

# Early Childhood Programs as the Doorway to Social Cohesion



Early Childhood Programs as the Doorway  
to Social Cohesion:  
Application of Vygotsky's Ideas  
from an East–West Perspective

Edited by

Aija Tuna and Jacqueline Hayden

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G



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OF THE INTERNATIONAL STEP BY STEP ASSOCIATION

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>List of Boxes, Figures, and Tables</b> .....	ix
<b>Acknowledgment</b> .....	xi
<b>Foreword</b> .....	xiii
<b>Part I</b>	
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
CHAPTER ONE	
Making a Difference—East and West Meet Vygotsky <i>Jacqueline Hayden</i> .....	3
<b>Part II</b>	
<b>Vygotsky and National Policies</b> .....	15
CHAPTER TWO	
Where There Are No Kindergartens: An Educational Program Fostering Self-Efficacy in Polish Rural Areas <i>Piotr Olaf Zylicz</i> .....	17
CHAPTER THREE	
Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Early Childhood Education: Vygotskian Influences and Ethnographic Insights into One Preschool in East Asia, Singapore <i>Lynn Ang</i> .....	31
CHAPTER FOUR	
The Teachers' Position in Adult-Child Interaction in Relation to a Child's Zone of Proximal Development <i>Elena Yudina</i> .....	45

CHAPTER FIVE	
Vygotsky and the Early Years of ECEC in Italy <i>Susanna Mantovani</i> .....	63
<b>Part III</b>	
<b>Vygotsky and Classroom Practice</b> .....	75
CHAPTER SIX	
Fiction, Drawing, and Play in a Vygotskian Perspective <i>Stig Broström</i> .....	77
CHAPTER SEVEN	
Hearing Children’s Voices: Emulating Vygotsky’s Theories in Good Evaluation Practice <i>Linda E. Lee</i> .....	95
CHAPTER EIGHT	
Approach to Assessment <i>Gabriela Portugal et al</i> .....	109
CHAPTER NINE	
Using Scaffolding to Teach Children with Disabilities: Applying Vygotsky’s Ideas in Azerbaijan <i>Ulviya Mikailova and Yulia Karimova</i> .....	125
CHAPTER TEN	
Implementing a Play-Based Curriculum in Primary School: An Attempt at Sustainable Innovation <i>Bert van Oers</i> .....	145
<b>Part IV</b>	
<b>Regional and Global Implications</b> .....	159
CHAPTER ELEVEN	
Make Believe Play vs. Academic Skills: A Vygotskian Approach to Today’s Dilemma of Early Childhood Education <i>Elena Bodrova</i> .....	161

CHAPTER TWELVE	
Zones of Professional Development: Arguments for Reclaiming Practice-Based Evidence in Early Childhood Practice and Research <i>Mathias Urban</i> .....	177
<b>Part V</b>	
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	193
CHAPTER THIRTEEN	
Building Bridges, Building Futures: ISSA and Changes in Early Childhood Development and Education in the Post-Communist Region <i>Aija Tuna</i> .....	195
<b>Appendices</b> .....	213
Appendix A .....	215
Appendix B .....	221
<b>List of Contributors</b> .....	231
<b>Index</b> .....	237





# LIST OF BOXES, FIGURES, AND TABLES

## Boxes

1-1	Internationally Applicable Benchmarks for Early Childhood Care and Education (UNICEF, 2008)	4
5-1	Vygotsky's publications vis a vis landmarks of ECEC in Italy	68

## Figures

2-1	Average Locus of Control Levels: Control of Failure, Control of Success and Global Locus of Control Index in WTANP Graduates vs. Children without Preschool Education	21
4-1	The example of a teacher's actual position being more authoritarian than the declared position	55
4-2	An example of authoritarianism level being higher in the declared position than in real interaction with a child	56
4-3	An example of authoritarianism levels of the declared and the actual position crossing each other	57
6-1	Children drawing	87
6-2	Children drawing	87
7-1	Drawing by girl in Hungary	100
7-2	Drawing by boy in Bulgaria	101
7-3	Representations of mathematics	102
7-4	Map of "Hot Spots" (Sargent Park School, Winnipeg, Canada)	104
9-1	Scheme of mentoring process	123

