Concept formation: the case for moral knowledge - an ethnographic enquiry

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Abstract

This paper discusses the development of higher-order cognitive functions through the development of moral knowledge in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. The paper argues that moral knowledge, a generally ignored aspect of cognitive development, is learnt through concept formation in the same way any other kind of knowledge is learnt. The data was analysed thematically and presented using interpretive-descriptive discursive narrative. The significant finding was that at a non-spontaneous level, mediation of moral concept to children at school is essential for the development of moral knowledge. Consequently, moral knowledge remains as relevant as any other form of knowledge leading to a true moral concept.

Introduction

Concept formation is integral to the learning process. A number of studies have shown how concepts are formed in mathematics, science, geography, child play, school learning and life learning, in the Piagetian or Vygotskian traditions, but there seems to be a gap on concept formation in moral knowledge. From a historical stand point, moral knowledge has been viewed as inseparable from religion (Diener, 1997), but this conflation is incorrect; they are not the same thing. Unfortunately, in today's postmodern democratic and multicultural world, religion has subtly been forced out of schools in the name of 'inclusion'. Consequently, there has been less and less resolute emphasis to teach moral knowledge at schools. Perhaps the violence in schools is an indicator of the dire need to reintegrate some form of moral regeneration into schools. This paper is a psychological response to these issues and partly a contribution to existing debates on the way forward.

Conception formation in a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

CHAT is a conceptual framework that is concerned with how human behaviour emerges shaped by culture and history (Blunden, 2010; Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev and Miller, 2003). The salient ideas that concerns CHAT pertinent to this discussion are *dialectics, mediation and concept formation.* Dialectic supposes the notion of a relationship – Figure 2 – in what Vygotsky (1981a; 1981b) calls 'cultural tools' or 'meditational means'. For him, culture is a pre-condition for mediation – mediation is a dialectic relationship requisite for the "development of behaviour" (Vygotsky, 1981b, p.164). The key idea in mediation is that of a necessary relationship, whether it is conceptual or material. Vygotsky's insight in this relationship stemmed from his explanation of the origins of human behaviour, which he emphasised originate from cultural or societal activities, that is, everything that is cultural and historical mediate the processes of cognitive development, and hence modify behaviour (Vygotsky, 1998; Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991).

Tools (psychological or material) evolved as products of culture and history. They are ". . . artificial formations. . . they are social, not organic. They are direct towards the mastery or control of behavioural processes – someone else's or one's own" (Vygotsky, 1981a, p.137). In other words, tools are 'instrumental' since their instrumentality emerges from human behaviour. Vygotsky maintains that "by being included in the process of behaviour, the psychological tool alters the entire flow and structure of mental functions. It does this by determining the structure of a new instrumental act just as a technical tool alters the process of a natural adaptation by determining the form of labour operations" (Vygotsky, 1981a, p.137). We can infer from Vygotsky's stance that mediation is neither a substitute nor a finite process to an end; it is an integral dialectical relationship of activity, that is, an ontological relationship without which it would be hard to explain how cognitive development is possible within CHAT.

As he examined the existing explanations of the origins of behaviour, Vygotsky realised that an autonomous stimulus and response reflex – Figure 1 – provided an inadequate explanation of the origins of human behaviour. These explanations were characterised by Stimulus 'A' and Response 'B' (in the Stimulus Response Framework (SR)).

Figure 1:   The stimulus response conditioned reflex

Stimulus A ●━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━● Response B

The dominant explanation of how Stimulus 'A' was related to Response 'B' was through 'association'. But if this is the case, then it can only be explained as an association of irreducible sensory and perception entities of consciousness; for Vygotsky (1981a), this explanation was insufficient and reductionist. Therefore, to the permutation 'A' ⇆ 'B', which is a biological process (Blunden, 2010), Vygotsky introduced the notion of a tool – a "psychological tool X" in Figure 2 (Vygotsky, 1981a, p.138), which in addition to providing instrumental mediation, has two other relationships: A ↵ X and X ↵ B, which in the broadest sense is the transformative mediating relationship that is dialectical and cultural-historical.

