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Taking the moral authorship of children and youth seriously in times of the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

In this article we argue for the need to take the moral voices of children and youth seriously particularly in times of the Anthropocene. Drawing on theories in ethics by John Wall, moral development according to Mark B. Tappan, and education in line with the works by Vygotsky, we construct a conceptual framework where the notions 'narrative,' 'moral authorship' and 'free will' can open new creative understandings of human ethical competence; a competence based in a relational, contextual and societal-cultural understanding of human existence. The use of our framework is illustrated in interpretations of empirical research with children demonstrating concerns of theirs in relation to climate change. The article concludes with reflections on the kind of education that can be inspired by this framework and the taking of children's voices seriously, as well as pointing to challenges also to the grown-up world.

Introduction

There are points in history when children and youth become more visible and assume a leading role in revealing what is ethically and morally at stake. The uprisings in Soweto against the Apartheid system in South Africa in 1976 are an example. The sudden explosion of school strikes in 2018–2019 by children and youth in response to climate issues became another example. To what extent, however, are children and youth taken seriously when they assume moral responsibility and position themselves ethically in cases such as these, when their own future is at stake? Are they taken seriously, or do they have an ambiguous standing both within ethical theory and theories of moral development – theories of interest in this article? Within much ethical theory, children are denied authority and are not regarded as 'proper' subjects i.e. independent, autonomous and rational individuals. From the point of view of moral development, children are seen as not grown up and in need of development due to

their age. By proposing our theoretical framework, we suggest an alternative for taking children seriously and question views that disregard the moral voices of children and youth, with educational implications.

In constructing this framework, we first draw on the work of John Wall (2010), an ethicist who has consistently argued for the moral agency of children and youth to be regarded in line with all human moral agency. Foundationally, Wall regards human existence as relational and human experience as interpreted through our own narratives, i.e. as narrated by us. Wall critiques ethical theory for a reductionist view on children and youth when this view does not recognise their subjectivity. Wall argues for childhood as a necessary lens for viewing human existence. Secondly, we draw on the work of Mark Tappan (1991, 2010), a researcher within the area of moral development who has stressed the moral importance of telling stories. According to Tappan, one can practise moral authorship in narrating one's experience, claiming authority and responsibility for the moral perspectives that inevitably are present in one's narrative. We also draw on the latter works of Lev Vygotsky (a socio-cultural psychologist who also inspired Tappan) which suggest that 'the use of language creates consciousness and even free will' (Bruner 1982 as qouted in Derry 2004, 113). Bruner argued that 'Vygotsky's theory of the development of intellect is not only a theory of education but also a step into the terrain of fundamental questions about the nature of what it is to be human' (Derry 2004, 114). This links to our interest in moral authorship as contextually lived and socially and culturally narrated and constructed – and adds Vygotsky's understanding of the concept 'free will' to 'narrative' and 'moral authorship.'

Research background

Regarding children and youth and the Anthropocene within the field of environmental education there is a fairly long tradition of research on how to educate on these matters (cf. Jickling 1992; Kopnina 2014). Studies focusing on how children and youth themselves view matters related to environmental concerns are more rare. One example from Kvamme (2019) analysed ten speeches by Greta Thunberg, a Swedish teenage schoolgirl who sat outside the Swedish parliament each Friday, initiating the now famous 'Fridays for Future' school strikes in a large number of countries, later becoming a globally wide-spread movement. Thunberg has been asked to address parliaments, the UN, and other politically influential contexts. Kvamme (2019) analysed her speeches to see how environmental ethical values were expressed, probing what is articulated by Greta Thunberg as a young person.

