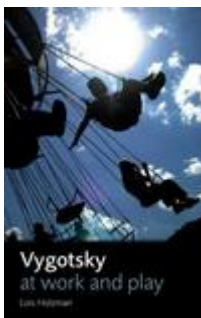


Current Applications of Vygotsky's Theory

A review of



Vygotsky at Work and Play

by Lois Holzman

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Reviewed by

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Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), who lived during the Russian Revolution, is known as the Mozart of psychology. Having taught psychology and sociology since 1994, I welcome the opportunity to discuss his social development theory with my students. Vygotsky's work was largely unknown to the West until it was published in 1962.

My experience working with children in preschool and primary education systems allowed for the application of Vygotsky's work, particularly his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD is the difference between a student's ability to perform a task under adult guidance and/or with peer collaboration and the student's ability to solve the problem independently. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning occurs in this zone. In Holzman's *Vygotsky at Work and Play*, Holzman states that "Vygotsky's zone of proximal development is not a zone at all, or a societal scaffold, but an

activity—simultaneously the performance space and the performance” (p. 19). This review will present a brief outline of Holzman’s work as well as a critique of this volume.

Holzman had the opportunity to meet Lev Vygotsky, and this encounter changed her views politically as well as academically. *Vygotsky at Work and Play* is a qualitative inquiry, “a life history of intertwined relationships, projects and communities in which Vygotsky plays a key role” (p. xix).

Her book is an attempt to bring Vygotsky’s work to ordinary people and their communities. Holzman admits that this work is subjective. Her intention is to inform, persuade, and introduce readers to the value of Vygotsky’s work, particularly as a process of creating environments for development. She writes, “I see Vygotsky’s work very differently. Not as a theory of mind, but as a *theory of becoming*. . . . It had to do with the process of becoming and not with the state of being” (p. 17; italics in original).

Critique of the Scientific Method

The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity. In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of study. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65)

In her first chapter, Holzman shares her disappointment in the fact that psychology has tried to emulate the natural sciences, in which the scientific method predominates, and she feels that this approach is in direct opposition to the American Psychological Association’s mission to promote health, education, and public welfare:

Because as a psychologist and educator I have learned that most people, including fellow psychologists and educators, have similar opinions about how psychology and education are misguided and misleading, but do not know what to do other than go along with how things are and make the best of it. (p. 5)

Holzman writes that Vygotsky questioned the very method of scientific inquiry, which she elaborates here as the entire methodological approach rather than a specific research technique. “Vygotsky proposes a qualitatively different conception of method—not a tool to be applied, but an activity (a ‘search’) that generates both tool and result at the same time and as continuous process” (p. 9). Vygotsky proposed a break from the problem–solution paradigm, advocating instead a tool-and-result methodology. In Holzman’s words,

Tool for result methodology is the epistemological counterpart to the ontology of problems and solution; it is essentially a problem-solving approach. In contrast, tool-and-result methodology rejects this way of viewing and living in the world, in favor of a more unified, emergent and continuous process approach. (p. 10)

Whereas psychologists tended to focus on the science of behavior, Vygotsky proposed a focus on activity as one possible alternative to behavior. Holzman states that activity is the ordinary person's search for method or the human capacity to make tools and results.

Zone of Proximal Development

What we call the Zone of Proximal Development . . . is the distance between the actually developmental level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined through the problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the ZPD posits that human potential is theoretically limitless; yet, the practical limits of human potential depend upon quality social interactions and residential environment. Holzman calls this the "collective form of working together" (p. 29). Additionally, she states that the ZPD views learning and development as a dialectical unity in which learning leads development rather than learning following development.

Barbara Taylor School

Many schools have traditionally held a transmissionist or instructionist model holding that a teacher transmits information to students. As Paulo Friere (1978) described this model, the student is considered a repository of the teacher's knowledge. In contrast, Vygotsky's theory promotes learning contexts in which students play an active role in learning. Roles of the teacher and student are therefore shifted, as a teacher should collaborate with his or her students in order to help facilitate meaning construction in students. Learning therefore becomes a reciprocal experience for the students and teacher.