The activity theory framework

Figure 2:   The traditional Triadic Triangle

Tool (X)

Subject (A)   Object (B)
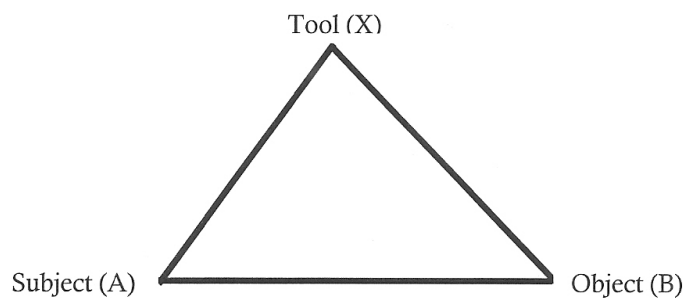
The centrality of mediation in CHAT is affirmed by Neo-Vygotskians (Blunden, 2010). It has been variously named: artefact-mediated collaborative action or joint action (Engeström, 1987); joint mediated activity (Cole and Levitin, 2000); tool-mediated, goal-directed action (Wertsch, 1985) and shared joint activity (Meshcheryakov, 2009). Blunden underlines this centrality by proposing that "by means of finite interactions with people and artefacts which are part of a definite cultural-historical society, a person gradually learns the ways of this society and very soon develops their own will, their own life-goals, and goes on to become a full and equal member of the society" (Blunden, 2010, p.201).

Following from above, Blunden has affirmed the necessity of mediation in child development by agreeing that the becoming of mind is a product of culture and history. He further suggests that for every society, "the reproduction of its culture" is a necessity that is built in its "institutional practices" (Blunden, 2010, p.155). If we maintain that children are the mediators of this reproduction, then there is no contradiction in suggesting that adults must mediate what the children are going to reproduce. This includes moral knowledge and moral practices for moral development. Much as moral development is for the holistic psychological development of the child, it is also the ground upon which the child becomes a "fully integrated member of society" (Blunden, 2010, p.157). The claim is that the process of moral development begins with the process of concept formation and any concept, for that matter, is learnt.

The formation of moral knowledge

How do children learn moral knowledge a *corpus* of knowledge? The claim is that moral knowledge is appropriated through the process of 'concept formation', through instruction and learning, in the same way as any other knowledge is appropriated as constituent parts of human knowledge. This knowledge according to CHAT is a product of culture and history.

Several studies have shed light on the process of concept formation: Fleer and Ridgway (2007), investigated the relationship between everyday concepts and scientific concepts in a playful learning environment. Wellings (2003), studied school learning and life learning focusing on the interaction of spontaneous and scientific concept in the development of higher mental processes, and Berger (2005), studied Vygotsky's theory of concept formation in relationship to mathematical education at university. However research on concept formation dates back to the works of Nelson (1985) on the emergence of linguistic symbolism objects and construction of higher level categories; Piaget and Inhelder (1969, 1964) on the classification of concepts such as time, volume and space during the developmental stages of a child; and Bruner, Goodnow and Austin (1956) on ways pupils learn categories of logical sets.

Following from above, I argue that moral knowledge for moral development is appropriated in the same way language or mathematics is learnt as a stratum of cultural-historical knowledge. The emphasis is on the processes of learning that begin, and are spread throughout childhood. If concept formation is at the heart of any learning process, then moral knowledge can be one way that brings about cognitive development (Blunden, 2010; Vygotsky, 1987). When children learn and internalise moral concepts, these become constitutive parts of their cognitive structures in form of moral knowledge, which they use to master their moral behaviour. Accordingly, moral knowledge as a psychological artefact is the basis of the concept of moral behaviour in the same way that the "concept of intelligent speech" is related to thinking and speech (Blunden, 2010, p.158). But moral concepts like their counterparts in language and mathematics are premised on the development of "intellectual functions which form the mental basis for the process of concept formation" (Vygotsky, 1987, p.130). It has to be said in a Vygotskian sense that concepts arise as a solution to a problem – in this case a moral problem. To solve a moral problem, a child must have moral knowledge.

The process of learning moral concepts is complex and assumes that cultural-historical experiences mediate the learning process as well as the content of what is learnt in a synchronous relationship.

(a) Firstly through *syncretism:* This is where the learning of concepts is subjective and is introduced through *trial and error*, then illogical coherence and aggregation (Blunden, 2010; Towsey and Macdonald, 2009; Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991; Vygotsky, 1987).

(b) Secondly through thinking in complexes: This is requisite for the child to structure and to organise experiences by associating, aggregating, chaining, diffusing them and then creating foundations of true concepts called *pseudoconcepts* (Blunden, 2010; Vygotsky, 1987, 1986).

