

Chapter 8

Creativity in Education: Play and Exploratory Learning

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this chapter is to respond to the scarcity of literature on creativity that is relevant both to CHAT and in the field of education. The authors explore Vygotsky's writings on creativity, imagination, art, and play in relation to three Swedish preschool projects that practice a pedagogy of exploratory learning. Also included are discussions of imagination versus realistic thinking, syncretism in children's creative work, and play as a creative activity. Because this study was a formative intervention, the pedagogy of exploratory learning became significant in the analysis. The bulk of the chapter consists of thick descriptions of the projects and discussion of aspects of creativity as they appear in the projects. The data was collected by teachers and a research team that consisted of the authors of this chapter. Data collection in the three projects took place before the intervention took place, during the initial phases of the intervention, and after the intervention had become an annual theme for the preschools. The research was initially guided solely by a cultural historical understanding of creativity, while the analysis brought CHAT into dialogue with postmodern writings that are related to exploratory learning.

INTRODUCTION

Creativity is central to L. S. Vygotsky's understanding of human development "in all of its expressions encompassing processes of being, doing and knowing" (Stetsenko, 2014, p. 183). Broadly, creativity is inherently a unique form of change

and Vygotsky's theoretical framework requires genetic analysis precisely because the historical conditions which shape us and which we shape through creative activity are – also inherently – constantly changing. More specifically, Vygotsky (2004) argues that we are all creative and that we are creative throughout the lifespan:

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There is a widespread opinion that creativity is the province of a select few... This is not true. If we understand creativity in its true psychological sense as the creation of something new, then this implies that creation is the province of everyone to one degree or another; that it is a normal and constant companion in childhood. (p. 33)

However, creativity does not hold a prominent place in second or even third generation cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) within the field of education. This is the case despite Vera John-Steiner and colleagues' (John-Steiner, 2000; Connery et al., 2010) important work on creativity, and Yrjö Engeström's (1987) work on creativity at an institutional level, i.e. expansive learning. CHAT that concerns itself with education has focused on appropriation of tools, tool or sign mediation and the zone of proximal development (see for example Säljö, 2010). This work has particularly addressed cognitive and constructionist approaches to learning. We address this lacuna within CHAT within the field of education by using CHAT to analyze children's creativity in play and learning in three preschool projects.

The projects took place at preschools that practice *exploratory learning*, an approach that is inspired by the pedagogy developed in the preschools of Reggio Emilia. The notion of exploratory learning, based on Reggio Emilia's pedagogical practice, has been discussed by many pedagogues and educational researchers, among them Gunilla Dahlberg and Hillevi Lentz Taguchi of Sweden. A major source of inspiration for Dahlberg and Taguchi has been the work of the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Exploratory learning emphasizes children's creative exploration by means of multiple interacting aesthetic means, called the "hundred languages" of children.

Through our own research, the preschools to which we refer, above, have recently incorporated,

and in doing so recreated, a CHAT-based approach to play called *playworlds*. In playworlds play is understood to be the primary form of early childhood imagination, and therefore closely related to creativity. Our shift towards a focus on creativity within CHAT that concerns itself with education is, therefore, in dialogue with postmodern approaches to learning. In such a dialogue Vygotsky's work on imagination, creativity and play constitute an important interlocutor.

The three preschool projects that we will discuss came to our attention during a research project in which we engineered a meeting between the Vygotskian play pedagogy of Gunilla Lindqvist (1995), *the creative pedagogy of play*, which we have come to call playworlds (Marjanovic-Shane, et al., 2011), and the pedagogical approach of exploratory learning. Our understanding of the preschools' projects is shaped by their positions within this research project. The first of these projects took place before playworlds was introduced to the preschools and the second took place during the initial phases of this project. The third project took place when playworld had been chosen by the preschools as their new annual theme.

We begin with a discussion of Vygotsky's theory of creativity. We then present playworlds and exploratory learning, and describe the above-mentioned research project. The bulk of the chapter is a discussion of aspects of creativity as they become evident in the three preschool projects. This discussion is guided by our cultural historical theoretical understanding of creativity, based in turn on the work of Vygotsky. One key objective is to introduce and explore concepts in Vygotsky's writings on creativity, specifically: imagination versus realistic thinking; syncretism in children's creative work; and children's play as a form of creative imagination that, in relation to adults' forms of creative imagining, lacks *only* in experience.

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