# Book Review: Myra Barrs, *Vygotsky the Teacher: A Companion to his Psychology for Teachers and Other Practitioners*
# (Routledge 2022)
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*Vygotsky the Teacher* (Barrs, 2021) is far more than the guide "*for teachers and other practitioners*" promised by the subtitle. It offers the cutting edge in Vygotsky scholarship, superseding other synoptic works like *Understanding Vygotsky: A quest for synthesis* (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). The book does not give quick tips derived from Vygotsky's works; it engages with each of its significant aspects, explaining them and their contribution to Vygotsky's overall project. All this is done in just over two-hundred pages thanks to Barrs' talent for concision and cohesion.

The book summarises Vygotsky's ideas in the wider context of their development and reception. These biographical sketches never detract from the main narrative. They make for an engaging read, helping us build a connection to Vygotsky the historical person. More importantly, they give us a richer grasp of Vygotsky's central concepts. As Ilyenkov (a philosopher inspired by Vygotsky) might put it, the book reconstructs the concepts' common genetic root (Azeri, 2016).




It may seem unusual for an introductory text to work chronologically through Vygotsky's oeuvre, but the rich breadth of materials covered makes it clear that we would miss most of what is of interest if we simply "skipped to the end" and read about his most famous work, *Thinking and Speech*. It paints Vygotsky as a diverse and vibrant thinker, as interested in art theory as special education.

Though the book generally avoids philosophical discussion, Barrs is clearly sensitive to Vygotsky's philosophical influences, such as how Spinoza shaped his views of agency (Derry, 2013). This makes her equipped to grasp Vygotsky's intentions and motives, in contrast to writers less sensitive to this dimension, like Anton Yasnitsky (2018).

Barrs selects quotations with great finesse. Key passages from the texts at the focus of each chapter are interlaced with those from Vygotsky's notebooks and elsewhere. These are embedded in a methodically structured narrative that helps to frame the material. The writing is as mellifluous as it is meticulous - the poetry of Barr's prose is part of what makes us feel we are in competent hands.

In the first chapter we learn that Vygotsky was himself a talented teacher in his native Belarus. The centrality of concrete practice to Vygotsky's theorisation is a recurring theme through the book. Barrs shows how many of Vygotsky's early experiences shaped his later concerns. His interests in psychology and pedagogy stemmed as much from practical concerns of how to do what is best




for the young people he encountered as from the rich intellectual milieu which his family provided for him.

The second chapter focuses on Vygotsky's first book and doctoral thesis *The Psychology of Art*. Barrs stresses that theatre, poetry, and the arts were lifelong passions for Vygotsky and were always intended to be part of his psychology. *The Psychology of Art* critically engages with sources from Shakespeare to the Russian formalists to arrive at a general thesis about art: that the content of a work of art contradicts its form. While many commentators (including Vygotsky's most influential student, Leontiev) dismissed the book as a jumble of ideas, Barrs stresses its symmetry and coherence. Though the final thesis itself is questionable and later rejected by Vygotsky in *Psychology of the Adolescent*, Barrs is surely right that there is much of interest here, both in its own right and in expanding our understanding of ideas that will become central to Vygotsky's thought. Barrs draws our attention to a chapter on Bunin's short story 'Gentle Breath' in which Vygotsky blurs the boundary between psychological experiment and literary analysis. He asks a group of participants to pay attention to how the form of the story alters their breathing as the plot progresses. This prefigures Vygotsky's later interest in how meaning and affect are embodied and enacted (to be discussed in Chapter 8).

The third chapter focuses on 'defectology'. Barr notes that Vygotsky himself was unhappy with this early twentieth-century term for special education. Again, Barrs stresses how much Vygotsky's dedication to this area of research




has been underplayed. Vygotsky began working with deaf and blind children and prioritised the support of children with a wide range of needs. He favoured integrating special education into mainstream schools but with specialist support. Much of this work concerned finding ways for children to participate in the activities of their peers and identifying the barriers to them doing so. Though Barrs rejects the term (it implies something less dynamic than what Vygotsky had in mind (Shvarts & Bakker, 2019)), some of the strategies here might today be described as scaffolding. Vygotsky believed fervidly that socialism required the inclusion in cultural life of its most vulnerable members.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 build up a picture of the methodological and theoretical tools Vygotsky and colleagues developed through their empirical work in psychology. Chapter 4 focuses on Vygotsky's manifesto-like short book on the 'crisis' in the psychology of his time. Vygotsky looks across a global landscape of disparate schools of psychology, each offering their own often incommensurate views of the mind. Vygotsky criticises these various schools for relying on particular foundational concepts: the reflex in reflexology, drive in psychoanalysis, experience in phenomenology. Vygotsky suggests we need a unified psychology: dynamic and led by practice, rather than relying on static prior categories. It is striking how relevant Vygotsky's criticisms are today. Many practicing psychologists simply do not critically reflect on their own practices or the history by which these practices came about (Maiers, 2022).

