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Principles of social education for deaf and dumb children in Russia

Lev Vygotsky

The system of social education of deaf and dumb children, based upon principles of which I shall be chiefly speaking today, is not only a theoretical construction but also real, living facts taken from daily life in various fields of pedagogical observation, facts which have been developing before us in the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, and particularly in the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. Of course, it should be understood that the theoretical and the practical work of this system has not yet been completed, and therefore I should be right in saying that I am here today for the purpose of sharing with you the experiments of the first steps in this direction, the first attempts of scientific thought and pedagogical conquests leading to the creation of a system of social education of the deaf and dumb. However, the chief principles of this system can already be formulated with such exactitude and clearness that I am hoping for some success in my endeavour to acquaint you with the principles of the new movement we are putting into operation.

Before proceeding to the actual principles of social education of deaf and dumb children, I should like to mention certain scientific principles on which the new system is based. These principles refer to the psycho-physiological peculiarities of a deaf and dumb child, and to the process of its upbringing. Every physical defect, be it blindness or deafness, alters the child's attitude towards the universe and, primarily, towards its fellow beings. Let us take, for instance, the geometrical place of a human being in the social sphere, his part and his fate as partaker of life and all functions of social existence, and we shall come to the conclusion that everything is to be entirely altered in the case of a human being with any defect. A physical defect provokes a social sprain, with unavoidable consequences, just in the same way as a sprained ankle or injured arm interferes with our movements and makes us suffer from pains and inflammation. It means that an organ is out of order and regular functioning of the body is interfered with.

The problem of children's defectiveness dealt with psychologically and pedagogically should be made an important social problem. Up to the present this

question has been considered of secondary importance; it is now necessary to change this attitude in giving this question a distinct social significance.

If a psycho-physical defect means a social sprain, then to bring up such a child properly means to place him safely in life, in the same way as a sprained organ is put back to its right place. It goes without saying that blindness and deafness are biological facts and not at all of a social nature, but the teacher has to deal not so much with these facts as with the social consequences of these facts. When we have a blind child as an object of education before us, we are compelled to deal not so much with blindness in itself, as with the conflicts which arise therefrom within the child when it enters life. It is obvious that its contact with surroundings does not proceed in the usual way as compared with a normal child. Blindness or deafness, as a psychological fact, is not at all a misfortune, but, as a social fact, it becomes such.

I am now approaching the starting point, the very first stage of the system of social education of deaf and dumb children, namely, their pre-school education, the importance of which, as far as I know, has not yet been sufficiently appreciated, either in theory or in practice, in quite a number of countries. The foundation of all future educational work, particularly the teaching of speech, is being laid at the children's home during pre-school education. It is exactly this very point, the central one of the system, that I shall discuss in order to let you see the fundamental importance of pre-school education which occupies the most prominent position in the whole system. It is in the children's home that the little ones first learn to speak; the teaching is based upon natural impulses, such as prattling and mimicry. Speech is considered as part of the child's general social life. Under the old traditional methods of teaching the deaf and dumb, these natural impulses of speech were neglected, and used to gradually disappear under unfavourable conditions; this stage was usually followed by a period of speechless development, and thus the child's speech and consciousness went quite different ways so far as development was concerned, and only towards the beginning of school days was the child taught to speak by sounds; by that time the general development of the child was so advanced that it could not possibly take an interest in the slow teaching of speech, and considered the task as a very unpleasant one without any practical advantages. On the other hand, the habit of mimicry became so strong that it was very difficult for the verbal speech to fight it, especially when the child's interest in the verbal speech had been absolutely killed. The only way out of this position was to make use of artificial measures, exceptional severity and cruelty, and appealing to the consciousness of the pupil, and thus the child was successfully taught to speak; but we all know that methods based only on conscious efforts of the pupil, against his fundamental interests and habits, are not reliable.

