

VERSIONS OF VYGOTSKY

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ABSTRACT: The current prominent influence of the theories of L. S. Vygotsky on studies of education, particularly of pedagogic practice, requires a re-examination. The dominance of deficient editions of his writings has had regrettable consequences such as a misplaced reading of the 'zone of proximal development'. The publication of his recent, albeit incomplete, Collected Works in English affords an opportunity to reassess Vygotsky's work. Potential areas for such rethinking include: a comparison between his work and influence with that of Piaget; Vygotsky's own epistemology and methodology; and the relevance of his approach to contemporary concerns.

Keywords: epistemology, pedagogy, Piaget, psychology, Vygotsky

1. INTRODUCTION

One purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the recent publication of Vygotsky's *Collected Works* in English (1987b, 1993, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999). I aim to highlight now visible deficiencies of earlier translations and to trace resultant distortions in interpretations of Vygotsky's work in education and related fields. With the benefit of hindsight it can be seen that the ideologies and practices of earlier translators have had long-lasting effects upon the public reception of his theories.

The cardinal influence of an authority can be gauged not only in the existence of books devoted to interpretations and applications of their work but even more strongly through the use of fleeting references that appear simply to reflect notions that have passed into standard use. Here, for example, is a seemingly uncontroversial reference to Vygotsky from a thoughtful review of a pedagogical textbook of good pedigree:

The teacher has a fundamental role to play in creating the conditions and engineering the interventions in children's learning which will, in Vygotskian terms, capitalise on the 'zone of proximal development'. (Burton, 1996, p. 442)

It may perhaps be challenging to received notions of Vygotsky's work in education studies to relate that (i) Vygotsky's only book on education has still never been published in English; (ii) he probably did not regard the notion of the 'zone of proximal development' as either important or original; and, furthermore, (iii) he never wrote a book called either *Thought and Language* or *Mind and Society*. In this article I contend that the contemporary reception of Vygotsky as a guru for the wide education community, overtaking Piaget in prominence, stems from a reading of his work that is highly selective, distorted and perhaps over-simplified in its apparent coherence. Hence, in countless studies of child development, pedagogical and psychological research, Vygotsky's ideas have often been recycled in tired forms that represent misunderstandings of a dynamic, and, I believe, more controversial figure than is currently being represented.

Before I turn to consider aspects of representations of his work and how they have been used, I need to consider an important question. Why did Vygotsky become such an influential figure, several decades after his death and in a very different society from the one he worked in – revolutionary Russia? In my opinion there are three prominent factors at work other than the issues of quality and value perceived in his work that might be assumed to be the only influences in this process.

The first of these is adequate distance. As a historical figure, Vygotsky is a convenient person to make into a guru. He is dead, although the gradual publication of his works makes him ever fertile. His geopolitical and chronological distance makes it feasible to 'claim' him as support for a variety of purposes and to take and apparently 'decontextualise' his ideas. Although feasible, that is not a simple task. His writing style is constantly dialogic, engaging with the work of predecessors and contemporaries. As some of those are relatively forgotten figures this can detract from accessibility for the contemporary reader; but at the same time that quality in itself creates a demand for secondary, filtered accounts that work to divorce his writings from their cultural context.

A second part of his appeal is as a 20th-century 'social conscience'. His work stemmed from concern with many of the ills recognised in modern, urban civilisation such as the requirement to teach literacy across society; the need for policies to deal with disabilities and special needs; and the effects of social diseases such as alcoholism. Contemporary readers can often recognise and share these concerns, finding his arenas of interest highly relevant to our society.

The third aspect that led to his prominence in education studies has been the opportunity presented for a facilitation of false coherence, as I shall argue in greater detail as I turn to consideration of representations of his work. I suggest that poor early traditions/editions have contributed towards the temptation of finding an overly simple sense of coherence in Vygotsky's work with the notion of the zone of proximal development a particularly prominent example. Without wishing to dichotomise falsely the disciplines of education and psychology, it is perhaps the latter field that might so far claim to embed some of the magnificent work that has been carried out with an acknowledged basis in Vygotsky's work (e.g. John-Steiner *et al.*, 1994; Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1985). I shall urge that we in education particularly should question what we think we know about Vygotsky's work. I suggest that a re-examination of sources could lead to reassessment and, more importantly, fresh directions in what could crudely be termed 'application', which always of course entails (re)interpretation, however implicit or otherwise.

