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# Encouraging dialogue between teachers and stu- dents in the environment of elementary school educa- tion: the sociocultural concep- tions of Vygotsky and Bruner

Spółeczno-kulturowe koncepcje  
Z. Wygotskiego i J. Brunera  
jako przykład podejścia,  
które zachęca do dialogu  
między nauczycielem a uczniami  
w środowisku edukacji elementarnej

## Introduction

Nowadays, the landscape of childhood and early-childhood education is quite different from five years ago. There are many reasons for this. One of these is wider access to the Internet and media. Multimedia toys and games are now widely available. Moreover, many children travel with their parents, and this broadens their minds. As a result of these circumstances, children between three and ten years in age learn more quickly, and are more active in exploring the world. However, having access to a great deal of information does not guarantee its efficient use. Success at school depends on having positive social relationships – we should not

focus only on the intellect. Observing the unfolding of these changes some questions arise: Are teachers embracing appropriate pedagogical and psychological theories about how to teach modern children? Are they using effective methods, strategies and procedures to support their teaching and learning environment?

### **The utility of the Sociocultural conceptions for the dialog**

The sociocultural conceptions of Vygotsky and Bruner can provide a useful framework here – one that will equip teachers with the necessary strategies and skills to build up a suitable environment for learning. They can also employ it as a basis for rethinking their role, and that of young learners, in the didactic process.

Thinking about the teaching-learning process in sociocultural terms requires us to adopt some assumptions that are helpful when seeking to instigate an effective process of teaching and learning. According to the theories in question, learning is an activity of students and teachers that falls within the area of human development. It is also a social process, in which social relationships are very important, and a process of acquiring language – the latter as part of one’s cultural heritage and also as a tool for acquiring knowledge. It is both individual and contextual: knowledge is always acquired in a specific situation. Moreover, both Vygotsky and Bruner suggest drawing attention to teaching-learning methods on account of their significance within the didactic process.

### **The features of learning of the children**

According to many psychological researchers, children are active learners and thinkers (Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner). They construct knowledge from out of their active interaction with the physical environment in developmental stages (children being connected up especially closely to their surroundings). They learn through their own individual actions and explorations. Activity (both physical and mental) and experience are fundamental to effective learning. Children must be encouraged to take risks and make mistakes in order to develop independence. Erring is itself a significant aspect of learning. Before all else, then, educators must grant children the status of being “active human beings”. When a pupil is active he/she is also involved. Vygotsky and Bruner assign a particular value to real, truthful, intrinsic activity, and teachers should be capable of distinguishing this from mere seeming activity. According to these authors, real activity is a result of internal motivation: what motivates it is not ambition, but genuine interest. Moreover, it does not reveal itself as hyperacti-

vity<sup>1</sup>. The activity that a child exhibits is related to its increasing ability to pay attention and to respond in the right way, using the teacher's guidelines as a basis. The activity of young learners is oriented towards acquiring knowledge of the social and natural world by instances of individually reproducing meanings established through contact with others<sup>2</sup>. Knowledge thus acquired is not passive (pupils do not learn it by heart), because children construct it themselves, and are then able to use it easily and effectively. This process of obtaining and selecting useful information is a basis for further learning.

### **The teachers and the pupils in the didactic process.**

Moreover, viewed from a sociocultural perspective, learning is an activity conducted by both pupils and teachers. The important question is this: Who, out of these participants of the didactic process, should be more active? According to Vygotsky, children develop their knowledge as a result of social interaction with more knowledgeable others, in activities which have specific goals. In other words, it emerges as a result of the child's participation in everyday problem-solving, tasks and socially-mediated dialogue, alongside a more skilled and knowledgeable person. Firstly, the educator performs a task, and guides the child through the relevant behavior until he/she is able to perform the task independently and successfully. Vygotsky calls the area in which the child can perform an action or task, provided that a more skilled or knowledgeable person is available to help, the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD). This he defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers"<sup>3</sup>. The child has the status of an "apprentice". He/she practices alongside an adult who has superior knowledge and competence.<sup>4</sup> Gradually, then, the pupils take the initiative, becoming more and more self-supporting and attempting to solve tasks themselves. The teacher continues to provide some guidance, but only when the child displays some uncertainty. Finally, he/she cedes control over the continuous learning process to the child, and just acts as a friendly audience. Thanks to the internalization process, the child can transfer his/her competences to another task. This provides an opportunity to then undertake further developmental challenges<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> E. Filipiak, *Rozwijanie zdolności uczenia się z Wygotskim i Brunerem w tle*, Sopot 2012, p.50.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.27.

<sup>3</sup> L. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, Harvard 1978, p.76.

