

Reclaiming ‘The Zone’

Consider this family scene:

“It was a family tradition to get together after the evening tea. By this time everyone was done with his or her activities, the father with business, the mother with housework and the children with their school assignments. They then talked to themselves about whatever came to mind, or read aloud either classic novels or newly released ones. Both the parents and children valued this time of family closeness and spoke warmly of it for many years to come.”¹

You are probably thinking ‘not a typical 21st century family’ and of course you are right it is a description of a family scene of renowned Russian educational theorist Lev Vygotsky in the early 19th century as described by his granddaughter, Vygotskaya. But it was this type of family scene that inspired some of the most prominent education theory in practice today.

It is hard to believe that Lev Vygotsky died as far back as 1934 because it is only since the 1980’s that his theories have had such an impact on western educational theory and still remains an important force today. Primarily this was because his ideas only became known to the west after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

One of his major theories was The Zone of Proximal Development or ZPD, which in its simplest definition is the potential a child has to learn if placed in a stimulating environment. In fact considering a child is always in a social or cultural environment (e.g. in a family or stimulated by media) the child always has a potential to learn. Given this, while developing ImaginationGYM®, we took a keen interest in who were the players in The Zone today and what were the social and cultural influences on a child’s potential? Was this potential been realised and was the outcome beneficial to the child. In other words did they learn good things or nasty things?

The first thing that was obvious to us was that Vygotsky’s theory applied to a post industrialised era which was beginning to take shape in the Soviet Union, whereas ImaginationGYM® is designed for a post Information Revolution era which we are clearly in now. So rather than to try second guess what Lev Vygotsky would say about his ZPD theory in the 21st century (although I hope he would agree with our sentiments), we have developed our own ‘Zone Theory’ which firmly plagiarises ZPD and bests suits the objectives of ImaginationGYM®. To further distance ourselves from academic conflict we happily describe this objective in a rather tabloid title as ‘Reclaiming the Zone’. Its objective is to help the people who really care about the children in their sphere of influence to get back in power.

One could ask why look at The Zone at all? Why is it important? Well Vygotsky says that all learning comes from the social and cultural tools in a child’s environment. Social

¹ ‘Gita’s reflection on her father L.S. Vygotsky’ School Psychology International, 16

is the environment around the child such as parents, siblings and peers and then the greater community. Cultural would be tools that we use in communicating with each other such as language obviously, but also things like signs and symbols. You use these everyday when travelling along a road or walking through a public building. If you see a sign of a man running you know that that means the direction of the fire escape and not that you are meant to run along that particular part of the corridor! Symbols are another key component of Vygotsky's cultural world. Apart from language other obvious ones are +, % and = or the symbols of the periodic table. In fact if you are particularly distracted some day you could do well to centre yourself by observing all the signs and symbols around you in your environment. In fact you can have an ongoing dialogue with your social environment without actually opening your mouth!

Another major cultural tool is culture itself, rock, pop, dance music, traditional story telling, theatre, art, where you place your knife and fork while you are eating and of course religion. To some extent Vygotsky's theories on culture are still as relevant today as he was from a Jewish culture in a part of Russia that was actively anti-Semitic at that time. In this regard his theories are as fresh today as we live in the ever increasing multiculturalism of modern western cities and towns. In fact it is suggested that because of the anti semiticism that he experienced as a youth that he wanted to understand why people acted in the way they did, how this become part of their learning? So he took an active interest on the influence of culture in learning.

However to Vygotsky the most important tool or component of the Zone was LANGUAGE. To him this really defined the potential of a child to learn. Because it is with language that a child has the capacity to take full advantage of the opportunities or potentialities that The Zone has to offer. For example a child can look at a cat and say "the cat is black" or an older child can look at the same cat and say "the cat is looking very restful and peaceful. I wonder what will happen if I try to play with it?" This is higher order thinking and advancement in the second child's learning. With ImaginationGYM® a child can imagine a cat that does not even exist in reality and describe it fully. This is even a further advancement in higher order thinking. Vygotsky saw this advancement in language as been a crucial component in driving forward learning not only in being able to express or understand higher order concepts but more importantly to be able to internalise that which has already been learnt.

