

of Piaget's associates and followers?

So who was Vygotskii and what was he about?

Revolutionary times

Vygotskii was born in 1894 into a lower-middle-class Jewish family living in what is now the independent republic of Belarus, in a pogrom-prone area of high Jewish settlement called the Pale. Lev was a studious, sickly child, fascinated by philosophy, who for most of his childhood studied at home, yet still gained very high grades in the school-leaving examinations to qualify him for university. The increasingly anti-Semitic state had recently introduced a quota for Jews applying to university, decided by ballot, but the young Lev was lucky and won a place to study in Moscow.

The First War came but the sickly Lev continued his studies (in law and literature). Then came the Revolution, the Civil War, the famine. Lev went back to his family in the provinces, taught literature at school and married a local girl. He was seized with the idealistic goal of freeing humanity from its chains, not least the chains of ignorance, and his interests as a teacher shifted to the process of learning and the means whereby it might be enhanced. He began to lecture at the local teachers' training college, wrote a bold paper on the nature of human consciousness and found himself invited to Moscow, to be a psychologist.

Moscow in the early twenties must have been a heady, exciting world for young Marxist intellectuals and anything must have seemed possible. Vygotskii soon found himself in charge of creating a national plan for the future of educating disabled children in a way that would be both materialist and dialectical; he was a representative for his country at an international conference on the teaching of the deaf in London and attended an open day at the Royal School for the Deaf in Margate, (where the visitors' book still bears his name). He teamed up with another young psychologist, Aleksandr Luriya, and soon – with Aleksei Leontiev – they were three: the *troika*, who had every intention of changing the

psychological world for ever.

At first, the Revolution eagerly took on any educational or psychological approach that considered itself progressive. Soon, however, these ideas found themselves subject to piercing ideological scrutiny and interrogation – then rejection. In psychology, Freudianism enjoyed brief interest (not least from Luriya); in education, the ideas of Dewey ran a little longer. In psychology, there were Behaviourists, some of whom would have surrendered psychology entirely to the study of reflexes; in education, there were those who advocated the total 'withering away of the school' but, as Soviet society fell under the discipline of Stalin, would-be progressives found no further scope for their activities.

Amidst all this, Vygotskii situated himself for a while amongst the 'paedologists'. The now-forgotten science of paedology (or child study) had begun in North America and Western Europe (not least in Britain) at the turn of the century. The Soviet paedologists of the twenties were a loose, multi-disciplinary movement of educators, psychologists, doctors and others who aimed to create a 'unified Marxist psychology of childhood'. This would then guide pedagogy to the correct methods to achieve desired physical and mental outcomes in the development of children. Psychometrics (mental measurement), originating in the West, was an important tool that psychology brought to this feast.

But the paedologists got bogged down in the 'two-factor theory' failing to make real synthesis between the biological and the environmental in explaining the origins of human intelligence. Vygotskii broke with them to plough

his own, more dialectical furrow (though mud stuck). He polemicised vigorously against bourgeois psychology (that is the psychology of the West); he crossed swords with his Swiss contemporary, Jean Piaget, over the nature of ego-centric speech; he participated in local government where he lived in Moscow. He also worked incessantly despite worsening health: TB had been confirmed. In 1934 he died, aged only thirty-seven.



A poster for the campaign against illiteracy. The caption would be best translated as 'The illiterate is like a blind man: failures and misfortunes await him everywhere'.

By then, however it was full-blown Stalinism and the glory days were over. Denouncement was in the air. Vygotskii had been severely (though unfairly) criticised for his earlier association with the paedologists, and Luriya and Leontiev had already taken themselves and their work to the safer clime of provincial

Биология и психология в работе Л.С. Выготского
 Л.С. Выготский считал, что психология должна быть наукой о развитии личности (Л.С. Выготский, 1927).
 В понимании психологии по Л.С. Выготскому психология – это наука о развитии личности.
 Л.С. Выготский считал, что психология должна быть наукой о развитии личности (Л.С. Выготский, 1927).
 В понимании психологии по Л.С. Выготскому психология – это наука о развитии личности.



