

BOOK REVIEW

Educational Psychology (1997), by L. S. Vygotsky, R. Silverman (Trans.). Boca Raton, FL: St. Lucie Press. (Original work published in 1926)

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Ask any educator to play word association and give them the name Vygotsky. The most common response would probably be “scaffolding,” or “Zone of Proximal Development” (ZPD), with a “socio-cultural” theory of child development being occasionally mentioned. Most of the participating educators would be unaware that Lev Vygotsky articulated the concept of ZPD fairly late in his 36-year life and that scaffolding was a phrase that never appeared in Vygotsky’s writing. Ask the same educators, even postsecondary educators, to discuss Vygotsky’s orientation to moral development and the response would most likely be a series of blank stares. The bravest of educators might state that Vygotsky dealt with cognitive development theory and not moral development as a way of responding to what they perceived as a trick question. Vygotsky did, in fact, address moral development and character education but in a book completed early in his career that is very rarely quoted or even cited. Although his *Educational Psychol-*

ogy was first published in 1926, it is a book well capable of enlightening and directing the character education movement of today.

The fact that most educators are unaware of Vygotsky’s thoughts on moral development can be largely attributed to two factors. The first factor is that Vygotsky’s *Educational Psychology*, though first published in 1926, was not published in English until 1997. It is a compilation of lectures delivered by Vygotsky with most experts believing it was intended as an introductory psychology text. Within this text, Vygotsky devotes an entire chapter to moral development and character education.

The second factor tending to obscure Vygotsky’s work in moral development is his view of where character development fell within his theory of cognitive development. Vygotsky articulates “moral behavior is a form of behavior which is amenable to education through the social environment in exactly the same way as is everything else” (p. 221). This statement implies that moral behavior is not a

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distinct class of behavior, but behavior learned in the same manner as an individual would learn to tie their shoes or become adept at the multiplication tables. Adding further depth to this concept is Vygotsky's statement that "moral imperfection always derives from experience and always denotes not a defect in innate reactions and instincts, ... but a defect in education" (p. 230). Thus, if moral behavior is a subset of all learned behavior, Vygotsky may have felt little need to elaborate on the subject, believing that his theoretical base of cognitive development applied equally to, and contained, moral development.

Within the pages of *Educational Psychology* are thoughts widely, and profitably, applicable to today's character education movement. Vygotsky would negatively view the proliferation of character education programs, and especially the categorization of character education as a "program." "Morality has to constitute an inseparable part of education as a whole at its very roots, and he is acting morally who does not notice that he is acting morally" (p. 226). There is little doubt that Vygotsky would place major emphasis on concepts such as "school culture" and "school as community" over programs that are relegated to particular time periods during the school day, to particular locations within the school environment, or to particular behaviors.

Character education used as a means of controlling behavior and achieving behavioral conformity would also earn Vygotsky's scorn.

The closest we can get to a definition of this new principle, which is to become the foundation of moral education, is to view it from general approaches to education, as consisting in the social coordination of

one's own behavior with the behavior of the group, and here obedience must be replaced throughout by free social coordination. (p. 233)

This statement is both a slap at "authoritarian" attitudes as well as a restatement of the primacy of the social environment in moral education, as in all areas of education.

Of particular relevance to today's educators of character is Vygotsky's statement that "people with great passions, people who accomplish great deeds, people who possess strong feelings, even people with great minds and a strong personality, rarely come out of good little boys and girls" (p. 232). Though this statement may smack of the "priest or criminal" dichotomy, it is a view that those who are truly innovative within a culture are often those not totally compliant with its strictures. It is a view that educators should develop ways to value and provide nourishment to such students, not punish or isolate them.

Educational Psychology is a mine full of such educational gems. It is a collection of thought capable of providing a theoretical foundation to the character education movement, and capable of explaining and supporting many of the "best practices" now emerging from the field. For the wise educator of character, the study of Vygotsky would not end with the reading of the chapter devoted to moral education within this book. The wise educator would recall Vygotsky's thinking that moral learning is a subset of all learning, and would recall that Vygotsky's statements on morality flow from a much richer and much broader theory of cognitive development capable of illuminating the entire educational process.