(c) Thirdly, the mechanism of thinking in concepts is either subjectively or objectively appropriated in two interrelated ways (Blunden, 2010): either through '*everyday (spontaneous)*' activities by aggregating and synthesizing everyday experiences of their environment, through the interaction with mother and the immediate family; or through '*non-spontaneous (scientific) activities*,*' which occur through *instruction* at school or some other organised system (Vygotsky, 1987). Whatever the case, "these concepts . . . cover the essential aspect of an area of knowledge and [are] . . . presented as a system of interrelated ideas"

(Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, p.270); moral concept constitutes such an area.

At school the child is taught to crystallize generalisations and abstraction of knowledge from mathematics, morality, history and physics. Generalisation occurs through distinct complexes: '*association*', '*aggregation*', '*chaination*', '*diffusion*' and '*pseudoconcepts*' (Blunden, 2010). Note that *pseudoconcepts* are transitionary milestones in cognitive development since they form the basis upon which the child abstracts *ideas*, *objects*, *events*, and *situations* to constitute them into distinct knowledge areas (Blunden, 2010). In the sequence of the processes of cognitive development they precede and lead to *potential concepts* and finally develop into true *concepts.* The assumption at the core of the formation of *pseudoconcepts* points to process of mediation, this is to say, the child's understanding of a 'concept' accurately reflects those understandings extrapolated from adults in the child's milieu (Blunden, 2010).

Meaning is made on the basis of what is. For example the ideas 'good', 'responsibility' or 'integrity' for a child are derived from and symbolise identical ideas held by adults in the child's community. This implies that the child develops the capacity to group identical entities as mediated by the child's cultural-historical milieu as accurately as possible or as actually understood in that milieu.

Furthermore, the child needs to develop not only the competence to abstract *pseudoconcepts,* but also to apply these to related fields of knowledge; this application is called "*potential concept*" (Blunden, 2010, p.160). One may argue that *pseudoconcepts* are merely place holders, yet like *potential concepts,* they are necessary in the process that leads to the budding of *true concepts* that arise from the process of socialisation mediated by the agency of culture and history. To put this into context, the principles of pure mathematics are not left to the child's own devices; however, this is not to suggest that the child's agency is extraneous to this process, it is indeed requisite for participatory and collaborative learning (Vygotsky, 1987).

So far, the following may be inferred: Firstly, moral knowledge is not innate since it derives from the culture and the history of a people. Secondly, moral knowledge arises from the power of practice and meaning making of cultural-historical values. Thirdly, whereas learning begins in childhood and at home, the process does not end there; we have said that concepts are learnt firstly as everyday concepts, and secondly as scientific concepts. Therefore there is no

basis for maintaining that the learning of moral concept is the sole concern of families or religious institutions.

Although very often associated with theism, moral knowledge is not religion since secular individuals also subscribe to moral knowledge. People reflect on moral problems embedded within the fabric of their societies: on the problems of duties and responsibilities, right and wrong, questions of corporal punishment, animal rights, corruption, abortion, euthanasia, substance abuse and child pregnancies. So, humans are quintessentially moral agents and will engage with moral issues at every opportunity.

I have argued (Jaki, 2007) that when a child's conduct is deemed unacceptable it is because, to some extent, the child's behaviour has been modelled by parents and by extension by their teachers. This is because children, especially in their early years of development are exceedingly impressionable. One has to bear in mind that self-mastery of behaviour develops progressively and emerges with the understanding of a 'true concept' (Blunden, 2010) as a quality of cognitive development (Piaget cited in Santrock, 2011). This means that during the early years of childhood the mastery of behaviour is derivative in character; it is patterned on imitating parents or teachers without motive. Although there isn't much logical reasoning in their choices, the logic is embedded in the capacity to imitate. A child who swears may not necessarily do so because he has the motive to swear, but rather because the child is merely reproducing behaviour modelled by adults.