Our interest in how to understand creative dimensions of the moral agency of children and youth is to some extent initiated by a research overview by a group of researchers (Osbeck et al. 2018), which reviewed almost 2000 articles in the field of ethics and moral education to see how an ethical competence to be

taught in compulsory school could be described. What is of interest here are residual aspects described in the research articles that did not fit in within an earlier theoretical framework of four moral dimensions: sensitivity, judgment, motivation and implementation, as described by Rest (1986). These residual aspects were: the need to be informed or knowledgeable about an ethical matter at stake, capacity to communicate one's ethical concerns, and finally a need for awareness of the specific context of a particular ethical matter (Osbeck et al. 2018, 199). These situational and communicative aspects of an ethical competence point to an integrative, communicative and situational capacity of individuals when assuming ethical responsibility.

The neglect of children and youth within ethical theory has a parallel in the struggle over the last decades of including the diversities of voices of women in ethical theory where they have been silenced (cf. Cannon 1988; Crenshaw 1991; Braidotti 1991). This has articulated the need for questioning and breaking away from understandings of an 'ideal' human being as autonomous, independent, rational and male, revealing patterns of power in relationships, and the different societal situating of human beings (cf. Young 1990; Benhabib 1992, 2011). In terms of childhood studies, this also foregrounds discussions on intersectionality where age, in the case of children and youth, needs to be factored in, but cannot be limited to that, as argued by Frödén and Quennerstedt (2020). Cook (2020) highlighted that children and youth in political discourse can be constructed as an absence, or as in the case of Greta Thunberg, are sometimes ridiculed when assuming responsibility. He exemplified these tendencies with utterances by ex-president Trump in the USA, but warned that similar social constructions of children and childhood can be seen more widely as androcentric discourses presently in need of critical monitoring within childhood studies.

Aim and methodological concerns

The aim of this article is to contribute a conceptual framework for the interpretation of moral voices of children and youth through the concepts 'narrative,' 'moral authorship' and 'free will.' Additionally, we explore what kind of education this inspires.

Our development of such a framework presupposes a relational, contextual, and societal and cultural understanding of our lives as human beings. Behind our effort lies an ambition to strengthen the voices of children and youth in society and deepen respect for their moral agency, while contributing to an alternative understanding of moral agency in general.

In relation to the much-used concept of 'moral agency,' we see our conceptual framework as emphasising a creative aspect of human moral activity with the use of the concept 'moral authorship.' This reflects how an author subjectively constructs her or his literary work, or narratives of life experiences.

Similarly, in the creative dimension of moral authorship, situated free will can shape a person's chosen ethical positioning. In addition to moral authorship, we use 'moral agency' and 'ethical positioning' in this article, although by moral authorship we want to emphasize and open up space for understanding creative dimensions and growth within moral agency and ethical positioning.

We draw on examples of children's narratives taken from two empirical studies which are historically, contextually and socio-culturally diverse, from southern Africa and Sweden, one published (Silo 2011)[1] and another not yet published. For the latter study, one of the authors (Sporre) carried out 41 interviews with South African and Swedish children aged 10 to 12 years old, between February and May 2019. Ethical permission to carry out the study was granted from relevant authorities in South Africa and Sweden.[2] Written consent was given by the parents and orally received from the children who participated. The children were interviewed in English or Swedish, the medium of instruction of their school, but not their maternal tongue for all of them. An interview guide was used and fairly strictly followed. Most questions required oral responses, but two questions asked for a written response. In total eight schools were visited, chosen to represent varying conditions regarding socio-economic backgrounds and geographical locations within the two countries. School leadership structures granted access to the schools and class teachers assisted in sharing information and distributing consent forms to parents and information to children. The researcher visited the schools to inform each class about the study. Five (in one case, six) children participated in the study from each class. During 2020–2021 the researcher has virtually (due to the Covid-19 situation) revisited the school classes where possible to report preliminary results and thank the children, teachers and school leadership for their contributions. All interviews have been transcribed by the researcher. As the research interest is directed towards children and their understandings of sustainability, local communities were sought in Sweden and South Africa where a scarcity of water had been experienced. This scarcity of water had been experienced in Sweden due to a dry summer in 2018, and in South Africa due to dry winters and lack of water for many years before 2019. This article is the second to report results from this study (cf. Sporre 2021).

