

Character Development and Ethical Behavior Formation Among Trainees: A Developmental Psychology Perspective Based on Vygotskian Social Interaction Theory — A Case Study of Nsamizi Institute of Social Development

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates character development and ethical behavior formation among trainees at Nsamizi Training Institute of Social Development (NTISD) in Mpigi, Uganda, grounded in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. The objective was to examine how social interactions within training environments shape the moral and professional dispositions of future social development workers. Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 trainees and 8 staff, supplemented by document analysis and observations. Findings reveal that character and ethical behaviors are primarily cultivated through peer collaborations, mentorship by lecturers (More Knowledgeable Others), community outreach activities, and institutional cultural practices. These processes align with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where guided social interaction mediates internalization of values. Trainees reported improved self-regulation, empathy, and professional integrity, although challenges such as resource constraints persist. The study concludes that intentional scaffolding of social interactions enhances ethical formation. Recommendations include embedding structured character education modules, strengthening mentorship programs, and fostering reflective practices.

Keywords: character development, ethical behavior formation, Vygotskian sociocultural theory, trainee formation, Nsamizi Institute, social development education, Uganda

1. Introduction and Background of the Study

The concept of character development has deep historical roots, tracing back to Aristotelian virtue

ethics, which posits that moral character is cultivated through habituation and practice within a political community (Kristjánsson,

2022). In the African context, character formation was historically embedded in indigenous education systems, where communal living, rites of passage, and intergenerational dialogue served as the primary pedagogies for instilling values such as integrity, responsibility, and empathy (Teklemariam, 2025). These pre-colonial systems viewed the individual as inextricably linked to the community, a stark contrast to the individualistic models later introduced. The advent of formal education in Uganda during the colonial era shifted focus toward academic and technical skills, often at the expense of holistic moral formation (Nyanzi & Mahmood, 2026). Post-independence, despite the 1992 Government White Paper on Education emphasizing the creation of “complete” citizens, the implementation of systematic character education in tertiary institutions has remained fragmented (Thornberg, 2013; Veugelers & Vedder, 2003). Over the last two decades, however, global and local shifts have renewed interest in “values education,” recognizing that technical proficiency without ethical grounding poses risks to social development, particularly in professions like social work where trust is paramount (Purwaningsih, 2024).

The general context of this paper is Nsamizi Training Institute of Social Development (NTISD), which was established in 1953 in Mpigi District and stands as one of Uganda’s premier institutions for training social development professionals. Historically, the institute has focused on producing practitioners equipped to handle community challenges, ranging from refugee support to probation and social welfare. Its pedagogical context is rooted in the broader mandate of NTISD to produce not just skilled workers, but ethically sound individuals capable of navigating the moral complexities of Ugandan society. Currently, NTISD engages in various community outreaches and partnerships, such as with the UNHCR, which provide practical platforms for trainee formation (2023). The theoretical context draws from developmental psychology, specifically Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, which argues that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition and morality. In Ugandan higher education, where social challenges like corruption and professional misconduct are prevalent (Abbasi-Asl et al., 2025), understanding how training environments facilitate the internalization of ethics is critical.

NTISD serves as a strategic case study because its pedagogical model inherently relies on fieldwork and community engagement, providing a rich social environment for moral learning.

Current Issues and Justification of Key Concepts: Contemporary issues in Uganda’s social sector highlight a crisis of ethics. Reports of mismanagement of refugee funds, neglect of duties by social workers, and general integrity deficits in public service have raised questions about the efficacy of current training models (Gidron & Hovel, 2018; Abukar, 2024). These issues underscore the urgency of the study. Justification for the key concepts lies in the need to bridge the gap between “knowing” ethics and “being” ethical. Character development is defined here as the gradual acquisition of virtues that stabilize an individual’s moral orientation (Purwaningsih, 2024). Ethical behavior formation refers to the process by which individuals internalize professional codes of conduct and apply them in practice. Vygotskian Social Interaction Theory is pivotal because it moves beyond trait-based psychology (which suggests character is fixed) to a developmental perspective (which suggests character can be constructed through social mediation). This study is important because it explores how the “More Knowledgeable Other” (MKO), in this case, lecturers and field supervisors, scaffold ethical reasoning in trainees. Furthermore, with the increasing digitization of education, understanding how social interactions, face-to-face mentorship, peer debates, and community immersion impact character is vital for curriculum design (Malik et al., 2025). By focusing on NTISD, the study addresses the specific need for contextually relevant moral pedagogies in African tertiary institutions.

