



The Mozart of Psychology: Lev S. Vygotsky, 1896-1934

Yuriy V. Karpov

November 17, is the birthday of L. s. Vygotsky, a Russian-Jewish psychologist and educator, whose ideas are now becoming more and more popular all over the world. It is not an exaggeration to say that Vygotsky is a unique phenomenon in the history of science. His life was very short (he died at the age of 37), and not very cheerful: Its beginning was darkened by anti-Semitic laws of the Russian Empire, and its end by tuberculosis attacks and baiting from Stalin's oppressive regime. After Vygotsky's death in 1934, his ideas were banned from public consumption in Russia. In the same year, many of his closest colleagues and followers fled from Moscow to a Russian provincial city to avoid repression that would have been quite possible had they remained in Moscow. It was only at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, because of so-called de-Stalinization, that Vygotsky's selected works were published in Russia. His single English-language publication appeared in 1929, but only in the 1970s-1980s were English translations of his major works published. Starting with the 1980s, more than 50 years after his death, Vygotsky has been widely recognized as "the Mozart of psychology" (S. Tulimn) whose ideas are surprisingly current.

The major reason for such a broad recognition of Vygotsky's approach relates to the fact that it provides an innovative view of the processes of child learning and development, which has found strong support in recent studies by American and European researchers. According to Vygotsky, children's learning and development are neither predetermined by heredity, as nativists hold, nor are they determined by conditioning, as behaviorists hold, nor are they the result of children's independent explorations, as constructivists hold. Rather, children's learning and development are products of adult mediation, that is, the engagement of children into age-appropriate activities, in the context of which adults promote the development in children of new motives and teach them new tools of thinking, problem solving, and self-regulation. That is how (and that is why) children, for example, develop intrinsic learning motivation and school readiness, that is, the characteristics that are necessary for successful learning at school.

Using Vygotsky's theoretical ideas as the basis for their studies, his Russian followers have elaborated these ideas and extended them to the level of practical applications and instructional programs. The 50-year experience of the implementation of the Vygotskian ideas in educational practices in Russia and some other countries has confirmed the validity of these ideas and has demonstrated the efficiency of the Vygotskian educational practices for the promotion of children's learning and development.

