

International Perspectives on
Early Childhood Education and Development 7

Bert van Oers *Editor*

Developmental Education for Young Children

Concept, Practice and Implementation

 Springer

Developmental Education for Young Children

International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development

Volume 7

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Bert van Oers
Editor

Developmental Education for Young Children

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Editor

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in Education
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Preface

Like many other countries all over the world, the Dutch government struggles to maintain high quality in Dutch schools. However, policy makers often do not shine in their educational imagination and seem to believe that direct instruction and norm-referenced standardised measurements of learning outcomes will finally provide the solution to the problem of achieving academic excellence in all pupils. Apparently they seem to hope that this will subsequently guarantee a good position in the international competitions of the knowledge economy.

In the past decades, however, a number of educators have been deeply worried about this exclusively economy-based approach to the education of the upcoming generation. Of course, they agreed that it is important that schools contribute to the formation of well-informed citizens, but they also saw that much more is required (at the level of loyalty to the community, fairness, personal sense, creativity, moral position, democratic attitude, etc.) to face the future problems of our world community and our planet. Schools also have duties in fostering what Hannah Arendt has called *amor mundi*. It is this critical “love for the world” that enables future generations to live their lives as morally and intellectually responsible citizens, and to see life – using Vygotskij’s words – as an essentially creative endeavour.

In the Netherlands, a small community of educationalists addressed the problem described above as an essentially *pedagogical problem* and as an issue of meaningful learning. From a Vygotskian perspective they developed both theory and examples of good practice for promoting cultural learning in play contexts within the school. This resulted in an approach embodied in an evolving play-based curriculum for the primary school. A large number of highly engaged teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum innovators, and academics succeeded in turning this ideal into an effective interdisciplinary collaboration for the realisation of innovated classroom practices. Our presentations of this approach and its outcomes for young children, both at international conferences and in journals, sparked much interest among many colleagues, especially with respect to how we implement this approach in the context of everyday classrooms. This interest led to the conception of this book *Developmental Education for Young Children*. We are grateful to the series

editor Marilyn Fleer who encouraged us to embark on this ambitious enterprise. We hope that this book can satisfy for the moment the interest that has been expressed in the approach, even though it remains one that is ever-evolving.

Composing and editing a book like this, with the collaboration of so many over-committed people, is no small thing. The engagement of everybody to contribute and make time for this project is in itself a sign of the deep personal engagement of the members of this interdisciplinary community. For the fact that the book could finally be published I must thank all contributors and especially two persons who have patiently and effectively supported me in the final stage of the project: Frea Janssen-Vos and the publisher's agent Astrid Noordermeer.

Amsterdam

Bert van Oers

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Bert van Oers (1951) is professor in *Cultural-Historical Theory of Education* at the Department of Theory and Research in Education in the Faculty of Psychology and Education of the VU University Amsterdam. He was trained as a psychologist, specialising in the theory of learning and developmental psychology at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. Since the mid-1970s he has been engaged with Vygotskij's cultural-historical theory and defended his dissertation "Activity and Concept" (in Dutch) in 1987 at the VU University Amsterdam. In the 1980s, he focused his research activities on early childhood education from a Vygotskian point of view and contributed to the elaboration of the concept *Ontwikkelingsgericht Onderwijs* ("Developmental Education"). In conjunction with many teachers, curriculum innovators, teacher trainers, and academics he collaborated in the nationwide implementation of Developmental Education in the Netherlands. For his work on early childhood education he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Jyväskylä in Finland.

His research interests are in play as a context for learning in the primary school (all grades), concentrating particularly on the development of mathematical thinking, literacy, and aesthetic thinking. Some of his English book publications are: *The transformation of learning. Advances in cultural-historical activity theory* (co-edited with Wardekker, Elbers and van der Veer; Cambridge University Press, 2008), *Narratives of childhood* (Amsterdam: VU Press, 2003), and *Symbolizing, Modeling and Tool Use in Mathematics Education* (co-edited work: Gravemeijer, Lehrer, van Oers, and Verschaffel; Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2003). He is a member of several editorial boards of journals on early childhood education. See: www.bertvanoers.nl.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Bert van Oers

This book describes an approach for the education of 3–8 year-old children in primary school, which was developed in the Netherlands on the basis of Vygotskij's¹ cultural-historical theory of human development. The purpose of the book is to clarify the views and concepts underlying this approach, to present illustrative practices, and to explain the strategies for the implementation of the approach in the lower grades of Dutch primary school classrooms (grades 1 through 4). Given the theoretical tenets of the approach and the strongly theory-driven applications and implementation strategies, it doesn't seem unreasonable to assume that most of the understandings described here may be applicable under appropriate circumstances beyond the borders of the Netherlands.