1.1 Problem Statement

Existing literature demonstrates that character education significantly improves professional outcomes in social work and related fields. Research globally indicates that students who undergo explicit ethics training demonstrate higher levels of moral reasoning and professional competence (Kristjánsson, 2022). However, in Ugandan tertiary institutions, including Nsamizi Training Institute of Social Development (NTISD), there is limited context-specific empirical evidence detailing how these processes occur or the effectiveness of the current methods. While it is known that social work students engage in fieldwork, the specific mechanisms

through which these interactions translate into internalized character traits remain under-explored (Stephenson, 1998; Veugelers & Vedder, 2003).

The core problem is that despite the emphasis on social work ethics in the curriculum, trainees may still graduate with insufficient character and ethical competencies required for the complex moral landscape of modern Uganda. This problem is evidenced by the increasing reports of unethical practices among social workers, including bribery, embezzlement of funds intended for vulnerable populations, and emotional detachment in service delivery (Abbasi-Asl et al., 2025). Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from NTISD supervisors suggests that trainees often struggle to apply theoretical ethical codes to real-life dilemmas during field placements, indicating a disconnect between classroom instruction and internalized behavior.

Past studies have largely focused on quantitative assessments of moral reasoning or curriculum reviews, neglecting the qualitative, process-oriented aspects of character formation (Purwaningsih, 2024). Specifically, there is a scarcity of theory-driven qualitative case studies that apply Vygotskian perspectives, such as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), to understand how social interactions scaffold ethical formation in African higher education settings. The research gap lies in understanding the role of the social environment (peers, mentors, community culture) in fostering moral consciousness. This study is necessary to generate actionable insights into how intentional social structuring in training can bridge the gap between ethical knowledge and ethical behavior, thereby improving the quality of social development professionals in Uganda.

1.2 Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this study is to examine character development and ethical behavior formation among trainees at Nsamizi Institute of Social Development from a Vygotskian developmental psychology perspective.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study was guided by the following objectives:

- 1) To explore the processes of character development among trainees at NTISD through social interaction.
- 2) To examine the formation of ethical

behaviors through social interactions in the training environment.

- 3) To assess the application of Vygotskian social interaction theory in fostering character and ethical competencies at the institute.

1.4 Research Questions

- 1) How do social interactions contribute to character development among trainees at NTISD?
- 2) In what ways are ethical behaviors formed through the training processes at the institute?
- 3) How does Vygotsky's social interaction theory manifest in the character and ethical formation practices at NTISD?

1.5 Significance of the Study

- 1) **Academics:** This study enriches the body of knowledge in developmental psychology and moral education by providing an African application of Vygotskian theory (Rigopouli et al., 2025). It contributes to the discourse on how sociocultural contexts influence moral cognition, offering a theoretical bridge between Western developmental theories and African communal educational philosophies (Teklemariam, 2025).
- 2) **Practitioners/Industry:** Findings will guide trainers, social workers, and field supervisors in designing effective mentorship programs and community-based ethical practices. By highlighting the efficacy of scaffolding and the "More Knowledgeable Other" role, the study offers practical pedagogical strategies for enhancing the ethical formation of students in social work institutions (Malik et al., 2025).
- 3) **Policymakers:** Insights derived from this study will inform the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) and the Ministry of Education and Sports regarding the integration of character modules into tertiary curricula. It provides evidence-based recommendations for policy frameworks that mandate structured mentorship and ethical formation as core components of professional training (Stephenson, 1998; Thornberg, 2013; Veugelers & Vedder,

2003).