At the Pre-School Children's Home, children are taught to speak from the age of two years. Synthetic reading of words, phrases, names, commands from the lips and reflexive, unconscious imitation of verbal speech are the two fundamental methods. The habit of expressing wishes and thoughts verbally is being developed here from early childhood. Speech is taught straight away in a most practical and social manner. When the child is playing and working daily, it learns unconsciously to speak and

understand the spoken word; it also learns to concentrate on speech, organize its life and the conduct of it; these achievements would be inaccessible to a dumb child. At the early stage, from two to five years, there are no sounds to be dealt with. The exercises consist of children's first prattlings which are preparatory to each new word and reading from the lips; simultaneously with it, the organs of speech – voice, breathing – are also working and developing in quite a natural way. These exercises are being practised before the child actually acquires correct speech. The child's speech is being organically developed directly from its chatter and is from the beginning intelligent and adapted to its function. If we were to wait until the child learned to pronounce each sound correctly, and then were to compose the sounds into syllables, the syllables into words – if we were to proceed from the elements of speech to synthesis – we would never hear a natural and real speech from the child. The natural method is just vice versa: from the complex to the simple elements of speech and their combining. If you look into the history of the development of human speech and that of a single child, you will find that the phrase precedes the word, the word the syllable and the syllable the sound. Even a single phrase is practically an abstraction. The speech is being made up of more than one sentence, and therefore children are much quicker at learning an intelligent, useful, socially necessary speech – by that I mean a logical speech and not an articulation. 'The consecutiveness in the development of speech of a deaf and dumb', says Natalia Rau, founder of the first Children's Garden for the Deaf and Dumb in Russia, 'must be copied from that of a normal child: the stages of development of speech must be the same, the difference is only so far as means and time are concerned – a deaf and dumb child will be able to say at the age of three to four what a normal child will say at the age of one year.'

The foundation of future speech is being laid here during the pre-school education. Speech does not only serve as a means of intercourse between children, but also as an instrument of thought. 'Synthetic reading from the lips', says Natalia Rau,

is already the beginning of thinking through the verbal word. When reading from the lips and observing the picture of the mouth and the movements of the speech organs, the child is intimately associating this picture with the idea, the idea with the movement of the mouth and tongue. Let us assume, for instance, that the child is already familiar with the sentence 'Come here', when it has to go itself or call somebody else – it sees mentally the uttering of the sentence in itself, and the muscles of the speech organs which are instrumental in the producing of this sentence become involuntarily strained. Gradually, in proportion as the frequent reading from the lips is being practised, the child's ideas and inner mental uttering are also becoming strengthened, and though not able to pronounce verbally, the child already speaks mentally; the result thereof is that the most precious thing in our work with the pre-school child is being formed, viz. the habit of understanding, thinking and expressing its thoughts verbally.

Thus real speech stands out in all its variety of functions; it becomes organically part of the child's life and begins to shape its life and conduct around the centre of its social experience, of which the chief organ is speech. Therefore, Natalia Rau is quite

right in her summing up: 'Experience proves that the pre-school education of the deaf and dumb serves as a strong basis for the natural verbal speech, and is the only means of intercourse between a deaf and dumb person and a normal one. *Through pre-school education to the natural verbal word, through the verbal word into the midst of hearing beings*'.¹

The further teaching of verbal speech at school is proceeded with on the same principles as in the Children's Garden. The fundamental principle, which is combating the analytical, artificial, dead method of sounds, remains; it is the fight for a whole word, an intelligent sentence, a logical, natural speech.

I shall speak to you only of two new, original methods which are based upon this principle and are being put into practice at our schools. The first one, that of Mr I. Golosov, Instructor of the Moscow Institute for the Deaf and Dumb, is considered to be the first and original attempt to build the teaching of verbal speech on the method of whole words. The fundamental idea of the author is to attempt to teach the deaf and dumb in the same way as our little children are taught. The preliminary working out of this method started in 1910; its practical work commenced at Warsaw in 1913, and only during the revolution were the theory and practice of this method completed in Moscow. The essential feature of this method is that children deal with a word and not with a part of it. 'The word', says Mr I. Golosov, 'arouses their interest in speech and makes them feel confident that they will learn to speak.' During the study of words and sentences, sounds are dealt with simultaneously. The results of this method were exceptionally good: thus, for instance, in the 1923-1924 semester, October to June, in the first group, children were taught by this method and mastered 22 sounds.

