vygotsky’s ideas about the “zone of proximal development”, by extending those ideas to the domain of moral education and by considering narrative and story-telling as an example of how the zone of proximal development works to facilitate moral development in a way that is markedly different from that described by contemporary character educators. The paper concludes with some brief reflections on questions left unanswered, and speculations about future directions for both theory and practice in moral education from a Vygotskian/socio-cultural perspective.

The Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky (1934/1987, 1978) introduced the notion of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in the context of a set of reflections on the relationship between learning and development. Having rejected both the view that development precedes learning and the view that learning and development coincide, Vygotsky proposed a new approach, one that focuses particular attention on learning and development in school-age children. The key to this approach is Vygotsky’s claim that in order to match instructional strategies to a child’s developmental capabilities accurately, we must determine not only her “actual developmental level”, but also her “level of potential development”.

The “actual developmental level” represents what the child knows and can do at the present moment. It is assessed typically based on tasks that the child solves independently: “we give a child a battery of tests or a variety of tasks of varying degrees of difficulty, and we judge the extent of their mental development on the basis of how they solve them and at what level of difficulty” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85). The actual level of development, in other words, captures only those mental functions that are fully formed, fully matured, fully completed—the “end products of development” (p. 86).

As a result, Vygotsky (1934/1987) argued, the actual level of development ultimately provides an *inadequate* measure of “the state of the child’s development”:

The state of development is never defined only by what has matured. If the gardener decides only to evaluate the matured or harvested fruits of the apple tree, he cannot determine the state of his orchard. Maturing trees must also be taken into consideration. The psychologist [similarly] must not limit his analysis to functions that have matured. He must consider those that are in the process of maturing (p. 208).

Thus, Vygotsky claimed, we must also determine what the child knows and can do with help, with assistance and guidance from others who are more competent. These are the so-called “maturing functions”, and only when they are considered will we have a complete picture of the child’s developmental potential.

The “zone of proximal development”, proposed Vygotsky (1978), “is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through

problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). To illustrate how the ZPD works in real life, Vygotsky (1934/1987) provided the following example:

Assume that we have determined the mental age of two children to be eight years. We do not stop with this, however. Rather, we attempt to determine how each of these children will solve tasks that were meant for older children. We assist each child through demonstration, leading questions, and by introducing the initial elements of the task’s solution. With this help or collaboration from the adult, one of these children solves problems characteristic of a twelve year old, while the other solves problems only at a level typical of a nine year old. This difference between the child’s mental ages, this difference between the child’s actual level of development and the level of performance that he achieves in collaboration with the adult, defines the zone of proximal development. In this example, the zone can be expressed by the number “4” for one child and by the number “1” for the other. These children are not at the same level of mental development. The difference between these two children reflected in our measurement of the zone of proximal development is more significant than their similarity as reflected in their actual level of development. Research indicates that *the zone of proximal development has more significance for the dynamics of intellectual development and for the success of instruction than does the actual level of development* (p. 209; emphasis in original).

The ZPD, in other words, captures those functions and abilities that have not yet matured, that are in the process of maturing, that can only be accomplished with assistance. Vygotsky (1978) called these the “buds” or “flowers” of development—to distinguish them from the “fruits” of development that are the functions and abilities that the child can accomplish independently. Consequently, he argued, “the actual developmental level characterises mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterises mental development prospectively” (pp. 86–87).

Vygotsky’s conception of the ZPD clearly reflects the two foundational assumptions of his socio-cultural approach to human development: (1) the claim that higher mental functioning is mediated by words, language and forms of discourse which function as “psychological tools” that both facilitate and transform mental action; and (2) the claim that forms of higher mental functioning have their origins in social relations, as “intermental” processes between people are internalised to become “intramental” processes within persons (Wertsch, 1985; also Tappan, 1991b, 1997). Vygotsky’s approach, therefore, focuses attention both on how such higher mental functions as thinking, reasoning, remembering and willing are mediated by language, forms of discourse and other semiotic mechanisms, and on the ways in which such functions necessarily have their origins in human social life. [1]

The ZPD thus highlights the critical relationship that necessarily exists between intermental functioning and intramental functioning in a given socio-cultural context:

The zone of proximal development serves a central role in Vygotsky's theory as an essential means through which the social world guides the child in development of individual functions. The use of the tools and techniques of society are introduced to the child and practised in social interaction with more experienced members of society in the zone of proximal development (Wertsch & Rogoff, 1984, p. 6).

