

Vygotsky and Multicultural Education

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Abstract

Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896–1934) was a Belarussian teacher, literary critic, special educator, and cultural psychologist whose career ascended in conjunction with the fall of the Romanov dynasty in Russia and subsequent formation of the Soviet Union. His enduring legacy came from his studies of human development that emphasized the role of cultural mediation rather than biological stages. He understood human development to follow from the ways in which people's thinking is shaped and engrained through participation in cultural activities. He saw people from different cultures developing in relation to their environments and the goals, social practices, artifacts, and other mediators that channel development in specific, culturally relevant ways.

This emphasis on culturally mediated human development makes Vygotsky relevant to current multicultural education. Schools in the United States tend to run according to principles adapted from the European Enlightenment, with an emphasis on rational thinking, the suppression of the emotional dimensions of learning, scientific thought, essayist traditions over expressive, the elevation of technical subjects (science, mathematicians) that have historically been the domain of males, and other traditions (McCagg, 1989). This emphasis benefits people from particular demographic groups, particularly middle-class Whites, more than others (Smagorinsky, 2017).

Cultural groups whose home-based literacy practices follow other conventions tend to be degraded and diminished for not complying with norms available through the dominant culture. Whole populations become pathologized through stereotypes based on school performances that ignore the many achievements from outside school that illustrate their intelligence, creativity, competence, and other qualities (Moll, 2000; Steele, 2011). Multiculturalism thus benefits from an understanding of mediated human development, one that helps account for the myriad ways in which human beings learn to navigate their worlds, and how the constricted nature of school instruction and assessment limits the potential of students who are socialized differently to be recognized and appreciated.

Keywords: Mediated human development; Multicultural education; Sociocultural perspectives; Vygotsky

1 Vygotsky's formative experiences with exclusion and inclusion

Multicultural education is oriented to including people of all forms of socialization, bodily makeup, and other factors of differentiation as respected members of society. Meeting this goal requires empathy, and thus an affective disposition to respect others and understand their developmental trajectories. To Vygotsky (1987a, 1987b, 1993), cognition and emotion are inseparable, making the affective side of life critical in understanding how people learn to think. He was especially concerned, due to his family's banishment to the Pale of Settlement as a Jewish person in anti-Semitic Tsarist Russia (Rossman, 2002), with the effects on one's feelings of self-worth that follow from social ostracism (Kotik-Friedgut & Friedgut, 2008; Smagorinsky, 2012a, 2012b; Van der Veer, 2007).

Vygotsky grew up as a member of a despised cultural group that had long been banished from mainstream society and subject to violent attacks and other forms of discrimination. He responded to this harsh treatment with a passion for including others. He “sought to blend harmoniously all the interacting elements of the world in which he lived, to define his own place in that universe, and to *integrate himself within the society; not to be ‘the other,’ rejected for being different*” (Kotik-Friedgut & Friedgut, 2008, p. 16; emphasis added). His concern for integrating all people into the ongoing work of a culture became a central concern for him in education and society. He sought to make others more attentive to and appreciative of people from outside society's norms, and to find ways to include them in rewarding roles in a culture's activities. The next section reviews his work in Soviet special education in the unfortunately named field of *defectology*.

2 Vygotsky, defectology, and inclusion

Defectology provided an approach to educating children damaged in the many wars taking place in Eastern Europe from the launch of World War I in 1914 through the final formation of the Soviet Union in the final days of 1922 (McCagg, 1989; see Smagorinsky, 2019). The principal goal of this approach was all-out inclusion of those whose bodies did not conform to evolutionary norms, especially those blinded, deafened, and cognitively impaired by explosives. He entered this field driven by a deeply engrained, personal understanding of how constructing outsiders as “the other” produces devastating feelings of inferiority and rejection. He sought to include those who were socially ostracized as full participants in cultural life.

Vygotsky's approach was thus multicultural in his acceptance of, and efforts for inclusion with, populations that were often shut away, or even put to death in the name of eugenics (Kevles, 1995). Vygotsky, however, saw such people as members of cultures who had unique mediational needs that could be met in school. Vygotskian defectology did not involve repairing the differences exhibited by the anomalous individual person or the groups they represented. Rather, it was oriented to *educating the people surrounding atypical people* to become better informed about their differences, more sensitive to their needs, and more determined to include them in cultural practices that led to a sense of social group inclusion. This approach, he insisted, helped address the *secondary disability* of feelings of inferiority that follow from being treated as different, threatening, substandard, and unwanted, often through pity or scorn.