- 4) **Society:** Ultimately, society benefits from the production of ethically competent social development professionals. Enhanced character and integrity among graduates will lead to improved community outcomes, increased public trust in social services, and more effective handling of vulnerable populations in Uganda (Abbasi-Asl et al., 2025).

1.6 Scope of the Study

- **Location:** The study was conducted at Nsamizi Training Institute of Social Development (NTISD), located in Mpigi District, Uganda.
- **Population:** The study population comprised trainees (specifically final-year students to capture the cumulative effect of training) and staff (lecturers and field supervisors) involved in social development programs.
- **Variables:** The key variables under study were Character Development and Ethical Behavior Formation (dependent variables), and Vygotskian Social Interactions (independent variable).
- **Timeframe:** The study focused on training processes and institutional practices observed from 2020 to 2025, capturing recent curricular adjustments and post-COVID-19 educational shifts.
- **Limitations:** The study relied on self-reported data from interviews, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Additionally, as a single case study, the findings may have limited generalizability to other institutions with different cultural or pedagogical environments.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, specifically the concept of Social Interaction Theory. Lev Vygotsky posited that learning is a socially mediated process where cognitive development, including higher psychological functions, occurs first on the social level and later on the individual level (Rowe & Wertsch, 2002; Kozulin, 2015). A central tenet of this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as the distance between a learner's actual developmental level, determined

by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Rigopouli et al., 2025).

The theory introduces the concept of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)—anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, typically a teacher or peer. In the context of moral development, the MKO guides the learner through ethical dilemmas, modeling appropriate reasoning and behavior. Through scaffolding, support is gradually withdrawn as the learner gains competence, allowing for the internalization of ethical standards (Vygotsky, 1978).

This theory was chosen because it emphasizes the collaborative and culturally embedded nature of learning, which aligns with Uganda's communal context and NTISD's community-oriented training model. Unlike stage-based theories of moral development (e.g., Kohlberg) that focus on individual reasoning, Vygotsky's theory allows for an analysis of how interactions—such as community outreaches, peer discussions, and mentorship—construct moral character. It relates directly to the topic by providing a framework to understand how trainees at NTISD internalize professional values not just by reading codes of conduct, but by actively engaging in social practices within their ZPD, mediated by institutional culture and mentors (Malik et al., 2025).

3. Literature Review

Variable 1: Character Development in Higher Education

Character development involves the cultivation of enduring virtues such as honesty, resilience, empathy, and responsibility. Recent studies affirm its critical importance in higher education, arguing that universities must produce not just skilled workers, but virtuous citizens (Purwaningsih, 2024). Literature suggests that character is not static; it is developmental. In the context of social work, character traits are the bedrock of professional resilience, preventing burnout and ensuring consistent service delivery. Studies elsewhere, particularly in the West, have utilized service-learning as a primary vehicle for character development, finding that engagement with diverse populations fosters empathy and civic responsibility (Kristjánsson, 2022). In African contexts, the literature highlights the

tension between traditional Ubuntu ethics and modern individualistic training approaches; Teklemariam (2025) notes that while African indigenous education excelled at communal character building, modern tertiary institutions often fail to integrate these holistic approaches, leading to a “moral disconnect.” Previous findings emphasize the role of role models; students tend to adopt the character traits of their instructors. However, what is missing in current literature is a detailed analysis of the micro-processes of peer interaction in character formation. While teacher-student dynamics are well-documented, the influence of the student cohort as a community of practice in Ugandan institutions remains under-researched (Abbasi-Asl et al., 2025). Furthermore, there is a dearth of studies linking specific developmental psychology theories like Vygotsky’s to character outcomes in African higher education.

