

Socio-Cultural Transformation and the Promotion of Learning

Transformación sociocultural y promoción del aprendizaje

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Abstract: The main premise of Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory is that to promote learning, and thus development, educators must intervene in, and change, the students' socio-cultural context. Vygotsky's theory, however, has been misinterpreted and the opposite approach has been accepted: the teaching is adapted, according to the context. The result is widespread failure in schools. This article reclaims the true transformative meaning of Vygotskian theory and shows how successful schools in several countries implement various actions to transform their social and cultural environment. Data is presented from six case studies of successful schools conducted in five European countries. The analysis shows that these actions improve instrumental learning and, consequently, cognitive development. All these efforts focus on teaching methods that aim to increase the amount that students learn.

Key words: transformation, adaptation, «curriculum of maximums», learning, development.

Resumen: La premisa central de la teoría vygotskiana es que para promover el aprendizaje y, consecuentemente, el desarrollo, es necesario intervenir en el contexto socio-cultural y transformarlo. Una interpretación errónea de la teoría histórico-cultural de Vygotsky ha llevado a decir lo contrario y ha abogado por la adaptación de la enseñanza al contexto, aumentando el fracaso escolar. Este artículo ofrece evidencias del verdadero sentido transformador de la teoría de Vygotsky y muestra cómo los centros educativos de más éxito a nivel internacional comparten la implementación de actuaciones que transforman el entorno social y cultural. Los datos presentados provienen de seis estudios de casos de centros educativos de éxito realizados en cinco países europeos. Los resultados indican que esas actuaciones fomentan el aprendizaje instrumental y, consecuentemente, un desarrollo cognitivo. En todas esas actuaciones es central una didáctica que se dirige a llevar a todas las y los estudiantes a niveles de conocimiento superior.

Palabras clave: transformación, adaptación, currículum de máximos, aprendizaje, desarrollo.

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LINKS BETWEEN LEARNING, COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Lev Vygotsky (1986) is one of the most important authors to analyse the links between cognitive development, society, and culture. His cultural-historical theory states that because social and cognitive processes are so closely related, cognition should be studied in connection with both interaction and social context. The social context in which children interact greatly influences their learning and, consequently, their cognitive development. Thus, if we are to promote learning, and cognitive development, we must consider these relationships when we develop strategies and teaching guidelines. In fact, as Vygotsky (1978) affirms, children's cognitive development cannot occur outside of this context or independent of social interaction.

On the other hand, the amount of learning that occurs will depend on how educators interpret the impact that the social context has on educational results, and the nature of the actions they take to either adapt to or change the context. When discussing the social context based on Vygotsky's concept, we also include aspects such as culture and language, as he believed they function as mediators of children's learning and development.

Vygotsky proposes that learning consists of both «inter-psychological» and «intra-psychological» elements. That is, the social context acts as a mediator in learning, promoting learning between people; people then internalise this learning and it becomes a part of them. It is through language that we take this step between the interpsychological and the intrapsychological. «Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological) (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). This means that the child first goes through an interpersonal learning process, in relationship with others, and then internalises that learning. Put more generally, first the child interacts with people in his or her environment, in a specific social context; this is his initial «interpersonal» learning. The child engages in learning and actions that he or she could not achieve alone, but can achieve through interaction with others in a specific social and cultural context.

For example, a boy can describe how to add two numbers to another boy in his class who does not yet have that skill, and can describe the strategies he uses to do so. Afterwards, the second boy internalises this «interpersonal» learning; in other words, he moves to an «intrapersonal» level because, having acquired new knowledge through interaction, he can put this new learning into practice alone. From that moment on he has mastery of this knowledge, and can do calculations by himself. However, what would have happened if no one had transformed the social context of that second

child, if he had only spent time with other children who cannot add? He would have had quite less opportunities for learning and even the mathematics curriculum would have been probably reduced for him and for his mates. Consequently he would have ended up knowing less how to add. The only interaction he would have had with someone more competent would be the teacher.

