

# Vygotsky from ZPD to ZCD in moral education: reshaping Western theory and practices in local context

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This article explores Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in the Malaysian context to support local reform of the Moral Education (ME) classroom. Small groups of students in three different types of school were involved in a participant action research (PAR) project. Such classrooms in Malaysia bring together students from various ethnicities aligned with Hindu, Confucian and Christian beliefs and understandings. Using the Malaysian multicultural ME classroom as a case study, we offer some examples of group conversations around moral dilemmas that illustrate ways that collaborative processes beyond the individual might expand an individual student's ZPD and the consensual as well as divergent views of each group as a whole. This suggests possibilities for an extension of the ZPD into a zone of collaborative development (ZCD).

## Introduction

Although Kohlberg's work on moral education was influenced by Piagetian notions, it is Lev Vygotsky's theory that has recently had a significant impact on ways that education can support moral thinking in a culturally complex and divided world. This article considers new possibilities for extending Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development to pay greater attention to his visionary work on the importance of collaboration in the development of thinking. To do this, we bring Vygotsky's insights to a consideration of dilemmas of action in everyday life in which different values or moral beliefs are pitted against each other, the kinds of dilemmas for which Kohlberg (1984) is best known. The ethnically diverse Malaysian Moral Education (ME) classroom was chosen for having several characteristics that make it a particularly informative site for exploring action research into the use of everyday moral dilemmas in ME.

ME in Malaysia is a core subject in the school education system. It is a compulsory subject for all non-Muslim students studying in government and private

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schools. The aim of the subject is to cultivate, appreciate and practise the positive values of Malaysian society (Malaysia MOE, 2000, p. v). The subject's explicit aim is to produce students who are knowledgeable, positive and willing to contribute productively towards Malaysian society within a global national outlook.

The curriculum for ME in Malaysia emphasises the holistic view of students' development. This is illustrated in the Malaysian national education philosophy:

Education in Malaysia is an effort towards developing the individual's potential as a whole to foster individuals who are balanced and harmonious, intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically, based in belief and obeying God. This is a continuous effort to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable, dynamic, virtuous, responsible and capable of achieving self-fulfilment as well as providing their service towards the harmony and peace of the family, community and country. (Malaysia MOE, 2000, p. iv; first author's translation)

ME in Malaysia takes a pragmatic approach aimed at instilling spiritual and moral strength with reference to daily experiences taken from religion, traditions and cultural rites. This approach is designed to support ME students' rationality and emotional sensitivity, to enable them to become socially and morally responsible citizens (Malaysia MOE, 2000).

### **Current practice in Malaysia**

Different pedagogies are used to disseminate the ME curriculum in Malaysian secondary schools. These include small-group and classroom discussions, drama, singing, story-telling, debate, simulation, role play, problem solving, problem-based learning and resolving moral dilemmas. Malaysian teacher education involves special training in ME, although most educators face challenges when teaching very diverse groups of non-Muslim students with pluralistic values. The students of ME belong to many religions, cultures and traditions, such as Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Sikh and (for several minority groups) pagan.

In the 1980s when ME was first introduced in Malaysia, the main approaches reflected theories popular at the time: cognitive moral development and values clarification. The pedagogies applied were 'chalk and talk' backed up by written exercises to reinforce what was taught by the teacher. Later, following the revision of the ME syllabus in 2000, Lickona's (1991) character education approach was implemented. The Kohlbergian cognitive development approach is still dominant, however. A variety of theoretical approaches and related pedagogies may be needed in a cultural and religious setting as complex as those of the Malaysian ME classroom. This diversity and flexibility is, in our view, most likely to lead to the transformation of the culture and life of the school suggested by Berkowitz and Bier (2005).

### **Why Vygotsky for moral education?**

It was during the post-revolutionary period of the 1920s that Vygotsky began his quest for a new psychology to bring together a unified notion of the way in which

students learn and develop (Valsiner, 1988). Social changes in Malaysia over the past five decades since independence from Great Britain have perhaps generated similar questions; there is concern about the place of pedagogy, particularly ME pedagogy, in shaping students' ways of understanding the complexities of their everyday realities (Vishalache, 2004). This article considers Vygotsky's theory of developmental psychology (1978, 1986, 1997) for the ME classroom, focusing on relevant aspects of his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Vygotsky's social, cultural and historical perspective was evident in his conviction that all learning was first accomplished through the language that flows between individuals. Language and action, for Vygotsky, were tools of mediation for learning. Since language is part of students' cultural heritage, speaking helps to reorganise students' thinking as they interact with others. This leads to further development of language and action. This belief is the 'cornerstone of the difference' Vygotsky made in conceptualising how 'students think, learn, and develop' (Wink & Putney, 2002, pp. 28, 29).

The work that Vygotsky began in post-revolutionary Russia is still relevant today. Emihovich and Lima (1995) suggest three reasons for the continuing popularity of Vygotsky's work: (1) his focus on the active contribution of humans to the development of their own consciousness; (2) the importance of social interaction in development; and (3) the notion of the mediating role of language in the communicative process.