Vygotsky's (1993) defectological writing has many implications for inclusive, multicultural pedagogies that are concerned with educating the mainstream population about not only the

dignity of people different from themselves, but their potential and need for inclusion in everyday cultural activities that help them feel accepted, legitimized, and valuable on their own terms and in light of their own contributions to the broader social group. Multiculturalism in this sense involves real, often difficult work at acknowledging one's own prejudices against people who are different, striving to view them as having the potential to contribute to society in valuable ways, and finding ways to include them in those activities in substantive ways. This antidiscriminatory, assertively inclusive perspective is essential if multiple cultures and peoples are to thrive in a pluralistic society where one culture has been historically dominant.

3 Vygotsky and mediated human development in the Soviet context

Vygotsky (1978, 1987a) viewed the principal task of human development to be the development of higher mental functions, that is, cultural ways of knowing that allow for abstract thinking aligned with a worldview and its ways and means. People from different societies evolve different cultural practices, values, worldviews, tools, and goals; and people within cultures, such as males and females, White people and Black, are often raised with different expectations and consequences. People grow into cultural orientations through their activity in communities of practice, and often those developmental channels are circumscribed by discriminatory beliefs built into a society's structure.

Yet the Soviet project required the integration of people of widely disparate geographical locations, religions, languages, and other factors in human development, and the formation of a union that had a singular culture. This demand led at times to the degradation of cultures that did not meet the standard for evolving the New Soviet Man (Soboleva, 2017), a person exhibiting specific qualities expected of all citizens of the Soviet Union, irrespective of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic socialization. (These references retain the sexist language of the original phrasing.) The Soviet Union's concern for equality rarely extended to women (Voronina, 1993), including its conception of the ideal Soviet citizen. The goal was to create a single Soviet people from a vast geographic region that covered 11 time zones and hosted speakers of over 120 languages.

Creating a vast nation of super people was easier in rhetoric than reality, and required deficit judgments of those who met a different standard from outside the Soviet purview. Vygotsky's collaborator Luria (1976) concluded about remote peasants studied in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan: "we had no luck getting these subjects to perform the abstract act of classification. Even when they grasped some similarity among various objects, they attached no particular importance to the fact" (p. 59), defying Western classification tendencies and thus appearing inferior and incapable of joining the ranks of the supermen. Luria concluded that among the "principal facts derived from the [administration of Western-style cognitive] tests" was that the Muslim peasants he studied in isolated Soviet territories were not yet ready "to become part of a more advanced culture" (p. 79). Ironically, then, prominent members of Vygotsky's own cultural psychology fieldwork team produced deficit judgments of those who could not conform to Stalin's vision of an evolved species dedicated to his version of Marxist principles. Their imposition of Soviet values on Muslim peasants shows that even highly sensitive people can make biased judgments about those who depart from dominant culture ways and means. Nonetheless, Vygotsky's theory of culturally mediated human development has more recently been applied to modern multicultural education.

4 Vygotsky and mediated human development in expanded national contexts

Vygotsky (1987a) provided an account of human concept development that influenced Cole's (1996) interest in comparative human cognition. His own cross-cultural research with Silvia Scribner among the Vai people in Liberia took an emic, or insider's, perspective on the cognition of people living in areas remote from Western influences. Scribner and Cole's (1981) task was to try to understand how and why people solved problems from the perspective of their own cultural contexts, rather than to measure them against a standard from outside their culture. The conflicts that emerged during the Civil Rights Movement amplified the cross-cultural issues in their own nation, leading to the formation of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition as a Vygotsky-inspired research collective designed to understand why people are different and how those differences are manifested in cultural life and, ultimately, in conflicts between antagonistic ways of life.

These conflicts are often evident in schools that follow the precepts of Western Enlightenment rationalism, yet that enroll students from multiple national, cultural, and ethnic societies and subgroups, along with those whose bodies require adaptations in the physical arena of school for navigation. By and large, U.S. schools are structured to serve the interests of people from the demographic group that schools were initially designed to enroll and educate: people affiliated with the values of landed, affluent, White males of privilege (Smagorinsky, 2017). Yet this population continues to diminish as the main demographic receiving an education and occupying the United States (Frey, 2018), while still exerting great structural influence on how schools are run.

