Title

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Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/89v3053c

Journal

Journal of Moral Education, 51(1)

ISSN

0305-7240

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Publication Date

2022-01-02

DOI

10.1080/03057240.2021.1992219

Peer reviewed

EXTENDED BOOK REVIEW

Connecting moral development with critical pedagogy: A reply to

Winston Thompson

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ABSTRACT

Winston C. Thompson's review of *Moral education for social justice* by Larry Nucci and Robyn Ilten-Gee, accurately captures the effort to integrate critical pedagogy with domain-based moral education. A core element is student participation in domain-based discourse entailing *responsive engagement* that transcends the cognitive activity of individuals. Those discussions may lead to action projects (praxis). Replying to Thompson's review, Nucci and Ilten-Gee address potential problems that may arise from student resistance, and from objections of conservatives who may view attention to social justice as political indoctrination. They conclude that moral education that does not attend to social justice suffers from incoherence.

KEYWORDS domain based moral education, social justice, critical pedagogy, social cognitive domain theory, responsive engagement

It is with pleasure that we offer this response to Winston Thompson's incisive review of our book, *Moral Education for Social Justice* (2021). We will not engage in a rebuttal of Thompson's remarks, because we do not disagree with any of his comments. However, we will attempt to clarify and expand on some of the issues he raised. What we have done in this book is to fully integrate the principles and practices of critical pedagogy as envisioned by Paulo Freire (2005) with what we refer to as domain-based moral education. This is in the spirit of recent reflections on the potential value of critical theory for moral education that appeared in this journal (Veugelers, 2017). We provide a discussion of the points of overlap and complementarity between these two educational frameworks and in subsequent chapters, as Thompson notes in his review, offer specific guidance to teachers for how to create lessons that integrate the cycle of praxis with domain concordant moral discourse. (We will say more about this discourse process below.) In his review, Thompson also points out that our integration of moral education within the regular academic curriculum is conjoined with attention to the social life of schools and the morality of disciplinary practices. We pay particular attention to the ways in which schools can establish conventions and structures that disrespect and undermine the cultural and personal standing of students based upon race, ethnicity, gender, social class, or ability. We offer detailed practical advice to teachers for how to address these issues in ways that are concordant with moral and personal

development, and that serve to undo the systemic and historical forms of oppression that many students experience in their daily lives.

Thompson credits us as addressing these issues. However, he also raises questions early in his analysis regarding our attention to ontogenesis as an aspect of our educational approach. Thompson appropriately acknowledges that our approach to moral education is grounded in social cognitive domain theory (Smetana et al., 2014). He also accurately and insightfully discusses how domain interactions, especially between convention and morality, sit at the heart of issues of social justice. We will return to this below. However, he expresses some surprise that our book also emphasizes age-related changes in the development of morality, convention and the personal. Thompson interprets this as a vestigial form of stage theory in the tradition of Piaget and Kohlberg. We acknowledge our roots in that structuralist tradition. However, the levels that we describe in our book, though supported by considerable evidence from varied cultural settings around the world, are not presented as definitive or necessarily accurate for a particular student. Most importantly, while we share Kohlberg's vision of moral education as contributing toward a more just society, we do not engage in Kohlberg's (1972) mistaken assumption (refuted by empirical evidence) of defining the aim of moral education in terms of movement through a developmental sequence toward a final stage of "principled" moral reasoning.

Attending to ontogenesis is in our view an important tool for social justice educators in the sequencing of lessons and establishing educational goals, as well as helping to establish school policies that are in sync with students' developing understandings of societal norms (of both home and school settings) and their own emerging needs for personal expression. More fundamentally, the constructivist account of ontogenesis offered in our book sits in opposition to prevailing adult-centric accounts of socialization, and in line with constructivism that is at the heart of critical pedagogy. In our book we employ what we have learned about development within domains to provide practical answers to teachers' questions regarding how to broach issues of social justice with younger students. The age-related patterns of development within domains depicted in our tables also capture the likely interactions in students' reasoning that may take place between moral and non-moral considerations within social contexts. These potential interactions across domains will reflect the experiences and judgments of individuals in particular contexts, however, and are not predetermined by developmental level. This is in contrast with other hierarchical stage frameworks that offered strong claims about development and moral behavior. Most importantly, we employ the recurring periods of negation of convention as *inflection points* in which teachers can engage students in a critical analysis of the social conventions that may be sustaining systemic inequalities both at the school and societal levels.

In his review Thompson accurately conveys the tension that we envision between concerns for the fair treatment of persons, and the legitimate requirements of all social organizations for social conventions that define social roles and conduct to allow for smooth functioning. What leads to social inequality is the structuring of conventions that privilege one group over others. This social positioning is often accompanied by a set of informational assumptions (such as beliefs about differing abilities of men and women) that sustain the legitimacy of these existing social norms and institutions. Domain theory is particularly suited to deconstruct these intersecting factors. Our educational approach employs the strategies of critical pedagogy to engage students in interrogating the informational assumptions sustaining prevailing social practices and employs domain theory to guide students in their efforts to wrestle with the practical and moral aspects of a given set of social conventions to work toward a more just set of social arrangements.

