

Cultural environments of early developments: how to support the acquisition of cultural tools

(on the basis of the activities in PlayLab Silmu 2002-2010)

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Main theoretical ideas on human development

- We understand the development as a *struggle* between the natural and *cultural forms of behavior* (Vygotsky, 1997b).
- Our hypothesis is that creative “drive” is the moving force of development and the purpose of development is to *accomplish creative potential* of the individual.
- Cultural development is a dynamic process; it is a constant ***re-construction*** and ***re-creation*** of existing cultural models. Every generation has to “*recreate*” and “*adjust*” the existing culture to a new socio-historical situation. Problem of ***retrospective*** vs. ***prospective*** education (Vygotsky, 1997b, Kozulin, 1998).

Cultural development of a child

- Cultural development (mastery of cultural forms of behavior) is a **collaborative** process (Vygotsky, 1997b; Donald, 2001) .
- Children are not just appropriators but active *co-creators* of culture from the very beginning (Vygotsky, 1997b, Lobok, 1996, Corsaro, 1997, Fogel, 1993).
- Play is the prototype environment (introduction to life) for the cultural development of the child in early years (Vygotsky): **creative imagination** (flexibility of thinking), **narrativity** and **symbol construction** (symbolic competence) are developed in play.

The general sequence of the cultural development of the child(Vygotsky, 1997b, 221):

1. Other people act on the child;
2. The child begins to interact with those around him;
3. The child begins to act on others: adults, peers, toys and environment;
4. Finally, the child acts on himself and starts regulating his own behavior (planning, predicting the consequences of own actions, carrying out the plan, reflecting).

Psychological tools

- Cultural development can be seen as the process of appropriation (acquisition) of ***psychological tools*** or cultural mediators (word, sign, symbol, etc.) that are used to regulate/master and control own “natural” psychological functions of perception, memory, attention, imagination, thinking processes, and etc.
- Psychological tools are symbolic artifacts - signs, symbols, texts, formulae, graphic-symbolic devices and so on (Vygotsky, 1997a).

The successive stages in the development of child's thinking

- Ability to create an image in one's head serves as the basis for defining the successive stages in the development of child's thinking in cultural-historical approach from *visual-operational* [наглядно-действенного], to *visual-pictorial* [наглядно-образному], then to *abstract-logical* [абстрактно-логическому].

The subject of development?

- In terms of cultural-historical psychology the subject of development and learning from the very beginning is not an individual child but an integrative whole that includes the child, the adult, and the symbolic tool provided by given society - ***poly-subject***.

The problem of cultural mediation: 3 main types of adult-child interactions:

- (1) **reproductive type**, where the child has to copy adult model;
- (2) **quasi-heuristic** type, based on hands-on activity and problem solving but adult preserves an authority position;
- (3) **developmental** or **productive** type based on genuine cooperation between the child and the adult. Presupposes the process of **creative development** and **self-development** of the participants, both the child and the adult.

Developmental type of interaction and ZPD

- Developmental collaboration could be expressed in the following way: “Let’s do it together!” and then, “Go on, I can help you, but you can do it better!”
- Adult mediator should keep in his mind three different zones of development of each concrete child simultaneously:
 - First ZPD – the **zone of proximal development** - mastery of a new type of operation/acting/solving a problem;
 - Second ZPD - the **zone of distant development** – self-development (child is employing new skills for personal aids);
 - Third ZPD - the **zone of potential development** that is not totally clear to the adult and should be seen as endless.

