THE INFLUENCE OF VYGOTSKY IN MOVIMENTO DA ESCOLA MODERNA EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CURRICULUM IN PORTUGAL

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Introduction

The Movimento da Escola Moderna (MEM) - Modern school movement concerns all levels of education. It is the result of the cooperative work of teachers in Portugal over the course of thirty years. Sérgio Niza is one of its founders and educational leaders.

This paper will discuss the formative aims proposed by the MEM Early Childhood Model and the philosophical foundations of practices applied to early childhood classrooms, and highlights how Vygotsky's theory of development and learning is one of its major theoretical foundations.

Educational practice in the early years has been greatly influenced by a Piagetian theory of development where development is seen as regulating learning. The child's opportunities to act and explore within a rich environment in order to develop a personal understanding of the world is the central focus of such practices. Teachers do not primarily have a teaching role, but they follow and observe children's activity and monitor their development. Some early childhood education experts have been pointing out the insufficiency of this theoretical foundation for sound practice (Kessler, 1991; Smith, 1993). Some ECE curricula are in a sense very limited as they do not identify a clear direction for learning and education.

The MEM model of early childhood education challenges the individualistic view of development inherent in Piaget's theory, with a social viewpoint generated through social practices, within cultural and historical parameters.

The MEM model is grounded in the empiricist conception of learning through trial and error based on the theory of Celestin Freinet (see Editorial note) but has been moving away from this conception in recent years into a broader perspective of learning through sociocentric interactions rooted in a sociocultural inheritance enriched by adults and peers, towards an instructionist perspective as described in the theories of Vygotsky and Bruner (Niza, 1996).

The goals proposed by the MEM model are: *1) Initiation into democratic life 2) Re-institution of values and social meaning 3) The cooperative reconstruction of culture* (Niza, 1991).

This educational model proposes an emphasis on the group as a form of an agency for the intellectual, moral and civic development with a close link to real life. This link gives an expanded meaning to the school and provides learning with challenges grounded in the problems of the community.

Philosophical and theoretical foundations of the MEM model

The curriculum is "life"

The MEM model proposes a curriculum based on real life problems and motivations. The central issue is to provide a school deeply integrated in the cultural background of the society it serves instead of constructing a cultural niche removed from the reality of its life. This is what makes home and school links effective. In this sense the cultural life experience of children are the foundation for the acquisition of new knowledge. In Niza's words

...very often , the teacher forgets that when the child enters school, s/he already knows a lot of things. The teacher assumes that the child knows nothing. We want to avoid this ... The teacher should take advantage of everything the student knows, (real life experience outside school) and use it as a starting point to improve his/her knowledge or constructing new knowledge"(Niza, 1995).

Following the same idea of a close linkage between school and life, the role of the school should be to provide learning that has social meaning, through an exchange of knowledge and full interaction with the community. Preschool activities have a functional meaning as they are something that is interesting or useful to the group in its social and cultural context. A close link with the community is a source of information, solving problems and links with interests that are developed into real projects full of cultural and social meaning. For example, in an inner city day-nursery where the children's playground was located in a public place, a group of children were involved in a project that aimed to improve the area. They interviewed other children, parents and local citizens about the conditions of the play area, they wrote to institutions asking for materials and finally they presented all the information, ideas and plans and did indeed persuade the local civic authorities to refurbish the play area for the benefit of the children as well as the local citizens.

Epistemological analogy between teaching-learning and knowledge development

Teaching and learning processes should be based on the methods used by those scientific or cultural areas throughout history "This is what in MEM is called epistemological analogy between teaching-learning and sociocultural development (Science, Techniques, Arts and everyday life)" (Niza, 1996). The MEM model rejects "didactic tricks" and simulations which in Niza's opinion reveals that schools are losing their social meaning and are disrespecting students. Scientific knowledge should use the general scientific method of creating knowledge; this means that a scientific method of discovering where observations, hypothesis, experimenting, organizing, writing and exchanging knowledge should take place as early as possible.

The sociocentric perspective

In the MEM model the focus is on the group as the ideal place for social, intellectual and moral development to occur. A democratic life experienced directly (not representatively) where communication is rich and cooperation and negotiation between subjects takes place naturally. According to Niza cooperation is the most advanced stage of moral development. Children are introduced to instruments and routines that give them an opportunity for empowerment within communal life, carried out through participatory organizations (see principles in practice section).

Learning is also centered on the group rather than concentrated on the teacher or on the individual child. Communication and exchanges between the teacher and children and between children are a way of constructing learning through cooperative processes and assistance, "everyone teaches and everybody learns" (Niza, 1996). Knowledge, in the MEM classes is not viewed as private property. Instead, individual learning is gradually extended in a widening circle outward to the whole group where children are encouraged to communicate.

Communication has a double function. First, communication can be viewed as a cognitive function that occurs when children are asked to speak about their actions or experiences. In this case, they undergo a metacognitive process which allows them to better understand what they have to communicate (Vygotsky, 1978). Secondly, communication also has a social function when information is shared and disseminated so that it can be of use to the "community" and for public scrutiny of knowledge. The

questions that children ask about someone else's experiences can lead the authors to question themselves and feel the need to be more explicit. The important role of language in cognitive development has been highlighted by Vygotsky who found that social meaning gives sense to this practice (Niza, 1995a).