Vygotsky was brought into prominence as an influence in Western academia more than 30 years after his death in 1934. The incorporation of Vygotsky's theorising into a late 20th-century framework of social scientific understandings can be seen as a classic Kuhnian paradigmatic shift from a Piagetian account of child development with its confident espousal of experimental psychological methodology, predicated on the existence of human universals and isolability of individuals and even processes within the individual. In the mid-1980s some useful work was undertaken presenting Vygotsky's ideas as if they were dichotomous to Piaget's and, with the benefit of later insights, now recognisable as more fertile (Bruner, 1984; Hickmann, 1986). Momentarily at least a social-constructivist coherence was proposed embracing the evolution of the species (phylogeny) and moment-by-moment learning processes (microgenesis) as part of any tale of individual development (ontogenesis), firmly embedded in a socio-historical environment (Wertsch, 1985). In a socio-historical account, human psychology is necessarily social in its origins and manifestations; human complexity resists reductionism to biological determinants (Ratner, 1991). An interpretive, hermeneutic paradigm can better capture such interpenetration of phenomena than the individually-centred accounts of the cognitivist perspective (Brockmeier, 1996).

This account of the contemporary context for Vygotsky's work is open to challenge (see below) but is offered as a temporary foundation for discussion. In a paper of this length and scope I can only

attempt to even mention a very small proportion of Vygotsky's work and subsequent interpretations, as attention to his work multiplies each year. Through a careful reading of a cross-section of works available I endeavour to contribute in a small measure to a critical re-examination of his work, chiefly by interrogating its past and current influence on educational studies in the UK and further afield.

2. VERSIONS OF VYGOTSKY: SOME MALFORMATIONS IN INFLUENTIAL PRESENTATIONS

Between 1987 and 1999 'The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky' have been published by Plenum Press in hardback. Many university libraries have not yet purchased all volumes, even if Vygotsky features prominently on syllabuses. It appears that sections of the market prefer far shorter works, such as Van der Veer and Valsiner's (1994b) *Vygotsky Reader*. At least until the time of this publication (and I do not think the newer works have yet changed matters considerably) the two presentations of Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (published 1962, revised 1986) and *Mind in Society* (published 1978, revised 1980) had an overwhelmingly prominent influence, with regrettable consequences:

Although the more sophisticated scholars were citing Vygotsky's journal articles alongside the two books, still the majority of reference to Vygotsky in the 1970s and early 1980s is to those two books. Vygotsky became more of a name than a real scholar, he was attacked by Westerners who did not (or could not) understand him (e.g. Fodor, 1972) or, alternatively, glorified (Toulmin, 1978). (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1994a, p. 4)

I do not have access to the recent Russian language collected works of Vygotsky. Nevertheless a relatively cursory comparison of translations, or, I might more accurately term 'versions' of Vygotsky that now exist in English is sufficient to highlight major deficiencies in those two major texts. I will concentrate on the 1986 'improved' version of *Thought and Language* as it has superseded the position of the 1962 edition and mention *Mind in Society* in its 1978 'original' version. (Even through the British Library I have been unable to borrow the 1980 revision. I therefore have to refer throughout to the 1978 edition.) Three issues relating to *Thought and Language* will be discussed, not directly in terms of the essential content of the ideas but as a 'version' of Vygotsky's work.

The first striking feature is that the title is a mistranslation. The Russian title is *Myshlenie i Rech'*. From my own knowledge of Russian

I can confirm Rieber and Carton's (1987, p. v) assertion that *myshlenie* is best translated by 'thinking' (although unlike Rieber and Carton I feel 'thought' is reasonably adequate as capturing the meaning of the concept and its abstract aspect). However *rech'*, as Rieber and Carton write, is absolutely mistranslated. *Rech'* always appears in dictionaries as 'speech' and is never a synonym for 'language'. If a term had been sought to indicate a broader meaning, Vygotsky might have used *iazyk* which can be glossed as 'language' or 'tongue'. But 'speech' in English as in Russian is a different concept from 'language'.