<sup>4</sup> H.R. Schaffer, *Psychologia dziecka*, A. Wojciechowski (transl.), Warszawa 2005, p. 226.

<sup>5</sup> E. Filipiak, *Rozwijanie zdolności uczenia się z Wygotskim i Brunerem w tle*, op. cit., p. 30.

J. Bruner affirms that “[...] beneath educational practices lie some opinions about the minds of young learners, some of which work in favour of the welfare of the child and some of which work against it. It is important to rethink them. [...] [P]rogress in understanding what it means to talk about the minds of children is a prerequisite of any progress in pedagogy”. According to sociocultural theories, the child is recognized as an intelligent knowledge seeker who can take advantage of the teacher’s guidance and “manage their knowledge”. The child seeks to understand the world. The child has their own opinions about the world, and about their own mind and the way it works. He/she will construct their own model of the world – one that will help them to interpret their own experience<sup>6</sup>.

Vygotsky stresses that learning is an individual process. Leaving the pupil to pursue his/her own activity is closely connected with paying due consideration to their individuality, where this includes acknowledging their individual needs. He admits that “it is not a slow accumulation of unitary changes, but rather a complex dialectical process, characterized by periodicity, unevenness in the development of different functions, metamorphosis or qualitative transformation”<sup>7</sup>. Learning must be unhurried, with time to explore, develop and reflect on ideas and feelings. Learning begins with the learner, and so with “where the learner is”. Some pupils may need different exercises to understand the content of the learning process, or may need some more repetitions using different words if they are to be encouraged to explore it. It should be noted that children differ from one another in terms of their ability to benefit from the assistance offered by their teachers and to respond positively to guidance. Hence it is important to develop the skills required for making effective use of the language of instructions and for successfully communicating to others about the results of the task the children have been asked to perform<sup>8</sup>.

### The effectiveness of the learning process

Learning can be thought of as a process of mastering the cultural tools or instruments of a given society. These cultural instruments are the topics and skills developed by that society and used for the transmission of its traditions. For this purpose to be fulfilled, they must be transmitted from one generation to the next<sup>9</sup>. Such ways of thinking and approaches to problem-solving are inherited by the younger generation in each and

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<sup>6</sup> J.S. Bruner, *Kultura edukacji*, T. Brzostowska-Tereszkiewicz (transl.), Cracow 2006, p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> L. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> D. Wood, *Jak dzieci uczą się i myślą, Społeczne konteksty rozwoju poznawczego*, R. Pawlik, A. Kowalcz-Pawlik (transl.), Cracow 2006, p.10.

<sup>9</sup> H.R. Schaffer, *Psychologia dziecka*, op. cit., p.219

every society via a process of internalization. Vygotsky calls such cultural tools “intellectual instruments for adaptation”. According to him, in the course of his sociocultural development man creates new ways and forms of behavior, that are specific to his culture. During the development of the child, and thanks to its interactions with adults, it learns how to use these cultural instruments. Using them enables the child to develop its higher mental functions<sup>10</sup>. According to Vygotsky, the most important cultural instrument of all is language: language is the primary medium of social experience – an intermediary between learning and development. “At the beginning of the development of the child, language becomes the most important factor of development”<sup>11</sup>.

The process of learning is a social one. As Vygotsky asserts: “Pedagogy is never and was never politically indifferent, since it involves willingly adopting a particular social pattern – a political line – in accordance with the dominant social class that has guided its interests”<sup>12</sup>. Participating in social interactions by talking, explaining, listening, communicating, the child gathers experiences that will help him/her to develop his/her own processes of reasoning and learning. In this way he/she both inherits the “local knowledge” and internalizes the process of learning and inference<sup>13</sup>. The young learner (“a novice”) encounters a teacher (“an expert”) and inherits the methods of thinking and learning that have developed in that particular culture. The pupil starts to be acquainted with “the instruments of the culture”, of which the most important is language. Social learning thus involves building a “system of learning”, in which dialogue between the participants is of the greatest importance. Language becomes an instrument for explaining and educating, and for regulating behavior itself<sup>14</sup>. Adults, teachers and the child’s more educated peers all participate in the development of his/her development, interpreting elements of the reality there. They serve as mediators between what the child has already come to know, and what he/she has not yet grasped or encountered. According to Feuerstein, adults help children to perceive, select, plan and develop self-control, as well as teaching them diligence<sup>15</sup>.