Barrs traces this set of concerns through Chapter 5, which focuses on Vygotsky's book *Tool and Symbol in Child Development*. Barrs suggests this could be a helpful intro to Vygotsky –
giving an accessible overview of some of his central concepts at this stage in his thought. We are introduced to one of Vygotsky's central methodological innovations – an appreciation of the ways in which, "Over a series of experiments the object of research changes". While traditional psychology narrows in on a set of pre-defined outcomes and carries out "pre-test and post-test" measures of these outcomes, for Vygotsky a psychological experiment is an ongoing process, the course of which is adjusted in light of what proves meaningful in the situation and according to the motives of those involved. Barrs relates that children enjoyed working with Vygotsky because they did not feel like they were being experimented on; they were made to feel like they were serious contributors in what was unfolding. What emerged was a psychology of development, more focused on the agency of participants than the abstract labels attached to the behaviour they could reproduce.

A key theme in this chapter and the next is the centrality of signs in mediating human action. It is signs that enable and enhance our agency. This is explained through an account of Vygotsky's experiments with children. Chapter 6 focuses on the book *History of the Development of Higher Psychological Functions* and much of the focus here is on Vygotsky's distinction between "lower" automatic responses to the environment which we share with other animals and "higher" rational responses, in which we in some ways redirect our own responses.

This chapter also contains interesting commentary on Vygotsky's investigations into language learning. Vygotsky stressed that language was not something found or transferred to the child as an abstract functional system, but something that emerged only as enacted in play with real meanings, integrated into real material practices. Language use develops through a series of qualitative stages of social interaction in the dramatic situations of imaginative play. Vygotsky would have no doubt despaired (as Barrs herself does) at the hegemony of phonics teaching in contemporary education.

Chapter 7 is about "pedology" – the name Vygotsky adopted for the science of studying children. This may seem rather vague but it is precisely Vygotsky's holism which Barrs emphasizes. Vygotsky was as interested in the endocrine system as in the interpretation of metaphor. You could not focus on any one of these if you wanted a full understanding of child development. Vygotsky's innovation at this stage in his work was that human consciousness had to be understood as a collection of functional systems, intertwined in complex dynamic hierarchies. Barrs explains how pedology was outlawed by Communist Party decree soon after Vygotsky's death because it was argued it was anti-communist in singling out certain children as developmentally behind others. I agree with Barrs that this is an unfair inversion of the motives of pedological researchers to close the gap rather than perpetuate segregation.

The chapter closes with a discussion of the concept of *perezhivanie* recently given a new lease of life by Veresov (2016). I think Barrs is wrong to endorse Bakhurst's (2019) recommendation that we ignore the hype around




*perezhivanie* and simply read the term as “experience”. Vygotsky follows Marx in starting with the material conditions for consciousness rather than its contents; unlike Bakhurst’s Kant, who theorizes abstract or “pure” experience, Vygotsky is interested in biological and cultural prerequisites for experience, like hereditary traits, historically available social roles, and aspects of our personality. Since this is a particular meaning which Vygotsky himself carves out, I think it is right to continue using “perezhivanie”.

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I have heard some practitioners of activity theory (the theoretical framework developed by Vygotsky’s student Leontiev) claim that a limitation of Vygotsky’s work is that he presented individuals as slavish automatons and could not explain human creativity. Chapter 8 conclusively demonstrates the extent to which this is not a credible reading. Sadly, Vygotsky’s writings on play, imagination and creativity do not appear in the six volumes of Vygotsky’s collected work and have often been overlooked.[1] However, in these excluded works, Vygotsky describes how children appropriate aspects of their culture in creative production and stresses that this is a gradual and developing process. Vygotsky’s views run contrary to the Rousseau-like folk view that children are born creative and have the creativity trained out of them through enculturation. In Vygotsky’s system, imagination and play lead development by uniting other faculties of consciousness.