Methodologically, some reflection on the children's narratives and their use here is needed. In this context their stories function as illustrations. A selection is shared, meaning that the full richness of the narratives with contradictions or variations of views is absent. Neither is it possible to present each child's narrative as a whole, and we do not discuss the societal, socio-economic or cultural background and situatedness of the children in detail. It shows forth only indirectly in the quotes. As the aim of this article is to present and a suggest a theoretical framework, including introducing three theorists and crucial concepts from their theories, we unfortunately had to limit the treatment of the

empirical material. For the interview study by Sporre the published article (Sporre 2021) demonstrates interpretations that consider contextual factors and for Silo's study in these matters we refer to Silo (2011).

In constructing our theoretical framework, we use the works of an ethicist (John Wall) and a researcher in moral development (Mark B. Tappan) for whom narratives play a crucial role in their respective theoretical work, as well as a cultural psychologist (Lev Vygotsky). Vygotsky's foundational work on language and mind formation within education foregrounded social interaction and builds theoretical bridges to the work of Mark B. Tappan, who has developed his understanding of human moral development based on an emphasis on cultural tools where language and discourses are crucial. Furthermore, a situated, contextual approach is evident in the thinking of all three; i.e. ethics in Wall's work takes a contextual or situational approach, and both Tappan and Vygotsky foreground socio-cultural understandings of being and becoming in education.

We offer a brief introduction to the work of these theorists describing the main features in terms of how this relates to our interest in moral authorship of children. After each theoretical piece, we exemplify in interludes how aspects of their theoretical contribution deepen the understanding of the empirical material we have chosen to use and consider the relevance to our framework. It is our hope that our brief presentations will contribute to an interest in more in-depth readings of the work of these theorists and further development of our suggested framework.

Theoretical and empirical presentation

John Wall – Ethical poetics

In his book *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Wall 2010), John Wall formulated an ethical poetics in which he suggested that the contemporary way of thinking about childhood and children needs to be rethought. He suggested that childhood should be the lens through which human existence is seen. In his elaboration of this view, Wall addressed ontological, teleological and deontological questions around human existence (Wall 2010, 1–10).

Foundational for Wall's thinking about children's existence, and that of all human beings (cf. ontology), is that we are born into (and continue to live in) and are formed by concrete situations which are shaped historically, socially, culturally and politically. It is within these situations we as human beings can act. This means, as humans, that our being is shaped both by prevailing conditions, i.e. is constructed, but it is also formed through our creative agency, and thus our abilities to exercise creative agency (cf. Vygotsky's notion of 'free will' shared below). Furthermore, as human beings we are interdependent beings, and vulnerable both in relation to our conditions, the agency of others and our own. This is so for all human beings; vulnerability is not something only

experienced by children. Wall based these assertions on the weaknesses of millennia-old Western philosophical and religious views on childhood. He critiqued them for assigning goodness – or lack thereof – to children, or for viewing children as morally neutral, as developing, on their way to becoming moral adults. He also pointed to how philosophising about childhood has been a part of understanding human existence throughout human history (Wall 2010, 11–58).

In Wall's ethical poetics new creative meanings can appear in human existence with every new human being. The ethical aim (cf. teleology) of human existence is to integrate one's unique experience, one's encounter with the world, into meaningful life. Wall called this a 'narrative expansion' (Wall 2010, 59). To link the past, present and future, to handle vulnerability and interpret one's experience into a meaningful narrative at present, is the challenge for all humans. The difference between children and adults is not this challenge, but rather that adults have more experience as a result of their earlier challenges. New experiences, irrespective of the age of a human being, need to be integrated into a meaningful narrative (Wall 2010, 59–86).

