Self-propulsion

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Vygotsky the Teacher: a companion to his psychology for teachers and other practitioners

Myra Barrs, Routledge, Oxford and New York, 2022.
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Has psychology anything of value to offer teachers? Certainly it has much to answer for. The influence on formal education of behaviourist notions and of psychometrics — from Binet and Spearman through Burt to the bell curve — has been malign. Yet the muddiest pool may yield up flakes of gold. Here's one: 'Direct instruction in concepts is impossible. It is pedagogically fruitless … the child learns not the concept but the word, and this word is taken over through memory rather than thought'.

Here's another:

> The entire future of humanity will be attained through the creative imagination: orientation to the future, behaviour based on the future and derived from this future, is the most important function of the imagination. To the extent that the main educational objective of teaching is guidance of school children's behaviour so as to prepare them for the future, development and exercise of the imagination should be one of the main forces enlisted for the attainment of this goal.

Here's a third:

> In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in condensed form; in play it is as though the child is trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour.

These glittering statements appear in the book under review (on pages 176, 140 and 129 respectively) and have been mined from the writing of Lev Vygotsky, the Soviet psychologist (if 'psychologist' is an adequate label) who worked to revolutionise his field, and so to humanise it. Many another nugget of his thought sparkles in Myra Barrs's thoroughly informed, helpfully organised, scholarly, necessary and occasionally frustrating book. Barrs combines an account of Vygotsky's short life — he died aged only 37, leaving a wife and two young daughters — with a lucid and commanding exposition of his chief ideas as presented in particular texts or groups of texts which Vygotsky authored or co-authored. Barr hopes to 'put Vygotsky together' (pxviii), the better to

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help readers align different elements of his work and secure a clearer sense of the many vicissitudes which have beset his writings as these have slowly been made public and, in translations of variable reliability, been disseminated and received.

Barrs also hopes to inform about the social and academic context within which Vygotsky worked and wrote. To this end she considers two difficult terms, 'defectology' and 'pedology', which stake out the practical and intellectual arena Vygotsky opted to work in. The field of defectology involves 'the study and care of children with developmental pathologies, disabilities and special needs', and the term's 'unacceptable implications' (pxvii) are acknowledged (by Vygotsky as well as by Barrs). Even so, the term has remained current in Russia since Vygotsky's time. Certain associated language (for example, the word 'retarded') appears now and again in the text, not always with qualification. Barrs glosses 'pedology' as 'child science' or a combination of paediatrics, child psychology and teaching (pxvii). She quotes Vygotsky's definition of it as 'the science of the development of the child' (p110). Stalin would slander this work as bourgeois reactionary idealist nonsense, ensuring it would be banned by the ever-obliging Communist Party Central Committee of the mid-1930s, and the field left to run to seed in the USSR.

Vygotsky's activity as a 'pedologist' is considered in depth across one chapter. Other chapters are devoted to seminal themes vitally important for any reflective teacher: 'tool and symbol'; 'play, imagination and creativity'; 'the psychology of art'; 'thinking and speech'; and, inevitably, the 'zone of proximal development' or ZPD. Would I had a pound for every time a student brandishes this term without ever having read what Vygotsky actually wrote about it … And yet one of the merits of Myra Barrs's book is to show me how I too haven't read what Vygotsky actually wrote about the ZPD. Barrs reveals how mistranslation and editorial intervention in the version of his text which appeared in 1978 in *Mind in Society*, for many years the only introduction to the ZPD available in English, meant that what Vygotsky actually wrote remained out of reach. Barrs herself translated Vygotsky's original text and wrote a commentary on it in 2017, retrieving in the process Vygotsky's interest in play, drama and 'imitation' as natural and valuable strategies by which children learn. The ZPD, it turns out, is not a pedagogical but a 'pedological' concept, helpful for diagnosing development rather than facilitating teaching.

Given the handful of pages he devotes to it, the ZPD appears to occupy a minor place in Vygotsky's *oeuvre*. Vygotsky himself seems to have understood it differently on different occasions, or at least to have emphasised different aspects of it. 'There is a sense', Barrs suggests, 'that the ZPD is a work in progress' (p154). She offers a critique of the idea and its (mis)uses, noting how it has been seen, wrongly, as an example of Brunerian 'scaffolding' and cannot be properly understood in the absence of the more worked-through (if not fully complete) theoretical framework within which it was

originally embedded. Yet something about the ZPD continues to call out to teachers. Barrs brings her chapter on it to a close by recalling the impact made on practitioners by the 'original' presentation of the ZPD as filtered through *Mind in Society*, and how this seemed to chime with the excitement generated by then-current discussion of the significance of language in the development of anyone's thinking, and hence language's importance for learning. The ZPD seemed to offer teachers something essential: a way to make manifest more of what children could do than was possible through conventional and less dynamic assessment, especially when children were working with others rather than alone. Barrs writes: 'Teachers see [the ZPD concept] … as representing a teaching situation and providing a model of effective intervention' (p158). It appeals strongly to their practical sense, and to the hope proper to a teacher's considered collaboration with the child, or with children, in the service of their development and educational growth.