Vygotsky also insisted that emotion was a crucial part of understanding consciousness. He 'emphasized the development and cultural construction not only of meaning, but of emotion and directivity' (del Rio & Alvarez, 1995, p. 386). Emotions and cognitions are key aspects of ME in Malaysia, fitting well within the philosophy of Malaysian education. It is hoped that through these two domains, the moral actions of students become acceptable and guide them into becoming moral citizens.

Regarding the individual, Yaroshevsky (1989) noted that 'the individual constructs the idea of his own person in the likeness of another individual, receiving his speech reflexes, and thus "settling" the other in his own organism' (p. 87). This is relevant for ME, where individual ideas may expand to complement collaborative ideas from others. With regard to the internal, Vygotsky (1978) questioned the Western focus on development of the internal processes of the individual with his proposal that learning takes place first on an interpersonal plane through interaction with others, then moves to an intrapersonal plane, as these expanded concepts are internalized by the individual.

The transformation of an interpersonal process into an intrapersonal one was seen by Vygotsky as the result of a long series of developmental events (Vygotsky, 1978). The issue of innate reductionism was countered by his construct of the 'social-cultural-historical construction of higher functions' (del Rio & Alvarez, 1995, p. 386). In Vygotsky's view, mental functions are socially, culturally and historically constructed rather than genetically determined. According to Wertsch (1991), Vygotsky's general genetic law of cultural development claims that an

individual's mental functioning derives from participating in social life, and that what occurs in internalization is not a mere copying of socially organized processes, but involves transformations of processes at an individual level.

Why would Vygotskian theory be useful in ME? Vygotsky sought psychology that would take into account the role of consciousness in development, while recognizing the cultural, social and historical basis of psychological functioning. He recognized language as both a psychological function and a cultural tool with which students can communicate thoughts as well as emotions to themselves and others, thus allowing for a transformative notion of learning and development to emerge in the field of psychology. Vygotsky might have been sympathetic to adaptation of his ideas to fit different nations which are multicultural in nature, in order to draw on their own local wisdom.

In Malaysia, a comprehensive-eclectic approach to ME appropriate for the local population might include aspects of cognitive development, values clarification and character education. This combination would allow the development of moral consciousness without ignoring the cultural, social and historical backgrounds of students. Language is of course important in pedagogy for communicating moral thoughts, moral feelings and moral action. In the following section, a wide-ranging eclectic approach, based on resolving the real-life moral dilemmas of students, is described. These dilemmas are explored collectively in the ME classroom, with the goal of expanding students' capabilities with the collaborative help of their capable peers.

Schools in different nations face challenges in supporting the diversity of individual students. Vygotsky recognized this challenge, as can be seen in his comment below:

The goal of the school is not at all a matter of reducing everyone to the same level, on the contrary, one of the goals of the social environment that is created in the school is to achieve as complex, as diversified, and as flexible an organization of the various elements in this environment as possible. It is only necessary that these elements not be in any way irreconcilable, and that they be linked up together into a single system. (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 79)

Vygotsky's vision of schooling fits comfortably with many aspects of the Malaysian ME classroom and school system (Malaysia MOE, 2000). Vygotsky warns of the dangers of reductionism within an egalitarian model of the classroom.

It is a challenge to teach ME in an environment where pluralism is a dominant feature (Vishalache, 2006). Furthermore, the top-down system of a government-mandated curriculum that spells out every detail of the curriculum may lack the flexibility needed to address students' contemporary concerns. Fortunately, there is room within Malaysian ME for adaptations to the curriculum and pedagogy to cater to the diversity of students' understandings and backgrounds, since the goal of ME in Malaysian classes is to support students' individual development grounded within their cultural values and traditions. At the same time, students need to follow the laws of the state as well as their community's values. Vygotsky

suggested that 'teaching means relating to students and relating the curriculum to their lives' (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 83). By enabling them to resolve their own moral dilemmas, students may find that the knowledge and processes learned in ME make a positive difference to their lives.

Vygotsky began his work in psychology with a clear focus on education as an important support for development, interweaving his developmental constructs with learning and teaching. He questioned why some students seemed to learn faster than others who seemed to require more assistance. These underlying questions led him to theorize in new and different ways from those already advanced in Europe. For Vygotsky, learning was more than just passively receiving information and responding to it; learning included the ideas generated in the process of dialectical discovery. From a Vygotskian perspective, 'learning and development are tied to the socio-cultural context' (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 10). This is relevant in ME as students in Malaysian ME classrooms come from different cultural and ethnic groups.

