

Impact of Lev Vygotsky on Special Education

L'INFLUENCE DE VYGOTSKY SUR L'ÉDUCATION SPÉCIALE

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Abstract: Lev Vygotsky is a famous psychologist from former Soviet Union, whose theory made great contribution to defectology. The paradigm to educate children with special requirements is derived from his theory on children development. This paper mainly discusses Lev Vygotsky's views on disabled children and how to educate them, his standard on measure of mental block education and some relevant issues.

Key words: special education; Lev Vygotsk; Zone of Proximal Development

Résumé: Vygotsky est un célèbre psychologue de l'URSS. Ses idées ont beaucoup contribué à la théorie de défectuosité. De sa théorie sur le développement de l'enfant, dérive le modèl de l'éducation des enfants ayant des besoins spéciaux. Cet article tente d'analyser le point de vue de Vygotski sur des enfants handicapés, les critères de mesure de l'éducation psychologique, l'éducation des enfants handicapés et des thèmes qui y sont liés.

Mots-Clés: éducation spéciale; Vygotsky; nouvelle zone de développement

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) is one of the most influential psychologists in 20th century, whose main researching interest is in relationship of thinking and language, learning and development of children. He is heightened for great attention by the academic community in psychology and education. Although he was born in the same year as Piaget, he died at the age of 38 for pulmonary tuberculosis. Because of an early death and the born place of Soviet Union, Lev Vygotsky is rarely known in academic community. Till the 1960s, his theory received great attention and then he was praised as the "Mozart in psychology". Lev Vygotsky is an expert on methodology of psychology, cognitive development, psychology linguistics and theory of learning. However, his contribution to special education is rarely discussed. This essay will investigate Lev Vygotsky' impact on special education from the aspects bellow:

1. ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT (ZPD)

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Lev Vygotsky thinks the development of mind is originated from interaction of the person with society. The procession of learning and development is neither unitary nor independent mutually. What's the relationship between these two factors? He puts forward a new theory: Zone of Proximal Development. Lev Vygotsky points out: development can be classified into two levels. One is the real level of development, on which children can solve problems independently; the other is potential level of development, on which children can solve problem under the guidance of adult people or in corporation with peers with higher capability. The biggest difference between the two levels is the "Zone of Proximal Development" (Vygotsky, L.S., 1978). Lev Vygotsky thinks the Zone of Proximal Development can illustrate the function of procession not matured yet being towards maturity. Therefore, the view of mental development in the Zone of Proximal Development is foresighted, while the view of the level on real development is backdated.

One of Lev Vygotsky's purposes for bringing forward the theory of Zone of Proximal Development is to correct the phenomenon that psychological tests are misused. In fact, psychological tests are supposed to be a relevance to teachers prior to teaching, not the only basis. It's the start point of teaching instead of the ending point. In his opinion, the psychological tests can only measure the children's real level of development, which shows their capacity without others' assistance. However, the capacity displayed by children in others' assistance is the object of teaching. Lev Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development exerts profound influence on prediction, diagnosis, and remedy of the students' learning ability, the decision of teaching object, the carrying on of teaching activities as well as assessment of teaching results. The theory of Zone of Proximal Development is the foundation of the forming of Dynamic assessment (This term is first put forward by Israeli scholar Feuerstein in 1979). This assessment attaches great importance to the psychological course of how learning is engendered and happens for children being tested, or in other words, "dynamic assessment" tries to measure whether a learner has the potential of change. From Lev Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development, we can draw some enlightenment to special education:

- 1st. Cognitive development is a course of social interaction. The disadvantageous social interactional environment may cause unfavorable development of cognitive ability.
- 2nd. Gradual assistance and guidance prompts the cognitive development zone of the special children to expand.
- 3rd. Cognitive assessment needs help of consistent interactional procession, for truly identifying the real potential of children.
- 4th. Cognitive assessment not only finds out children's initial learning level, but also paying attention to the level of improvement they get from the teaching.
- 5th. Effective teaching must offer students teaching material in accordance with their learning level, inspiring relevant knowledge accumulation, concentrating on important information and raising interaction of positive and negative cases as employed by Socrates.

2. LEV VYGOTSKY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

Defectology is the field in which Lev Vygotsky studies contemporary special education and educational psychology, whose literal meaning is study of defect. Lev Vygotsky's study of special education targets children handicapped in sense, physiology, cognition and neuropsychiatric, constituting four kinds of education on disabled children (Gindis, B., 1995): children with hearing disorder and deafness, visual disorder or blindness, intellectual disturbance and children with speaking and language impairment.