As such, positive developmental effects obtain for individual children when they collaborate, via the medium of language, with more competent adults or peers in performing particular tasks and engaging in specific practical activities.

Rogoff (1990) has extended Vygotsky's ideas about the ZPD in helpful ways, arguing that child development results from processes of "guided participation", wherein "caregivers and children collaborate in arrangements and interactions that support children in learning to manage the skills and values of mature members of their society" (p. 65). Guided participation entails two inter-related elements, as children and care-givers work together to: "(1) [build] bridges from children's present understanding and skills to reach new understanding and skills, and (2) [arrange] and [structure] children's participation in activities, with dynamic shifts over development in children's responsibilities" (p. 8).

"Central to Vygotsky's theory", Rogoff argues, "is the idea that children's participation in cultural activities with the guidance of more skilled partners allows children to internalize the tools for thinking and for taking more mature approaches to problem solving that children have practised in social context" (p. 14). Within the ZPD, therefore, an interaction or dialogue (see Bruner, 1987) occurs between children and their partners as both actively engage in, and thus transform, specific cultural practices. This interactive or dialogic view, moreover, highlights (somewhat more so than Vygotsky's own formulations) the *active* role that children play in fostering and facilitating their own development:

The rapid development of young children into skilled participants in society is accomplished through children's routine, and often tacit, guided participation in ongoing cultural activities as they observe and participate with others in culturally organized practices... [This view], while consistent with the Vygotskian approach, provides more focus on the role of children as active participants in their own development. Children seek, structure, and even demand the assistance of those around them in learning how to solve problems of all kinds. They actively observe social activities, participating as they can (Rogoff, 1990, p. 16).

Rogoff also argues that sometimes forms of communication other than language (i.e. non-verbal forms of communication) serve to mediate and shape the dialogic interactions that occur in the ZPD.

In sum, then, Vygotsky's conception of the ZPD offers a new way to think about the relationship between the educational experiences and the developmental processes at work in children's lives. "Good learning", Vygotsky (1978) argued, *always precedes development*, thus creating the ZPD in the first place, and

“awakening” developmental processes that initially operate only when the child collaborates with more competent others:

learning is not development; however, properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning. Thus, learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human, psychological functions (p. 90).

As a result of the guided participation that takes place in the ZPD, in other words, externally orientated and socially constituted learning processes between people become internally orientated and semiotically mediated developmental processes within people.

Vygotsky’s educational and developmental assumptions are thus directly linked [2]. These interrelated assumptions, moreover, define a theoretical framework that is particularly useful, I would argue, in exploring the relationship between moral education and moral development—an exploration to which I now turn.

Moral Education in the Zone of Proximal Development

In this section I intend to offer a brief sketch of what might be called a Vygotskian perspective on moral education—a perspective grounded in Vygotsky’s conception of the ZPD, as has been sketched above. Such a perspective, I believe, offers a vision of moral education that integrates educational and developmental assumptions in ways that are lacking in other current models of moral education. As such, it holds the potential to transform the way we think about the practice of moral education in the contemporary world.

Crucial to this perspective is the assumption that moral functioning (like all higher mental functioning) is a *cultural practice* or *practical activity* (Rogoff, 1990) that is mediated by words, language and forms of discourse, and thus necessarily situated in a particular socio-cultural-historical context. As Michael Oakeshott (1975) argues, morality is fundamentally a “practice” or a form of “conduct” (an activity) that facilitates human interaction: The conditions which compose a moral practice are not theorems or precepts about human conduct, nor do they constitute anything so specific as a “shared system of values”; they compose a *vernacular language* of colloquial intercourse (p. 63; emphasis added). This language, claims Oakeshott, is thus fundamentally pragmatic; it is a *tool* used “like any other language, [as] an instrument of self-disclosure...by agents in diagnosing their situations and choosing their responses; and it is a language of self-enactment which permits those who can use it to understand themselves and one another” (p. 63):

A morality, then, is neither a system of general principles nor a code of rules, but a vernacular language. General principles and even rules may be elicited from it, but (like other languages) it is not the creation of grammarians; it is made by speakers...It is not a device for formulating judgments

about conduct or for solving so-called moral problems, but a practice in terms of which to think, to choose, to act, and to utter (pp. 78–79).

