

# Adolescence, morality and reading guidance

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## Introduction

Our youth now loves luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise. They no longer rise when others enter the room. They contradict their parents before company, gobble their food and tyrannize their teachers.

Does this sound familiar? If it does, you are quite correct in assuming that it is a definition of teenagers by an adult. It was written by the Greek philosopher Socrates, about 500 years before the birth of Christ. This definition, critical though it is, is considered by many of today's adults as far too mild for modern teenagers. Adults point out the startling increase in alcohol and drug abuse, assault, vandalism, violence, serial killings, gender bending, contempt for all forms of authority, et cetera in support of their arguments.

Are teenagers then the affliction of modern day society? Is it actually harder to be a teenager today than it used to be in the past? Are today's teenagers under more pressure and stress than their peers of the past? If so, what can we as educators offer to alleviate stress, build meaningful relationships and support today's young people. Before we can formulate any goals or offer any solutions to the problem, we have to define at least three concepts very briefly: adolescence, morality and reading guidance.

## Adolescence

1. The well-known psychologist Stanley Hall, 1844–1924, referred to the period 12 to 25 years as adolescence, a term derived from the Latin “adolescere”, to grow. Hall said that adolescence is a time of storm and stress, contradicting tendencies, violent mood changes and marked variations in especially the following areas:

energy and enthusiasm

*versus*

indifference and boredom

gaiety and laughter

*versus*

gloom and melancholy

vanity and boastfulness

*versus*

humiliation and bashfulness



2. Konopka, as quoted by Boshoff, concurs with this definition: “The feeling of omnipotence tangoes with the feeling of helplessness and inadequacy. The cocksure conviction that it won’t happen to me plays hide and seek with the fear that it will” (Boshoff 1980:21).

Teenagers themselves are sensitive to these mood swings and inexplicable feelings of ambivalence. It is only too obvious from their behaviour, their pastimes and social pursuits, their relationships, the lyrics of their music and their preferred literature. The following poem by a 16-year-old sums it up:

No one can describe me the way I am  
No one can enter my brain  
At least no mortal man

For if you say you know me please sir look again  
For no man knows who I am but me  
And then ... do I really?

3. At least one “mortal man” did try to enter the brain of the adolescent. Sigmund Freud, 1856–1938, stated that the stage of puberty from 12 years upwards is marked with hormonal changes and an increase in sexual awareness. Freud’s daughter, Anna, regarded the continual restoration of the psychological balance as one of the major problems and tasks of adolescence. Because teenagers so often suffer from feelings of internalised guilt and conflict, two typical defence mechanisms come to the fore when trying to restore a psychological balance:
  - asceticism, by which the adolescent becomes extremely religious as if in defence against the “sinful” sexual drives of youth;
  - intellectualisation, by which the adolescent becomes extremely intellectual and logical about life as if in defence against emotionality of any kind.
4. Social anthropologists Ruth Benedict, 1887–1948, and Margaret Mead, 1901–1975, both argued that the behaviour of adolescents depends to a large extent on their socio-cultural environment. This is especially obvious in moral development, sex roles, responsibility and dominance. Which reminds us of the nature versus nurture school and the theories of Goddard and Watson and Arnold Gesell’s observation that although culture may inflect and channelise, it does not in itself generate the progression and trends of development. But more about this controversial and challenging topic in Mark West’s warmly recommended recent study *Children, culture, and controversy*.

5. During the 1950s social psychologists RH Peck and Robert J Havighurst postulated important theories as regards adolescent behaviour and development. In opposition to environmentalists they stated that not only the environment, but a meaningful interaction of maturation plus environment produces the personality of the adolescent.

Both Peck and Havighurst believe that in order to satisfy the needs of the individual and meet the expectations of society, the adolescent must accomplish specific developmental tasks for the period of adolescence, 12 to 18 years. The nine main developmental tasks which are marked in certain peak periods are the following:

- Accepting one's physique and accepting a masculine or feminine role
- Forming new relations with peers of both sexes
- Emotional independence from parents and other role playing adults
- Achieving the assurance of economic independence
- Selecting and preparing for an occupation
- Developing intellectual skills and concepts necessary for civic competence
- Desiring and achieving socially responsible behaviour
- Preparing for marriage and family life
- Building conscious values in harmony with an adequate scientific world picture.

6. According to Harvard psychologist Erik Erikson, 1902–1994, the individual is constantly pressured by his own internal needs and the external demands of society. Human life progresses in eight stages or phases, each stage marked by a crisis which needs to be resolved before significant and meaningful development can occur. Each stage has two possible resolutions, one positive, one negative. Unresolved crises or failure at any stage, can lead to anger, frustration,

unhappiness, or even adverse development at a later stage. Although Erikson's developmental stages form the ideal picture of adolescence, it is hardly possible to ever complete all these stages perfectly:

|             |             |              |        |                    |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------|--------------------|
| Infancy     | 1–1½ years  | basic trust  | versus | mistrust           |
| Childhood   | 1½–3 years  | autonomy     | versus | shame              |
| Play Age    | 3–5 years   | initiative   | versus | guilt              |
| School Age  | 5–12 years  | industry     | versus | inferiority        |
| Adolescence | 12–18 years | identity     | versus | identity confusion |
| Young Adult | 18–25 years | intimacy     | versus | isolation          |
| Adulthood   | 25–65 years | generativity | versus | stagnation         |
| Maturity    | 65+ years   | integrity    | versus | despair            |

The first four stages refer to the preschool, primary school and pre-adolescent child. The last two stages do not concern us at present, but the fifth and sixth stages reflect on adolescence and deserve close scrutiny. The fifth stage, 12 to 18 years, has as its positive the achievement of identity and as its negative identity confusion. Erikson, who coined the now well-known phrase “identity crisis” maintains that an adolescent with an ideal state of identity would experience little or no internal conflicts and anxieties. During adolescence young people must be allowed to experiment with different identities the better to reach a personal identity, even and also vicariously through literature. Adolescence must provide a moratorium, a time out. But if adolescents persistently steer clear of commitments or if they refuse to make choices, they fail to achieve a cohesive personality and identity confusion and crises occur. Remember the anguish of Biff in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a salesman* : “I just can’t take hold, Mom, I can’t take hold of some kind of life”.

