

Radical-Local Teaching and Learning for Education and Human Development

This book presents an approach to teaching and learning that we have designated *radical local*. To realize both general societal interests and worthwhile personal development, the content of educational programmes for children must be grounded in and draw explicitly from the local societal conditions within which the children live. Through working with this content, children should appropriate an understanding of general theoretical-dialectical concepts from subject-matter disciplines, which they can use as tools for understanding the content they have studied, and more generally for analyzing their own life conditions and future possibilities. These are distinctive features of a successful radical-local teaching and learning approach. The central concern of radical-local teaching and learning is how to relate educational practices to children's specific historical and cultural conditions – both the objective conditions in which the children live and their comprehension of and relation to those conditions.

The specific event that provided the opportunity for formulating our theoretical ideas about radical-local teaching and learning was the possibility to conduct an experimental teaching programme for a group of elementary school children in the context of an existing experimental afterschool programme in East Harlem.¹ An afterschool programme can be an ideal place to experiment

1 The afterschool programme was started originally by Pedro Pedraza, a researcher at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, City University of New York City, with a focus on developing literacy and mathematics competences for children (Pedraza, 1989). This afterschool programme was part of the El Barrio Popular Education Program (K. Rivera, 1999; Torruellas, 1989; Torruellas, Benmayor, Goris & Juarbe, 1991), which was started by researchers at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, in part, because of a dissatisfaction with producing research studies that contributed primarily to the professional advancement of the report writers, without affecting noticeably the conditions and possibilities for the people in the community being described.

with radical-local concerns such as bridging family and community traditions with subject-matter knowledge, because the content of afterschool activities are not usually formalized by laws, regulations and curriculum plans.

The first part of the book presents a framework for conceptualizing and designing radical-local educational interventions for schoolchildren. We start by considering the goals of education and the relation of educational practice to personal development, and then consider some of the problems faced by cultural minorities, especially Latinos in completing school. The idea of radical-local teaching and learning is introduced, along with some key principles from the cultural-historical research tradition about knowledge, psychological development, and teaching and learning. Some of the cultural-historical principles are elaborated further in relation to problems of (a) selecting subject-matter content that takes account of schoolchildren's cultural-historical background and life situation, and (b) using that selection in a way that is relevant both to their present life in their local community and their coming societal life.

The second part of the book presents a qualitative analysis of the teaching experiment. The intention of the educational programme was to develop the children's subject-matter knowledge about general social science concepts and principles from history and social studies through investigation of a theme that was central in their lives. The specific topics selected for investigation were motivated by our knowledge of the cultural-historical background of the children and their families. General subject-matter concepts are first formulated through specific investigations. In turn, as these concepts become explicitly formulated, it is possible for the children to use these concepts to reformulate their everyday understanding of their life and community. In other words, the programme was an attempt to realize our ideas about radical-local teaching and learning.

Our interest was to develop a positive intervention that addressed significant intellectual and cultural needs of the children, most of whom came from families with a Puerto Rican background, while drawing upon knowledge of the East Harlem community in which most of the children lived. We did not want to conduct another study documenting that Puerto Rican children were not achieving comparable levels of academic success as other social groups in New York City (e.g., Calitri, 1983; Santiago Santiago, 1978) nor show that the form and content of teaching that the children receive tends to be oriented to rote learning, repetitious drill, and other kinds of tasks that do not require nor encourage analytic, creative, theoretical thinking (e.g., Anyon, 1981; Orum, 1988). These points have been well-documented, and they continue to be well documented, not only for Puerto Rican children in New York City, but for other Hispanic groups in the United States (e.g., Arias, 1986; Brown, Rosen, Hill, & Olivas, 1981; De La Rosa & Maw, 1990; Goldenberg, 1990; National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics, 1984; Nieto, 1998, 2000).

Although it is important to document the existence of these problems, these analyses do not usually contain insights into what positive steps should be taken for intervention. Especially in the more descriptive studies, one cannot tell what a symptom of inadequate educational programmes is and what a cause is. Our interest in this book is to present a theoretically motivated approach to subject-matter teaching, which in the present case was directed toward the needs of Puerto Rican children in East Harlem.

Formal Education and Child Development

A major goal of formal education, at least as formulated in official documents, is to help children gain insight into and a capability for using subject-matter traditions to understand the social and natural world. However, the content and purpose of formal schooling are not limited only to the goals of subject-matter learning and subsequent intellectual development. There are usually expectations that formal education should prepare and motivate children to participate in a society's existing economic, political, and cultural practices, where subject-matter learning is seen as part of realizing that goal.

Radical-local teaching and learning is concerned to realize these widely-held goals for formal education, but focuses additionally on how education can contribute to the personal development of children in relation to their historical and cultural conditions. The assumption is that the relationship between schoolchildren's cultural background and the historical conditions within which they live can and should have consequences for the content of teaching if these goals are to be realized. Schooling is normally organized around specific subject-matter content such as specific content and procedures for reading, writing, calculating, analyzing physical and historical phenomena. How are these specific practices to be related to these general goals? And how should one consider them in relation to the variations found within contemporary societies such as between city and country, rich and poor families, religious and cultural differences, to name only a few of the more important dichotomies that are commonly considered.

