The history of the reception of Vygotsky's paper on play in Russia and the West

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Abstract

This article describes the responses of academic researchers and teachers to Vygotsky's paper on play, published in Russian in 1966 and, in a new translation, in the present issue of this journal. That paper has had a major influence on research in play both in Russia and in the West. Its cultural-historical view of the development of play, and its key theoretical and methodological ideas, have continued to reverberate and to generate and influence a huge body of work. The article identifies the key trends in these responses to Vygotsky's paper, reviewing the work by major scholars in this field, such as Elkonin, Leonte'ev, and Zaporozhets. The article also describes how Vygotsky's ideas in this paper became the foundation of the national curriculum for early childhood in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s.

The article critiques some of the research which, using the 1978 translation of Vygotsky's paper, presented his approach as that of a cognitivist or as a social constructivist and argues that these reflect a tradition in the West of simplifying Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory and methodology. It also reviews some contemporary studies by researchers working within the cultural-historical approach to play. These are making original contributions to the cultural-historical conception of play or bringing new insights into play as a leading activity in children's development.

Keywords

Vygotsky; play; imaginary situation; cultural-historical theory; development; leading activity; zone(s) of proximal development; cultural contexts; collective imagining

Introduction

A complete analysis of the reception of Vygotsky's paper would take our article over its limits; we will therefore try to identify main lines and trends and follow this with some examples which, as we believe, clearly show these tendencies and trends. Our intention is not to go too deeply into details; we are focused on the big picture.

Vygotsky's paper on play was published in Russian in 1966, 10 years after *Izbrannie psihologicheskie issledovania* [Selected psychological investigations] (Vygotsky, 1956), 6 years after "Development of higher mental functions" (Vygotsky, 1960) and 16 years before *The Collected Works* (1982–1984). This year, 1966, was remarkable in Soviet psychology for at least two reasons. First, the XVIII International Congress of Psychology took place in Moscow on August 4–11. It is interesting to note in this respect that two of Vygotsky's closest associates held important positions at the Congress: Alexey Nikolaevich Leont'ev was the Congress President, and Alexander Luria was a Chair of the Congress Program Committee. Second, in the same year, the Faculty of Psychology was established at Moscow State University and A. N. Leont'ev was its first Dean. This famous Faculty for many years remained an *alma mater* for generations of cultural-historical and activity theory researchers in the Soviet Union and internationally. The year of publication of Vygotsky's paper thus coincided with tectonic changes in Soviet psychology, in both the political and organisational dimensions. The publication of this paper generated a huge amount of research on play within the cultural-historical and activity theory traditions in the Soviet Union as well as a series of debates and criticisms.

This relatively small paper does not represent the advanced psychological theory of play, but it contains several key theoretical and methodological ideas that were accepted and developed in both the cultural-historical and activity theory traditions. In general, it is an approach to child's play looking at it through the lens of socio-cultural development. To put it another way, it represents some directions of the cultural-historical genetic analysis of play. Two interrelated aspects of the analysis that the paper is focused on are 1) the socio-cultural nature and genesis of play itself and 2) its role in the mental development of a child.

The analysis of the socio-cultural nature and genesis of child's play covers four main aspects that include: 1) the view of play as social and cultural phenomenon, 2) the imaginary situation as the main distinguishing feature of play, 3) the genetic contradictions of play, and 4) stages of development of play. The role of play in the mental development of the child is discussed through the conceptual lenses of a) play as a leading activity, b) play and zones of proximal development, c) the discrepancy between the visual field and the field of meanings in play, and d) the dialectical relationship between meanings and actions as developmental characteristics of play.

Sociocultural nature of play: psychological and educational studies and implications

The socio-cultural and historical nature and genesis of child's play was the focus of long-term research by Daniil Elkonin. His early publications on this topic appeared already in 1948 and 1957 (Elkonin, 1948, 1957). Vygotsky's paper on play remained unpublished, but it was definitely known to Elkonin as well as some other researchers of the Vygotsky school. Thus, in "Psychology of play" (Elkonin, 1978/2005), which summarises Elkonin's studies of play, we can find an addendum called "Notes on Vygotsky's lecture on the psychology of the pre-school

child" (p. 395–405), which includes key ideas about Vygotsky's conception of play. This means that already in the 1930s, Elkonin definitely had access to Vygotsky's unpublished materials.