The task of mediating moral concepts to children starts with parents in the form of spontaneous concepts and transitions into non-spontaneous concepts at some point in their growth and development (Vygotksy, 1987). What distinguishes these two processes is that the former starts as soon as a caregiver can communicate with the child. Communication is vital since it forms the basis of the child's primary understanding of what constitutes moral concepts. For emphasis, if we agree with Vygotsky (1986) that concepts arise in the context of complex operations aimed at problem solving, we must admit that moral knowledge is a constitutive process of cognitive development, that is, it is the basis for solving moral problems. Let us put this into context: the idea of a heavy thing is an example of a spontaneous concept. When a child interacts with concrete instances of everyday objects that have the property of heaviness, she appropriates and internalises, initially illogically, that objects contain something that makes them heavy. These experiences become part of the child's initial deposit of knowledge in the category of weight. This is

raised to a new level when the category, weight, is used in an abstract sense as in 'the evidence will weigh heavily against him'. The category becomes even more complex when the child understands that all objects are affected by something called gravity. These latter examples are non-spontaneous concepts whose appreciation is premised on the concept heavy. This transition from the everyday sense of 'heavy' to the abstracted sense of 'weighty' and 'gravity' is mediated through instruction and collaboration between the teacher and the learner (Vygotsky, 1987).

I propose therefore that the learning of moral knowledge begins with moral concepts. The learning of moral knowledge at home is rooted in the use of everyday concepts within the child's milieu from moral agents. For instance, the use of the concept 'right' or 'good' is learnt through instances of particular applications or operations, sometimes manifested through a simple response such as 'yes' or 'no' emerging out of a problem situation. These concepts are not moral *per se*, yet what is moral and what is not is anchored in each of them through the meanings designated in their application. However, when a concept assumes an extended meaning beyond its spontaneous use; for instance, the concept 'good' is subsumed into the concept integrity, value, responsibility, tolerance or duty, such a concept enters the realm of non-spontaneous concepts. According to Vygotsky (1987) non-spontaneous concepts are appropriated through instruction. Instruction in the Vygotskian tradition refers to the child being taught what these concepts embody as operations of knowledge. The child has some understanding of what the concept 'good' means, but is taken to higher levels of understanding when she is taught that she has 'responsibilities' in her milieu.

But what is a true concept or a 'true moral concept'? Blunden (2010, p.160) posits that the grasp of a true concept is premised on "someone who has become or is in the process of becoming a member of an adult community, with its history, its literature, its laws and the variety of institutions and social positions". One gets to this point through the processes of cultural-historical mediation. Blunden (2010, p.160) maintains that it starts "[with] the use of complexes . . . [When children organise] their speech and control their behaviour they are able to understand adults and communicate with adults without the adults being aware of the difference in the thought forms they are using". Hence, when the child and adult use the word 'good' or 'right', both adult and child refer to the same object whether this is a concrete or an abstract object.

Ethnographic design

Ethnography has been used to investigate a range of educational issues; for example, Rist (1973) and Vavrus (2005). Ethnography has invariably investigated phenomena delineated by the discourse on '*ethnos*' to understand anthropological issues: their interpretation, meaning and purpose (Chambers, 2000).

Ethnography is based on established epistemological assumptions. Firstly, cultural-historical phenomena are objects that can be studied (Wolcott, 1990). Secondly, the ethnographer is the epistemological instrument who investigates these issues, his 'intention' in the final analysis is to "grasp the native's point of view" (Malinowski, 1922, p.25). The ethnographer observes, selects, coordinates and interprets cultural-historical data (Sandy, 1979); yet to do so requires long residence *in vivo* (Boaz, 1948; Clifford, 1983). In education, for example, Wolcott (2005) suggests that *in vivo* residence should span one academic year. Thirdly, ethnography assumes holism, that is, the attempt to synthesize dissimilar observations to paint a unified pictures of phenomena (Thornton, 1988). But holism also refers to the collection of data that is inclusive and yet does not claim universal application since cultural-historical phenomena are contextualised (Jaki, 2007; Fetterman, 1998). Fourthly, the ethnographer's findings need to be shared. This entails authorship: source, style, interpretations, explanation and the judgement of what to include or exclude in the final publication. These assumptions capture the epistemological essence in which ethnographic inquiry is practised when exploring anthropological questions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The assumptions discussed above apply to contemporary ethnography, which has become complex and multifaceted in two senses: firstly what constitutes ethnographic studies have been redefined, are more inclusive and embrace a broader spectrum of fields of knowledge as will be shown in the discussion that follows. This "democratisation of knowledge" (Tedlock, 2000, p.467) has resulted in a new and critical awareness that has increased the sensitivity of ethnographers to study fields of knowledge that go beyond the traditional view of *ethnos*. Today, what constitutes *ethnos* carries both the traditional as well as an abstracted meaning of the term. For example if one said Zulu culture, referring to their way of life, a traditional sense of the term is implied. However an abstracted sense is what Chambers (2000, p.852) refers to as "those understandings and ways of understanding that are judged to be characteristics of a discernible group". In this sense culture is an abstraction

applied to various groups: a school, a classroom, a gang, a company, or even a nation, which obviously has a broader appeal and application. Thus, "culture has shifted from being a durable repository of a people's traditions to [being] an unstable and mutable process by which people actively strive to derive meaning from their continually changing relationships and circumstances" (Chambers, 2000, p.856). This study uses the abstracted meaning of culture to study a group of Grade 5 and six children.