Variable 2: Ethical Behavior Formation

Ethical behavior formation entails the internalization of moral reasoning and the translation of that reasoning into professional conduct. Scholarship underscores that ethics training is most effective when it is experiential rather than purely didactic (Stephenson, 1998; Thornberg, 2013; Veugelers & Vedder, 2003). Simulation, case studies, and field immersion are cited as best practices for bridging the “knowing-doing” gap. In the social work profession, ethical competency is non-negotiable due to the vulnerability of client populations. Research indicates that ethical behavior is formed through a cycle of encountering dilemmas, reflecting on them, and receiving feedback. Researchers (Malik et al., 2025) argue that in “Generation Alpha,” the digital context complicates ethical formation, requiring new forms of social scaffolding. Despite the recognized importance of ethics, recent studies reveal significant gaps in Ugandan higher education, as Stephenson (Stephenson, 1998; Thornberg, 2013) and Veugelers & Vedder (2003) reported that many institutions treat ethics as a theoretical “add-on” course rather than an integral part of the curriculum. What is missing is longitudinal research that tracks how students at NTISD navigate the transition from classroom ethics to field practice. Additionally, limited research exists on how institutional culture—specifically the unwritten rules and norms of a training institute—either supports or undermines the ethical behavior of trainees (Abbasi-Asl et al.,

2025). The role of observation and mimetic learning in ethics formation also requires further exploration in this context.

Variable 3: Vygotskian Social Interaction in Moral Contexts

Vygotsky’s framework is increasingly applied to moral education. The theory posits that moral reasoning, like cognition, is constructed through social interaction. Rigopouli et al. (2025) highlights how creativity and collaborative problem-solving—key Vygotskian concepts—can be utilized to foster ethical decision-making in the 21st century. The ZPD is interpreted in moral terms as the space where a learner can solve an ethical problem with guidance but not alone. Research indicates that peer dialogue is a powerful tool for moral development, as it forces individuals to articulate, defend, and refine their ethical viewpoints (Rowe & Wertsch, 2002; Kozulin, 2015). Furthermore, the concept of “tools” (language, cultural symbols) is central; trainees internalize the language of their profession to mediate their ethical behavior. However, there is a gap in applying these theory-driven insights to the specific context of social development training in Uganda. While Vygotsky is widely cited in cognitive educational psychology, his application to affective and moral domains in African tertiary institutions is limited (Traina, 2025). Specifically, how the concept of the “More Knowledgeable Other” functions in a resource-constrained environment where staff-student ratios are high, remains an unanswered question. This literature review suggests a need for empirical studies that operationalize Vygotsky’s constructs (ZPD, Scaffolding, MKO) to explain the character formation processes at institutions like NTISD.

4. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, utilizing an exploratory case study design. This design was deemed appropriate as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the social processes of character development within a bounded system (NTISD) in its real-life context (Creswell, 2016). The target population included trainees and staff members involved in social development programs.

Sampling Method: Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich information regarding the study’s objectives. Specifically, 12 final-year diploma and certificate trainees were selected because they had

undergone extensive training and fieldwork. Additionally, eight staff members (five lecturers and three administrators) were selected based on their experience in mentorship and curriculum implementation.

Sample Size: The total sample size was 20 respondents. This size was deemed sufficient for qualitative saturation, ensuring that diverse perspectives were captured.

Data Collection Methods: Data were collected using semi-structured interviews (comprising 4

probes per research question to ensure depth), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with trainees, document analysis (reviewing field reports and student ethics portfolios), and non-participant observation of classes and field activities.

Data Analysis: Data were analyzed thematically. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo software to identify emerging patterns related to the Vygotskian constructs. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of methods and member checking.

Table 1. Table of Respondents

Category	Number	Role/Year of Study	Rationale for Selection
Trainees	12	Final Year (Diploma/Certificate)	Have experienced full cycle of training and socialization.
Lecturers	5	Social Development Department	Act as “More Knowledgeable Others” and mentors.
Administrators	3	Program Heads/Deans	Oversee curriculum and institutional culture enforcement.
Total	20		

The table represents a balanced purposive sample enabling rich triangulation of social interaction processes at NTISD, and the selection ensured representation across gender and specific programs (e.g., Social Work, Community Development) to capture a holistic view of the institutional culture.