According to Elkonin (2005), the most important contribution to the theory of roleplay is that:

> role play develops in the course of society's historical evolution as a result of changes in the child's place in the system of social relationships. It is thus social in origin as well as in nature. Its appearance is associated not with the operation of certain internal, innate, instinctive energy, but rather with well-defined social conditions of the child's life in society. (p. 86)

This conclusion, supported by the huge amount of experimental data presented in "Psychology of play" (1978) could be considered as a continuation of one of key ideas of Vygotsky's paper; but this conclusion cannot be attributed only to roleplay, it seems to have a relevance to all kinds of play. Play as a cultural and socio-historical phenomenon, the challenges and contradictions of play, and new types of play in contemporary sociocultural environments, remain central in the research of Smirnova and Gudareva (2004), Smirnova and Ryabkova (2010), Elkoninova and Bazhanova (2007), Kravtsova (1999; 2004), and Kravtsov (2008). Some of these research programs contain critical analyses of Elkonin's theory of play; thus, Elkoninova and Bazanova's research discovered a connection between an "ideal form" of play and fairy-tales. At the same time, this research shows how roleplay is related to a child's emotional experiences (*perezhivanie*).

A remarkable contribution to studies of play and its role in child development was made by the Institute of Preschool Education (*Institut doshkolnogo vospitania*) of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of USSR led by its Director, Alexander Zaporozhets, who was one of the Luria's collaborators in early 1930s. These research programs (Zaporozhets, 1964, 1965, 1976) were not only academic studies of play; the Institute was responsible for the development of the national curriculum for the whole system of early childhood education in the Soviet Union which was introduced in 1962 and modified in 1978 as a Federal Program of Education in kindergartens (*Programma obuchenia I voospitania v detskom sadu*).

Therefore, the research programs led by the Institute combined psychology and pedagogy, with a strong impact on educational policies and practices (Zaporozets & Usova, 1966). It would not be an overestimation to say that in the 1960s–1970s key ideas in Vygotsky's conception of play were the foundations of the national curriculum for early childhood education in the Soviet Union (Mihailenko & Korotkova, 2003; Poddiakov & Mihailenko, 1987).

Play as a leading activity in early childhood

The idea of a leading activity is a key concept in Leont'ev's psychological theory of activity. Although Vygotsky's paper on play does not provide an explicit explanation of the meaning of "leading activity", this was the first paper where the idea of play as a leading activity in early childhood appeared (Veresov, 2006).

> Is play the leading form of activity, or is it simply the predominant activity, in a child of this age? It seems to me that from the point of view of development, play is not the predominant form of activity, but is, in a certain sense, the leading line of development in preschool years" (Vygotsky, this issue, p. 6).

We could therefore assume that the concept of the leading activity originated in Vygotsky's paper on play. This concept, in its developed and conceptualised form, appeared and was developed in Leont'ev's writings in the 1960s:

> Each stage of mental development is characterized by a definite relation of the child to reality that is led at the given stage, by a definite type of his activity. Consequently, it is necessary to speak of the development of the psyche depending not on activity in general but on leading activities. Thus, leading activities are activities the development of which condition the most important changes in the child's mental processes and psychological personality traits at given stages of his development. (Leont'ev, 1983, pp. 285–286).

However, careful analysis shows that the notion of leading activity appeared earlier in Leont'ev's work, and in relation to play. Thus, in the paper "Psychological foundations of pre-school play" (Leont'ev, 1944) we find the following definition:

> What is a leading activity in general? We call "leading activities" not just those activities occurring most often at a given stage of development of the child. The leading activity is an activity the development of which brings about major changes in the child's mind and within which mental processes occur that prepare the child's transition to a new and higher stage of his development. (p. 306)

It seems clear that Leont'ev's concept of the "leading activity" draws on Vygotsky's original formulation of it in the play paper, and was generalised in Leont'ev's subsequent work.

