



*Leoarna Mathias continues her series on education's original thinkers with a look at Lev Vygotsky...*

# Pioneering play

"IN PLAY A CHILD ALWAYS BEHAVES beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself."

This quote appears, I'm guessing, in hundreds of essays produced by students undertaking undergraduate education studies degrees, every year. It sums up the essence of a theoretical standpoint with considerable eloquence. It gets right to the heart of what the reader needs to know about Vygotsky's view of the value of play in children's lives.

Lev Vygotsky led a short but productive life. He was born in 1896 and as a Jew, got to university in Belorussia only by virtue of winning a lottery for one of the limited number of university places open to the Jewish community. Working against the backdrop of the Communist Revolution, he wrote prolifically, demonstrating, in the early stages of his career, the esteem in which he held the work of Piaget (his contemporary, and the man who gave us a 'staged' view of childhood development). Vygotsky repeated many of Piaget's experiments, but soon began to formulate his own thinking, critically recognising the importance of the contexts the child finds himself in, in play.

## *Widespread influence*

The early years community are familiar enough with Vygotskian theories, even if they do not necessarily ascribe them to him explicitly. There is a direct link between elements of the EYFS and his work. Vygotsky was probably the first modern day theorist to fully consider the meaning and value of play in children's lives, and to recognise how the learning that occurs as a result of children's participation in play is 'socially constructed' – that is, their learning does not occur in isolation from their surrounding environment, which includes places, things and, perhaps most importantly, people. In acknowledging this, Vygotsky encouraged us to accept the individuality of children; he asserted that the potential of each child is

inextricably tied up with those around him (adults and children), and it follows that such interplay with others is unique to each child. He named this concept the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Vygotsky's writings remained behind the iron curtain until the 1960s, when his work was translated and brought to publication in the West. They had an immediate impact. In 1967, Mary Plowden, in her report to government, stated that:

*"At the heart of the educational process lies the child. No [changes to these processes can] have their desired effect unless they are in harmony with the nature of the child, unless they are fundamentally acceptable to him ... Individual differences between children of the same age are so great that any class, however homogenous it seems, must always be treated as a body of children needing individual and different attention."*

Fast forward to EPPE in 2004, and the critical importance of the quality of the environment, which includes other children and well-trained adults, was again emphasised.

Ultimately Vygotsky argued that children should be assessed not only for what they can achieve in the here and now, but also for the potential they possess to progress

further given a favourable environment. For Vygotsky, the responsibility of those adults working with children is to recognise such potential, and create what is needed. In this, we can see the continuing relevance of his work. Practitioners today are called upon to continually operate within a reflective cycle on each child's behalf, recognising where they are now and where they might go next. In another elegant quote, he asserted that, "What the child can do today in collaboration, tomorrow he will be able to do independently."

## *His legacy*

Lev Vygotsky succumbed to tuberculosis in his 38th year. Having battled the illness for some time prior to his passing and sensing that time was against him, he focused on getting his ideas down on paper. Some argue that his views were not as well expressed in these later writings. At times, he strains for a vocabulary to describe his thinking; but perhaps, as other have suggested, this was because he was expressing ideas for which no vocabulary had previously existed. Nearly a century later, he leaves a considerable legacy.