Gita Vygotskaya at the grave of Lev Vygotskii and his wife, Novodevichii Cemetery in Moscow

Kharkhov. Vygotskii was too sick to accompany them and died in Moscow where he was buried in Novodevichii Cemetry, a Russian official Valhalla where lie Nikita Khrushchev and Raisa Gorbacheva.

In 1936 came the Decree against Paedological Perversions, which railed against pseudo-scientific theories, the increasingly widespread use of psychometric testing in the education system, and the effect of this in creating a growing special-school population of children termed 'difficult' or 'hard to teach'. The greater part of the special-school population was transferred back to local schools, the supremacy of pedagogy and teachers declared within education, all paedological units in schools were 'liquidated' and all the paedological methods and teaching abolished forthwith. Psychology – and along with it the work of Vygotskii and his followers – effectively dropped from sight for the next 20 years.

Revolutionary ideas

Vygotskii regarded the enormous range of theories and positions within the psychology of his day (more properly, the psychologies) not as a sign of its strength, as is still proposed today, but as a science in crisis, one that he would resolve by creating a new psychology to sweep away the old. The new psychology would be both

dialectical and materialist, with close analogies to the work of Friedrich Engels, not only in its dialectical method but also as regards the role of labour in humankind's adaptation to nature, and the transformation of natural forces with the help of tools. For Vygotskii, activity with tools led to change in human behaviour and distinct qualitative differences between human beings and all other animals. He also owed a conscious debt to Karl Marx, not merely quotations, but in the creation of his own *Capital* of human mental development.

Vygotskii's Social-Historical (or Cultural-Historical) Theory sees human behaviour and thinking as an end product of two separate processes:

- Biological evolution which over the course of millions of years resulted in the emergence of *Homo sapiens*;
- Historical development which over a much shorter period has transformed primitive thinking into modern thinking, without corresponding structural or biological change to the brain.

This denies a direct relationship between brain physiology and mental functioning in human learning and development, asserting instead that this relationship is always mediated by cultural factors, with especial emphasis upon the role of speech in conveying socially determined meaning. It does not

deny individual differences at the physiological level but proposes the enormous force of sociogenesis. Leontiev later used the term 'new functional organs' to describe formation within the brain of complex reflex systems dependent upon verbal stimuli: 'new mental tools' formed out of children's active experience of the world, in interaction with adults. Potential, from this standpoint, is not therefore something that children bring with them into the world and is then 'fulfilled' (as we say today). It is actively created out of the process of upbringing and education in the home, at school and in society – a third factor of over-riding importance to development.

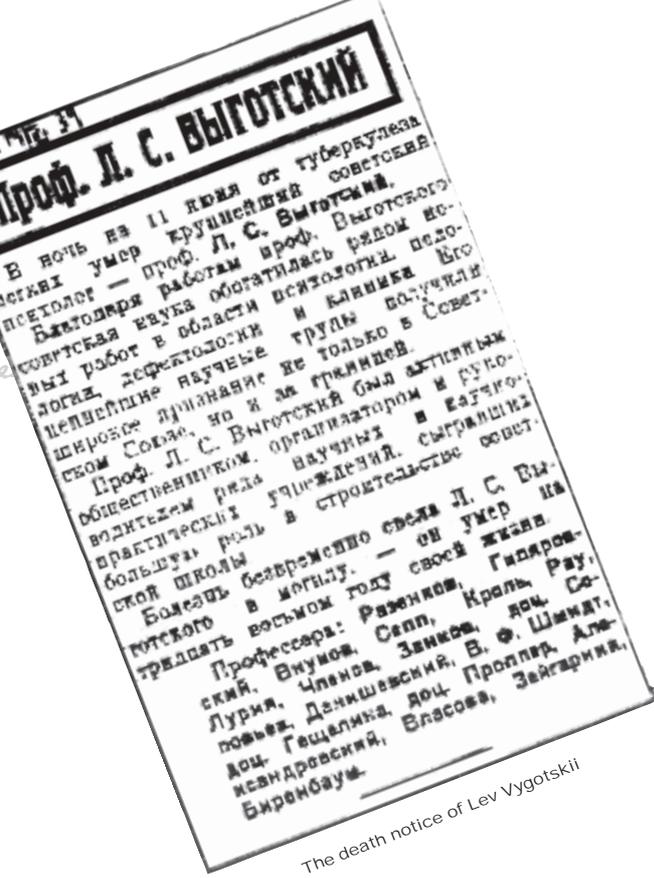
This changes the whole meaning of the notion of development, reminding us that the verb 'develop' has a transitive as well as an intransitive meaning. In other words, not only do children develop, but we adults develop them. The psychology of learning has also to be a psychology of teaching – a redefinition for us, but much easier to apply to Vygotskii and his followers, since the Russian word '*obuchenie*' means both teaching and learning anyway.