Vygotsky never confused the two notions of 'speech' and 'language'. He had studied the work of Russian formalist linguistics and indeed one book important to Vygotsky was Potebnya's (1862) *Thought and Language [Mysl' i iazyk]* – see Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, p. 5; and Kozulin's introduction to Vygotsky, 1986, p. xv. Vygotsky always maintained a clear distinction between the concepts, especially perhaps in this very book. In chapter 7 of *Thought and Language* Vygotsky is concerned with aspects of speech, thinking and language; to call his work by a title very different from the one he gave seems to me inexcusable. The translator admits he is making an error but allows the title to stand nevertheless (ibid, p. lvii). The effect of the mistranslated title in literary terms is one which readers can judge for themselves; but to me *Thinking and Speech* is more concrete and immediate somehow than the more abstractly philosophical *Thought and Language*. The effect of the mistranslation is to move away from the active register of pedagogy into epistemological realms.

Secondly, although the editor and translator of *Thought and Language* gives no indication of this, his version of *Thought and Language* is less than half the length of Rieber and Carton's presentation of *Thinking and Speech* in their 1987 volume. Why did he fail to acknowledge this? Popkewitz (1990, p. 50) points out that early translators and editors of Vygotsky cut out references to Marxism, presumably under the influence of the McCarthy-inspired 'great red scare' in the USA which outlived the infamous senator who died in 1957 (Fried, 1997). Kozulin cut out reference to Marx, Engels, Plekhanov and so on but preserved references to literary figures. Amongst these, the criterion for editorial selection cannot have been familiarity to Western readers. Although several passages concerning L.N. Tolstoy are included (e.g. Vygotsky, 1986, pp. 150–152; 247–248); a discussion relating to the Russian playwright Griboyedov is also preserved with references to 19th and 20th century Russian poets (Vygotsky, 1986, pp. 250–255).

Cutting out all references to Marxism is to distort the sources of Vygotsky's ideas but also has a few more surprising effects. Chapter 3 'Stern's Theory of Speech Development' is, I find, something of a struggle to read whether in *Thought and Language* or *Thinking and Speech* but at least the latter is enlivened by Engels' discussion of sailors teaching their parrots to swear! (Vygotsky, 1987a, p. 117) However, the real question is why a half-size reduction of this influential text was, and in large measure still continues to be, tolerable to its readership in educational studies.

The third issue I wish to discuss in respect of *Thought and Language* is how these cuts have been made and to look at their effect. I argue that even where the intention of the translator/editor is carried out reasonably successfully, a great deal is still lost and the effect of this can fairly be described as distorting. I will demonstrate this by presenting the reader with one exemplar: a quotation from *Thought and Language* will be followed by the same passage as it is rendered in *Thinking and Speech*.

I have chosen the particular example that follows for two reasons. Firstly, I think the cut is representative of the intentions and practices of the translator/editor. Secondly, in choosing a section where Vygotsky discusses a general problem for Piaget, the content is relevant to considerations of the writers' epistemologies.

Here is a passage as it appears in *Thought and Language*:

Piaget, however, did not escape the duality characteristic of psychology in the age of crisis. He tried to hide behind the wall of facts, but facts 'betrayed' him, for they led to problems. Problems gave birth to theories, in spite of Piaget's determination to avoid them by closely following the experimental facts and disregarding for the time being that the very choice of experiments is determined by hypotheses. But facts are always examined in the light of some theory and therefore cannot be disentangled from philosophy. Who would find a key to the richness of the new facts must uncover the *philosophy of fact*: how it was found and how interpreted. Without such an analysis, fact will remain dead and mute. (Vygotsky 1986, p. 15, emphasis as in original)

The same passage as it appears in *Thinking and Speech*:

