PLAYING WITH CHILDREN, ANSWERING WITH OUR LIVES: A BAKHTINIAN APPROACH TO COAUTHORING ETHICAL IDENTITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I develop an alternative to prevailing moral development assumptions in early childhood education. Drawing on a Bakhtinian theoretical framework, theories of identity formation, and examples from my longitudinal research study of child–adult play, I reframe development as a lifelong process of coauthoring ethical identities that may begin in early childhood when adults join children in dramatic play.

Keywords: moral development, early childhood, dramatic play, Bakhtin, ethical identities

I believe that maturity is not an outgrowing but a growing up: that an adult is not a dead child but a child who survived. I believe that all the best faculties of a mature human being exist in the child, and that if these faculties are encouraged in youth they will act well and wisely in the adult, but that if they are repressed and denied in the child they will stunt and cripple the adult personality. And finally, I believe that one of the most deeply human, and humane, of these faculties is the power of imagination. (Ursula Le Guin, 1979, p. 44)

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the social constructivist, sociohistorical, and cultural turns in educational theory, research and practice, constructivist and developmental assumptions are still dominant in the field of early childhood. In particular, though there has been a quarter century of broad critiques of the theory of moral development from feminist scholars (e.g. Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984), early childhood reconceptualist scholars (New and Cochran, 2007), as well as alternative frameworks or approaches to moral or values education proposed by researchers, philosophers and practitioners (e.g. Arthur, 2005; Buzzelli, 1997; Gibbs, 2003; Higgins, 2003; Tappen, 1997; Tappen and Packer, 1991; Wringe, 1988), a cursory glance in any early years textbook will reveal the pervasiveness of the Piagetian theoretical framework guiding pedagogy that can easily frame young children, in the words of the author Ursula Le Guin quoted above, as needing to ‘outgrow’ who they are. Children are understood to be individuals at less competent stages of cognitive or moral development than adults, including when they play. Those who have extended Piaget’s (1975/1932) moral development theories, especially...
Kohlberg (1984) and Hoffman (2000), also assume that young children are inherently more egocentric, lacking in deep empathy, and less able than adults to abstractly and rationally reason about moral issues. Not until a child has demonstrated to adults that, in relation to others, he or she is able to cognitively construct more developed and less egocentric ways of conceptualising the world, as well as less impulsive ways of acting, is the child considered to be really capable of moral reasoning. Only then can the child develop more mature understanding such as how to apply universal ethical rules that, it is assumed, guide action in everyday life.

The works of the Russian philosopher and literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, have gradually become more influential in educational studies since his works were translated into English beginning in the 1980s. His theories have shaped research and practice in literacy, including early literacy learning (Dyson, 1997; Juzwick, 2004; Kendrick, 2003), theories of discourse (Wertsch, 1991), and have been applied to critique early childhood practice (Tobin, 2000) and policy issues such as home–school relationships (Graue et al., 2001). Along with the theories of Vygotsky, Bakhtin’s writings have been used to extend and critique moral development theory and education (Buzzelli, 1997; Tappen and Packer, 1991). However, the significance of Bakhtin’s theories of ethics and aesthetics for early childhood has not been considered.

In this article I apply and extend aspects of Bakhtin’s theories, in particular those of answerability, authorship and action (1990, 1993), as well as discourse and dialogism (1981), to provide the field with an alternative approach to moral education reframing development as a lifelong process of coauthoring ethical identities that may begin in early childhood when adults join children in dramatic play. For illustrations I draw on data from my longitudinal research study (Edmiston, 2005, 2008) of the ethical dimensions of adult involvement in a child’s dramatic play (also known as imaginative, sociodramatic, symbolic, fantasy, make-believe, and pretend play). For over five years I gathered and analysed examples of playing with our son Michael, beginning when he was age three, as he and I explored scores of narrative worlds. Now nineteen at the time of this writing, Michael has continued to provide me with feedback and interpretations of my analyses.