In Dutch the approach is named *Ontwikkelingsgericht Onderwijs*, which can be literally translated as “development-oriented schooling”. In order to avoid cumbersome terminology, in international communications the approach is usually called *Developmental Education*. However, both in Dutch and in English, this term

¹A note on the transliteration of Russian names must be given. Although we have striven to be consistent in the transliteration of Russian names into the Roman alphabet, some inconsistency is unavoidable due to the worldwide mixture of different transliteration systems in use, and the necessary acknowledgement of current customs in the spelling of frequently used names. Basically, this book will employ the United Nations system UN87 as a method of transliteration which does more justice to the actual spelling of the Russian names than the current American transliteration customs. As a result, some names may appear in different form than the ones the reader may be familiar with (like for example Vygotskij vs. Vygotsky, Lurija vs. Luria; Bachtin vs. Bakhtin etc.). In cases of renowned publications (like for example Vygotsky 1978) we did not, however, change the spelling of the names. Care has been taken to avoid ambiguity.

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has turned out to be ambiguous and maybe even misleading. Therefore, a brief note on its historical background and a preliminary explanation of the intended meaning of the term may be in order.

A Historical Note

The first steps in the elaboration of the concept of “Developmental Education” (DE) date back to the 1980s in the Netherlands, when two different groups of people started thinking, relatively independently from one another, about innovations of school learning and teaching which go beyond the deterministic, cognitivist solutions that had become popular during that period (based on the works of Thorndike, Ausubel, Gagné, Reigeluth, Taba, for example). Some educationalists by this time had serious doubts about the deterministic assumptions with respect to the regulation of human learning and development, and emphasised the importance of acknowledging cultural impact on the developmental process of children. In their view, the course of human development is an open process that depends to some extent on cultural (pedagogical) choices in the ways a society tries to promote the development of its members. Grave misgivings emerged regarding the then current conception of educational theory as a kind of applied psychology. Although detailed theories about alternatives were not yet available, people were looking for ways to conceive of a more *pedagogically oriented educational approach* that could account both for the modern psychological understandings of learning and development, and at the same time do justice to the individuality of the pupils and to the normative and critical choices educators make in their goal-oriented interactions with the pupils.

One of the centres involved in this endeavour to find a new approach to education, schooling and development was the department of educational psychology of Utrecht University. Two scholars from this department, Carel van Parreren and Jacques Carpay, became deeply involved in the study of cultural-historical theory. In 1972 they published a monograph, called “Sovjetpsychologen aan het woord” (Soviet psychologists speaking), that introduced Vygotskij’s cultural-historical theory into the discussions of Dutch education. In those days students in this department were trained as educational psychologists, socialised in cultural-historical thinking about learning, development, and schooling. The editor of this book was one of them.

In the late 1970s Carpay and van Oers moved to the Vrije Universiteit (VU University) in Amsterdam, where Wim Wardekker (with a background in pedagogy) came to join them in the early 1980s. A number of significant developments took place during these years (1980s–1990s). First, as a research group we were deeply involved in discussions about the characteristics and possibilities of the school that intended to promote human development deliberately, and aimed to contribute to the formation of critical agency and emancipation of developing pupils. We called this type of education “Developmental Education”. This approach was often articulated by contrasting it with “*Following Education*” which suggested in a

Piagetian sense that schooling should follow behind development (see Vygotsky 1978, p. 80). Examples of such education can also be found in progressive movement schools that adjusted pedagogical interactions strictly to the natural developmental rhythm of the child, like Montessori-schools, or Fröbel-schools (see Chap. 3 on Progressive Education). Secondly, in the wake of these discussions on Developmental Education, we also started working on problems of implementation of cultural-historical theory in real classroom practices (see for example Roegholt et al. 1998).

In the 1980s, some members of the group began to address problems in the early grades of primary education (4–8 year-olds). There were several reasons for this. In our research with older pupils we saw that our ambitions to create an emancipatory and development-promoting education could only be realised when we were able to influence children's development from an early age.

The re-orientation on younger children was further stimulated by political discussions about Dutch schools. In the mid 1980s significant political decisions were made in the Netherlands with regard to the institutional education of 4 and 5 year-olds. In 1985 these children were integrated into the regular primary school system and many people were deeply concerned that this would lead to a programme-based form of direct teaching for these young children. We thought this trend could be countered with the help of Vygotskij's ideas about play as a leading activity for young children.