Vygotsky turned to psychology so that he could combine scientific knowledge of the discipline with his own common-sense knowledge, intuition and inspiration from his experience as a teacher. He was so convinced that theory and practice are interrelated, he declared that the motto of his new psychology would be 'practice and philosophy' (Yaroshevsky, 1989, p. 15). In Vygotsky's theory the teacher and students are required to play non-traditional roles as they collaborate with each other. It was seen as important that the teacher collaborate with students to create meaning in ways that students can make their own (Hausfather, 1996). According to Vygotsky (1978), learning that is oriented towards developmental levels that have already been reached is ineffective from the point of view of the child's overall development. This is because it does not aim for a new stage of the development process but rather lags behind this process.

Tappan (1998) considers a Vygotskian perspective on moral education as one that integrates educational and developmental assumptions in ways that are lacking in other current models. The assumption is that moral functioning is a cultural practice or practical activity (Rogoff, 1990), mediated by language and forms of discourse and situated in a socio-cultural-historical context. This moral language is shared by people engaged in the same activities in similar social or moral practices, although individuals may differ in many ways. This is a great challenge in the Malaysian ME classroom where students and teachers have considerable individual differences yet are under the same roof to engage in learning to become morally educated. From a Vygotskian perspective, it would appear that ME entails a process of guided participation in which students are helped by teachers, parents and capable peers to attain new and greater potential in moral thinking, feeling and action.

### **An alternative approach to teaching ME**

Various approaches have been used in the practice of moral education, for example, autonomous versus heteronomous (Bebeau, Rest, & Narvaez, 1999; Kohn,

1977) and indirect versus direct (Benninga, 1991; Dewey, 1977; Lickona, 1991). In most countries, socio-cultural factors and matters of religion and law are also to be considered when dealing with ME.

The alternative ME approach that this article explores combines the cognitive learning approach in value clarification with character education, taking into consideration each student's uniqueness, as well as the importance of both teachers and peers. Figure 1 shows an approach suggested for the complex pluralistic context of students in a Malaysian ME classroom.

The use of a *bunga raya* (hibiscus) as a metaphor in the comprehensive-eclectic approach acknowledges the national flower of Malaysia. Its five petals represent the five main ethnic groups in Malaysia: Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban and Kadazandusun, hence symbolizing unity in diversity among the different ethnic groups. Each petal is particular in its structure. In each petal are the different approaches of ME which were and are still being used in ME in Malaysia. However, the student who is the stem and the filament of the *bunga raya* is free to adopt any approach with which he or she feels comfortable. The swaying of the filament due to environmental factors like the wind and the opening of the petals with the sun is also symbolic in the sense that students may be influenced by state law, culture, religion and ethnicity but still stay firm, strong and intact.

When dealing with moral issues, content and skills, placed on top of the fourth and fifth petals, play an important role. Students of ME need to share a common understanding of the aspirations of the country where education is concerned (content) and be able to use tools acquired during their school years to apply when dealing with moral conflicts (skills). It is essential that knowledge acquired in the ME

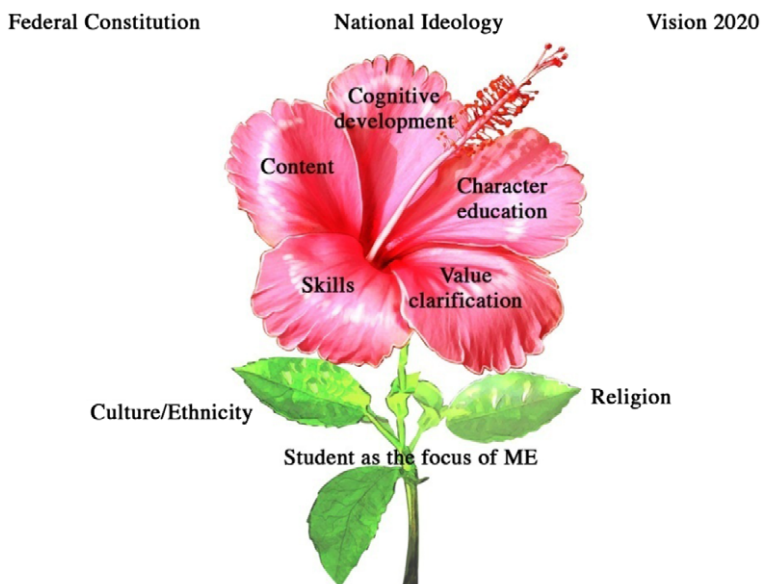


Figure 1. A comprehensive-eclectic approach for ME in Malaysia

classroom is related to the moral development of the student. Based on this assumption, the Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development has further application.

### **Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**

Vygotsky introduced the notion of ZPD in relation to learning and development. It is based on his theory that learning is, at its core, a largely socially mediated activity, and that real learning takes place in students' ZPD. According to Vygotsky (1986, p. 188), 'What the child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow. Therefore the only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it ...'. Rejecting a sequential ordering of learning and development in children (or vice versa), Vygotsky proposed an interrelated, dynamic process (Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 86) in which students become active participants in their learning through the use of language and interaction with others. Wells (2000) refers to this process as an active minds-on activity, with language as the tool of greatest importance and discourse the pre-eminent joint activity, with the goal of creating common knowledge and enhancing understanding.

