

## *Recension / Book Review*

René van der Veer. (2007). *Lev Vygotsky*. (Series editor, Richard Baily; Series title, Continuum Library of Educational Thought, volume 10). London, UK: Continuum International Publishing Group. 169 pages. ISBN: 978-0826484093 (Hardcover)

Thomas Hillman. Doctoral candidate, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa

Although Vygotsky's broad ideas may be introduced in nearly every introductory course about learning or cultural psychology, the life from which those ideas emerged is often less well known. Given the focus on the influence of the social, cultural, and historical on cognition in Vygotsky's work, it is somewhat ironic that his ideas are much better known than his life. Addressing this issue, René van der Veer's book, titled simply *Lev Vygotsky*, examines the relationship between the man's life and ideas. Published as part of the *Continuum Library of Educational Thought*, *Lev Vygotsky* is one of a series of books, edited by Richard Bailey, that includes volumes on such luminaries as John Dewey, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jean Piaget. Working chronologically, Van der Veer, who has written or edited numerous books and articles about Vygotsky (e.g. Van der Veer, 1996, 2007b; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994), discusses the man's life, his writings, and his influence on contemporary educational research.

In the first section of *Lev Vygotsky*, Van der Veer outlines Vygotsky's life, paying particular attention to the political turmoil that surrounded it. This biography underscores the hardships that Vygotsky endured as a Jew in Tsarist Russia, an intellectual in Soviet Russia, and as a sufferer of the chronic tuberculosis that eventually led to his death. Born to Jewish

parents in what is now Belarus, Vygotsky may never have had the chance to work as a teacher or academic if not for the Bolshevik revolution that occurred while he was a young man. Although the Soviet government allowed Jews to take academic positions, it also put extreme pressures on the kinds of work and publications considered acceptable. Faced with the risk of drastic repercussions throughout his short career, Vygotsky died at the young age of 38 with much of his work suppressed and virtually unknown in the West. Against this background of significant struggle, Van der Veer paints an impression of a man whose breadth of contributions is remarkable and who “seems to have been a very modest, generous and delicate man who treated his patients, students and colleagues with the utmost courtesy and friendliness” (Van der Veer, 2007a, p.25).

Having outlined Vygotsky’s life in the first section, Van der Veer then addresses his major works, beginning with his master’s thesis, an interpretation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Here, Vygotsky’s ideas are organized thematically but are also discussed chronologically in relation to his life. Although this chronological approach retraces the history discussed in the first section, it is much more detailed, offering a very thorough view of the circumstances of each major chapter in Vygotsky’s working life. At first glance, it might seem unnecessary to first provide a biography and then retrace it in more detail, but I found that this approach helpfully afforded me a sense of each of the very varied phases of his work within the larger context of Vygotsky’s life.

With such a variety of contributions to choose from, Van der Veer concentrates on three particular areas beyond Vygotsky’s early student writing. First, the author speaks to cultural-historical theory, then the zone of proximal development, and finally cross-cultural education. Although each area is addressed in some detail, I feel that perhaps Van der Veer dedicated too much attention to the zone of proximal development at the expense of other ideas. Although it is an important and well-known theory, I would like to have seen attention to other important theories such as the mediation of cultural tools. That being said, choosing highlights from Vygotsky’s contributions to educational research is undoubtedly a difficult task, and the author addresses a wide variety of them in an admirably coherent and readable manner.

In the final section of *Lev Vygotsky*, Van der Veer discusses the ongoing contemporary influence that Vygotsky's ideas have had. Again, given the impact of Vygotsky's thinking on contemporary educational research, Van der Veer could have chosen a wide variety of examples. He chooses to focus on the theories of scaffolding, the internalization of mental processes, the development of cultural-historical theory, and Vygotsky's influence on alternatives to IQ intelligence testing. Although each topic is important, illustrating the breadth of the impact of Vygotsky's ideas, I could not help but wonder why there was no mention of Cultural-Historical-Activity-Theory (CHAT). Although a number of neo-Vygotskian, empirical investigations are discussed that have contributed to the elaboration of cultural-historical theory (e.g. Scribner & Cole, 1981), Van der Veer ignores the development of CHAT either by direct collaborators and students of Vygotsky such as Leont'ev (e.g. 1978) or Luria (e.g. 1976), or by contemporary researchers such as Engeström (e.g. 2001) or Roth (e.g. 2007). Because of the wide-ranging use of CHAT as a theoretical framework in current educational research, I would have appreciated some discussion of its origins and development.

In 1962 Kozulin translated into English the first of Vygotsky's seminal works, *Thought and Language*. Since then, Vygotsky's ideas have become more internationally influential than he probably ever thought possible. It could be easily argued that Vygotsky has become one of the most influential thinkers in the field of education with a rich lineage of work that has been spawned from his ideas. In *Lev Vygotsky*, René van der Veer offers a thoughtful and readable examination of Vygotsky's life and work. Having read it, I have a much greater appreciation of the context from which Vygotsky conceived and developed his now famous ideas.

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