5. Interview Findings per Variable/Objective

Objective 1: Processes of Character Development among Trainees

The findings revealed that character development at Nsamizi Training Institute of Social Development (NTISD) is primarily an experiential process grounded in practice rather than theoretical instruction. Trainees consistently emphasized that meaningful character formation occurred through active participation in fieldwork, particularly in community outreach programs involving refugee settlements and vulnerable populations.

One trainee explained this transformation in detail:

“During our field placement at Kyaka II refugee settlement, I encountered families who had lost everything due to conflict and displacement. I realized that responding to such people required more than academic knowledge. I had to learn how to slow down,

listen carefully, and control my emotional reactions. Over time, I developed patience, empathy, and emotional strength because the situation demanded it, not because it was taught in class” (Trainee 7, Interview).

This narrative illustrates that character development is triggered by real-life emotional and moral exposure, where trainees are confronted with human suffering that reshapes their attitudes and behavior.

Documentary evidence from student reflection journals (2020–2025) further supports this finding, showing a progressive increase in empathy-related language such as “understanding,” “compassion,” “patience,” and “emotional resilience,” indicating gradual internalization of moral values over time.

Peer interaction also emerged as a critical mechanism for character formation. Trainees reported that after field visits, they regularly engaged in evening debriefing sessions where they openly discussed emotional challenges and moral dilemmas encountered during fieldwork. These sessions provided emotional relief and collective meaning-making. One participant noted:

“After visiting the field, we always gather as students to talk about what we experienced. Some of us feel

overwhelmed or even helpless when we see suffering. In these discussions, we encourage each other, share coping strategies, and remind one another why we are in this profession. It helps us not to lose hope or become emotionally drained” (Trainee 3, Interview).

However, some trainees indicated that inconsistent ethical modeling by a few staff members sometimes weakened the learning process, as contradictions between taught values and observed behavior created confusion.

Overall, these findings suggest that character development at NTISD occurs through internalization of lived experiences within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Field placements act as the primary learning environment where More Knowledgeable Others (MKO), including supervisors and community leaders, guide trainees in interpreting complex human situations. Peer debriefings serve as secondary scaffolding structures that support emotional regulation and shared moral understanding. This aligns with Vygotsky’s view that higher psychological functions originate through social interaction and are gradually internalized into individual character (Abbasi-Asl et al., 2025; Teklemariam, 2025).

Objective 2: Formation of Ethical Behaviors through Social Interactions

The findings indicate that ethical behavior formation at NTISD is strongly shaped by structured social interaction and guided learning processes. Initially, most trainees reported that they perceived ethics as abstract rules that were difficult to apply in real situations. However, this perception changed significantly after exposure to case-based learning and mentorship.

A lecturer explained the teaching approach as follows:

“We present students with real-life ethical dilemmas drawn from social work practice. For example, we might present a situation where a client offers a gift to a social worker, or where there is a conflict of interest in service delivery. Students are then placed in groups to analyze the situation, debate possible actions, and justify their decisions. As facilitators, we guide them toward professional ethical standards while allowing them to critically think through the dilemma” (Staff 4, Interview).

This explanation shows that ethical learning becomes more effective when students actively engage in problem-solving rather than memorizing ethical codes.

Institutional culture also plays a major role in reinforcing ethical behavior. NTISD promotes a strong culture of “community living,” where students share responsibilities, interact closely, and are constantly observed by peers. Many trainees explained that this environment creates a sense of accountability. One trainee stated:

“Here at NTISD, you cannot easily behave irresponsibly because everyone knows everyone else. If you do something wrong, your colleagues will question you. Even when no lecturer is present, we feel responsible because we represent our group. That pressure helps us behave properly” (Trainee 9, Interview).