Ethnography uses various instruments to investigate phenomena. The methods of ethnography are now applied to study fields of knowledge that transcend the traditional understanding of culture. For instance performance ethnography was introduced into academic discourse in the 1970s. It is reasonable to construe this as a kind of ethnography (McCall, 2000; Denzin 1997). This seems to suggest that beyond the methods used within ethnography, there are variants of ethnography. Whatever the identity of ethnography, it may be inferred that ethnography is constituted by theory, practice and philosophy. It is this open framework that seems to make ethnography an instrument of choice and inquiry in an interdisciplinary environment. This being the case, ethnography has been used to investigate "cultural studies, literary theory, folklore, women's studies, sociology, cultural geography, and social psychology . . . education, counselling, organisation studies, planning, clinical psychology, nursing, psychiatry, law, criminology, management, and industrial engineering" (Tedlock, 2000, p.456).

It is evident that ethnography has moved away from concerning itself with merely the eccentricities of bounded cultures to concerning itself with cultural processes. In other words, cultures are constructed and negotiated within social spaces. The case of Grade 5 and six learners within a school is an example of this reconstitution.

Suffice to say that if ethnography lends itself to academia so as to actively respond to intra-cultural and inter-cultural issues, to understand how meanings are constructed and reconstructed in social negotiations, to point out which voices are involved, which ones are dominant, what values are at play, ethnography has to continuously redefine itself to remain relevant as a lens that ethnographers can use to examine, to understand and solve human problems.

The relationship between ethnography and CHAT is a practical one? Vygotsky's psychology provides a research framework within which

individual human beings, their activity and their material conditions and artefacts can be investigated (Blunden, 2010). The process of learning lends itself to be investigated as a cultural-historical activity. It seeks to understand how human behaviour emerges, how cognitive development occurs, that is, how the entities of the interpsychological realm, alter those of the intra-psychological one. In this connection, my interpretation of Vygotsky on research is that he would have insisted on rigorous and methodical investigation of any object of study. A tool of inquiry is useful in so far as it unravels research questions. So from a researcher's stance, a specific research instrument is only practical provided it guarantees rigorous and methodical inquiry. Instruments are specific, determined by need, aims, context as well as the subject matter of inquiry.

Ethnography suited this study because it was dealing on the one hand with a focus group and on the other hand with the subject matter, namely the development of moral knowledge that was best examined using the instruments of ethnography – the assumptions and the methods. The sample needed to be observed in-depth, which required me to be resident *in vivo;* I visited the school for fifteen months. Various ethnographic methods were employed for triangulation, validity and reliability purposes: observation, interviews, focus groups, artefacts collection, and video recording. The resulting field notes were transcribed, typed and analysed thematically to elicit patterns of learners' meanings and children's understanding of moral knowledge. English was the common medium for communication for the duration of the inquiry. The learners were both comfortable and fluent in using English. The language factor ensured that we were both referring to the same concepts.

Sample (participants)

The sample consisted of learners aged 14–15 years, in Grades 5 and 6. The size of the class was 23 and 24 learners respectively. This sample ensured diversity, a wide range of views and the capacity to think logically and reflection on moral knowledge.

Procedures

The learners were observed during school activities on the assembly grounds, in the classrooms, in laboratories, in the library and on the playground as well

as during field trips. Artefacts were collected, photographs were taken and debates were videotaped. The focus in this paper is based on a videotape extract of a debating session and field notes jotted down and focus group interviews conducted. The different pieces of data were analysed using Atlas.ti, qualitative data analysis software.

Data analysis, presentation of findings and discussion

Open coding was used to 'microanalyse' data guided by the question: What factors are responsible for the formation of moral knowledge (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Coding as an iterative process yielded different sets of codes. These were categorised according to the meanings they embodied. In coding and creating categories patterns emerged from which themes were constituted (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The findings were grouped into three themes of meanings: Patterns power relationship, Patterns of children's voices and children as moral agents are presented in an interpretive-descriptive narrative in keeping with ethnographic theory. The data selected and presented below required selective attention and interpretation involving "weaving descriptions, speakers' words, field notes quotations and interpretation into a discursive descriptive narrative" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.22).