Vygotsky (1978) conceptualized the ZPD as a way of viewing what students are coming to know. The key to this approach is Vygotsky's claim that, in order to match instructional strategies to a student's development capabilities accurately, what must be determined are not only her 'actual developmental level' but also her 'level of potential development' (p. 86). The actual developmental level reflects what the student knows and is able to perform at any moment. However, Vygotsky argued that it 'only captures mental functions that are fully formed, fully matured, fully completed – the end products of development' (1978, p. 86).

In short, Vygotsky (1978) argued that the actual level of development (current performance capability) provides an inadequate measure of the state of the child's development:

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

Vygotsky claimed that what must also be confirmed is what the students know and whether they are able to resolve problems beyond their actual development level if they are provided with guidance in the form of prompts or leading questions from someone more capable. This person, the more capable peer, could be another student, a teacher, or anyone who is able to help deliver the students from that problem. Vygotsky (1978) defined the zone as: '... the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (p. 86).

Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) named these distances the ‘buds’ or ‘flowers’ of development to differentiate them from the ‘fruits’ of development that are the functions and abilities that the child can produce independently. The ZPD is a notion that takes into account individual differences and is focused on the communicative nature of learning in which the students come to an understanding of the task they are performing. Continual guidance within the ZPD enables students to understand what is complex and move on to being able to know something well and to share it with others. Just providing facts to clarify values or creating an ideal character that students are supposed to conform to would provide students with only a superficial level of learning in ME.

Vygotsky made important connections between the development of individuals and the development of the collective in which they learn and play (Lima, 1995). In the Malaysian scenario, the notion of collective development is most consistent with the pluralistic nature of the society. Individuals who collaborate engage in networking and discussion as a way to begin developing collaborative relationships (Himmelman, 1997). It makes them understand more clearly the world where collaboration is a social process in which meaning is constructed from discussion among group members (Vygotsky, 1978).

The ZPD, as described by Vygotsky, reflects two foundational assumptions of his socio-cultural approach to human development. The first of these is that higher mental functioning is mediated by words, language and forms of discourse that function as ‘psychological tools’ to facilitate and transform mental action. The second assumption is that forms of higher mental functioning have their origins in social relations, as ‘intermental’ processes between people and are internalised to become ‘intramental’ processes within persons (Tappan, 1991, 1997; Wertsch, 1985).

Therefore, Vygotsky’s approach focuses attention both on how such mental functions as thinking, reasoning and remembering are mediated by language and forms of discourse, as well as on the ways in which such functions necessarily have their origins in human social life. Vygotsky’s theory has some constructivist leanings in line with Piaget’s work (see Forman & Pufall, 1988), but is most complementary with that of Bruner. Bruner (1987) stated that ‘Vygotsky’s view of development was also a theory of education’ (p. 1). In his view of development and education, Vygotsky placed great importance on the role of language—itsself shaped by historical forces—as a tool for shaping thought.

Vygotsky’s view of the ZPD is also linked to the metaphor of the ocean wave. The idea is that the process of development can be both progressive and regressive (Wink & Putney, 2002). Likewise, the wave moves forwards and backwards—progresses and regresses. This links with human experience, and according to Vygotsky, both forward and backward movement is finally progressive. Although the backward movement appears to be regressive, it is a time for making sense of the world and the conflicts within it. This approach seems to suit ME development, which involves facing challenges and complexities in a nation of diversity and multiculturalism like Malaysia.



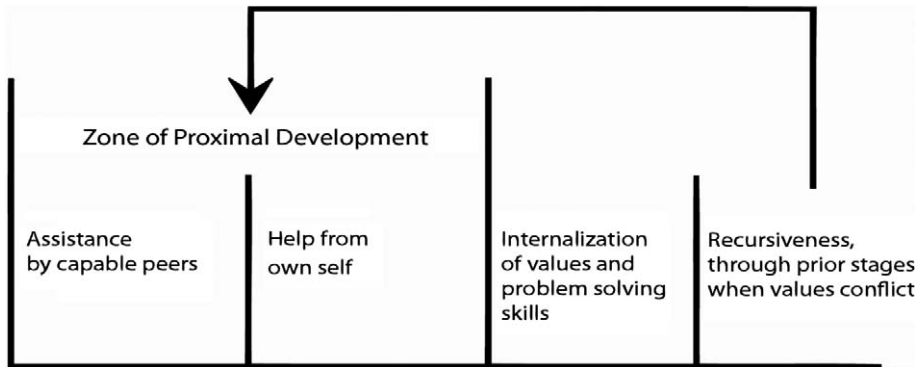


Figure 2. A modified version of Tharp and Gallimore’s Four-Stage Model of the ZPD (1988) relevant to the teaching of ME

Tharp and Gallimore (1988) use a four-stage model of the ZPD to show how children develop speech and language and we have modified their model (Figure 2) to show the teaching of ME using Vygotsky’s ZPD.