For example a child asks you an inquisitive question and you answer them in a way you think they will understand. Obviously this is new information to the child so they must have sufficient language skills to be able to take that information in. The child will then go away and use their own language skills to internalise that information i.e. they'll think about it, muse about it and maybe nod to themselves that they now know the answer and they have learnt something. They may well share this new information with their best friend later.

The question might well have been "Mammy where do babies come from?" and the reply could of being "well a stork flies over and drops a little package under a bush outside your house with a baby in it" (not sure if anybody uses this one anymore!) Depending on the child's language development she maybe able to get the answer without further

questioning. She mightn't have ever heard of a stork before but guesses it is a bird because it is flying (higher order thinking). She knows what a package is because you get Xmas presents in them and every body knows what a bush is. So satisfied with the answer she goes off and thinks about it a bit more (she internalises it). She remembers the next door neighbours have a new baby and indeed they have quiet a big bush in their front garden. She then gets a little concerned that there is no bush in her front garden but then remembers there is one in the back garden. So she happily concludes that she knows where babies come from and decides that she must tell her best friend when she meets her the next day. In fact by the end of the week most of the children living on the street will know where babies come from!

So The Zone is beginning to take shape. We know it consists of signs and symbols and language as communication tools and social and cultural fabric as the source of learning. But who are the players in The Zone? Well obviously the child is a player or you might think not. You might say that because the child is doing the learning they are not the influencer but rather the influenced. Vygotsky would disagree and he would say that the child is their own influencer. In some ways they are in charge of what they learn. He called this 'mediation'. In its simplest form the child mediates on all possible learning potential offered by their social and cultural environment and by using the language tools at their disposal they effect what they learn.

Put it this way. If you place two children in the exact same learning opportunity one may learn from it and one may not. For example in the previous example if the little girl had her younger sister with her, the younger child might have no idea what a stork or a package is and the explanation would go over her head (i.e. the symbolic tool of language was not sufficiently developed). Alternatively a little boy of the same age on hearing the question may say "yuk! I don't want to know where babies come from I'm off to build a mud castle". So the three children all mediate on the 'learning potential' and come away with different learning experiences.

Now back to the players. Apart from the child who else is a player in The Zone? Well there is quiet a list. The important ones are parents, teachers and peers. By parents we mean the parents who the child recognises as their mum and dad during their formative years, so not necessarily their biological parents if one or more is missing. By teachers we mean those whose parents have entrusted their children for learning outside the home such as crèche, childcare workers, school teachers or special needs resource workers. By peers we mean friends or children of similar age with whom they regularly come in contact with. However there can be many other important players such as grand parents, uncles, aunties, siblings, family friends, neighbours and a whole assortment of people in their community such as youth workers, religious leaders and sports coaches. In fact anybody who is a 'significant other' and comes in regular contact with the child for good or for bad is a player.

This structure of players has really become unchanged from the beginnings of time. Traditionally a child has grown up in a society that consists of the immediate family, the enlarged family and the wider community. Vygotsky believed that this was the structure

that created the social and cultural settings in which children learned. The Zone of Proximal Development. In summary he stated this structure continuously provided a support to the children to learn more, which they would then 'go away' and internalise to the extent that their current language development allowed. This was later described as 'scaffolding' by another commentator². The concept being that to build a building you very often had to put scaffolding around it and when the building was finished you could take the scaffolding down. So 'the players' support the child until they have learnt and can stand on their own in their newly acquired knowledge. They can then withdraw their support (the scaffolding) until something new needs to be learnt.

It is a very interesting theory and supported by many academics and educationalists around the world. It is also a good model in which to assess whether the current educational and development needs of children are being addressed in today's post information revolution society. Under Vygotsky's theory if The Zone of Proximal Development is in balance we will have a healthy society for young people to grow up in and learn. However if it is out of balance we will have many of the problems that are occurring in society today. Primarily this will result in the breakdown of education systems, increased child behaviour problems, 'getthoisation' of children, increased child violence, poor self esteem and achievement, lack of independent thinking, a decline in social skills, a lack of creativity and a collapse in problem solving skills. There is more but does this begin to sound familiar? All these problems are very complex and could be dealt with on an individual basis and in many cases this is what educators are trying to do. However in designing ImaginationGYM® we decided to use Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development as a model and see how we could use ImaginationGYM® to 'Reclaim The Zone' or tip it back into balance.

