

II

Fundamentals of Defectology (Abnormal Psychology and Learning Disabilities)

DAVID K. ROBINSON, *Truman State University*

Defectology is a word that does not fit the demands for euphemistic expressions that reign in the United States today. (Its more expansive cousin, *pedology*, sounds even worse!) In Russia and the Soviet Union, however, when the term *defectology* appeared early in the twentieth century, it represented quite a stride forward in scholarly study and humanitarian treatment of children (and others) who were suffering from learning disabilities. Although Vygotsky is remembered today mostly for his contributions to psycholinguistics and developmental psychology, his work in what we now call special education is also of great historical significance: it was the field of his most intensive activity when he first began his career in Moscow, and this work had important influences on the formation of his general theories. Jane E. Knox and Carol B. Stevens (1993), translators of Volume 2 of *Collected Works*, have made this argument persuasively.

After Vygotsky received his law degree in Moscow in 1917, he returned to his hometown of Gomel, Belarus, to teach psychology and literature in the normal school, which trained teachers. Some biographers credit him with opening a psychological laboratory there and working with handicapped students. Other writers note that Gomel actually had a home for the handicapped, not a very common institution in that part of the world at the time. There is, however, no direct evidence that Vygotsky took advantage of that resource in his studies, and Vygotsky did not publish on special education in the Gomel period, when his articles mostly concerned literature and, occasionally, psychology.

The problem of the handicapped had received little official attention during the imperial period of Russian history, but the ravages of the World War and its aftermaths burdened the young Soviet Union with up to seven million homeless children, many of whom were orphaned, disabled, and/or antisocial. At the end of the Civil War, therefore, as famine and disease still ravaged the cities and the countryside, the Commissariat of Education (NarKomPros, led by A. Lunacharsky) established the Section for Social and Legal Protection of Minors (SPON, in the Russian acronym) in 1923. Soon after Vygotsky joined the Moscow Institute of Psychology in 1924, he also joined SPON as head of a subsection devoted to the education of physically handicapped and otherwise “difficult” children. By all accounts Vygotsky was remarkably successful working with the children, as well as with his co-workers.

In 1925 or 1926, Vygotsky was able to organize a laboratory/clinic for the study of abnormal children at the Medical Pedagogical Station in Moscow, and later he was made associate director of the Defectological Section of the Pedagogical Faculty of the Second Moscow State University. Vygotsky's aggregation of titles might possibly indicate his rise to prominence (as it would have in the French academic system); more likely the plethora of titles was simply a symptom of the inspired, but chaotic, early Soviet expansion of institutions during the 1920s. Suffice it to say, Vygotsky was fully engaged with disabled children of various kinds, working closely with specialists who were devoted to educating and helping them, and this work began to influence his thinking about psychology in general. Veresov (1999) makes the case that studies in defectology, combined with his earlier engagement in literary studies, led Vygotsky to the theoretical breakthroughs in *Crisis* and later writings (see Section III of the present volume). So how does Vygotsky represent the learning problems (and indeed successes) of these special children, and how did this work contribute to his broader theories?

The articles on defectology included in this volume give a fair picture of Vygotsky's work in the field and of the theoretical background against which he developed it. (Extensive discussions of experiments, however, are not included here or anywhere else in *Collected Works*.) "Introduction: The Fundamental Problems of Defectology" is a programmatic report of the Defectological Section of the Second Moscow State University, published in 1929. The discussion highlights the approach of Vygotsky and his colleagues compared to prominent foreign theorists on education and child development, particularly the Germans, William Stern and Alfred Adler (famous for "inferiority complex"). However, the most interesting moments are revelations of the humanity and creativity of Vygotsky's approach, one that emphasized qualitative over quantitative measures. "The thesis holds that a child whose development is impeded by a defect is not simply a child less developed than his peers but is a child who has developed differently" (p. 31). "The course created by a defect—that of compensation—is the major course of development for a child with a physical handicap or functional disability" (p.34). "The history of cultural development in an abnormal child constitutes the most profound and critical problem in modern defectology. It opens up a completely *new line of development* in scientific research (p. 42 emphasis in original).

Vygotsky's optimistic approach makes it somewhat easier for the general reader to deal with the dreary classification of deficiencies that are discussed in the essay: mental retardation, deafness, blindness, etc., as well as some new categories, such as motor disability, moral insanity, and even a special Russian term, the "difficult" child. Vygotsky's attitude is even more impressive when the reader notices that he frequently draws a parallel between learning disabilities and a particular biological disease, tuberculosis—a person can live with it if the body can compensate. Of course, this is what Vygotsky himself had to do, and was able to do for a few years.

Vygotsky's report insists that special (auxiliary) schools are needed, where specially trained teachers can help the special children. The compensatory mechanisms can function in positive ways (progressive development) or in negative directions (heightened sensitivity, inferiority complex, antisocial behavior), and "more teaching" is needed to help the pupils along the positive track. Compensation can even lead to superior development, as in the case of Helen Keller. Nevertheless, the ways to help the child to compensate positively are not always obvious

or directly intuitive. If the child is deficient in abstract thought, for example, his teachers would actually be wrong to rely too much on visual aids, as that method could hinder the needed development of abstract thought. The auxiliary school should have a “creative character”; it should be “a school of social compensation, of socialization” (p.50). Vygotsky’s prescriptions for these schools give a flavor of the concepts for which he is now well known—the cultural–historical approach, scaffolding, the unity of affect and intellect, and the Zone of Proximal Development—though he did not yet use those exact terms.

