

Title: Vygotskian Sociocultural Pedagogy and Schooling: Will the Promise be Fulfilled?

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Abstract

The emergence of new educational principles based on Vygotskian sociocultural approach to learning and development has generated a hope for a fundamental re-conceptualization and reconstruction of educational practices. In post-Vygotskian educational psychology the two branches are now most prominent and promising: The North American branch of sociocultural research and the Russian tradition of cultural-historical studies.

Each of those two research branches predominantly concentrated on just one of the two aspects of human development and learning while almost ignoring the other aspect. Specifically, they either concentrated on the “what” of the instruction (the content of instruction) or on the “how” of instruction (instructional methods and procedures). As a result, the two basically independent research traditions have evolved over the years, taking only little notice of each other. Namely, the “how” of instruction, that is, the role of the adult and the forms of the child’s interaction with adults and peers in broad sociocultural context have been studied mostly in American sociocultural research. The “what” of instruction, that is, the character of cognitive tools the child is acquiring under the guidance of the adult, have become the major focus in Russian post-Vygotskian developmental and instructional psychology.

In the 'Western branch' of sociocultural research, the specifics of learning and development in broad social contexts and in different educational settings have been scrutinized. The analysis focused on gradual transformation of a novice into a competent participant and problem-solver in the cooperative shared activity within the ‘community of learners’. As a result, a number of innovative programs for teaching academic subjects in schools have been developed.

In contrast, the second major post-Vygotskian branch, represented mostly by the works of Russian scholars, focused on the process of internalization of cultural tools as the specifically human form of individual’s cognitive development. With respect to

instruction, these studies were predicated on the assumption that the character of cognitive tools acquired by the child (the content of instruction, e.g., scientific concepts) define the developmental potential of instruction. Characteristic enough, the collaborative aspect of the child–adult interaction, so central to the American line of research, has been given little attention in the Russian studies. A number of innovative programs also emerged as a result of this line of research.

The two prominent approaches mentioned above, both tap into one of the two crucially important dimensions of human development and learning but both discard another important part of the whole: in one case -- the aspect of internalization and individual cognitive growth; in the other case -- the interactional aspect of teaching-learning that is all important especially at the first stages of learning. The incorporation of the two, in fact, quite compatible and complementary sets of principles, into an integrated theoretical framework would greatly enhance the educational potential of sociocultural pedagogy.