The essential part of this method is the reading from the face, whereas the analytical method deals with the technique of uttering. Reading from the face is connected with the reading of the same material written and printed. The sound is not dealt with separately, but is worked out in whole words, starting with short words (one syllable), and in whole sentences and even in short stories. I should like to mention that this method coincides in its essential features with that of Mr Malisch, though it came into existence in an independent and original way. This coincidence is likely to suggest that we are moving in the right direction.

Mr Malisch holds a similar view with regard to natural speech; its teaching must begin straight away with logical speech. 'Children should be taught', says Mr Malisch, 'only those things that are now, or may be later, directly useful in life'. Reading from the face, reading from letters, writing and articulation - all those four aspects of teaching are intimately connected here, but reading from the face is given the most prominence. 'Satisfactory pronunciation is being attained', says Mr Malisch, 'in a purely automatic manner', whereas in the analytical method it is based upon a conscious uttering of each sound and corresponding sensation connected with it.² However, we cannot be satisfied with a technical reform and partial improvement. Our principles are urging us towards entire revision of the whole system. We must have courage to go to the end without stopping half way. This attempt is being made by Mr Sokoliansky through his method.³ This method leads to the mastering of speech chiefly through reading from the lips. Speech sensations, which are very

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indistinct, are *not* chosen here as a basis for thinking, but what is more prominent and familiar to the deaf and dumb, viz. sight sensations, such as images of words on the lips of the speaker, words written on a blackboard, and motor sensations of the hand when writing. An intelligent, logical whole sentence is given to the deaf and dumb under these three aspects. The problem is, so to speak, to 'throw' the deaf and dumb into our speech, with the result that the child gets mechanically into logical speech without special effort. The chief characteristic of this method is its mechanical and reflexive nature. At first, sentences are given only in the imperative, and always with the corresponding action. Conditional reflexes are being developed. According to the accepted order, the sentence is first read from the lips accompanied by a direct instruction, i.e. a natural gesture: 'Children, get up!' – and the teacher shows with the hand what they should do. This is repeated two, three times; this is followed by the reading of the sentence from the lips without a gesture, it means with a conditional instruction: this is repeated seven, eight times, and the children master the sentence. When the children get hold of a considerable number of sentences in the imperative, the same material is used for the descriptive form in the present and past tenses. But the most remarkable feature of this method is that children learn not only one phrase but, in about 12 minutes, they learn a number of signs, phrases and a whole chain of sentences. These are, for instance: 'Children, get up!' 'Children, come here!' 'Children, lift up your hands!' 'Children, put down your hands!' 'Children, go to your seats!' 'Children, sit down!'

When the children master the chain of sentences by reading from the lips, they are given the same sentences to read separately in order to ascertain whether they really know what they have learned in the whole chain; the results are always very satisfactory. The same chain of sentences is given in writing: it is either written on a blackboard or on a wall poster. This exercise must be repeated from three to four times. The children take about 12 minutes to get hold of the chain of sentences by reading from the lips, and from six to seven minutes by reading from the poster. The subsequent chains are composed on the basis of the preceding.

→ The most striking feature of this method is that the children learn very quickly to write. The technical working out of the pronunciation is dealt with separately at special lessons, but it is always subordinated to the fundamental lessons in speech, viz. reading from the lips, which is practised two hours daily. It is difficult to say when the child will be able to speak as quickly as it reads from the lips, but we must not forget that even the normal child is passing through a period when it understands more than it can say.

Though these methods are subject to revision and correction, there is no doubt as to the direction which the education of the deaf and dumb will take, and that is that the principle of logically connected speech will be in future the dominant feature of the education of deaf and dumb children. I shall even go so far as to say that there is no one method which, by itself, can completely solve the problem of teaching the deaf and dumb to speak. There is no solution of this problem outside of the general system of education; here methods can be blamed or approved of. Thus, for instance, the

verbal method was killing in the old system; it may become beneficial in the new one. It is necessary to organize the child's life in such a way as to make speech necessary and interesting. The teaching must appeal to the children and should not be directed against them. We must make the children's interests our allies and not our enemies. Desire for speech should be created, and the child is more likely to learn to speak when it is urged by necessity; this very motive is being completely destroyed by the traditional school which separates the deaf and dumb child from normal surroundings and places it in a special environment, where everything is adapted to its infirmities; thus, the circle of its interests becomes very narrow and this encourages unsociable instincts.

