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## Freire, Vygotsky, and Social Justice Theories in English Education

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The educational theories developed by Brazilian teacher and visionary administrator Paulo Freire have influenced and inspired social justice educators for many decades. Freire sought to uncover effects of external social realities and structures on people's lives and help them develop tools for countering inequitable conditions. Educators have also found the research of Belarusian psychologist Lev Vygotsky to be provocative, although more for his insights on the ways in which social mediation channels human development toward cultural ends. Vygotsky investigated how engagement with those structures and social practices helped to shape one's "higher mental functions": processes that meld practical and formal learning to produce abstractions that serve as frameworks for thinking in both established and new situations.

To get a sense of how often the work of these two scholars has been referenced in academic papers, we ran citation searches through Google Scholar. Freire recorded 52,150 references, and Vygotsky 19,198. Undoubtedly, they are among the most frequently cited thinkers in all of academia. Although we were not able to refine this search to link their writing to publications centering on issues of social justice in English Education, we can make an educated guess that these two, particularly Freire, are often invoked to justify educational approaches centered on issues of equity, inclusiveness, and liberatory structures.

Although each derived his ideas from the views of Karl Marx, they incorporated Marxist principles into different social, cultural, and disciplinary frameworks emerging from the societies in which they grew up and the educational problems each faced. Freire and Vygotsky foregrounded different aspects of the dialectic relation that people have with their particular circumstances. Freire was concerned with how people interpret their environments, read their worlds, and can act to change them. Freire's work was focused on using Marx's capitalist critiques to help lower-class Brazilians develop critical meta-awareness of their

worlds and seek to change economic structures in order to encourage the leveling of social classes. His pedagogy aimed to teach those oppressed by inequitable educational opportunities and income distribution to question their locations in society and ultimately seek to alter personal agency and economic structures in order to live more fulfilling lives.

Vygotsky's position as a Soviet psychologist focused his research on studying, understanding, and explaining the process of how people internalize ways of thinking. He was primarily interested in how people's consciousness is shaped through engagement with social mediation. As a member of the burgeoning communist Soviet empire, he had little need to critique capitalism given that it had been legislated out of existence in his society, and so had little reason to be concerned with matters of economic disparity and injustice.

The positions of Freire and Vygotsky produced different career trajectories and emphases. Freire was raised in a middle class family in Brazil that, like many others, was devastated during the Great Depression. His experiences with poverty influenced his teaching career by impressing on him the importance of providing the poor with literacy practices and social tools to construct new futures for themselves. He was thus an educational philosopher whose ideas emerged from his practical experiences with the Brazilian oppressed. His liberatory pedagogy was seen as a threat to the military government as evidenced by the events which immediately followed the military coup of 1964: Freire's programs were dismantled, and he was jailed and then exiled for over 15 years. During his expulsion Freire continued his work in Chile, the United States, and Africa, bringing global recognition to his ideas. Upon his return to Brazil, he worked in the area of adult literacy and later as Secretary of Education for São Paulo. He moved to administrative positions that enabled him to affect pedagogical policy, including his engagement with the practical problem of alleviating poverty and oppression through liberatory pedagogy.

Vygotsky came of age during the Bolshevik Revolution that produced the formation of the Soviet Union. As a Jew in an anti-Semitic culture that took an official stance of atheism, he rose through the Soviet psychological ranks on the basis of sheer intellectual brilliance. He further had the courage and chutzpah, even in his twenties, to challenge the reigning titans of his day, including Ivan Petrovich Pavlov, a Nobel laureate 57 years his senior. He began his career as a teacher and then became a clinical psychologist; it is somewhat ironic that he developed and articulated a sociocultural theory of human development in the relatively isolated context of laboratory studies. In his brief life and career—he died at age 37 from tuberculosis, which had debilitated him for much of his adult life—he worked more as an experimenter and theorist, rather than immersing himself in the gritty realities of daily life. Although he was never exiled, he likely would have been, given his interest in individual internalization of cul-

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tural frameworks for thinking in a Soviet society driven by a brutally enforced Marxism that did not allow the individual an agentive role in constructing the setting of his or her life.

Both Freire and Vygotsky then, began as teachers and adopted a generally Marxist perspective that emphasized the role of social mediation in teaching and learning. Freire employed this focus to advocate for changes in consciousness that produced intellectual and social tools to promote changes in individual beliefs, practices, and projected life trajectories. His career project thus concerned using a Marxist framework to help people acquire and develop tools and strategies to change their circumstances. He affirmed that the literacy process involved not only reading words but worlds and their intricacies within the context of socioculturally- and historically-shaped structures. Literacy was conceptualized by Freire as a vital instrument to change one's location in society, as a way to reclaim control of one's life, to engage in transformation and promote social justice. In Freire's (1970a) notion of *conscientização* or critical consciousness, people look at their history and the social construction of their realities, seeking to problematize and separate personal beliefs from institutional discourses. Through dialogue, histories are considered, present realities and conditions are deconstructed, and futures are collectively envisioned.

