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Edu 511

What would Vygotsky think of my Daily Writing Program?

Introduction

I have been developing this writing program over the last several years since I began working in kindergarten. The program started out scattered and incomplete, then it became more inclusive but also more regimented than what it is today. Over the course of this semester, I have continued to examine my writing program. While there has been a tremendous amount of useful information presented over the course of the semester, I am partial to Vygotsky's theories. But why would he care about a writing program? "In Vygotsky's view, acquiring tools that are at least partly symbolic or mental in nature- cognitive tools- greatly enhances children's thinking abilities." (Ormrod 2008) And so I will support the writing program I have developed as though Vygotsky were.

The Daily Writing Program (DWP)

The Daily Writing Program, as it is unimaginatively called until some company thinks of a more marketable name, consists of five phases that most children in my class progress through over the course of the year in our half-day kindergarten. Almost everyday

after the children come through the door, they finish their arrival routine by beginning work on the particular phase of the DWP they are in at that point in time, as they progress through the phases at their own pace.

Whiteboards

Much of the written work children complete in the DWP is done on personal whiteboards. There are two types of these easily erasable writing palettes that are available to the children. One has no lines and the other has a single writing line comprised of a triad of parallel running lines approximately an inch and a quarter apart in total. The top and bottom lines are solid with a dotted line juxtaposed half way between them. Children often begin writing on the whiteboards with out lines and within the next couple of weeks are consistently using the whiteboards with lines.

Why is this important? Most children, just like most adults, don't like to make mistakes, much less be reminded about them. If children make a mistake they can easily erase it, forget it, and try again. It is quite amazing the number of times a kindergartener can erase and start over for the "first time" when there are no smudges

on or rips in their papers. Since photocopy machines have become so readily available in schools, it takes only a second to have a hard copy to file in a child's portfolio or send home to proud mothers and fathers. The combination of easily forgotten mistakes and immortalized success often motivates children to keep trying.

The 5 Phases

Phase 1

In Phase 1, children learn the routine of DWP, begin to attach value to writing/reading by learning how to recognize and write their name, and begin practicing their penmanship. The children find the seat where a model of their first and last name is written. At first the whiteboards and markers are waiting for them; from the start of the second week on the children will be responsible for gathering their own writing materials from the appropriate place. The children copy their names from the model and present them to the teacher. The teacher will assess their writing grip, ability to copy from a model accurately, and penmanship. The teacher will then assist the child in their particular area of need. There are a large number of fine motor aides and strategies that are widely available. As the children

become more proficient they are encouraged to use the model less and less.

Phase 2

The children now copy at least three words out of our alphabet books or words they find in the classroom (many of our everyday objects such as chairs, markers, and the computer are labeled). After they have finished writing, the children present and read their three words to a teacher. The teacher will continue to check for accurate copying and penmanship but also for "reading".

Often times a child will "read" a word incorrectly based on the picture clues. The teacher will model a train of thought that guides the child to the correct reading of the word. For example, many children will initially read the word "kitten" as "cat" because of the picture and that "k" makes the same sound as "c". The teacher might say, "I see the letter N and it says 'n'. Do you hear 'n' in 'cat'? Let's listen to the other letter sounds in the word to find out what it says."

Phase 3

The teacher draws pictures on the class whiteboard and the children write at least three words they choose to represent the pictures. The teacher will look for phonetic spelling of a word that progressively includes a beginning sound, an end sound, and lastly middle sounds. When the children bring their whiteboards to the teacher, the teacher will help them make improvements on their spelling by modeling a thought process. For example, the teacher might say, "I see you wrote N-I-S but when you say 'nose' I don't hear I say 'i'. What letter says 'o'?"

Phase 4

The teacher will draw a picture on the class whiteboard and the children will write a sentence about it. When the children are done the teacher will help with modeling spelling, punctuation, and the inclusion of "eraser spaces" between words. For example, the teacher might say, "This is great writing but it is very difficult to see where one word starts and another word ends. What could we add so that your sentence does not look like one long word?"