The ZPD in ME can be seen as the gap between what students can morally decide and accomplish independently and what one student can achieve with the guidance of a more capable peer.

### Expanding the Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development

The ZPD has been a hugely important notion for educators for over 30 years. It is a flexible and creative theoretical device, with the potential to draw on cultural knowledge found in narratives such as stories, myths and poems. As pedagogical devices, such narratives could expand the individual’s development. This has particular implications for ME, since popular narratives may provide powerful models of moral behaviour (Tappan, 1998). Although Vygotsky stressed that students play an active role in their own development in the process of internalization, he said little about the content of what is learned. This might lead to a problematic relativism when applied to the moral domain in the Malaysian classroom. For example, if students learning ME in class judge a moral dilemma without considering their religion and the law and norms of society, they could experience serious trouble in everyday life. This is the emerging challenge of ME in Malaysia. The teacher’s contribution and role in collaboration with the students play an important part in bringing out the students’ voice.

Vygotsky was also not greatly concerned about the particular actions of individuals after experiencing enhanced learning through the ZPD. In the Malaysian setting, adolescents in secondary schools are constantly pitting their own decision against communal expectations. Thus the collaboration with more capable peers encourages students to take collaborative moral actions that fulfil the requirements of the nation in developing a ‘shared moral language’.

The collaboration between teacher and students, and students and students, enables a vision of the fundamentally dialogic nature of all teaching and learning (Tappan, 1997). Without having an appropriate syllabus and some practical illustrations to carry out the pedagogical component, whatever is suggested might have little value for students. Wells (2000) suggested several characteristics of a Vygotskian class: constructing a collaborative community; engaging in purposeful activities involving whole persons actively forming identity; incorporating activities that are situated and unique; using curriculum as a means for learning, not just an end result; producing outcomes that are both aimed for and emergent; and constructing activities that must allow diversity and originality. In such a class the teacher is a facilitator who prompts and provides leading questions. The above characteristics may provide a guide but need to be adapted for a multicultural ME classroom as in Malaysia.

### **Background to the research**

The conceptual approach adopted here provided the foundation for previously described research examining the possibilities of student-provided 'real-life' moral dilemmas for students in the Malaysian ME classroom (Vishalache, 2009). The research involved a sample of 22 16- to 17-year-old ME students, chosen from 3 schools that differed in ways representative of the main regions and types of school in Malaysia. The students were from all the main ethnic groups of secondary students from non-Muslim religious backgrounds who undertake compulsory ME in lieu of religious instruction. The students volunteered to be part of the research after listening to the briefings of the researcher and obtaining written permission from their parents or caretakers. The three different schools chosen represented all three types of government secondary schools in Malaysia: a boys' school, a girls' school and a co-educational school. The boys' and girls' schools were situated in a city and town, respectively, while the co-educational school was situated in a rural area. This distribution reflected national demographics, since rural areas tend to have co-educational schools. Typical of multicultural ME classrooms, students were from a variety of ethnic groups: Chinese, Indian, Sikh, Sikh-Indian and Chinese-Indian backgrounds. Participants belonged to several religious faiths: Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Sikh. Participants from the different schools decided upon their own school's pseudonym. The names chosen were *Orkid* (boys' school), *Kekwah* (girls' school), and *Seri Pagi* (co-educational).

The research was based on a participant action research (PAR) paradigm (Kemmis, 2001). The study used qualitative research methodology consisting of a modified framework of participant action research as the methodological framework. The pedagogy of the ME classroom under study was based on guided discussion; this pedagogy was extended to the students' discussion about their participation in the PAR paradigm. Data were gathered through a modified form of participant observation, focus group transcripts, interviews and student journals for textual analysis. The research trialled a process of resolving real-life moral dilemmas with

these classrooms of secondary students. The research was designed to record the moral choices the students made and the moral orientations they used in their focus group discussions. This approach drew also on recent feminist research on the political dimensions of PAR, which has emphasised the importance of collaboration in the research process (Frisby, Maguire, & Reid, 2009; Reid, Tom, & Frisby, 2006). This latter focus on the importance of collaboration in the sharing of knowledge and understandings was crucial for the Malaysian ME students in this study.

### **Expanding to a Zone of Collaborative Development?**

Much work in the Vygotskian tradition has considered collaborative learning in areas such as reading comprehension (e.g. Palincsar, 1986) and mathematics. This was linked to a theoretical enhancement by Goos, Galbraith and Renshaw (2002), who expanded the ZPD to consider ‘collaborative zones of proximal development’ for the performance of individual senior secondary students solving maths problems together in groups. While most of this research is in the cognitive tradition, there could be important implications for moral reasoning that includes affective and action linkages. Fascinating work towards such a possibility has been reported by Turner and Chambers (2006), who looked at the reasoning of individual graduate student participants before and after collaborative discussion of the Heinz dilemma. There was strong evidence that individual participants’ reasoning advanced after such discussion.