Although Erikson’s sixth stage is partly concerned with adulthood, it is discussed briefly because it refers to intimacy with others, and in a far more

comprehensive sense than just physical or sexual intimacy. Erikson implies that the essential ability to relate one's deepest fears and hopes to another person is to accept that person's need for intimacy in return. The identity of the adolescent may be more successfully and easily achieved and fulfilled by the loving intimacy with another person:

No man is an island entire of  
itself;  
Every man is a piece of the  
continent  
a part of the main (John Donne)

7. More recently, during the 1980s, a clinical psychologist, John Coleman, completed a longitudinal study of 800 teenagers, boys and girls of 100 each at the ages of 11, 13, 15 and 17 respectively. Like Stanley Hall the "focal theory" in Coleman's research highlights periods of storm and stress. Coleman's research makes it clear that adolescence is not an either/or phenomenon, but a life cycle with its unique problems, problems which often go unnoticed by parents and teachers. According to Coleman feelings of unhappiness and frustration occur most often in the following developmental areas: self-image, heterosexual relationships, parental relationships, friendships and peer group situations, including loneliness.

All those areas are of considerable concern to adolescents at all developmental stages, but each area peaks at a different age level. Thus conflict with parents refers to less than 20 percent of 11-year-old boys, whereas it escalates to 60 percent of all 17-year-olds.

In summary, then,

adolescence is a period of rapid personal development beginning at puberty and ending at adulthood, at which time most people have achieved employment and a relatively permanent relationship with another person, or both (Dacey 1982:28).

### **Morality and moral development**

Ethics, morality and moral philosophy is the study or discipline which concerns itself with judgments of approval and disapproval, judgements as to right and wrong, good or bad, virtue and vice, the desirability of actions, objectives, states of affairs. Three main groups of questions come into play when morality is discussed:

- Moral questions: Is polygamy wrong?
- Questions about opinions: What did Christ say about polygamy?
- Questions about moral concepts: right, good, duty, patriotism, celibacy, monogamy, et cetera.

These are all abstract ideas and according to Jean Piaget, eminent Swiss psychologist, adolescence is exactly that particular developmental phase which is characterised by the ability for abstract thinking, generating alternatives, forming hypotheses and for testing opinions against evidence. Thus during adolescence, the concrete operational stages of childhood is replaced by the stage of formal operations, with a shift from the real and concrete to abstract and deductive reasoning. This newly acquired ability enables the adolescent to conceptualise personal thoughts as well as the thoughts of others.

The cognitive abilities of the formal operational stage enables the adolescent to question existing values and mores, to notice and criticise discrepancies between

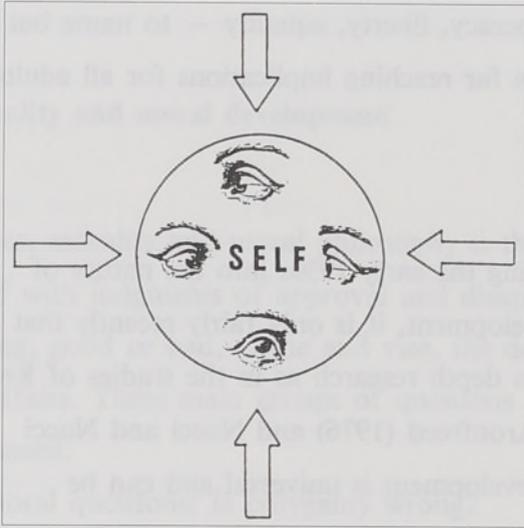
actual and possible in social, political and religious systems. Diverse points of view are considered, situations are weighed and carefully examined in order to arrive at general guidelines. Dilemmas are resolved by universal acknowledgement of principles of justice, freedom, democracy, liberty, equality – to name but a few. Needless to say that this stage has far reaching implications for all adults who communicate with young people.

Apart from Piaget's investigations during the early 1930s into the nature of morality and the process of moral development, it is only fairly recently that psychological research has attempted in depth research as in the studies of Rest (1973; 1976), Kohlberg (1969; 1976), Aronfreed (1976) and Nucci and Nucci (1982). Kohlberg claims that moral development is universal and can be facilitated. Moral development occurs in six stages:

Stages 1 and 2 are based on a sense of preconventional morality. Obedience and moral decisions are based on physical and material power, the desire to avoid physical punishment or disapproval from a superior person and in satisfying one's own need.

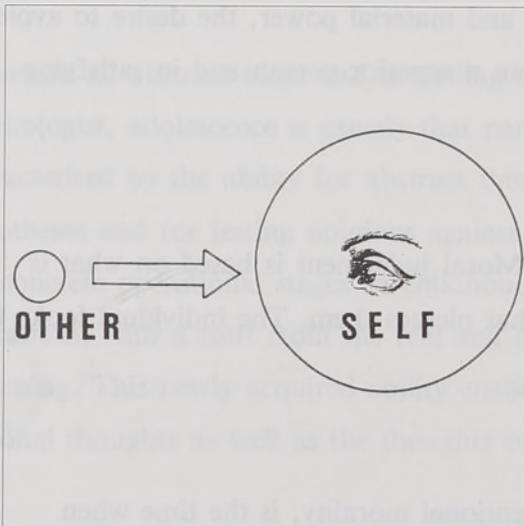
Stages 3 and 4 are social conforming. Moral judgement is based on what is considered acceptable by others and what pleases them. The individual looks to rules, codes and laws for guidance.