Wall argued that critically approaching ethical theories from the point of view of childhood, demands not only that children's authority as moral agents be restored and seen in line with that of other human beings, but also requires a recognition of the kind of obligations of persons and societies vis-a-vis children or adults – as other human beings (cf. deontology). Here Wall points to how encounters with 'the other,' meaning both other persons and diverse materialities (e.g. those presented by climate change in the Anthropocene, or drought conditions), with which the person may not be familiar, present as challenges decentres the person's prior experience, and require a response that may challenge existing narratives (Wall 2010, 87–110).

A first interlude: human experience as narratives

Wall's proposal that human beings form meaningful narratives from their experiences can be exemplified by a few voices from Sporre's interviews with the schoolchildren. For instance, a South African girl in response to the question of what is good and fair in life stated:

> The thing that is good and fair is that we have something to walk on. We have the road to walk on, we have the grass to walk on. If we had nothing to walk on we would just be walking on rocks. Ahm, what I also think is good and fair is that at least even if somebody's poor once in a while they get something really nice. We, at the end of everything, we end up getting something really nice. There is no stage when you don't get something nice. Like for example, everyone in [name of hometown] gets provided with water. Ahm, thanks to Nelson Mandela we are allowed to be together like this [the interviewer is white, the girl is black] and the world is [brief pause] equal, and fair. Ah, I also think that it is good and fair that everybody gets treated the same even if they have different knowledge. And I really think, it is also really fair that at the end of something you get to share your feelings and that person gets to understand. That's all I can think of. (SA school 4, student 1)

That the children interpret what is going on around them and form their own narratives and new creative meanings in their worlds, is obvious from the story by this girl. Related to what is wrong and not fair, a Swedish boy said:

> What is wrong and not fair is that all children can't have it equally good, because there are those who have to pay to go to school. It is only a few who can go to school. They have to take food along. Here in Sweden we don't have to do things like that. For us in Sweden things are really good, but for example in, I can't think of a country now, but in other countries there . . . are many children who cannot go to school. Many parents, children, no, grown-ups don't have a job or so. And, that is unfair. [Translation by author] (Sw school 3, student 1)

So, the equal right of children to education featured in this boy's narrative, expressing moral concern of inequalities. When responding to what could be done to make things better, reflecting the creative meaning being made in his moral authoring, he continued:

> And, I don't really know what one should do to make it better. But, one could try to create a rule all over the world that all should go to school and that all should have, or should get food in school. Everybody should have a good life. No one should have to be outside, feel offended. I think everyone should have a good life. [Translation by author] (Sw school 3, student 1)

As well as a global regulation of school for all children and food provided at school, this boy also touched on the issue of friendship and fair treatment (i.e. not leaving someone out). Behind the comment of the South African girl above, of one's own feelings being understood, was a matter of a difficulty in a friendship. This points to vulnerability and the wounds that can be present in relationships. The examples demonstrate two children's ways of relating to the world around them and forming narratives, their own meaningful and creative yet contextually situated narratives that reach beyond their immediate existence, linking past, present and future across contexts as Wall proposed is possible.

Mark B. Tappan – moral authorship

Mark B. Tappan, a sociocultural moral development theorist, was interested in how human beings come to articulate moral perspectives. For Tappan (2006), who drew on Vygotsky and Bakhtin, moral functioning is mediated through cultural tools, amongst which words, language and forms of discourse are central. Moral development from this perspective presupposes expanded moral discourses, as language shapes our moral thinking, feeling, speaking and acting. A multitude of discourses and narratives makes inner dialogue possible as well as creative, nuanced and rich responses possible. Furthermore, the responses are always formulated in specific contexts, in relation to specific utterances of others (e.g. Tappan 1991).

Moral discourses grow in contexts where one meets and practises narratives and voices in relation to what one interprets as competent narrators in these practices. Written stories and narratives are important but the narratives that we meet are often socially represented narratives, both those that we listen to and those that we tell ourselves.