Thus, according to Vygotsky, people's minds are formed within the social context, and are not developed outside it. In other words, there cannot be learning or subsequent cognitive development outside the social context. Consider, for example, the well-known case of the «wild boy» of Aveyron (Itard, 1962). It cannot be established that he was born without cognitive deficits, but what is clear is that a child who has lived without any contact with other human beings does not achieve full cognitive development simply as the result of a natural maturation process. Children require contact with human beings, with a socio-cultural context, in order to develop. This learning, generated through interaction, is what precedes later cognitive development, according to Vygotsky (1978): «the only *good learning* is that which is in advance of development» (p. 89).

This idea is opposed to other concepts which hold that learning depends on children's previous level of cognitive development. Some theorists of development, such as Piaget (Piaget & Inhelder, 1962), take this approach. In contrast to Vygotsky, Piaget states that learning is produced after cognitive development: first children grow and mature biologically, and then, when they have reached a certain stage of evolutionary development, they are capable of understanding certain concepts or learning. Piaget focused on the individual cognitive development of children; he conducted many experiments to determine the ages at which children reach various evolutionary stages that make them capable of carrying out certain cognitive processes. At age two, children cannot read or write, because they are too young, but at age five, they are mature enough to learn to read and write, and to understand what they are doing. Thus, Piaget attributes cognitive development to the maturation of the individual, in accordance with his or her age.

Vygotsky, however, would say that what produces cognitive development, understood as higher psychological processes, is learning, and the generation of learning is closely linked to the social context and the interaction that occurs in it. In other words, cognitive development is not predetermined by a child's reaching a certain evolutionary stage. From this perspective, school education plays a crucial role and educators are responsible for applying teaching methods that transform the context and promote the interaction that generates the learning that will form the basis of later cognitive development.

VYGOTSKY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF CONTEXT: THE ERROR OF REPRESENTING VYGOTSKY AS «ADAPTATIONAL»

Vygotsky's approaches have often been misinterpreted in practice, leading educators to use methods that do not in fact correspond with his theoretical premises. The major error in interpretation is in the link between learning and context. Some hold that the context «determines» children's learning. That is, what children learn will depend on their context, and therefore expectations about their learning must be adapted to it. However, Vygotsky has always stated clearly that learning should not be adapted to what the child already knows: «learning which is oriented toward developmental levels that have already been reached is ineffective from the viewpoint of a child's overall development» (1978, p. 89). An example of the opposite approach is seeing the key for learning in the adaptation of teaching to the level of prior knowledge or the actual developmental level. An example of this is Ausubel's (1978) theory of meaningful verbal learning. In *Educational Psychology: A Cognitive View*, he says that «If [he] had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, [he] would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly» (Ausubel, 1978, p. 163).

However, when Vygotsky discusses the relationship between social context and learning, he argues that what promotes learning is the transformation of the social context. If learning begins as an inter-psychological process, teaching strategies should work to transform the children's context, thus placing them in a context with more interaction which leads them to learn as much as possible, and, consequently, to develop cognitively. The mistaken interpretation of Vygotsky's thinking does not focus on transforming this context, and does not endow it with more and better interaction; instead it suggests adopting a teaching approach oriented towards adapting to the context.

One Spanish example of the educational repercussions this misinterpretation can have is the educational reform called LOGSE (Ley Orgánica General del Sistema Educativo) [General Organic Law of Education] passed in 1990 (Ley Orgánica 1/1990, 04/10/1990). One of the changes this law introduced is Individualised Curricular Adaptations (ACIs: *Adaptaciones Curriculares Individualizadas*); it also introduced so-called flexible groups. ACIs are based on the idea that learning is related to the environment where it takes place, as set out in Vygotsky's theory. However, it assumes that, because of the relationship between learning and context, we should adapt the learning to the context. Here is the interpretative mistake: Vygotsky (1978) argues not for adaptation, but for transformation. He states that our ability to

change the «order of nature», that is, to transform the context, is what differentiates us from animals and that people also transform themselves through these actions. «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» (p. 60). Therefore, not only can people adapt to a context; they can also transform it. This capacity for transformation has significant implications for learning and for the decisions about didactics and organisation made in schools.