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The only way out of this difficult position is a fundamental change in education as a whole; and this idea has been put into practice in the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, and the problem of the education of the deaf and dumb has been solved on the basis of a general new school of labour education for normal children. The chief principle upon which our schools are based is that education is considered as a part of social life; school is an organization where children participate in the life which surrounds them. 'The bringing up and education of children must proceed within society, through society and for society.' This is the basis for social education as defined by one of the theorists of the new school of labour education.⁴ The education of the deaf and dumb is based on the same principle.

Just as it is impossible to become a swimmer by standing and looking from the shore, so it is quite impossible for the deaf and dumb to learn to speak outside of the general social life. Work, Society and Nature are the three leading subjects upon which the training and educational work is based. Such a practical education is the best and safest way into life, because the child becomes accustomed to take an active part in life from early childhood. The deaf and dumb being brought up and educated in these surroundings, enjoy company and speech, take an active interest in life and are quite prepared for an independent future.

'Through the study, from a practical, working point of view', says Krupskaja, 'of connections and relationships between man and nature, individual and society, economics, politics and civilization past and present, the teaching of subjects acquires a general educational and polytechnical nature.'⁵ Upon such a technical working education is the professional training based; through the latter the pupil receives a finishing touch, so far as a certain aspect of labour is concerned, so that he may be fitted to take up his work in society. The organization of Children's Social Bodies is based on the same principle, and perhaps I shall not be wrong in saying that the world's first experiment of self-governing among deaf and dumb children has been made in our schools. The children organize their own life; they have their own school governing body, with sanitary, cultural and other committees, and all these interests go to make up their whole life. As a result, social habits, conscious instincts, initiative, organizing abilities, collective responsibility are developing and strengthening through this system.

Then comes the deaf and dumb Children's Communist movement, participation of children in detachments of young pioneers. The pioneer movement is, from a pedagogical point of view, an experiment of building and organizing children's games in an international and universal spirit. Through these games, children are put in direct touch with the life of the working class; they learn to understand the experiences and hardships of the grown-ups. The pulse of universal life is beating in the pioneer movement, and the child learns to realize that it takes part in universal life. There is one more new feature of these children's games: it concentrates the child's interest on the present and future, whereas the usual games were based on the historical past. It is obvious that, in this manner, the deaf and dumb child enjoys life just as fully as the normal one. This very system of social education contains the newest and most significant reforms gained through the revolution on behalf of the education of the deaf and dumb.

In the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, the education of the deaf and dumb is a state business directed by the organizers of the People's Education. Of course, we are still poor in means and forces, and therefore unable to do as much for the deaf and dumb as we should like to. We went through very hard times during the war, blockade and hunger and, naturally, together with everybody else, the deaf and dumb suffered. When things became generally better, more care and attention was also extended to the deaf and dumb. Moreover, if we compare the number of schools for the deaf and dumb and the number of pupils in them in the territory of the Union before and after the revolution, we shall find that both the number of schools and pupils have increased since the revolution. Thus we had 51 schools on the present territory of the Socialist Soviet Republics before the revolution, and towards 1 June, 1925 we had 63 schools. There were 2,377 deaf and dumb pupils before the revolution; by 1 June, 1925 we had 3,250. In Moscow we had six institutes for the deaf and dumb; three school institutes with 260 pupils, and three pre-school institutes with 60 pupils before the war; by 1 June, 1925 we had eight institutes (612 pupils): four for children of school age (466 pupils) and four for children of pre-school age (147 pupils).