To do this we must first identify how it is that The Zone is under threat and then provide tools that are relevant in today's cultural and social setting to 'Reclaim the Zone'.

Lets first look at the structure; 'The Players'. We mentioned the most important one was the family. The concept of the family in current western society is very different to what it was in Vygotsky's day. A huge amount of children are brought up in single parent families, in families where both parents are working and who may have long commute times. In other words parents are less significant players than they were because the quantity of time they can spend with their children has declined. Furthermore the quality of that time has also decreased because of increased stress levels due to the demands of current society e.g. work, economic pressures, increased media penetration of the home, etc. (We accept this is a generalisation and not true of all families)

Typically in the past most average families sat down together for meals. Then it migrated to just Sunday dinner. That soon became abandoned but at least everybody sat down to watch television together but that soon migrated to having different televisions in several rooms including the children's bedrooms. The current evolution is that children are abandoning their televisions for the internet and gaming. This isn't de-facto but you get the drift.

² J.S. Bruner 'Towards a Theory of Instruction 1966

While some commentators might say that the solution is to tackle these problems individually, our position is to work with the prevailing social and cultural conditions as they are. That is to provide tools that will work within The Zone as it is today.

In the extended family we would see other threats. Grand parents are not always used as effectively as they were in the past. Very often they are not even in the same community as the immediate family. Media has also played its role in ridiculing older people diminishing them as positive role models.

In the extended community more and more adults are afraid to engage with children, even close relatives, in case their actions are misinterpreted under 'stay safe' practices. Whatever your opinions on these children are being deprived of positive role models outside the immediate family unit.

However the greatest threat to the structure of The Zone and this may surprise you, is the role of peers in The Zone. You may remember that Vygotsky considered language as the most important component of the Zone? A child's peers play a very important part in that language development. In fact 'play' is the operative word. One of the greatest challenges we are facing in our changing society is that children's 'free play' with their peers is in serious decline. In fact one report suggests that children's free play declined by 25% between the mid seventies and 1997³. Free play is defined as play with other peers that has no objective or outcome and can freely change according to the desires of the children. The reason for this decline because children's play is much more structured today. Their lives are being totally organised with adult involvement being a feature of this play. Now you might think this is a good thing because it means more positive adult involvement in The Zone. The problem is that this is hindering the child's language development.

Adults unfortunately tend to finish sentences for children or anticipate their needs without letting them fully express themselves. We do this unconsciously. However in a peer to peer environment a child has to fully express themselves to fully let the other child or children understand them. There is no second guessing. There is also other subtle or higher order language development that takes place when children play. For example, when boys 'mess fight' there is a clear distinction between this and real and aggressive fighting. They must learn exactly how much force can be used and still be fun. They learn from each others bodies and reactions on how to act with each other to keep the game going. They also learn how and when to reverse roles. The child who always wants to be 'king of the castle' will soon have no friends.

Children in unstructured play such as creating house or doctors and nurses using the tools around them will use much more of their imagination than in an activity laid out for them by an adult. This all leads to higher order language development and thinking. Without it they are going to under perform in school. Parents and educators who insist on 'skilling' up their children in detriment to natural developmental peer to peer activities are actually damaging their chances at school in later years.

³ Scientific American Mind

Mind the Gap

So there are two major threats to the Zone, language development and withdrawal of parents and significant others in terms of quantity and quality of time and this is causing a gap in the Zone. But the gap is being filled. Another force has moved into the Zone that could have never been contemplated by Vygotsky. In his time his family used to gather in their sitting room every night and tell each other stories, sing, play musical instruments and read to each other. So he lived in quiet a different world to the average modern family of today. So you have probably guessed it, the Gap is being filled by media. One could argue that media fits within Vygotsky's theory because it is a cultural tool however we would say that it is also a player. This also fits within Vygotsky's theory but not in a way he contemplated.