According to Tappan, having the opportunity to tell stories, and in that sense exercise *authorship*, is extremely important. It is important in two senses (Tappan 1991, 20). Firstly, to tell a story inevitably means to take a moral position, or 'moralizing' (Tappan 1991, 8). To tell a story involves characterising human actions, giving moral perspectives and thereby imbuing the story with moral values. Tappan refers to Bakhtin who has described this process as an 'ideological becoming.' Stories reveal a particular way of seeing the world. To tell a story involves authorship. As the author of a story, one has to claim authority over the story and take responsibility for its perspectives (Tappan 1991; Tappan and Brown 1989). The speaker cannot be held responsible for an absence of perspectives, perspectives that he/she has never met, only for how the present voices are put together, in relation to the context in which he/she is addressed. To tell a story also, secondly, means to hear the story that oneself narrates. This means having the possibility to go into inner dialogue with this story, the visualised moral perspectives, and one's own experiences: 'Consequently, authorship (and authority) is both expressed and developed through opportunities to tell one's own moral stories' (Tappan 1991, 20).

A second interlude: children's voices and moral authorship

Sporre's interviews can be seen as practices where children were offered the opportunity to narrate their views on sustainability, scarcity of water, the future as well as on justice and on being human. In practising moral authorship, they took moral positions and gradually expanded their perspectives, partly because in their storytelling they were able to listen to and respond to themselves. During the conversations and in hearing their stories, they creatively articulated moral authorship. The first example is from a South African girl:

> I think we should recycle more, build with eco-bricks, care for pets, and don't buy a pet if you can't afford it. Don't treat it like it is nothing. It is a living thing and it has feelings. Ahmm, always look after the earth, don't throw rubbish everywhere. (SA school 3, student 3)

In addition to the care and respect for animals, construction of houses, recycling and not littering, this girl, towards the end of the interview, asked the researcher about studies in school and how to become a scientist – all in the light of how to care for the earth. The example can be seen as an illustration of how through the interview an explicitly expressed story and position evokes questions, new

perspectives and awareness. To practise moral authorship is challenging and can be demanding for oneself as well as for others. To be responsible is also to ask for responses.

The concern for the future of another South African girl had a more immediate focus on how to sustain and care for family, which reflects her immediate contextual experience and concerns. In response to the question of what is important to know when you grow up, she gave this answer:

> I think it will be, you need to know how much you need to pay with the money. You need to know, you need to know what you [need] for your family, you need to know what your family needs and what they love. You should also learn your children that if they want something they will have to wait. (SA school 1, student 4)

Swedish children also expressed concerns about animals, recycling and littering. In one interview discussions developed on cars driven with electricity instead of petrol and on attitudes in human society towards electric car use. Regarding the future and what it would be important to know, this boy claimed one needed professional knowledge, expanding both his voice and options during the conversation. He gave examples of his father's job and the work of bakers:

> What I think is important? This was a was a tricky question. [...] Let's say that I am, that I want to work as a salesman, as my dad does, and then, I must be good at numbers, sort of, and selling things. I must be good at that. If I want to be good at something else then I might have to be brave as a person. [Interviewer: So it is somewhat dependent on what job you chose] Yes, a little bit. [I: ... what is important to know?]. Yes, because if you are a baker you must be good at baking. [Translation by author] (Sw school 4, student 1)

This boy's story demonstrated traces of an inner dialogue. He pointed to the importance of professional knowledge, but it seems as if, through his narrative, he became aware of other conditions that should be added. Professional skills are not enough. A person's character and virtue (like being brave) are vital. His practice of moral authorship expanded his moral discourses. The dialogue in response to questions from the interviewer, a more experienced moral author with a broader repertoire of moral discourses, took the process further. A sort of conclusive meta language concerning knowledge of importance and value in relation to various professions is offered to the child through the dialogue with a more competent friend (the interviewer) and this can further the child's moral authorship.

