

MEDIA RELEASE

29 August 2007



Does Vygotsky hold the key to reinvigorating the modern education system?

There is concern across the UK, Europe and beyond that children are being pressurised at an ever-earlier age to achieve measured academic skills. But are we, and they, losing something in the process and does this mean that today's education system is letting our children down?

The work of a Russian psychologist who died 70 years ago has been attracting increasing attention in recent years and applied across the world to help reinvigorate the modern education system. The ideas of Lev Vygotsky has been the focus of a major international conference in Prague this week, 'Exploring Vygotsky's ideas', and the focus of a special edition of **Children in Europe**, **'Rediscovering Vygotsky'** published on Tuesday, 4 September.

Lev Vygotsky, believed passionately that education is only useful for children if they are active participants. He believed in two kinds of education – spontaneous and reactive. In spontaneous types of education children create their own programme, in reactive education they have to study according to someone else's.

Contributors to this special edition are concerned that 'reactive education' is too dominant in many education systems today, with learning in school too narrowly focused on the mastering of cognitive tasks. This is all the more worrying if Vygotsky's belief that a child is only able to study reactively from a certain psychological age – around eight or nine – is correct.

This edition explores how some of Vygotsky's ideas can be applied in education today. (SEE EXAMPLES BELOW).

Play

Vygotsky was a strong advocate of play as a means of promoting 'spontaneous learning' The Research Centre of Developmental Teaching and Learning at Kajaani campus in the University of Oulu, Finland, have been experimenting with 'joint play worlds'. Usually teachers start a play-world by telling a good story or tale and then helping children construct an imaginative world by enacting a specific role or scene after observing children's independent play.

A snapshot of the play-world of Rumpelstiltskin

The play-world of Rumpelstiltskin had been running for two months. The king's messenger (a teacher in role) announced that Rumpelstiltskin had arrested the people at court and made them prisoners in the castle's dark basement. Could the children free them? Unconsciously, children started to prepare psychological tools with the help of which they could overcome their fear. Every child cut a shield from cardboard, to carry while entering the castle's basement (in the school basement). The children decided that Rumpelstiltskin is afraid of red, so every child coloured their shield red. When they felt that this was not enough, everyone invented a personal magic spell against the magic powers of Rumpelstiltskin. They wrote their spell on the inside of their shields and read them loudly at the door to the basement.

Although this is not free play (adults have created a new imaginative situation by dramatising and taking roles) the children are active participants and learning vital new skills in the process.

Pentti Hakkarainen, who works at the centre, said: "It has been hard work convincing schools that a play-world can be a more effective learning environment than ordinary school lessons. We emphasise the development of imagination, children's initiative, and willingness to change one's own personal characteristics. A joint play world creates challenging imaginative situations, in which children have to take the initiative, carry out roles and solve complicated problems.

"We are sometimes told that playworlds steal time from real learning. This argument is based on the idea that only assignments and tasks in each school subject and teacher's explanations can lead to 'real learning'. In play, everything makes sense for children, but in 'normal' teaching, children need motivating to solve the tasks set for them. These school tasks are not part of children's own world and creativity."

In Vygotskian psychology children's pretend role-play has been called "the school of will and motivation".

Multi-age classrooms

Many innovative educational programmes were set up during Perestroika in Russia. Elena Kravtsova, developed the Golden Key curriculum, to break down the alienation from school felt by many children and families. Based on the principles of Vygotsky, over 30 Golden Key schools have been established since 1989. Working with Vygotsky's ideas about interaction and the zone of proximal development, children in these schools are placed in families rather than classes, each "family" consisting of 15-25 three to ten-year-olds, with its own "home" instead of a classroom. Teachers learn to enhance a community of learning with the help of in-service training and parents are active participants. Within the mixed-age "families", older children learn to model more competent behaviour, as well as provide other support for younger children. Children also learn by imitation – not to be confused with merely copying - which is directly related to participation. "The intrinsic relationship between imitation and participation is of utmost importance for the practice of education."

Zone of proximal development – ‘learning potential’

The notion of proximal development is probably one of the most famous concepts introduced by Vygotsky. Initially he used the concept as an index for intellectual potential, arguing that developmental potential cannot be assessed in absolute terms (for example, by a score on an intelligence test): it should be based on what a child can learn under optimal conditions (for example, with assistance). The zone developed into an educational concept. The zone is a shared activity, collaboratively produced in the interaction between a child and more knowledgeable others – imitation, though not to be confused with copying.

Notes for editors:

Children in Europe is a magazine for everyone working with and for children from 0-10 and those interested in children’s issues. It is published simultaneously in eight languages by a network of national magazines. It aims to provide a forum for ideas, practice and information and contribute to the development of policy and practice at European and national levels. It is published in the UK by Children in Scotland, the national agency for voluntary, statutory, and professional organisations and individuals working with children and their families in Scotland, with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation. *Equal Opportunities for All*, issue 13 of Children in Europe, is published next month.

Lev Vygotsky – 1896 – 1934

Peter Moss is available for interview. Please contact: Nicola Pay, communications officer, 0131 2222448.

A copy of Children in Europe *Rediscovering Vygotsky* can be obtained from Nicola Pay, communications officer, 0131 2222448.