Contemporary studies of play as a leading activity in early childhood and its role in child's mental development include an impressive variety of approaches and empirical research projects in Russia and in the West. Thus, Duncan and Tarulli (2003) undertook an analysis of the concept of play as a leading activity, comparing the approaches of Vygotsky, Leont'ev, and Bakhtin. Dmitry Lubovsky's (2009) paper shows the development of the concept of leading activity in the works of Vygotsky, Leont'ev, and their followers. Edwards (2011) looks at the relation of play and imagination in children through the lens of the concept of leading activity. Research by G. Kravtsov and E. Kravtsova (Kravtsov, 2008) develops Vygotsky's original idea of looking at play and its development as a historical and socio-cultural complex phenomenon. The concept of the leading activity, and the analysis of the development of play in early childhood undertaken by Fleer (2010), open new dimensions in theoretical and empirical studies of play in various educational settings.

Play studies in Western academia: trends and tendencies

From the time of its publication in an abridged and altered form in *Mind in Society* (1978) Vygotsky's paper on play began to attract attention from researchers in Western academia. However, this interest was a part of a much more general Vygotskyan boom in the 1990s. It therefore reflected the main tendencies in the reception of Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory in the West. Veresov (2010) identified these tendencies as a nexus with three dimensions: 1) the multiplication of simplified versions of the theory, 2) the dissolution of the original conceptual framework, and 3) critical improvement. These three dimensions demonstrate themselves clearly in the reception of Vygotsky's paper on play.

Some researchers continue to use and quote the version of 1976 and 1978, focusing on some aspects of Vygotsky's approach and leaving others on the periphery (Holzman, 2009; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999; Smith, 2010). Thus, in *Vygotsky at Work and Play* (2009), Holzman undertakes an analysis of key Vygotskyan ideas: play and the ZPD (p. 31); play, the imaginary situation, and rules (p. 50); and play and the imagination (p. 51). However, it seems that the dialectics of roles and rules, and the genesis of meaning/sense (*znachenie i smysl*) and play actions—much of what constitutes the developmental analysis of play in Vygotsky's paper— were not in the focus of analysis. Because of translation problems in the 1976 version, Holzman (2009) says that according to Vygotsky, "all play creates an imaginary situation" (p. 50). But Vygotsky's position is different, even though not opposite: "in play, a child creates an imaginary situation" (Vygotsky, this issue, p. 8). This is important, as it shows the active role of the child in creating imaginary play situations. The imaginary situation created by the child is what makes play possible, as the child begins to act within the imaginary situation. This situation psychologically frames play actions, bringing play meanings to play actions.

Curtis and O'Hagan (2003) present their original interpretation of Vygotsky's conception of play. They correctly reflect that for Vygotsky, play is a vehicle of social interaction and the leading source of development in preschool years, and that it creates zones of proximal development (p. 108). However, in their view, Vygotsky is a cognitive theorist, and this puts strong limits on the authors' approach to the cultural-historical genetical character, and the uniqueness of Vygotsky's conception of play. Thus, these authors state "Vygotsky, like Bruner and Piaget, believes that from about eight years of age games with rules are more important than free-flow play" (p. 108). But according to Vygotsky's conception, play develops as a social-cultural phenomenon and as a human activity; it has its own genesis and specific features. Therefore, there are no forms of play in ontogenesis which are less or more important than others. At the end of this lecture, Vygotsky does not suggest that imaginative (not "free-flow") play becomes less important but that it is replaced, in social-cultural terms, by games with rules. Moreover it "does not die away but permeates the attitude towards reality" (Vygotsky, this issue, p. 20).

In the book edited by Waller (2005), Vygotsky is presented as a social constructivist. The following quotation shows how Vygotsky's concept of play is interpreted:

> Like Susan Isaacs, Lev Vygotsky . . . recognized the significance of play in both children's cognitive and emotional development. He believed, as Freud did, that children played out their "unrealisable desires" but in a more general sense. Unlike Montessori and Froebel, Vygotsky also recognized the importance of fantasy or pretend play in young children's development. He suggested that because pretend play released children from the constraints of more formal learning, they were able to operate and think at a more sophisticated level. (p. 102)

This description obviously gives some insights into Vygotsky's conception of play. However; the cultural-historical approach to play and its role in child's development, which is the heart of Vygotsky's paper, is not shown, which makes the description superficial.