Holzman presents the Barbara Taylor School in New York City as a case for the application of Vygotsky's theory. During its first six years, Holzman reports, the school concentrated on creating conditions for children to be emotionally supported and challenged so that they could learn. Holzman and a colleague put together a Stop Abusive Behavior campaign:

The abuse at issue was not physical, but relational, and so routine as to pass unnoticed, despite the emotional toll it instills: the way adults humiliate students and students humiliate one another; the standard of practice of teaching to tests with no regard for the learning process; the insistence on following rules that have only to do with adults asserting their authority; and the classism, racism, sexism and homophobia that are ingrained in schools and teaching practices. (pp. 54–55)

This led Barbara Taylor, the principal, to hold discussions to discover the manner in which the children felt that she abused them. They revealed that it was in the “look” that she gave them. From there, they worked on solutions for change. “This project was the foundation for what became a continuous and continuously transforming process of collectively creating an emotionally supportive—by which I mean therapeutic, by which I mean developmental—learning environment” (p. 55). This was just one environment that Holzman discusses with respect to the application of Vygotsky’s theory.

Vygotsky Outside of School

“For me, bringing Vygotsky to bear on children’s lives outside of school means, in large part, providing opportunities for performances that are the unity of intellect and affect, performances of caring, interest, curiosity and passion” (p. 67). Out-of-school programs have been under a great deal of pressure, according to Holzman, to provide outcomes and indicators of their success related to academic achievement. When one is applying Vygotskian principles, the focus is on the social nature of the learning that occurs in out-of-school programs.

Holzman discusses Fifth Dimension, an after-school program developed to promote academic achievement. In this program, children play computer games and gamelike activities, assisted by staff as well as student interns from a local college. “The Fifth Dimension is conceptualized both as a ZPD for collaborative problem solving and use of meditational tools, and as the activity system of which it is a part (the university–community partnership, school district and community)” (p. 70). In this type of program, outcomes are focused on feelings of belonging and self-worth, experiencing close, positive relationships, and mastery of social, emotional, and intellectual challenges.

Vygotsky and Adults

Much has been written about the application of Vygotsky's work in the school setting, with very little outside of that environment. Holzman shares the case of Rose Salit, an actor, singer, and well-rounded performer who leads workshops for large corporations, working with their executives and staff. She created Performance of a Lifetime (POAL): Theater-Based Executive Education to provide a stage for untrained actors to perform improvisation for therapeutic benefits. Holzman states that the following are key elements of the POAL initiative:

1. Talking to participants in the language of the theater as a necessary component of creating a performatory environment;
2. Using the "authority" of the stage to give participants the license to do something quite out of the ordinary, broadening each person's notion of "what you're allowed to do";
3. Letting them experience themselves as producers of their relational activity and improvisers of new social relations. (p. 88)

This approach allows adults to think outside the box. Learning to think quickly on your feet can generalize to work in the corporate culture. "What it points to and supports is people exercising their capacity to not only respond creatively to the unforeseen but to generate the unforeseen" (p. 89). In viewing how improvisation affected the working environment of adults, Holzman poses the following questions:

If Vygotsky is right, and performing is how we learn and develop, then don't the "living organizations," "learning organizations," and "passionate organizations" that business leaders are now speaking about need to recognize themselves as "performing organizations"? If creativity and growth come into existence when people together create ZPDs in the home, the school, the theater, the ball field, and the therapy office, can management and employees learn to create them at the workplace? If getting up on stage puts you in touch with your "performing self," teaches you that you can always create new performances of yourself and has been shown to help adults, teens, and children create better functioning and happier families and peer groups, might it not do the same for teams and workgroups? (p. 89)

Conclusion

I think this is an interesting work on the application of Vygotsky's work to current organizational environments. Although subjective, the work is well thought out and well referenced. One critique is that the work is not in APA style, which at times was distracting to me as an editor. I highly recommend this work to students, educators, and practitioners. The book does spend quite a bit of time on academic settings and youth settings as opposed to work settings. More examples of how Vygotsky's theory can be applied in the workplace would have been helpful. Given my background in organizational psychology, I found this to be a fascinating application of Vygotsky's theory to the work environment and organizational culture.

References

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