More and more children are being influenced by the media as a significant other. It is providing a learning mechanism where it effectively takes a lead role in the Zone of Proximal Development and even provides scaffolding while the child learns through internalisation using their current stage of language development, some of which is being derived from media itself. It influences children on how to behave, how to dress, what music to listen to, how to interact with their peers, who their role models are, how to imagine, how to be creative, etc. It is true that media can be good but it can also be out of balance.

Our research has shown that many teachers are having problems in the classroom because their children are acting out behaviour they have learnt from TV programs and that concentration and focus can only be maintained for short segments of time. In drawing activities (a significant activity in ImaginationGYM®) that they are only able to draw out images they have seen in computer games and are unable to generate their own appropriate to the topic e.g. nature.

We live in an information age with children that are wired for that for that information revolution but it appears that we have allowed a culture tool to replace the players, whereas the players should be in charge so as to help the children mediate this new cultural tool. Media is an important part of a child's life but it needs to be moved to its proper place in the Zone and the players need to fill the gap.

Our aim in ImaginationGYM® was not to fix any of the problems but to provide tools that accepts the prevailing social and cultural tools in The Zone and status of influence of the players so that Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development could be put back in balance. Our main tool in striking this balance is imagination. We developed a series of imagination worlds or exercises which could be used by both players and children and which would also contribute to language development.⁴ We have spent over ten years testing these tools and developing a methodology in which they are used. During this time we received much support from academics, teaching professionals and clinical practitioners. The results of this research and development process have been very

⁴ This design also incorporates other theories such as Multiple Intelligence Theory, Flow Theory, Emotional & Social Intelligence and Whole Brain Learning (right/left integration).

interesting but we would just like to discuss them in the context of ‘Reclaiming the Zone’.

We identified three areas of intervention needed to ‘Reclaim the Zone’

1. Rebalancing the adult/child interaction while repositioning media as a social or cultural tool rather than as a player.
 2. Promoting individualism to improve mediation between children and media.
 3. Encouraging language development in response to the decline of ‘free play’ within The Zone.
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1. Media needs to be pushed out of The Zone as a player and parents in particular are in the best position to reclaim it. ImaginationGYM® is media but its position in The Zone is as a cultural tool not as a player. It is designed to be non-invasive and to stimulate the development of the child. The audio adventure worlds have been designed to be of benefit to both adult and child so that the experience can be shared together. We do not want to go into too much detail about the products here, because that information is freely available, but rather talk about the principles at play.

These are the common benefits to both adult and child of this type of activity; relaxation and distressing, centring, activation of the whole brain, exercising the brain through imagination. Specifically for a parent it helps them switch off from the work environment and into the home environment. Your relationship with your wife is different to that with your work peers or your children to your subordinates. Specifically for a child it puts them in a better frame of mind for learning e.g. homework.

Jointly however it creates a framework in which real communication can take place. If father comes home from work and asks Johnny “How was school today?” invariably the answer will be “fine” or “OK”. The reason for such poor communication is that you have two totally separate worlds coming together without a hook into each. But a media activity such as ImaginationGYM® creates quality time together after which real communication can take place. The joint activity gives a basis for moving forward by two individuals who are in a much more cantered and relaxed state of mind. This is sometimes referred to as ‘emphatic resonance’ where literally the brains of two individuals mirror each other, in this case the father and son.⁵

The alternative scenario is that dad arrives home from work and flops down in front of the TV to watch the news and Johnny goes off to play on the computer. None of the individual benefits occur, there is no communication and media fills the gap.

⁵ Mirror neurons were discovered by Giacomo Rizzolatti. We all have these and they allow us not only to think what the other person is thinking but also to feel what they are feeling. But sometimes the correct environment (Time & Space) has to be created so that they can be switched on.