Moral functioning understood, therefore, as a “socio-cultural activity” (what we might call “moral activity”), is mediated by a vernacular moral language that fundamentally shapes the ways in which people think, feel and act. This vernacular moral language, moreover, is shared by persons who share the same activities, who are engaged in similar social/moral practices. It is these shared activities that enable people to understand the forms of speech by means of which they communicate about moral issues with themselves and with each other—if they did not share these activities they would not share this common moral language (Tappan, 1997).

This conception of moral functioning as a socio-cultural activity has profound implications for how we understand the linked processes of moral education and moral development. From a Vygotskian perspective, therefore, moral education entails a process of guided participation whereby children are helped by parents, teachers and more competent peers to attain new and higher levels of moral functioning [3]. These attainments occur initially within the ZPD, as new forms of moral thinking, feeling and action are introduced to children, and they are guided and assisted in their efforts to think, feel and act in these new ways. This is the essence of moral education (or “moral learning”) from a Vygotskian perspective, and it sets the stage for moral development.

Moral development occurs when the child, following Vygotsky’s “general genetic law of cultural development” (Wertsch, 1985), begins to internalise these new forms of practical activity—these new forms of moral thinking, feeling and acting—as intermental processes (experiences of guided participation that occur between persons in the ZPD) are transformed into intramental processes (aspects of the child’s moral understanding, moral sensibility and moral volition/action). Crucial to this developmental process, of course, is the fact that moral functioning, like all forms of higher mental functioning, is mediated by words, language and forms of discourse. Thus what is internalised are not “activities”, literally speaking, but rather semiotically and linguistically mediated social relations. Internalisation occurs, therefore, as external speech between people becomes inner speech within people (see Vygotsky, 1934/1987)—that is, as overt, external moral dialogue becomes silent, inner moral dialogue (see Tappan, 1997).

Tharp and Gallimore’s (1988) analysis of the four stages of the ZPD helps to clarify and extend this conception of the ways in which moral development occurs in the ZPD. In the first stage the child’s performance is assisted by more capable others, using six “means of assistance”: “modeling, contingency managing [rewarding and punishing], feeding back, instructing, questioning, and cognitive structuring [providing structures for understanding, thinking, and acting]” (p. 44). In the second stage assistance is provided by the self, primarily through inner (“self-directed”) speech and inner dialogue. In the third stage the child’s performance is fully developed, internalised, automatised and “fossilized”—“assistance, from the adult or the self, is no longer needed” (p. 38). Finally, in the fourth stage,

“de-automatization of performance leads to recursion back through the ZPD”, and the child is ready to develop new abilities and capacities (p. 38).

To illustrate some of these ideas let me consider briefly a central scene in John Singleton’s 1991 film *Boyz ‘n the Hood* in which Furious Styles explicitly assumes the role of moral educator, in conversation one afternoon with his 8-year-old son Trey:

Furious: So tell me, are you a leader or a follower, huh?

Trey: Leader!

Furious: OK, then, what’s the three rules? Break it down for me. And hey!—*think* before you answer.

Trey: I got it. Always look a person in the eye—if you do that they’ll respect you better. Two was...never be afraid to ask you for anything—stealing isn’t necessary. And the last one, I think, was never respect anybody who doesn’t respect you back.

Furious: Yeah, yeah, you got it...What do you know about sex?

Trey: I know a little bit.

Furious: Oh yeah, what little bit is that?

Trey: I know I take a girl, stick my thing in her, and nine months later a baby comes out.

Furious: You think that’s it?

Trey: Basically, yeah!