2. AUTHORING, ETHICS AND ANSWERABILITY

In Bakhtin’s early philosophical essays, published as Toward a Philosophy of the Act (1993) and Art and Answerability (1990), he lays out a theory of ethics as answerability in which he argues that each person’s moral life quest is to continually ‘author’ a self that is in a changing dynamic ethical relationship with all of the other people encountered in social relationships and cultural groupings. Hicks (1990, p. 230) has argued that, ‘at the heart of Bakhtin’s early essays is a critique of modernist objectifications of personal experience, relationship, and knowledge’. In contrast with a conceptualisation of a unitary, atomistic, individualistic
self essentially separated from other people, as assumed by developmentalists, Bakhtin theorises authoring selves that, though unique, are nevertheless always in relationship with others. In a late essay, Bakhtin (1986, p. 95) describes ‘the others’ of our authoring selves as ‘addressees’. Every answer is authored in response to having being addressed since, as Holland et al. (1998, p. 169) contend, human beings ‘always exist in a state of being addressed and in the process of answering’.

An authoring self is unique since it acts from a position in time and space that no other person occupies or will ever be in again. As Bakhtin (1993, p. 40) explains, ‘everyone occupies a unique and never-repeatable place, any being is once-occurrent’. Morson and Emerson (1990, p. 179), summarising Bakhtin, stress that, ‘Ethical action is born of a sense that each act is unrepeatable and responsibility is nontransferable. What can be accomplished by me cannot be accomplished by anyone else, ever’. In this paper I argue that children can be authoring selves in dramatic playing as much, if not more, than they can be when they act in everyday life.

According to Bakhtin, to be ethical is to be answerable for one’s daily actions: an authoring self ‘evaluates from the standpoint of others’ (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 15). Answering is an ongoing process. To develop moral integrity, ‘the individual must become answerable through and through: all of his constituent moments must not only fit next to each other in the temporal sequence of his life, but must also interpenetrate each other in the unity of guilt and answerability’ (ibid, p. 2).

Bakhtin’s theorising is a critique of Kantian ethics, the moral theory underlying the works of Piaget and Kohlberg. Bakhtin is highly critical of idealising an individual’s reliance on objective rationality in pursuit of the formulation, or understanding, of universal ethical principles as the way to judge what acts are right or good. Whereas Kant, as an Enlightenment philosopher, turned to individual reason and the pursuit of ethical laws, Bakhtin views reason alone as an inadequate ‘glimmer of a lamp before the sun’ of being wholly answerable for performed acts (ibid, p. 29).

Readers, tellers and writers of stories, for Bakhtin, are authors when they intentionally and imaginatively project into the world of a narrative and then contemplate the meaning of the actions they image. The same can be true in dramatic play when both children and adults may be answerable. When people project into the consciousnesses of characters to create and co-experience events with them they must use their own consciousness to ‘give shape to others’ whom they represent (1990). At the same time, when they judge those characters’ actions as right or wrong, Bakhtin (1993, p. 18) argues that their authoring is ethical and affects their moral viewpoint since a person ‘gives shape to their self’ by being ‘outside’ but evaluative of, their own imagined actions. Unlike in much of everyday life, in aesthetic spaces people are answerable as authors since ‘the self is forced to perceive itself in the category of the other’ (1990).
3. Ethical Identities

Though Bakhtin does not use the term identity, it is useful to connect the concept of identity with Bakhtin’s idea of an authoring self that both acts in-the-moment and makes connections with others over time. Holland et al. (1998, p. 270) propose that, ‘Identity is one way of naming the dense interconnection between the intimate and public venues of social practices’. I use the term identity, as they do, and as Norton (1997, p. 410) clarifies, to describe that aspect of the self related to ‘how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across space and time, and how people understand their possibilities for the future’. How adults or children identify with others and act in present social encounters is interrelated with both how they have acted, been identified, and identified themselves with others in the past, as well as how they hope to act and identify with people in the future. Dramatic playing can be significant in shaping identities because it relies on past experience and anticipation of future actions and relationships, thus establishing a liminal space in which possibilities – rather than certainties – for being and identifying can be explored.