## Tables

2-1	Average Locus of Control Levels: Global Index (LoCI) and failure/success in WTANP graduates vs. children without preschool education (non-WTANP)	21
4-1	The distribution of Russian and Lithuanian kindergarten teachers according to the correlation between the declared and the actual position in their interaction with a child	58



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ISSA is a membership organization that connects professionals and organizations working in the field of early childhood development and education. ISSA promotes equal access to quality education and care for all children, especially in the early years of their lives. Established in the Netherlands in 1999, ISSA's network today stretches across the globe from Central and Eastern Europe to Central Asia, Asia, and the Americas. ISSA's core members are the 29 nongovernmental organizations located primarily in Central/Eastern Europe and Central Asia which implement the Step by Step Program initiated by the Open Society Institute in 1994. Within its network, ISSA supports a wide array of programs that collectively provide a comprehensive set of educational services and advocacy tools intended to influence policy reform for families and children, with a special focus on the years from birth through primary school.

ISSA's mission is to support professional communities and develop a strong civil society that influences and assists decision makers to:

- provide high quality care and educational services for all children from birth through primary school (age 0–10), with a focus on the poorest and most disadvantaged
- ensure greater inclusion of family and community participation in children's development and learning
- ensure social inclusion and respect for diversity.

ISSA's overarching goal is to promote inclusive, quality care and education experiences that create the conditions for all children to become active members of democratic knowledge societies. ISSA does this through: raising awareness of the importance of quality care and education, developing

resources, disseminating information, advocating, strengthening alliances, and building capacity to create conditions where all children thrive. ISSA's vision is of a world where families and communities support every child in reaching his or her full potential and developing the skills necessary for being a successful and active member of a democratic knowledge society.

In 2009 ISSA launched *Competent Educators of the 21st Century: Principles of Quality Pedagogy*, a revised version of its Pedagogical Standards, a network-developed tool that defines quality in teaching practices and classroom environment. This document represents a framework of principles for quality pedagogy and can provide guidelines for teacher preparation and continuous professional development, supporting early years professionals from the classroom to the policy level. This document serves as a basis for professional discussion, building and expanding partnerships, improving practices, and bringing change into the lives of young children in the countries of the ISSA network and beyond.

[www.issa.nl](http://www.issa.nl)



INTERNATIONAL  
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ASSOCIATION

## FOREWORD

Perhaps more than at any other stage of life, experiences in early childhood have the potential to affect an individual's life over the long term, including health and general well-being. The first years of life are marked by rapidly increasing mobility, development of communication skills and intellectual capacities, socio-emotional development, and swift shifts in interests and abilities. What supports this development and what experiences will be most conducive to positive growth and learning is a topic of endemic interest and focus for professionals from many sectors of society. During recent decades, early childhood has also become increasingly visible on agendas of international agencies and decision makers at all levels.

Recent research findings have identified a relationship between quality early childhood experiences for young children and enhanced early school performance that leads to more successful learning and achievements throughout life. Early childhood services are also associated with poverty reduction through employment opportunities and reduced welfare dependency. It is also increasingly clear that early childhood services may be a significant entry point for meeting new social goals—those associated with facilitating social cohesion and respect for diversity in changing demographics, economic, social, and political environments.

Early childhood has great potential to be the meeting point for all families and all members of a community in order to recognize and identify the need for early support and intervention when necessary, to get to know each other, and to build social cohesion using all existing diversity and potential.

During the last two decades, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia have been working on rebuilding and improving early childhood programs and policies, ready to learn from early childhood structures, policies, and systems of service delivery in the West, but also building upon their own traditions and knowledge. This is a unique and privileged position of developing new systems and structures, in which the good and useful features of a previous system can be preserved and enriched with new knowledge and experiences from across the world. In this situation, a timely window of opportunity is opened and can be used for the benefit of children and societies in general.