Phase 5

The children no longer use a whiteboard. The children are given a paper, similarly ruled to the whiteboards that they have been using, with a silly picture on it. The children must write a story about the picture. When the children have finished writing they will read the story to the teacher who will discuss their story and writing with them. For example, the teacher might say, "This story is great I'd love to read what the bear is saying while it's standing on that chair!" If the child would like to they may read their story to the class.

Authentic Activities

Vygotsky suggests that "children should have opportunities to engage in activities that closely resemble those they will encounter in the adult world." (Ormrod 2008) Such activities are referred to as *authentic activities*. The DWP gives the children many opportunities that fit this idea. In Phase 1, the children recognize, read, and write their names. These are skills that adults need to do numerous tasks in their professional and personal lives from writing checks to reading mail. In Phases 2 and 3, the children write and read lists of words. Many adults make lists for chores and grocery shopping. In Phase 4 and 5, children transform groups or lists of words into connected

ideas by way of sentences. Adults write letters to friends and family and reports for work. Obviously the written language is at the core of many of our adult activities, and the list of examples in which these basic skills are used is could fill reams upon reams of paper.

Ormrod quotes J.R. Anderson, Reder, & Simon (1996) whose study suggest "students can often master basic skills more effectively when they practice them in relative isolation from other activities. (Ormrod 2008) That being said, the DWP is balanced with the simplest of instruction in each of its components. Time is spent during the educational portion of the school day working on phonics, letter formation, and sentence structure independent of each other.

Zone of Proximal Development

One of the most powerful pieces of Vygotsky's theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). It consists of two different ability levels that can be thought of as ends of a continuum from the *actual developmental level* to the *level of potential development*. Between the ends of this continuum lies the area where Vygotsky believed children learn best. It is the level which is greater than their current ability, but attainable with the help of someone with a greater

expertise in that domain. This is called the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

How does the DWP guide children into their ZPD?

Scaffolding

The DWP allows for children to progress independently from their classmates because each child receives direct instruction tailored to their specific needs, their ZPD. When the children bring their work to the teacher, the teacher assesses the child's ability level and models strategies that will increase the child's successful completion of the task. Many scaffolding strategies are present in the DWP such as hand-over-hand writing, modeling a correct pencil grasp or eraser spaces, talking a child through the phonetic rationale to read or write a word, or asking questions to prompt the next level of story writing.

In our text, Ormrod compiles a list of scaffolding strategies that include "modeling correct performance of a task, dividing a complex task into several smaller, simpler activities, giving specific guidelines for accomplishing a task, and asking questions that get the students thinking about the task in productive ways." (Ormrod 2008) At every

phase of the DWP, the teacher models what is expected of the children first as a class, then individually as they present their work to the teacher. The guidelines are very specific and become routine almost immediately, especially between Phases 2 and 3 and then Phases 4 and 5. At every phase of the DWP, teachers are challenging the children to answer questions about how they did their work, and how or what might happen if they did it differently.

Formal Conversation

Communication about the children's work is a major component of the DWP. Vygotsky valued "formal education, in which teachers systematically impart the ideas, concepts, and terminology used in various academic disciplines." (Ormrod 2008)

My theory behind the importance of the DWP's teacher's communication with the child is that, the teacher's oral modeling of thought processes will become strategies of the child. After the teacher models their thought processes, the child will copy the teacher by orally using these same strategies (self-talk) eventually internalizing the ideas when they become automatic. When "automaticity occurs with little or no conscious attention or effort and

requires little working memory capacity; it is, in a sense, 'thoughtless'" (Ormrod 2008), and the child's actual developmental level is closer to their level of potential development.

Linking Scaffolding and Automaticity Through the Phases

If you were to revisit the progression of skills through the phases, you could see how they have been scaffolded by division into smaller tasks that build upon the automaticity acquired from the previous phases.

Phase	Penmanship	Concepts of letters/words	Phonemics/ patterns of sounds	Spaces and punctuation	Writing for communication
1	[shaded]				
2	[shaded]		[shaded]		
3			[shaded]		
4				[shaded]	
5					[shaded]

It is important to note that penmanship does not stop being acquired after Phase 2, but rather that enough of the letters (mostly uppercase) are automatic so that children are focusing on phonics much more so than on letter formation. Also, it is that by the end of Phase 2 that children understand a particular group of letters spells a

particular word, and their focus is on what sounds they hear in the words not if it is a word.