In contrast with the dominant modernist assumption that identity is a unitary, coherent and fixed essence of an individual self, feminist poststructuralist theorists (e.g. Davies, 1992) have redefined selves and identities as multiple, dynamic, relational, negotiated, emotional as well as cognitive and (in different contexts) potentially contradictory. As Evans (2002, p. 3) puts it, ‘Who I am and how I feel is not just about me in a vacuum. It is about me in relationship to others, and them in relationship to me’. Further, in synthesising scholarship from the fields of cultural anthropology and social constructivism, Holland et al. (1998) conceptualise identities as socio-cultural.

Using a Bakhtinian approach, every person’s ethical identity intersects and overlaps with their social and cultural identities but, I argue, cannot be conflated with them. I use the term to refer to people’s ethical identifications that frame their past, present and future relationships with other people both within and across social and cultural groups: malleable frameworks guide, and in turn are shaped by, both daily interactions and evaluations of their own and others’ deeds in terms of their ‘rightness’ and ‘goodness’. For example, though I grew up in an authoritarian culture in Northern Ireland I came to believe that it was right that adults should negotiate with children as authoring selves. Significantly, social psychologists have begun to recognise, and have empirically validated, that a person’s moral behaviour is affected by their ethical or ‘moral identity’ in addition to any rational moral choice they may have made (Monroe, 1996, 2009; Reynolds and Ceranic, 2007).

From a socio-cultural framework, Holland et al. (1998) propose that identities are formed in two complementary and intersecting ways. On the one hand, from a cultural viewpoint identities are determined by the narratives and practices that particular groups share and that people identify with when they regard themselves as group members. In Holland’s terms, relationships in cultural
groups are ‘figured’ or ‘narrativised’. On the other hand, from a social constructivist viewpoint identities are formed as people consistently position others with more or less power, authority, and status. For example, families or classrooms can be considered to be cultural groups while at the same time they can be regarded as a collection of intersecting and changing social relationships. Children learn how to behave in general ways and in specific situations, including when they are playing, both because of their identification as a member of a particular family or classroom and because of their identities as a child relative to adults and siblings or classmates.

From a cultural viewpoint, a ‘narrativised’ or ‘figured identity’ creates a framework for viewing, interpreting and acting in one particular community and relating to other communities (each of which is a culturally constructed or ‘figured world’). People in every group share and tell stories that across time and space carry shared meanings and values. As Holland et al. (1998, pp. 281–282) note, ‘the signs or markers of culturally constructed identity, whether they be the display of particular skills, the enactment of certain motives, the cultivation of ways of speaking etc. . . . especially if objectified in the figured world, means to evoke one’s own sense of who one is and so organize one’s behavior’. The creation, and repeated enactment and references to, the stories of our dramatic play became markers of Michael’s, my own, and our family identity.

Identifying with a group also implies not identifying with those outside the group. As Hall (1996, p. 5) clarifies, ‘It is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the “positive” meaning of any term and thus its identity – can be constructed’. However, growing up in the divided society of Northern Ireland I was aware of corrosive consequences of a superior/inferior negative identification towards others and wanted our children to view others as different, but not lesser, selves who could have different expectations, including about appropriate behaviour when playing.

Holland also argues that, over time, people develop perspectives on the world as part of ‘positional’ or ‘relational identities’ as they are consistently socially positioned, and position themselves, in relation to other people. Relational identities, like ‘child’, ‘adult’, or ‘son’ are ‘a set of dispositions toward themselves in relation to where they can enter, what they can say, what emotions they can have, and what they can do in a given situation’ (Holland et al., 1998, p. 143). For example, at the core of how I ethically positioned our son, Michael, I would always be honest with him and, as much as possible, negotiate ‘win-win’ situations whether these were in everyday situations or as we played. He came to position me in a similar way; as someone who should be willing to listen, consider alternatives and act on the negotiated resolution of a proposed idea.

