

# THE HAGUE UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES, & CODARTS UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS, ROTTERDAM, THE NETHERLANDS

## Educating the Creative Mind

Michel Hogenes<sup>1</sup>, PhD

[m.hogenes@hhs.nl](mailto:m.hogenes@hhs.nl)

### ABSTRACT

*The 21st century demands a lot from both of us human beings as well as from the planet we live on. We are dealing with ‘wicked problems’, complex issues, that urgently require solutions. Globalization, the rise of the internet and the increase in technological development, make people’s lives easier, but also create a number of complicated issues. The complexity of these issues originates from the fact that many people are involved as a result of which different interests and views. Sometimes – and not seldom – even conflicting perceptions occur. However, initiated developments are continuing at a rapid pace and contribute to issues that have to be solved, but often create new issues. Education should prepare children to deal with these issues in the future. This cannot solely be done via pure scholastic assignments, but asks for playful, inquiry- and design-based activities in which all children can and want to participate. Inclusive activities, offered in a rich learning environment in which children can explore their talents, and make up stories to expand the world they are living in.*

**Keywords:** arts; CHAT; creativit;; education; wicked problems

### INTRODUCTION

Children are explorers, researchers, artists, entrepreneurs, and scientists. All this in development and all in one. In order to get grip on their environment, children at a young age have a natural urge to get to know the world around them by experimenting and exploring (Weterings & Plamper, 2021). This leaves us, adults, the responsibility to give children opportunities to discover and explore their talents. Talents in every conceivable area.

The 21st century demands a lot from both of us human beings as well as from the planet we live on. We are dealing with ‘wicked problems’, complex issues, such as sustainability, no poverty and

quality education, that urgently require solutions (Haarsma, 2021). Globalization, the rise of the internet and the increase in technological development, can make people’s lives easier, but also create a number of complicated (wicked) issues. The complexity of these issues originates from the fact that many people are involved as well as from different interests and views. Sometimes – and not seldom – even conflicting perceptions occur. However, initiated developments are continuing at a rapid pace and contribute to issues that have to be solved, but often create new issues. Education should prepare children to deal with issues they will encounter in

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Michel Hogenes is principal lecturer at the teacher education program of The Hague University of Applied Sciences and leads the Master of Arts Education at Codarts University of the Arts, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

the future.

What do children need to be prepared to participate in future's society/ societies? This question can partially be answered with creative thinking and the ability to explore issues in a inquiry and design-based (creative) ways (see e.g. OECD, 2019). However, it is important to keep in mind that education is not only about the qualification of children, to teach them to read, write and do math, but also about subjectification and socialization (Biesta, 2014). Children have to learn to collaborate with other children and adults and function in teams, appreciate what other people can, do or think, and then take their own role in networks they participate in. This paper is a philosophical exploration of what education for our future society could, or maybe even should, look like.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION**

In the Netherlands, the country where the author of this paper is born, has been raised and educated, educational concepts such as Steiner, Montessori, and Dalton are available for primary and secondary education (see Onderwijsinspectie, 2022). Teachers' expectations of students, their ways of interacting with students, and their notions of development and learning are all determined by a school's educational paradigm. As a result, it influences how school subjects are taught. One of the most recent educational concepts in the Netherlands is Developmental Education, based on Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Activity Theory. This educational concept is characterized in the lower grades of primary schools by a play-based curriculum and in the upper grades by an inquiry-based curriculum.

Developmental Education assumes that education is always a step ahead of a student but must also remain meaningful to him or her. This vision presupposes pedagogically sound ideas about what students need as critical and responsible participants in the future knowledge society: relevant knowledge and skills, critical and creative thinking, as well as an investigative attitude. This is why Developmental Education opts for a broad vision of educational outcomes. Education should help students participate in cultural practices of their community now and in the future. For example, by practicing a certain profession, by life-long learning, running a household and participating in the economy. Students must acquire the qualities necessary for this at school: they must be able to communicate, think critically and acquire scientifically based insights. Developmental Education is therefore not only about transferring cognitive knowledge and skills, but also aims at the formation of research skills, social, moral and creative skills and attitudes. For this reason, Developmental Education focuses on a broad education of students who can look at themselves critically and who feel responsible for their actions and the consequences thereof for society. Research and practical experience have shown that Developmental Education is feasible and produces the desired learning outcomes. In Developmental Education not only children learn, teachers and counselors also have to continue to develop. In other words: jointly evaluate and process the changing insights in order to realize the conditions for good education. Only then can education really be meaningful for both students and teachers, and (thus) be meaningful education.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Developmental Education as described above, is as said, based on the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) of human development and learning. For the description of education derived from Cultural-Historical Activity Theory four main concepts have proved to be useful to this paper: 1) meaningful learning; 2) zone of proximal development; 3) involvement; and 4) play (Van Oers, 2012; 2021).