Stages 5 and 6, the stages of postconventional morality, is the time when individuals reach the highest moral development. They behave according to social contract and universal principles of judgement.



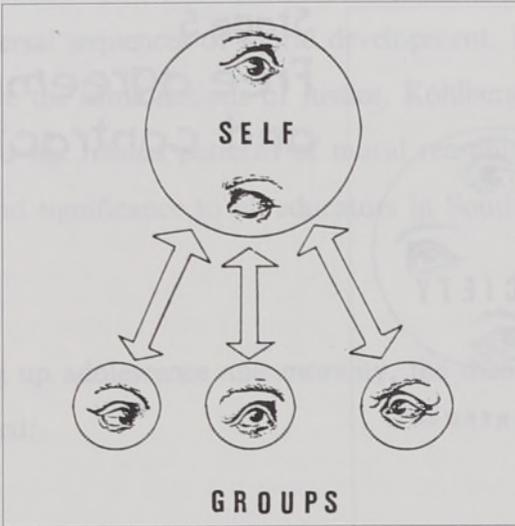
Preconventional moral values

Stage 1  
Concern about self



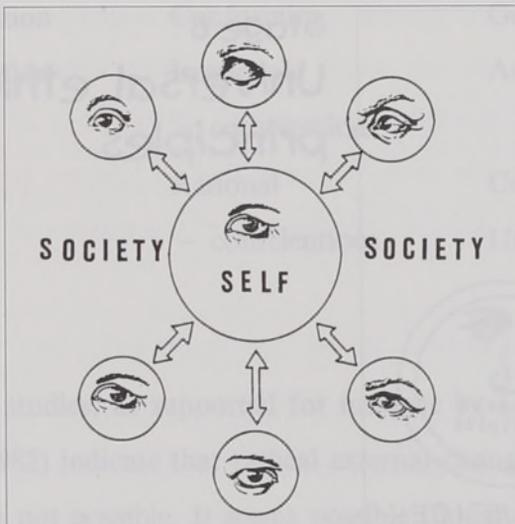
Preconventional moral values

Stage 2  
One-way concern  
about others



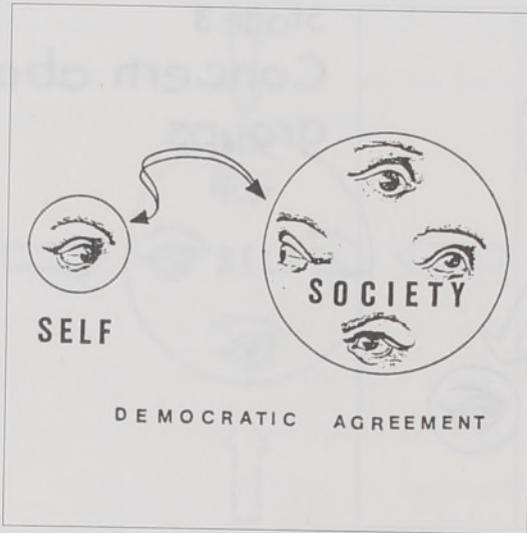
Stage 3  
Concern about  
groups

Conventional moral values



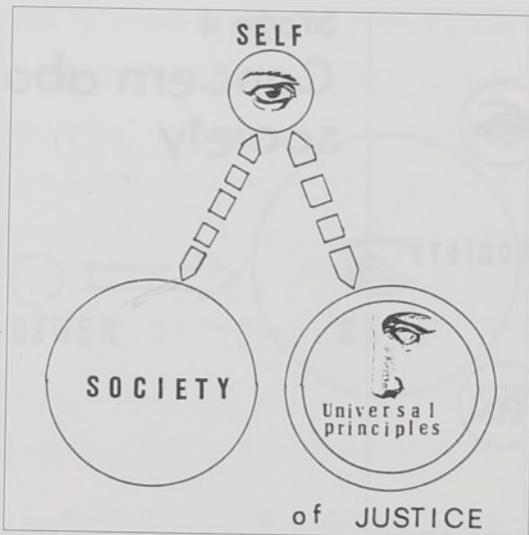
Stage 4  
Concern about  
society

Conventional moral values



Stage 5  
Free agreement  
and contract

Postconventional moral values



Stage 6  
Universal ethical  
principles

Postconventional moral values

Postconventional morality is characterised by a major thrust towards autonomous moral principles and a willingness to conform to the universal principles of justice. Although teenagers in South Africa may differ in culture, they will all follow universal sequences of moral development. Hence teenagers of different cultures have the same notions of justice. Kohlberg's findings about cultural diversity and age related patterns of moral reasoning seems to be of special relevance and significance to all educators in South Africa.

In summing up adolescence and morality, the theories of well-known researchers are compared:

| <b>Piaget</b>   | <b>Peck &amp; Havighurst</b> | <b>Kohlberg</b>            |
|-----------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Individual   | Amoral                       | Obedience vs Punishment    |
| 2. Egocentric   | Expedient                    | Instrumental hedonism      |
| 3. Cooperation  | Conforming                   | Good boy/good girl         |
| 4. Codification | Irrational                   | Authority and social order |
|                 | – conscientious              |                            |
| 5.              | Rational                     | Contractual legalistic     |
|                 | – conscientious              | Universal ethics.          |

Kohlberg's studies, as supported for instance by Lieberman & Selman (1974) and Maqsud (1982) indicate that radical external changes in the moral judgement of teenagers is not possible. It seems possible though to promote positive moral development in discussion groups such as sex education, social studies and reading and career guidance.

