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“You Have to Get Dirty to Go on a Bug Hunt”: Performance and its Significance in Psycholinguistic Development

Dr. Andrew Spano

Summary: We must encourage cognitive processes while facilitating literacy and critical thinking development, which are not bound by a period, as are listening and speaking. As Vygotsky points out, reading and writing development continues through to old age.

When I'm not teaching, I am out in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, running. I'm proud to say I'm a "distance runner." While I prefer fourteen miles a day, I've found six more realistic. I've loved this sport all my life, with bike riding second and plain old long-distance walking around the city or along trails next. Anyone who has gotten into this habit will notice the same thing: an uncanny clarity of mind. This is useful for thinking about the day and about ideas.

Although I don't take a rest, I do take time out to use a sit-up bench outdoors five feet from one of the playgrounds. It is an odd place for this, since the toddlers there seem to have little use for an adult-size torture bench (as it can seem), or the six-foot-high chin-up bar. Maybe the idea is that as the kids have fun, Mom and Dad can work on their biceps and abs. But not on this day.

A few couples hovered over their children at a fallen tree trunk just a few feet from the bench. Their children, who appeared to range in age from about three to five, were engaged in a project, as they themselves announced.

"We're going to go on a bug hunt," said a boy, five. The other three children agreed this was a good idea.

"A bug hunt?" said one adult, "in winter?"

"Yeah. What's wrong with that?" the boy said.

"Well there aren't any bugs in winter," said the parent.

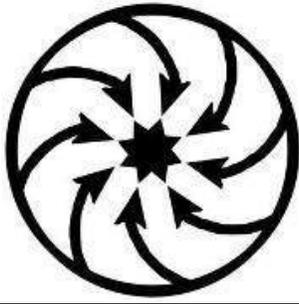
I guess he had not been to Alaska, where mosquitoes can drain a bull moose of blood when it's thirty-five degrees below zero. I've lived there. But we get the point the adult was trying to make: bug hunting is for the warm weather because that's what his (limited) understanding dictates.

In my opinion, what this adult failed to recognize is the psycholinguistic needs of these children, who were unanimously enthusiastic about the *hunt*, not the bugs. You want bugs? Try my father's living room year round with pavement ants marching to the kitchen, or go to the zoo. They wanted the hunt. Furthermore, the children had decided, without any help from their nay-saying parents, to use sticks about six inches in length to do two things: hit the logs to make the bugs come out, and to help pry away the wood to expose them.

"Betty, give me that stick," said a mom. "You might fall on it and it will go into your stomach." Mom took the stick away. Certainly such freak accidents happen, but it is more common for parents to make illogical statements concerning safety to children as part of the ubiquitous Safety Culture of middle-class white parents. It's almost a syndrome: if you make that face it will stay that way, don't go barefoot because you'll get worms, don't eat snow or you'll get sick, and so on.

Before I say more about this scene (from a psycholinguistic point of view), I should summarize my observations.

The "need" here is to develop the cognitive skills of curiosity, exploration, hunting/finding, tool making, teamwork, creative ideation, basic verbal communication, and, perhaps, dealing with frustrated expectations. Taking the Innatist point of view of Chomsky, the structuralist view of Piaget, or the constructivist view of Vygotsky, these children were initiating exactly what they needed to learn critical cognitive skills at exactly the age they



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needed to learn such skills because, as we know from cognitive science and developmental psychology, *the brain is actually physically developing structures that will be with the children for a lifetime and cannot be changed once they have matured.* That is why the Critical Period (0-12) is "critical."

As all of this communication among the parents and children occurred through language, the analysis falls to the paradigms of psycholinguistics. The benefits of the children's *performance* (a "performance" is defined here as an enclosed drama involving two or more characters with a conceptual or psychological purpose organized into a "story"), is described above. What is important is what the parents did *to thwart the children's development*, as well meaning as their role in the performance was.

The good news is that the cognitive developmental process is part of the child's autonomic *will*, and is almost impossible to arrest. Development is arrested typically in individuals who have neurological impairments or have been subject to unusual and extreme circumstances. Where there's a will there's a way, we might say. As you will see below, the semantic processing of a child at the beginning of language development has an almost unshakable literal quality.

Figurative language (metaphor, simile, hyperbole, and personification) are typically alien to a child. It seems that the typical adult lack of generative imagination is inversely proportional to his ability to misuse language in a non-literal way. As the sports writer writes: "The Jets killed the Patriots last night, leaving their fans suicidal." Whereas children seem to have a singular ability to use generative imagination. They take language almost too literally since much of idiom and vernacular, without figurative language, is in itself paraliteral, as in "I'm starving" for "I'm hungry," or the statement that you will "go over" someone's house. A child may ask, "How can you go over a house?"

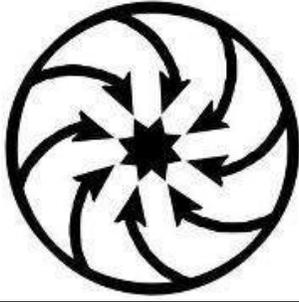
It may very well be that anchoring language in literal

semantic meaning, as children do, aids in the use of generative imagination by providing a concrete (no pun intended) conceptual foundation to construct a story, picture, song, or performance from their imagination. Often this cognitive play (Gardner) is generated by innate developmental needs, just as when young animals "play" at fighting or catching game.

Now let's get back to Prospect Park and the families. By ignoring the importance of imaginative play, "experts" (as Vygotsky calls parents and teachers) may interrupt, disrupt, or divert the natural process of learning. One parent attempted to introduce a new dialogue to the performance unrelated to the bug hunt story. He pointed to the four-year-old girl's hat and said, "Why does your hat have two eyes on it?" The girl seemed perplexed at why he would ask such a question, and replied, "It's just decoration." Her natural response was a defense against his diversion from the story, and from the lack of need and context for his question. The adult then felt that he must explain himself because the girl didn't "get it." "Well," he said, "I thought that maybe you wanted two extra eyes so you could see twice as much." The girl's uninterested silence said it all.

Of course, what the parents provide in the way of food, clothing, shelter, safety, dialogue, teaching, and most of all love, goes a long way in making up for the awkwardness of their attempts to engage in the children's performance because of their lack of imagination. However, if you watch these scenes carefully, you will see that the adults seem to think that their role as experts (parents/teachers) is to stop children from engaging the psycholinguistic developmental process and instead try to get children to enter into the same *crystallized* (Vygotsky) state they are trapped in. The result is children feel bored, frustrated, distracted, and angry because their process is by nature dynamic and in constant flux. It is not a "state" but a process.

I'll leave you with the parting image (I had completed my sixty sit-ups). The five-year-old boy who was the initiator and leader of the bug hunt



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started to roll in the leaves. "Hey, get up from there," said Mom, "You'll get all dirty." With clear-eyed understanding of what he was doing, the boy said, "But you have to get dirty to go on a bug hunt."

Resources

Greene, Judith. (1972.) *Psycholinguistics: Chomsky and Psychology*. Penguin.

Lust, Barbara. (2006.) *Child Language: Acquisition and Growth*. Cambridge University Press.

Piaget, Jean. (1954.) *The Construction of Reality in the Child*. Basic Books.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978.) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press.