In spite of his attempts, Piaget did not succeed in avoiding the fatal dualism to which the crisis in contemporary psychology has doomed even the best representatives of the science. Piaget attempted to hide behind a high wall of reliable fact. But the facts betrayed him. They led him to problems. They led him to theory,

implicit and undeveloped theory to be sure, but nonetheless to theory of the kind that he had tried so hard to avoid. Yes, there is theory in his books. This is inevitable. It is fate. Piaget writes:

'All I have attempted has been to follow step by step the facts as given in the experiments. We know well enough that experiment is always influenced by the hypothesis that occasioned it, but I have for the time being confined myself strictly to the discussion of the facts' (1932, p. xix).

However, he who *considers facts, inevitably considers them in the light of one theory or another*.

Fact and philosophy are directly interrelated. This is particularly true of facts such as those that Piaget has discovered, reported, and analyzed because they concern the development of the child's thinking. If we want to find the key to this rich collection of new fact, we must first clarify the *philosophy of the fact*, the philosophy of its acquisition and interpretation. Otherwise, the facts will remain silent and dead. (Vygotsky, 1987a, p. 55. Emphasis as in original)

I should repeat that the second version is as yet little read; it is *Thought and Language* which is still the oft-cited, widely available paperback. The second version is to me not only more powerful than the first, but actually easier to understand. I will make a few points of comparison between the two passages, focusing on specific points of content.

In the first sentence, Vygotsky's assertion that psychology is in crisis (the time of writing was 1933/34) has been transformed to the weaker statement that psychology is (at the time) operating in a condition of somehow general crisis. Yet it is often argued that the crisis in psychology that Vygotsky perceived at that time continues to this day and that an improved appraisal of Vygotsky's ideas could be beneficial (Brockmeier, 1996; Burman, 1994; Fischer and Granott, 1995; Ratner, 1991; see also Vygotsky, 1987a, pp. 53–54). Summarising the shift in assumptions underlying methodological choices suggested by a Vygotskian approach, Van der Veer and Valsiner write:

Discarding the static ethos of traditional experimental methodology where 'effects' of the changes in the 'independent variables' upon the selected outcomes measured by 'dependent variables' are sought, Vygotsky developed a methodological scheme that introduces the dynamic emergence of novel

structures of psychological phenomena as the main focus of empirical investigation. (1991, p. 398)

Referring to the quotation from *Thought and Language* above, we can see that in putting the idea that ‘the very choice of experiments is determined by hypotheses’ (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 15 – see above) in Vygotsky’s ‘mouth’ rather than in the quotation from Piaget where it belongs, Kozulin has made Vygotsky appear to take the employment of these terms for granted. In other words I suggest that it is the misappropriation of the terms that gives a misleading impression, suggesting that Vygotsky is accepting that the proper subject matter and activity of psychological investigation is defining a hypothesis and then testing it by experimentation, in a ‘traditional’ framework. Reading this, one might fairly assume he is taking for granted certain methodological (or meta-theoretical) assumptions.

From my overall reading of Vygotsky’s work (especially *Thinking and Speech*) I propose that his approach is actually very different. Vygotsky emphasises investigations of cognitive developments as they occur rather than as manifestations of abilities viewed as static at any particular point in time. Further, the investigations are pursued always with careful consideration to the effect of the experiment itself on the subject. The experiment itself is often the site for a learning activity – a site of development in microcosm – and the process by which the child sets about the task is the focus of study rather than a measure of achievement for example (as noted by John-Steiner *et al*, 1994). Finally, in Vygotsky’s writings, hypotheses are shown as being formed, tested and developed in tandem with the experimentation process. His anti-reductionist stance and multi-disciplinary approach contribute to making his works readable and rewarding, while in his approach to the application of developmental psychology to study of the processes of education he presages, as it were, Donaldson’s (1987) highly influential *Children’s Minds*.

