

Guest editors' introduction to the special issue

This issue of the IRECE is about children's play, and specifically about play viewed in relation to Vygotsky's well-known paper "Play and its role in the mental development of the child". That paper, in a new translation by Nikolai Veresov and Myra Barrs, is the first article in this issue of the journal, and is accompanied by an introduction, a commentary, and an article about the reception of Vygotsky's paper in Russia and the West. The new translation provides an opportunity to revisit Vygotsky's theory of play and relate it to the contemporary context.

What have most people taken from Vygotsky's lecture on play? Among the most obvious "messages" that have been drawn from this dense and subtle paper are firstly the idea of play as a "leading activity", and secondly the idea that play creates a "zone of proximal development"—the Vygotskian concept that has dominated so much of the discussion of Vygotsky's work over the years.

Undoubtedly the idea of play as a "leading activity" has taken hold partly because the concept of "leading activities" in different stages of development went on to be developed at length by Leontiev and Elkonin. But the term actually first appeared in this paper by Vygotsky, whose conception of play was different from that of Leontiev. Vygotsky saw play as "syncretistic creativity" in which imagination takes many forms and in which the child is "liberated from action" and from reality. Leontiev took a social-realistic approach to play, seeing it as a reproduction of reality (Lindqvist, 2003).

The interest of the treatment of the "zone of proximal development" in the Play paper is that it differs markedly from the classic definition of the ZPD as the difference between the *level of actual development* (when the child is working independently) and the *level of possible development* (what can be achieved when the child is working with adults or more intelligent peers). Yet in the Play paper it is the *engagement in play* that creates the zone of proximal development, as Vygotsky (this issue) clearly states:

play creates the zone of proximal development of the child. 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 a condensed form; in play it is as though the child is trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour. (p. 18)

Here there is no mention of "adults or more intelligent peers", it is the emotional engagement in imaginative play that enables a child to behave "as though he were a head taller than himself"—through the power of the imagination. This extraordinary statement deserves far more attention and should inform and broaden all discussions of the zone of proximal development.

In this paper Vygotsky does not categorise play into different types. Instead he focuses for most of the argument on the most important feature in child's play—the imaginary situation. It is clear that in Vygotsky's view of child development imaginative play had a central importance.

What are the challenges of studying play now, when children are engaging in so many new types of play activities? However different the circumstances of contemporary children's play, however different their play activities, there are certain key points which emerge from Vygotsky's paper on play that can help us in reading children's play today. The first is clearly the role of the

imagination, which continues to be the mainspring of play. Vygotsky was the first psychologist who saw the main point of play as the development of the imagination.

The second is Vygotsky's warning against the dangers of an "intellectualistic approach to play" in which all the focus is on play as a cognitive process. Vygotsky was alert to the need to include the affective aspects of development in all accounts of children's learning and growing and viewed cognitive approaches as limiting—and also as missing the point. Play is the child's activity, and must be viewed holistically and for its own sake, not as a means to a cognitive end.

Thirdly, the core of this paper lies in Vygotsky's definition of the key moment in play: the divergence between the visual field and the field of meaning. Acting in an imaginary situation enables children, over time, to be able to act independently of what they see—to act with the play meanings, not the everyday meanings, of objects. The classic example of this is the stick-horse, where the stick, in Vygotsky's words "becomes a pivot for severing the meaning of horse from the real horse" (this issue, p. 13). Through this kind of pretend play children begin to be able to operate with meanings detached from objects and move a step nearer to abstraction.

Vygotsky makes a great deal of this example, which he regards as exemplifying a "vital transitional stage to operating with meanings alone". His language in this whole passage is brilliantly descriptive and alive, it often reaches for metaphor as he analyses what exactly is going on. The stick can stand for a horse because of "the power of one object to steal another's name". When the child applies the word "horse" to the stick, "mentally he sees the object standing behind the word". The stick is the "necessary material pivot to keep the meaning from evaporating". These concepts are complicated, but the Vygotsky's explanatory images are vivid and often poetic. This area of the paper is one of the places where we have departed considerably from the original Catherine Mulholland translation, in order to convey with as much clarity as possible the complexity of what is going on. Vygotsky insists so much on this point—children's growing ability to act independently of what they see, to separate the field of meaning from the visual field, because it is a basic condition for development; it opens the way for so much. This major insight has still not been fully taken account of.

These are the three big ideas that the paper puts forward—the imaginative situation of play, the importance of not intellectualizing play, and the key role of play in enabling children to separate meaning from perception. All are as important now as when Vygotsky was writing. The density of thought in this paper, together with the vivid images through which the concepts are conveyed, continue to make it a memorable text for all concerned with the centrality of play in learning and development.

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