According to sociocultural conceptions, cooperative learning is an important factor, that helps to establish a good relationship in the classroom. While learning, pupils should also work together in small groups to

<sup>10</sup> L.S. Vygotsky, *Problemy rozwoju wyższych funkcji psychicznych*, [in:] L.S. Vygotsky, *Wybrane prace psychologiczne*, E. Fleszerowa, J. Fleszer (transl.), Warszawa 1971, p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> L.S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, op. cit., p.48

<sup>12</sup> L.S. Vygotsky, *Educational Psychology*, Hardcover 1997, p. 348

<sup>13</sup> D. Wood, *Jak dzieci uczą się i myślą*, op. cit., p. 150.

<sup>14</sup> Tamże, p.131.

<sup>15</sup> R. Fisher, *Uczymy, jak myśleć*, (transl.) K. Kruszewski, Warszawa 1999, p. 23

accomplish shared goals. Putting learners into smaller teams enables them to learn more effectively<sup>16</sup>. This is a “win-win” situation for all of the participants involved. This is exactly what lies at the base of Vygotskian theory itself, since its central observation is that development and learning take place in a social context: i.e. in a world populated by other people, who interact with the child from birth onwards. Whereas for Piaget, the child is an active learner “alone in a world of objects”, for Vygotsky the child is an active learner in a world full of other peers, who are also present in the classroom. These play an important role in helping the pupil learn new words, read stories, ask and answer questions, and find some solutions to problems (peer tutoring)<sup>17</sup>.

Cooperative activity on the part of pupil and teacher in the zone of development is aimed at the autonomy of the pupil and the enhancement of the instruments of learning. Learning strategies correspond here to intentional behavior on the part of the learner – behaviour aimed at helping him/her gain and process information. It is clear that developing effective learning strategies helps children to succeed, and schools must therefore seek to equip children with them<sup>18</sup>. According to sociocultural theories, the self-regulated learner can recognize the learning situation and choose a suitable strategy for achieving his/her educational goals. Such a learner will be a determined individual, who is prepared to strive to solve the task. They understand what they learn and are aware of the tasks to be undertaken. In short, they are learning for themselves. They will reconstruct the knowledge in their own minds, combining the new knowledge with that previously acquired. When such a person encounters difficulties, they will look for help, treating the situation as an opportunity to learn something, rather than as a test of their skills. He or she will apply the appropriate learning strategies. They will be capable of monitoring their own learning process, and will be aware of their strengths and weaknesses<sup>19</sup>.

### To conclude

Teachers can support this sort of active and autonomous learning on the part of their pupils by ensuring that goals are both clearly outlined and properly modeled on learning methods, with both the directions for learning and its point being appropriately presented. It is important to

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<sup>16</sup> L. Cameron, *Teaching languages to young learners*, Cambridge 2001, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> G. Mietzel, *Psychologia dla nauczycieli*, Gdańsk, p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> M. Dembo, *Stosowana psychologia wychowawcza*, (transl.) E. Czerniawska, A. Matczak, Z. Topplitz, Warszawa 1997, p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> E. Filipiak, *Rozwijanie zdolności uczenia się z Wygotskim i Brunerem w tle*, op. cit., p.74.

create a special space for the students, in order to enable them to function as self-regulating learners. First of all, they must be able to withdraw from helping students when the latter do not actually need their help, thus enabling them to work more and more independently. Vygotsky and Bruner underline the important role of the teacher: he/she is an engaged partaker in the production and placing of meanings in an appropriate situation, whose function is to orchestrate learning opportunities for his/her students. It is important that the teacher selects suitable research problems – thanks to which the child will discover the truth about the world. The selection of the right and relevant questions is a part of the culture of classroom learning. The role of teachers is to implement the procedures necessary for learning the methods involved in scientific knowledge: he/she organizes the learning environment, is an active partaker, and also diagnoses what is going on with respect to the process of learning. He/she is both a mediator and a tutor<sup>20</sup>. Teachers, we may say, erect the scaffolding for their pupils. This term refers to the process of learning according to a “common program of action”. The decisions and actions are shared between the tutor (the teacher) and the tutored (the pupil). Teachers’ efforts always remain connected to the zone of proximal development. Creating this scaffolding involves instigating the situations thanks to which children will be able to expand their current skills and knowledge. While building up the scaffolding, the teacher pays attention to the knowledge that the child has already acquired, which may help him/her solve the new task. The role of the teacher is thus to support the pupil’s development, so that the latter may pass on to the next stage or level of learning<sup>21</sup>. One of the most important factors in establishing this scaffolding is sensitive control on the part of the teacher. Control of the educational process is an indispensable element of what goes on between educator and pupil. Its aim is to bring about a change: the transition from control of the child by another to self-control on the part of the child. Gradually, the pupil takes over responsibility for the process of learning<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> J. Bruner, *Kultura edukacji*, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> E. Filipiak, *Rozwijanie zdolności uczenia się z Wygotskim i Brunerem w tle*, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>22</sup> Wood, *Jak dzieci uczą się i myślą. Społeczne konteksty rozwoju poznawczego*, op. cit., p. 228.