The idea of radical-local teaching and learning presented here is an attempt to make an integrated conceptual model for educational practice that addresses this tension between valued general goals of education and the individual and diverse variations found in its concrete practice. We focus specifically on the dynamic between how general subject-matter content and specific historical conditions can contribute to children's development. The focus is on how education, through subject-matter teaching can contribute to the development of motives and competencies that are relevant for the child's societal life.

The cultural-historical research tradition provides a useful set of theoretical resources for articulating and clarifying the ideal of radical-local teaching and learning, which in turn reveals some limitations in the current theoretical development of the cultural-historical tradition.

CULTURAL-HISTORICAL THEORY OF EDUCATION

In 1931, Lev Vygotsky prepared a book-length manuscript on his cultural-historical theory of human development. This theoretical perspective provided the framework for subsequent investigations into schoolchildren's conceptual development. In several of his texts from the period 1932-1934, Vygotsky discussed this relation, considering different models. The model Vygotsky promoted was that instruction and learning should be the source of further development, where instruction should prepare and motivate the child to participate in a society's existing cultural practice as well as develop psychological functions of thinking and concept formation that were not yet fully acquired. This model contrasted with a behaviorist model which equated learning and development, or a Piagetian model in which instruction must wait for a certain level of development to be achieved (see also Vygotsky, 1926/1998b, Chap. 4 and 6).

In Vygotsky's analysis, thinking with real concepts was the major psychological function that characterized school age children, and instruction should be directed toward such development (e.g., Vygotsky, 1934/1987, Chap. 6). As part of his analysis of the development of schoolchildren's conceptual thinking, Vygotsky considered the relation between what he called spontaneous or everyday concepts and academic or scientific concepts. The former are typically learned as a result of everyday practice and tend to be strongly situated. The latter, which are usually learned as a result of formal instruction, often by verbal definition, tend to be abstract and reflect historically-developed systematic analysis of societal and natural phenomena. The acquisition of scientific concepts depends on the child's everyday concepts, and a consequence of this acquisition is that a child's everyday concepts are modified and their content further developed. This dialectic of the child's everyday knowledge and its potential transformation from theoretical knowledge acquisition provides an important conceptual model for addressing a main concern of radical-local teaching and learning, namely to use the general concepts of disciplinary knowledge as a way to develop and refine personal, local knowledge.

Vygotsky's perspective about the relation between learning and development for school age children and the theory of activity provided a conceptual framework for Vygotsky's former research assistant Daniil El'konin, who in collaboration with Vasili Davydov, started in the late 1950s to develop an approach to educational practices that aimed, in part, to support psychological

development.² In the late 1970s this tradition started to receive attention and interest from other cultural-historical researchers outside of Moscow, especially in Northern Europe (e.g., Hedegaard, 1990, 2002; Hedegaard, Engeström, & Hakkarainen, 1984; Hedegaard & Lompscher 1999; Lompscher, 1985; van Oers, 1999), and this tradition continues to be developed today especially within Russia, Ukraine, and Latvia (Davydov, 1998; Experiment Centre, <http://www.experiment.lv>; International Association 'Developmental Education', <http://www.maro.newmail.ru>).

Developmental teaching-learning research has focused primarily on problems of subject-matter teaching (Davydov, 1988b; 1988c; Lompscher, 1985, 1999), providing an important theoretical and practical perspective for developing educational interventions aimed at promoting children's learning of theoretical-dialectical concepts. The developmental teaching-learning approach developed by El'konin and Davydov did not conceptualize sufficiently the children's cultural background and local historical conditions, even if these aspects are generally recognized within the theoretical tradition as significant.

We believe this theoretical tradition, given its grounding in the cultural-historical tradition, can be elaborated to integrate these aspects, so that cultural and social conditions and motive development can be addressed explicitly in the planning process and in the content of the teaching. The elaborated theoretical perspective provides a coherent general perspective for conceptualizing processes of learning and teaching and the role of knowledge in children's development.

SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHING WITH CULTURAL CONTENT IN A RADICAL-LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Rather than view cultural sensitivity and disciplinary standards as necessarily standing in opposition to each other, we assume that by giving a solid disciplinary foundation through the investigation of topics that are related to their life, children will be able to better appreciate the relation between academic or disciplinary studies and their own life situations. That is, in a radical-local teaching approach, schoolchildren should develop academic knowledge and

2 After El'konin's death in 1984, Davydov and his colleagues continued to develop this tradition, which came to be called *developmental teaching-learning* (e.g., Davydov, 1988a). More precisely, Davydov called his approach *Oubchenie Razvitsia*. The polysemous Russian word *oubchenie* means simultaneously *teaching* and *learning*. There is not a corresponding English word that has this double meaning, so we will use the somewhat awkward 'teaching-learning' to preserve the intended meaning.

skills that correspond to those normally expected in a school curriculum, but developed through subject-matter content that is relevant to the children's life situation, and which can develop the children's capabilities for analyzing and interpreting their situation. Our goal in this book is to show how one can conduct subject-matter teaching that simultaneously draws from the participants' historical situation while contributing to their own development in relation to that historical situation.