Vygotsky was less of an activist and more of a descriptive psychologist. He aimed to account for how people learn, rather than to change the circumstances and thus the quality of their lives, although he did suggest ways in which concepts could be taught more effectively in the context of school (1926/1992). Both found roles for the individual within a Marxist perspective, an orientation that likely would have ultimately sent Vygotsky to the Gulag had he survived his illness (Zinchenko, 2007). Although some have conflated Freire's social activism with Vygotsky's cultural psychology (e.g., Fiore & Elsasser, 2001; Trueba & McLaren, 2000), we see their work as being different in key ways, deriving at least in part to the different cultural milieus in which each one's life and career took place.

Although in many ways an orthodox Marxist—not, however, enough to suit the state, which banned his work shortly after his death because of his focus on individuals in relation to society, rather than on the collective itself (Daniels, 2007)—Vygotsky did not write about capitalist exploitation. If anything, he contributed in part to the Soviet effort to impose homogeneity according to Soviet notions of equality. Luria's (1976) study of illiterate peasants in remote villages of Uzbekistan and Kirghizia, which Vygotsky helped to plan, produced the insight that Muslims were a backwards people because they conceptualized social groupings differently than did Western subjects in Moscow. The Soviet national goals included taking the many and varied countries that were being assimilated into their emerging Russian-based culture and “elevat-

ing” them to the height of Soviet beliefs, whether they wanted to cogitate so or not. Vygotsky and Luria did not seek to empower these remote peasants to rebel against Soviet intervention into their lives and construct liberated social futures for themselves; such social action was for those who sought to labor in Siberia.

Vygotsky postulated that people’s frameworks for thinking are internalized through social practice; that is, the setting of their learning provides them with tools, signs, and practices that suggest a societal destination (what Wertsch, 2000, calls a teleological end) and the means for achieving it. Freire, in contrast, encouraged learners “to bring their culture and personal knowledge into the classroom, help them understand the connections between their own lives and society” (Fiore & Elsasser, 2001, p. 71), empowering each person to engage in challenging their realities and collectively negotiating context-specific ways for taking action to change their conditions (Rymes, Souto-Manning, & Brown, 2005).

Vygotsky recognized the reciprocal relationship between people and their cultures in that he saw people having agency to affect their environments, even as they inevitably internalized their structures, goals, and practices. He foregrounded, however, the process of internalization. Freire, in contrast, foregrounded the other end of this process, externalization, in which people acquire tools in order to work on and alter their environments to create new settings, social destinations, personal and group trajectories, and means for producing them.

These contrasting, but complementary” emphases are indicative of another key difference between the two through their focus on different life phases in human development. Vygotsky was a developmental psychologist, adopting a “genetic” method—a term referring not to genes and thus biological development, but rather to the social process of internalization through which people learn how to think—to understand how children develop higher mental functions, the culturally-specific ways of thinking that enable them to function within a society. His emphasis was evident in his belief that psychologists should study training sessions rather than the performances that follow them, in that the training sessions provide an opportunity to study how one learns to perform a task, which he found theoretically much more compelling than studying the operations involved in an already-learned process (Vygotsky, 1934/1987). His clinical research focused on young children. When adults were involved in dyads—such as those through which he postulated the zone of proximal development and its illumination of performance through more expert assistance—their presence was designed to illustrate how children internalize existing means of mentation from their elders (or, less often, their more experienced peers).

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Freire, in contrast, specialized in adult literacy and liberatory education. He was interested in teaching adults to critique their sociohistorical locations and take new action to change them. His notion of *conscientização*, or critical meta-awareness, focused on helping adults to develop a complex understanding of the world and its social and political contradictions so as to provide them with tools with which to act against oppressive circumstances. Freire was less interested in the processes through which young children internalize the values of their societal surroundings. Nevertheless, his approach (culture circles) offers fertile ground for social justice in early educational settings (Souto-Manning, 2009, 2010). All in all, Freire sought to foster critical consciousness so that oppression became exposed and adults developed strategies for diminishing it.

Together, their substantial differences aside, the work of Vygotsky and Freire account for the cyclical processes of social mediation through engagement with life's settings, the internalization of a worldview based on the use of cultural mediational tools such as speech, and individual and group efforts to recreate that setting through a raised consciousness of life's possibilities even if such a vision runs counter to the prevailing dominant culture. Even with this complementarity, we must emphasize that Freire's critical pedagogy was not available to Vygotsky in the context of the Leninist and Stalinist Soviet Union, in which dissent was met with swift and brutal reprisal.