I suggest also that Piaget’s own position and Vygotsky’s estimation of it are both rendered more fairly and subtly in *Thinking and Speech* than in the shorter version. In reading the quotation from Piaget I am reminded of the impulses from deduction to induction that led towards grounded theory in sociology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Vygotsky’s following discussion about the inextricability of facts and philosophy is richer than it appears in *Thought and Language*. On the one hand the point is well made that the process of gathering and selecting facts entails a particular epistemology. On the other hand the point is made that the facts that are being gathered elucidate the

child's own development of thinking. The matter of philosophy is doubly inescapable. The potential for linking Vygotsky's ideas as they are presented in the second version to hermeneutics in educational research, and indeed elsewhere in the human sciences, is surely greater.

Before I leave this matter of general presentations of Vygotsky's work I should mention that *Mind and Society* (Vygotsky, 1978) is unsatisfactory to an equivalent degree, although, since it was produced after the USA had passed through the cathartic and lively 1960s, Marxism now appears prominently. The translators/editors confess to 'significant liberties' in their 'construction' of the text. (See the editors' preface to Vygotsky, 1978, pp. ix–xi). They admit to omitting sections, putting sections together that did not originally belong together and even inserting materials 'from additional sources in order to more fully explicate the meaning of the text.' (ibid, p. x). These insertions do not necessarily even come from works by Vygotsky, although, to be fair, the editors say that insertions when made from the works of others are referenced in notes. *Mind and Society* – that 'cocktail-type mixing of various of his ideas to fit the American audience' as Valsiner and Veer (1994, p. 4) accurately describe it, requires a more cautious reception than that accorded to it in educational studies circles at least, especially owing to one particular element of its legacy.

3. THE VYGOTSKYAN TUTORIAL AND ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

I will consider the status and presentation of just one idea that has emerged originally, as far as I can see, from *Mind and Society* and taken on a vigorous life of its own, as some interpreters have taken it to be the *central* idea in Vygotsky's work – the zone of proximal development and its related concept, the Vygotskian tutorial. As indicated by the quotation given at the beginning of this article and Moll's (1990) influential collection *Vygotsky and Education*, these notions are often treated as particularly significant. In his introduction Moll makes a powerful case for his decision to focus upon the zone of proximal development:

I concentrated in this Introduction on developing some ideas about the zone of proximal development because, as a 'connecting' concept in Vygotsky's theory, it embodies or integrates key elements of the theory: the emphasis on social activity and cultural practice as sources of thinking, the importance of mediation in human psychological functioning, the centrality of

pedagogy in development, and the inseparability of the individual from the social. (Moll, 1990, p. 15)

The force of Moll's placing as central the notion of the zone of proximal development is reinforced in this volume by a biographical study of Vygotsky. In a chronologically arranged outline, Blanck (1990, p. 32) introduces the idea of the zone of proximal development when Vygotsky is hardly a decade old. But, although I consider fair Moll's characterisation of 'key elements' of Vygotsky's theory as presented in the quotation immediately above, I question whether the notion of the zone of proximal development should be either viewed as central in 'Vygotsky's theory' (terming it thus makes the work of such a wide-ranging thinker appear more singular or unitary than I think is helpful) or as being the 'connecting' factor for the 'key elements'.

The oft-quoted definition of the zone of proximal development, often used to introduce the idea that a child is capable of more when interacting with an adult or more capable peer than alone, reads as follows:

. . . the zone of proximal development . . . is 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, p. 86).

The arena for this activity is then popularly characterised as 'Vygotskian' – even 'the Vygotskian tutorial' – an umbrella term for learning situations, most often dyads, where contingent assistance, in effect, is provided by the senior partner in their 'scaffolding' of the young child's learning (see e.g. Dunn, 1992, p. 141). But, as Van der Veer and Valsiner describe, this concept is then often discussed with references to Vygotsky in a way that is really somewhat misleading:

It is interesting to note that nowadays countless investigators of mother-child dialogues and joint problem solving (with their emphasis on the steering role of the more experienced other in an intimate setting) feel obliged to refer to Vygotsky, although in fact Vygotsky never discussed these situations and instead focused more upon culture as providing tools for thinking. (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1994a, p. 6)

The application of the notion of the zone of proximal development to study of such subjects as children's cognitive and language

development in mother/child dyads is attributable above all to the example of later researchers (see e.g. Bruner, 1985; Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1985; Wertsch and Hickmann, 1987). Possibly current researchers should more often acknowledge a debt to their work rather than directly to that of Vygotsky.