Flexible groups are another example of this incorrect interpretation of Vygotsky's thinking. In this approach, students are placed into homogeneous groups based on their educational level; this adaptation to the context involves grouping «those who know the most» with others who «know the most» and those who «know the least» with others who «know the least.» The teacher then adapts the content, orienting it according to the amount that students already know. This approach does not try to change the context or provide opportunities for interaction between diverse students with different amounts of learning. Also, as we describe below, this kind of adaptation is often used in more disadvantaged socio-cultural contexts.

SOCIAL CONTEXT AND THE MOST DISADVANTAGED: THE «CURRICULUM OF MAXIMUMS» VS THE «HAPPINESS CURRICULUM»

If it is important to change the learning context in order to promote learning and thus development for all students, it is even more important to do so for students living with disadvantage. It has been proclaimed —erroneously— that the way to achieve educational equality is to provide all children with access to compulsory education. This is not accurate, however, in terms of either educational equality or social inclusion. As Soler (in press) explains:

...educational systems are still one of the most basic sources of knowledge and one of the main vehicles for social inclusion. However, simply going to school is no longer enough to ensure that a child will be included in society (Soler, in press).

The results of international surveys such as PISA and PIRLS demonstrate the existing inequality in terms of educational results. These inequalities also emerge from analyses of academic results in various schools. Likewise, there is evidence that these educational inequalities are directly linked to inequalities in other areas of society, such as housing, health, employment, or social

and political participation (INCLUD-ED Consortium, 2009). Moreover, students living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, for example those with lower socioeconomic status or higher percentages of immigrants, rarely score as well on these exams. These inequalities and poor results have led some education professionals, administrators and even scholars to make statements that link failure in school to the type of students in schools, or, more specifically, to their socio-cultural context. That is, it is blamed social class, ethnicity, and the social and academic background of families and children for the children's failure at school: «they link the cause of school failure to the presence of migrant students, rather than linking it to the quality of education they have access to» (Alexiu & Sordé, in press).

This approach contrasts with Vygotsky's thinking: he emphasises promoting learning by changing the context, rather than looking at each child's individual characteristics or their context as what determines their learning opportunities. That is, from Vygotsky's perspective, children will learn more if efforts are made to transform their disadvantaged contexts: if they are provided with more, better, and more diverse interaction and more resources, and if the existing resources are better organised. This thinking has been demonstrated in the INCLUD-ED project, one part of which studied successful schools in Europe, where students from disadvantaged contexts do well academically, independent of their social and ethnic origin, and of their families' academic background.

Because of this erroneous application of Vygotsky's thinking, the schools enrolling the largest numbers of disadvantaged students have often experienced the most curricular adaptations, along with the greatest reductions in both the level of the material being taught and the expectations for learning. This has led communities to reject the schools that enrol such students. But it is precisely those children, in the disadvantaged social contexts farthest removed from the academic world, and those whose families have the least education, who most need to have their environment transformed. These children often experience less of the interaction that promotes learning. Using Vygotsky's theory as he intended it, rather than the distorted version of it, means transforming a disheartening environment into one based on high expectations. Doing so allows children to progress as learners and move past all the barriers they encounter.