In other words, Phase 1 builds a sense that letters that are drawn a particular way and that a particular group of letters spells a child's name. Phase 2 builds on that sense in that there are many groups of letters that spell many different words and you can use phonics to find out what words they are. Phase 3 builds on the children's knowledge of phonics to construct rather than copy words. Phase 4 builds on the children's spelling ability to organize words into more meaningful ideas by introducing sentence structure. And finally, Phase 5 builds on the children's understanding of sentences to create more complex written communication in the form of a story.

But What About Piaget?

It seems that people who talk about Vygotsky are inclined to compare him with Piaget. In the interest of balance, I'll ask some questions Piaget might have of the DWP.

How do children interact with each other during the DWP?
"Piaget emphasized the benefits of interactions with peers whereas Vygotsky placed greater importance on interactions with adults and

other more advanced individuals.”(Ormrod 2008) It appears that the children involved in the DWP felt the same way as Piaget. Two trends develop over the course of the year. First children who are struggling ask for assistance, or sometimes plagiarize the work of their peers if they are struggling. The second trend usually comes Phase 3 when the children begin writing words. The more advanced children tend to act out the role the teacher has been playing to them. This is obviously a gift when they offer correct advice to their peers, and a curse when their strategies are flawed. None the less, we discuss as a class to ask yourself if what someone is telling you makes sense. Piaget would love the conflict resolution when a group of children debate whether “hot” has a U or an O in the middle.

What is exploration’s role in the DWP? “Piaget maintained that children’s independent, self-motivated explorations of the physical world form the basis for many developing schemes, and children often construct these schemes with little guidance from others.” (Ormrod 2008) The children are encouraged to write words that are important to them. They can copy any word they can find in the classroom whether it be from an alphabet book, a story book, the

morning message, environmental labels, something they brought from home, or someone else's nameplate. Later on in the year we take word finding trips as a class, but kindergarteners are not allowed to roam the halls on an unguided quest for discovery.

In Conclusion

It would seem that Vygotsky would be happy with the DWP. When the teacher is motivated to commit the amount of effort needed, but that's another paper, the DWP is a sound theoretically capable way of providing children with a highly scaffolded system for learning writing.

In practice, besides the reflection in this paper, the DWP has only my satisfaction with the progress my children are making in writing year after year, the praise of the first grade and language arts teachers who work with my children, the parents of my children, and the children's own pride to justify my continued belief and development of the DWP.

After the Poster Session

Many of my peers and Dr. Kauffman had offered me great insights into where this paper could lead to. There are a number of

other ideas like how the DWP addresses student motivation (the reason I touched upon for using whiteboards, among other aspects), how the DWP helps a teacher to build a caring environment by assuring that the teacher and children have daily individual contact, and how the DWP compares with other writing programs like Cast-A-Spell. In all honesty, the length of this paper was very limiting as to how in-depth I could go with all the ideas that could apply to Vygotsky and the DWP. If I were to write this paper again, despite the overwhelming number of issues we discussed over the semester and the valuable input I received on poster night, I would focus on one idea, theory, or theme that spanned the phases of the DWP in depth.

Bibliography

Ormrod, Jeanne Ellis. (2008) *Human Learning 5th Edition*. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.

The paper was done on the last page but as a side note, I wanted to say thank you. When you said in class that references outside those provided in class were not required, I acquired a huge surge of momentum. It seems that all too often a paper is judged by the depth of its bibliography (understand I do agree with multiple sources), and not the depth of its thought. The time I would have spent in the ECSU library digging through articles to find a pre-determined number of quality articles that related to my topic, was much better spent applying the knowledge I gained over the semester in EDU 511. During the last couple of weeks, while my paper was in various stages, I was stoked to be able to tell my colleagues I'm doing such and such this way because research/theory says this. I wish I had had this course as an undergraduate.