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Examining play through a Vygotskian perspective

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Examining play through a Vygotskian perspective

Abstract

This graduate research article titled "Examining Play Through a Vygotskian Perspective" is to inform practicing educators of the work of Lev Vygotsky. The role of play in the early childhood classroom is discussed. The techniques of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development (ZPD) are defined. Strategies were provided in this article for implementing a Vygotskian theory based program. Examples integrating the methods of scaffolding and the ZPD are provided as a technique to enhance play.

Examining Play Through a Vygotskian Perspective

A Graduate Research Article

Submitted to the

Division of Early Childhood Education

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Pamela Novy

July 10, 1996

This Graduate Research Article by: Pamela Novy

Titled: Examining Play Through a Vygotskian Perspective

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has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Abstract

This graduate research article titled "Examining Play Through a Vygotskian Perspective" is to inform practicing educators of the work of Lev Vygotsky. The role of play in the early childhood classroom is discussed. The techniques of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development (ZPD) are defined. Strategies were provided in this article for implementing a Vygotskian theory based program. Examples integrating the methods of scaffolding and the ZPD are provided as a technique to enhance play.

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Pamela A. Novy

Examining Play Through a Vygotskian Perspective

A parent comes up to me at school and asks, "Why is my child spending so much time just playing in your classroom? He can play all that he needs to at home. Here he needs to learn the three R's - you know, academics - the important things in life."

Many parents, school administrators, and colleagues object to play in classroom settings. Some parents view school only in terms of academic gains by their children. These parents are often more pleased when their children bring home worksheets which validates work and learning. To school administrators who believe that learning is proved only by test scores, play seems to be only for amusement and recreation. Colleagues who do not have an understanding of how children develop in their early childhood years view play as wasted time, and early childhood educators as mere babysitters. Many adults see play as just play - fun, but not *learning*. Unschooled in the ways in which play enhances development, adults may not appreciate the social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and creative gains that a child can make through play. The challenge, then, is to help adults recognize how children learn through play and how it benefits a child's total development; therefore, with these objectives in mind, I propose to discuss the value of play in terms of the work of a Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky.

Positive attitudes of play

In my early childhood center-based classroom, play is an integral part of my program. Play is used at center time when students choose which type of activity, such as blocks, manipulatives, art, writing, or dramatics, in which they want to become involved. Young children can develop many specific intellectual, social/emotional and physical skills through play. Some of these skills include: problem solving, attending to a task, representing, taking another's point of view, exchanging ideas, and large and small muscle growth.

For the child, play and learning are not separated. Play is learning. Learning is accomplished as children experience, accommodate that experience, and then assimilate it. For the learning to be significant to the individual child, the play is spontaneous and unstructured, rather than adult-directed and structured. Play is the basis for all of the higher forms of mental activity that children will do later in life (Vygotsky, 1978). I believe that learning is accomplished through play.

The zone of proximal development and scaffolding

Many educators, such as myself, have been trained in the theory of Jean Piaget, who emphasized biological maturity as an inevitable condition for learning. Vygotsky (1978) disagreed, for he writes that the developmental process can be influenced by the learning process; consequently, any pedagogy that does not respect this fact would be sterile. For Vygotsky, pedagogy creates learning processes that lead development, and this sequence results in zones, or areas of proximal (nearest)

development (ZPD) (Moll, 1990). Vygotsky defined this zone as the distance between the real level of development and the potential level of development (Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of ZPD is symbolic of Vygotsky's method of research in education: A difficult goal is offered; the child receives orientation from an adult; he reaches that goal and another one is offered; he tackles it and solves it independently or with the help of the adult. This concept has had a major influence in education (Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984).

Theoretical support for the teacher as participant is provided by Vygotsky. He identified a ZPD as 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" (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 86-91). It is the area in which a child can solve problems by working with others, especially an adult. This is the area that, according to Vygotsky, is especially important in a child's learning - that area where a child, with help, can go beyond her present developmental level. Adult-child interaction becomes crucial in that it provides necessary assistance as the child stretches beyond her level of development. Learning is viewed as a profoundly social process, emphasizing dialogue and the varied roles that language plays in instruction and in mediated cognitive growth (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, Vygotsky's theory implies that teacher-child interaction in play settings can enable the child to progress in learning (Schrader, 1990). This interaction takes place when questions are posed, when ideas are suggested, and when observations are discussed.

In Vygotsky's work, a term has emerged that describes effective teaching/learning interactions within the ZPD: scaffolding. Scaffolding is the changing quality of support over a teaching session, in which a more skilled partner adjusts the assistance he provides to fit the child's current level of performance. More support is offered when a task is new; less is provided as the child's competence increases, thereby fostering the child's autonomy and independent mastery (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

The role of play

Areas of research influenced by Vygotsky include play (Elkonin, 1980). Play is considered to be the principle activity for the interiorization and appropriation of reality during the first years (Vygotsky, 1978). As Vygotsky suggests, play mediates the learning of children. Because they are only playing, they are free to risk doing things they are not yet confident they can do well. In social play, children transact with each other, mediating each other's learning. They learn to understand the meanings of the world as they play with their representations of the world. They build concepts of mathematics and science as well as language, including literacy. The concepts begun in play not only are the basis for scientific concepts but eventually become part of these concepts (Goodman & Goodman, 1990).

Vygotsky discusses the role of play as a context in which the ZPD is also activated. This view of play is revealed in the following statement.

Play creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it

is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a
magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a
condensed form and is itself a major source of
development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102).