Although Michael and I could negotiate, we were also constrained by various institutional and social norms, depending on where we were and who else was present. Despite constraints we had agency to actively construct and reconstruct our identities. For Holland et al. (ibid), authors have agency when they improvise
responses to particular events that affect their position in a particular social and cultural space. There is a space for authorship between how identities are culturally determined and how they are the product of social positioning. Though improvisation is acknowledged to be at the heart of dramatic play, coauthoring entails improvisation that is more social and protean than is usually expected.

As Michael and I improvised we used cultural resources as tools for making meaning; these included all of the inferred people, objects, events and encounters of whatever narrative world we were exploring. As Holland et al. (ibid, p. 18) stress, how a person improvises depends on the cultural resources available to them because people opportunistically create responses in the moment ‘using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject positions afforded one in the present’.

In contrast with those everyday life experiences with adults, such as trips to unfamiliar places like restaurants, when the consciousness of young children can easily be overwhelmed by social expectations in cultural worlds that do not relate to their needs, children can choose in dramatic play to enter narrative worlds, where they already understand much of the social demands and cultural possibilities of imagined encounters. Knowing what characters do or might do, they can use their words, objects, actions and ideas to take charge of events, experiences and meaning-making. When an adult joins in, the resources available now include the adult’s deeds and their ethical evaluations.

4. COAUTHORING ETHICAL IDENTITIES IN DRAMATIC PLAY

In dramatic play children, and adults, can imagine and take action as they improvise the deeds of ‘possible selves’ (Davies and Harré, 1990) in whatever ‘possible narrative worlds’ (Bruner, 1986) they desire to project into. As the Russian social psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1967, p. 93) argues, ‘in play a child creates an imaginary situation in an imaginary illusory world [where] unrealizable desires can be realized’.

As Vygotsky (1967, p. 101) recognises, when children play their attention is more on the meaning of things and events in imagined worlds rather than on actual objects and movements as in everyday life: ‘In play, action is subordinated to meaning, but in real life of course, action dominates meaning’. There is a divergence between what a child actually perceives and the meaning created: ‘In play, thought is separated from objects and action arises from ideas rather than from things’ (ibid, p. 97). A stick may become a sword, a doll a child, a hand represents a person, or a moving boy may create a dragon.

Though play is widely accepted, using Vygotsky’s (1967, p. 539) phrase, to be ‘imagination in action’, play and imagination both tend to be dismissed as ‘not real’. Spatial theorists recognise the reality of imagination: only in imagination can we construct, conceptualise, and accept a reality of social and cultural relationships that is more complex than we can actually experience. As Soja (1996) puts it, social spaces are always ‘real-and-imagined’. I argue, following Vygotsky’s
conceptualisation that the ratio of action to meaning is inverted, that in dramatic play, as in the arts, social spaces are ‘imagined-and-real’. Players know that the imagined reality is created, and can be abandoned, at will. As we played, though Michael would accommodate the presence of objects and non-participating people (like furniture and his baby sister), the physical space was always transformed into places where we could have lived imagined-and-real experiences of, for example, violent aggression, bravery, kindness and deliberation.

Bakhtin did not regard children’s pretend play as promoting answerability since ‘playing does not presuppose any spectator situated outside their playing’ (1990, p. 74). When children play without adult involvement they rarely get ‘outside’ of their deeds to evaluate the actions of their possible selves. However, I argue that when adults collaboratively participate with children in dramatic play they create spaces in which significant ethical contemplation can take place. As I outline below, children can get outside their deeds in dramatic play with an adult, and vice versa: adults and children can be coauthoring selves and ethical identities when they pretend play together.