Furious: Well, remember this, any fool can make a baby but only a real man can raise his children...I wasn’t but seventeen when your mother was pregnant with you. All of my friends was droppin’ out of high school, hangin’ out on corners, in front of liquor stores, gettin’ drunk, gettin’ high...some of ‘um was robbin’ people, some of ‘um was even killin’ people. Hey, you remember my friend Marcus? Yeah, he got into robbin’ people, wanted me to come along and join him, but I was like, “Nah, man, gettin’ ready to have a son...” (I knew you was goin’ to be a boy). Anyway, I wanted to be somebody you could look up to. So, I guess that’s why I went to Vietnam. Don’t ever go in the Army, Trey. Black man ain’t got no place in the Army.

I would argue that this conversation captures clearly the complex dynamics of moral education in the ZPD. As such, it not only illustrates the interaction between educational and developmental processes that is the hallmark of Vygotsky’s perspective, but it also highlights the role that guided participation can and does play in transforming young lives.

I want to focus my attention on two aspects of this excerpt—Trey’s recounting of the “three rules” that Furious asks him to recall, and Furious’s “lecture” about responsible sexuality and what it means to be a father. With respect to the former, I would argue that Trey’s ability to repeat the three rules represents the outcome of educational and developmental processes that have already been largely completed—Trey, in other words, stands somewhere between stages two and three of the ZPD (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Trey appears to have internalised the three rules

of life as a result, we must assume, of the complex dynamics of the ongoing relationship that Furious and Trey share as father and son. We can easily imagine that Furious and Trey have talked about these rules many times, and that Furious presented these rules to Trey—forms of discourse that initially stood at the upper edge of Trey's understanding and appreciation—not simply to be memorised, but also to be understood and appropriated in a new way, as a guide to his moral actions in the world. As a result, therefore, of these ongoing interactions within the ZPD, what was originally an aspect of the intermental (i.e. interpersonal) relationship between Furious and Trey has become an aspect of Trey's own intramental processes (i.e. his own inner speech/inner moral dialogue).

With respect to the latter, I would argue that Furious's discussion about fatherhood represents his attempt to define, for Trey and for himself, a *new* ZPD through which to traverse together. Furious asks Trey about his understanding of sexuality and parenthood, which identifies Trey's actual level of development, and then Furious offers Trey his own understanding of what it means to be a father, which defines Trey's potential level of development. We can assume, therefore, that what will result will be another ongoing series of discussions between Furious and Trey, in the ZPD, that will assist and enable Trey to arrive at a new, more mature and more complex understanding of the moral dimensions of sexuality and fatherhood—an understanding, once again, mediated and shaped by specific words, language and forms of discourse (e.g. "any fool can make a baby but only a real man can raise his children" or "I wanted to be somebody you could look up to") that originate in a specific socio-cultural context.

While this conversation between Furious and Trey illustrates some of the ways in which moral education in the ZPD can and does occur, it misses an important element of the argument I have presented above—the claim that moral functioning must be conceptualised as a socio-cultural activity. Furious guides and assists Trey in developing new ways of thinking and talking about moral issues, and thinking and talking are certainly forms of cultural practice (see Austin, 1962; Searle, 1970). However, there are other, more explicit forms of cultural practice/practical activity that we typically associate with moral action. For example, Noddings (1992) provides a helpful discussion of how schools, in particular, can assist and guide children in engaging in a wide range of "caring activities"—ranging from caring for animals to visiting residents of nursing homes, to doing other forms of community service. All these activities require children to receive initial guidance and support from teachers, parents and other adults. Thus they all require that children enter and traverse a ZPD wherein educational and developmental processes enable them to internalize gradually, and thus make their own, an understanding of "caring activities" that begin as joint ventures with others.

Finally, let me briefly compare this Vygotskian conception of the way in which moral education and moral development occur in the ZPD with the way in which proponents of the cognitive developmental paradigm understand the role of discussion and dialogue in moral education (see Kohlberg, 1981; Berkowitz, 1985). From the cognitive-developmental perspective moral development is facilitated when a person is exposed to forms of moral reasoning that are between one-half and

one full stage higher than his or her own actual level of moral judgement, as measured using Kohlberg's (1984) six-stage sequence (see Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975; Higgins, 1980). This exposure is assumed to occur most commonly in the context of a classroom moral discussion orchestrated by a teacher to maximise peer interaction and cognitive conflict. When an optimal amount of stage mixture is present among students in a class, when students are actively engaged in the processes of moral discussion, dialogue and disagreement, and when peer discussion is primarily *transactive* (characterised by transformations in one partner's reasoning by the other partner, "via integration, logical analysis, or some other operation" [Berkowitz, 1985, p. 205]), then moral development is most likely to occur (see Berkowitz *et al.*, 1980; Berkowitz & Gibbs, 1983).