Meanwhile, the industrialized countries in the West (Western Europe, the Americas, and Australasia), amongst other changes, are dealing with tensions between an increasing emphasis on market forces versus social

justice and equity issues for citizens—all this within a paradigm of increased government attention to the early years of life and increased demand for accountability for public expenditures. Recent financial turbulences across the globe have added new challenges to both placing and protecting the position of early childhood development (ECD) in a prominent place in the political and social agendas of countries from East to West.

There is growing agreement that ECD issues, including various services for young children and their families, should be approached and decided from the perspective of the interests of the child. As education stakeholders grapple more and more with issues such as children's rights and universal approaches along with the importance of cultural specificities in program development and delivery, the social and economic implications of early childhood development have become common areas for investigation by researchers and common topics of international conferences and seminars. Theories and practice from different parts of the world have been reviewed, compared, deconstructed, and, in some cases, consolidated.

Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers from any part of the world can benefit from an exploration of early childhood programs through the reciprocal sharing of perspectives and experiences. The legacy of Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky provides a unique example of how the belief in the importance of early childhood and attempts to provide the best support to children's development have crossed borders and developed, in spite of distances, varying and often opposing political regimes, and diverse socio-economic conditions.

The 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference<sup>1</sup> of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA), which took place in Prague between 29 August and 1 September 2007, represented such a forum. The International Step by Step Association (ISSA),<sup>2</sup> with more than 10 years of experience in early childhood education in Central Eastern Europe and Central Asia, co-hosted the conference.

The focus of the conference was the legacy of L. S. Vygotsky and his astounding ability to be a driving force for early childhood practice and policy in both the East and the West—despite their significant differences in terms of culture, politics, and socio-economic conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the conference visit: [www.easyprague.cz/eecera2007](http://www.easyprague.cz/eecera2007).

<sup>2</sup> For more information on ISSA visit: [www.issa.nl](http://www.issa.nl).

While following on a number of similar international forums, the Prague conference, entitled *Exploring Vygotsky's Ideas: Crossing Borders*, had some unique and seminal features. It was the largest EECERA conference to date, as well as the first time that a significant cohort of early childhood professionals had gathered at the EECERA Conference from such diverse geographical and sociopolitical regions. Of the 780 early childhood specialists in attendance, about half came from Western nations and half from the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS).

During the conference, representatives of major universities and other research and implementation agencies from CEE/CIS and Western nations took the opportunity to review the influence of Vygotsky in relation to how young children are viewed and how programs for children are developed in different contexts.

It was inspirational and gratifying to note that the rich history and the huge leaps in early childhood development and education in the Eastern regions and Central Asia were not only acknowledged, but embraced by colleagues from the West.

As a way to embrace and memorialize the good will, mutual respect, and collaborative approaches which took place at the conference, ISSA endeavoured to gather a group of papers representative of the wealth of knowledge shared at the conference and to develop the collection of papers into a book—this book!

Combining contributions from both East and West presented challenges in incorporating different styles of scholarly writing in one publication, but also allowed the expansion of the body of professional knowledge for both sides. Another outcome of this book is to show that some aspects of globalization are positive!

In this case, the opportunity to note our common touchstone and to discuss how one theorist has affected our diverse systems has resulted in a feeling of global comradeship. As a result of the 2007 Conference, many collaborative initiatives and consortia have been developed in the intervening years, many involving ISSA's own members. Both East and West have been enriched by sharing information about research, policy, and practice in early childhood education.

On a practical level, the chapters in this book are presented to facilitate the learning of students in teacher preparation programs for early childhood education, social psychology, social work, and other child related disciplines about how Vygotsky's work has shaped our current approaches to quality in early childhood care and education. The book will be useful as well to

civil society organizations involved in piloting and implementing quality early childhood programs, and to decision makers at national and international levels who want to support good practice in education programs and systems.

