

Squaring Soviet Theory with American Practice

In a momentous educational exchange, the USSR's Academy of Pedagogical Sciences is collaborating with Montclair State College to introduce *Philosophy for Children*, an American critical thinking program compatible with Soviet educational theory, into their schools.

As I begin preparing this account, I am in a British Airways plane leaving Moscow. Now that my visit to the USSR is over, I have time to reflect on what was accomplished. Outstanding, without a doubt, was the co-signing of an agreement between V. V. Davydov, Vice President of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences (APS), the USSR's top educational research organization, and me, as director of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) at Montclair State College in New Jersey. I would like to relate how that agreement—unexpected by both parties—came about. The story has its roots in the USSR, early in this century.

The Psychology of Thinking

Since my narrative must have a beginning, I shall let its starting point be the 1920s, a decade of brilliant activity by the Soviet scholar, Lev Vygotsky. Far from being a narrow specialist, Vygotsky was deeply immersed in problems of art and creativity, as well as in philosophy and humanistic approaches to knowledge and understanding. Yet, all the while his attention was focusing more and more on psychology—in particular, the psychology of thinking—which he saw as central to education. Here, his restless energy and wide-ranging compassion

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led him in the direction of the education of the blind, the deaf, and other disabled individuals, particularly children. His study of those with perceptual and learning deficiencies suggested to him that he should concentrate his efforts on the analysis of the dynamic concept of thinking rather than on the relatively inert and elusive notion of intelligence, even though his theory of "proximal intelligence" is of substantial importance.

To Vygotsky, with his penchant for a behavioral interpretation of mind, thinking had to be understood as *internalized* activity, the genesis of our thoughts being explainable in terms of the overt, external activities—particularly the linguistic activities—in which we had been and continued to be engaged. These activities Vygotsky understood to be primarily social. They and the connections that hold among them are re-presented or re-animated in the life of the mind by a process of

internalization. Our thoughts and the relationships among them tend to correspond roughly to what we and others say and do in the world.

Suppose, for example, that the stance of a teacher in an early elementary school classroom is one of overwhelming authority, and it is only the teacher who generally displays originality, independence, and thoughtfulness. The students, consequently, may tend to be merely reactive and hesitate to show intellectual initiative. The only classroom behavior that stimulates them is the teacher's questioning, to which they provide the expected responses. If I find myself in such a classroom, I will likely identify with my peers and behave—and think—as they do, although there are, of course, exceptions. What can snap me out of this cognitive lethargy, Vygotsky is suggesting, is lively classroom discourse, in which my classmates and I set models for each other of animated, thoughtful, and rational individuals quite capable of thinking for ourselves rather than waiting always for questions from the teacher to which to react.

Vygotsky's account of the social origins of thinking clearly called for a reconstruction of the classroom so that vigorous and reasonable dialogue would form a matrix that would in turn generate children's thinking—

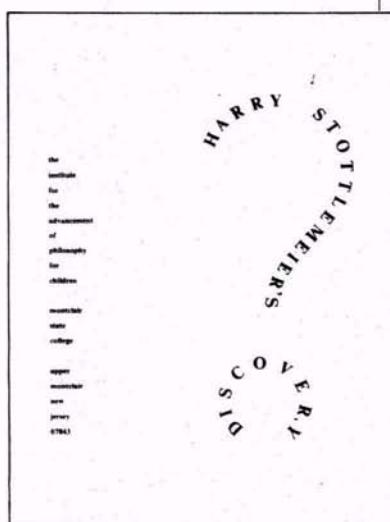
thinking that would be correspondingly vigorous and reasonable. The stilted thinking that characterizes so many children after they have been in school for a while is a direct consequence of the stultified and stultifying behavior of their classmates, who have not been permitted to conduct themselves as a reflective community. In this one masterful stroke, Vygotsky laid bare what is probably the most common cause of miseducation: the failure to convert the classroom into a community of discursive inquiry—and pointed out the direction in which educators had to go if the situation were to be corrected. But Vygotsky did not live to implement his theories; by the early 1930s, at the age of 38, he was dead of tuberculosis.