Adults can join children as equals inside narrative worlds. Together they can explore narrative landscapes with children and be coauthors of both a socially improvised spoken and embodied ‘text’ as well as interpretations of imagined events. In the following example from my field notes (June 4, 1994), Michael, aged 4½, has recently been captivated by, and listened over several days to, six cassette tapes of Tolkien’s The Hobbit; we have briefly pretended to be dwarves and dragons. For a few minutes one Saturday morning we pretend play after Michael climbs into bed beside me and our infant daughter.

I was lying in bed this morning with Michael and Zoë. Michael was pushing my arm with his foot as I cradled Zoë.

MICHAEL - I’m Smaug [the dragon from The Hobbit] and you are the people on the hill. OK, Daddy? Your hand is the people going down the hill [meaning my arm].

BRIAN - OK.

[I proceed to walk my hand down my arm. Michael kicks my arm away and giggles. Then he roars and transforms himself into Smaug, snarling and snapping at imaginary people which he devours.]

MICHAEL - Now you’re a dwarf and Zoë is a dwarf and I am Bilbo Baggins [all characters from The Hobbit]. OK, Daddy?

BRIAN - OK.

BILBO/MICHAEL - I have the ring (spoken in a lowered voice).

DWARF/BRIAN - What can the ring do?

BILBO/MICHAEL - It can make us invisible.

DWARF/BRIAN - What shall we do about Smaug? He’s killed all those people!

BILBO/MICHAEL - We’ll all creep up on him.

[Zoë starts to cry]

MICHAEL - Smaug put his foot on her that’s why she’s crying.

[I turn to comfort her. She stops crying and begins to look around.]

MICHAEL - Now Smaug has put his foot on me [lying down as if in agony].

BRIAN - He’s put his foot on me too. Help! Help! What shall we do? [also as if in agony]
DRAGON OF GOODNESS/MICHAEL - I am the Dragon of Goodness and I have come to help you.

DWARF/BRIAN - Help! We’re being crushed by Smaug.

MICHAEL - [as if grabbing and throwing a great weight] I threw Smaug over the mountain.

DWARF/BRIAN - He’s flying away. Oh, thank you for saving us. How did you know to come?

DRAGON OF GOODNESS/MICHAEL - Because your spirit called me.

DRAGON OF GOODNESS/MICHAEL - [kneeling down] Climb on my back [flapping his imaginary wings] We will fly to India. I escaped from the island where all the demons are [i.e. Lanka from *The Ramayana* which we’ve been reading in a picture book version].

BRIAN - Thank you Dragon of Goodness for saving us.

[We stop and leave the room for breakfast.]

In dramatic play, both Michael and I project into and move among the deeds of different possible selves: the dragon, Smaug; people being attacked and consumed by the dragon; the heroic dwarf, Bilbo, and other dwarves; and the Dragon of Goodness. This narrative world, like any fictional creation, is a possible world provided we can imagine that dragons and dwarves exist. It is significant from an ethical viewpoint as a world where Michael and I could experience and contemplate an attack, death, rescue and escape. Michael explores how he might act if he encountered people being attacked: moving among different possible selves he imagines he is first an attacking dragon, then one of those attacked; he chooses to confront the attacker and rescue the victims as a different dragon.

From the viewpoint of coauthoring a narrativised, or figured, ethical identity, in addition to his physical explorations and social negotiations in everyday worlds, often with me joining him, Michael could enter landscapes and particular encounters from scores of narratives, including *The Hobbit* and *The Ramayana*, that he had been introduced to and that had captured his intense interest. Michael was only minimally restricted or confined by a hierarchical world of ‘childhood’; as much as possible his mother and I and he together negotiated among our competing voices in order to ‘figure out’ family life so that we could accommodate most of Michael’s desire to engage in dramatic play as well as our other individual and shared pursuits (like having an uninterrupted mealtime). Nevertheless, he and I could both improvise more freely and extensively in dramatic play than in everyday life.