Experimental PlayLab SILMU

- *Creative play club* for young children
- *Learning site* for students, teachers and parents
- *Research laboratory* on Play, Creativity, Imagination and Early Years' Development

Experimental-genetic method (Vygotsky, 1997b)

- “Analysis of process, not thing
- Analysis that discloses the real causal-dynamic connections and relations
- An explanatory, not descriptive analysis
- Genetic analysis, which turns the initial point and reestablishes all processes of development” (1997b, p.72)

Participants and schedule

- Once a week 13 to 17 children (between the ages of 6 weeks and 6 years) with their parents
- 10-25 students, a music teacher and 1-2 university teachers – researchers present
- Activities last 3-4 hours:
 - Free choice 9.00- 9.30
 - Morning circle 9.30-10.00
 - Story presentation* 10.00-10.30
 - Playtime** 10.30-11.15
 - Lunch 11.15-11.45
 - Free playtime** 11.45-12.45
 - Farewell circle 12.45-13.00

Organization of sites and centers

- **Block and construction** play
- **Dramatic play** (role play)
- **Book and story reading**
- **Music and games:** city play, board games, puzzles, assembly kits and etc.
- **Meeting** (circles) and **art** making
- **Handicraft** site for making play props (e.g. puppets, heroes for fairy-tales and stories from vegetables, clay, plasticine, etc.)
- **Creative drama** site for imaginative role-play, story presentations, and puppet theatre
- A **kitchen** for lunch and preparing food.

Data collection, reporting & planning

- Activities are video taped with 2 - 4 cameras
- Students write field notes, on the spot observations and daily report + detailed narrative of joint imaginative play is written.
- All our planning of the next session is based on video material, weekly reports, and field notes.

Adult as an organizer and creator of cultural environment and a model of higher forms of behavior

- Adults are constructing a rich cultural environment: storytelling, puppet and drama presentations, singing, painting, constructing, handicraft, modelling and etc.; children are always invited to join; adults actively play with children
- Time is divided 1:2 - one-hour adult initiated activities, two hours child initiated activities.
- Mixed age children in the group is very important aspect of experimental work: young children are not excluded from “bigger” children’s activities

Character of adult-child interactions

- Dialogic form of interactions between adults and children
- Children and adults are seen as co-creators of joint activities, co-players
- Child's own initiative, his/her intention, idea is the starting point for adult intervention
- We try to notice, to "understand" child's intention/idea, to support it and bring to the point where the child becomes aware of his/her own idea and is able to express it in play, painting or any other creative form.

We understand children's play as:

- A movement from 'thinking' using body movements and actions (gesture language) to thinking in words (concepts)
- Nonverbal form of narration - organizing ones thoughts into a story form.

Criteria of *mature narrative role-play*

- Social, co-constructed (2 and more participants)
- Imaginative (based on productive imagination)
- Creative (not stereotypical and repetitive)
- Lasting in time (may last several months and develops over time (developed by individual children, a group of children or adults))
- Challenging (demands action at the highest level of play skills)
- Has narrative structure (a storyline is constructed during play)

Aims and interventional tools

- We aim at supporting the development of children's ***narrative thought***, imaginative thinking, skills of storytelling ***in play*** and ***through*** all possible ***symbolic media***.
- Creative drama methods are the main ***interventional tools***.

Creative drama methods: DDP, TiR, superhelper, playworld and etc. aim at:

- Adults and children *in roles* developing playworlds, 'acting out' different adventures of the characters, together constructing exciting narratives.
- The main goal of the activity is to involve children into the process of active exploration, experiencing (perezhivanie), reflection and *representation*.
- This is done through playing, drawing, oral storytelling and all possible representational activities.

The content and the forms of children's activities are extended by constructing (NEPL)

- Narrative environments for play and learning (NEPL) operate in the frame of a story that creates the context for joint playworlds (Lindqvist, 1995, Hakkarainen, 2004), for joint exploration and learning.
- Creative drama methods are used in building (NEPL): adults and children in roles 'act out' different adventures of the characters.
- The main goal is to involve children into a process of active participation, 'perezhivanie' (experiencing) and reflection that results in learning and development.

Steps of the construction of NEPL

- **I step:** Introduction of a new story through storytelling, puppet presentation or dramatization
- **II step:** Co-construction of a playworld ('in-role' participation of students)
- **III step:** Reflection on joint experiences through painting/drawing, oral storytelling supported with puppets and etc.

Changes in children's activities...