In the next example, one of the Swedish girls who was worried about the environment, thought in terms also of sustainable technological inventions regarding what one needed to know when grown up:

> To have a lot of plants around oneself so that one can breathe. And to go and plant seeds, and to try to stop those who build a lot more cars that let emissions out, dangerous emissions. Truly, we only have one earth, we think. We have only one earth that is sort of close to us. I am almost sure that there is more life in space and

at those planets I think that, well, either we are behind them or ahead of them. Then they are out at . . . or . . . Now I remember what I was going to say, that they are so far away, so, well, it will be difficult to go there if this earth is destroyed. We only have one earth that is close to us and we must protect this earth. To try to fix, or to invent, to do that and save animals . . . [Translation by author] (Sw school 3, student 3)

The realisation that we only have one earth and that we need to care for it was evident among both the Swedish and South African children. For several it is existentially connected to their own life and their involvement emotionally and intellectually, and it is also influenced by their contextual situations and experiences (e.g. parent's experiences and wider societal events such as the relatively new use of electric cars). Their concern and repeatedly expressed ambition to assume responsibility for the earth was also strongly prevalent in the interviews – thus, their moral authorship was obvious and expressed in various ways including mirroring aspects of their contextual situations. In other words, their creative agency was visible in their moral authoring, and they were able to link past, present and future in this authoring which, as emphasised by Tappan (2006) also involves socio-cultural situated languages and meaning-making processes and experience. Moral positions, authority and responsibility are expressed and expanded during the process of moral authorship.

Vygotsky – A non-reductionist view of free will

Linked to our interest in moral authorship is Bruner's argument that Vygotsky's theory of the development of intellect was not only an educational theory, but a reflection on what it means to be human (Derry 2004, 3). Vygotsky's psychology (1931/1997) examined mind and will as shaped via socio-cultural activity. Mind and will are important for constructing moral authorship narratives as outlined above, they also reflect political commitments. This was evident in how some of the children's narratives emerged from socio-cultural activity in family, community and school life.

Derry (2004) and Blunden (2018) explain that Vygotsky's work on freedom (written in Vygotsky 1931/1997) was linked to Spinoza's understanding of freedom in ethics, in which he integrated philosophical and psychological perspectives, seeking to avoid articulating the will as either a mechanistic or reductionist concept, or as a spiritualistic concept only. Vygotsky's interest was to overcome this dichotomy, and building on Hegel and Marx's dialectical elaboration of Spinoza's work (Blunden 2018) he offered a dialectical psychological and empirical alternative way of coming to understand the emergence of free will. This, in our view, adds an important dimension to the concept of moral authorship. Vygotsky's work offers a different reading of freedom from that of free choice, or freedom from constraint; rather it is a concept in which *freedom is intertwined with the formation of will*. Such a reading of will, as argued by Derry (2004), also avoids a Cartesian reading of the will in which our activity is

dislocated or appears as independent from the social milieu in which we find ourselves (cf. also Blunden 2018). Our creative agency, and thus our agency for moral authorship and narrative construction, are not independent of the social milieu as reflected in the children's narratives above. This, as argued by Wall and Tappan (above), does not mean that our narratives are constrained by social milieu; rather they are situated and relationally and reflexively emergent from social milieu. Vygotsky implied that in children's moral authorship or expressions of 'free will,' despite being influenced by social milieu, there is an independence of thought and reason that emerges in which children's desires become their own. In other words, they are involved in a process of 'becoming free' when narrating their stories via the reasons that children express for holding particular views and/or constructing particular narratives that cannot be reduced to simply adopting dominant narratives in society. As children narrate reasons for their actions or views, so their freedoms and 'free will' are enhanced and expanded. As Derry (2004) pointed out in relation to Vygotsky's work, 'to put the point simplistically in Spinozist terms, to know the reasons why I act is to be a cause of myself (*causa sui*) rather than to be the subject of extraneous determinations' (Derry 2004, 116).