As a peer reviewed, academic publication, this volume is meant to suggest ideas and build links between theory and practice, as well as to stimulate development of new ideas for successful implementation of quality early childhood education.

***Moving Forward Together: Early childhood programs as the doorway to social cohesion. An East–West Perspective*** is a product of many forces. ISSA, as a leading network of early childhood education organizations from CEE/CIS has been in a perfect position to gather those forces together. ISSA's long-term cooperation with and support from the Open Society Institute (OSI), successful partnership with EECERA, and generous financial assistance from the Bernard van Leer Foundation helped make this book a possibility. The authors from Australia, Azerbaijan, Canada, Denmark, Italy, Singapore, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russia, USA, and the United Kingdom, have brought our vision to life.

Those of us who had the good fortune to experience those intense days in Prague came away with a feeling that divisions can be overcome and that diversity can be an inspiration and strength. It is our hope that this book will contribute to the growing cooperative movement amongst educators, decision makers, and civil society for the benefit of children, their families, and communities.

This book aims to be a strong step towards this mutual sharing and knowledge enhancement.

We acknowledge everybody who has contributed to the development and publishing of the book, with very special thanks to Taryn Paladiy, Coordinator of the project, for her hard work, patience, and commitment.

Liana Ghent, *Executive Director, ISSA, Hungary*  
Jacqueline Hayden, *Macquarie University, Australia*  
Aija Tuna, *Program Specialist, ISSA, Latvia*

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# Part I

## Introduction



## CHAPTER ONE

# MAKING A DIFFERENCE—EAST AND WEST MEET VYGOTSKY

JACQUELINE HAYDEN

### **Making a Difference**

The recent *Report Card 8 from UNICEF* identifies internationally applicable benchmarks for early childhood care and education. The benchmarks refer to macro social and fiscal policies which are seen to have indirect effects on the quality of an early childhood system. These global benchmarks include policies for poverty reduction, parental leave, access to health services, and other structural issues. The benchmarks also include regulatory items such as adult to child ratios and teacher training requirements (Box 1-1).

While there is no doubt that the global early childhood sector needs to promote and advocate for these macro policies and state regulations, the benchmarks may seem to be outside of the immediate sphere of influence of most early childhood teachers. In fact, knowing about these benchmarks for quality care can be de-motivating: Classroom teachers may well feel that their efforts towards effective service delivery are wasted if these 10 macro policies are not in place.

This book represents an important message: While we must never stop advocating for macro changes, there is a realm over which early childhood professionals do exert direct control—and that is the environment within each setting. It is at this level that our focus and energies can make an immediate difference for every child and parent with whom we come into contact.

Using Vygotsky as a common baseline, the following chapters provide some guidelines, review some issues, and present some innovative and inspirational examples for making a difference in the lives of all young children, regardless of the context; of the number of international benchmarks which have been met; or whether programs emanate from the East or the West.

## Box 1-1

**Internationally Applicable Benchmarks  
for Early Childhood Care and Education (UNICEF, 2008)**

1. Parental leave of 1 year at 50% of salary.
2. A national plan with priority for disadvantaged children.
3. Subsidized and regulated child care services for 25% of children under 3.
4. Subsidized and accredited early education services for 80% of 4 year-olds.
5. 80% of all child care staff trained.
6. 50% of staff in accredited early education services tertiary educated with relevant qualification.
7. Minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in preschool education.
8. 1.0% of GDP spent on early childhood services.
9. Child poverty rate less than 10%.
10. Near-universal outreach of essential child health service.

**Vygotsky and Quality—A Global Approach**

The very existence of internationally applicable benchmarks for early childhood care and education reflects the importance which is placed on the sector. Early childhood programs worldwide are increasingly recognized for their potential to address myriad social, educational, cultural, and economic issues. Indeed, the correlation of early childhood programs to educational, psychosocial, and bio-medical outcomes for children, and concomitant increased employment, reduced poverty, enhanced education and human capital, and other macro level social and economic outcomes is a common argument for support and commitment by a growing number of nation states and global initiatives. As a result, the call for increased access to early childhood programs is common in nearly every nation on the globe.