Researchers have frequently observed this specific distortion; Aubert, Flecha, García, Flecha, and Racionero (2008) describe it as the «happiness and sociability curriculum,» as compared to the «curriculum of efficiency and maximums». The «happiness curriculum» is provided for the children in the most vulnerable communities, and a priority is placed on ensuring that they «are happy» and «do not create conflict». To ensure that they are happy, teachers use approaches based on sociability, emotions, and processes, by-

passing quality instrumental learning and efforts to see the children succeed academically. As Alexiu and Sordé (in press) describe it:

...the curricular adaptations carried out for segregated students are based on the notion of respect for difference or what has also been called the «happiness curriculum». This means teaching is focused on attitudes, self-esteem courses, manual abilities, instead of instrumental learning such as mathematics, reading, science, competences, etc. (Alexiu and Sordé, in press).

This «happiness curriculum» corresponds exactly to the erroneous interpretation of Vygotsky's thinking, described earlier, in which the material presented to children is based on and adapted to what they already know. Since they have not yet acquired a great deal of knowledge, adapting the curriculum to that level means not offering them the opportunity to learn more. Meanwhile, for children of more privilege, schools promote a «curriculum of efficiency and maximums», which encourages a high level of instrumental learning. From the Vygotskian perspective the aim would be to establish a «curriculum of maximums» for all children: an approach whose teaching methods focus on getting all children to progress towards maximum learning. Since the levels of acquired learning and the socio-cultural contexts are clearly different—and unequal—it becomes necessary to transform the context, and especially for those who enter school with lower levels of knowledge.

ACTIONS TO TRANSFORM THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

In the case studies we report on here, the schools have increased students' learning by transforming the context rather than adapting it. These transformations link together the school, the family, and the educational community. In this section we analyse empirical work carried out in six successful schools in five European countries, describing the various actions taken to transform the social context. The six schools are all located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods; all have low SES levels and high percentages of students from minority backgrounds. Here, action is being taken to transform the social context, as Vygotsky would urge, and the schools are succeeding academically, in comparison to others with the same socioeconomic characteristics.

The curriculum of maximums

One of the main actions that can change the social context is to stop using the happiness and sociability curriculum, described above, and instead move from a curriculum of minimums to one of maximums. In other words, schools must implement educational practices that focus on achieving maximum learning.

One element in this «curriculum of maximums» is providing disadvantaged groups with the best resources. For example, the most disadvantaged students and/or members of the educational community are given computers and access to information technology classes. This is not merely a matter of providing equipment; more important is providing the tools required in today's society to those who have traditionally been denied them. The use of technology, including the Internet, is the key to social inclusion—and it is precisely this disadvantaged group of students that most needs these tools. Though some schools in disadvantaged areas still do not provide quality education, the schools that aim at transformation support a high level of learning for the entire community. Thus, some of the schools studied in the INCLUD-ED project hold information technology courses for family and community members. For example, one Roma mother, whom we will call Mercedes,¹ said, «But there was an IT class here which lots of mothers came to, and there still is one, and they are learning about computers because that is the future, computers.»

In addition to its focus on very specific content, such as computers, the «curriculum of maximums» moves beyond being mainly an educational philosophy in which teachers believe all children are capable of learning, to being an instrument for achieving maximum levels of learning. High expectations are a reflection of this curricular philosophy: teachers categorically believe in the abilities of all girls and boys. Questionnaire results from a school studied in the UK reflect the high expectations in these successful schools: 85% of students indicated that they expected to achieve better results in the following academic year and 89% of family members believed that their child(ren) would perform either better or much better the next year. Moreover, 100% of parents indicated that they expected their children to go on to university.

These high expectations are directed not only towards students but also towards families; teachers have high expectations of family participation, including those who initially seem less likely to participate:

After school when they [relatives] say I am not going to come because I don't know how to do this, [we say] you just come and we will help you and we will give you a voluntary task that you can do easily (María, head of studies).

This change in belief, which may seem so simple, already constitutes a significant transformation in the social context of these disadvantaged boys and girls. No longer are they living with the reduced expectations that are part of the «happiness curriculum». High expectations exist in all six of these schools, at every educational level, from primary through to secondary education.

