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A Distant Perspective on the School of the Dialogue of Cultures Pedagogical Movement in Ukraine and Russia

This article responds to articles that offer the School of the Dialogue of Cultures pedagogical movement in Ukraine and Russia as an approach that will revolutionize schooling. In this response I question the degree to which the exclusive intellectual quality of the private school curriculum could be adapted to schools characterized by poverty and other factors that would mitigate against students' embrace of a classical education.

I begin this response to the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology's* two-issue feature on the School of the Dialogue of Cultures (SDC) pedagogical movement with a set of qualifiers that I hope helps the reader to situate my perspective properly. First, I come to this response with no prior knowledge of either Bibler or the SCD; the articles published in the journal represent the first opportunity I have had to learn about their approach to teaching and learning. Second, I do not speak Russian and so rely on translations to inform my understanding of the SDC approach to schooling, and as such, it is entirely possible that my reading will be compromised by my inability to grasp conceptually some points they are making; that something has been lost in translation. And so I undertake this response with a certain degree of caution, and from a distance that might refract my reading of these texts in ways not intended or anticipated by the authors.

In an SDC school, an education is predicated on an understanding of how cultures develop and what happens when they are put in dialogue with one another.

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The primary culture of students in the SDC schools in Ukraine and Russia is that emanating from Russia; and the cultures with which they come in dialogue through the curriculum are those with which Russia has engaged over time, primarily those of Europe and Asia, continents contiguous with Russia's borders. An SDC education involves the sustained effort to understand what lies at the heart of one's own culture and to refine that understanding through thoughtful and critical consideration of other national cultural perspectives. As described in these articles, the curriculum includes no attention to within-nation cultural variation and so is not concerned with the sort of diversity issues that now consume U.S. educators; the Russian culture emphasized is that emerging from the traditional arts, philosophy, and other disciplines and their texts that provide a canonical sense of Russian intellectual history: "the 'highest' achievements of human thought, consciousness, and being enter into dialogic communication with previous forms of culture" (Bibler, 2009, p. 36).

Culture, says Berlyand, "can substantiate itself only by going beyond its own boundaries, at the edge, in dialogue with another culture. . . . Every culture, according to Bibler, creates its own universally particular reason" (Berlyand, 2009, p. 22). Understanding a culture's internal reasoning is central to the SDC's approach; and understanding the evolution of cultures provides a key to grasping this internal reasoning, its logic.

The focus of an SDC school thus returns to what Cole (1996) has identified as an ancient premise of cultural psychology: to understand, in the tradition of Herodotus, how cultures evolve in order to understand why they clash. The SDC extension of this principle is to understand what motivates, informs, and sustains a culture and how a dialogue with a different cultural perspective can illuminate much about both cultures and help each discussant develop a better-defined personal cultural identity. The emphasis on established and historic national cultures and their best and brightest contributors makes the project of changing this culture, in any sudden or radical way, unlikely. If cultural change follows from an SDC education, it would appear to be incremental and within the established contours of the nation's cultural history.

The inevitable ethnocentrism of SDC that follows from national and thus cultural insularity presents the need for a dialogue among cultures, in order to clarify how different cultures conceive of their essential tools. The SDC curriculum has a classical European foundation; the notion of culture is historical and that of the intellectual and aesthetic elite whose ideas have shaped the course of societal growth. Bibler maintains that "contemporary thinking is constructed according to a schematism of culture where the 'highest' achievements of human thought, consciousness, and being enter into dialogic communication with previous forms of culture" (Bibler, 2009, p. 36). Students in SDC schools do not dabble in the commonplace or ephemeral trends of the day; there is no effort to include in the dialogue of cultures present-day multiliteracies, popular culture, young adult literature, or other passing fancies, as is popular now in many U.S. schools. Rather, the focus is on open-ended inquiry into the great ideas of history's greatest thinkers.

In Bibler's vision, the first to eleventh grades "are built in sequence and around dialogue of the main historical cultures, primarily cultures from European history, in chronological order" (*ibid.*, p. 40).

Educators continue to disagree on the value of attaining an education based on engagement with classical and canonical ideas or immersed in the present-day concerns of young people, and I do not aim to resolve that dispute in this essay. My point is simply to clarify where the SDC falls on the continuum of canonical vs. contemporary issues as the basis of a school curriculum and to establish it clearly and unequivocally in the classical tradition.

The SDC conception of dialogue, then, is distinctive in that its practitioners view the curriculum itself as malleable; there is no set outcome to what students internalize through their cultural dialogues. The point of education is entirely constructivist in the Piagetian sense: that students, through their engagement in dialogue regarding the evolution of cultures and how they come into being and perpetuate themselves, construct their own conception of their cultural, spiritual, intellectual, and emotional lives based on what they understand to be available to them from different cultural constructs that they continually discuss throughout the course of their education.