## Reading guidance

At the onset of this discussion the challenge was posed of how best to support adolescents in moral growth and development. The generation gap – and it definitely exists! – between adolescents and adults may be partly bridged by a wholehearted, honest commitment to positive and constructive reading guidance and reading programmes. The generous sharing of literacy and literature is a time tested way of communication and it can and will enhance moral development. According to Beard's research, 1988, with a group of 240 multicultural teenagers from different urban areas, young people do benefit from discussion groups about moral dilemmas. Beard found that after intervention discussions the Kohlberg test for moral judgement showed a mean increase of 0,5 and Rest's test for defining issues recorded a mean increase of 0,7 (Beard 1988:398).

In addition to Beard's research, it could be useful to adapt the work of Blatt, Colby and Speicher on hypothetical dilemmas for discussion groups. Maybe it is advisable to concentrate initially on one moral dilemma only, although YA books often investigate more than one moral or social issue. For instance in *On my honour*, by Marion Dane Bauer, the main theme is that of honesty versus dishonesty, but self-preservation, loyalty, obedience and the trauma of death are also interwoven.

Consider *On the edge*, by Gillian Cross, a highly suspenseful novel which poses some very relevant ethical questions about, *inter alia*, identity, shifting family relationships, powers and privileges of the press and survival at all costs. The central critical dilemma revolves around the decisions of the main character. Tug tries to survive on his own terms, rather than submit to the brainwashing

manipulations of his kidnappers. Cross pits a select group of individuals against a highly charged political crisis. Tug's moral struggle makes for rivetting reading and challenging discussions.

Religious stories have almost become anathema and religious belief is rarely portrayed as a desirable moral choice for young adults. Educators have become so liberal in providing "safe" books that they have closed their minds against the deep-rooted psychological needs of readers who crave the reassurance of "good, godly books" in the finest sense of the word, excluding didacticism and moral pontification. For adults must ever be careful of the thoughts which are presented to young minds; like hand-down clothes they do not always fit. Consider, for instance, the uses and abuses of prayer in *Izzy, willy nilly*, an uplifting story by award-winning Cynthia Voigt and in *See you Thursday*, by Jean Ure. Consider also the firm religious belief that the conquest of South Africa was justified as a divine mission, as portrayed in *Waiting for the rain*, by Sheila Gordon. I quote Frikkie, the main character:

They were truly religious people. They travelled with the gun in one hand and the Bible in the other. They believed it was God's will that they should trek north and settle in the Promised Land.

Religious workers like clergyman, revival leaders, nuns, priests, et cetera are often either ridiculed or romanticised in YA literature. A fair portrayal is appreciated as in *A Solitary blue*, by Cynthia Voigt. Brother Thomas is central to the plot, as he is more perceptive to Jeff's problems than his father, the professor. "Brother Thomas had a deep stabilizing faith; although he didn't talk about it, it was always there in him."

In *Waiting for the rain*, Tengo is tutored by a white Methodist minister who feels helpless before the violent tactics of the comrades who “have been forced into existence by the cruelty and injustice” of the apartheid government. In the Afrikaner churches funds are raised for the upliftment of poor whites, because “we cannot allow our own Afrikaner people to live like kaffirs”. Tengo cannot help but be sceptical about the teachings of the Bible, when he considers how the white people use it at random to support racist politics, “finding their justification for maintaining blacks always as menials by regarding them as the children of Ham who were to remain hewers of wood and drawers of water”.

During the last decade many schools have opted for moral education rather than formal religious instruction. Although the former neither excludes nor includes mandatory religious instruction, the ultimate connection between moral education and a religious inclination is obvious. Moral education can easily be part and parcel of religious instruction and or reading guidance.

Fortunately reading guidance is no longer the sole prerogative or responsibility of librarians. Teachers, parents, peers, staff in bookshops, publishers, authors, community workers – in short all educators partake in the process. The success of their combined efforts are largely dependent on adequate knowledge of their target group – adolescents, available reading materials and ways and means of bringing readers and books together in a meaningful process of reading enjoyment and moral development.

If brief periods of classroom discussion can have a substantial effect on moral development, a pervasive, enduring and psychologically sound concern for the schools influence upon moral development should have a much deeper and more positive effect (Blatt & Kohlberg 1973:51).

Beard's research proves this theory. After intervention, such as the application of the Moral Developmental Approach, devised by Kohlberg, Turiel and Blatt, Beard's research indicates that exposure to discussion in itself has significant influence (1988:302). The manipulation of the environment, as with discussion groups and reading guidance programmes, can and will stimulate growth in moral development.

Regrettably adults often regard reading guidance to adolescents as either impossible or redundant. According to Edwards many adults experience adolescents in the library as beasts intruding into a fair garden. Indeed, says Edwards, the teenager may be "a hooligan, a rebel ... a drop out, a loner, a gang cultist, a dabbler in the latest trends, a revolutionary, given to giggling and exhibitionism, irreligious, vulgar, inarticulate and utterly selfish". And yet they expect "life on the mountain tops". Instead adults give them "plains of boredom and valleys of misery" (Edwards 1975:13). It is, therefore, not surprising that teenagers decline to read and consequently suffer from reading problems. Readership surveys like the Whitehead Report (1974) and the Heather Report (1980) provide conclusive proof of reluctant and sometimes aliterate readers.

