Chapter 17

Play through the Prism of Projects

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In this commentary, I’ve accepted an invitation to look at play activity through the prism of “project.” Play in its mature forms is typically a complex collective activity which gives rise not only to the development of the collective’s members but also to understanding of the culture around them, both on an individual level (development of higher, cultural, psychological functions) and on the collective level.

Looking at play through the prism of the concept of a project also opens up some possibilities to overcome previous difficulties in analyzing play, especially in a pedagogical realm where it could help to provide a clearer answer to the question of the role of adults in a child’s play. It can also assist in a deeper understanding of mechanism of play, and provide new insights for clarification of play vis-à-vis learning and development.

Two main lines of Vygotsky’s thinking seem to be promising in such an analysis: the theory of development of higher psychological – cultural – functions and the methodology based on genetic-experimental method of double-stimulation during such development. To study development, according Vygotsky, is to start with analysis of the appearance of a new social situation of development in the life of a child with a view to its internal contradictions, following up with analyses of the genesis of neoformations. His two notions – “social situation of development” and “neoformation” must be considered carefully during the analysis play as a project of childhood. Such analysis also must elucidate the crises, the critical periods that open up at each level of development, as well as the prerequisites of neoformations it contains for the disintegration of the social situation of development. To assist development is to provide conditions for one’s development with full understanding of such mechanisms, the laws of development, as Vygotsky called them. Because, in the process of development, the child, “arms and re-arms himself with widely varying tools,” (Vygotsky, 1997b, p. 88) it is also necessary to understand development along the cultural line of development.

From the very beginning of his career, Vygotsky insisted that play would be viewed as an activity within cultural development. The motives of play activity for Vygotsky clearly relate to the cultural development of a child and actions in play are always goal-oriented. Unlike Piaget and Freud, Vygotsky
maintained that play and imagination are always part of child’s cultural experience. As a cultural function, imagination is active. When engaged in artistic creativity, like drawing or storytelling, children direct their imagination towards a creative pursuit – this pursuit is not just a subconscious activity but a particular skill that children access and promote. Even in play that is not directly or explicitly related to creative pursuits, children actively engage their imaginations in constructing a world in which they contextualize their play. Fantasy does not serve as merely a context, but rather is “highly directed.”

We cannot determine where a project will “end up” in advance, and the same could be said for play. The role of the plot in mature make-believe play opens an opportunity for a teacher to infuse the play with some curriculum-oriented material but in no way can pre-determine the outcome of the action development of the play. This open-endedness of the individual play and multivariate possibilities of child’s creative actions that stems from the child’s initiative is the characteristic that unites play and projects. This is also why adults’ effort to influence play directly and to infuse it with pre-determined academically-useful actions remain at times problematic, as it is impossible to influence play from the outside of the play-space by a direct instruction without ruining the play.

Other methods are needed to aid play activities. This is exactly what distinguishes genetic-developmental methods, or the projective method as Kravtsova and Kravtsov call it in their chapter, from activity with pre-determined learning outcomes with instruction of a behaviorist nature. The projective method, or the experimental-genetic method does not aim at achieving some pre-conceived quantifiable results; it aims to model the developmental processes which are replicated in the social situation of development of a child. The projective method represents an approach to determining the highest possible level of cultural development of a child’s personality in the form of a future neoformation, and uses “projection” models to help children to develop them with the mediation of adults: “The projective method is aimed at the mechanisms and conditions of origination of the psyche’s and the personality’s various qualities” (p. 42).

Similarly, Michael Cole echoes the need to create a new methodology – mesogenetic method, as he calls it – that arises from the same Vygotskian proposition that to understand behavior means to understand the history/genesis of behavior. Cole believes that there is a strong need for “a new methodology – a new way of “collecting data,” inscribable aspects of the flow of human activities which our theory specifies as relevant to understanding the phenomenon of interest” (p. 333).