- Children get new ideas for their joint activities and practice to frame/express them in a narrative form
- They practice in playing and negotiating together: new themes, ideas, values, points of view, new behavior models
- Children start creating their own stories using the whole array of different means: telling, drawing, dramatizing, making books, making puppets, playing together with other children

Steps of the construction of NEPL

I step: introduction of a new story during morning circle through storytelling, puppet presentation or dramatization performed by the students (no more than 10 minutes)



Steps of the construction of NEPL

II step: co-construction of a playworld ('in-role' participation of students)

- Role playing
“Princesses and Wolves”



Steps of the construction of NEPL

III step: puppet presentation

- Children's version of "Little Red Riding Hood"
- Two girls are playing "puppet theatre" inspired by student's storytelling with puppets



Acquisition of cultural tools - narrative construction I: case study lasting for 9 months

- A boy (5.2-5.9) started participating in puppet presentations arranged by the students.
- A month before own puppet presentation the boy (5.8) participated in painting activity with a student (90 min.) creating an interesting narrative about own family.
- After 9 puppet presentations the same boy (5.9) organized his own puppet presentation together with a girl (5.6) for all participants (children & parents).

Turning points in participation

- Resistance
- Growing interest
- Involvement & participation
- Leadership and organization of the activity

Self organized puppet presentation “Centipede's nightmare”



Acquisition of cultural tools - narrative construction II: case study lasting for 2 years

- 1 year - A boy (3.4) experiments with: big blocks; knight's helmet & sword; dragon's figure (from stories, books & play)
- 2 year - The boy (4.4) is involved in castle play (role play with students); a book about castles was read



Two years later (5.5)

- Formulates the question:
"Where evil comes from?"
- Painted several pictures
most probably looking for the
answers to the question:
"How to fight the evil?"
- Drew a book with a possible
answer...



THE BOOK OF KNIGHTS

(told & illustrated: Niilo 5.5 years)

A knight stood on the wall of the castle. Two dragons approached. The knight saw the dragons. The smaller one escaped, but the bigger one came closer and closer.

The other knights came, but it did not help. They started to think together what to do. The dragon went around the castle. Then the knights made a big figure of knight from canvas. They hung the figure in front of the wall. The dragon got frightened when the figure was ready. So at the end they drove the dragon from the castle.

**After a week:
Brave knights fighting a Dragon (5.5 & 3.5)**



Sense creation leads to narrative construction

- Starting point for play is a strong need for expressing certain emotional experiences/ideas.
- The child starts play by imitating the others (adults and peers) and seeking for the resources in cultural environment.
- In play one must creatively transform own feelings, emotions and experiences giving them a “**material**” **form** and putting them into certain order: clear form, rhythm, time or event line (beginning, conflict, resolution).
- Play and drawing can be understood as a way to tell a story (narrative construction) about one's emotional experiences and building **order** from **chaos**.

Who is playing, teaching, learning, developing?

- The goal of student intervention is to develop joint play activity (taking roles and participating in play)
- A student is not an expert of play. In play he “learns” to play and at the same time “teach” a child to play (modeling play behavior)
- “Learning” of both participants is a result of joint play activity
- Spontaneous “free learning”: *holistic* and *participatory*, proceeds through *search activity* (poiskovaja dejatel'nost'), careful *observation* and gradual *imitation*.
- **Who is developing? *Poly-subject?***

Conclusions

- Creative drama is a tool that moves participants into collaborative co-construction of shared activity system (play + narrative) and prepares the next developmental step (self-development) in children + professional & personality development in adults.
- Analysis of collaborative interactions revealed that adult participation in joint activities (drama, play, painting) creates the space supportive for the development of all participants, **both children and adults.**

Growth on personality level?

- Genuine participation in shared play activities is very difficult for many students (adults). This process requires “stepping out” of one’s own understanding and “meeting” understanding of ‘another’
- But if this happens all the participants become involved in creative process that bring *change in participants by* moving them to a new level of functioning and understanding - deep, experiential learning.
- THANK YOU!