#### WHITEHEAD SURVEY : 10-15 years : 7800

*1969-1974*

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| 10+ →      | 3 books per week   |
| 12+ →      | 2,2 books per week                                       |
| 14+ →      | 1,9 books per week                                       |
| 36 % 14+ → | no books at all  |
| 50 % 10+ → | books based on television                                |
| 50 % →     | non-readers are of average or above average intelligence |

## HEATHER SURVEY : 13-14 years : 60

1979-1980

### Time spent reading per week

|             |                              |
|-------------|------------------------------|
| 9 → 15 % →  | Do not read books            |
| 15 → 25 % → | Do not read every week       |
| 8 → 13 % →  | Under two hours              |
| 15 → 14 % → | Between two and four hours   |
| 4 → 11 % →  | Between four and eight hours |
| 4 → 11 % →  | More than eight hours        |

We, the educators, owe these young people powerful reading experiences, experiences which engage their normal judgement in a critical and vital way. Great thinking can emerge from great questions and inspiring book discussions can be memorable reading experiences. There is a rare sense of pleasure in a book that is enjoyed and savoured privately, but there is an even greater sense of elation watching young people discuss books with pleasure and passion, long after a book talk. Books which offer a variety of moral choices will foster moral growth.

Many teenage novels are written with genuine respect for the reader and their authors have a perceptive eye to authenticity and sincerity. Regrettably, there seems to be a trend towards writing about gratuitous sex, violence and taboo subjects. Today's young people need books which do more than just entertain. Readers must be challenged, must be made active participants in the text, must be drawn in on cognitive, emotional and moral levels. They are, after all, the inaugural generation of our democracy.

If educators want to introduce such meaningful reading programmes, it is necessary to take serious note of the fields of interests of young people and their various ways of communication, bearing in mind that reading is but one of many such ways – and often not even a popular one.

Reading profiles for mixing and matching will contain information on, *inter alia*, the following aspects of communication:

- What do teenagers read?

Paul Zindel, Judy Blume, Wilbur Smith, *Scope*, *Asterix*, *Mad*, *Surfer*.

- What do teenagers listen to?

Luciano Pavarotti, Prince, Julio Iglesias, Little Sister, UB 40, Rolling Stones, Rap.

- What do teenagers watch?

Music videos, computer programs, virtual reality, pornographic films, plays at the Nico Malan, art exhibitions, Beverley Hills, The Piano.

- What do teenagers do?

Disco-dancing, slimnastics, water aerobics, rugby, boardsailing, shooting smack, rollerblading, ballroom dancing.

From these grassroots levels we can maybe then progress to novels which complement the developmental tasks of adolescents, as illustrated in the appended reading list. There is such a wide variety of teenage books that educators can provide for an extremely broad spectrum of reading interests and reading levels, ranging from abortion to zootherapy. They can, so to speak, shop for reading matter in the supermarket of life. But whether or not reading guidance can enliven, and maybe replace, the sterile pop culture teenagers have come to know, can only be hoped for.

In fulfilling our educational and moral obligations to young people, we share in exciting and challenging reading experiences. Erik Erikson, who died last year at the age of 91 and still obsessed by the ideal to serve young minds, urges us towards a common goal:

We are now working towards and fighting for, a world in which the harvest of democracy may be reached. But if we want to make the world safe for democracy, we must first make democracy safe for the child ... We have learned not to stunt a child's growing body with child labour; we must now learn not to break his growing spirit ... If we will only learn to let live, the plan for growth is all there!

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## Selected reading list

### Accepting one's physique and sexual roles

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Blume, Judy         | <i>Deenie</i>                                     |
| Chambers, Aidan     | <i>Dance on my grave</i>                          |
| Hautzig, Deborah    | <i>Second star to the right</i>                   |
| Kingman, Lee        | <i>Head over wheels</i>                           |
| Lowry, Lois         | <i>A Summer to die</i>                            |
| Rees, David         | <i>The Milkman's on his way</i>                   |
| Scoppettone, Sandra | <i>Happy endings are all alike</i>                |
| Townsend, Sue       | <i>The Adrian Mole diaries</i>                    |
| Wersba, Barbara     | <i>Crazy Vanilla: tunes for a small harmonica</i> |

### **New relations with age mates of both sexes**

|                   |                                      |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Anderson, Rachel  | <i>French lessons</i>                |
| Banks, Lynne Reid | <i>My darling villain</i>            |
| Hinton, S.E.      | <i>Tex</i>                           |
| Rosenberg, Sandra | <i>Will there never be a prince?</i> |
| Ure, Jean         | <i>See you Thursday</i>              |
| Voigt, Cynthia    | <i>David and Jonathan</i>            |
| Wersba, Barbara   | <i>The Dream watcher</i>             |

### **Emotional independence of adults**

|                     |                                |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| Campbell, R. Wright | <i>Where pigeons go to die</i> |
| Cormier, Robert     | <i>After the first death</i>   |
| Moggach, Deborah    | <i>You must be sisters</i>     |
| Peck, Richard       | <i>Father figure</i>           |
| Voigt, Cynthia      | <i>A Solitary blue</i>         |
| Wersba, Barbara     | <i>Run softly, go fast</i>     |

### **Achieving economic independence**

|                 |                               |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| Ashley, Bernard | <i>Break in the sun</i>       |
| Ball, Donna     | <i>The Winners</i>            |
| Darke, Marjorie | <i>Comeback</i>               |
| Kamm, Josephine | <i>The Runaways</i>           |
| Lingard, Joan   | <i>Into exile and sequels</i> |

### **Selecting and preparing for an occupation**

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Hinton, Nigel       | <i>Buddy</i>                            |
| Kennemore, Tim      | <i>The Chosen few</i>                   |
| Leach, Christopher  | <i>Searching for skylights</i>          |
| Le Guin, Ursula     | <i>Very far away from anywhere else</i> |
| Paterson, Katherine | <i>Lyddie</i>                           |
| Potok, Chaim        | <i>The Chosen; My name is Asher Lev</i> |
| Zindel, Paul        | <i>A Star for the latecomer</i>         |