Vygotskii posited two means of acquiring concepts:

- Everyday or spontaneous concepts, formed by children themselves out of their day-to-day experiences;
- Scientific or taught concepts, passed

В.С. Выготский считал, что психология должна быть наукой о развитии личности (Л.С. Выготский, 1927).
 В понимании психологии по Л.С. Выготскому психология – это наука о развитии личности.
 Л.С. Выготский считал, что психология должна быть наукой о развитии личности (Л.С. Выготский, 1927).
 В понимании психологии по Л.С. Выготскому психология – это наука о развитии личности.





The death notice of Lev Vygotskii

on ready-formed through the speech of adults.

An essential feature of scientific concepts is their already established existence within the culture, in systematic relationship with other concepts. As children acquire a scientific concept, they acquire this relationship too, enabling them to systematise their everyday concepts and handle them too as scientific ones, in a conscious fashion.

This opens the way for an important Vygotskian model, 'the zone of next development'. Vygotskii proposed that two levels of intellectual development exist simultaneously within all learners:

- The 'actual' or present level of development, manifest in what a child can achieve independently, without the help of an adult;
- The 'potential' level of development, demonstrated by what a child can do in cooperation with an adult who is able to give the maximal, optimal help, guidance, explanation, demonstration etc.

Vygotskii called the gap between the two levels 'the zone of next

development' (American translators have introduced the term 'zone of proximal development'). Vygotskii held that children's greater or lesser ability to transfer from what they can achieve with help, to what they can achieve on their own, is the most sensitive indicator of their development and their academic potential at a given time.

Consequently, in evaluating children's educational potential, attention should be directed, not towards whether they can solve problems on their own but rather upon their zone of next development, i.e. whether they can in fact solve harder problems with the adult help best suited to their needs and then, having mastered the process taught, go on to use the new mental tools to solve analogous problems on their own.

For Vygotskii, the only good teaching is that which stays ahead of development, and pedagogy must be oriented not towards the yesterday of development but towards its tomorrow.'

Vygotskii's dialectical-materialist approach also permitted him to

suggest practical theoretical frameworks that would open the way to a stage theory of mental development, with vital implications for the *different* ways children should be best educated at different points in their development; for a new viewpoint on special education for children with disabilities; for accelerating the development of socially disadvantaged children; for a new view of the nature of emotions; for the new clinical science of neuropsychology; and for a new educational psychology relevant to the practical processes of pedagogy. For all the talk of Vygotskii here in Anglo-American literature, little of these practical benefits have enriched our own educational practice. Is it not time?

Andrew Sutton is Director of the Foundation for Conductive Education and chairs the Editorial Board of Special Children. tt

A subsequent article 'Vygotskii goes West' will examine how Vygotskii's work has found its way into English and offer some guidance on further study.

Say his name: Lev should be pronounced something like 'Lyoff'.

Spell it: Vygotskii here is spelt according the British Standard; Americans favour 'Vygotsky'.

Read more: a good introductory text is *Vygotsky's Psychology: a Biography of Ideas* by Alex Kozulin (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990)