#### **A Freirean and Vygotskian Framework for Social Justice in English Education**

In spite of this seemingly prohibitive limitation in Vygotsky's work, his mediational framework enables some possibilities for being joined with Freire's Marxist capitalist critique to inform the work of English educators who take a social justice perspective. Given that Freire's career was dedicated to liberatory pedagogy and social justice education, applying his ideas to English education—given literature's concern with the human condition—is relatively straightforward and requires little interpretation. Vygotsky, as a clinical psychologist whose emphasis focused on socioculturally-mediated human development, and whose research was conducted with young children working in dyads on problems outside the English curriculum, requires greater extrapolation, especially to issues of social justice that were not a part of his research program. Two fruitful areas in which their work does overlap concern the ways in which social institutions provide mediational means that establish the basic framework for human development, and the ways in which higher mental functions enable the self-regulation and agency to act on one's environment.

To Freire, societal inequities follow from the ways in which competitive capitalism establishes class distinctions that are detrimental to the life trajectories of those at the lower tiers of education and income distribution. Vygotsky's

research outlines the ways in which societies establish institutions and their attendant semiotic sign systems that people internalize to form the basis of how they conceptualize life in society (see his discussion of inner speech, 1934/1987). Freire theorized that when people internalize a conception of society, they tend to reinforce its explicit and implicit hierarchical relationships through their activity within its routines and practices. Freire's educational vision centered on disrupting debilitating internalizations of socioculturally- and historically-constructed structures among oppressed people that perpetuate their circumstances over a series of generations. Vygotsky's value to this project comes in his empirical documentation of how social values are reflected in individuals' word use, particularly the ways in which one's attribution of meaning to words evolves over time to indicate concept development. When these concepts reinforce social hierarchies, Freire believed, it is the province of education to facilitate the process whereby learners negotiate ways to employ tools to critique, problematize, and change social structures to provide more equitable access to a society's benefits.

Freire's critical activist interpretation of the principle of internalization produces the following assumptions regarding the externalization of understanding available in school through collaborative, speech-mediated, experience-informed action to change societal structures—i.e., through praxis (Souto-Manning, 2010):

- When students arrive in the school or classroom, they already have knowledge of their own language and everyday worlds.
- Students are the subject of their own learning. In this kind of educational setting, each student investigates and engages in inquiry employing problem-posing, critical dialogue, and problem-solving.
- Conflict is the basis for learning. When old knowledge and new knowledge conflict, participants ask questions and engage in dialogue, critically constructing their own bodies of knowledge.
- Learning takes place collectively rather than in isolation.
- Culturally-relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1996) is not spontaneous; it requires continual inquiry and research. There is much planning, yet the teacher/facilitator must know how to critically take advantage of teachable moments and engage students/participants from multiple backgrounds and communities in meaningful learning experiences (Freire, 1970b).

Freire pointed toward the need to create positive learning environments in which individuals can recognize their oppression(s) and take active roles, collectively constructing their futures as they consider the histories of their collective and unique contexts. His liberatory pedagogy (1970a) promotes active involvement and meta-awareness of the transformative process. Individuals must ac-

tively and collectively engage in their own struggle for social justice. According to Fiore and Elsasser (2001):

Often, Freire says, students unaware of the connections between their own lives and society personalize their problems. To encourage students to understand the impact of society in their lives, Freire proposes students and teachers talk about generative themes drawn from the students' everyday world. Investigating issues such as work or family life from an individual and a socio-historical perspective, students bring their own knowledge into the classroom and broaden their sense of social context. (p. 70)

Smagorinsky (2007) provides examples of how the social setting of activity invokes norms that may or may not be appropriate for all involved. U.S. schools tend to validate and perpetuate the values of middle class Whites, especially in terms of what counts as a sense of propriety in terms of the volume, diction, occasions, and other aspects of speech. Students who are relatively loud and speak out of turn are typically viewed as disruptive and often subjected to disciplinary action. In Georgia's Houston County in 2007-2008, for example, where the student population was 54% White and 35% Black, 61% of suspended students were Black and 31% were White. When asked about possible racial bias in discipline, James Kinchen, Houston's Director of School Operations, responded, "Discriminating based on race, no, that doesn't happen in Houston County" (Hubbard, 2009, n.p.). And perhaps it doesn't, at least not intentionally. One way to interpret this phenomenon is to consider the possibility that Black students are punished for acting in ways that they find appropriate, yet that their teachers find disruptive.