SCD teachers must decenter themselves to mediate the dialogues effectively. Yet the texts and topics are canonical, magisterial, and in the study of one's own culture, Russocentric. There is thus an inherent paradox in an SDC education, in that outside cultures are viewed in contrast to Russian culture and its European roots, which requires a decentering in order to recognize the Bakhtinian emphasis on the polyphonous and heteroglossic nature of stimulating and productive dialogue. Students are apprenticed into disciplinary discourse, yet also must attempt to decenter themselves in order to work at the productive boundaries between cultures. A tension thus exists between apprenticeship and decentering, and between curricular emphasis on Eurocentric topics and the necessary suspension of ethnocentrism needed to take other cultural perspectives.

These teachers and students undertake the SDC curriculum in private, rather than public schools, and so presumably draw on an exclusive population. As I read the demands of the curriculum, I must assume that the students are not preoccupied and distracted by problems that follow from poverty or hunger, or that they do not come from social classes in which education is not highly valued. Rather, they are ready in the third grade to study the Culture of Antiquity.

Nor are the students from cultures in which the canons of Western society are remote or foreign. Rather, students appear to emerge from well-educated classes in which a social future of intellectual stimulation and maturity is projected and fostered through engagement with the curriculum.

The scholarly approach begins early in an SDC education, when third-graders experience dissonance with conventional classroom processes and begin to "criticize the usual collective discussion that takes place 'here and now,' identifying it as 'for children' and inventing 'adult' forms for their future learning experience: 'the logic

chair,' 'the scholarly article,' 'the physics experiment,' 'the writing of adult plays,' and so on" (Solomadin and Kurganov, 2009, p. 25). An SDC school, says Osetinsky, "could be said to specialize in *philology*, since it first and foremost prepares *readers*, and not just readers of literary fiction, but of philosophical treatises, scholarly articles, and the like" (2009, p. 64). This approach is not for the impoverished, the hungry, the desperate, or the uninitiated. It appears designed to form classically educated minds in children whose family values and resources prepare them to be receptive to such an education and seek the intellectual heights to which the curriculum aspires. It is thus well-suited for the private school environment in which it has been practiced thus far.

Theoretical underpinnings of the SDC approach

The authors of the articles on the SDC identify Bakhtin and Vygotsky as their theoretical inspirations, even while dismissing the ideas of Vygotskian educators Galperin, Davydov, and Elkonin in their operation of the Developmental Instruction (DI) approach. My reading of the SDC program in these articles raises questions about their interpretation of Vygotsky; and I make this remark aware that the authors have read Vygotsky in Russian and I have not.

There are several areas in which I find their conception of human development to be more individualistic and stage-oriented—more, in other words, like the view of Piaget that Vygotsky critiques—than to have the sort of cultural-historical and social basis that I associate with Vygotsky. A great part of Piaget's fallacy was in studying his own children's concept development and thus generalizing from a small, insular, and exclusive population. Based on what I have read of the SDC, its private school status and the elite population from which it draws provides the SDC teachers and theorists with a rarified population on which to base its claims of how a quality education should work. The higher mental functions that are promoted and enculturated are presumed to be the same for all students, a teleological assumption about the scholarly culture that is fostered through instruction built on students' seemingly advantaged home lives. The pupils are channeled toward this destination so that it appears to be a natural process. Ironically, while cultural dialogue is central to the pedagogy, the students conduct this dialogue within the bounds of a classic Eurocentric curriculum rather than in dialogue with cultural others—Russian peasants, Muslims, immigrants, and others from social classes outside the historically dominant culture of the nation. Kurganov, for instance, argues that

Through learning dialogue, through "points of wonder," we not only help the children become *skilled readers*, but we create a *psychological portrait* of the modern young schoolchild similar to the psychological portrait of the twentieth century European preschooler that Jean Piaget created. (Kurganov, 2009, p. 34)

A second area of theoretical disagreement concerns the authors' understanding of inner speech. The SDC authors, as I read their essays, underplay the sociocultural

nature of internalized speech and emphasize its individualistic character. Kurganov, for instance, says:

Agreeing with Jean Piaget's thesis that child reflection emerges only after argument (dispute) in the true sense of the word enters the children's collective, Vygotsky presumes that this argument, submerged within one's consciousness, gives rise to an argument between the child and himself. . . . The true sense of the inner word is rooted in the understanding of the world that resides in this child.

In inner speech, Vygotsky finds the agency of the person's authorship, at which the personality starts unfolding, the "surplus of vision" in education crystallizes, becomes condensed, and moves to external speech. (2009, pp. 35-36)

Inner speech, as I read this explanation, seems interpreted more in line with Piaget's notion of constructivism—of individuals constructing a world from what an environment provides—than with Vygotsky's construct of inner speech, as I understand it. I have accepted Wertsch's (1985) premise that the idea of inner speech suggests that thinking is social in origin; that one's higher mental functions are a product of what one internalizes from culture through engagement with mediational tools toward shared social goals. My understanding of inner speech, then, is less individually oriented than that of the SDC educators. If anything, the notion of inner speech could be used to make quite a different point: that Russian schoolchildren in SDC programs have, prior to enrolling, appropriated a classical conception of Russian culture that the curriculum reinforces before exposing children to other ways of thinking based on other cultural organizations. Their inner speech is a product of their engagement with a culture whose values, social languages, perspectives, and other qualities they have appropriated to provide the framework for how they develop "higher," or "academic," or culturally specific ways of thinking. These ways of thinking undoubtedly have an individualistic character but only insofar as they are a product of what their culture has impressed on their inheritors.