These demographic shifts have produced challenges to the status quo. Women outperform males in many educational measures (van Hek, Kraaykamp, & Wolbers, 2016); immigrant populations (particularly those that are minoritized) continue to increase in size and school enrollment (Pew Research Center, 2015); previously outnumbered racial and ethnic groups grow in size to the point of becoming a majority (Hobbs & Stoops, 2002); and more excluded groups assert their rights to recognition, respect, and equity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In an era characterized by both increasingly pluralistic student bodies and the neoliberal standardization of curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Ross & Gibson, 2006) coupled with reactionary discrimination and nativism (Varsanyi, 2011), educators are faced with a multicultural conundrum: If the policy world is imposing standardized means of evaluating teachers and students, and if students (if not the teaching force, whose demographic remains roughly 85% White and 85% women; see U.S. Department of Education, 2016) are growing in cultural diversity, how can schools be conducted to honor multicultural traditions?

Vygotsky's (1987a) account of scientific and spontaneous concepts, and their role in learning and human development, helps to situate the challenge. Spontaneous concepts are everyday conceptions learned outside formal training, applied to real problems that people face in home and community life. These conceptions are important in that they are grounded in worldly experience and thus have empirical demonstration. They are also critical in addressing the local concerns of people as they arise in daily life. They become inadequate when new contexts develop requiring other ways of thinking. They are vitally important, however, in understanding social group life as it is conducted within social conventions. The everyday concepts that students bring to school are as many and varied as the communities that provide schools with their enrollments.

Scientific or academic concepts are privileged in schools. These concepts require broad generalizations. Schools tend to emphasize academic concepts in abstract forms: mathematic equations, novels about the human condition, scientific rules, historical generalizations, and so on. What they lack is gritty application to everyday concerns. They are best at helping to extract principles from across cultures and cases. They may be problematic when they are derived from a singular culture, as is often the case in schools that are built on Western Enlightenment rationalism and do not admit the legitimacy of cultures adhering to different traditions and ways of knowing, such as the means of argumentation practiced among African American people that rely on different rhetorical moves from those taught and assessed in school (Majors, 2015).

To Vygotsky, neither form of conception – spontaneous/everyday or scientific/academic – is sufficient without the other. An academic concept to which people cannot instantiate personal experience will be remote and hollow. Academic concepts that efface the experiences of minoritized people inevitably reify the dominant culture by excluding counternarratives and other disconfirming evidence. An everyday concept that cannot be applied in new contexts will have local application only. What benefits learners most is the opportunity to test a scientific concept with real-world experience, and to have multiple real-world experiences to allow for broader generalization and refinement in relation to knowledge accrued and conveyed in school or other formal settings of learning.

A problem with school is that the academic concepts are derived from the experiences of a singular group of people, the dominant culture and its values, practices, outcomes, and other means of conduct (Portes & Smagorinsky, 2010). Yet students come to school with a host of different cultural experiences that become nullified and devalued when teachers discourage them at the expense of the established knowledge embedded in the curriculum. Multicultural education is thus discouraged by the manner in which cultural values are limited to those provided by White, often male-dominated institutions. Literature teaching and learning, for instance, has a canonical bias (Applebee, 1993) such that works by people of color (Hames-García, 2003), works from traditions like hip-hop that follow other norms (Hill, 2009), literature intended for youth addressing controversial topics (Hayn & Kaplan, 2012), literature by women (Poster, 1996), and works that emerge from other traditions and perspectives are less available for formal study in school. Rather, students from divergent forms of socialization are all required to read the same works and derive the same lessons from them, often produced through assessments that many students find alienating (Gee, 2004).

From a multicultural perspective, this academic approach reifies abstract, generalizable knowledge associated with science, where all roads lead to the same established knowledge. When Stalin sought to evolve a New Soviet Man, he had to eliminate those who didn't fit the mold, with mass murder among his methods of shaping the process (Snyder, 2010). One might argue that schools' standardization drive – the historical mission of U.S. schools (Smagorinsky, 2021) – while not murderous, has effectively run off those who don't match the standard view of students, how they are taught, what assesses them most reliably and validly, and how they best are served by schools. The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2018) finds that White students have the lowest school dropout rates of any racial demographic. National and state policies force all students to meet historical school expectations. This governance perspective was generated when schools primarily served White students (for many years, males only). With expanded expectations for school retention and mass education, this restricted emphasis works against

multicultural education in ways that Vygotsky's developmental theory helps to account for. He provides insight into how culture shapes cognition through immersion in a social group that may or may not fit the expectations of schools and the policy world that governs their conduct. This mentation has a strong emotional dimension that produces senses of affiliation and disaffiliation with school that follow from feelings of inclusion and exclusion of students' home and community cultures.