One of Vygotsky's many merits, in Barrs's view, is the 'optimistic and future-oriented character of his thought' (p158) and his willingness to look at future development more than at past progress. Vygotsky wanted to reveal 'the logic of the development process's self-propulsion' (p159) in the face of 'the conflict between the evolved cultural forms of behaviour with which the child comes into contact and the primitive forms which characterise its own behaviour' (p159). This confrontation is the process of education. Just how skilled, thoughtful, observant and alert a teacher must be to enable it Vygotsky well knew, for he had begun his career by becoming a teacher.

Barrs devotes two chapters to Vygotsky's final work, *Thinking and Speech*, in which she believes he 'managed to include … the essence of what he wanted to say' about consciousness — a career-long concern — and about affect and emotion (p198) which, for him, are always entwined with thought. Vygotsky found himself exploring the question of consciousness through a consideration of language, and in particular of the word. Very late in his life he wrote: 'Consciousness is reflected in the word as the sun is reflected in a drop of water. The word is a microcosm of consciousness, like a living cell is related to an organism, like an atom is related to the cosmos. The meaningful word is a microcosm of human consciousness' (quoted p199).

If for nothing else we should be grateful to Vygotsky for this recognition of the foundational part language has to play in human consciousness and hence in learning. Our appreciation should be all the more heartfelt at a time when education policy disdains the importance of exploratory classroom talk among young people, refuses any amelioration of the inadequate approach by which reading is mandated to be taught, and leaves consideration of many aspects of language 'cabin'd, cribb'd and confined' within a curriculum and assessment regime which, while rigorously requiring students to identify and name a metaphor or a simile in someone else's writing, is utterly indifferent as to whether and how well students can conjure them up in writing of their own.

To reap the full harvest of Barrs's scholarship it would help to have become already acquainted with Vygotsky's thinking and engaged by it. The book's subtitle implies as much: here is a 'companion' and not an 'introduction' to Vygotsky's psychology. The subtitle also declares that teachers are among the intended audience. Does it matter that academic specialists seem to have been kept in mind at least as much? Some passages (parts of chapters 3, 4 and 7 for example) seem to me encumbered by historical and technical detail. As a lay person, my attention risked wandering when I had to traverse the scrupulous citation and documentation that allow a reader to track which particular Vygotskian text in which collection of texts was being referred to. Yet such punctiliousness may well be necessary when presenting a writer whose published collected works are apparently anything but. Certain Vygotskian claims seem worth testing further, such as those made towards the end of chapter 2 about art and its social function, or the link propounded between method and truth (p64) or the assertion that the essential feature of imaginative thinking is that, in undertaking it, consciousness departs from reality (p133).

More mundanely, there is some repetition across the book. A misdating has slipped through at the top of page 3. And surely the 'cell' of bourgeois society from which Marx's analysis embarks in *Capital* is the commodity form, and not 'commodity value' as is stated on page 66? Disappointingly, it is allowed (on page 96) that the high Stalinism of the early 1930s was bringing about 'socialism … through the radical restructuring of the system of production and the rapid elimination of illiteracy'. To forget, if only for a moment, that socialism is the self-emancipation of the international working class, and has nothing in common with the system Stalin and his acolytes imposed after they had liquidated or exiled so many who laboured for that goal, is to forget too long.

Barrs's book grounds a renewed respect for Vygotsky's humane, discriminating and undogmatic research into children, and into adolescents too. Vygotsky saw adolescence as a turning point: a moment of qualitative change in both the content and the form of thinking. The adolescent comes to wrestle with the hard work of acquiring — rather than merely memorising — an understanding of concepts, or systematised and codified disciplinary knowledge. Vygotsky somewhere calls this hard work 'a genuine and complex act of thought', much more than 'a mere mental habit', and Barrs says it 'involves voluntary control of thinking and leads to a different *way* of thinking — conscious awareness.' (p177; original emphasis). Concepts, Barrs points out, open up the deep structures of knowledge (p113) and usher the adolescent across the threshold into what Vygotsky termed 'complete socialisation of thought … so that the world becomes an environment for thinking' (p113).

Those who continue to advocate the educational worth of drill-and-direct instruction would do well to reflect on how these approaches actively prevent rather than enhance in their students the hard work of concept-formation.

Officially sanctioned advocacy of drill, direct instruction, the dominance of the teacher's expert voice in the classroom, and many another current (mis)educational practice is a world away from Vygotskian thought. Why toil as a reflective practitioner in an exhausted gravel pit when there are seams of gold to work and Barrs's book to hand, a pickaxe with which to lay them open?

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