Research on the significance of collaboration for expanding the individual’s ZPD provides important detail about the ways that an individual’s understanding is enhanced through interaction with others grappling with similar problems. At the same time, the individual learner of interest to Vygotsky in the early revolutionary period of the Soviet Union may not be entirely commensurate with the individual so ubiquitous in educational writings today. Much work from the 1980s in the area of culture and the self has emphasized that the individual is in many ways a peculiarly ‘Western’ notion (e.g. Johnson, 1985; Sampson, 1983). We wondered if the Vygotskian ZPD could be expanded further to construct a Malaysian version that would recognize a more collective achievement of an entire group, rather than to focus on an individual’s learning advance. Such a zone might be better described as a zone of collaborative development (ZCD). The rationale for this approach was based specifically on the ME classroom context in Malaysia where there is a great emphasis on shared consensus in the solving of moral problems, although students also have time to reflect their own moral thoughts, feelings and actions. The diversity of Malaysian ME students’ cultural and religious backgrounds also provides an important setting for discussion of moral complexities that take into account wider cultural meanings and debates. Collaborative problem-solving could provide an opportunity for students to learn from each other’s cultures and experiences because of the equality in power sharing in such situations. The complex cultural identity of Malaysian students—which may

have some points of similarity for some students from diverse cultural backgrounds in other multicultural countries—makes it even more challenging for students to understand and resolve their moral dilemmas within a collaborative setting. Even within one ethnic group there are many clans with diverse beliefs. Students are influenced by their own culture and traditions as well as other cultures and the emerging popular global youth culture.

We offer the suggestion that the ZPD enlarged to a ZCD has the potential to encourage students to be responsible for their own dilemmas and those of their friends. They would be able to use their own cultural resources within the classroom-group discussions and ideally transform their thoughts and feelings into moral actions, as aspired to in the Malaysian ME philosophy. Rather than ‘correct’ solutions, students would develop a shared moral language.

### Example of a Zone of Collaborative Development

Several examples of discussion of moral dilemmas in the Malaysian ME classroom are offered here to point to the possibilities for considering an enhancement of the collaborative understanding of an entire group of students. This might provide not only collaborative expansion of individual zones of proximal development but the possibility of an enhanced understanding for the whole group, in effect a ZCD.

A discussion of restrictions in the lives of students suggested by the *Orkid* group led to a key moral dilemma for the students’ everyday lives: individual freedom versus respect for parental authority. For example, several participants in *Orkid* felt their parents did not provide enough freedom and autonomy for them to undertake activities they considered important. Many of the students described their parents as ‘*berkuasa*’ (too authoritative). The same issue also came up in *Kekwah*. Participants felt that they were adult enough to handle activities in daily life but that they were controlled by their parents most of the time, as shown in the classroom excerpt below.

The extract below is taken from the boys’ school (*Orkid*). Students were discussing a dilemma about how a 16-year-old is controlled by his parents and how he felt the need to have some freedom in his life. Students are identified by letter so as not to identify the ethnicity of participants, and the interviewer was the first author.

Interviewer: What is the main conflict here? What does the person want?

Student S: Freedom in his teenage life.

Interviewer: Freedom to do what?

Student U: To be able to do what he wants.

Interviewer: Be more specific ... what do you like to do at this age?

Student P: Chatting, on-line-games, dating

[...]

Interviewer: Why do you think you lack freedom?

Student S: Sometimes when we are talking with our friends, our parents cut in and say don’t waste time.

- Student P: They must give us space to grow or else we feel so bogged down by them.  
 Student Q: But I feel the freedom should be controlled too.  
 Interviewer: What do you mean by that?  
 Student Q: Parents should give children freedom but they also have to monitor them or else children might abuse the freedom and parents will have more headaches.  
 Interviewer: There are two different opinions here.  
 Student S: I feel parents can keep an eye on their children but not to the level of monitoring the kids for 24 hours.

The discussion starts with complaints about lack of teenage ‘freedom’ (S) ‘to do what he wants’ (U). There is a considerable literature and popular portrayal of the restricting bonds of parental authority for teenagers. For example, Swanson, Spencer and Petersen (1998) argue that adolescents can experience increased conflict with parents when negotiating for greater autonomy. According to Nakkula and Toshalis (2007), if adolescents’ desire for freedom is challenged by authority so that their feelings of powerlessness are re-enforced, students may resist and feel frustrated. This came up in a number of the PAR interviews: participants seemed to be in a ‘demoralized’ state, yearning for freedom while also expressing disappointment with the lack of reciprocity in their relationships with parents. This position of powerlessness is well illustrated in the comments of S and U (above), and reinforced by P. This was similar to the discussion in the two other groups, *Kekwah* and *Seri Pagi*, when participants expressed dismay at the difficulties involved in juggling their desire for more freedom with the need to please their parents in the way constantly expected of young people of this age in Malaysian society.