Let us consider how the ZPD and scaffolding can be utilized in an early
childhood classroom. When a child, through his chosen activity of puzzles, is
having a difficult time getting the pieces to fit together, I would demonstrate to
him through words and actions how I would fit the pieces together. This might
include: making a *frame* out of some of the pieces into which the other pieces
would fit; looking at the outer edges of the pieces for straight or jagged edges;
and considering the color of the pieces to be matched together. Next, I would
have the child work with me on the puzzle to see at which level he would now
be performing. From this observation, I would next continue with further
scaffolds until the child would be able to achieve success in putting the puzzle
together. Through this example, you can see how the child establishes the ZPD
and how the interactions between the teacher and child were emphasized, as
they supported Vygotsky's technique of scaffolding of the concepts through
shared responsibility and joint problem solving.

Previously when planning activities in my classroom, a major concern of
mine was if the students were developmentally ready to acquire the learning.
Now, after having studied Vygotsky's work, I see that learning can lead
students' development. Utilizing Vygotsky's ZPD I consider what interventions
will work best to raise a student's performance on a task. I view my role in
teaching as that of assisting the child's performance through the ZPD. Teaching

can be said to occur when assistance is offered at points in the ZPD when it is
needed for the child to understand a term, fact or
concept (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

Studying Vygotsky's work on play has been exciting because it confirms
beliefs and actions that I know work in my classroom. Many of his ideas fill in
the reasons for my way of teaching. With continued recognition of children as
active participants in their learning, I now have a means of analyzing what I do
in regard to children's play. Instead of only having the option of following the
child's lead, or for me to lead, I now have more ways of assisting his or her
performance.

Lev Vygotsky's work helps us to understand that when children transact
with their world they are capable of doing more than they appear to be and that
they can get much more out of an activity or experience if there is an adult, or a
a more experienced playmate, to mediate the experience for them. While
teachers are professionals, they must still be caring adults. They need to
involve learners in relevant activities and experiences that will stretch their
capabilities. Furthermore, they can mediate the learner's transactions with the
world in minimally intrusive ways, and in the process support learning without
controlling it (Goodman & Goodman, 1990).

In conclusion, I would like to invite those parents, administrators, and
colleagues who do not understand the purpose of play to reconsider any
negative opinions concerning the value of this form of behavior. For in
reviewing Vygotsky's developmental theory, one must acknowledge how play
sets the cornerstone for a young child's educational growth in the future.

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Appendix A

GUIDELINES
FOR WRITERS OF
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP
1 9 9 6 - 1 9 9 7

Educational Leadership is the official journal of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). Its contents are intended for all persons interested in curriculum, instruction, supervision, and leadership in education. Each issue contains articles by leading educators, reports of programs and practices, interpretations of research, book reviews, and columns.

Issues are organized around themes (see "Themes" inside). In general, the more appropriate your article is for a theme issue, the more likely we will be able to publish it. We also accept articles on "Special Topics" if the subject is of great interest but not related to a theme. In addition, we invite international contributions all year long, but especially for those three to four issues designated as having an International Section.

Other important information: The Association ordinarily offers no remuneration for articles by professional educators. Decisions regarding publication are made by the Executive Editor and the editorial staff. The Association reserves the right to reject material, whether solicited or otherwise, if it is considered lacking in quality or timeliness.

What We Look For . . .

The editors look for *brief* (1,500–2,500 words) manuscripts that are helpful to practicing K–12 educators. We are not looking for term papers or reviews of literature, and we rarely publish conventional research reports. We prefer articles in which the writer speaks directly to the reader in an informal, conversational style. The treatment of the topic should be interesting, insightful, and based on the writer's experiences. Practical examples should be used to illustrate key points. When reporting their own research, writers should emphasize explanation and interpretation of the results, rather than the methodology. We usually don't find query letters helpful; we prefer to read the manuscript.

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To prepare your manuscript, double-space all copy and leave generous margins; number *all* pages; and show your name, address, phone number, and fax number on the cover sheet only. Please do not single-space or otherwise crowd your pages. We prefer manuscripts that look like manuscripts, not like typeset articles from desktop publishing. On page one, just above the title, *please* indicate the number of words in the manuscript, including references, figures, and the like.

Cite references in the text like this (Jones 1978), and list them in bibliographic form at the end of the article; or use citations in the form of numbered endnotes. See a recent issue of *Educational Leadership* for examples of citations. Authors bear full responsibility for the accuracy of citations, quotations, figures, and the like.

For other matters of style, refer to *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.

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If your manuscript is accepted, even provisionally, we will ask you to send a computer disk or a letter-quality original of your article. Then your manuscript enters the pool of manuscripts on hand for a particular theme issue (or for use in "Special Topics"). When the editors assemble a particular issue, they review all manuscripts in order to make selections for the table of contents. All manuscripts selections are tentative until we go to press.

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difficult to spell out the "whys" and "wherefores" of each selection in advance. The outcome depends on a variety of factors, such as the balance of perspectives, locations, grade levels, and the like. If your manuscript becomes a contender for the final table of contents, you will be notified, and we'll ask you to send a computer disk or a letter-quality original. However, in editing and layout we may find that the issue has not turned out as expected; and there are often last minute adjustments, with resultant disappointments to authors

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Appendix B

2408 Cimmaron Drive
Marion, IA 52302
July 10, 1996

Marge Scherer, Managing Editor
Educational Leadership
ASCD
1250 N. Pitt Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-1453

Dear Ms. Scherer,

In May 1996 two copies of my manuscript titled "Examining Play Through a Vygotskian Perspective" were submitted to Educational Leadership for publication. I have recently revised my manuscript and am hopeful that you will consider this revision of my article for your journal. Enclosed are the two new copies prepared as is indicated in your Guidelines for Writers of Educational Leadership.

Thank you for your interest.

Sincerely,

Pamela Novy