2. The Information Revolution is here to stay. Media is not going to go away. Our children are wired for it as part of the natural evolution of human kind. So our education system needs to equip our children with life skills to mediate with this new reality in a beneficial way. The post industrial revolution education system does this by 'skilling' children in the techniques of using information technology and in fact most children take to this naturally. Even 5 year olds are more adept at using computers, mobile devices and media players than their grandparents will ever be able to master these technologies in their life time. But this just reinforces the evidence that the information revolution is a natural evolution of human kind. But there is something seriously missing.

A post Information Revolution needs to develop strong intrapersonal skills so that children can mediate on this new cultural tool without being swamped by it. Many parents know this and will limit the time their children will spend in front of the TV or on the internet. The extended community will provide advice to try to influence The Zone, such as the American Association of Paediatrics who would claim that children under 3 years of age should not watch TV at all. But these actions, while sensible, do not actually develop the intrapersonal skills that children need so that they can naturally mediate media as a cultural tool rather than as a player. There is a need to develop awareness skills so that they can distinguish between their reality and the fantasy of media. These skills will also be relevant in adult life. To do this a child needs to develop a strong sense of self.

In the past it was always understood that it was important for children to think for them selves, not to have a herd mentality and not to bow to peer pressure. Most parents hoped their children would have these skills before they entered their teen years or else life could become difficult after that. In those days the influences came from hanging around with the wrong crowd or an over dominant friend from a dysfunctional family or neighbourhood.

To counteract this, the aim was to develop character in the child through sports, hobbies, development of talents, participation in youth groups or engagement in arts. In fact any type of healthy peer to peer activities or individual pursuits. In many cases this is still the approach and it works. But its effects are diluted if there is another player in 'The Zone' media' that is time dominant and giving out mixed messages about how to behave and think. So children need to develop discernment about what is right for them. We believe this can be achieved through development of intrapersonal skills.

In ImaginationGYM® we do this by helping children to tap into their own natural resource of imagination. By harnessing a child's imagination they can reconnect with their own internal processes. By using methodologies in the

ImaginationGYM® such as time and space⁶ and imagination exercises they learn to distinguish between what are their thoughts and reality and what are the external inputs of peers and media. In other words they de-clutter their mind and become aware of their own feelings, what they like and dislike. They increase their self awareness and in time imagination brings them into their own internal world where nobody else belongs. This fosters individualism and allows them access to the gifts they have brought into this world.

3. Vygotsky was most concerned about language development in the child because without this The Zone of Proximal Development would be ineffective in helping children learn. If, as we have seen, language development is under threat because of the decline in free play we must respond to current cultural practices with new ideas. To Vygotsky language is symbolic. If we say Qui, Si, or Yes we are using an auditory symbol to communicate agreement. So to develop language skills we need to develop knowledge and use of symbols.

Knowledge of symbols comes from development of language, art, music, dance, drama or any cultural tool we use to communicate. But in essence as we are communicating it is also about developing interpersonal skills or intelligence and finally as we need to internalise what we learn or communicate our ideas better, we need to develop ‘higher order’ language capacities.

The ImaginationGYM® Methodology addresses this by including activities with imagination exercises that encourages children to express their creativity through the symbolic language of drawing, storytelling and digital media outputs such as film and photography.

It encourages engagement with emotions in a non threatening way as we see emotions are also part of the fabric of language and an important tool in developing interpersonal skills. The methodology itself teaches important concepts of self regulated behaviour such as respect for your own and other’s boundaries.

However its biggest contribution to language development is through imagination exercises. Imagination has a wonderful dual benefit to the child in that it increases internalisations skills due to its intrapersonal nature and develops higher order language skills if an imagined idea has to be communicated to another individual. After listening to an imagination exercise called The Enchanted Forest a child begins “Let me tell you about the cat I saw in the forest.....” In describing something imagined and not actually in the real world, the child uses language in a ‘higher order’ capacity. This is the first stage in the child’s development in using language to communicate concepts.

Further information on the ImaginagiantionGYM® Methodology is available at www.imaginationgym.com

⁶ Time & Space is a representation of the left and right brain hemispheres. If implemented correctly according to the rules of the ImaginationGYM® methodology they afford the engagement of the whole brain in activities. Our research has shown that this is one of the greatest challenges in modern society.

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