5 Vygotsky and the zone of proximal development

Undoubtedly Vygotsky (1978, 1987a) is best known for his postulation of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), as it is commonly but possibly erroneously known in translation (see Smagorinsky, 2018a for the preponderance of Vygotskian citations to this construct). Educators have latched onto translated accounts of this construct as the epitome of his educational theory, focused on the immediate consequences of instruction. Yet Vygotsky himself gives it scant attention relative to the thousands of pages he produced during his short lifetime. This far broader context of his writing suggests that the ZPD's interpretation as an instructional strategy that produces results “tomorrow” following collaboration today is questionable, and that he was more likely referring to long-term developmental processes than short-term teaching techniques, such as Wood, Bruner, and Ross's (1976) now-ubiquitous idea of instructional scaffolding (see Smagorinsky, 2018a, 2018b). Isolating his very brief account of the ZPD from Vygotsky's expansive attention to human development strips the notion of its cultural, historical, and social emphases. Reducing the ZPD to a simple instructional method such as scaffolding may allow many to claim a Vygotskian instructional approach, but does so in ways that distort it reductively. When the ZPD began to mean all things to all people, it lost its greater potential for comprehensive reformulation of educational structures to accommodate greater diversity, and came to mean little of consequence (Chaiklin, 2003; Mercer & Fisher, 1992; Smagorinsky, 1995; Wertsch, 1984).

The ZPD's reduction to a scaffolding – a term Vygotsky never used in this context – has trivialized his more comprehensive concern with mediated human development. It may be appealing to teachers who are concerned primarily with short-term learning rather than long-term human development. School structures work against process-oriented, long-growth instruction through frequent demands for grades, pressuring teachers to think in terms of the lesson rather than the unit. This problem has been exacerbated in publications that see the ZPD in such limited terms and that conflate the ZPD with scaffolding (see Smagorinsky, 2018a, 2018b). As a result, the ZPD tends to be viewed in a very limited sense: learning with guidance today, doing independently tomorrow; with “tomorrow” understood literally and not metaphorically, as is more appropriate. This restricted understanding is well represented by the scaffolding metaphor. Focusing on short-term learning rather than whole-person development misses Vygotsky's greater, far more important point about attending primarily to the sort of socialized person who enters school with cultural experiences. This attention is especially important when learners and teachers come from different cultural backgrounds and the teachers view their own socialization as the norm, all of which works against the implementation of a truly respectful multicultural education.

The most commonly quoted Vygotskian quote on the ZPD comes from one chapter in *Mind in Society* (1978). There he is translated as saying that the ZPD is comprised by

the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers. The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state. These functions could be termed the “buds” or “flowers” of development rather than the “fruits” of development ... what is in the zone of proximal development today will be the actual developmental level tomorrow—that is what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow. (pp. 86–87)

This account of the ZPD is typically quoted to justify short-term teaching, overlooking Vygotsky's use of metaphors that in contrast suggest a *long-term developmental process*. The functions are *embryonic*, and the process involves long-term growth toward the *maturation*. Further, he refers to the *buds* or *flowers* of *development* rather than the *fruits* of *development*. These metaphors refer to a season or more of growth, not immediate changes. Yet the term “tomorrow” has dominated how his statement has been applied at the expense of his emphasis on long-term development. A developmental, metaphorical understanding of “tomorrow” as “in the future” as opposed to “in 24 hours” in the context of Vygotsky's full corpus of scholarship leads to a very different conception of what he was proposing, one that makes far greater contributions to multicultural education.

Moll (1990) contended that the ZPD is commensurate with “social contexts ... for mastery of and conscious awareness in the use of ... cultural tools” (p. 12). As a set of intersecting social contexts rather than what some have referred to as an in-the-head “cognitive region” (e.g., Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube, 2001, n.p.),

the ZPD is a characteristic not solely of the child or of the teaching but of the child engaged in collaborative activity within specific social environments. The focus is on the *social system* within which we hope children learn, with the understanding that this social system is mutually and actively created by teachers and students. (Moll, 1990, p. 11; emphasis in original)

The ZPD is thus collective, distributed, historically grounded, and interactive. It is always concerned with the long-term development of the whole person and interrelated with the social environment, itself derived historically from prior cultural practice.

This expansion of the ZPD requires any instructional episode to be contextualized in light of the value systems embedded in the setting and its cultural history (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989), which are critical concerns of multicultural educators. Moll's (1990) study of Mexican immigrant students' struggles to fit with U.S. school structures – and consequential high dropout rates (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) – found that the individual competition required at school is at odds with the students' home cultures' emphasis on the whole social group's prosperity, leading to disjunctures that affect the student's learning potential. In the absence of intersubjectivity – a shared understanding of social situations and how they function – teaching and learning can produce deficit conceptions of students as easily as it can promote new understandings. This long-term process of achieving intersubjectivity requires adjustments on the part of the learner and the teacher, and matters greatly in multicultural education.