### **Meaningful Learning**

As mentioned before, Developmental Education is one of the most recent educational concepts in the Netherlands (Van Oers, 2021). Because the author sought to explore inquiry and design-based learning within an educational framework in which education could be analyzed as and at an activity level, Developmental Education was chosen as the educational idea for this paper. Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, which underpins Developmental Education, offers such a framework, with activity participation as a crucial feature. Leont'ev (1981), who established a psychological theory of human action, completed Vygotsky's approach.

The mission of Developmental Education is to create a theoretically well-grounded practice for education that is inherently pedagogical, in other words, an approach that aims to intentionally promote children's cultural development while acknowledging the responsibilities and normative choices that educators must (and want to) make in helping children to become broadly developed autonomous and critical agents in society (Van Oers, 2012, p.13). Teachers and other educators in Developmental Education base their methods on the assumption that students grow as individuals as they work

to improve their skills and knowledge while also developing socially and emotionally – students are responsible for and admit responsibility for their own actions. Education becomes socially relevant when students feel connected in their community and wish to actively participate to social practices with a positive yet critical attitude.

From a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory perspective, meaningful learning is fundamental for learning that promotes broad cultural development and agency (Van Oers, 2012). Learning will only be meaningful when learning outcomes are compatible with cultural meanings available to students and make sense to them. Such type of learning is expected to contribute to students' action potential. In other words: 1) Meaningful learning focuses on the appropriation of cultural meanings. The results (learning outcomes) of meaningful learning have an exchange value in the community (knowledge, skills and attitudes that are of societal significance). 2) However, it also relates to the learner's own value system (motives, interests, and convictions) and is permeated with the students' own personal meaning, which adds personal value to the appropriated cultural meanings (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Van der Veer, 1996).

What is essential in cultural-historical thinking about development-promoting learning is the assignment of personal meanings (i.e. sense) to the process of cultural transactions. Leont'ev (1978) argued that without sense, human actions and learning may lead to alienation of students from learning and the educational process. They can be an obstacle in developing responsible agency. According to Menčinskaja (1989/1968), as quoted by Van Oers (2012), Developmental

Education essentially should recognize the subjectivity of students and as such it should take into account students' interests and personal characteristics.

This dual conception of meaningfulness in learning is a key to Developmental Education. Van Oers (2012) states that educators should recognize students as individual subjects who bring their own voices and histories into the process of participation and learning. However, as Leont'ev (1978, 1981) made clear, sense cannot be taught by the means of direct instruction. It can only be formed through interaction between a person and his or her social environment. Development of sense can be formed on the basis of student experiences and personal valorizations. In Developmental Education, development of sense in the acquisition of cultural meanings begins with participation in cultural practices that make sense to students.

### **Zone of proximal development**

The zone of proximal development is generally seen as the core of Vygotsky's view on learning and development (Chaiklin, 2003). Learning that promotes development should be ahead of children's actual level of performance (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 89). Educators should deliberately incorporate new tools and ways of acting into children's activities and help in appropriating them. However, the definition of the zone of proximal development that is most quoted refers solely to the "*discrepancy between what the child can do independently and what he can do with appropriate help from adults and more knowledgeable peers*" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 89). This is a perilous definition as it also may allow the interpretation of teaching as direct instruction, regardless of the sense that learning itself has for

children. A problem with this interpretation of the zone of proximal development is that it misrepresents Vygotsky's idea about developmental learning. Learning essentially *needs* to make sense for children. For Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development is inherently related to imitation (see Vygotsky, 1982, p. 250), and imitative participation in cultural practices (Van Oers, 2012, p. 22). As a consequence, the promotion of children's development should be contextualized in cultural practices in which children – given their orientation to reality – want to participate and are able to do so at their actual level of development and in accordance with their personal interpretations of that practice. Through such participation, children continue to develop (with the help of others) and new action potential is formed in accordance with children's needs that have emerged from these cultural practices. Within the frame of imitative participation in cultural practices, zones of proximal development can be constructed in interactions between children and adults, that become valuable contexts for developmental learning, as long as the child receives the appropriate help (Van Oers, 2012, pp. 21-22).