A third interlude: children's voices

In the following extracts from a study on children's participation in waste management practices in primary schools in a southern African country (Silo 2011), we see children's moral authorship being voiced (also politically) in ways that are critical of educational circumstances and teacher's ethical attitudes and practices that constrain the moral authorship of the children. This is an interesting form of moral authorship that shows some of the dimensions of gaining 'free will' as outlined above. The children were able to voice deeply critical concerns, despite a traditionally authoritarian educational environment (Silo 2011).

> L1: I don't like my school because as you can see it doesn't look nice. I'm worried about toilets, the toilets are so dirty. There isn't any serious commitment to it when it comes to picking up litter and it just doesn't give you a good feeling. There is filth all over and we are never given any guidance as to how to clean our school. (cited in Silo 2011, 177)

> L6: The problem is that the teachers are not even interested in seeing the state of our toilets. They know that they do have a toilet next to the kitchen. But as for us, what we use, they just don't care about us. They don't see us as people. I mean imagine for us girls, only two toilets for so many of us! How many are we? I guess more than 500 because I know we are more than boys. (cited in Silo 2011, 202)

The major area of contention in these narratives was lack of care, support and guidance from teachers; children are critical of teachers not caring about the school environments or the sanitary state or environmental health of the school. Children here were clear about the reasons behind their concern

which were related to their health and safety, the aesthetics of the environment of the school, and care for them as young people, showing the 'freedom seeking' dimensions of their moral authoring. They showed capacity for authoring stories with past, present and future dimensions. The linguistic and cultural situatedness of the narratives emerge as significant too, providing the foundational language and situational experience from which the narratives emerge.

And education? What our argument inspires

The three perspectives outlined above offer an expanding view on the dimensions and dynamic of children's moral authorship. As pointed out above, we have an interest in explicating what the perspectives offer for educational thinking as education, much like wider society, has been shaped by dominant views of childhood, which often tend to neglect or fully recognise children for their abilities to express moral authorship and agency in the world via their narratives.

Wall's work drew attention to the way in which children's moral authorship is generated and generative as children encounter others that are differently situated to themselves, as well as other materialities (e.g. drought conditions). Children expand their experiences and their creative potential as they come to deliberate and think about the meaning(s) of these encounters in and for their lives as they link past, present and future experiences, knowledge and 'wonderings' into their narratives (shown in the first interlude texts from children above). For education, this inspires a need to give attention to how children are expanding their experiences and encounters with the known and unknown and how they link past, present and future via these narrations.

In terms of moral education, for Tappan it was centrally important to give attention to *how* young people are offered practices that enable them to grow in stories told and stories heard. In educative contexts they should be challenged into authorship. In addition, it is of importance that the practices where the children are active are also contexts where they meet others who are more competent in their language-mediated moral functioning. Here, both the use of vernacular language (Tappan 1998, 147) and specific moral discourses like voices of care and justice could be understood as valuable (Tappan 2006). Explicitly encouraging moral authorship and narrative creation, and exposing learners to the languages and vocabularies of moral authoring, become an important process in education. We should not 'over model' or 'dominate' how children should engage in moral authorship and narrative constructions, but rather provide the means via new languages and experiences that broaden the possibilities for their moral authorship and narrative constructions.

With the work of Vygotsky, we can see that education is and can become a freedom seeking process in which children are offered opportunities to develop their language and reasoning, including their critical abilities to express reasoning(s) around their moral concerns. Derry ([2004](#)) argued, however, that Vygotsky's view of 'free will' should not be confused with some practices of 'child centred education' that emphasise the '"rights" of children to follow their own interests/desires/wants' as these are 'premised upon the Cartesian conception of will.' She argued that Vygotsky's work presents another possibility for thinking about free will in education which is 'the possibility that may be thought of in a different way (as inextricably linked to intellect).' She went on to say that this 'presents an interesting challenge' for education, as this way of thinking of the will involves engaging in educational processes in which we become more conscious of the constraints on our actions, and the reasons for our actions, and develop our own understanding that these are not all of our own making.