Patterns of power relations

The meanings of power relations cannot be ignored in the reproduction of moral knowledge. Moral knowledge is a significant constituent of cultural-historical content of any people and indeed of any individual within that society. So in connection with children, there are several suppositions that need to be dealt with: Firstly, we assume that moral knowledge is given. For children, they are at the receiving end at home and at school. Secondly, that moral knowledge is meaningful to the extent that it shapes behaviour. Thirdly, that since moral knowledge defines the values that people hold, it is worth reproducing; hence, it is taught to children. Fourthly, that someone must be responsible for delivering or bequeathing moral knowledge to children. However what these suppositions omit is the underlying current of power that defines the nature of the relationship between children and everybody else. Power is an under-current that is involved in shaping the teaching of moral knowledge to children. Firstly, at school, the very first tier of power relations involves the teacher and the learners. The teacher is a source of moral power as a moral agent, but also in her capacity as a teacher. In her role, a teacher is

guided by the syllabus and curriculum, but how she communicates her message is determined by her. A scene in the movie *Sarafina* of a teacher teaching a history lesson epitomises the teacher's power. The teacher's authority stems from her capacity to empower learners with skills to think, with knowledge to solve problems independently and the meanings they can create from her message. This is encapsulated by the remarks of a Grade 6 teacher who said:

> . . . I realised the power of education and that is when I thought . . . no child in my class will not be able to think for themselves when they go out (*sic*) . . . If you get the kids to think critically, that is all that you need to teach them. I mean then they can use their own brain to sort out anything and. . . not [allow] shallow thinking. Kids like to think superficially and not think of real things. So teachers have to attach efforts to teach . . . [critical thinking] (Jaki, 2007, p.117).

When the teacher allows and creates the environment for Grade 6 learners to debate teenage values in the context of the larger society, she allows them to make sense of it, to make meaning of how they should related to the larger society; and what better way of empowering learners than to teach them the power of critical thought. Through practice they develop the capacity to question, to analyse, to evaluate and to provide reasons for their position on moral issues.

Furthermore, power is embedded in the teacher in her *loco-parentis* role. This is supported by evidence in the data, ". . . if you are allowed to just express yourself so freely, would your parents . . . send you to this school?" She is referring to a range of issues they have been discussing with her learners: hair style, wearing earrings, and so forth. She is claiming that parents sanction what children may or may not do. In one sense it is a question of moral boundaries, but in another sense, she is effectively an extension of this power to sanction. To prove her point, she challenges the learners: "Alright . . . take your little arguments home, discuss with your parents and . . . speak with me tomorrow." Whereas the teaching of moral knowledge is contingent on the 'authority' of the parents, the teacher provides continuity at school, the non-spontaneous dimension of learning moral knowledge (Vygotsky, 1987). The meanings children make of moral concepts are not confined to everyday usage but can develop into non-spontaneous concepts resulting in cognitive development, assisted by the teacher.

Patterns of children's voices

Where is the child's voice in the process of learning moral concepts? Learning is not a democratic process. If the 'stuff' of learning is mediated from the cultural-historical context (Vygotsky, 1987), where is the democracy in this? In addition, are children the weaker partner in the learning process? There are ways one can speak of patterns of children's voices in the process of learning moral knowledge. Through their voices they are able to make meanings and sense of the learning relationships. This is possible, firstly through participation as a form of collaboration. Learning would not be possible without the collaboration of the learners (Vygotsky, 1987). Collaboration is the choice to participate even when the odds are against you. In one instance, a learner was asked by the teacher whether her parents would allow her wear any type of hairstyle to school. She said "my parents wouldn't like it". I think the significance here is embedded in moral boundaries. What kind of moral concepts would characterise this boundary – responsibility perhaps? Is this a silent voice, an acquiescing one or reasoning one? What sorts of meanings are created here?

Alongside collaboration, children have a voice that negotiates with parents, peers, and teachers on moral issues. In a debate on different values, the teacher told the learners ". . .take . . .these same things: hairstyles, earrings. Ask your parents: What do they think about boys and girls' earrings, exotic . . . hairstyles . . .as an expression of your human rights? I want honest answers from your parents . . . Your parents are in-charge of you. . ." Children can negotiate what they are allowed or not allowed to do. They can also negotiate the meanings of the sanctions, the privileges, and responses within their context. Again it is within these boundaries that moral concepts are used, clarified and extended. This contributes to the child's cognitive development by giving them a better grasp of moral concepts beyond what they know, assisted by the 'social other'.