On the surface this view of moral education, wherein the moral development of 'lower stage' individuals is facilitated by exposure to "higher stage" forms of moral judgement, might appear to be quite amenable to a Vygotskian interpretation. I would argue, however, that in the last analysis these two approaches have such radically different foci that they can not be easily integrated. The focus of the cognitive-developmental perspective is change in the deep structure of moral reasoning—specifically about issues of justice and fairness—as measured by Kohlberg's scheme. The focus of a Vygotskian perspective, in contrast, is the development of new and dynamic forms of cultural practice/practical activity that have moral dimensions—forms of practice/activity that develop as experiences of guided participation lead to the internalisation of new ways of thinking, feeling and acting. In other words, when one is interested only in stage change, one cannot consider changes in moral thinking, feeling, and action that emerge from social interactions in the ZPD. [4]

Thus the Vygotskian conception of moral education that has been sketched above provides a new way to think about an issue that has been central to the field for more than 20 years—namely, the role of dialogue and discussion in moral education. At the same time, however, it also offers a different perspective on another set of issues that have emerged relatively recently—namely, the role of narrative in moral development and moral education. Let me turn, therefore, to a brief consideration of these interesting and important questions.

Narrative, Moral Development and the ZPD

Researchers and practitioners interested in the relationship between narrative and moral development typically adopt one of two rather different positions. One position holds that moral narratives, stories, myths and poems provide powerful models of moral behaviour that have very positive effects on children's moral development. This is the position held by many character educators, including Bennett (1993), Kilpatrick (1992), Lickona (1991) and Vitz (1990). The other position, influenced by recent developments in interpretive and narrative psychology (see Packer, 1985; Sarbin, 1986; Packer & Addison, 1989), holds that lived *moral* experience is expressed and represented by and large through stories or narratives (see Tappan & Brown, 1989; also MacIntyre, 1981; White, 1981). Simply put,

people tend to tell stories—either orally or in written form—about their real-life moral conflicts and dilemmas, and these stories constitute *texts* that, when they are *interpreted*, provide some insight into both the psychological complexity of moral experience and the psychological dynamics of moral development (Tappan, 1990; Pratt & Arnold, 1995).

I want, however, to sketch the outlines of a third position *vis-à-vis* the relationship between narrative and moral development. In this view narrative not only expresses important dimensions of people's lived moral experience, but also mediates and shapes that experience in critical ways. As such, narrative functions as a central component of our "cultural tool kit": signs, words, language, forms of discourse provided by society that enable action and interaction and encourage developmental progress (Bruner, 1986). In other words, narrative forms and structures function in our culture as "discursive forestructures" that guide and direct how we interpret and make sense of events over time (Gergen & Gergen, 1986). We do not have an experience and then, *sui generis*, produce a narrative that recounts and describes that experience. Rather, our very experiences themselves are mediated by a common set of narrative forms and structures that are available to us as members of our culture—"symbolic forms whose function is to give shape to reality and to confer meaning on experience" (Nicolopolou, 1997, p. 182). Thus, as Volosinov (1929/1986) argues, "experience exists even for the person undergoing it only in the material of signs. Outside that material there is no experience as such" (p. 28).

This position suggests, therefore, that while narratives play a critical role in shaping the psyche in general, and promoting moral development in particular, the educational process whereby such shaping occurs does not happen simply by exposing a child to a particular story. Rather, it occurs only in the context of an ongoing set of social interactions, mediated by narrative, as parents, teachers, other adults and even more competent peers assist children in moving through the ZPD. Let me illustrate this perspective on narrative, moral development and the ZPD by returning, briefly, to the conversation between Furious and Trey reported above.