Despite these positive influences, some trainees reported challenges related to resource constraints. For example, limited transport and workload pressures sometimes resulted in lateness or incomplete documentation, which they later recognized as ethical shortcomings.

These findings suggest that ethical behavior is socially constructed through interaction, reflection, and institutional expectations. Case conferences and mentorship function as scaffolding mechanisms that support learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). At the same time, institutional norms act as cultural tools that reinforce accountability. However, contradictions arising from resource limitations may weaken consistent ethical internalization (Stephenson, 1998; Thornberg, 2013; Veugelers & Vedder, 2003; Purwaningsih, 2024).

Objective 3: Application of Vygotskian Social Interaction Theory

The findings clearly demonstrate the practical relevance of Vygotsky’s social interaction theory in explaining both character and ethical development at NTISD. Lecturers and supervisors function as More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs), providing continuous guidance, correction, and support during training and fieldwork.

A trainee described this developmental transition in detail:

“In my first year, I depended completely on my supervisor. I would ask her what to do in every situation because I was afraid of making mistakes. But as I progressed, something changed. Now in my final year, even when I am alone in the field, I can make decisions confidently. It feels like her guidance has become part of me. I don’t need her physically because

I already know what she would advise me to do” (Trainee 11, Interview).

This statement clearly reflects the process of internalization, where external social guidance gradually becomes internal self-regulation.

Peer learning also plays a significant role in reinforcing ethical reasoning. Group discussions and collaborative tasks require trainees to express, defend, and sometimes revise their ethical viewpoints, leading to deeper understanding through dialogue.

However, the study identified that digital communication gaps occasionally disrupted these interactions, reducing the consistency of collaborative learning experiences.

Overall, the findings confirm that NTISD operates within a strong sociocultural learning framework. Ethical competence is not developed in isolation but through guided participation, social dialogue, and progressive internalization. This supports Vygotsky’s model of development and aligns with Malik et al. (2025) and Rigopouli et al. (2025), who emphasize learning as a distributed and socially constructed process.

6. Discussion

Discussion of Objective 1: Character Development Processes

The social processes observed at Nsamizi Training Institute of Social Development (NTISD) align with recent literature on character formation through collaborative and culturally relevant practices in African contexts. The finding that field experiences are the primary driver of character resonates with Abbasi-Asl et al. (2025), who argue that character is person-specific and develops through active engagement with one’s environment. Unlike traditional didactic methods, the immersive nature of social work training forces a confrontation with the self, fostering resilience and empathy.

The role of peer debriefings as a support mechanism mirrors the communal ethos of African education described by Teklemariam (2025), where learning is a collective responsibility. This peer scaffolding allows trainees to process traumatic or challenging field experiences, preventing empathy fatigue. The study’s findings also support Kristjánsson’s (2022) view that character is a cluster of virtues activated through habituation, with the field serving as the primary habituation ground.

However, the inconsistency in staff modeling

highlights a gap between theoretical expectations and institutional realities. While Rigopouli et al. (2025) emphasize the creativity and guidance role of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), the realities of staff burnout and occasional ethical lapses in Uganda (Stephenson, 1998; Thornberg, 2013; Veugelers & Vedder, 2003) suggest that the effectiveness of the MKO depends heavily on institutional support systems. This aligns with Wenger’s (1998) concept of a community of practice, where both learners and educators mutually develop within a supportive system.

Overall, the findings confirm that character development is socially mediated and context-dependent, reinforcing Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. Fieldwork functions as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where trainees internalize virtues through guided participation.

Discussion of Objective 2: Formation of Ethical Behaviors through Social Interactions

The findings indicate that ethical behavior formation at NTISD is deeply rooted in guided social interaction. Initially, trainees perceived ethics as abstract rules; however, through case conferences and mentorship, these rules became practical decision-making tools. This supports Stephenson (1998), Thornberg (2013), and Veugelers and Vedder (2003), who emphasize that ethical learning requires active engagement with real-life contexts rather than passive instruction.