### **Involvement/engagement**

The emotional relationship actors establish in particular situations is an important dimension of social situations of development. This relationship refers to the extent to which a person feels engaged in the cultural activity in which he or she is taking part. An important precondition is that a person feels accepted in this activity and is able to play his or her part in a personally meaningful way. Vygotsky referred to this emotional involvement in the situation as *pereživanie*. It is hard to find an English equivalent for for this word

(Van Oers, 2012, p. 22). *Pereživanje* refers to experiencing an activity so intensely, that one becomes fully immersed in it. It therefore refers to a state of an authentic and emotional engagement that serves as a personal prism to evaluate an activity setting in an authentic way. According to Vygotsky, engagement is an important dimension for constituting meaningful and functional social situations for cultural development. From an activity-theory point of view, engagement can occur when an actor takes a role in an activity he or she feels emotionally related to, a role that is supported by a personal imagination of what it means to act out this role.

It is interesting to see that a contemporary of Vygotsky, stage director Stanislavsky, used the same notion of *pereživanje* (see e.g. Stanislavsky, 1989). Stanislavsky's use of this concept could be helpful in understanding its relevance for education. As a stage director, Stanislavsky tried to avoid mechanical enactments of a role in an actor's approach to mastering a role for a stage play. Instead, he encouraged actors to profoundly live "into" the role so that the part can be played as if an actor is momentarily *being* the character that features in the scene, and not just *pretending* to be it.

Involvement in an activity or role is an essential element of Developmental Education. Only through such involvement in cultural practices are actors able to learn to become agents in the activity. In other words: actors become engaged in learning processes that potentially promote broad development. In Developmental Education schools and teachers get children involved in cultural practices that make sense to them and encourage children from an early age to take a role in

cultural practices and act out this role in a personally meaningful way.

### **Play**

Drawing on the concepts of meaningful learning, the zone of proximal development and involvement described above, Van Oers (2012) developed a new conception of play based on the Activity Theory. This conception rejects the idea of play as a distinct phenomenon *sui generis*, apart from other types of human enterprises like work or learning. He argues that play refers to the way an activity is carried out, i.e. to the format of cultural activities (practices). Formats of an activity can be characterized by three main parameters: the *rules* that constitute the activity, the level of *involvement* to which children are engaged in the activity, and the *degree of freedom* that the cultural community allows the player.

Developmental Education is characterized as an approach that advocates a play-based curriculum for young children (Janssen-Vos & Van der Meer, 2017; Van Oers, 2012). However, play is not a phenomenon exclusively meant for young children alone. Activities for older children can also be carried out in playful ways and become meaningful in a format in which they do not follow strict rules. The idea of play as an activity that promotes learning and development is also consistent with Vygotsky (1978, p. 103) and El'konin (1972). This means that meaningful learning should be embedded in meaningful practices (practices that make both cultural and personal sense) that follow a play format, in which: 1) the cultural status of an activity, especially the rules that constitute it, are taken seriously and are maintained, if necessary, through educational support systems (help/scaffolding). Such support systems

facilitate the performance of the activity without simplifying it; 2) students and their teachers take up roles that make sense to them and participate voluntarily (to an extent that is both culturally and ethically as well as systematically permitted), with authentic involvement, and in personally meaningful ways; 3) the teacher encourages students to develop their ability to participate in that practice as self-dependent, critical, and responsible agents by deliberately encouraging students to appropriate the tools and rules that go with the impersonated role. In this process, students have a degree of freedom to explore and experiment with the tools and meanings. Teachers monitor this process continuously and take advantage of meaningful teaching opportunities in the context of play. These are considered to be fundamental professional abilities of teachers in a play-based curriculum.

Last but not least, an important and distinctive characteristic of Developmental Education is that a play-based curriculum is *not* just a curriculum that allows children to play in spare moments in addition to learning and work. Playfulness is an essential characteristic of all children's activities in the play-based curriculum of Developmental Education. Opportunities for teaching are embedded in these activities at moments that make sense for the students. A play-based curriculum is not to be conceived of as a curriculum that allows children to play now and then, but as a curriculum in which playfully formatted cultural practices, such as music composition, invariably become contexts for meaningful learning (Van Oers, 2012).