At the heart of our approach is involving students in domain-based discourse around the core issues of a given lesson that conforms to what the political philosopher Anthony Laden (2012) describes as *responsive engagement*. Responsive engagement requires that participants work toward a common position through actively listening to the positions of others, attending to the facts that have emerged through their shared investigations, and offering bridging positions that integrate or are comprised of competing views. This form of discourse is a collective activity

of *reasoning* that transcends the cognitive activity of individuals. In essence our approach to moral education for social justice relies on processes of *sociogenesis* rather than reducing moral education to the promotion of ontogenesis among individual students. Thompson accurately characterizes our approach as social rather than individualistic even as we aim to impact the moral development and moral positions of individual students. We address the growth of students as individual moral people through a reconceptualization of character as a partial system within the student's overall self-system. Although we emphasize the role of discourse and reasoning in moral development, the impact of moral education is upon the student as a totality. As Thompson notes in his review, this connects our approach to concerns often associated with traditional views of moral socialization (Arthur et al., 2016; Grusec, et al., 2006; Lickona, 1996).

We certainly hope that educators who hold those traditional views will explore our book and find new ways to improve the moral lives of students. We move away from reducing character to a collection of culturally defined virtues toward a vision of the person as both the product and the originator of their moral decisions and actions. In our view the generation of mature moral character entails the capacity to engage with others in moral discourse and action that furthers the morality of the society as well as the moral perspective and actions of the individual. In this way our vision of character development includes elements of sociogenesis and is not reduced to ontogenetic processes that we characterize as the source of basic 'moral

wellness.' Within our educational approach we link the outcomes of the discourse activities associated with engaged reasoning to action projects (the praxis component of critical pedagogy) that can include such things as creation of a podcast, online video, or direct community action. The book includes a chapter dedicated to critical digital pedagogy to provide guidance for teachers wishing to engage in these educational practices.

Thompson raises important challenges for this approach to moral education by pointing to the ways in which different positionalities can lead to differing perspectives on the 'facts' unearthed through student investigation. He also warns against the prospect that some students may actively undermine the effort at responsive engagement. He raises the specter of 'trolls' who would employ their discourse skills not to work toward a common morally just resolution of a social justice problem, but to thwart any serious effort to find common ground. 'Trolls' may not only derail the conversation, but may cause moral harm to their peers who may have lived experiences with the issue or conflict at hand. Teachers can help students see discussions as acts with moral consequences, instead of just conventional ones (getting a good grade). We stand in agreement with Thompson that such efforts by students could undermine a teacher's efforts at moral education. In our book we provide detailed information on how to prepare students for engagement in responsive discourse, and how teachers should set up the classroom to foster responsive engagement. A critical element of the situations to be presented for discussion is that they include

credible positions on at least two sides of an issue. We do not advocate for a version of social justice education that would simply supplant positions rooted in prevailing social conventions with a counter position promoted by the teacher heavily weighted on the moral side of complex social issues. Didactic top-down instruction, even when hidden in the form of 'rigged' discussions, is as harmful to moral development when done in the name of 'justice' as it is when done in the name of socialization.

Our experience with teachers and students that went into the writing of this book has been that when students are provided with opportunities to address issues that they themselves find morally compelling, and when the students perceive themselves to be in open dialogue with their peers, their engagement and their search for moral positions is genuine. This has been sustained through student self-reports and teacher ratings that were part of our program evaluations. However, we remain open to the prospect that some students, particularly at the high school level, could actively seek to undermine the efforts by their peers and their teacher. Fritz Oser (2014) discusses this problem with insight in his work with 'just community' schools, and we have addressed the issue of student resistance in other places (Nucci & Turiel, 2009). Future research with our approach to moral education should include continued attention to these possibilities.

We are also cognizant that politically conservative school districts or parents might reject our approach out of hand on the grounds that we are undermining social harmony and promoting a liberal/progressive political

agenda rather than engaging in traditional moral education and character formation. As Thompson states in his review, our domain approach may be interpreted as encouraging students to frame 'seemingly non-moral matters as potentially immoral.' Thompson offers the provocative suggestion that moral educators should take this challenge head-on and engage in the intellectual analysis of such arguments to afford moral educators with tools to counter resistance (including political opposition) to addressing issues of social justice. It is with the prospect of such resistance in mind that we state in the opening chapter that ours is a book about moral development and moral education with a point of view. However, we also borrow from Thompson (Erikson & Thompson, 2019) to make the case that any effort at moral education that does not address issues of social justice, thereby allowing them to live in accordance with the norms and values of an unjust society, suffers from incoherence.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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