These examples reflect the general tendency: despite (or perhaps because of?) the publication of Vygotsky's paper of 1978, which was followed by complete translations in the 1970s and 1980s, we still have a tradition of looking at Vygotsky as a social constructivist or a pure cognitivist. On the other hand, these simplified versions of Vygotsky's conception of play reflect the general tradition of the simplification of cultural-historical theory and methodology (Veresov, 2010).

Improving cultural-historical conception of play: new approaches and developments

Chaiklin (2003) notes in relation to ZPD:

> one must appreciate the theoretical perspective in which it appeared . . . . That is, we need to understand what Vygotsky meant by "development" in general, if we are going to understand what he meant by "zone of proximal development" in particular. In this way, the reader can develop a generative understanding of the theoretical approach, which will be more valuable than a dictionary definition of the concept. (p. 46)

It seems that this generalisation also applies to the conception of child's play. To paraphrase, if we are going to understand Vygotsky's approach to play and its role in child's mental development, we need to understand the cultural-historical theory of development.

An analysis of a series of publications shows that a process of the "development of generative understanding" of Vygotsky's theory is taking place among researchers of play who belong to the cultural-historical tradition. In addition, new developments in the understanding of play in various sociocultural and educational settings are enriching the theoretical framework. Again, we will limit our overview of these developments to a few examples; however we believe they reflect the main traits of the whole picture.

Lindqvist's book (1995) is an example of an original contribution to the cultural-historical conception of play. Ferholt (2007) explains this contribution as follows:

> Lindqvist's pedagogy is designed to investigate how aesthetic activities can influence children's play, and the nature of the connections between play and the aesthetic forms of drama and literature. She is trying to find a "common denominator" of play and aesthetic forms, a denominator which she calls "the aesthetics of play" (Lindqvist, 1995). Lindqvist considers one of the most important conclusions of her investigation to be that the development of adult-child joint play is made possible through the creation of a common fiction, which she calls a "playworld". The playworld is created through the activity of bringing the actions and characters in literary texts to life through drama. It is the interactive space in which both children and adults are creatively engaged. (p. 17)

The conception of a playworld introduced by Lindquist is rooted in Vygotsky's conception of play and, at the same time, significantly enriches our understanding of play in a child's development (for more on this, see Lindqvist, 2001, 2003).

Another example of new developments in the cultural-historical conception of play is the study of Bredikyte (2011). Researching the zones of proximal development in child's play, she came to conclusion that a critical feature of any play situation is how much space is left for children's own initiative, improvisation, cooperation, and creativity. In another paper (Hakkarainen & Bredikyte, 2008) the authors claim:

> Actually we are proposing that the full integrative definition of the ZPD should include one more step: from joint action (problem solving) to child-initiated social experimentation and developmental qualitative, system level change . . . . The internalization phase is not included in the basic definition of the ZPD as the distance

between individual and joint problem solving. Another problem is that individual change is focused on instead of broader cultural units. In play context the necessity of joint experimentation is obvious and an extended concept of the ZPD is needed. (p. 9)

The authors agree that the zone of proximal development in play includes experimentation with human values and motives; they suggest an expanded definition of ZPD in play: "This definition proposes two distances: 1) between individual action and joint higher level potential, and 2) between joint higher level potential and qualitative change in personality" (p. 10).

Fleer (2009) looks at child's play in a wide cultural-historical theoretical perspective:

Vygotsky's (1966) theory of the role of play in the mental development of children provides powerful new directions for re-thinking how we have conceptualized play. Considering play as the leading activity in the development of young children is different to thinking about play as the "child's world" or the "child's work". A cultural–historical study foregrounds the motives, needs and interests of children alongside of the cultural contexts which privilege and value specific practices. (p. 14)

Fleer's research provides new insights into understanding play as a leading activity in various cultural communities. This approach is important as it brings to attention the cultural contexts and contents of play and challenges Western perspectives to move beyond a universal view of the construct of play. Culture and context are central to the understanding of how play is valued, expressed, and used as a pedagogical approach in early childhood education internationally.

