

A Cultural-Historical Approach

Radical-Local Teaching and Learning



Mariane Hedegaard and Seth Chaiklin

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Preface

Over the past 20 years we have been developing a perspective about subject-matter teaching and learning in relation to individual development. Although pedagogical trends and fashions come and go, some basic issues are always present as part of the defining features of pedagogical practice. Two of these problems, which are addressed in this book, are (a) how to conceptualize and organize the subject-matter content to be used in pedagogical interactions, and (b) how to develop desired psychological capabilities through pedagogical interactions with subject-matter content. While these problems can be addressed in general terms, it is also necessary to relate the general perspectives to the local historical conditions within which pedagogical interactions are conducted. From this point of view, general theoretical perspectives become interesting when they serve to guide efforts to realise a practice in a specific historical context, while practical efforts should be evaluated in relation to a general theoretical perspective. In turn, practical work challenges the further development and clarification of our theoretical understanding of how to relate subject-matter teaching to the particular conditions under which children are learning.

The practical research work in this book was conducted in an afterschool program for children in a New York City neighborhood where many of the families have a historical relation to Puerto Rico. The intention is to present an example of the dynamic interaction between theory and practice in a way that will encourage persons with a more practical interest to consider the theoretical arguments, while the more theoretically oriented reader will also consider the practical example. The hope is that the reader will reflect about the ways in which theoretical and practical aspects of pedagogical work can be integrated, to the benefit of both aspects.

At the time that we conducted the project, Mariane Hedegaard was a visiting scholar at Teachers College, Columbia University, while Seth Chaiklin was a Project Director at the Institute for Learning Technologies at Teachers College, Columbia University. The afterschool project was conducted in collaboration with Pedro Pedraza as a project at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, City University of New York, with support from the Exxon Foundation. This collaboration was essential for the development of the project. We thank Pedro

Pedraza, the leader of the project, Jorge Ayala, a research assistant in the project, Karen Diaz Navarro, the teacher in the project, who worked with engagement and enthusiasm, and the parent helpers, Carmen and Belén, who assisted the children in the classroom.

*Seth Chaiklin and Mariane Hedegaard
Copenhagen, February 2005*

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Radical-Local Teaching and Learning for Education and Human Development

This book presents an approach to teaching and learning that we have designated *radical local*. To realize both general societal interests and worthwhile personal development, the content of educational programmes for children must be grounded in and draw explicitly from the local societal conditions within which the children live. Through working with this content, children should appropriate an understanding of general theoretical-dialectical concepts from subject-matter disciplines, which they can use as tools for understanding the content they have studied, and more generally for analyzing their own life conditions and future possibilities. These are distinctive features of a successful radical-local teaching and learning approach. The central concern of radical-local teaching and learning is how to relate educational practices to children's specific historical and cultural conditions – both the objective conditions in which the children live and their comprehension of and relation to those conditions.

The specific event that provided the opportunity for formulating our theoretical ideas about radical-local teaching and learning was the possibility to conduct an experimental teaching programme for a group of elementary school children in the context of an existing experimental afterschool programme in East Harlem.¹ An afterschool programme can be an ideal place to experiment

1 The afterschool programme was started originally by Pedro Pedraza, a researcher at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, City University of New York City, with a focus on developing literacy and mathematics competences for children (Pedraza, 1989). This afterschool programme was part of the El Barrio Popular Education Program (K. Rivera, 1999; Torruellas, 1989; Torruellas, Benmayor, Goris & Juarbe, 1991), which was started by researchers at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, in part, because of a dissatisfaction with producing research studies that contributed primarily to the professional advancement of the report writers, without affecting noticeably the conditions and possibilities for the people in the community being described.

with radical-local concerns such as bridging family and community traditions with subject-matter knowledge, because the content of afterschool activities are not usually formalized by laws, regulations and curriculum plans.

The first part of the book presents a framework for conceptualizing and designing radical-local educational interventions for schoolchildren. We start by considering the goals of education and the relation of educational practice to personal development, and then consider some of the problems faced by cultural minorities, especially Latinos in completing school. The idea of radical-local teaching and learning is introduced, along with some key principles from the cultural-historical research tradition about knowledge, psychological development, and teaching and learning. Some of the cultural-historical principles are elaborated further in relation to problems of (a) selecting subject-matter content that takes account of schoolchildren's cultural-historical background and life situation, and (b) using that selection in a way that is relevant both to their present life in their local community and their coming societal life.

The second part of the book presents a qualitative analysis of the teaching experiment. The intention of the educational programme was to develop the children's subject-matter knowledge about general social science concepts and principles from history and social studies through investigation of a theme that was central in their lives. The specific topics selected for investigation were motivated by our knowledge of the cultural-historical background of the children and their families. General subject-matter concepts are first formulated through specific investigations. In turn, as these concepts become explicitly formulated, it is possible for the children to use these concepts to reformulate their everyday understanding of their life and community. In other words, the programme was an attempt to realize our ideas about radical-local teaching and learning.

Our interest was to develop a positive intervention that addressed significant intellectual and cultural needs of the children, most of whom came from families with a Puerto Rican background, while drawing upon knowledge of the East Harlem community in which most of the children lived. We did not want to conduct another study documenting that Puerto Rican children were not achieving comparable levels of academic success as other social groups in New York City (e.g., Calitri, 1983; Santiago Santiago, 1978) nor show that the form and content of teaching that the children receive tends to be oriented to rote learning, repetitious drill, and other kinds of tasks that do not require nor encourage analytic, creative, theoretical thinking (e.g., Anyon, 1981; Orum, 1988). These points have been well-documented, and they continue to be well documented, not only for Puerto Rican children in New York City, but for other Hispanic groups in the United States (e.g., Arias, 1986; Brown, Rosen, Hill, & Olivas, 1981; De La Rosa & Maw, 1990; Goldenberg, 1990; National Commission on Secondary Education for Hispanics, 1984; Nieto, 1998, 2000).