Considering this transformation of the context and based on Vygotsky's idea that learning is first «interpersonal» and then «intrapersonal», INCLUD-ED has found that learning increases when adults generate interaction between boys and girls with different levels of education. This increasingly diverse interaction also helps to transform the context in way that promotes learning. The six case studies we have analyzed include many instances of this process. Various educators noted these instances, and children also become aware that these practices increase their learning. The teachers themselves say the children learn more after they help each other, and are more motivated to learn.

Democratising the school

In these six successful schools, the transformation of the context, and the actions that make that happen, occur not only within the school involving the teachers and students; they go beyond the school, connecting the school with its exterior, by democratising the schools. This means inviting in the entire educational community, including family members and other members of the community.

This school has one characteristic which is that it is a learning community... Apart from that a more formal and normative part of the organisation is that there is more direct organisation, which is more democratic when many of the parents participate (Aleix, educational administration officer).

One way this is done is by creating spaces for families and the whole community to participate. The school invites people to participate in different areas such as decision-making, learning, and student evaluation. Since these areas are shared with families, this means that the whole community participates in, respects and supports the school management, to ensure that it remains open and democratic:

«Well, yes, since everyone knows about it and has participated in it, they make it their own. Therefore they respect it a lot more because they have done it, we have all done it together» (Araceli, primary teacher).

This participation generates a greater connection between the school and the social, cultural and family context, thus transforming the student's context. As Vygotsky explained, the social and cultural context mediates learning. A family context that is not academic and that is disconnected from school does not advocate academic learning for these students. However, when schools are opened up to community participation, all the people who know and work with the child can organise themselves to work together, focusing on the child's learning. Then the context is transformed, because what happens at home is no longer separate from what happens in the school; learning is promoted in both places and occurs more extensively. In one specific example of this, the school organises educational activities requested by the families themselves and suitable to their needs and schedules. These types of classes transform the relationships with the school; families feel more ownership of it and they communicate the importance of school education to their children, either explicitly or implicitly. This entire process has a direct impact on children's learning, as children and family members start to share academic situations together.

...families also value the activity in the school more, because the way they look after their folder, their material, more care is taken so that they... they later link the idea of having to go to class with the idea that in order to go to class they need a folder, specific material... and they later transmit this in their home, and to their children, and they can see that their children need to bring something to school, to bring material (María, head of studies).

As more community members in the disadvantaged communities became involved in the schools, the project noted that many were the so-called «Other Women» (Beck-Gernsheim, Butler, & Puigvert, 2003). These are women without high levels of education who are sometimes members of ethnic minority groups and have traditionally been excluded from the feminist movement. When these women participate in schools, they help transform the social and educational environment and generate more learning. Araceli, a primary teacher described how this works: «The fact that [students] see their mother, because some of [the mothers] come to classes to learn how to read or write, they come and are there for the classes, this motivates [the students]».

In turn, their engagement changes the opinions that both students and teachers have of «Other Women»—and this also promotes learning. In the eyes of children, women who previously were just at-home mothers now become adults with whom they interact and debate, and learn. This is how one mother describes it:

Yes, yes. They [usually] see you as a mother and that is it. The woman and the mother, the wife and the mother, and of course if they see you moving away from that [role], they value you more. When their little friend or whatever says, «Look, your mum is so good at teaching me or she is so good at reading that to me or she's so good at... I don't know», above all they value it very much when their friends speak well of you (Alicia, mother).

Likewise, by participating in schools, these women provide meaning to children's learning and also to their own lives (Puigvert & Elboj, 2004). The women themselves also transform their relationships with other people in the neighbourhood. In the excerpt below a mother describes how mothers who barely speak the school's *lingua franca* are starting to communicate more and more.

I think so, because it is already easier to help the children in the classrooms or at home, with homework, or in the neighbourhood, you walk by and [they say] «hello» and «good morning», they already know how to express themselves. Now they walk by and because they already know Spanish or Catalan, they say hello and we have already shared more when we have meetings here. They get involved, they already say what they think... And there is a lot of participation now (Patricia, mother, Colombian origin).