I should like to emphasize once more that we are very far from thinking that we have reached something final in this matter. On the contrary, we think that we are only starting, but we consider that the path chosen by us is the right one, and that the future belongs to the social education of the deaf and dumb.⁶

Notes

First published as Vygotsky, L. S. 1925: Principles of social education for deaf and dumb children in Russia. In *International conference on the education of the deaf* (pp. 227-37). London: William H. Taylor & Sons. Vygotsky was indicated as Dr Leo Vygotsky (or Vigotsky), Director

of Education of children with defects, under the People's Commissariat of Education, Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, and Lecturer of the Second Moscow State University. The presentation at the conference in London took place in June 1925 as part of the only trip abroad Vygotsky ever undertook. It seems he travelled by train and boat and paid visits to research centres in Germany, Holland and France. No details of this trip have so far been unearthed and one can only guess that he visited Gestalt colleagues in Berlin and defectologists/educationalists in Amsterdam and Paris.

A slightly longer Russian version of the same paper has been published in vol. 5 of Vygotsky's Collected Works. See Vygotsky, L. S. 1983: *Principy social'nogo vospitaniya glukhonemykh detej*. In L. S. Vygotsky *Sobranie Sochinenij. Tom 5. Osnovy defektologii* (pp. 101–14). Moscow: Pedagogika. Some of the biographical and bibliographical information provided in notes 1 to 4 is based on the notes to this edition.

- 1 Rau, Natalia Aleksandrovna (1870–1947), Russian expert in the education of the deaf. Vygotsky refers to p. 59 of Rau, N. A. 1926: *Doshkol'noe vospitanie glukhonemykh* [Pre-school education of deaf and dumb children]. In S. S. Tizanova and P. P. Pochapina (eds), *Puti vospitaniya fizicheski defektivnogo rebenka* [Ways of Educating the Physically Defective Child]. Moscow. Apparently, Vygotsky saw some unpublished version of this book as his talk was held one year before its publication.
- 2 Malisch, Konstantin (1860–1925), Austrian specialist in the education of deaf children. Vygotsky's quotes are taken from p. 81 of Külpe, G. I. 1926: *Metod celykh slov i fraz Malisha* [Malisch's method of whole words and phrases]. In S. S. Tizanova and P. P. Pochapina (eds), *Puti vospitaniya fizicheski defektivnogo rebenka*. Moscow.
- 3 Sokoliansky, Ivan Afanas'evich (1889–1960), Russian expert in the education of deaf and blind children. Started his first educational experiments with a group of pupils in Kharkov in 1923. Was soon generally regarded as the founder of a new system of education for deaf, dumb and blind children. His most successful pupil Ol'ga Ivanovna Skorodokhodova was as well known in the Soviet Union as Helen Keller in the Western world. His work was continued by his student A. I. Meshcherjakov. Vygotsky's description of Sokoliansky's method is based on pp. 74–5 of Kotel'nikov, M. N. 1926: *Na novom puti: (chtenie s gub kak osnova obucheniya glukhonemykh ustnoj rechi)* [On a new path: (lip reading as the basis of teaching deaf and dumb vocal speech)]. In S. S. Tizanova and P. P. Pochapina (eds), *Puti vospitaniya fizicheski defektivnogo rebenka*. Moscow.
- 4 This may have been the German school reformer Georg Kerschensteiner (1854–1932), whose ideas were very well known by the Soviet theorists of the labour school – such as P. P. Blonsky – and greatly inspired them, but whose name was not very popular as he was considered to hold bourgeois and authoritarian views.
- 5 Krupskaja, N. K. (1869–1939), wife of Lenin. Took great interest in educational matters and was active in the People's Commissariat of Education. Published papers and pamphlets discussing school reform and boy scouts. See, for instance, Krupskaja, N. K. 1925: *Vospitanie molodozhi v Leninskom dukhe* [Education of the Youth in Lenin's Spirit]. Moscow: Molodaja Gvardia. The present quote can be found on p. 214 of Krupskaja, N. K. 1978: *Sistema narodnogo obrazovaniya v RSFSR*. In N. K. Krupskaja, *Pedagogicheskie Sochinenija. Tom 2*. Moscow.
- 6 Vygotsky's paper was followed by four tables which gave an overview of the number of deaf and dumb people in Russia and the Ukraine, the institutes taking care of them, the trades the children were taught, etc.