Along with translation issues concerning Vygotsky's (1978) metaphorical use of horticultural processes and the idea of developments taking place “tomorrow,” the term ZPD itself may be based on a questionable translation that leads to misconceptions and misapplications of Vygotskian theory. The documentary film *The Butterflies of Zagorsk* (BBC, 1990) focuses on deaf and blind children in a Soviet school of defectology in the city of Zagorsk, where the children were taught to communicate through a long, laborious process of learning to spell words on one another's hands with their fingers, and in turn to read that spelling through the rapid interpretation of these impressions. Through this extended, multi-stage developmental process, the children grew “tomorrow” in the metaphorical sense: in competencies that allow for their fuller participation in their culture's practices and processes; and that enable them to read in the absence of sight or hearing. Producer Michael Dean's narration described the process as occurring within a *zone of next development*, a very different conception than is available through the *zone of proximal development*. The goal was not to teach children something to do independently within 24 hours. Rather, the educational goal was to provide acculturation to communication practices that teach a form of competency that bypasses conventional means, and to do so with long-term development in mind to anticipate and prepare the learner for the next stages of cultural maturation. This process served a broader goal of inclusion so that the deaf and blind children could maximize their human capabilities, allowing them to participate in cultural activities and thus live satisfying lives, affirmed by others as valued and important in building a society over time, a central goal of schools of defectology. The translation of *next* rather than *proximal* development represents Vygotsky's intentions with the metaphor as a long-term, developmental process that is more appropriate in the context of his career project.

From a multicultural standpoint, these issues suggest a series of questions for educators that are far more comprehensive than how to teach today so that learning is independent tomorrow. These questions include: Whose culture dominates the school? Which students are best enculturated to participate in its practices and activities? Which students struggle to adapt, and which cultural factors account for their struggles? What role do teachers have in adapting to students to help establish intersubjectivity that contributes to a mutual understanding of long-term developmental needs? What are the consequences of operating school as a monoculture, when students have been socialized to diverse orientations to teaching and learning? These questions address a comprehensive way of thinking that will be increasingly important as student demographics shift and the teaching profession remains White and middle class. Expecting multifarious students to do all the adapting to the ways and means of the demographic that governs education will only perpetuate the challenges facing schools to address the needs of its many and varied students (Paris & Alim, 2017).

6 Conclusion

Vygotsky's theory of mediated human development helps multicultural educators to account for why people arrive to school with different forms of socialization, and to reconceive their teaching to account for pluralistic orientations to education. He helps make the case that schools cannot accommodate multiple cultures without fundamentally changing how they are structured and operate. The deep structure of school – the institutionalized curriculum and assessment, dress codes, codes of conduct, approved speech genres and social languages, conventions for interaction, composition of administration and faculty, the physical arrangement of schools, the hidden curriculum, and other structural factors that organize the

educational process according to a specific value system (Smagorinsky, 2020) – has been remarkably durable over time, helping to perpetuate the illusion of White supremacy by evaluating all students according to a single standard grounded in White, middle-class culture. This structure has worked against efforts to diversify the faculty in that if school is hostile to minoritized youth, it is unlikely to recruit or retain teachers from minoritized communities who never felt that school recognized or rewarded their qualities the first time around, given the recruitment effects that make it more likely for identifiers to become teachers than non-identifiers (Lortie, 1975).

If multicultural education is to work, it needs to work below the surface and affect the whole enterprise of education rather than tinkering at the surface with such minor adjustments as adding occasional readings by authors of color, who themselves have been accused of degrading the curriculum by educational heritage defenders who resist all departures from Eurocentric canonicity; see, for example, Stotsky (2019). Multicultural education should provide more than expanded opportunities for assimilation, the achievement of which is believed by many (e.g., Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004) to serve as a critical role of education. From a multicultural perspective, it should involve instead a more revolutionary effort to reconsider how school works from multiple perspectives (Gutiérrez, 2008), which requires giving voice to and listening to counternarratives from diverse cultural perspectives. The tools provided by Vygotsky for understanding mediated human development may help educators recognize the inequities of conventional schooling, and think carefully about alternative ways of making classrooms and schools more broadly speaking into settings where the greatest number of students possible feel included, respected, dignified, heard, and educated.

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