Although it is important to document the existence of these problems, these analyses do not usually contain insights into what positive steps should be taken for intervention. Especially in the more descriptive studies, one cannot tell what a symptom of inadequate educational programmes is and what a cause is. Our interest in this book is to present a theoretically motivated approach to subject-matter teaching, which in the present case was directed toward the needs of Puerto Rican children in East Harlem.

Formal Education and Child Development

A major goal of formal education, at least as formulated in official documents, is to help children gain insight into and a capability for using subject-matter traditions to understand the social and natural world. However, the content and purpose of formal schooling are not limited only to the goals of subject-matter learning and subsequent intellectual development. There are usually expectations that formal education should prepare and motivate children to participate in a society's existing economic, political, and cultural practices, where subject-matter learning is seen as part of realizing that goal.

Radical-local teaching and learning is concerned to realize these widely-held goals for formal education, but focuses additionally on how education can contribute to the personal development of children in relation to their historical and cultural conditions. The assumption is that the relationship between schoolchildren's cultural background and the historical conditions within which they live can and should have consequences for the content of teaching if these goals are to be realized. Schooling is normally organized around specific subject-matter content such as specific content and procedures for reading, writing, calculating, analyzing physical and historical phenomena. How are these specific practices to be related to these general goals? And how should one consider them in relation to the variations found within contemporary societies such as between city and country, rich and poor families, religious and cultural differences, to name only a few of the more important dichotomies that are commonly considered.

The idea of radical-local teaching and learning presented here is an attempt to make an integrated conceptual model for educational practice that addresses this tension between valued general goals of education and the individual and diverse variations found in its concrete practice. We focus specifically on the dynamic between how general subject-matter content and specific historical conditions can contribute to children's development. The focus is on how education, through subject-matter teaching can contribute to the development of motives and competencies that are relevant for the child's societal life.

The cultural-historical research tradition provides a useful set of theoretical resources for articulating and clarifying the ideal of radical-local teaching and learning, which in turn reveals some limitations in the current theoretical development of the cultural-historical tradition.

CULTURAL-HISTORICAL THEORY OF EDUCATION

In 1931, Lev Vygotsky prepared a book-length manuscript on his cultural-historical theory of human development. This theoretical perspective provided the framework for subsequent investigations into schoolchildren's conceptual development. In several of his texts from the period 1932-1934, Vygotsky discussed this relation, considering different models. The model Vygotsky promoted was that instruction and learning should be the source of further development, where instruction should prepare and motivate the child to participate in a society's existing cultural practice as well as develop psychological functions of thinking and concept formation that were not yet fully acquired. This model contrasted with a behaviorist model which equated learning and development, or a Piagetian model in which instruction must wait for a certain level of development to be achieved (see also Vygotsky, 1926/1998b, Chap. 4 and 6).

In Vygotsky's analysis, thinking with real concepts was the major psychological function that characterized school age children, and instruction should be directed toward such development (e.g., Vygotsky, 1934/1987, Chap. 6). As part of his analysis of the development of schoolchildren's conceptual thinking, Vygotsky considered the relation between what he called spontaneous or everyday concepts and academic or scientific concepts. The former are typically learned as a result of everyday practice and tend to be strongly situated. The latter, which are usually learned as a result of formal instruction, often by verbal definition, tend to be abstract and reflect historically-developed systematic analysis of societal and natural phenomena. The acquisition of scientific concepts depends on the child's everyday concepts, and a consequence of this acquisition is that a child's everyday concepts are modified and their content further developed. This dialectic of the child's everyday knowledge and its potential transformation from theoretical knowledge acquisition provides an important conceptual model for addressing a main concern of radical-local teaching and learning, namely to use the general concepts of disciplinary knowledge as a way to develop and refine personal, local knowledge.

Vygotsky's perspective about the relation between learning and development for school age children and the theory of activity provided a conceptual framework for Vygotsky's former research assistant Daniil El'konin, who in collaboration with Vasili Davydov, started in the late 1950s to develop an approach to educational practices that aimed, in part, to support psychological

Teaching about the local community: using first-hand experience. The European dimension in primary education. Towards a critical school geography. Teaching and learning geography. Edited by Daniella Tilbury and Michael Williams. London and New York. Part III concludes with an exploration of the implications of adopting a radical perspective for defining course aims, content, teaching methods and pupil assessment. Just as the content and teaching methods associated with geography will vary as pupils and students move through the stages of schooling so do the purposes and modes of pupil assessment. Radical-Local Teaching and Learning presents a theoretical perspective for analyzing and planning educational programmes for schoolchildren. The radical-local approach provides an integrated perspective for confronting the tension that arises between a universal goal to prepare all children for a satisfying and productive societal life and the historical fact that most con Radical-Local Teaching and Learning presents a theoretical perspective for analyzing and planning educational programmes for schoolchildren. The first half of the book introduces the idea of radical-local teaching and learning and develops the theoretical background for this perspective, drawing on the cultural-historical research tradition, particularly from Vygotsky, El'konin, Davydov, and Aidarova.