In another case, a mother who married very young and dropped out of school, but then got involved in her children's school, decided to finish her own education, with her children's encouragement. Overall, family participation leads to many such changes in the context.

When we got married at 16, we didn't know you could still study. It was like when you leave school that's it, you're finished, but I've said to my kids you still can get a degree when you're 40, 45, so there's never an end to studies. So [my children are] quite proud of that... They want me to do more (Aisha, mother, Pakistani origin).

Within the framework of the connection between family, the environment and the school, some of the schools we analysed also accommodate volunteers whom the children do not know initially, such as university students or people from the neighbourhood they have not mixed with before. Such volunteers result in even more interaction in their learning environment, with people from very different backgrounds. As interaction increases, and becomes more diverse, it enriches the learning context and multiplies the learning opportunities. In the schools with high expectations, such as those we analysed, it has even more impact on learning for all the children and on their cognitive development.

One specific way that family participation generates more learning is through after-school programs, which extend the time for learning. When the schools become democratised, they are kept open beyond the normal hours. During these additional hours various adults—family members, volunteering teachers, or other educators—offer more instrumental learning activities. Thus the traditionally non-school hours are transformed into time for instrumental learning; this increases the options for children who do not have the resources at home to do their homework or to study, because their parents are not highly educated, or the home lacks books or a computer. These extra hours make both human and material resources available to them to transform the context in which they do their homework. Thus learning is promoted in one more way.

This school is open from seven, from seven in the morning or 07.30, [and] it is open until six or seven in the evening. In other words, it is open for twelve hours... Now [that the school is] opening the doors, parents have also felt more identified [with it]... I think that parents are very important in the children's classrooms (Pedro, physical education teacher).

In short, in order to achieve all of this participation it is essential that people engage in issues directly related to learning and that it is ensured that the people participating are taken into account. It is important that their opinion count and that they be considered significant in the school. Araceli, a primary teacher, was asked which of her actions she would emphasise as having helped to promote the involvement of community members:

That they feel confident enough to come into the school as if it were their home. Well the issue related to what I was telling you, well that mothers come in, that they act as volunteers, they prepare festivities, make decisions, and are listened to, at the end of the day. They are listened to and are able to decide.

Coordinated action with associations and other organisations in the school

A final set of successful actions extend beyond the school environment, and even introduce elements of the outside context into the school. Thus the effort at transformation shifts, from focusing specifically on the school to working in the local environment, and the neighbourhood. For the community to participate significantly in the school already represents a large transformation. However, some schools go even farther, and promote a broader social and cultural transformation, which brings even more benefits in terms of the children's learning.

In this category of changes, some schools engage in projects that are coordinated with other organisations in the area such as neighbourhood associations, neighbourhood leisure centres, youth associations, Roma associations, NGOs, and homes for retired people. In this process, the whole community, not just the children's immediate family members, gets involved in order to change their social and cultural situation and promote learning for children. Such actions connect tightly with the idea that learning takes place in many contexts and areas, both inside and outside the school. Therefore, to best promote learning, people must transform all these contexts, and to be most effective it must be done in a coordinated way.

To give a specific example, in the primary school *The Rainbow* in Spain, local groups (associations, neighbours, etc.) hold meetings to organise efforts to improve the children's learning; this also opens up the possibility that these people will participate in the school. It also makes possible start new projects, based on family participation and consensus and collaboration between the school administration and the neighbourhood entities. Originally, *The Rainbow* only provided primary education, for children up to age 12; however, the families asked that secondary education also be provided in the same school, a request that seemed impossible at an administrative level. Their reasoning was that, at age 12, many children dropped out because they had to travel outside the neighbourhood to attend a secondary school, even though this secondary education was compulsory. Through a collaborative effort that involved all the neighbourhood entities and the educational administration, a way was found to offer secondary education in the same primary school; this ensured that the children could continue to attend, and that they could earn the minimum compulsory education certificate.