However, a new direction was expressed in the *Orkid* group in the discussion above, when Q expanded on the concept of freedom by saying that ‘freedom should be controlled too’. Here Q is demonstrating awareness of parents’ points of view, legitimizing parents’ place in monitoring their children’s behaviour and the strain (‘headaches’) this surveillance places on parents. Of course, Q could be making a socially desirable response for the sake of appearing to be a good student to the adult interviewer, but the embodied detail of the description of the parental reaction (‘headaches’) seems to go beyond the potentially socially desirable responses mentioned above.

The interviewer joined this collaborative discussion by pointing to the fact that two oppositional views (whether or not to limit freedom) were being expressed. At this point a new direction emerged: student ‘S’ then created a middle position about the legitimacy of parental monitoring as long as it is not total (‘24 hours’). The others in the group then agreed with this middle position. S and U had two different opinions but when they came back to the group, Q posed the middle position which was agreed upon as the discussion continued.

### **A model of the Zone of Collaborative Development (ZCD) for the Malaysian ME classroom**

The collaborative work in this group can be represented in a model. This model is generic in nature and can be utilised in any moral dilemma analysis process.

However, it is unique in being sensitive to contextual complexities when students undergo the process of ZCD. The process becomes the method by which dilemmas are analysed in the context of a respectful, caring relationship. Throughout the process, there is a need to build a safe environment for the students to operate in and to be able to resolve dilemmas without being threatened (see Figure 3).

The strength of expanding the ZPD to include collective enhancements in the learning of a group is that collaboration is included at every stage. In the expanded ZCD, the cycles of discussion make it feasible for students to come back together as a group, collaborate and proceed with moral actions where applicable. In *Orkid* when the participants were discussing the issue of freedom, the others shared their own experiences but within their own cultural boundaries. Students sometimes used their first language in these discussions; since Malaysian classrooms often include multilingual conversations, meanings must be negotiated across several languages. Similarly, differing participants in *Seri Pagi* also used body language specific to their ethnic groups to express the strength of their viewpoints. The ZPD is often used to explore cognitive processes, whereas the ZCD might also include emotions and actions that complement the ME philosophy in Malaysia. Collaboration is key as students share their experiences and knowledge and obtain help from capable peers to resolve the real-life moral dilemmas. Individuals might progress or regress depending on the support from their peers. One participant in *Seri Pagi* expressed in his journal how his need for individual leisure time led him astray from his original desire to concentrate on his school work, although later he became aware that he had to keep to his original plans. This was supported by his peers who reminded him of the importance of focusing on his academic goals and leaving leisure till later.

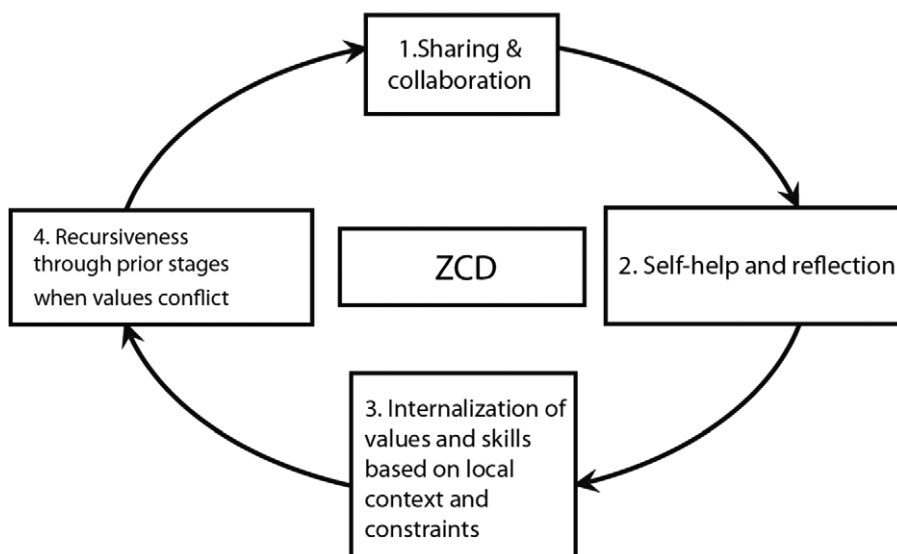


Figure 3. A suggested process in the Zone of Collaborative Development (ZCD)

### *Sharing and collaboration*

The process of ZCD begins with building a safe environment for the students. Then it proceeds to the sharing and collaboration phase. Students share their real-life moral dilemmas and use the open discussions within their groups to analyse the conflicts from different perspectives. Capable peers help in bringing the discussions to greater heights. Moral thinking and moral feeling are integral to this phase.

In the research there was evidence of a degree of trust that had been built up with the students in this classroom situation in *Orkid*; this is very unusual for Malaysian secondary schools.

Student R: Even though you did not provide us with any answers, we had the opportunity to discuss, to argue and to support each other to come to resolutions for the conflicts together.