I simply want to call attention to the fact that in the second part of the dialogue where, as I suggested above, Furious appears to be defining a new ZPD for Trey, Furious begins the "lesson" about responsible sexuality and the importance of fatherhood by telling Trey a story—a narrative that recounts Furious's own experience of becoming a father for the first time. It is not an elaborate story, but it places a series of actions and events in a temporal sequence ("I wasn't but seventeen when your mother was pregnant with you"), and it has a (two-part) "moral" ("I wanted to be somebody you could look up to...that's why I went to Vietnam. Don't ever go in the Army, Trey. Black man ain't got no place in the Army")—two key elements of any narrative (see White, 1981; Tappan & Brown, 1989). As such, Furious's narrative provides a "text" that he and Trey can begin to talk about, can return to from time to time as they explore its meaning and ramifications, and can use as a "tool" to help Trey ultimately construct both his own understanding what it means to be a father, and his response to the institutional racism he will encounter throughout his life. It is a text, in other words, that they will use to mediate their interactions in the ZPD—interactions, discussions and dialogue that Trey will

gradually internalise, to shape his own moral thinking, feeling and acting, as these dimensions of his moral functioning continue to change and develop.

This example, however, raises two related issues I want to address briefly as I bring this section to a close. The first concerns the problem of interpretation in the ZPD—specifically, how do Furious and Trey come to an agreement about what Furious's narrative means? This relates more generally to the problem of "intersubjectivity" in the ZPD—specifically, how do adults and children agree on the details and dimensions of the task at hand? Wertsch (1984) offers a helpful clarification of this issue, arguing that while adult and child typically have different initial understandings of the task with which they are faced ("situation definitions"), it is indeed possible to construct a joint understanding of that task that enables the child to reach his or her level of potential development:

Adult-child collaboration at the potential level of development often involves...a situation definition [that] represents objects and events in a way that will allow communication between the adult and child. In some cases, it corresponds to the child's actual level of development. That is, the dyad can attain intersubjectivity on the basis of the child's intrapsychological situation definition. However, this is not always the case. In many instances, the negotiated intersubjective situation definition that defines the potential level of development is often one that requires the child to change his or her understanding of objects and events. This change can involve the child's shifting to the adult's situation definition, or it can involve a shift to a viewpoint somewhere between the adult's and the child's original intrapsychological situation definitions (Wertsch, 1984, p. 13).

Thus Furious and Trey must come to a common understanding of the meaning of Furious's narrative, just as all adults and children, working together in the ZPD, via a complex process of communication and negotiation that is necessarily mediated and shaped by words, language and other semiotic mechanisms, arrive at a common understanding of the task with which they are faced. [5]

This brings me directly to the second issue. Although narratives function to mediate and shape moral experience in fundamental ways, it is important to stress that children—like Trey—ultimately construct their own understanding of such narratives, as those narratives are internalised as a result of the guided participation and social interaction that occur in the ZPD. Vygotsky's conception of development appears, at times, to have very behaviouristic overtones—wherein children passively copy what adults say and do as intermental processes become intramental processes. However, as many commentators have argued (see Rogoff, 1990; Lawrence & Valisiner, 1993), Vygotsky stressed not only that children play an active role in their own development, but also that the process of internalisation involves an active transformation and reconstruction of words, language and forms of discourse (external speech) into fundamentally *new* forms of inner speech:

What was an outward sign operation...is now *transformed into a new intra-psychological layer* and gives birth to a new psychological system...The

process of “interiorization” of cultural forms of behavior...is related to radical changes in the activity of the most important psychological functions, to the reconstruction of psychological activity on the basis of sign operations...The inwardly instrumental process begins to make use of entirely new connections and methods unlike those that were characteristic of the outward sign operation. The process here undergoes alterations analogous to those observed in the child’s transition from “outward” speech to “inward”. As a result of the process of interiorization of the higher psychological operation, we have a new structure, a new function of formerly applied methods, and an entirely new composition of psychological processes (Vygotsky & Luria, 1930/1994, pp. 155–156).

Thus we must assume, *vis-à-vis* our example, that although Furious offers Trey a specific narrative as a tool to understand the moral dimensions of fatherhood, Trey will ultimately construct his own understanding of that story as it is internalised and takes its place among the repertoire of words, language and forms of discourse that mediate and shape his moral thinking, feeling and acting. [6] Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that this potentially quite novel outcome of the process of internalisation is very different to that for which character educators hope—namely, that children will take in the moral stories they are told verbatim, and will simply model their moral actions on those of the characters in the story, without questioning either the model or the “moral” of the story.