2.1 Lev Vygotsky's viewpoint on disability (Das, J.P., 1995)

- 1st. Although disability is a noun with negative meaning, it helps us to examine children by special methods positively.

- 2nd. To development of disabled children, the difference of quality is more meaningful than that of quantity.
- 3rd. If there is appropriate social supportive system, disabled children is not necessary to overcome emotional disturbance caused by inferiority complex and disadvantageous social position.
- 4th. The intellect ability of either disabled children or normal children is diversified and differentiated in the social cultural background.
- 5th. The disabled children should exclude children without handicap and affected by unfavorable elements of culture and learning.

2.2 Lev Vygotsky's viewpoint on special learning problems of children

- 1st. The developmental principles for normal and disabled children are almost the same, for which reason these two kinds of children should be educated together and take part in connatural activities.
- 2nd. The basic focus of educationist and psychologist should be on the merit and ability of children with developmental problems, not their limitations and defects.
- 3rd. Defective children can't take part in normal interactional or collective activities, the deficiency of society and culture caused by which is more terrible than the original body defects to them.
- 4th. Generally speaking, the deficiency of society and culture on a higher level is easier to cope with than the original problems.
- 5th. The procedure of mental and psychological compensation to different children with disability can create their unique personality character and developmental orbit.

3. LEV VYGOTSKY'S IMPACT ON SPECIAL EDUCATION

3.1. Aware of social nature and disabled people's dynamic particularity

Lev Vygotsky thinks there is a big difference between normal behavior and abnormal behavior, and the development of human beings is a course of social inheritance, which is very complex. There are two levels in psychological functions(Wertsch,J.V., 1985): one lower level is entitative, including sense, memory, attention and nervous system, which are within organismal entity; the other higher level is cultural, including abstract reasoning, logical memorizing, language, automatic attention, plan and attention, etc. Lev Vygotsky points out: children's psychological function will occur two times: the first time is on the social level among people, and then the second one is on the personal level internally within the children. In his opinion, disability is not only limited to the physiological realm, it also includes abnormal social behavior, in other words, the defect of social interaction.

3.2. Compensation, rehabilitation and education of disabled people

The main object of special education is not only to compensate major disabilities through developing and strengthening psychological functions, but also to prevent, rescue and heal the second level of disability through psychological and educational methods. Lev Vygotsky thinks that, effective rehabilitation should apply appropriate and timely methods to educate, strengthen and compensate their cultural and psychological functions, communicational ability and social relationship. Lev Vygotsky also proposes we should adopt positive classifying methods to assess disabled children, and to measure disabled children from the perspective of strengthening is more appropriate than merely from the perspective of disability.

3.3. The selection and measurement of disabled students

Lev Vygotsky thinks that standard intelligence tests do not fit children. They may not test their real intelligence for the children's inexperience of language, lack of knowledge or cultural disadvantage and other elements. He thinks we should measure their intelligence by dynamic assessment, in other words, measure whether the students have the potential to change, the gap between their capability possessed already and the potential capability after learning (Zone of Proximal Development), which should be awarded more attention. Zone of Proximal Development can reflect students' potential of learning.

4. BRIEF CONCLUSION

The majority of psychologists devote themselves to the normal psychological research, but pays much less attention to clinical application of psychology. In fact, Lev Vygotsky makes great contribution to psychology of special children, thus acknowledged as the father of "Defectology". The theory of disontogenesis created by Lev Vygotsky is a kind of special education more extensive, tolerant and humane in the 20th century (Gindis,B., 1995). His viewpoints and enlightenment on special education as well as his study of empirical data has much longer and profound impact.

For teachers of special education, how to apply Lev Vygotsky's theory into practical teaching? My opinions are as follows:

- 1st. According to Lev Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development, what's important to disabled children is "what they can do", not "what they are supposed to do". These children have some weaknesses in certain fields, but they have compensatory strong points in other fields. Normal procedure of tests is unlikely to appropriately assess their true capability.
- 2nd. Teachers of special education should know special children need more opportunities to interact with adults and peers; otherwise they will probably have problems of belonging in "cultural development" or other problems more serious. Therefore, teachers of special education are obliged to encourage special children to interact more with adults and peers, that is to say, try their best to bring interaction into the normal activity of the original culture, which is one of the main purposes of inclusive education.
- 3rd. According to Lev Vygotsky's theoretical suggestions, involvement with and education of disabled children with hearing disorder should be designed in the context in which there are many opportunities to use sign language and activities to interact with others, in order to stimulate their development both in language and cognition.
- 4th. Lev Vygotsky's theory also suggests teachers of special education that they should not limit themselves to the classroom, instead, they can cooperate with professional groups of education, learn from each other and work together to achieve their common ideal object.

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