In this same period, another group in the Netherlands was also concerned with the innovation of educational practices in early years classrooms. Since the early 1980s Frea Janssen-Vos and her colleagues (including Bea Pompert) at an educational institute (APS) in Utrecht had been working on the innovation of early childhood education practices. Her engagement with early childhood practices drew from different theoretical sources (like social pedagogy, experiential learning). She developed a strategy that could be used by teachers in classrooms to organise rich and stimulating interactions with young children. This approach acknowledged both the *children's own experiences*, the *adults' responsibilities* in their work with young children, and the importance of a *broad conception of developmental goals* that go beyond narrow cognitive achievements. Janssen-Vos deliberately didn't want her approach to be seen as a fixed curriculum that imposes rigid structures and tasks upon young children. She passionately argued for an approach to early childhood education that would aim to stimulate children's development through rich and meaningful interactions between children and adults in the context of children's play. Her approach was called *Basisontwikkeling* (translated as: Basic Development) and is still known by this name (Janssen-Vos 1990, see also Chap. 4 of this book). In her view "Basic Development" is an educational strategy for working with 4–8 year-old children that aims to lay a broad and firm foundation ("a basis") for children's development as cultural agents.

The refusal to design a strict school curriculum for early childhood education that prescribes teachers' actions on a day-to-day basis had an important consequence: teachers were given substantial responsibility for children's learning and therefore they had to learn themselves how to work with children in this new way. A logical

consequence of the approach was that much attention had to be given to the implementation of “Basic Development” into everyday school practices. To support this implementation process, different practice-oriented books have been published since the 1990s, including publications in the domains of literacy and mathematical thinking (Knijpstra et al. 1997; Fijma and Vink 1998).

In the early 1990s the two lines described above crossed and discovered a good deal of similarity in the missions of these academic and practical approaches. In fact, Basic Development could be interpreted as a practical elaboration of the concept of Developmental Education for the early grades of primary school. Several collaborative works have been published since then (van Oers and Janssen-Vos 1992; van Oers et al. 2003). Developmental Education also has been elaborated for preschool children (see Janssen-Vos 2008; Janssen-Vos and Pompert 2001) and is currently being elaborated for the higher grades of primary school as well (see for example van Oers 2009a). A current state of the art, including a description of its nation-wide infrastructure is described in van Oers (2009b).

Implementing Developmental Education

An assumption underpinning the process of implementation of Developmental Education in classroom practices is that it essentially boils down to questions of professionalisation and learning to teach in the type of play-based curriculum outlined in this book. The principles for development-promoting learning that are assumed for pupils are taken to be valid for the learning of teachers as well. The learning of teachers who want to improve their ability to act as agents in Developmental Education practices is also based on assisted forms of participation in these practices, and appropriation of the relevant tools in meaningful ways. In one way, however, the situation of teachers is fundamentally different from that of pupils. Teachers do not just carry out their job of promoting cultural development in pupils and looking for ways to improve that work on a day-to-day basis. For the benefit of the pupils and their developmental potentials, teachers must also think about permanently and critically *improving* their own work conditions so that they can maintain the optimal and ever-changing standards for learning and development. Hence, Developmental Education not only entails the realisation of optimal classroom conditions for developmental learning, but it also requires permanently optimising the conditions that make the whole system an optimal learning context for both pupils and teachers.

A consequence of this conception of the role of teachers is that they need to be seen as classroom researchers as well, examining the classroom processes and looking for ways of improving and testing them. Hence teachers have always played an important role in the construction of the Developmental Education approach. In collaboration with teacher trainers and academic researchers the DE-approach has been built up as a kind of *design research* in which teachers, teacher trainers and researchers have often worked closely together in order to set up practices,

make them work, and examine their consequences for both pupils and teachers. At some moments in the whole process academic research often takes a more distanced view (with case-studies, observational studies, ethnographic studies and quasi-experimental studies) in order to gauge the quality of the approach, to collect supporting empirical evidence, and find moments for further critique and innovation. This book is not meant as a scientific justification of the evidence and underlying methodology, but these studies are available for inspection (see for example van Oers 2003, 2009b, 2010a, b, 2012; Poland et al. 2009; Wardekker 2000). Consequently, they will not be further discussed here.

Overview of the Book

In the present book we focus on Developmental Education for young children (4–8 year olds). We will focus on the elaboration of the general approach, and describe a number of selected examples of practical work and some implementation strategies. It must be emphasised, however, that the approach for young children described here is driven by a general theory on education and cannot be appropriately understood without some awareness of broader theoretical and practical issues. Therefore some of the chapters address broader issues that do not specifically refer to young children (see Chaps. 3 and 17), but the ideas presented in these chapters are definitely essential for the understanding and improvement of education for young children.

