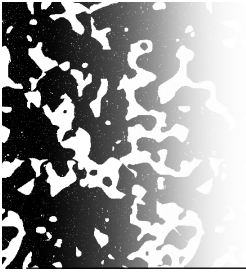


Vygotsky on Education

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PRIMER



Introduction

"Vygotsky left an impressive body of work that, as is the case with most geniuses, become[s] more modern as time goes by" (Blanck, 1990, p. 31).

Who was the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and is his work still relevant to educators in the 21st century? In what ways does his work converge with the field of progressive education in general and critical pedagogy in particular? These are some of the questions that provided the impetus to write this book as a part of the Peter Lang primer series along with *Critical Pedagogy* (2008), *Bakhtin* (2007), *Foucault and Education* (2005) and *John Dewey* (2006) to name a few related titles.

All of Vygotsky's contemporaries and present day scholars in psychology will attest to the fact that he was a genius and a forerunner to the field of cognitive psychology. However, he had many other interests as well, including poetry, theatre, fiction and



film. His unique and groundbreaking theories on the dialectical connections between thought and language are timeless and priceless contributions to all content areas of education. Before his untimely death at age 38 he had written or co-written 180 major works, transformed the practice of Soviet psychology from its behaviorist origins, and almost singlehandedly created what we now call the field of special education.

Even though he died almost 80 years ago, in many ways his life work is even more relevant and significant to the field of education today than in the 20th century. This book gives centrality to Vygotsky's emphasis on the role of the cultural and historical context in learning and challenges theories that emphasize a universalistic view of learning through fixed biologically determined stages of development. In this present time of undue preoccupation with standardized outcomes and the corporatization of schooling, Vygotsky's most important ideas about education need to be freshly considered.

The book opens with a snapshot of Vygotsky bursting on the public scene at a national conference on Soviet psychology. From the beginning of his career until his death 14 years later, he challenged the status quo by imagining and acting against the grain of given orthodoxy. Particular attention is given to the cultural-historical context of Vygotsky's life as the shaping dynamic behind his views on education. This is followed by an overview of his two most popular ideas: the zone of proximal development and the development of thinking and speech as a means of empowerment. Another chapter introduces the readers to Vygotsky's views of both critical and creative imagination in the formation of personal agency and in creative collaboration. In Chapter Five Lake explores the convergence between Vygotsky's work and critical pedagogy through a framework provided by Joseph Schwab's notion of the four commonplaces of curriculum—milieu, teacher, subject matter, and learner. This chapter also provides an overview of present day



practices and practitioners that clearly reflect and build upon Vygotsky's work in a wide array of international and multicultural settings across all age levels. Applications to current practices from an expansive range of sources help provide clarity and relevance to diverse audiences. The primer format maintains the essence of Vygotsky's work in language that is accessible to all students of education.