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CULTURAL-HISTORICAL THEORY AND MODERN
EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to analyze modern theoretical constructions based on Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory with regard to the education of young children. Crucial concepts of higher mental functions, social situation of development and zone of proximal development are seen through the lens of recent research in childhood studies. In terms of higher mental functions development executive functioning comes to a fore front of research. Social situation of development is currently analyzed not only through leading activity of the child, but also through his/her interest that is respected in course of interaction with an adult. The problem of recognizing the child's voice reflects complex social construction that educators are faced with. Zone of proximal development is also analyzed from the position of the child, who is mastering reality through leading activity. Coming to understanding of the education that is based on Vygotsky ideas the necessity of cultural means acquisition is stressed. It is obvious that two tendencies can be observed in preschool education: the first one relates to the adult's leading role as a person who possesses the cultural content, and the second one that calls for children's autonomous activity where the main task is to support the voice of each participant in the educational process.

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1. Introduction

Lev Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory is a highly relevant scientific system that sets the current context for preschool education development (Vygotsky, 1983). In considering various aspects of the process of children's learning and development, the authors make much use of such ideas of the cultural-historical concept as 'higher mental functions', 'zone of proximal development', 'social development situation', 'cultural means' (Fleer & Ridgway, 2014; Engeström, 2014; Veraksa & Sheridan, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

One of the goals related to the application of the cultural-historical approach is to analyze new aspects that are highlighted by the interpreters of the Vygotsky concept when conducting their own research into upbringing and education of young children.

3. Research questions

The problem under consideration in this paper can be referred to as an analysis of modern theoretical constructions based on Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory with regard to the education of young children.

4. Purpose of the study

It appears to be highly relevant and important to show not only the current trends in the study of child development and the construction of preschool education systems, but also understand and open up prospects for further movement of the main categories of the cultural-historical concepts that open up in the course of their description.

5. Research Methods

Recent studies as well as well-known works of Vygotsky were analyzed to answer the research question.

6. Findings

According to Vygotsky, the main line of child development is geared towards the formation of higher mental functions. They have a number of fundamental properties, among which researchers single out mediation, awareness, arbitrariness and systematic structure. Interest in the study of higher mental functions in education is focused primarily on such problems as development of mediation and voluntariness. In many ways, this direction of studies of the development of higher mental functions resulted from the application of the activity approach, which was developed by A.N. Leontiev (2009). As has been shown in numerous works, acquisition of cultural means changes children's consciousness dramatically. They begin to identify culturally significant properties objects around them. Thus, higher mental functions can be interpreted as a special form of consciousness that allows children to reflect how objects are used in human culture. Development of a child's cultural vision of a situation is a condition necessary for play to emerge, according to A.N. Leontiev (2009) and D.B. Elkonin (1978).

Modern research into development of higher mental functions attached much importance to the study of voluntariness related problems. It has brought to the fore structural moments including such components as the actions of control, regulation of movements and memory. A special role is assigned to the development of executive functions.

The concept of the social situation of development is largely characterized by the adult's role and the leading activity that is supported. Much attention is paid to communication between participants of interaction: mother and child, children with one another, adults and children (Einarsdottir, 2014). At the same time, the emphasis is placed on supporting children's activity, initiative and the child's ability to present oneself.

One of the modern approaches to the analysis of the social development situation relates to the assessment of preschool education quality. What is of particular interest here is how authors of various evaluation systems understand the role of the educational environment in child development. On the one hand, more attention is focused on the content of the educational process and the academic knowledge the child receives, and, on the other, on the accessibility of the educational environment for children's autonomous activity.

In the context of M. Bakhtin's works (Bakhtin 1981, 1986) the concept of 'a child's voice' acquires special significance. The child is regarded as a subject of the educational process and his life, i.e. he influences the choice of the content to be mastered and is involved in time management (Komulainen, 2007). The child's voice reflects that cultural form of the social development situation in which the communication takes place. Thus, the child's voice acts as a complex polyphonic social construction.

As noted by Tertoolen et al. (Tertoolen et al., 2017), the voice of a subject, including that of a child, is inherently social because of the specifics of human interaction. They found the content of children's utterances to tally, to a great degree, with that of close adults: parents and teachers. Thus, the authors were able to show that children's voices were, indeed, complex polyphonic products created in the process of communication between children and adults. There arises a special communication problem: distinguishing a child's own voice (Schnoor, 2013). Based on this, it is advisable to build appropriate practice. The complexity of the task stems from the need to take into account the child's interpretation of a specific situation of communication.

The zone of proximal development is considered in two contexts: in the wording proposed by Vygotsky himself as a difference between what the child can accomplish independently and what he can do with the help of an adult. In this sense, the zone of proximal development appears more as a characteristic of developmental well-being. At the same time, the zone of proximal development also acts as a space in which communication between children and adults occurs. Therefore, it is no coincidental that the child's play is considered the zone of proximal development.

Speaking about children's playing activity, the authors emphasize its importance. In the case when play appears as a leading activity, the main pedagogical task is to enable the child to master it and realize it together with all its inherent structural elements, such as a role, a plot, play actions, substitute objects. The teacher's role is to support children's play at a sufficiently high level. If need be, he introduces children to the structural elements of play and may participate in the play or take charge of the play with others following his lead.

The analysis of play activity as a free, unregulated form of activity emphasizes its social context as a special social space in which children acquire the experience of resolving social conflicts and mastering social competencies. It emphasizes that children have their rights; their opinion is valued and all those participants in the play should consider it. In this sense, the teacher's task is to support children's play with an eye on the individual characteristics of each of the children.

Considering the effect the cultural-historical theory has on learning, it should be noted that most authors underline the need to create developmental educational models (van Oers 2012). There are two tendencies observed in preschool education: the first one relates to the adult's leading role as a person who possesses the cultural content, and the second one that calls for children's autonomous activity where the main task is to support the voice of each participant in the educational process.

Of particular interest in this regard is the system of developmental training for preschool children (Shiyan & Krasheninnikova, 2014). This study has proved that by establishing relationships of opposition and using special systems of mediation, children can discover complex structural relationships in different contents between objects and phenomena of animate and inanimate nature and at the same time they can display creative thinking.

One of the fundamental concepts of the cultural-historical theory is the category of means. Child psychology and pedagogy have established psychological means that are characteristic of preschool age children. The researchers have identified sensory standards, schemes, visual models and other imaginative means. The new impulse to develop the understanding of mediation is associated with the process of digitalizing modern childhood. ICTs allow you to build models that are very complex in content, making it possible to reflect complex relationships between various phenomena of the reality in a form that is accessible to children. With their help, preschoolers are capable of setting and solving very complex problems. This direction opens new prospects for understanding the forms of mediation and the possibilities of their application in the educational process.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, we note that Lev Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory continues to attract the attention of childhood researchers and specialists in the field of education of young children. Its conceptual apparatus includes such categories as 'higher mental functions', 'zone of proximal development', 'social development situation' and 'means'. This apparatus is being actively developed and used in the design of modern research and the construction of educational practices.

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