In Vygotsky's work, I find that the zone of proximal development received direct exposition in two contexts which are rather different from either the Vygotskian tutorial or Moll's (1990, p. 15) general "connecting" concept' (although I do not suggest there is nil overlap). The zone of proximal development is discussed by Vygotsky in just two contexts, as far as I am aware from perusal of all texts available so far to me. His discussion related to assessment of learning (see for example Vygotsky, 1987, pp. 209–214) is made use of by some contemporary investigators (e.g. Drummond and Nutbrown, 1996). The concept applied to pretence play (most clearly expounded in Vygotsky's 1967 paper) is also fertile (Fein, 1991). Where then is the origin of the term, zone of proximal development, that has come to be so widely applied across pedagogic contexts?

It will be remembered that the definition I quoted above was from *Mind and Society*. The source of this is traced for us by Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991, p. 377). Incidentally, their translation is almost identical except that, not insignificantly, they render the last phrase, 'more capable peers' as 'more intelligent partners'. The passage in question appeared in a stenogram of a lecture delivered by Vygotsky shortly before his death and published posthumously. Reading the quotation in the context provided for us by Van der Veer and Valsiner, it is interesting that Vygotsky spoke of the zone of proximal development as if applying an already existing concept and simply meanwhile inserting a clear definition of the term in the course of a lecture. Van der Veer and Valsiner (1991, p. 347) claim that Vygotsky himself stated that the concept of the zone of proximal development was not original. Indeed this was seized upon by some Stalinist critics of Vygotsky (ibid). Although Van der Veer and Valsiner appear to avail themselves of the potential sensationalist value of this point (ibid, p. 397) they elsewhere, more accurately in my opinion, treat this statement of Vygotsky's as an under-assessment of his own development of others' previous insights (ibid, p. 347).

By presenting the definition of the zone of proximal development in the context of what seems to be a paper, in *Mind and Society*, his editors imbued it with the texture of an original proposition and it has since been received as such. Arguably, the notion of the zone of proximal development is little more meaningful than that of a learning

situation presented to a child, where adults and/or more advanced children directly or indirectly have a positive influence on the child.

In the confines of this paper I cannot do justice to competing opinions as to the greater significance of other areas of Vygotsky's work and theories, that are perhaps less banal as 'central' or 'connecting' concepts than the zone of proximal development. A substantial treatment of his legacy would include such issues as the relationship between interpersonal communication and individual language acquisition, the growth of scientific concepts in the child, the 'cultural-historical theory' of Vygotsky and Luria, the activity theory of Leont'ev that is contentiously held to be a direct descendent and so on.

Fully in line with Vygotsky himself, we can claim that societal meanings are not only vehicles for remembering scientific ideas, but also (and equally effective) the means to purposefully forget some (Van der Veer and Valsiner 1994a, p. 5)

4. CONCLUSIONS: SURVIVAL OF VYGOTSKY'S WORK

Although his most thoughtful commentators, such as Wertsch (1985, p. 230), recognise that the sources for Vygotsky's vision lay in the 'sociohistorical milieu created by the Russian Revolution,' the climate of hope, creativity and intellectual collaboration against a background of material privation is not always appreciated (although Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991 is an important exception). Before Vygotsky died at the age of 37 in 1934, the suffocation of intellectual originality under Stalin had begun. The survival of Alexander Luria, a Russian psychologist colleague of Vygotsky's, was a remarkable exception to the cull of independent thinkers although he could not openly participate in the intellectual life of so-called 'Soviet psychology' between 1934 and 1956. With the Krushchev 'thaw' he began to resume the task he had begun in the 1920s, that of promoting Vygotsky's work in the West.