From a Vygotskian perspective, Black and White students have internalized different conceptions of what constitutes appropriate behavior in formal social settings such as church and school. If Black students are enculturated to the "call and response" style of an African American church—see, e.g., a sermon by Rev. Jeremy James at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MR0WM2xI4rg&feature=related>—and view such behavior as appropriate in any formal social setting, including school, then they might be viewed as disruptive and become subject to disciplinary action, including suspension in school.

From a Freirean perspective, the fact of disproportionate suspension rates would provide the opportunity for critical social awareness designed to produce a just outcome and more equitable approach to discipline in school, considering the sociohistorical issues shaping such oppression while seeking to challenge and redefine what is "acceptable" in schools and society. This kind of critique has occurred in English classes, as when Fecho's (2001) students engaged in inquiry in order to address their feelings of threat in his high school English class. His inquiry method is one among many ways of critiquing social inequities within the confines of the English curriculum; others include Hillocks, McCabe,

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and McCampbell's (1971) organization of literature according to themes and other concepts such as social responsibility and discrimination (e.g. Smagorinsky, 2008; Beach & Myers, 2001). Fundamental to each of these approaches is the opportunity to use texts more central to students' lives as vehicles for raising questions about what sort of society we inhabit and how, through social action, teachers and students can envision what needs to happen in order for it to serve all of its members equitably.

This critique could come from another overlap between Freire and Vygotsky, that being their mutual interest in the ways in which one develops the faculties necessary to reach a state of conscientização. Among Vygotsky's postulations in his formulation of the notion of higher mental functions, or scientific concepts, is that the ability to conceptualize a problem provides one with the tools for regulating one's own thinking about it, consequently leading to action. This being the case, education can strive to help young people develop something approaching conscientização, a state that may be available to students of different ages, experiences, levels of maturity, and other developmental factors (Souto-Manning, 2009, 2010). What they need, then, is a curriculum that continually spirals among themes related to social justice: discrimination, social responsibility, mental health, gender roles, the banality of evil, censorship, cultural conflict, immigration, and so on (see, e.g., the units of instruction outlined at [http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/Virtuallibrary/Unit\\_Outlines.htm](http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/Virtuallibrary/Unit_Outlines.htm)). This routine and systematic engagement with themes related to oppression and inequity could help students to develop a concept of social justice that could provide the basis for the sort of praxis that Freire found central to a critical consciousness.

### Conclusion

In this chapter we have argued that, their substantial differences in emphasis aside, the work of Vygotsky and Freire may be bridged to suggest related possibilities for social justice education. Synthesizing their work can be productive, if labor-intensive. Reading Vygotsky is a tall order. In his "Translator's Foreword and Acknowledgements" to *The Collected Works, Volume 3*, Van der Veer noted, "I have not attempted to improve Vygotsky's style of writing although it was at times difficult to refrain from doing so. It is clear that Vygotsky . . . never rewrote a text for the sake of improving its style and readability. Hence the redundancy, the difficulty to follow the thread of his argument, the awkward sentences, etc." (p. v). Given the many perils of translating Vygotsky and the subsequent challenges of reading a translation (which itself might be problematic), undertaking the sort of extensive reading of Vygotsky that produces an understanding of his cultural project is beyond the patience of many policymakers and teacher candidates. And yet accepting summaries of his work written by others can lead to gross distortions of his views (Smagorinsky, 2009).



Furthermore, Vygotsky's work emphasized attending to contexts, making it difficult for the sort of generalized plans favored by policymakers. If Vygotsky's work suggests anything to policymakers, it may be that teaching and learning involve situated practice, and so site-based management makes better sense than top-down administration of large educational bureaucracies.

Freire's work has more immediate possibilities for policy. He intentionally wrote more accessibly and practically, with some of his later work being published in dialogue format (e.g. Freire & Macedo, 1995; Freire, 1997). As an educational administrator, he understood and was concerned with the work of making policy, of linking theory and practice. Freire believed that:

We must not negate practice for the sake of theory. To do so, would reduce theory to pure verbalism or intellectualism. By the same token, to negate theory for the sake of practice, as in the use of dialogue as conversation, is to run the risk of losing oneself in the disconnectedness of practice. It is for this reason that I never advocate either a theoretic elitism or a practice ungrounded in theory, but the unity between theory and practice. (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 382)

Given that he was an activist for social justice, Freire wrote in order to affect social change. Such a career lends itself far more easily to adoption into policy than do the reports of experimental psychological research in which Vygotsky specialized.

The points of connection that we have identified between Freire and Vygotsky can help English educators consider how a school curriculum can be structured, and how teachers can encourage a critical perspective on social inequity that can provide students with tools for acting on the injustices that they perceive in their worlds. What remains to be seen is the extent to which teachers adopting this perspective must engage with, and possibly be exiled from, academic institutions as they urge their students to critique and overturn the very structures through which they challenge inequity and oppression.

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