Over time, we can become more conscious of how society and the languages and cultures embedded in activities (e.g. driving petrol cars) often shape our reasons for action. As we are able to make decisions in relation to this understanding, we are able to exercise our freedoms of moral authorship (e.g. we can choose to drive electric cars instead of petrol cars as we develop understandings of the consequences of our options and choices). And so, we become more conscious of how our moral authorship is both formed in society via language and social interactions that occur in forms of activity that emerge in and through our cultures, societies and histories, but also of how we can take ownership of alternative moral narratives.

Having the space to engage in such forms of moral authorship in and via education is therefore an important dynamic that supports creative agency and children's moral authorship. As can be seen from the third interlude, this does not always arise in supportive conditions, and in this interlude, we can see children's moral authorship grounded in their desire for alternative present conditions and their wish for more supportive environment for creating this with their teachers. Thus, education in this setting can be a 'freedom-enhancing process' which, as pointed to above by Derry ([2004](#)), involves knowing one's actions to be a cause of one's own development, thereby also engaging extraneous determinations. The interlude also reveals that education can be more consciously freedom producing if teachers also hear the moral authoring of the children in their care.

In thinking about the kind of education that this inspires, we would like to offer the view that education can be a freedom seeking opportunity for children in the supportive company of teachers, parents and others. However, this requires educators and parents to hear the moral authoring and authorship of children, to listen carefully to their stories, and what the stories or narrations are expressing about past, present and future. The educator's role is to enable and

enrich environments in which children can take up their moral authorship, in the process recognising their role in children's critically reflexive engagements with the world – and to appreciate these for what they are: children's authoring of the world.

As we have argued across the paper, critical to such processes are the narrative creating spaces necessary for children to express their experiences and thoughts. Via this paper, we wish to encourage teachers, parents and educators to be (or become) more alert to how children are taking up responsibility and their ideas of moral authorship and to be more attuned to children's inner stories and reflections and how they are expressing these. Educators, as we can see from our third interlude, can also give more attention to deepening their respect for children's moral agency. This work ultimately has implications for ethical practices of teachers and how they view and approach children as people with moral agency and capacity for moral authorship.

Conclusion

In this article, we have suggested and tested a framework that we propose can contribute towards acknowledging contemporary ethical positionings of children and youth, taking them more seriously. This framework counteracts a disregard for children and youth due to their age and has a wider use as it relates to human agency irrespective of age. However, given the aim of this article in suggesting a theoretical framework the possibilities to elaborate on the various contextual situations of the children represented in the empirical material has been limited. The framework with the concepts 'narrative,' 'moral authorship' and 'free will' as elaborated here, need not only be used for purposes exemplified here, but they can also take on a critical role as exemplified in the third interlude, or when contemporary political narratives are expressions of greed and self-interest as described by Cook (2020). In line with this, when contemporary narratives fail to recognise environmental ethical values (cf. Kvamme 2019) and do not contribute towards the wider common good (Lotz-Sisitka 2017), they can be critiqued and the question raised as to whether such expressions are *moral* authorship. As argued here, education potentially has a supportive and enabling role in fostering moral authorship and putting it into settings for deliberation, enrichment, further engagement via the creative agency displayed within moral authorship itself.

Notes

1. This study was supervised by one of the authors (Lotz-Sisitka). The study was granted ethical clearance by Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa. The methodological issues of the study were thoroughly discussed in the PhD thesis, Silo (2011).

2. This project has been approved by three different bodies and appropriate decisions were taken by: (1) Regionala etikprövningsnämnden, Umeå, Sweden. Dnr 2018/325–331. Date of decision: 2 October 2018. (2) The Western Cape Government, Reference: 20,180,912–6302. Decision signed by the Directorate Research official. (3) Province of the Eastern Cape, Education. 28 January 2019. Decision signed by the Director for strategic planning policy and research.

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