Yes they do secondary or primary here, and since they do the whole secondary stage here, if they do it here, my children attend, my children will be here, because they are in their [own] neighbourhood, they are in their [own] environment, no? And they will complete it and they will get their basic education (Ramón, Member of the Roma Cali Association).

New educational projects are also being created outside of school hours and outside of the school. One such project is the *Proyecto Educativo de Barrio* (Neighbourhood Educational Project), which is just beginning in the same neighbourhood as the *The Rainbow* school. This project implies that the three educational centres (from this and the adjoining neighbourhood) will implement actions to transform their social and cultural environment, including opening the doors more hours in a coordinated way. Another project is the *Centro Finde* (Weekend centre), which is in process of being implemented and will imply the opening of the school over the weekend offering

educational activities mainly for children and teenagers but also other programmes for young and adult people from the neighbourhood.

It promotes learning in other parts of the neighbourhood in coordination with the school. One key element in this process is that all of the new proposals being coordinated by these neighbourhood groups must be for activities that have already been proven to succeed elsewhere. Vygotsky refers to transforming the context, which has sometimes been interpreted as «trying» something new, carrying out «creative innovations», etc. The INCLUD-ED project, however, has conducted research to determine which practices do work, and have succeeded in which countries. This empirical evidence can be used as the basis to further transform our schools, to promote learning and development for all children. It does not involve innovating for the sake of innovating; instead, «the transformation was to be grounded in actions that had already proven successful elsewhere» (Aubert & Lalor, in press).

DISCUSSION

If we read Vygotsky's texts directly we can observe that his theory has been misinterpreted with regard to the relationship between learning and the socio-cultural context. Vygotsky has frequently been characterised as «adapational»: he is seen as promoting efforts to adapt learning to the social context and to the knowledge children have already acquired. This incorrect interpretation has mostly been applied to children from the most disadvantaged social groups, and evidence has been found that this erroneous application has led to worse educational results and more social inequalities.

However, when Vygotsky is read correctly, we observe that he constantly emphasises changing the context in order to generate learning, and stresses that humans alter nature in order to transform their lives. Along these lines the INCLUD-ED project has found empirical evidence that children's educational outcomes improve when actions are taken to change the social and educational context. This evidence can be found in the schools where students succeed academically, despite their disadvantaged educational context.

Implementing a «curriculum of maximums» is one of the primary approaches in which both an educational philosophy and specific actions ensure that children learn as much as possible and that more is given to those who have the least. From this perspective, far from applying teaching methods that have been adapted to the context, teachers use methods that will help children learn all they possibly can.

Another key action is democratising the school by having family members and other community members participate in significant activities such as decision-making and helping in the classroom. This participation also

transforms the environment, since it transforms the relationships between the school and the community and generates more and more diverse interaction, which in turn promotes learning. One specific result is an increase in the time that children spend on instrumental learning, since community participation makes it possible to offer more of the instrumental learning activities outside of school hours.

The final action we emphasise here is the transformation of the whole educational environment, not only the school context. Thus the school works in coordination with other neighbourhood organisations to create joint coordinated learning activities. In this way a neighbourhood educational project can be created by implementing educational activities that have already succeeded elsewhere. The whole neighbourhood can then become involved in transforming the socio-cultural context, thus leading to greater learning and, consequently, greater cognitive development for children.

Our analysis shows that, in order for all children to succeed academically through an increase in their instrumental learning, educators should base their educational practices and teaching methods on empirical research, on educational practices that have been proven to be successful. Finally, if they base their work on Vygotsky's theories, they must be sure they are following the «real» Vygotsky, the «transformative» Vygotsky that we have described here, especially if they are working in the most disadvantaged contexts.

NOTES

¹ This name, and all others here, are pseudonyms.

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