From the viewpoint of coauthoring positional, or relational, ethical identities, in his early years, especially in our dramatic play, I was a primary person whom Michael addressed and answered as another authoring self. This example illustrates the reciprocity in improvised exchanges that over the previous years had become part of our relational ethical identities. I consistently addressed Michael with assumptions of competence (e.g. assuming, but ready to remind him if necessary, that he would take care not to hurt his baby sister), a readiness to go along with his ideas and, at the same time, a willingness to negotiate rather than
rely on my parental status or an adult hierarchy: I agreed to be positioned by Michael, in the world of *The Hobbit*, in any way Michael wanted (be attacked by a dragon, become a dwarf, and be rescued). At the same time when I initiated an exchange (asking what to do about the people) I could assume we would converse as if we were the possible selves of any of the characters or as our everyday selves.

These brief moments of negotiated exchanges in the world of *The Hobbit* have ethical significance for Michael and me, in relation to one another, but also in relation to a wider range of ‘others’. Bakhtin’s earlier writings on an ethics of individual answerability should be read in relation to a shift found in his later writings, in which he is more concerned with an ethics of difference (Juzwik, 2004). In his early works, Bakhtin argues that ethical meaning is made when people are answerable for their acts (for example, as Bilbo is answerable for stealing from Smaug). In his later works, however, Bakhtin gives more attention to the group than to the individual, as he considers the implications of developing an authoring self in relation to *many* others (for example, Bilbo’s heroic actions and Smaug’s hateful attacks, in relation to the dwarves and the rescuing dragon). He stresses that meaning-making is always a process of negotiation among *different* (and to a greater or lesser extent, contested) positions, ideologies and languages that as ‘utterances’ are always addressed by authors towards other people who answer them. In everyday life the negotiations between Michael and me were rarely confrontational, whereas in imagined-and-real spaces, encounters could be highly oppositional, that could include (pretend) violence (for example, as a dragon killed people and was opposed by a heroic hobbit).

All of this is not to argue that if a child chooses to be a victim or a hero who uses violence in a pretend encounter, that his or her single act is ultimately a defining ethical position. Rather, through play, multiple conflicting positionings are possible, leaving open the possibility of determining, in the moment and over time, which are ethical. For Bakhtin, there is a ‘finalising’ effect of an ethical deed (e.g. people act in choosing to rescue others or not), but also significantly, an always present ‘unfinalisability’ of ethical action in a ‘heteroglossic’, multivocal community of authoring selves. Such multivocality and its related contestations are analysed in terms of both everyday speech (1986) and as discourse in the novel (1981, 1984). Whether formally or informally encoded, deliberation, for Bakhtin, is always a balancing of different viewpoints (e.g. between an escape and an attack in response). All texts, whether written or spoken, for Bakhtin (1981, p. 292), are comprised of competing voices and discourses: each consciousness has a specific point of view with an ethical presupposition about right actions that ‘encounter one another and coexist in the consciousness’ of writers and readers and, I argue, in those of people creating a text in dramatic play.

As many art theorists have stated, in aesthetic spaces, such as a painting, a poem, or a dramatic episode, it is possible to be more aware of how ideas collide and may be combined in juxtaposition or alignment. Bakhtin (1990, p. 5) argues that in everyday life we are ‘interested not in the whole of a human being but
only in those particular actions on his part which we are compelled to deal with in living our life’. But in aesthetic spaces, ‘the author’s reactions to the particular self-manifestations on the part of the hero are founded on his unitary reaction to the whole of the hero’ around whom a story revolves. The ‘hero’ of *The Hobbit* is Bilbo Baggins in relationship with all those he encounters. In our dramatic play, unlike with Michael’s experience of other aesthetic spaces, especially movies, the ‘whole of the hero’ included the consciousness of his father made apparent in my words and deeds as I projected with him into the imagined-and-real spaces of multiple narrative worlds.