I should remark, in passing, that Vygotsky's theory may throw a bit of light on a notorious historical enigma: how it happened that certain small towns of barely 30,000 inhabitants—I am thinking of Athens of the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. and of Florence of the 14th and 15th centuries A.D.—could have achieved such an intensity of artistic and scientific creativity. The explanation that brilliant people from all over the world gravitated to these spots may be correct as far as it goes, but it is weak. It is more helpful to recognize that these towns were communities of inquiry in which discovery and invention everywhere stimulated fresh thinking, which in turn stimulated new discoveries and new inventions. Societies that do not aspire to be *communities of inquiry* may have to resign themselves to the fact that neither freedom nor justice nor wealth nor power can assure the scintillating productivity that we so much admire in the cases of Athens and Florence.

Teaching and Mental Development

Another position of Vygotsky to which I felt powerfully drawn had to do with the connection he saw between teaching and mental development. In contrast to Piaget, who seems to ignore completely the effects of his observational and interviewing techniques upon the mental behavior of the children he is describing, Vygotsky stressed

the interconnectedness of the mode of experimental or pedagogical intervention and the resultant development of the mind of the child. This reminded me of Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle: there is no way a particle can be observed without disturbing it. Our knowledge of things can be only our knowledge of how they act as a result of our observing and experimenting with them. For if the child's mind "as it truly is" cannot be that mind at rest and undisturbed, then we must face up to and accept the dramatic alternative: the child's mind is likewise defined by how it acts when probed and stimulated by countless forms of intervention. If, then, the child's mind realizes itself as the result of a variety of pedagogical interventions, then teaching and mental development cannot be severed from one another. As Vygotsky put it, "The only good teaching is that which stays ahead of development and draws it up behind."



CHAPTER ONE

In perhaps we couldn't have happened if Harry hadn't fallen asleep in science class that day. Well, he didn't really fall asleep either. My mind was wandering off. The teacher, Mr. Bradley, had been talking about the solar system, and how all the planets revolve around the sun, and Harry just stopped listening. Because at once he had the picture in his mind of the great flaming sun and all the little planets spinning madly around it.

Suddenly, Harry knew that Mr. Bradley was looking directly at him. Harry tried to clear his mind so that he could pay attention to the words of the question. What is it that has a long tail and revolves above the sun once every 175 years?

Harry realized that he had an idea: the teacher, Mr. Bradley, expected it. Very fast! It is a comet he placed with the idea of saying "a long tail". He had just read in the encyclopedias that famous was called the "Dog star". So he was scared. Mr. Bradley wouldn't find such an answer appropriate.

Mr. Bradley didn't have much of a sense of humor, but he was extremely patient. He knew he had a few moments, which might be soon enough time to figure out something. "All planets revolve about the sun," he recited. Mr. Bradley saying this thing with the tail, whatever it was, who can around the sun. Could it also be true? It seemed worth a try. "A planet?" he asked rather doubtfully.

He wasn't prepared for the laughter from the class. If it's been paying attention, half have heard Mr. Bradley say that the object he was referring to was Halley's. It and that comes going around the sun just as planets do, but they are definitely not

comets. The bell rang then, signaling the end of school for the day. But as he walked home, he will feel badly about not having been able to answer when Mr. Bradley called on him.

Now, he was puzzled. How had he gotten wrong? He went back over the way he had to figure out the answer. "All planets revolve about the sun." Mr. Bradley had

The pages excerpted here are from Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery, written by Matthew Lipman and published by the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, Montclair State College, Upper Montclair, New Jersey. As part of the agreement between the college and the USSR, this book and others by Lipman will be translated and modified to reflect Soviet culture.

The Primacy of Thinking in Education

When I first read Vygotsky, in the late 1940s, I was unready for its strong emphasis on the connection between thinking and language. I was still caught up in the social behaviorism of American pragmatism, which inclined me to favor the stress on interaction with the environment that I found in Piaget. The philosophy and psychology of language did not seem to me to have the glamorous patina that they were later to develop. I read psychology during those years because I enjoyed doing so, even though my chosen field was philosophy. And while I found Vygotsky to be, for the most part, quite congenial, I was far more fascinated by the social psychology of George Herbert Mead.

If Dewey's work extended to the farthest reaches of pragmatic experimentalism, Mead's seemed to me to be at its very core. I saw—and still see—no conflict between them: they simply approached different areas of interest with much the same method. Mead's chief area of interest was the genesis of community through communication and of the thinking self through internalization of that community.

