Full length article

Understanding and responding to negativism in schooling: the potential of the 'double move'

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A B S T R A C T

This essay considers the significance of negativism in classroom activity and its potential to provoke us to pay attention to the situation it expresses. Negativism is explored as a function of behaviour in cultural-historical theorisation of children's development, drawing on Vygotsky's work in child psychology. The relationship in post-Vygotskian research between negativism, crisis, the social situation of development and activity setting is reviewed. Positioning and agonistic struggles in the drama of development are explored. Hedegaard's practice of the 'double move' is elaborated, with alternative yet sympathetic moves considered in conclusion for pedagogic practice in response to negativism.

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1. Introduction: the problem and methodological issues

> In a very short time, the child changes completely in the basic traits of his personality. Development takes on a stormy, impetuous, and sometimes catastrophic character that resembles a revolutionary course of events in both rate of the changes that are occurring and in the sense of the alterations that are made. These are turning points in the child's development that sometimes take the form of a severe crisis.
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> [(Vygotsky, 1998, 191)]

This enquiry emerges from a long-held research interest in the interactive and intersubjective practices of secondary school classrooms (for example, Webster, Beveridge, & Reed, 1996; Reed, 1986; Reed, 1999, 2004, 2008), therefore concerning the behaviour of adolescents. My objective is to understand what Vygotsky (1998, 18) terms 'negativism'[1] and to elaborate its purpose in his work towards 'a general theory of child development' (Elkonin, 1998, 302). I seek also to review a range of writers in the cultural-historical tradition in order to consider possibilities for pedagogical directions that might respond to negativism. This article will take the form of an essay – that is, writing that 'eschews the dichotomy of arts and science as two opposed and irreducible kinds of knowledge' (Gualtieri, 1998, 50) by merging both. The essay form also allows me to review in detail source texts – many of which are not easily available[2] – and to

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[1] This is, of course, a translation from the Russian. Vygotsky also refers to the negative phase (Vygotsky, 1998, 16).

[2] The essay will draw extensively on *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky*, which, although the standard reference in English for twenty years, is often not available in university education libraries, my own included.

quote directly, rather than summarise. Within this essay I will concentrate primarily on negativism as a principle of young people's development. Although negativism is certainly a feature of adult activity and some aspects of its role will be considered, it is to the understanding and extension of young people's agency as learners that we will look. The conclusions I draw offer a step towards experimental strategies that may be explored and reported through future research and publication.

2. Negativism in the classroom

The commonly held perspective is that adolescents' negativism is simply bad behaviour and oppositional to the proper activity of learning. To the contrary, I will argue, in line with Vygotsky (1998), Yaroshevsky (1989), Bozhovich (2009), Radzikhovskii (1987), Varenne and McDermott (1998), and Hedegaard (2004, 2012), that negativism is a constituent of developmental activity and learning and offers 'a real, vital coincidence' (Vygotsky, 1998, 16).

We need to understand better what is going on, what displays and expressions of negativism suggest, and their significance to the social relations of the classroom and the institution – in short, that such negativistic acts have potential for the development of agency and are not simply insignificant and annoying distractions to learning. As teachers and educationalists we are fond of portraying pedagogical encounters in general and behaviour in particular in terms of positive and negative, as if charged with physical force like electricity, rather than charged with motive, feeling, significance and personality, as language and culture are. We also tend to leap to metaphysical and moral imperatives by equating negativism with "badness" and judging it. What happens if we dispel such other worldly affordances and suppose instead that such-and-such act of "bad behaviour" might denote in some way a constructive comment on the activity of teaching and learning? What happens if we ditch the good/bad, positive/negative dualism and detect what might be ontogenetic, dialogic and reciprocal clues in this puzzle of being and becoming that is schooling?

There is an expression in English that is deployed reactively and rhetorically by teachers, parents and responsible adults when we encounter some individual or collective action by young people that interrupts our process: "What in the world do you think you are doing?" We seem to ask the question even though we know in part the answer because we have just witnessed the action that raises the question. My guess is that equivalent expressions and variants are widespread in family and institutional settings and have been commonplace across history.

What is going on is instantly recognisable, not necessarily as a question in a semantic or syntactic sense, but as an utterance with particular functions in respect of an individual or group behaviour that runs contrary to the expected flow of teaching and learning. The force of the utterance is partly to rebuke and partly to draw attention to the behaviour that has arrested the pedagogical flow. Therefore whatever was done or said is revealed as an irritant to the normal process. For the most part, the asking of the question is purely symbolic, to draw attention to the irritation and therefore to subdue it with the hope of moving on in harmony. However, although that may close down and negate the initial negative action that causes the interruption, it doesn't explain the action – the potential of the original negativism has not been addressed, so it remains an irritant. Think of it like an insect bite that you stop to scratch, which affords temporary relief but doesn't cure the bite, so in a few minutes you stop to scratch all over again. In classroom activity terms the same parallel applies: the pedagogic process is stopped by the teacher calling attention to the interruption, which is supposed to quell the irritation, but doesn't cure the source of the problem, so a few minutes later the interruptive action is replayed.

An irritant behaviour has always been something produced in the classroom that sticks with me long after the attempt at correction (which in my experience usually fails), leaving me with questions, and in research terms, an impetus to inquire what social knowing might be at play?

The significance of an irritant was important early in Vygotsky's career in terms of the awareness he drew from literary criticism and reapplied in the study of psychological functions:

> Any work of art is naturally regarded by the psychologist as a system of irritants consciously and deliberately organized in such a way as to produce an aesthetic reaction. In analyzing the structure of the irritants, we reproduce the structure of the reaction.
> [(Vygotsky, 1987a, 40, in Yaroshevsky, 1989, 144–145)]

In some respects I want us to think about incidents of adolescent behaviour as works of art, since they are often aesthetically designed to produce a perceptible and pleasing reaction – to the author of the incident and the immediate audience, that is. However, the move I suggest we need to make to negativism is not simply appreciative but dialectical – thus the move that Vygotsky describes above – that of taking apart what constitutes the 'irritant' in order to understand the cultural processes that might inform the activity expressed by that irritant. Having considered the structure of a negativistic reaction we might in turn be more understanding of how to act with it developmentally – constructively and rationally – rather than simply to negate it in a reactionary manner.

3. An overview of negativism in Vygotsky's writings

> [W]e see inner discontent, anxiety, striving for isolation, self-isolation, sometimes accompanied by a hostile attitude towards those around. The decrease in productive activity, demise of interests, and a general anxiety constitute the main, distinct traits of the phase as a whole. The adolescent as if repels his[3] environment, that which was recently the subject of his interest;

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[3] Vygotsky is drawing on an Austrian contemporary, Charlotte Bühler, who observes girls and boys, so we should think (as elsewhere) of the use of 'his' to reflect both sexes.