But access alone does not guarantee nurturing environments for young children. As Box One implies, it is not merely *more* spaces which we aim for, but assurances that children, when they obtain access, are being exposed to quality programs.

This has been emphasized throughout the literature, and especially in the findings from longitudinal studies of early childhood programs (Schweinhart 2005, Lynch 2004, Kagitcibasi, Sunar, Bekman, Baydar, and Cemalcilar 2009).

Over and above the international benchmarks, few researchers would argue with the notion that even when all benchmarks are met, what constitutes quality service delivery is dependent upon, and consistently reconstructed by, the dynamics of context and community values.

However, there is one construct which can be universally applied: Relationships within settings is a fundamental indicator of quality programming!

This truism stems from the work of Lev Vygotsky. His insistence that full cognitive development requires social interaction defines the essence of his theory and is both universal and timeless.

For Vygotsky, human development is dependent upon social relationships, and experiences in the early years of life set the foundation for healthy development. His works provide a guideline for establishing these critical relationships. Studies from East, West, North, and South have shown that within their classrooms, even if they are under resourced, overcrowded, housed in poor facilities, and/or set up in the middle of toxic environments, early childhood teachers can make a difference to the children they engage with by engaging with them in appropriate ways.

This book gives an insight into the wisdom and timeliness of Vygotsky's legacy.

The chapters herein apply Vygotsky's theories to diverse contexts: Azerbaijan, Canada, Croatia, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Italy, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States and beyond, and attest to the universality of his offerings about the way that human beings learn and develop.

But this book is not merely an explanation of applied Vygotsky-ism. Indeed, there are hundreds of publications about Vygotsky, and we were not compelled to add to that already rich literature. Rather, our purpose for this book is to serve as a reminder of the basic teaching of Vygotsky: *It is through others that we become ourselves.*

All early childhood professionals influence the children in their care, at every moment, through every interaction. It is not a role that can be taken lightly. We developed this book because more than at any other time, we early childhood professionals need to be reminded and inspired to fulfil our role: We might not have the power to create social transformations in the immediate future, but we are social provocateurs. We can change

children's lives within whatever context we find ourselves, and we can turn to Vygotsky for support.

Despite the detailing of very different issues and approaches, each chapter illuminates an aspect of the influence of Vygotsky in the practice of early childhood education. The book serves as a reminder of the importance of Vygotsky and provides examples for many of his terms which permeate the early childhood sector around the globe: *zone of proximal development, mature play, leading activity, mediation, socially constructed approaches, intersubjectivity, mediations by a knowledgeable other*. In clarifying the use and meaning of these terms, there is also a warning—misunderstanding and misuse of Vygotsky is a common practice across divides.

The culmination of the chapters makes it very clear that within the setting walls, much of what we associate with quality, contextually relevant early childhood education owes its development to Vygotsky.

Beyond our original goals, to highlight the impact of Vygotsky, as the chapters rolled in, another purpose for this book emerged. We noted a global collegiality amongst those who care about the day to day experiences of young children. The chapter by Mathias Urban (which we kept for last) provides a good description of this. Early childhood teachers constitute a community of professionals who communicate despite language, geography and huge differences in historical and political backgrounds. This common purpose is what we hope the book will reflect and reinforce.

In this unsettling era of global movement and rapid change, we think the chapters in this book will remind early childhood teachers in the East, West, North, and South to remember why they chose this profession—and to realize the profound impact they can have in their day to day interactions (*mediations*).