### **Developing intellectual skills and civic competence**

|                 |                                |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| Adams, Adrienne | <i>Into the road</i>           |
| Darke, Marjorie | <i>A Kind of courage</i>       |
| Hinton, Nigel   | <i>Getting free</i>            |
| Hofmeyr, Dianne | <i>A Sudden summer</i>         |
| Pointon, Barry  | <i>A Song for the disco</i>    |
| Zindel, Paul    | <i>I never loved your mind</i> |

### **Desiring and achieving social responsibility**

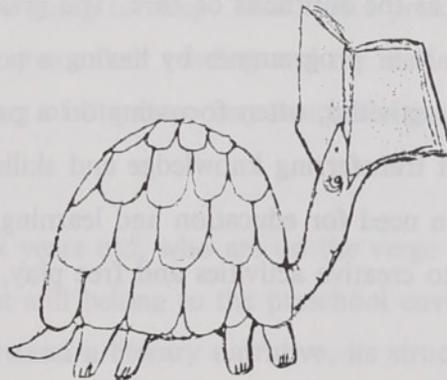
|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Bransby, Lawrence   | <i>Down street; Homeward bound</i>         |
| Cormier, Robert     | <i>The Chocolate war; We all fall down</i> |
| Harris, Marilyn     | <i>Hatter fox</i>                          |
| Townsend, John Rowe | <i>King Creature come</i>                  |
| Zindel, Paul        | <i>Confessions of a teenage baboon</i>     |

### **Preparing for marriage and family life**

|                    |                                      |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Arundel, Honor     | <i>The Longest weekend</i>           |
| Cookson, Catherine | <i>Hamilton</i>                      |
| Doherty, Berlie    | <i>Dear Nobody</i>                   |
| Gabel, Wolfgang    | <i>Breakfast together for always</i> |
| Guest, Elissa H.   | <i>Over the moon</i>                 |

### **Building conscious values**

|                    |                                     |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Bauer, Marion Dane | <i>On my honour</i>                 |
| Bosse, Malcolm     | <i>Ganesh</i>                       |
| Bransby, Lawrence  | <i>A Mountaintop experience</i>     |
| Chambers, Aidan    | <i>Now I know</i>                   |
| Cormier, Robert    | <i>The Bumble bee flies anyway</i>  |
| Craven, Margaret   | <i>I heard the owl call my name</i> |
| Stewart, Michael   | <i>Grace</i>                        |
| Watson, James      | <i>Talking in whispers</i>          |



# Children's literature in Swedish pre- school education

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The Swedish preschool<sup>1</sup> curriculum is traditionally based on the ideas of Friedrich Fröbel and his followers, relating preschool education to children's own world of experience. Teachers have the role of being organisers of a supportive and respectful environment based on knowledge of children's development. The preschool teacher should thus enhance development by giving the child an opportunity to meet new influences and new experiences. However, in the last decades, this main tradition has in some places been replaced by an artificial dichotomy, where learning can be seen as the opposite of development, and education as the antithesis of care. The preschool in general solves this inherent conflict in their programmes by having a portion of the day allocated to structured activities, often focussing on a particular theme of content, with the purpose of transferring knowledge and skills, and this curriculum is seen as satisfying a need for education and learning, while another portion of the day is allocated to creative activities and free play, where the children have the initiative.

In an experientially oriented preschool education (Pramling 1989), children encounter a pedagogy where this unnatural dichotomy is dissolved and where

children work in an atmosphere where learning and development are seen as one, as in the early preschool based on Fröbel. The role of the teacher in this approach is to give children rich opportunities to express their ideas of the world around them, and also to change their ideas when confronted with alternatives. The teacher's aim should be to structure activities that will give children room to think, and reflect on the structure and content of the subject matter, as well as on their own learning. In this context, children's literature could play an important role in showing children an extended world of experience. Narratives are also by nature neither more nor less connected with one or the other of the two main goals of preschool; education and care.

According to the official documents in Sweden (Socialstyrelsen 1987), children's literature should form a natural content of preschool education in order to make children develop literacy and language, as well as to facilitate children's emotional and social development. In practice, studies (for example Williams-Graneld, 1989) have found that children's literature is used mainly as a sedative, as a means of regression rather than development. That is, in order to calm down a large group of restless youngsters, the children are read to before going home, or before sitting down to a meal, or even before going to sleep. Thus, since preschool teachers seldom speak to the children about their reading and the stories they read, they take children's understanding of literature very much for granted.

In order to find out how children, six years old, who are on the verge of entering the formal school system, but still belong to the preschool environment of supported free development, understand a literary narrative, its structure and content, how they relate it to the world around them and also how they relate listening to narratives to their own learning, we interviewed two groups of children about their response to Shel Silverstein's *The Giving tree* (1964). One

group had been subject to an experientially oriented pedagogy and the other to “ordinary” preschool education (Pramling, Asplund Carlsson & Klerfelt 1994).

In this our first study, we were primarily interested in children’s understanding of a tale, related to two differing kinds of preschool pedagogy, but we also found some implications for preschool didactics. These implications were realised in a development project “Children, narratives and books in preschool” where children’s literature was to be used in order to make children reflect on the structure and content of narratives, on the world around them and the process and content of their own learning. It seemed that even in a study of an experientially oriented pedagogy, the main focus of children’s development was placed on traditionally “academic” fields of learning such as literacy, arithmetic, society and nature. Children’s literature was still used very much in order to get children’s attention, calm them down and make them relax. We will in this paper present one example of how this work was carried out in the form of a literary theme “The characters of Moomin Valley”.

### **The aims of the project and the themes developed**

In the project, four different schools were selected, from different areas in and near the city of Gothenburg. Two of the schools were day-care centres, where children from the age of two up to six years spent a large part of the day, while their parents were at work, and two schools were part-time preschools or kindergartens, where children, aged six years, stayed for a few hours in a kind of school preparation programme. Two of the schools, one day-care and one kindergarten, choose to work with the “Moomin Valley”, a well-known series of children’s books by the Finnish author, Tove Jansson.