In the years that followed, I considered myself to be a Mead enthusiast, having been strongly impressed by his *Mind, Self and Society* as well as his *Philosophy of the Act*. But I was also, from even further back, a disciple of John Dewey. At the time I became involved with education, in the late 1960s, I still hadn't read much of Dewey's educational writings, although I think I had more or less deduced his pedagogy from related convictions he had expressed in such works as *Human Nature and Conduct*, *Art as Experience*, and *Experience and Nature*. Doubtless, there is no one right way to read Dewey, but the method I happened to employ, of reading the major non-educational works first, seems to me far more felicitous than reading the pedagogical works first—or reading only those works.

I saw myself eventually putting these various educational theories into practice. I am referring to the notion I took from Dewey that an educational session

should begin with *an experience*—a unified, cognitive/affective event that would both provoke and sustain continued reflection by the class. I refer, also, to the idea I took from Dewey and Mead that the school had to harness and put to work the social impulses of the child—in contrast to the imperial, di-

ct itself have to be redesigned. It would have to be a brighter, more readable version of philosophy, in which the great ideas would continue to sparkle yet would provide, as nothing else can, the much needed strengthening of children's reasoning, concept-formation abilities, and judgment.

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vide-and-rule strategy that some teachers even today still employ. But the central thrust of the educational revolution to come—pioneered by Dewey and Vygotsky—was the insistence on the primacy of thinking rather than of knowledge in education.

When, in the late '60s, I decided to try a new approach to the elementary school curriculum, I had sympathy with Dewey's recommendation that each discipline be reconstructed into a form of scientific inquiry so that each student could become an inquirer. Nevertheless, it was my hunch that children are primarily intent upon obtaining meaning—this is why they so often condemn school as meaningless—and they want meanings they can verbalize. It was here that scientific inquiry was less promising than philosophical inquiry. I saw philosophy as the discipline *par excellence* for making sense of things and for preparing students to think in the more specific disciplines. And yet, the experience of teachers with traditional, academic philosophy had been anything but satisfactory. Philosophy might be indispensable for the redesign of education; but to make this happen, philosophy would

An Invitation from the USSR

I shall skip over the years that have intervened since I first tried to envisage what a children's community of inquiry might be like, the result of which was *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*.¹ I pick up the story again in 1989, 20 years later. *Philosophy for Children* is now virtually complete as a curriculum and a member of the National Diffusion Network. Lee Wickline, the longtime director of NDN, had been approached by Nikolai Nikandrov, Deputy Director of the USSR's Academy of Pedagogical Sciences. Nikandrov said that Soviet schools were in trouble: the students complained that what they were being taught was irrelevant, and the school system had no way of identifying and supporting the superior academic programs that might provide Soviet children with a more meaningful education. Wickline visited Moscow to discuss the matter further—this was in the summer of 1989—and was asked to follow up that visit with further visits from content specialists, particularly in the area of critical thinking. I was asked if I would be interested in going, and I immediately accepted. Before long, I had an invitation from APS.

In advance of my visit, I sent the Academy some materials about *Philosophy for Children*, which I consider the critical thinking approach with the greatest range and depth for children at the elementary school level. I also sent a few chapters of *Pixie*,² which I asked to have translated into Russian. This is the sequence of events over the next few days, as I remember them.

Sunday, October 7th. I meet, after dinner, with Vitaly Rubtsoff (a close associate of Davydov) and Arkady Margolis, both of the APS staff, as well as with a number of other psychologists, to discuss the schedule of the next two days. Although I speak no Russian, they

all speak English, and we get along quite well. But as yet, we have hardly touched on any substantive issues.

Monday, October 8th. I pay a visit, along with the APS group, to Moscow School #91 and conduct a session in *Pixie* with 4th graders. Despite the awkwardness of having to translate everything said in English into Russian and vice versa, the dialogue moves along very nicely and productively. For example, we discuss *Pixie's* claim to be writing the story of how she wrote her "mystery story." I ask the children if their desks have stories, if their school has a story, if their country has a story, and if the world has a story. To each they assent, with some elaboration. (Afterward, I regretted not having asked them whether the history of the world were its story or the story of its story.) I conclude the exercise by asking them if they too have stories. To this, they enthusiastically agree. At the end of the session, to my surprise and delight, a number of them come forward to ask if I would like them to write their stories of themselves so that they could give them to me. (This offer of reciprocity—in which I began the session by offering them my story and they concluded the session by offering me theirs—represents precisely the kind of meaningful exchange to be expected of a community of inquiry, although I myself was quite surprised to have it happen after only a single meeting.)