The essays on educating blind, deaf-mute, and retarded children are all available in Volume 2 of *Collected Works*; in the present volume we reproduce the remarkable article “The Difficult Child” to illustrate the breadth of Vygotsky’s conceptualization of disability. The Russian word *trudny* implies “hard to deal with” or “difficult to raise”—a child that imposes almost unexplainable difficulties on those who are involved with her. Vygotsky supposes that the origins of such a tendency could be anything, from subtle physical deficiencies (poor hearing, for example) to giftedness. By discussing giftedness as a kind of handicap, Vygotsky emphasizes that defectology is mainly about social problems within social environments, not so much about the handicaps themselves.

In “The Dynamics of Child Character” Vygotsky explores a common term that enjoyed little attention in psychological theory concerning pedagogical practice. Vygotsky understands character in terms of social process, rather than as a state or condition, and he compares his conception with those of Adler, Pavlov, Freud, and others. The final essay here in Section II, “The Collective as a Factor in the Development of the Abnormal Child,” invokes a theme that was broadly advocated in Soviet ideology concerning work and education. Vygotsky explores collaboration between abnormal children, as well as their interaction with teachers and other caregivers. There is considerable discussion of Piaget’s notion of egocentric speech, and Vygotsky’s concept of inner speech, a distinction that is explored more fully in Section I of the present work. Again Vygotsky points toward the promise of improvement: “. . . unlike the defect itself, which is a factor in the failure of the elementary function’s development, the collective, as a factor in the development of the higher psychological functions, is something that we can control” (p.199). It is important to educate the handicapped, but it is even more important to reeducate the broader society.

Vygotsky’s program of defectology was surely one of the most impressive and promising parts of the wider Soviet program in pedology, which had aspirations to modernize society and sweep away many old problems and injustices. By 1931, however, Communist activists were demanding more doctrinaire adherence to Marxism and were less willing to tolerate constructive references to foreign “bourgeois” scholars. These Party loyalists grew impatient in the face of persistent problems, especially concerning education and other indicators of lagging progress that the specialists liked to discuss. Some charged that pedology’s programs in educational testing were only producing new problems for children, problems that had not even existed before. In 1933 Lunacharsky was removed as Commissar of Education, replaced by someone with less interest in modernization, and by 1934 Stalin started purging his Party leadership. That was also the year that Vygotsky died of tuberculosis. In 1936, the Central Committee of the Communist Party decreed that pedology was a “pseudoscience.” This work, whose experimental and observational techniques took account of both heredity and environment, and which

derived so much from Western methods of social science and might well have contributed to them eventually, was officially and almost totally abolished in the Soviet Union. Leaders such as P. P. Blonsky and A. B. Zalkind paid for their advocacy with their lives. Others managed to move out of the way, to Ukraine or Uzbekistan. As part of the general pedagogical movement, defectology suffered too, in spite of Vygotsky's criticism of quantitative testing, and the Moscow Institute of Psychology took the full brunt of the purge. Only after Stalin's death did institutions devoted to psychological research begin slowly to reemerge in Moscow, where the Experimental Defectological Institute carried on Vygotsky's work in special education, at least in theory (Bein *et al.*, 1993).

Though Vygotsky was dead, his ideas certainly were not. The general psychological theories that arose in connection with the work in defectology have probably never been more influential than they are today. His characterization of how children learn, indeed how damaged and deficient children compensate to continue to develop their activities and build fulfilling lives, could also stand as a metaphor for Russian psychology, even for Russian society.

References

- Bein, E. S., Vlasova, T. A., Levina, R. E., Morozova, N. G., & Shif, Zh. I. (1993). Afterword. In *Collected works, Volume 2: The fundamentals of defectology (abnormal psychology and learning disabilities)* (R. W. Rieber & A. S. Carton, Eds.; pp. 302–314). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Knox, J. E. (1989). The changing face of Soviet defectology: A study in rehabilitating the handicapped. *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 37, 217–236.
- Knox, J. E., & Stevens, C. (1993). Vygotsky and Soviet Russian defectology: An introduction. In *Collected works, Volume 2: The fundamentals of defectology (abnormal psychology and learning disabilities)* (R. W. Rieber & A. S. Carton, Eds.; pp. 1–25). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- McCagg, W. O., & Siegelbaum, L. (Eds.) (1989). *The disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and present theory and practice*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Veresov, N. N. (1999). *Undiscovered Vygotsky: Etudes on the pre-history of cultural-historical psychology*. European Studies in the History of Science and Ideas, vol. 8. Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1993). *Collected works, Volume 2: The fundamentals of defectology (abnormal psychology and learning disabilities)* (R. W. Rieber & A. S. Carton, Eds.). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Yoo, Y. (Ed.). (1980) *Soviet education: An annotated bibliography and reader's guide to works in English*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.