The general structure of the book reflects three aspects that we consider important for a good understanding of Dutch Developmental Education practices in schools. The first part (Chaps. 2, 3, 4) addresses *fundamental conceptual issues* that constitute the theoretical framework underpinning the reasoning in both the elaboration of good practices and their implementation in real classrooms. Part II (Chaps. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11) presents a number of core issues, and describes how they have been leading the development of *good practices*. Although the book is not meant as a presentation of the underlying research and attempts at verification, some of the chapters in this section do refer to research in order to sketch some of the empirical evidence that supported the ongoing construction of the described practical issues. No deep methodological justification is given, however, as this would require another type of discourse that goes beyond the intentions of this book, which basically focuses on Developmental Education practices and how they are implemented in everyday classrooms. The *implementation problems and strategies* are described in Part III (Chaps. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17).

All of the chapters look at Developmental Education and its implementation in real classroom practices from a coherent theoretical point of view. Chapters 3 and 4 will elaborate the general approach in greater detail. Chapter 3 analyses the important notion of responsible teaching and demonstrates how Developmental Education attempts to realise responsible teaching in the classroom, what it requires from teachers with regard to their view of development and aims of development.

Building pupils' and teachers' identity as responsible citizens turns out to be a major aim of Developmental Education. This includes the education of the youngest pupils in school.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the general picture of Developmental Education for young children from the perspective of classroom practice. This practical approach is called Basic Development. Focusing on the early years classrooms, the authors point out how the broad development of pupils can be accomplished through getting children meaningfully involved in playfully formatted cultural practices and encouraging them to use cultural tools of literacy, mathematics, construction etc., for the improvement of their abilities to participate in real-life cultural practices. The chapter also describes a number of tools that teachers need for promoting and assessing broad development in pupils.

After this general introduction of basic concepts, a number of good practices of the Developmental Education early years curriculum will be described in Part II. Each of Chaps. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 starts out from a short Vygotskian interpretation of a specific element of the Developmental Education curriculum. Chapter 5 focuses on ways to stimulate the communicative development of young children, following the reasoning of Vygotskij combined with a functional linguistic approach (like Halliday's). Communicative development is basically a process of learning how to *mean* and as such it is basic to all processes of cultural learning across the curriculum. The chapter reveals some of the roles that teachers must learn to play in cooperation with pupils in order to support their development in communicative activities. All chapters of the book in some way acknowledge the communicative dimensions in cultural learning processes. The differences between the various areas of the curriculum depend on the differences in objects and perspectives of communication. Examples of these can be found in Chaps. 8 and 9, where it is demonstrated that both abstract and aesthetic thinking depend on taking specific points of view of the world and communicating about these with different tools and rules that are taken as valid in distinct practices and communities.

It goes without saying that teaching in Developmental Education classrooms is a goal-directed process and that it also requires careful sensitive assessment. Assessment is a core issue in Developmental Education, and Chaps. 6 and 7 give examples of how this is conceived in the domains of vocabulary development and narrative competence. Both examples of assessment are elaborations of Vygotskij's approach to assessment rooted in his view of the zone of proximal development. These chapters give illustrations of *dynamic assessment* that focuses on what children can learn rather than on what they have learned. The chapters serve as descriptions of alternatives for standardised testing that tend to underestimate children's real developmental potentials in a certain area.

It is important for teachers in Developmental Education to be able to fine-tune the help they give, and their interactions with, children. As a result, each child is considered a special child, and this is basically the starting point for the interactions with children who seem to have problems with learning in everyday classroom environments, both those who are generally called "special needs children", as well as highly gifted children. Chapter 10 provides lively descriptions of how

Developmental Education teachers cope with differences among children, in order to stimulate the development of all children and at the same time to maintain inclusiveness, keeping all children together as a group (including the children-at-risk). This chapter nicely demonstrates how Developmental Education truly is a *caring* curriculum, not just by applying a general ethical rule of providing help, but by acting out a deep engagement with individual needs, rooted in a sense of responsibility to guide each child towards the perfection of its personal version of cultural identity.

Fine-tuning is also an important quality of teachers' interactions with parents. Chapter 11 addresses the idea of educative partnership between parents and teachers for the benefit of children. Developmental Education schools take a very specific position towards the role of parents in the educational process. Parents are seen as partners in education, and teachers carefully try to get them engaged in a process of mutual border-crossing where parents and teachers take part (really or virtually) in each others' daily educational practices.