From a heteroglossic viewpoint, in contrast with his everyday often partial and confusing experiences of people’s actions including mine, in our dramatic play Michael had a ‘whole’ view of countless actions of mythic heroes, like Bilbo, in relation to antagonists, like dragons, and those affected by their acts, like dwarves. Michael was captivated by the whole of whatever encounters we enacted and he moved within and among all consciousnesses: victims, perpetrators, bystanders and heroic people.

Bakhtin (1990, p. 26) details how authoring and answerability in an aesthetic space requires tripartite action: empathetic projection into another consciousness, a return to an outside consciousness, and an act of ‘contemplation’ or ‘completion’ of ethical and other meaning. Given the many times we played out a story from multiple character positionings, Michael could physically, mentally and emotionally project into the consciousness of any of the characters we encountered through story and play. Second, Bakhtin stresses that to be answerable, ‘my projection of myself into him must be followed by a return into myself, a return to my own place outside the … person, for only from this place can the material derived from projecting myself into the other be rendered meaningful ethically’. Because he is playing with me, Michael can repeatedly return to a position outside the consciousness he has just projected into. In relation to me, representing shifting addressees, he moves back and forth ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ projections into Smaug, his victims, dwarves and the Dragon of Goodness. I do the same with him now as a shape-shifting addressee for me.

Third, returning to a position outside another consciousness allows me, and Michael, to use ‘transgredient features’ not part of the person’s consciousness, that allow us to ‘complete’ meaning and thus ‘form and consummate’ values. My actions and evaluations became resources that Michael could also use to make meaning and shape values.

Being answerable means that as a person authors, in response to being addressed, they draw on, but also shape or determine, their values. Michael was continually addressing me. In each case an answering act is grounded by, but also affects, my beliefs of what is right-and-wrong and good-and-evil (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 141).

In *The Hobbit* example, as his father, I agree to his request to enact this scenario. Then in the imagined world I agree to being in vulnerable positions (being eaten by Smaug; being stepped on) as well as potentially heroic positions (as dwarves). I address Michael about what do about Smaug (in relation to the ring of
invisibility), ask for help, and then thank our rescuer (the Dragon of Goodness). I am aware how my actions in this particular encounter implicitly affirm the values that Michael and I are coauthoring: confronting oppression, defending the vulnerable and rescuing those in need. At the same time, as Michael answers me in response to how I address him, he affirms or raises questions about those values (for example, to enact a rescue he invents an alterego for Smaug, the Dragon of Goodness; on another day as Smaug he asked me/Bilbo why I was stealing his gold). In some encounters my ethical assumptions shifted, for example when I balked at shooting Mr Hyde (in the narrative world of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde that he explored soon after The Hobbit). As we played, and encountered children killed by Hyde my ethical belief about the use of weapons changed on that day. Having previously refused to use a gun, when I became a police officer I used the imagined gun, that Michael had introduced to the narrative world, to shoot and stop Hyde.

These episodes were typical of countless encounters that occurred over more than five years across multiple episodes in scores of mythic and other fictional narratives. Implicitly and explicitly hurtful and hateful acts were evaluated as wrong, mean, or evil while the acts of heroic defenders or nurturers were evaluated as right, kind and good.

Over time, we coauthored our ethical identities. As we explored and coauthored more nuanced narratives, Michael and I addressed each other in relation to more complex ethical dilemmas. In our dramatic playing I consistently promoted reciprocity between myself and Michael: we were coauthors of the living texts we created that focused on whatever narratives interested him as well as on the ethical meaning of scenarios.