Method of argumentation

I close this response to the articles on the SDC with a critique of the ways in which the authors have collectively argued their endorsement of their pedagogical approach. Solomadin and Kurganov claim that the experiences of the authors have "served as convincing evidence that Bibler's philosophical and pedagogical ideas were realistic" (2009, p. 6). I am less impressed with the uses of evidence to support claims in these articles, and will outline my concerns next.

Throughout the articles, a research base is claimed yet never reported, and the authors' credentials are touted yet not referenced. Solomadin and Kurganov refer to "Countless pedagogical experimentation by teachers within the Dialogue of Cultures School [that] affirm Vygotsky's thought that at the age when children first attend school, out of the egocentric speech of preschoolers is born inner speech of the young schoolchild" (*ibid.*, p. 26). Yet this experimentation is not referenced; we have only the authors' claims of "countless" studies that confirm their high

opinion of their teaching. On the whole, the evidentiary basis for accepting the authors' claims is weak, raising for me questions about how pervasively effective the schools are for the full range of students enrolled or how easily this approach could be implemented in schools whose students lack the sort of cultural conditioning evident in the students whose dialogues are reported in these articles.

One problem that I have with the ways in which the SDC's processes are illustrated is that the authors focus on what appear to be the most brilliant students. The students in these transcripts sound more like graduate students than young children. Perhaps there are such students in the private school environment of the SDC, and perhaps they illustrate an SDC education at its best. But the authors claim that they are revolutionizing education in ways that will render current practices obsolete. If that is the case, then they should illustrate their practices with how the dialogic curriculum works for children who operate more within the normal range than in the elite rung of intelligence and culture evident in the children reported in these articles.

What the authors never provide is any information on the typicality of the dialogues that they report. I find it hard to believe that they are ordinary discussions taking place among the school's less talented students. In U.S. scholarship, it is customary to demand that researchers report disconfirming data or discrepant cases, but these authors provide us only with what appear to be exceptional students on their best days. If I am to accept their claims, I would first of all appreciate a more independent confirmation of the quality of the dialogues, and second, some information about the typicality of the dialogues presented so that I know which tier of performance I am being provided in order to persuade me of the method's effectiveness.

Other claims, often grandiose in scope, are made with no supporting evidence at all. Kurganov, for instance, asserts that

The teacher ensures that all the children have an opportunity to express their unrepeatable and "irreplaceable" point of view, however strange, paradoxical, or incomprehensible it may seem at first to the teacher and the other students. The teacher is both a conductor, leading the learning dialogue like a symphony, and its active and equal participant. When SDC teachers are sincerely struck by surprise and a desire to share their thoughts, doubts, and judgments with the children, they do so, and their opinions are discussed on an equal ground just as the children's ideas are. (2009, p. 32)

I would love to see such a symphonic orchestration of student dialogue in action, and I am guessing that they do happen in SDC schools. But I would like to see evidence that it does work as claimed, and that it works in such a manner for more than the most skillful teacher and accomplished students.

Discussion

On the whole, I find these articles on the SDC both compelling and frustrating. I think that such an education could indeed achieve the lofty goals that the authors have for the pedagogy, but only under conditions that are replicated in the most

exclusive of private schools. By eliminating popular culture from the curriculum and focusing exclusively on canonical works and ideas, the program would appear to alienate students whose cultural backgrounds have not predisposed them to valuing such texts and such an intellectual orientation. In U.S. schools, many students are affected by poverty and other disadvantages, and popular culture is often identified as one way in which to help students connect their worlds with their studies. And so while I am happy to have this model available for schools to consider, I see it unlikely that the SDC will have widespread adoption of its principles for locations in which the population is culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse.

This reservation does not undermine my admiration for the extraordinary commitment these educators have made to their schools and their students. Nor does it question the value of having students place cultures in dialogues. I see how this idea could be adapted to inform an understanding of the various subcultures that provide the strata for diverse societies such as the United States, where Latino, Native American, conservative, liberal, Eurocentric, and many other cultural perspectives are available and often in conflict with one another. Taking these various perspectives and placing them in the sort of cultural dialogue envisioned in SDC schools would be a very interesting educational experiment, one I would like to see undertaken. It is another issue how to do so within the market-driven values that structure U.S. education—where competition, accountability through standardized testing, U.S.-centered values, and other mediators emerging from a capitalist economy mitigate against the sorts of relativistic discussions fostered through SDC dialogues.

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