Conclusion

In this paper some of the implications of Vygotsky’s conception of the ZPD for the practice of moral education in the contemporary world have been explored. The ideas of Vygotsky and others regarding the ZPD have been summarised, those ideas have been extended to the domain of moral education, and the relationship between narrative, moral education, and moral development have been considered from a Vygotskian perspective. This endeavour, in large measure, has been undertaken in order to explore a model of moral education that addresses problems inherent in both the cognitive–developmental approach and the character education approach—a model, in other words, based on coherent and compatible developmental and educational assumptions, which also offers a sensitivity to context and culture and an appreciation of the power of social interaction.

In the final analysis I would argue that a Vygotskian approach to moral education occupies a middle-ground position between the cognitive–developmental view that moral development results from the child’s active construction of new cognitive–structures, to resolve disequilibrating forms of cognitive–conflict, on one hand, and the character education view that moral development results simply from exposing children to stories about virtue and character on the other hand. In contrast, the Vygotskian position acknowledges that although active construction of novel ideas on the part of the child and guidance and support by adults are both key to the process of moral development, because educational experiences and interac-

tions (between adult and child in the ZPD) provide the starting point for developmental transformations (within the child), the theoretical link between education and development is both explicit and coherent. Moreover, by making that link explicit a Vygotskian approach to moral education addresses a fundamental weakness in the character education model, and by making that link coherent it addresses a fundamental weakness in the cognitive–developmental model.

In addition, Vygotsky's recognition and understanding of the influence of culture, broadly defined, on "mediated action" (Wertsch, 1991) paves the way for a respectful consideration of the effect of social, cultural and historical differences on the formation and transformation of moral functioning/activity across the lifespan. Such a perspective on difference is a critical one for moral educators, as we begin to explore the ways in which the social, cultural and historical contexts in which children and adolescents live shape their moral experience and moral development. We live in a world of undeniable and irreducible diversity. As technological advancements bring the world increasingly closer, such differences are magnified even more. For example, even within the United States, while the myth of the great "melting pot" implies that all differences are resolved into the generic "American", the reality of life in the last decade of the 20th century is that gender, racial, cultural and class differences are the rule, not the exception. Such differences, furthermore, mean differences in power, economic and political advantage and quality of life. Thus, I would argue, in the contemporary world a focus on *differences*, and the socio-cultural contexts that give rise to them, must be a fundamental part of any adequate theory of moral development and moral education.

Finally, Vygotsky's conception of the ZPD outlines the *process* by which learning paves the way for development, but it says nothing about the *content* of what is learned. Although this may appear to lead to a problematic relativism when Vygotsky's conception of the ZPD is applied to the moral domain, in the end I would argue that the ZPD does entail a specific moral vision that provides a compelling aim for moral education—a vision of the fundamentally *dialogic* nature of all learning. As such, Vygotsky's work shares much in common with the work of Noddings (1984, 1992), who argues that the kind of dialogue that Vygotsky assumes occurs between teachers and students, parents and children, and even between peer collaborators is, at its core, a profoundly *moral* activity. Dialogue, no matter where or how it happens, is morally valuable, according to Noddings, because it naturally gives rise to care, concern, and compassion—for both "self" and "other" (see Tappan, 1998).

This is not to say, however, that there are no weaknesses in the Vygotskian perspective. A number of questions must be addressed before the approach sketched above can be put into widespread practice. Chief among these are questions about how to assess and measure developmental levels of moral functioning/activity in a way that both avoids imposing the kind of universal standards that have traditionally been employed to chart developmental progress, and yet provides some means by which distinctions can be drawn between different types/forms/manifestations of moral functioning/activity. This is critical in order that parents, teachers and other "developmental educators" can determine the difference between a child's "actual developmental level" on the one hand, and her 'level of potential development' on

the other hand, and thus help the child to construct an educationally and developmentally appropriate ZPD.