Institutional culture also plays a significant role in reinforcing ethical behavior. The culture of accountability and community living creates a social environment where trainees regulate their conduct to maintain group acceptance. This reflects Purwaningsih (2024), who argues that ethics are socially enforced norms shaped by institutional expectations.

Nevertheless, resource constraints introduce contradictions in ethical practice. Trainees reported instances where limited resources affected punctuality and record keeping, creating tension between ideal ethical standards and practical realities. This finding suggests that ethical behavior is not only psychological but also materially influenced. As Malik et al. (2025) argue, environments must enable the practice of virtue; otherwise, ethical development becomes constrained.

Discussion of Objective 3: Application of Vygotskian Social Interaction Theory

The findings strongly demonstrate the relevance of Vygotsky's social interaction theory in explaining character and ethical development at NTISD. Lecturers and supervisors function as More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs), providing structured scaffolding that gradually transitions into internalized self-regulation.

A key finding was the internalization of supervisory guidance, where trainees reported that they eventually "hear the supervisor's voice" when making decisions. This clearly reflects Vygotsky's (1978) concept of internalization, where external social dialogue becomes internal cognitive regulation. Traina (2025) further supports this view by arguing that moral development is essentially a dialogue between the self and others.

Peer interactions also function as secondary scaffolding mechanisms, allowing trainees to co-construct ethical meaning through discussion and reflection. This aligns with Rigopouli et al. (2025), who emphasize that learning and problem-solving are collaborative and creative processes.

However, the study also identified limitations associated with digital disruptions, which occasionally weakened face-to-face interaction. While Vygotsky emphasized direct social interaction, modern learning environments increasingly incorporate digital tools. Despite this, the findings suggest that emotional and moral learning still requires physical presence for deeper resonance, as supported by Malik et al. (2025).

Integrated Summary of Findings and Theoretical Implications

Overall, the study confirms that character development and ethical behavior formation at NTISD are deeply embedded in Vygotskian social interaction processes. The training environment functions as a sociocultural system where trainees internalize values through guided participation with MKOs and collaboration with peers. Fieldwork serves as the most significant Zone of Proximal Development, where trainees confront real moral dilemmas and develop virtues such as empathy and resilience.

Ethical behavior is socially constructed through case discussions, mentorship, peer interaction, and institutional norms of accountability. However, resource constraints and inconsistencies in staff modeling sometimes create dissonance between theoretical ethical

standards and lived experiences.

Ultimately, the internalization of supervisory guidance confirms the transition of ethical competence from the social to the individual level, validating Vygotsky's theory within the Ugandan social work education context (Abbasi-Asl et al., 2025; Rigopouli et al., 2025).

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- 1) **To the Institution (NTISD):** The institute should formalize the "social scaffolding" processes by embedding structured reflection sessions into the curriculum. Specifically, post-field debriefs should be mandatory and facilitated to ensure peer learning is maximized. The institute should also invest in training staff to be consistent moral models, recognizing their role as the primary MKOs.
- 2) **To the Government and NCHE:** The Ministry of Education and NCHE should review the curricula of social development programs to ensure that field practice is not just an academic requirement but an assessed component of character education. Policies should be introduced to fund mentorship programs in tertiary institutions, acknowledging that staff-student ratios affect the quality of social interaction.
- 3) **To Educationists and Trainers:** Educators should intentionally use Vygotskian strategies such as scaffolding and collaborative learning in teaching ethics. Rather than relying solely on lectures, they should create "ethical ZPDs" where students solve moral dilemmas in groups with decreasing levels of assistance.
- 4) **To Future Researchers:** Further studies should investigate the impact of digital social interactions on character formation, as this study suggested potential gaps in online ethics instruction. Longitudinal studies tracking graduates into their professional lives would also help determine if the character traits internalized during training persist in the workforce.

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