As Vygotsky had always endeavoured to do, Luria struggled when possible to engage in constructive dialogue with contemporary Western psychologists. Luria appreciated the enormous contribution the original ideas of his mentor could make and it is to him we owe the survival of Vygotsky's ideas. It could be considered that in view of the impact Vygotsky's ideas were having by the time of Luria's death in 1977 he was remarkably successful, but I think he might reasonably have expected that the movement towards faithful

translations of Vygotsky's works into English should have gathered momentum sooner. Each era brings its own translations and interpretations of thinkers that continue to exert a powerful cultural influence. Perhaps it is cruel of me to dwell on the imperfections of Vygotsky's editors and translators of the 1960s and 1970s. But it is these works that are still by and large those influential on students and researchers. It is taking too long for them to be superseded.

Not long ago I asked a prominent educational researcher, who shall remain nameless, what he thought of Vygotsky's work. He replied that he preferred to ignore Vygotsky because, 'He's so fashionable.' I have some sympathy for this view; Vygotsky has become one of those authorities it is almost obligatory to cite in a range of subject areas. To give just one example: Ramsden's (1997) description of practitioner research in a playgroup setting is a straightforward account of activities derived from suggestions by F. Laevers (for references see Ramsden's paper). But, judging from the article itself and the introduction to the volume, this is evidently felt to be an insufficient theoretical backing, and so support from Vygotsky's theories is wheeled out:

Vygotsky believed that children have varying capacities for development and that it was the role of the teacher to help them gain their full individual potential, which lay at differing points between the child's present level and it's potential level or 'Zone of Proximal Development'. [sic] (Ramsden, 1997, p. 14)

Any researcher/writer who attains prominence will attract oversimplified accounts of their work; I use the quotation above cruelly. The influence of second-hand nutshell reviews of the corpus of someone's work in the curricula of future educators are probably desirable reflections of more detailed interpretative work going on elsewhere.

However, surely the current presentation of Vygotsky is a particularly interesting example of a writer being elevated and simultaneously distorted even in some surely fundamental features? Here I know I am treading on dangerous ground, seemingly denying the shifting sands that must always lie beneath any interpretation, writing myself as if it were possible to gain the right purchase on his work. All I can offer are my own signposts towards another reading, trying to make the case for further questioning as to the past impact of readings of Vygotsky, often juxtaposed with readings of Piaget, upon the fields of child development and education.

Vygotsky's writings on language development have been particularly timely over the last two decades or so. He can be regarded as

contributing to a tendency which strives to account both for the influence of society on the ways we think and speak and for language as a semiotic system (see e.g. Halliday and Hasan, 1989; Hymes, 1996). His microgenetic methods of study, employing discourse analysis, albeit loosely, complement some current exciting developments in and critiques of developmental psychology (see e.g. Burman, 1994; Fischer and Granott, 1995; Ratner, 1991). Application of such work to the study of pedagogy is surely valuable.

Further, the notion that Vygotsky's work should be seen as necessarily dichotomous to Piaget's is being questioned. Vygotsky (1987a, pp. 53–91) had suggested that his work should be taken together with Piaget's, as together representing a qualitative, even holistic approach in opposition to traditional developmental psychology with its deficit-based model of measurable comparisons with adult norms. Burman (1996) has proposed that Piaget's methodology has been the least understood feature of his work and that significant continuities in the two writers' epistemologies have been suppressed.

A rethinking of the work and influence of both writers, undeniably of great importance to pedagogical studies, requires, I have argued, serious engagements with new 'versions' of Vygotsky's work. These may I believe have the effect of reducing a certain idolisation of the figure but replacing this with a more creative response. Reading, for example, Vygotsky's only book on education, the radical *Pedagogical Philosophy* originally written in 1924, might have the effect of ending the current laudatory phase of the reception of Vygotsky's work, but ought surely to afford the opportunity for more sensitive understandings and render greater challenges in seeking relevance to our problems today. If a more questioning approach to existing translations and interpretations is adopted, then Vygotsky may well be brought off the top shelf. It is my belief that his ideas, thrown into the melting-pot then shaken and stirred, will become hotter and spicier to many, albeit in the meantime rendered unpalatable to some who prefer their guru sauce bland and conservative.

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