

# Vygotsky's ideas in the new democracies

*Tatjana Vonta explains how Vygotsky's theories are inspiring new pedagogical practice in some former Communist countries*

**E**arly childhood education under the Communist system had an authoritarian, hierarchal structure, strongly influenced by a behaviourist approach towards child development and learning and a transmission paradigm of teaching. The teacher's job was to implement whole group activities from approved programmes, plans and textbooks, with all children doing and learning the same things at the same time. Children's opportunities to select and play with toys or materials were not valued as a learning experience; in most countries serious learning and free play were treated as quite separate. The social aspects of learning were much less emphasised than cognitive and physical skills, and the use of language was often restricted to answering teachers' questions. This hierarchical atmosphere was also present in teacher education and in family involvement.

The International Step by Step Association connects professionals in the field of early education primarily from Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (see next page). The association's child-centred approach uses a creative combination of different theoretical sources, one of the most important being Vygotsky. Many educators in the region were either not familiar with his theories or did not realise their practical implications. But it soon became clear that Vygotsky's work could have a positive impact on the changes needed at several levels, including: teachers' work with children in the classroom; teachers' professional development; and relationships with families and communities.

This article provides examples of how Vygotsky's ideas have supported educational change. In particular, within the association network Vygotsky's ideas have contributed to redefining the role of the early childhood educator, focusing attention on the significance of social

experiences and communication and the need to use children's zone of proximal development for planning and individualising pedagogical work.

## **Working with children**

### *Learning occurs in interactive processes*

The Step by Step approach creates social experiences to help children develop and learn, by providing situations where they have choices of groups and projects, allowing them maximum opportunities to listen and speak with others and share experiences. Educators combine whole group and small group activities during the day; provide opportunities for children to make choices in their work activities; create mixed-age groups (if possible); and provide opportunities for the inclusion of children with additional support needs and from diverse backgrounds.

The educators' role in this context is to support children in building the classroom community and its culture, with values and behaviours that create the social context for their learning. For example in morning and afternoon meetings, children build their relationships with each other; care for one another; negotiate and develop classroom rules, bring common solutions about their lives; and share knowledge,

understandings and experiences. Children plan together with teachers and reflect on what they are doing, what they learn, and what they would change. Social interactions with other adults are encouraged and planned for through the inclusion of families in classroom activities and through opportunities for children to visit and communicate with community members and for community members to visit classrooms.

### *Language and communication are essential in the learning process*

Vygotsky pointed out that language presents the shared experiences necessary for building cognitive development. The Step by Step approach believes that children learn not only by doing, but by doing together and by talking (note the difference between the behaviourist or Piagetian approaches to child development). The role of the teacher is redefined from being the sole transmitter of knowledge to that of a facilitator, creating situations for children to talk to and learn from each other. Cooperative learning widens, deepens, supports, and stimulates communication and interaction on different levels among children and among children and adults in order to support the child's learning. It also encourages the active participation of all of the children in the social life of the classroom and helps them practice





Small group activities encourage children to build a classroom community and culture

and understand their responsibilities in a democratic environment.

#### *Zone of Proximal Development*

Another Vygotsian concept which has influenced the Step by Step approach is the zone of proximal development – the distance between the most difficult task a child can do alone and the most difficult task he or she can do with assistance from more capable children or adults. This assistance is known as scaffolding and can help a child reach a new concept or skill by giving supporting information or help. To provide this kind of help, educators must observe children to determine where they are in the learning process and where they are capable of going next, taking into consideration their individual needs and the social context that surrounds them.

This is the foundation of the association's work in the area of individualisation; it influences all our activities connected with curriculum planning. Each child's developmental needs, interests, learning styles, knowledge, skills, and experiences are taken into consideration. The educator builds a bridge between official curriculum demands and her observations and knowledge of each individual child and her judgment about how best to support their learning. Scaffolding involves taking risks, testing hypotheses, learning from mistakes, which can provide successful learning experiences only in environments where children feel psychologically and physically safe. To create this kind of environment, a strong feeling of community must be constructed through interactions among children, families, educators, administrators and community members.

### **Educators' professional development**

Social experiences and interactive processes of learning are also important for educators' professional development. Team working and networking provide opportunities for sharing, reflecting, and growing personally and professionally. The association's training courses offer interactive learning opportunities where educators share their experiences to better understand educational concepts and how to implement them.

This professional development work incorporates the idea that there is a zone of proximal development with adult learning. The association promotes different ways of mentoring teachers: regional mentoring systems, school-based mentoring teams, peer mentoring, on-line mentoring etc. Mentoring facilitates educators' self-assessment of where they are in the process of improving practice and helps them identify the next steps they need to make. The association's training and mentoring programmes also promote an awareness of the unconscious prejudices, biases, and opinions that can influence teachers' behaviour and interactions with children and families and offer ways to counteract these negative influences to improve the social context of the learning environment.

### **Relationships with families and communities**

Following Vygotsky, the association believes that children's learning and development are strongly influenced and shaped by their families, communities, culture, and status within society. The

foundation for the learning process is what children bring from their home micro-culture – what they already know and believe. Knowing children's family context, showing appreciation of it, and incorporating part of it into the classroom context are necessary to create optimal learning conditions.

One way to ensure the inclusion of children's social contexts is through the active involvement of family members in activities that connect school and family for learning. Educators seek information from parents that will help with children's learning and include parents in assessment and planning processes. Such participation is achieved in an atmosphere of respect, cooperation, and openness to diversity, in which parents feel empowered and effective both in the home and their child's preschool.

### **Conclusion**

Incorporating Vygotsky's ideas into early childhood education has the potential to change our societies; to value and improve social interactions and to promote individuals' participation in civil society. Vygotsky's ideas have brought important changes in the association's network countries. However, the association appreciates differences. For this reason, the implementation of Vygotsky's ideas reflects differences in social contexts among network members, providing opportunities for research that can bring new insights about Vygotsky.

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Children's drawings focus on the importance of family time in Romania

## The International Step by Step Association (ISSA)

ISSA is a membership organisation that connects professionals and organisations from many countries working in the field of early childhood development and education. Originating in the Step by Step programme, initiated by the Open Society Institute (OSI) in 1994, ISSA today is governed by a Board of Directors elected by 30 core members, non-governmental organisations located primarily in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union: OSI continues to provide funding and has a seat on the board.

To fulfil the promise of quality education and care for each child, ISSA promotes democratic values, active parent and

community involvement, and a commitment to diversity, inclusion and equal opportunities. Its child-centred approach, which was a radical departure in many of the countries where it works, is both a practical way of recognising differences and a platform for implementing appropriate programmes. Members of ISSA consider this approach the best way to ensure meaningful internalised learning, leading to the development of life-long learning skills and habits needed to be an active citizen in a democratic society.

ISSA's activities pay special attention to children from ethnic minorities, with disabilities, living in remote areas or in poverty. To promote access to quality

education for all children, ISSA provides training in the field of social justice, multicultural and bilingual education, embracing different target audiences including decision-makers of different levels.

Being actively involved in several international networks, ISSA also campaigns for effective policies and forges links with government agencies and international organisations, to make sure that successful approaches and programmes become part of the system.

**For more information, see [www.issa.nl](http://www.issa.nl)**