The day-care teachers wanted to work with the concept of character in the whole series of books. Therefore they read nearly all the books in the series and worked with the characters in a number of ways. The goal of the theme was to make children aware of the fictional characters, how the fictional characters appear in these books and how they are related to the “real” world of friends, parents, teachers; that is, the child’s own world of characters. In fact, fictional characters form a large part of the child’s world of experience, and the goal of this theme was to discern and problematise the phenomenon “fictional character” in general and the characters of the Moomin world in particular.

The other school was mainly interested in the structure of “Finn Family Moomintroll” (Jansson 1968) as a novel or “chapterbook”<sup>2</sup> and the phenomenon of magic. However when the theme was completed the teachers found that the children had taken such a great interest in the characters that a new theme had begun, before the school year ended.

What do we then actually mean by “character” in fiction? Docherty (1983) points at three different and contradictory concepts of character; firstly, the emblematic, or allegorical, secondly, the realistic or mimetic and thirdly, the (post-)modern, or phenomenological character. The allegorical character has only one interpretation and is the personification of a single attitude, of certain moral implications and can be summarised in one word: for instance Evil or Good. We found (in Asplund Carlsson 1993) that children and adolescents read the story *The Giving tree* in an allegorical way, where the two protagonists, the tree and the boy were interpreted as symbols of Jesus and mankind, Giving and Taking, Spiritualism and Materialism, et cetera.

Adolescents (average age 17) also preferred to read a short story by Franz Kafka "Before the Law" as an allegory (Asplund Carlsson, Marton & Halasz 1993), thus interpreting the figures of the man from the country as everyman and the doorkeeper as an emblem for the Law.

The mimetic or psychological character can be described and understood in the same way as a "real" human, with the same demands on psychological probability and coherence, on development and conflict et cetera. The (post-)modern character is often absent in the text according to Docherty. This character, also discussed as "point of view", describes the events, the other characters and the setting in a narrative and makes the reader experience the narrative through this character although the character itself is transparent.

These three types of character, following the development of the concept of character in the history of epic, can all be found, brought forward and problematised in the books about Moomin. They also have relevance for the child's conception of character, both fictional and nonfictional, "real".

### **Procedure of the theme work**

In an experientially oriented pedagogy, it is essential to start with children's own world of experience. The books about Moomin and his friends and family have been translated into animated film by a Japanese film company. These films were shown on Swedish television at the time when the schools were about to choose their themes. Therefore, it was not surprising that the children were playing Moomintrolls at school. In a game, initiated by the teachers, where the children

were asked to give examples of characters in books, the Moomin characters were mentioned repeatedly. The teachers found that even though they themselves were more interested in working with a theme of folktales, the Moomin Valley and its inhabitants could not be disregarded.

The schools decided on books to read and started reading them aloud to the children. They had to make alterations in their daily routines of reading so that the reading could be followed up by creative work in order to make the children reflect on the texts. Before the daily reading session started, the children were asked to retell what they had listened to the day before. If someone had been absent this was an excellent opportunity to discuss the importance of the events in the preceding sections and to recapitulate the story. It was also necessary for the teachers to observe what children had focussed on in the previous section and what they thought was of less importance. The teacher also had an opportunity to bring forward what she thought was remarkable in the previous events. During the reading aloud, the children were allowed to interrupt if they had remarks to make and questions to ask. Other children were invited to discuss matters raised by the children. After reading and discussing some of the more complicated words and events in the new text, the children were given a task to be carried out which was supposed to reflect what had been brought up in the text read that day. They could be asked to make drawings of a particular character, or of their own favourite character or of a feeling expressed by one of the characters.

The techniques that were used to make children express and reflect on their own thinking were drawing, painting, clay modelling, drama, song and dance et cetera.

At one such instance three children, two boys and a girl, painted their own favourite characters and while painting expressed their experiences of the

character in question. In this work the teacher made the observation that the girl was more concerned with the outer appearance of her character: that Moominmamma had a striped apron and a black handbag. This girl also made a series of paintings with Mymble doing all kinds of mischief, but in response to the teacher's question whom she liked most, she said she preferred Moominmamma, because of the apron and the handbag. The two boys on the other hand chose their characters from these characters' favourite occupations: fishing (Snufkin) and collecting plants (Hemul). When more children had taken part in the painting sessions, these preliminary observations were confirmed and the children discussed with their teacher why the female characters, whom the girls preferred, wore things and owned things, while the male characters whom the boys chose were more likely to do things. Why did the girls not favour Mymble? In this work, the children became aware of the fictional characters being described by accessories and by speech as well as by events. In order to focus on the events the teachers arranged a shadow play with the chosen characters, where the accessories were only vaguely visible and where the speech and the events were stressed in order to characterise the figures.

The creative work connected with the reading was thus not used only for amusement and for the development of children's creativity as such, but it was also used as a means to make children express, in creative work and in discussion, their conceptions about the focus of the work, in this case fictional character. When the children had been given a task, there was never an issue whether the solution to the task was right or wrong, but the point was rather to be made aware of the several possible solutions to the task and also the possibility to discuss the different solutions. Therefore, the group was used as a means to develop children's conceptions of the task and the focus of it.

## What is development of conceptions of character?

Firstly we had to ask, what the children's conceptions of fictional character were, as the theme was initiated. As we saw in the example above, the children were able to express their conceptions when making paintings of the characters. The teacher was then able to direct the work and plan the theme in order to develop the children's conceptions. She decided that she wanted the children to describe and reflect about characters in more psychological terms; from an outer – more emblematic – focus on character to an inner, more psychological description of character. As we can see from Docherty's characterisation of the development of the novel, the teacher's aims follow that of the history of character, without her being aware of it.