## Vygotsky and National Policy

**Zylicz** describes a diminished sense of self-efficacy as an outcome of the post-communist era, whereby the state promoted obedience, and state teaching practices favoured passive reproduction of knowledge with little or no attempt to relate this to the daily lives of children. Since the fall of Communism in Poland and other countries, preschools and schools have had to reconceptualise themselves from being instruments of ideological influence, to agents of change. The notion of citizenship is no longer state driven but based on self-efficacy. Poland and similar countries need self-reliant, active, and engaged individuals in order for the countries to be active and viable members of the European Union.

Zylicz reports that Vygotsky's ideas about child development, and his emphasis on the importance of embedding programs within the sociocultural environment, have guided the highly successful *Where There Are No Preschools* (WTANP) program in Poland. WTANP faced great opposition during its development and throughout its expansion era, because it challenged the traditional, highly hierarchical, and top down approaches to education.

Zylicz's article is especially important because it presents one of the few comparative studies of children who have experienced child-centred/play-based programs with those who did not have access to the WTANP program. Although these are not necessarily validated research methods, the studies undertaken show definite indications that children exposed to particular (Vygotskian influenced) preschool programs score higher than their peers on tests of locus of control, self-confidence and persistence. Longer term outcomes of enhanced social skills and curiosity were also recorded. The study is seminal. Polish authorities now have evidence that it is not merely attendance at preschool which makes a difference, but that particulars of classroom engagement (as per Vygotskian ideas) which facilitate healthy development in children.

**Ang** picks up the theme of creating reflective, thinking citizens as an outcome of early childhood practice. She uses the example of a Christian school that caters to a large percentage of non-Christian families to make her point. The teachers post plans and follow what seems to be a predetermined, set curriculum, yet somehow, at every moment, the classroom reflects child-centred, spontaneous (yet purposeful) activities, which to the untrained eye might seem chaotic. Ang concludes:

An effective curriculum is not just about meeting educational outcomes, setting clear aims, or careful planning. Equally important, it is to enable children to take ownership of their learning, independently as well as collaboratively, and to create contexts in which their learning is sustained in an environment where they can create and co-construct their own experiences. In essence, the key processes of early childhood education are not derived just from a carefully planned curriculum or programme, but from the opportunities that children are given to undertake tasks, make choices, and partake in activities with the adults and peers around them (this volume).

This is the gist of Vygotsky's gift to the field of early childhood education.

Ang goes on to describe a music lesson which, to her non-Singaporean eyes, seemed unsuccessful. She later discovers that there were goals to the

lesson which reflect the sociocultural context “*We are brought up to listen. A good child’s one who listens.*” and concludes that in the Vygotskian sense, there is no one way to “do Vygotsky.” Indeed, the role of the early childhood teacher involves finding the balance between promoting and facilitating the inquiring child and the need for all children to learn the skills of cultural and social negotiation.

The role of cultural historical psychology in facilitating child outcomes at the classroom level is the focus of the chapter by **Yudina**. She investigates what she calls *the teachers’ position* and how this impacts child outcomes, particularly in relation to extending a child’s zone of proximal development (ZPD): Teachers positions towards children exist along a continuum of *authoritarian* through to *no guidance given*. Those who fall too close to either end of this continuum cannot engage in the important joint activity which facilitates extension of the zone of proximal development.

Yudina goes on to describe research studies across three contexts and three diverse educational systems (Russia, Latvia, and USA) and shows that teachers’ *declared position(s) frequently differ from their actual position*. In some cases, teachers are more authoritarian than they believe and in other cases, less authoritarian. Meanwhile, differences between Russian and American children on the ‘perception of the child’ scale show very different cultural expectations: in Russia a child is seen as a vessel to be filled with knowledge; in America teachers are more apt to view the child as a partner in his or her own development. In her seminal analyses, Yudina shows that beyond any curriculum it is the *teacher’s position*, or teachers’ sets of attitudes toward the child, which determines how effective they can be in guiding development. As she puts it, *the set of attitudes towards the child (is) the key participant of the educational process*, (because these attitudes) impact on the character of the child-adult joint activity which Vygotsky tells us leads to real learning and development. Yudina concludes by raising questions about how cultural attitudes are developed in teachers, how they might be ‘moved’ to ensure maximum effect for leading activities within the ZPD.