Chapter 9 brings together references from across Vygotsky’s work to his now widely utilized concept of the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). While the chapter gives a clear explanation of the concept, there is perhaps too much

emphasis on issues of translation and apparent misunderstandings. While misconceptions can of course teach us about a concept, I am not sure to what extent, for instance, the distinction between “proximal” and “proximate” is salient. As I see it, Vygotsky just wants to draw attention to what is *in the grasp* of a child. Barrs’ discussion of the ZPD children create in play indicates that Vygotsky intended something much broader by the concept than a measure of distance between developmental stages. Perhaps the various critics chiding teachers for their misuse of the ZPD in this chapter are being too austere in their understanding. As Barrs has demonstrated, it’s often illuminating to go back to Vygotsky’s sources. My conjecture is that Vygotsky is partly drawing on Bergson here. According to Bergson, consciousness involves a “zone of possible actions or of virtual activity that surrounds the action actually accomplished by the living being... From this point of view, the consciousness of a living being may be defined as an arithmetical difference between potential and real activity" (Bergson, 1998, p.145). Seeing the ZPD as a zone of potential activity, as well as a measure of distance between stages of development, places it closer to the creative and vibrant Vygotsky we know from earlier chapters.

Barrs worries that to measure the ZPD Vygotsky seems to rely on the kind of static IQ test questions of which, elsewhere, he is very critical. But Neil Mercer has shown that IQ test questions can also be used in a dynamic Vygotskian way. Mercer allowed children to discuss questions on a Raven’s matrices IQ test before answering them. They took versions of the test before and after this social activity – as a result, their “IQ” increased in the post-test condition

compared to kids who only practiced independently (Mercer, Wegerif & Dawes, 1999).

Chapters 10 and 11 discuss the most complete account of Vygotsky's mature, *Thinking and Speech*, a collection of essays published shortly after Vygotsky's death in 1934. These chapters are a valuable guide to this complex and wide-ranging book. Chapter 10 explains the book's aims and Vygotsky's critical engagement with Piaget. Vygotsky criticises Piaget for his crude empiricism and functionalism: he challenges Piaget's claim that psychology can pursue scientific inquiry with no prior theories, as well as his tendency to ask children artificial decontextualised questions to produce certain effects in experimental settings. These criticisms have been pursued by Piaget's own disciples like Perret-Clermont (1982). Chapter 11 is unlike earlier chapters in that as well as explaining Vygotsky's ideas, it offers an interpretation of them in terms of other thinkers like Voloshinov (who Barrs suggests Vygotsky read). This seems like a fruitful bit of cross-pollination if we are interested in developing Vygotsky's investigations of the relationship between thinking, writing and speech. The chapter also contains a wonderful interpretation of a poem by Osip Mandelstam – a poet much loved by Vygotsky.

Chapter 12 deals with Vygotsky's legacy and how his thought was exported to the West. Barrs is very critical of Cole et al.'s *Mind in Society* (1980). The criticism is significant since this text is the only access many English-speaking readers have to Vygotsky. While readers are given the sense that they are

reading Vygotsky's own words, what Barrs reveals is a patchwork of many different texts which the editors assembled for a US audience.

The chapter ends with the history of Vygotsky in the UK. I read this account with a kind of pride at the role of the English department at the London Institute of Education in instituting Vygotsky's influence on teacher training. It was here that Barrs herself was introduced to Vygotsky, and where I would learn about him on my English PGCE. But perhaps this is also a limitation of the book. In a chapter on Vygotsky's legacy, it is a significant oversight to make no mention (among other places) of Brazil. Brazil is arguably the centre of experimentation for Vygotsky's ideas today, with researchers like Ana Luiza Smolka, Fernanda Coelho Liberali, Priscila Nascimento Marques, Adolfo Tanzi Neto, Newton Duarte, and Daniel Magalhães Goulart blazing a trail for the Vygotsky of the future.

What becomes clear over the course of *Vygotsky the Teacher* is that Vygotsky's legacy is a legacy of denunciation, censorship, and misrepresentation. Even those who championed Vygotsky have often taken defensive and conciliatory stances, attempting to align his radical ideas with hegemonic discourses. Yasnitsky's recent *Vygotsky: An Intellectual Biography* (2018) appears to have the same aims as Barrs' book, but it seeks to undermine Vygotsky's legacy by highlighting the apparent discontinuities in his work. *Vygotsky the Teacher* is one of the few books to follow Vygotsky's own intentions at each stage of his work to demonstrate its continuities.

## Endnotes

[1]Coincidentally, a French translation of all the texts reviewed in this chapter came out in 2021 - l'imagination dans l'œuvre de Vygotskij

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