In addition, questions about the most effective means by which parents, teachers and other adults assist and guide children's moral functioning/activity in the ZPD must be addressed. I suspect, for example, that some of Tharp and Gallimore's (1988) six "means of assistance" that can be used by more competent parents, teachers, experts and peers to assist children's performance in the ZPD may be more appropriate than others for the practice of *moral* education; but which ones? How can we make that determination, both theoretically and empirically? [7]

Jerome Bruner (1987), in his prologue to Volume 1 of the *Collected works of L. S. Vygotsky*, argues not only that "Vygotsky's conception of development is at the same time a theory of education", but also that

[Vygotsky's] educational theory is a theory of cultural transmission...For "education" implies for Vygotsky not only the improvement of the *individual's* potential, but the historical expression and growth of human culture from which Man [sic] springs. It is [therefore] in the service of both a psychological and a cultural theory that Vygotsky places such enormous emphasis upon the role of language in [human] mental life and upon its cultivation during growth. For Vygotsky language is both a result of historical forces that have given it shape, and a tool of thought that shapes thought itself (pp. 1-2).

A Vygotskian approach to moral education—like any approach to moral education—must ultimately be more than a theory of cultural transmission. It must also, in the end, push toward theory of cultural *transformation*—a theory, that is, of how, using powerful and empowering words, language and forms of discourse, in the context of loving, nurturing and supportive relationships with young and old alike, we can make our world a better, more just, more caring, more compassionate place. If as parents, teachers, and other adult members of our culture, we genuinely care about the welfare of the next generation, then we can aspire to nothing more critical, nor more challenging.

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NOTES

- [1] Moreover, because Vygotsky claimed that these functions occur first between people in the course of social interactions, and then within people (particularly children) as intramental processes, he assumed that such functions "can be carried out in collaboration by several people (on the intermental plane) as well as by an individual (on the intramental plane)" (Wertsch & Rogoff, 1984, p. 2). In other words, both individuals and social groups (e.g. couples, families, communities and even entire societies) think, reason, problem-solve and remember. This implies, therefore, not only that an individual's mental functioning develops in the social context in which she lives, but also that her individual functioning will necessarily mirror the form and structure of her social world because the words, language and forms of discourse that mediate and shape that functioning are inherently

- socio-cultural phenomena: "This means that variation in the organisation of social functioning can be expected to lead to variation in the organisation of individual psychological functioning" (p. 2).
- [2] Wertsch (1984) argues, in fact, that "the zone of proximal development is an instantiation of Vygotsky's general genetic law of cultural development" (p. 12).
 - [3] I attempt to address the difficulties entailed in identifying what constitute "higher levels of moral functioning" in the Conclusion to this essay. To foreshadow part of that discussion, let me acknowledge that it might appear that Vygotsky's conception of the ZPD, as applied to the process of moral education, provides no criteria that would enable one to compare the moral progression of, for example, a child raised in a blatantly racist family and community with that of a child raised in an inclusive non-racist family and community. In the end, however, I argue that Vygotsky's conception of the dialogic character of the ZPD entails a moral vision (of care and responsiveness to others) that does, indeed, provide the criteria necessary to make the kind of value judgements required in both developmental and moral analyses (see Tappan, 1998; also Noddings, 1984, 1992).
 - [4] I would argue that Berkowitz *et al.*'s research on the developmental features of moral discussions might lend itself to a more explicitly Vygotskian analysis if increases in transactive forms of discourse between and within discussion partners, rather than increases in stage of moral reasoning, were to become the focus of this research programme.
 - [5] This process highlights the fundamentally *dialogical* character of Vygotsky's conception of the ZPD (see Bruner, 1987).
 - [6] Bakhtin's (1981) conception of how others' words become one's own, and how forms of discourse become less "externally authoritative" and more "internally persuasive", provides a useful elaboration and extension of some of these ideas about the constructive character of the developmental process (see Tappan, 1991a, Wertsch, 1991; also Pratt & Arnold, 1995; Day & Tappan, 1996).
 - [7] In the end, therefore, perhaps our goal is to seek a dialectic relationship among cognitive-developmental, character education and socio-cultural approaches to moral education. Perhaps, that is, the Vygotskian contribution is mediational rather than oppositional, to stand between and complement the other two approaches. As such, we may move toward a new theory of moral development and education that incorporates features of all three approaches into an expanded model that addresses a wide range of issues and concerns.

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