Student T: I feel when we study this way, we are able to understand the values better and learning moral education becomes more interesting.

Student Y: I also find this way of studying is more interesting and meaningful because the issues involved have some connections with us.

Vygotsky himself might have appreciated the consensus building referred to in these quotes. Despite the social, cultural and experiential differences evident in each discussion, the capable individual student may be developing the skills to resolve future conflicts that may arise. Such discussion can take the analysis of the dilemma into deeper waters with wider reflection on the principles at stake.

### *Self-help and reflection*

The second phase of ZCD begins when individual students start their own reflections and provide self-help. This has the effect of incorporating into ME the religious or cultural dimension based on student background, until now seemingly missing in the literature. Each student has his or her own capacity to reflect and this is given priority in the ZCD. The reflection process enables students to use their moral reasoning to think through moral choices. This can also lead to group discussion about the possibilities of moral actions consistent with the reasoning pursued, giving concrete strategies to take into everyday interaction.

The reflective phase also allows students to compare and contrast resolutions suggested, resolutions applied and future resolutions needed to be taken in order to be accepted as moral individuals. It is an important phase because differences in values and orientations are likely to disturb thoughts and emotions, but because of the earlier collaboration and cooperation phase, students are also in a better position to reflect upon the conflicts.

Student L: By studying this way, I get to express my feelings and analyse and reflect upon my actions which I have never done before.

Student K: I find studying this way useful. We get to learn from previous mistakes.

Student J: I get to discuss my problem with my friends. We get to help each other in solving our conflicts and it's a nice feeling. (*Seri Pagi*)

*Internalization of values and skills based on local context and constraints*

The third phase of ZCD is the internalization of values and skills based on local context and constraints. Without being sensitive to local context and constraints, interpretation of moral actions can be difficult, because morality can be specific to particular cultures and ethnic groups. When values are internalized and skills are acquired during the process of ZCD, students become aware of such differences and able to apply skills based on these differences as well as to consider moral principles shared within a society. For example, some students in *Kekwah* said,

Student B: Mum is so set in her ways. Because she has been brought up the strict way, no one can change her set ideas and mentality. Because mum had a strict upbringing, she tends to pass the same way of upbringing onto her children.

Student F: Unless we tell ourselves that we want to break away from such traditions and the way of thinking, we might end up like them too.

Student A: This discussion has given us some time to see what we want to be when we are adults. We'll be selective.

*Recursiveness through prior stages when values conflict*

The processes in this final phase of the ZCD are applicable even when students are by themselves. It provides an opportunity for students to put into action what they have acquired and to bring the ME philosophy of moral thinking, moral feelings and moral action into a unified perspective. The skills and knowledge acquired from capable peers may be applied directly or indirectly. At times these newly acquired skills and knowledge may not be applicable but the processes of collaboration, self-help and internalization of values can help the students face other moral dilemmas. They can ask for suggestions from groups of friends or other authorities. Through the teacher's (and sometimes students') explicit questioning, students can be encouraged to practise self-reflection about the efficacy of the reasoning so that they can apply the ZCD to other contexts.

These cycles of ZCD repeat themselves every time a moral conflict is discussed. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that development of individuals contributes to the collective development of those around them, as these students from *Seri Pagi* showed:

Student K: We need to think of our future. But it's a long way away.

Student J: When someone thinks, he will be careful before taking an action. Anyway we are half adults so working life is not far away.

Student O: It's strength that comes from within.

Student K: I've got a practical solution.

Student O: What?



Student K: If I want to play for two hours, I'll tell myself I need to study for two hours first. But first I got to start off with the studying then go to the more fun part.

### **Towards the future**

This research project showed the potential benefits of self-disclosed moral dilemmas elaborated upon in shared discussion in the ME classroom. While the current research was set in the context of the religious and ethnic pluralism of Malaysian society, the approach could be employed in many multiethnic settings. The method was in line with current research trends in participant action research, since there was an ethically informed emphasis on collaboration between all people involved in the research, the teacher/researcher and students. There was also an acknowledgement of the specific ethnic and religious setting of the ME classroom in Malaysia. Developing collaborative relationships should be a focus of ME in secondary schools in Malaysia as it makes students understand both local and global contexts.

This analysis led to an extension of a Vygotskian perspective on cognition that had underpinned earlier work in ME. Going beyond the individual zone of proximal development (ZPD), the approach reported here suggested a zone of collaborative development to describe students' efforts at working through issues together on several moral dilemmas. There was some evidence that such discussion could lead to collective enhancement of the understanding of moral dilemmas faced by the students in their daily lives. As these ideas are explored further in future research, we look forward to further collaborative discussion with ME researchers about the possibilities of this approach for a variety of national settings.

Students enter and traverse a ZCD where educational and developmental processes gradually help internalization. This assists their understanding of caring activities that begin as joint ventures with others. There are opportunities for other researchers to explore collaborative resolution in moral education and how such processes affect the moral decision-making of students, either within the classroom or later in life.

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