We close this section of the book with a case study of Vygotsky’s influence upon early childhood education programs and practices in one nation. **Mantovani** describes the influence which Vygotsky has had on Italian approaches to early childhood education, most notably on the renowned Reggio Emilia programs. She reminds us that despite his application to guiding practice, Vygotsky’s ideas are truly political in a deep sense, attributing to school and education a fundamental role for understanding and changing society.



## Vygotsky and Classroom Practice

The next section of the book is dedicated to pragmatic ideas for classroom practice, based upon Vygotskian principles.

**Broström** provides an example of how a Vygotskian approach can develop literacy and aesthetic development. He gives the example of using specific-ended questions—a kind of scaffolding—(such as ‘*What surprised you about this story?*’) to demonstrate how reading one simple book can provide myriad opportunities for creativity, fantasy, language, and social development.

**Lee** points out how Vygotskian thinking lies behind the values which we place upon diversity, participation, and respect for different ways of knowing. She uses several examples to illustrate how young children have been given voice through teaching strategies which do not depend on competence in oral or written language skills. Her examples remind us of the many languages of children and the many ways in which communication—social interaction—can take place. Lee provides poignant examples of the myriad (non-verbal) ways in which children communicate. When a young boy was asked to draw a picture of what he liked about school, but drew instead a picture representing sadness and fear, this presented a portal for understanding the boy’s social reality. When a group of children were instructed to draw a picture depicting ‘what is math’ and drew several non-numerical designs, the teacher knew that her students had understood the concept of *math-in-context*. When children were asked to take photos of *hot spots* in their school, administrators became aware of the physical infrastructure needs and could address areas which were causing alarm to young children. Children found ways of communicating their fears in ways that were meaningful to them.

**Portugal et al** demonstrate the Vygotskian principles behind *The Portugal Curricular Orientations for Preschool Education (COPSE)*. Rather than prescribing activities and outcomes, COPSE offers strategies which reflect learning through play, working in the zone of proximal development, promoting significant, differentiated learning, and considering social reality as a source of development. In addition, COPSE points out the importance of taking into consideration the children’s cultures of origin, the type of partnership to be established with the family, and the appropriation of pertinent symbolic-cultural instruments and other concepts.

Portugal et al’s chapter is especially interesting in light of its presentation of the Child Follow-up Instrument (CFI) which is used to assess the context including the socio emotional environment of the classroom as a tool for assisting teachers to construct appropriate group interventions.

**Mikailova and Karimova** describe how Vygotsky's theories are facilitating the radical transformation in attitudes and strategies for teaching children with disabilities in Azerbaijan.

In many ways, they report, the teaching profession has been conditioned towards a system of "defectology" promoted by the previous Soviet regime. Under that system children with disabilities were given lesser attention and resources and were kept far away from mainstream classrooms. The authors point out that new policies are working to dispel old procedures. While integration is now recognized as a human right and an effective strategy, teachers need support and training to overcome old biases.

This chapter describes a pilot project which addresses these needs. The theories of Vygotsky are shown to be highly effective in the development of the children with disabilities and the overall achievement educational goals for the whole group. The chapter describes how classroom teachers were scaffolded themselves as they learned to observe children, build relationships, assess and work within zones of proximal development, and finally to mold a learning environment which could accommodate the needs of all children.

**Van Oers** reminds us of the central role of teachers in applying Vygotsky's theories within the classroom—especially as they transition from traditional approaches to a play-based curriculum for the early primary school years. He describes a project from the Netherlands which shows how facilitating the integration of Vygotsky based theoretical ideas and the tools for teachers culminated in more independent and creative classroom practices; and why the interaction between teacher educator, teacher, and pupils is fundamental to sustainable learning outcomes.

## Global Implications

The two final chapters, by Bodrova and Urban, serve as a summary, a reminder, and a tribute to the importance of Vygotsky on a global scale.