Ethical meaning-making is not only unique for an individual in the moment, understanding it is also always socio-historical and socio-cultural. Ethical and other understandings form ‘links in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances’ (1986, p. 69) that over time collectively create ‘discourses’ that can be used as ethical frameworks to evaluate actions as right or wrong in relation to social and cultural groups, that include families and classrooms, as well as particular interactions. When the meaning from one exchange links with, and is affected by, meanings from other exchanges discourses become more and more ‘dialogised’ and thus more complex. Using Bakhtin’s metaphor of ‘voices’, the authoring self can be regarded as having ongoing internal as well as external conversations, or, as Morson and Emerson synthesise: ‘Selfhood is not a particular voice within, but a particular way of combining many voices within’ (1990, p. 221).

In one of the brief talks (June 30, 2004) I had with Michael at this age about our play it was clear how he had ‘combined many voices within’.

Would you kill all monsters?
Oh no, only those that have done many, many, many mean things . . . killing people mostly.
And what would you do before deciding you had to kill it?
I’d teach it to stop doing those mean things.
Aged 16 (July 7, 2006), his ethical understanding was much more dialogically nuanced yet retained the same core principles:

I don’t think anyone really deserves to die, I don’t think it’s right, but I think it’s sometimes necessary. I think it can be justified if you have no other option or if you’ve already tried all the other options and they haven’t worked. You can kill someone in self-defence, if the person is directly threatening to kill you or somebody else particularly if that person isn’t capable of defending themselves. It’s always more complicated than that but that’s the basic principle.

In everyday family-life negotiations I used our coauthoring reciprocity as much as possible to move us toward ethical commonality in ‘win-win’ solutions to problems. For example, we would negotiate both the content and timing of activities, assuming that all viewpoints should be considered. By contrast, in the imagined-and-real scenarios of our dramatic play Michael most often moved us towards making ethical meaning in extreme ‘win-lose’, often ‘life-and-death’, encounters.

On occasions, playing with Michael led to me being addressed in encounters that could become both more emotionally and ethically challenging for me: How do you react to seeing Quasimodo being publicly whipped, or Hyde kicking a person to death, or seeing the Beast dying in Beauty’s arms for lack of love? Michael wanted, and needed, my answers to such life-and-death questions not as universal moral absolutes but as ethical in-the-moment responses that were consistent with my ethical identity and moral integrity. In dramatic play where I had to act in answer to how I was addressed, I could not rely on moral platitudes or hide behind generalisations as I acted to protect, intervene and love other people in need. I tried to answer with honesty and integrity, relying on what I ethically believed rather than on moral abstractions. Bakhtin (1990, p. 1) reminds me that by turning to my life for answers my worldview will change.

I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life.

5. CONCLUSION

Vygotsky (1967, p. 100) insists that ‘a child’s greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality’ (emphasis mine). A Vygotskian (1978, p. 86) framework stresses that learning is in advance of a child’s development in ‘zones of proximal development’; when children play it’s ‘as if they are a head taller’ (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 95). Vygotskians who have empirically demonstrated the positive effect of play on learning, notably Bodrova and Leong (2006), have argued that in addition to assisting children in setting up the environment for play, adults need only participate and directly influence play in order to model social and play skills.
In this article I have argued for a Bakhtinian approach to adult participation with children in dramatic play that both extends Vygotsky and provides an alternative to moral developmentalist assumptions: child–adult coauthoring in dramatic play can affect the formation of the ethical identities of both children and adults.

Bakhtin’s theory of coauthorship assumes that people of any age will not only make meaning together when they repeatedly address and answer one another in ongoing dialogue but also authoring dynamically changing relational selves. The need for coauthors to honestly speak, hear and respond to one another, means that adult coauthors must base their relationships with children on mutual respect.

In extending Bakhtin’s theories of aesthetics and ethics to dramatic play I have argued that significant coauthoring will occur when participants project inside and move outside and among the consciousnesses available in fictional narratives that interest children. Any adult’s existing ethical identities will inform but also be affected by his or her moral evaluation of fictional events – evaluations needed by children if they are to coauthor ethical identities with adults. Perhaps the greatest challenge for adults who want to play with children is that they must be ready to be answerable to children with their lives.

6. REFERENCES


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