Another important improvement of our understanding of the role of play in children's development is the introduction of the concept of digital play (Fleer, 2014). In Fleer (2014), Vygotsky's original concept of an imaginary situation is expanded to allow for digital play. A meta-imaginary situation is created by children when they use digital tablets to document their own play.

when a child picks up and uses the digital tablet to document their own play, the digital tablet acts as a placeholder in play, that is, the digital tablet is acting as a virtual placeholder for real objects and actions in play. (p. 117)

Digital representations can serve as new virtual forms of objects or actions and digital tablets can also act as a pivot in children's play.

In this sense, the digital tablet serves as a virtual pivot for either an object or an action. It is possible for a child to be able to sever meaning from real objects and actions through creating a digital representation—as a virtual rather than real object or action. The idea of digital placeholders and a virtual pivot also expands Vygotsky's original theorisation to take account of digital play.

A recently published book on play (Schousboe & Winther-Lindqvist, 2013) provides us with new theoretical and methodological findings in the cultural-historical approach to play and its development. The book presents three challenging issues: 1) research in play is often one-sided in the sense that it overexposes some phenomena and underexposes others; 2) most authors address children's play, but do not discuss our understanding of what play is or which persons can be regarded as players; and 3) despite the ZPD being an influential concept, it is most often only used in ways that suit each researcher's own particular project. In the authors' words:

This key concept is surprisingly rarely discussed, and elementary questions like "Is the playing child always ahead of its age, ahead of its own normal behaviour?" are often not asked. This seems remarkable if one supposes that all researchers, who have for longer periods observed children at play, have seen children that enjoy stepping into the role of a demanding, crying and extremely unruly baby. (p. 3)

The chapter by Fleer (2013) introduces a dialectics of individual imagining and collective imagining. This new theoretical perspective develops Vygotsky's conception of play as both a cultural phenomenon and a human activity:

> Traditional approaches to play which draw upon maturational or biological theories of development foreground the play activities of children over time, categorizing them into stages. However, these theories have not been able to show concretely and theoretically what occurs across a whole community of players in care and education settings. Play, when conceptualized as a dialectical relation between collective imagining and individual imagining, makes visible how both collective and individual action in play support the development of theoretical knowledge in early childhood group settings. This reading of play gives a different conceptualization, building upon earlier empirical and theoretical works which seek to understand play within group settings. (p. 85)

This powerful theoretical finding is supported by the empirical research of Li (2013), examining the role of collective and individual imagination in play in the heritage language development of young bilingual children.

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Vygotsky's paper on play is a classic text not only within cultural-historical psychology, it influences directly or indirectly almost every scholar who does research on play. Its uniqueness and validity is proved by time. It is a ground-breaking text within Vygotsky's own work; it extends the basic concept of the zone of proximal development beyond the accepted definition (the difference between what a child can accomplish unaided and what he can achieve in collaboration with others) and suggests that, in imaginative play, children can become their own "other": "Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, this issue, p. 18)

Given Vygotsky's emphasis on the fundamental role of imaginative play in early development, it is surprising that at the end of his paper he does not say more about the further development of play, focusing instead on the way in which it is replaced by "a limited form of activity, predominantly of the athletic type" (Vygotsky, this issue, p. 20). He only hints at its continuing importance ("play does not die away, but permeates the attitude towards reality"). Yet at the beginning of the lecture he had written: "we can say that imagination in adolescents and school children is play without action" (p. 8) and in another work he suggests that imaginative thinking, initially appearing in children's play, "drives human creativity", in science and technology as well as in art (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 21). In the last words of the lecture, Vygotsky does identify a major shift that has come about through play: "in play a new relationship is created between the semantic field – that is between situations in thought – and real situations" (this issue, p. 20).

Published over 50 years ago, this paper has had a remarkable destiny; it still attracts the attention of generations of researchers in Russia and internationally. It is widely referred to and quoted, it contains powerful ideas and insights that make it continue to live. We hope this new translation

will help all researchers into play, especially those whose research is located within the cultural-historical tradition.

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