**Bodrova** identifies a (perhaps *the*) fundamental issue which is defining the concept of early childhood education worldwide: As Bodrova points out, both the east and the west—with such diverse backgrounds in terms of rationale and evolution of early childhood programs—are facing similar pressures today. The perceived co-relationship of school success for individuals to national productivity, reduced poverty, and concomitant decrease in social unrest is having profound effects in both regions.

Concerns about children not being ready for school, as well as concerns about children falling behind in their later academic learning, is creating what

Bodrova calls the *miniature schools movement*, whereby early childhood programs focus superordinately on ‘school knowledge’ and test preparation. Bodrova does not mention this, but we are acutely aware that there is global reinforcement for this notion. In a recent report from UNICEF, Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon states

Pre-primary schooling differs substantially from one country to another, but the strongest programmes share three basic characteristics. First, they support parents during the children’s earliest years; second, they integrate educational activities with other services, notably health care, nutrition, and social services; and third, *they provide children with educational experiences that help ease the transition to primary school* (Ban Ki-Moon cited in UNICEF 2007, 45). (Emphasis is the editors’.)

While we applaud the fact that the Secretary General acknowledges the importance of early childhood education, we fear that the term *educational experiences* may not be seen to encompass the broad spectrum of development beyond school related skills.

Bodrova addresses this when she describes how early childhood specialists in both the East and the West are working hard to promote a counter movement to the promotion of academic focus for young children. However, and this is a controversial but important point, according to Bodrova, in our enthusiasm to counter prevailing notions of schooling, an upswing towards the notion of child centeredness can go too far! In its extreme form, child centeredness over-privileges the notion of following the child’s lead. This can diminish what Vygotsky identifies as the most important aspect of early childhood teaching—adult mediation in meaningful children’s play.

In fact Vygotsky has very specific ideas about what constitutes play as a source of development. Bodrova’s description of how play provides the foundations for abstract thought should be read by anyone who has ever had doubts about the relationship of play to academic (especially literacy) skill development. However, not all play, and certainly not all play materials, are meaningful. This is an important and vital chapter!

**Urban** provides a final chapter which focuses on the issues that most early childhood professionals are facing worldwide As indicated in the Bi Moon quote above, as early childhood education and care moves up in the international policy agenda, the push for an educational outcome and the discourse on ‘curriculum’ and other means of regulation is predominant—as are national policies which emphasise access and cost benefits for a myriad of goals which may have little to do with enhancing the quality of a child’s

day to day experiences, and much to do with developing an employable citizenry. The economic/human capital discourse creates tensions with early childhood professionals who do not see themselves as technicians, but who emphasise the importance of critical reflectiveness, professional autonomy, and habitus over the mere acquisition of skills. Meanwhile, professionals everywhere are expected to achieve predetermined outcomes in a working context that is increasingly diverse and unpredictable. Urban demonstrates how Vygotsky is critical in steering us toward s the possibility of policy-practice relationships that allow for and encourage the development of critical thinking and embrace ‘untested feasibilities,’ rather than predetermined outcomes.

## Conclusion

Despite deep differences between the east and west, there is little doubt that early childhood professionals across these borders are united by a similar goal: We all want to contribute to healthy and stimulating environments which will facilitate optimal developmental trajectories for all children.

Undoubtedly in many regions of the world, the socio-political environment works against this goal. Children and families, who are exposed to violence and conflict, discrimination and stigma, poverty and ill health, have huge barriers to overcome. And yet there is a significant body of research which supports the notion that early childhood programs services can make a significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of young children—even within unstable, fragile, and/or conflict ridden contexts (Connolly and Hayden 2007).

We may not be able to influence immediate peace and security, nor might we have direct influence on the global indicators in Box One, but we *can* create environments for young children which are stimulating, creative, and effective, despite the macro context—and in this way we can move every child we come into contact with closer to actualizing their full cognitive (and social-emotional) development.

The following chapters provide some guidelines.

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