Another feature of the session worth noting has to do with the way the dialogue developed. The aim of a community of inquiry is to move from teacher-student dialogue to student-student dialogue. I am a bit afraid, before the session begins, that this movement might be inhibited by the need to filter all discussion through the interpreter. But from the start the discussion is animated, and there are lots of hands in the air. Soon the device of funneling all the conversation through the interpreter becomes so objectionable to the students that they short-circuit me and develop numerous discussions among themselves. And so they end up doing what I had hoped they would do, although by a quite unexpected route.

After dinner that evening, we look at *Socrates for Six-Year-Olds*, the BBC film on *Philosophy for Children*, which I have brought on cassette. (Interestingly, the other two one-hour films in the three-part BBC series also have connections with Vygotsky's work.) Subsequently, we discuss a two-page

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memorandum that I had prepared the previous week entitled "Forming a Philosophical Community of Inquiry." (The memorandum was written after I had read Davydov's most recent book, *Problems of Developmental Teaching* [1986]. My memorandum was an attempt to unpack the sequence of psychological events that took place in a session of *Philosophy for Children*, such as the one that was enacted at School #91 that morning. I paid particular attention to such Vygotskian concepts as *internalization* and *appropriation*, showing how they were realized as the dialogue unfolded. I also showed the compatibility or similarity between *Philosophy for Children* practice and the pedagogical theory of Davydov.)

Tuesday, October 9th. The day begins with another *Pixie* session in School #91. It seems to me that it goes equally well. When the discussion turns to thoughts and I ask if all one's thoughts need to be supported by reasons, one girl remarks, "Only those you express, not those you think."

Another girl tells me that relationships can themselves have relationships. She and several other students then proceed to construct an analogy as an illustration of this point.

After lunch, as we walk on the sidewalk along one of Moscow's enormous boulevards, Rubtsov and I discuss the next steps to be taken: the exchange visits, the exchange of conferences, the appointment of APS as the USSR affiliate center of the IAPC, and so on.

Later that afternoon, we meet with the APS Vice President. Davydov has apparently been well briefed about my demonstrations and the progress of the various discussions that have taken place. He quickly assents to the preparation of a joint agreement or protocol, which he and I sign. We chat a bit longer, and soon our conversation is over. The following day I leave Moscow, bound for London.

A Marriage of Ideas

I cannot help thinking that we have shown the feasibility of welding together the chief variety of Soviet educational psychology with one particular variety of American educational practice. But why hadn't the Soviet psychologists thought of our approach themselves?

The answer, I suspect, is to be found in an unwarranted presupposition prevalent among educators in all countries and not just in the Soviet Union. It is that what must be avoided at all cost is the introduction of another subject into the elementary school curriculum. Instead, each discipline is expected to cultivate and enhance the thinking that takes place in its own bailiwick. This means that the new thinking activities to be introduced must be virtually transparent or content-free.

What is overlooked in this approach is the fact that content-free materials are also meaning-free—and children are hungry for meaning. There is, however, one discipline that specializes in meanings, in values, in concepts, in reasonings, in the making of judgments (both evaluational and classificatory)—and that is philosophy. The addition of philosophy to the cur-



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riculum of the schools is a drastic step, but not more drastic than the dire situation we are in demands. Perhaps the reason the Soviets could make such a swift decision is that they are not bewildered by countless alternatives, for each of which there are countless momentary enthusiasms, extensive claims, and virtually no theoretical support. It seems to me they knew what would count as a successful implementation of their theoretical position, and they recognized it as soon as they perceived it in operation. In the end, they may settle on some as yet unthought of alternative; but if it happens, it will be to a considerable extent because *Philosophy for Children* has opened their eyes to the educational solution that their theory makes possible and which is almost within their grasp.

I cannot close without mentioning that none of this would have been possible just a few short years ago. For more than 40 years, the writings of Vygotsky were proscribed in the USSR, and those who considered themselves his followers were, for at least part of this time, barred from holding positions of educational authority. All of that is now changed. Davydov and Rubtsoff are now firmly in the saddle. It will be interesting to see which direction they choose to go. □

¹Harry Stottlemeier's *Discovery* is a novel for children of 11 or 12 years of age. It depicts a classroom in which children of that same age are engaged in discovering what it is to reason and to apply the process of reasoning to problems they face in their own lives.

²Pixie is a novel for children of 9 or 10 years of age. It too serves as a classroom text and depicts a fictional group of children considering problems of classification and definition. At the same time, it provides the live children in the classroom with a model of how children can engage in dialogue and form a community of inquiry.

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