It is always more difficult to focus on the inner qualities of a character when working with characters that have an established form, like the Moomins, whose portraits are clearly outlined, through illustrations, picture books and films. In other themes, teachers read narratives which were not illustrated, or where the illustrations were introduced to the children, once the theme was completed. Through the arrangement of the shadowplay, however, the outer characteristics were reduced to a minimum and the inner were brought into focus. Another means of shifting the attention from the outer to the inner was through focussing on feeling and thereby letting the inner state of mind reflect the outer expression instead of vice versa. It was found, which was not surprising, that the children had a conception of outer appearance reflecting inner qualities; that is, Beauty is good while the Beast is evil. They had a tendency to let this conception based on a fictional world of experience influence their own world of friendship and the only girl at day-care who did not have long curly hair suffered severely from this.

One task was to depict gloom using pencil. How do you look gloomy, how have professional artists depicted gloom, and how do children as artists describe the feeling? Subsequently, the teacher arranged an exhibition of all the drawings in grey and white and the children were free to comment on the different ways to depict gloom. This was also one way of getting away from the children's conception that pictures should always be "nice" and reduce the competition between the children as to who had made the nicest picture.

Another difficulty is to make children aware of a character's inner change. Many narratives for children are based on outer change reflecting inner change. The prince becomes a beast who eventually changes back into a prince. When the children, from the whole project, were interviewed about the tale of Beauty and the Beast, they were not always aware of the prince and the beast as the "same" being. Therefore character is often conceptualised as static, even if the process of "getting to know" the "real" character is dynamic. The beast was really a prince all the time.

How then does the teacher know that the work with the theme has been successful? The teacher's own development and increasing knowledge about children's conceptions is one measure of success. If the teacher has not learnt anything about her children, the theme has been a failure, in developmental terms.

If the children have had several opportunities to express themselves and to listen to others, they will have learnt that there are more ways to solve a task and more ways to describe a fictional character than that of the film they have seen or the book they have read. One teacher observed for instance that the first

drawings of the Moomin characters were more like Tove Jansson's original, while the final drawings depicted the characters as human and not as trolls. This observation suggests that the children looked on the characters as friends and relatives and saw their inner qualities rather than their outer, which was one of the goals of the theme. In fact, Tove Jansson's own drawings of the trolls show the opposite direction of development (Westin 1988).

When the children were made aware of their own development in their conceptions of the fictional characters visible in their drawings, they were also able to reflect on their own learning process, which was another goal of the theme.

As researchers, we have other means of evaluating the theme work. All the children were interviewed before as well as after the theme work about stories that were not focussed in the work at all. The children who had worked with the theme of character all showed an increasing tendency to reason about fictional characters as psychologically coherent, when it was relevant.<sup>3</sup> Children from the other preschools, working with other themes, did not show the same tendency, when being interviewed about the same story. Some children even tried to understand some of the evil characters, which most children, and adults as well, just accept as allegorical figures.

## **Conclusions**

The theme of this conference is "Other worlds, other lives". In the theme work described in this paper, teachers have tried to stress the differences and

similarities between the fictional world of the Moomin Valley and children's own world of friends and family. Both worlds belong to children's world of experience and they have been able to compare them and focus on the existence or lack of correspondence between inner and outer qualities in both worlds.

In the world of Moomin, the starting point was the outer qualities where both differences and similarities were found. The girls found a footring and a curly fringe on Snork Maiden, and a striped apron and a black handbag belonging to Moominmamma as points of similarity. The boys found the activities of Snufkin and the Hemul as corresponding to their own preferences. All children found similarities in family relations, friendship and home environment. What they found different were above all the emblematic characters depicting evil, to whom they found no correspondence in their own real world of experience. They could also find similarities in the plans, hopes, aspirations and feelings expressed in the books about the Moomins. If differences were focussed on as regards to outer appearance, then similarities were stressed as regards thoughts and feelings. Thus, a study of fictional characters became a study of life, and of the children's own world.

The primary characteristics of this type of theme work is firstly, to take as point of departure the children's own world of experience as the children express it and not as the teachers take it for granted. The researchers and one of the teachers each had one interview with all the children about different stories and the results of these two interview studies were discussed with the teachers before the theme started. Secondly, awareness of children's conceptions of the content and awareness of what conceptions teachers want children to develop is another prerequisite, since the goal of the theme work is to increase the child's world of experience and to develop children's conceptions. It is also necessary to seize the

moment as it presents itself. In one of the groups the children had made their own paintings to illustrate a short story before the teacher presented an artist's view of the story, and when she finally did, this provoked a lively discussion of choice of colours and techniques which would reflect the shifting mood in the story. While the children had used similar colours, the artist let the choice of colours illustrate the mood, something the children were able to see and discuss. Thirdly, the theme should be evaluated with reference to the development of children as well as teacher in the mutual process of learning. Since the outcome of learning is documented through the concrete work; in paint, pencil and clay; children and teachers can compare not only a development of skills but also a change of conceptions as a result of learning.

This paper presents one example of how children's literature can be used in changing children's conception of the world around them. It is also an empirical study of children's literature, since it provides us with insight into how children think about the Moomin world of characters. It seems that children around the world take to the characters of Moomin, since the books have been translated into several languages. We would now like to invite researchers and teachers interested in children's literature to study the African child's concept of narrative. What differences and similarities will African children find in the Moomin world of characters?

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## Notes

- 1 Compulsory schooling in Sweden, starts in August, the year a child is seven years old.
- 2 The canon of preschool literature in Sweden and its genre categories established in practice has previously been presented in Asplund Carlsson (1994).
- 3 Compared with the results in Marak (1994) our five and six year olds were on the same level of reasoning as Marak's eight year olds from the same type of home environment.

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