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### Summary

Current technological, economic and social developments are having a significant impact on the process of teaching and learning. The landscape of childhood and early-childhood education is also changing. This paper suggests that this transformation can influence adult-child interactions and the way children learn. Nowadays, children have far-reaching access to both the internet and other media. However, the fact that they can acquire a great deal of information so easily does not guarantee that they will be able to make effective use of it. Some of them may also have personal and social difficulties. Therefore, the social background of the teaching-learning system is very important. This article advocates rethinking the role of pupils and teachers in the didactic pro-



cess, and seeking out the most efficient psychological, pedagogical and social conceptions that will support both the dialogue between teacher and pupil and young learners' development more generally. It cannot be doubted that the selection of a particular conception of teaching and learning will have implications for how the didactic process is organized, and so will help to define the role of young learners and teachers.

The sociocultural theory of Vygotsky and Bruner furnishes us with a suitable basis for understanding both the teaching-learning process itself, and the dialogue that this involves. The principal features of the model provide a coherent theoretical foundation and point of view, regarding how and what pupils should learn, and how teachers ought to go about creating the didactic structure needed in the classroom if a particular style of learning is to be successfully implemented. The aim of this paper has been to present the central premises of the theories of Vygotsky and Bruner as these pertain to dialogue, learning and the generating of information, to specific strategies for teaching and learning, to how the role of young learners in that process is to be viewed, and to the significance of motivation for building up and fulfilling the desire to learn. The sociocultural model, as this article has sought to demonstrate, offers a valuable formative structure for preparing teachers to think about what is involved in creating a suitable learning environment, and why this is necessary.

**Keywords:** sociocultural conception, sociocultural perspective, supportive learning environment, didactic process, teaching methods, didactic strategies, didactic procedures.

## Spółeczno-kulturowe koncepcje Z. Wygotskiego i J. Bruner jako przykład podejścia, które zachęca do dialogu między nauczycielem a uczniami w środowisku edukacji elementarnej

### Streszczenie

Obecny technologiczny, ekonomiczny i społeczny rozwój ma znaczący wpływ na proces nauczania i uczenia się. Pejzaż dzieciństwa i wczesnej edukacji również się zmienia. Niniejszy artykuł sugeruje, że ta transformacja może wpływać na relację dorosły – dziecko i sposób uczenia się dziecka. W dzisiejszych czasach dzieci mają szerszy dostęp do Internetu i innych mediów. Jednakże fakt, że mogą szybko uzyskać wiele informacji, nie gwarantuje, że będą potrafiły nimi skutecznie manipulować. Poza tym niektóre dzieci mogą mieć również pewne osobiste i społeczne trudności. Dlatego też społeczne tło systemu nauczania-uczenia się jest bardzo

ważne. Ten artykuł proponuje przemyślenie roli uczniów i nauczycieli w procesie dydaktycznym i poszukiwanie najbardziej efektywnych pedagogicznych i psychologicznych koncepcji wspierających dialog między nauczycielem i uczniem i rozwój młodych uczących się. Niewątpliwie szczególnie dobór koncepcji nauczania i uczenia się implikuje organizację procesu dydaktycznego oraz określa rolę uczniów w młodszym wieku szkolnym i nauczycieli.

Społeczno-kulturowe teorie Z. Wygotskiego i J. Bruner przyczynią się do właściwego rozumienia dialogu i procesu nauczania-uczenia się. Twierdzenia tych modeli tworzą spójny teoretyczny fundament i punkt widzenia na to, jak uczniowie powinni uczyć się i jaką nauczyciele powinni stworzyć strukturę dydaktyczną w klasie, aby uzyskać własny styl uczenia się. Celem tej publikacji jest przedstawienie założeń teorii Z. Wygotskiego i J. Bruner dotyczących: dialogu, nauki i generowania informacji, konkretnych strategii nauczania i uczenia się, postrzegania roli uczniów w młodszym wieku szkolnym w tym procesie, znaczenia motywacji do budowania i realizacji zamiaru uczenia się. Modele społeczno-kulturowe, które charakteryzuje ten artykuł, stanowią przygotowanie nauczycieli do myślenia o konieczności budowania odpowiednich warunków do nauki i dialogu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** koncepcje społeczno-kulturowe, społeczno-kulturowy punkt widzenia, wspierające środowisko uczenia się, proces dydaktyczny, metody, strategie dydaktyczne, procedury dydaktyczne.

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