Sometimes children's voices are not always heard. Sometimes outcomes of a moral discussion are predetermined because parents and teachers have a particular opinion. In one case, the teacher makes the point that moral issues can't be decided upon by the vote of the ballot. She says, "If the majority of the parents say children can do as they wish; the principal needs to have a discussion with the parents to decide who wants to stay with our values". But a learner insists that "the discussion should also include children". The teacher dismisses the learner by telling her that "your parents are in-charge of you",

which can be interpreted to mean 'you have no voice'. The essential point, in my view, is that these tensions and contradictions are a necessary part of learning. According to Piaget (cited in Santrock, 2011) conflict within the cognitive structures makes learning possible.

Within the same debate, a learner asks the teacher, "Why do we have to follow the values of our parents? . . . maybe they should give us the freedom . . . to make our own values and our own decisions." Although the teacher's response signals finality in the matter, "not as a child", she says, there are several interpretations that can be made here. But the fundamental one is that the "social situation of development constrains child development" (Blunden, 2010, p.154). Basically, the qualitative development of psychological functions is conditions by "age-level expectations in the institutional . . .practices" (Blunden, 2010, p.155). If children are to reproduce the culture of their society, what they can do needs to be congruent to their developmental capacities. Is it even feasible for children to have their own values in the context of their culture and history? This section underlines a point made previously namely that the mediation of moral knowledge is a cultural-historical necessity that must be led by the 'social other'.

Children do not create their own moral knowledge; they learn and participate in the knowledge that derives from their milieu. A child might exercise her right of choice, but this is limited to what she is given or considered 'moral'. Thus the teacher points out: "This is what I am trying to show you that if you just express yourself so freely, would your parents . . . send you to this school?" Her answer underscores the fact that children are socialised into the community's expectations. But the learner's response is even more interesting. She says "You express yourself in a way that is appropriate. . ." The question is what is appropriate? Who or what determines what is appropriate?

Are children moral agents?

Children are not vessels at the receiving end of moral knowledge. They are moral agents. Human consciousness presupposes agency, and therefore the autonomy to self-determination (Blunden, 2010). This is to say they act with motive. A *double-simulation* shows how thinking and doing are two sides of the same thing (Towsey and Macdonald, 2009). It needs to be shown that a 14- or a 15-year-old is capable of rational moral reflection on complex conceptual moral issues. Reasoning as a means of influencing self-thought, of developing

critical thought, is about using concrete situations to make meaning, and making meaning is about negotiations to make more meanings and these meanings constitute the practices of their experiences. Thus, the child is an actor but with constrains.

Conclusion

I draw some broad conclusions in defence of the teaching and the learning of moral knowledge. Firstly, moral knowledge is a *corpus* of knowledge like any other that arising out of a cultural-historical context. Moral knowledge consists of different concepts. Children's knowledge of the moral world starts with their own everyday experiences and continues with non-spontaneous concepts acquired through instruction (mediation). This is a formal process of learning moral concepts. The learning of moral concepts must lead to a true moral concept. A true moral concept is a mediated and collaborative process that finds its fulfilment when a child becomes an adult member of a community. Therefore, to dismiss moral knowledge as something that does not require our concerted attention is, to some extent, to dismiss cognitive development, and in my opinion, is a disservice to child development.

The second point emphasises the central role played by the teacher in the learning process of moral knowledge. In one cartoon I read, the teacher asked the learner: 'What makes a bad learner?' A learner put up his hand and calmly replied: 'A teacher'. This epitomises the quality of teachers we have today, who in spite of their 'natural authority' have simply failed the learners. It is a false argument to suggest that the learning of moral knowledge is either an arbitrary activity or an exclusively parental activity. For Keil (1989) the learning of concepts is relational, that is, moving from the familiar to unfamiliar that is where mediation by teacher or capable parent takes over since with their experience and knowledge they can guide children into the unfamiliar areas of moral knowledge. Finally, moral knowledge as any other knowledge transforms the psychological structures of the child. If this is the case, it is therefore the duty of the teacher to ensure that learning is empowering since in the final analysis this is the goal.

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