## **DEVELOPMENTAL (ARTS) EDUCATION**

Creativity is often associated with the arts, making something new, creating

or solving something in a creative way (Haarsma, 2021). However, creativity has many meanings (Cropley, 2011). Giving meaning to such a concept is a joint process in which different experiences and interpretations play a role. Children in this process do similar things like adults. This can be interpreted as willingness to participate and contribute to the world that already exists. It also shows that discoveries are sometimes made in the same, but sometimes also in different ways. Haarsma (2021) therefore defines creativity as an attitude to make things with the help of existing materials and ideas, with both hands- and brainpower, that are new and valuable to us. Creativity can be considered an open-ended process, in which different options for action are available. It is an interactive process in which actions repeat itself. These repetitions make it possible to deepen and broaden the actions.

Moran and John-Steiner (2003) described Vygotsky's (1978) ideas regarding the development of the creative imagination over the lifespan and the role of creativity in cultural development. Like play does for children, creativity creates a lifelong zone of proximal development for adults to continually learn from and contribute to their cultures. It helps people actively adapt themselves to the environment and modify the environment to themselves: "The dialectical approach, while admitting the influence of nature on man, asserts that man, in turn, affects nature and creates through his changes in nature new natural conditions for his existence" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 60). Through such interaction, creativity actualizes inherent and latent possibilities of people and environments; it not only broadens what we singly and collectively have done, but also what we can and may

do. It allows people to step out of the present moment, reflect on the past, and plan future behaviors; it connects us to what could be, or can imagine to be. Through the development of creativity, a person comes to be a flexible and intentional inventor of his/her personal future and a potential contributor to his/her cultural endowment. Creativity is not a priori stable property of only special people, but a positive and essential capability of all healthy-functioning individuals. It transforms both the creator through the personal experience of the process and transforms other people via the creation of knowledge and innovative artifacts propagated through the culture to be appropriated by others. Creativity is both the goal and the means of personal and cultural development (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003, pp. 63-64).

Haarsma (2021) stated that creative thinking asks for lots of knowledge and skills. One must be able to come up with original ideas and dare to share these ideas with others. Sometimes, a certain speed is important, just like working together with others, and being able to explain ideas to someone else. Creativity demands for flexibility and the ability to keep an overview in a complex reality: keeping an eye on details and discovering patterns at the same time. Creativity and being creative requires courage.

Children need to stay creative in creative meaningful activities. As Robinson and Aronica (2015) point out that schools should embrace children's creativity. But what do these creative meaningful activities look like? How can teachers also make sure that arts subjects become more relevant, meaningful and challenging? Would it be possible to give students assignments that an artist could have come up with? Or maybe borrow

assignments directly from artists. Bremmer and Heijnen (2020) developed a book full of examples and tips with the Wicked Arts Assignments. They state that children need enabling constraints in order to be creative. Constraints that offer children both a framework and freedom, like Van Oers (2012) describes. These constraints provide guidance to start a process, but do not prescribe the final product.

Creativity itself is not something one can learn. It is an attitude that can be learned. Several elements of it deepen by participating in meaningful activities. These can be play(ful) activities, but also inquiry- or designed-based activities. Materials will be used to play, inquire, or design. Children talk about these materials as well as on the activities themselves, and issues are presented that require a creative process of doing and making.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In order to prepare children to participate in future's society/ societies it is necessary to think about the conceptual background of the education we offer them. It is clear that modern society has become more and more complex. Adults are facing wicked problems. It is likely that these problems will increase, both in number and complexity. In order to deal with these wicked problems, children need to be or stay creative. Teachers need to educate the creative minds of their students. This cannot solely be done via pure scholastic assignments, but asks for playful, inquiry- and design-based activities in which all children can and want to participate. Inclusive activities, offered in a rich learning environment in which children can explore their talents, and make up stories to expand the world they are living in.

Using playful, inquiry- and design-based activities, every classroom teacher should be able to educate the creative mind. The Cultural-Historical Activity Theory offers teachers tools to motivate, stimulate and facilitate students in working on wicked (arts) assignments, which offers students insight in theoretical concepts and practical skills. The presumed potential of this theory is that it can enhance meaningful learning in elementary school students. The validity of this theoretically construed claim can only be verified by further empirical research in which this theory is implemented in everyday elementary classrooms.

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