

# It's never too late to learn, it's never too early to teach



Galina Dolya is a leading authority on the theory and practice of pioneering Soviet educationalist Lev Vygotsky. Here she talks to *Improvement* editor **Nick Wright**

**H**ow children learn to learn is a key problem that lies at the heart of the education process. And the focus on Early Years Learning – regarded as an urgent political objective by government – has borne fruit in the heightened awareness that success in the later, and more formal, stages of our children's education is critically dependent on what happens in the first stages.

The search for solutions has stimulated renewed interest in the creative work of the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky. It wasn't until the sixties that his ideas appeared in substantial English translation. For that generation of teachers trained in the first decades after the partial abolition of the eleven plus, the idea that children's abilities are not innate or biologically determined but rather shaped by the social conditions in which they live, the cultural framework in which they apprehend the material world and the character of their education was immensely liberating.

I put this point to Galina Dolya and immediately the issue of social and educational context took centre stage. Galina Dolya is the doyen of Vygotskian practitioners in this country and her presentation at Aspect's Early Years conference earlier this summer has stimulated a burst of interest. As a teacher of English and later head of a Moscow school her experience is shaped by the Soviet context in which the deeply regressive British testing tradition seems alien, almost incomprehensible.

Rather the focus on the cultural tools that children must acquire has drawn her into the preparation of a veritable treasure trove of materials for the teacher. The Vygotskian toolbox comes in a concrete form as a set of manuals, an actual box of artefacts, an Aladdin's cave of objects. While the language – the most recent manual is titled *The Technology of Child Development* – is mobilised in a way that suggests its Russian origins, the material artefacts have a popular and universal appeal that can swiftly engage the interest and active engagement of children.

But in Vygotskian schema these tools for the teacher are far from random in their selection. On the contrary, they conform to a firm framework of pedagogical thought. It is this systematic and concrete working out of the kinds of activity that underpin the foundations of language that distinguishes the Vygotskian approach.



**Language gives children a powerful tool that helps them solve difficult tasks, inhibit impulsive actions, plan solutions to problems before executing them, and ultimately control their own behaviour**



Galina Dolya emphasises the continuity between material tools and psychological tools.

Not surprisingly for an educationalist working in the first two decades of the revolutionary state Vygotsky mobilised the idea – given

legitimacy in the Soviet context by Engels’ work – that the material foundation of cultural development lies in humankind’s use of tools. Galina Dolya argues that human culture is the bearer of these tools and language the most powerful of them.

Dolya quotes Vygotsky: “Language gives children a powerful tool that helps them solve difficult tasks, inhibit impulsive actions, plan solutions to problems before executing them, and ultimately control their own behaviour.”

Giving the work of teachers, especially those working with younger children, a more rigorous theoretical basis for their work is seen by Galina Dolya as a key to improved outcomes. And in the midst of a powerful media and political discourse in which teachers – and all professionals working with children – are frequently blamed for the manifest failures of the system, Vygotskian theory places a welcome emphasis on the role of the teacher.

Galina Dolya locates the renewed Russian interest in Vygotskian theory to the perestroika period in which the collectivist foundations of the Soviet state began to unravel. Seeking solutions to problems posed by the development of her own children she was part of a powerful trend to rethink some of the foundations of Soviet education which, she argues, had become overly prescriptive.

She accepts the paradoxical nature of these phenomena and diplomatically fails to comment on the suggestion that it was precisely the successes of the Soviet education system – from the Sputnik era onwards – that lay behind Western and specifically US concerns that the Soviet Union might outstrip them in science and technology. A further irony is that the US educationalist Urie Bronfenbrenner authored one of the most powerful critiques of the US system in his comparative study of the US and Soviet education systems, *Two Worlds of Childhood*, and then went on to advise of the US Headstart programme.

She describes how a Congress of Creative Teachers was formed, how a series of informal summer camps and a seasonal Eureka University became the site for brainstorming sessions in which Soviet teachers, psychologists and educationalists subjected their practice to a fierce examination. A further irony is that it was in the newly emergent private education sphere that some of these ideas were first put into practice.

A key concept in Vygotskian practice is wrapped up in the term ‘the zone of proximal development’. Defined as ‘the place where the child and the adult meet’ this concept is a powerful support for the dynamic and central role of the teacher. It focuses attention on the judgement exercised by the teacher in guiding children’s activity towards tasks that lie just beyond their capacity at any given time.

In doing so it subverts the notion that children’s ability is necessarily innate.

Galina Dolya constantly emphasises the ‘commonsense’ nature of many of these prescriptions and I wondered aloud if this perhaps underplays the importance of the political, economic and social context of educational practice. By this measure of ‘commonsense’ a selective system that consigned generations of British children to their ordained place in a hierarchy of class was defended and explained. ■

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