We believe that helping children explore the historical and cultural conditions of the community in which they live can be relevant for this purpose. It is possible to select social studies subject-matter content that is relevant to children's life situation, and to investigate this content in a way that concurrently develops academic knowledge and skills typically associated with disciplinary traditions. 'Relevant' means that the content of social studies teaching should provide children with useful academic concepts and methods for analyzing existential issues that confront them in their lives. These issues include both immediate and visible issues (e.g., housing conditions, family life, and adequate resources in their neighbourhood) as well as longer-term identity issues in which one forms an attitude or position in relation to one's life situation.

A focus on relevant topics does not necessarily result in a dilemma or contradiction in which the teacher must choose between academic relevance and personal relevance. It is necessary, however, to help children integrate their experience and information into a theoretical model or perspective for understanding the significance of events and conditions, and not simply to draw on experience or provide children with specific historical facts that are culturally relevant. Ideally, such a model or perspective functions as a foundation from which children can continue to analyze and interpret their life situation. By bringing the methods of investigation of a subject-matter discipline into the classroom as a working approach, the teacher, in collaboration with the children, can develop specific substantive results which can be related to the children's concrete situation. More generally, through this process, one aims to help children acquire knowledge and skills for understanding and developing better relationships to their life conditions.

In the case of our experimental teaching programme, we assumed that it would be possible to give the children academically challenging activities that reflected disciplinary standards, despite a common tendency to assume that such goals are too demanding or inappropriate for inner-city minorities in the United States.³ By incorporating the history and culture of the immediate community

3 Though there are some exceptions (e.g., Levin, 1995; Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik, 1996).

in educational activities, we aimed to help the children in the project extend their knowledge about central characteristics of the Puerto Rican community in general and in East Harlem in particular. Through this investigation, and planned instructional activities, we expected the children to acquire research methods and concepts from social science. We hoped to engage the children in these instructional activities by letting them become active in researching their community and its origins. That is, through acquiring concrete knowledge about their local community, we would at the same time develop appropriate theoretical-dialectical concepts that could be used as a tool for analyzing their own life conditions and future possibilities. Thereby we hoped that they would develop motivation for school subjects and self-respect as competent pupils.

CHILDREN'S MOTIVE DEVELOPMENT

We do not assume that children will necessarily learn about their local community simply because we introduce this subject-matter content as part of teaching. Even though experience with their local community is part of their everyday life, it is often necessary to develop a motivation for wanting to investigate this experience in a more systematic way. One task in a teaching-learning programme is to create activities that are interesting for the children so that they develop interest for the kind of knowledge presented in the programme and hopefully thereby a general motive for learning.

Vygotsky's colleagues El'konin (1999) and Leontiev (1978) both extended Vygotsky's theory by introducing development of motives as a central aspect of human development. Motives are seen as culturally created through the child's participating in institutional activities. El'konin describes how cultural-historical practice in institutions influences children's development and how new motives that become dominant result in qualitative changes in the child's relations to the world and therefore can be seen as markers of new periods in development.

Plan of the Book

The first part of this book describes the theoretical background that was the foundation for formulating the teaching intervention described in the second part. Chapter 2 contextualizes the intervention by discussing the goals of education, the nature of problems experienced by children from minority families, and reviewing research about school completion. Chapter 3 introduces the concept of radical-local teaching and discusses some of the research and intervention

projects that have considered the use of local community knowledge in relation to teaching.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the main theoretical ideas that were used to plan, conduct, and analyze the teaching intervention. Chapter 4 contains an analysis of different forms of knowledge and how they are related to school teaching and what this implies in relation to children's personal knowledge. This combination is seen as the primary process by which persons can relate their theoretical knowledge to their daily life. In the case of cultural minority children, this would mean acquiring a theoretical-dialectical understanding of their local community so that it could be used to interpret their daily situation. Chapter 5 presents a theory of child development. Development is described as a societal and cultural process, in which the interaction between motivation and knowledge acquisition are the main developmental processes, and the development of motives is the central aspect of personality development. Chapter 6 describes a theory of radical-local teaching characterized as a double move between the goals of teaching and the conditions and interests of the child. There is a special interest in clarifying the relation between subject-matter knowledge and the cultural procedures and understanding from everyday life. Chapter 7 gives a historical overview of the history of the community of East Harlem. Chapter 8 describes some of the educational conditions in East Harlem along with the specific problems that motivated the teaching experiment. Chapter 9 gives a brief overview of the content and organization of the teaching experiment conducted in an afterschool setting in East Harlem, along with methods of data collection and analysis. Chapters 10 through 13 give a narrative report and some analysis of the teaching experiment, while Chapter 14 discusses the competencies the children achieved through participating in the experiment. The book concludes with Chapter 15 which discusses the implications of radical-local teaching and learning for planning teaching of cultural minorities and majorities.