Part III of the book concentrates on questions of how Developmental Education should be implemented in real classroom practices, what it demands of teachers, and of the coaches who assist teachers in this innovation process. The Developmental Education movement in the Netherlands is associated with a broad network of schools, teachers, teacher trainers, educational innovators, and researchers, which brings together and distributes the expertise that has been gathered over more than two decades. With particular regard to the implementation process of Developmental Education in schools and classrooms, teachers' learning has been an area of growing understanding. On the basis of many experiences with schools that wanted to innovate their teaching along the lines of Developmental Education, it has become clear that the initial stage of the process is very important and requires serious attention in order to make a start that fits in with the school's and teachers' needs (see Chap. 12). After the initial stage it is important to continue coaching the teachers in their classrooms, and to set up collaborative teaching activities. Chapter 13 demonstrates that this enterprise often requires a fundamental innovation of teachers' basic educational assumptions, which often go beyond mere cosmetic practical adjustments. The chapter points out how this can be accomplished, especially how teachers can learn to view children's play in a new way, participate in children's play and give impulses to children's learning through embedded teaching without disturbing the play format of these activities. As described above, a key instrument in Developmental Education is the assessment (evaluation, registration, and planning) of children's learning. Chapter 14 reveals in great detail what this entails, and how teachers can appropriate the evaluation strategy of Developmental Education.

Due to the play-based and caring nature of the Developmental Education curriculum, beginning teachers (but parents and inspectors too) sometimes doubt whether pupils will indeed master enough of the basics of cultural learning goals. Chapters 15 and 16 demonstrate how learning to read and learning to mathematise can successfully take place in a play-based curriculum without making concessions to the acquired contents, and to the level and quality of learning achievements.

Both examples elegantly show the heart of cultural learning on a Vygotskian basis. In both areas (literacy and mathematics) children are invited to take part in well-known cultural practices and experience new emerging needs for cultural tools that may enhance their abilities to participate. The chapters demonstrate how this can be managed in heterogeneous classrooms by assisting pupils to improve their communicative activities (see also Chap. 5) in the areas of literacy and numbers.

One of the things we have learned over the years is that implementation of Developmental Education in a school may vary from one school to the next. Most of the time, the character of the implementation depends to a great extent on the institutionalised conditions for innovation that are constituted in these schools. Chapter 17 discusses a number of conditions that have turned out to be important for successful broad implementation of Developmental Education in classrooms. It is important that a school conceives of itself as a learning organisation that keeps encouraging teachers, coaches and principals to strive for ongoing professional development and create a culture for critical learning in the school that permanently optimises the social situation of development of pupils and teachers, and gives pupils a firm basis for participation and critical learning in the context of cultural practices. This is essentially what we mean by Developmental Education as responsible teaching, and although it is not explicitly elucidated in Chap. 17 for young children, it is valid for teachers of young children as well.

This book is an attempt to demonstrate how these principles can be elaborated for different domains of the child's cultural life in the context of education in (pre) school settings, and to demonstrate how this works out for the implementation process and the professionalisation of teachers.

The book ends with a brief concluding reflection on the core ideas and potentials of Developmental Education for the present and for the future (Chap. 18).

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Part I
Developmental Education: Core Issues

Chapter 2

Developmental Education: Foundations of a Play-Based Curriculum

Bert van Oers

A Vygotskian Approach to Cultural Development

In the past decades many people (teachers, innovators, academics) in the Netherlands have been involved in elaborating an approach to the education of primary school children on the basis of Vygotskij's cultural-historical theory of human development and learning. In Dutch the approach was named *Ontwikkelingsgericht Onderwijs*. In international discussions this approach came to be called "Developmental Education". The mission of the approach was the development of a theoretically well-grounded practice for the education of (young) children that would be inherently pedagogical, that is to say an approach that aims to deliberately promote the cultural development of children, acknowledging the responsibilities and normative choices that educators have to make (and want to make) in helping children to become autonomous and critical agents in society.

In recent years we have noticed, however, that both the Dutch and English names for the approach have been used by several others in ways that do not cover the Vygotskian intention that was initially invested in the Developmental Education approach. Obviously, most modern approaches to schooling will claim that they are oriented to children's development, and that they stimulate this development in appropriate ways. We must bear in mind, however, that some of these approaches start out from a theoretical point of view that conceives of schooling as a process of cultural transmission on the basis of fixed and scientifically approved methods (curricula), imposing culture upon pupils; others reason from a strictly child-centred position, claiming that schooling must take into account the inherent psychological characteristics of individual children's development and organise the teaching

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