An Anthropological-Historical Perspective

Similar to Vygotsky's views, Niza sees development as deeply cultural and education as cultural inheritance. He believes that all the tools (for instance print, computers) which made advances in humanity should be incorporated at the school level (Niza in Grave-Resendes, 1989). It is in this sense that literacy has a central role in this curriculum (discussed later). Niza stated that "We shall bring to school real cultural instruments and not the didactic transposition of those instruments" (Niza, 1995a). Some MEM classes use the printing-press for the reproduction of texts. Inspired by Freinet's pedagogy, the printing press is viewed as a means for the appropriation of writing and a possibility for extended communication throughout space and time. The printing-press in MEM schools is viewed as a cultural tool. However, in practice, this concept often looses its original intent and meaning. As Niza says:

> It happens that the printing press is used sometime just as a didactic instrument, loosing its cultural meaning. When this happens it becomes more the school printing press rather than the printing press used in real life. In this way it is the same as working with worksheets."(Niza, 1995a).

We have, at present in our schools, the advantage of having computers in the classroom similar to those that function for word processing, outside of school.

The philosophical foundations of the MEM, apply to all levels of education; they reveal a conception of the teaching-learning process, of child development and learning as well as for the expanded role of the school in society. From these philosophical foundations, three conditions are fundamental for early childhood education. They are: (1) Groups are organized with children at **different ages and abilities**; (2) There is a climate of **free expression**; and (3) Children are permitted **time to play, explore and discover**.

To meet the first condition, groups are organized with children of different ages and intellectual abilities. This condition aims to enrich the child cognitively. It is based on Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and especially his belief that children's contact with more advanced adults or peers enhances their learning. In addition, the intention is that children benefit socially when the group guarantees respect for individual differences and when formative collaboration and assistance take place.

> "Any effort of uniformity or simplification remove from education which is complex and holistic, its sense of total development." Niza (198)

Diversity is seen as enriching the classroom's social milieu. From the beginning of the MEM, teachers integrated children with special needs into their classes and each year the group integrates new elements as well as children from the previous year. Younger children are introduced to the group and to the class organization by the older ones.

The second condition is a climate of **free expression** (referring to Freinet's work) reinforced by a group / public validation of children's opinions, life experiences and ideas. This is the starting point for teachers to expand children's communication skills both in language and literacy.

The third condition is recognizing the need for children to have **time to play, explore** ideas, materials and documents for questioning and "wonder" to happen. Only if children have this opportunity will they be able to actively engage in trying to understand the world around them.

Principles in practice

In this section I will concentrate on the content area of literacy as well as on classroom organization, as an example of how the MEM practice is related to the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the Model and deeply inspired by Vygotsky's work.

Classroom organization:

Organization is of central importance to the effectiveness of this model. This includes the classroom environment in relation to planning, evaluation and accountability, working areas and a daily arrangements, routines and schedules (see chart).

In the MEM model classroom organization is seen as the basic structure which provides opportunities for students to learn. Usually the teacher is the one who is responsible for this organization which includes planning the environment and activities, monitoring children's work and evaluation. Niza argues that in a sociocentric approach, children should be empowered through decision making, self-reflection and evaluation opportunities. Instead of having the organization centered on the teacher, classes should have a sociocentric organization. Students are regarded as participants in the decision making process so they should be introduced to appropriate tools and practices that allow this process to happen. "The democratic practice of shared organization is established in cooperative council. It embraces all the aspects of school life from planning activities and projects, their accomplishment and cooperative-operative evaluation"(Niza, 1996).

A routine is indispensable to create a secure environment where cognitive engagement can occur. The daily structure in MEM preschool centers is in accordance with the relevant role of the group in children's learning and life. In the morning children tell the group about their experiences, their projects, and in this way they establish working contracts and plans. They start working on their own or in small groups and they come back to the group after a snack for communication and evaluation. Social interactions of this nature have a central role in extending learning as they extend individual experience. Education is a social enterprise.

The importance of individual learning is extended to the group as children are asked to communicate their projects to the group, and sometimes to other groups in the form of conferences, correspondence or the "class journal". In this sense this model moves from expression to communication.

In the afternoon planned cultural activities take place with invited guests such as parents and people from the community. Children and teachers organize different activities like story telling, cooking, conferences, writing to other schools and so forth.

The afternoon council meeting is a shared review of the day where experiences are brought to the group and evaluation takes place. Usually ideas to extend projects are registered and children speak about their own actions. Friday afternoon council is the big evaluation of the week were instruments (charts, the diary) are read, evaluated and plans for the next week take place.

The group has a set of tools which help them to regulate what is happening in the classroom and can act as documenting group life. Teachers and children use these tools such as: **the attendance chart.** This is a table with two entries with the days in the week/month on the top row and children's names in the left hand column. Every morning as children come in they mark their own presence. This chart is used as a normal presence register but also as an opportunity to understand time: "Yesterday I did not come to

school. Tomorrow, is Saturday. Nobody will come to school!" "It is the beginning of a new month...", etc. Before starting work children register their choices in **the activities chart** - a two way table with all the children's names in the left hand column and the activities or working areas across the top column. Each child makes a circle in the planned activities and after finishing they go back and fill the circle up. This activity plan is used as a process of self-reflection about action. Progressively children learn to anticipate their activities making their plans, and they can self monitor their work by just looking at it and see what they have not finished. This table is used in council meetings to evaluate the work of the group. "Why has nobody been working in the carpentry area lately?" These issues are discussed together and children become conscious of their own work as well as the group's work.

The **Classroom Diary** is a register of things that happen, desires, conflicts, or accounts of events that any group member wants to register. It consists of four columns: "We liked", "We didn't like", "We did" and "We wanted". The first three columns enable the group to do a sociomoral evaluation of the week and the fourth to plan the following week. During the week, any child or adult can register what they want in the diary. They can draw or ask an adult to write for them and the child can illustrate this afterwards. At the end of the week, during the Friday afternoon council, the contents are analyzed. One child is invited to read (usually the one who wrote the sentence) and everybody takes part in the discussion. Negative events like "I don't like it when John kicks me" or "I don't like it that Jane spoils my drawings" are briefly but seriously discussed with all the children implicated speaking. Sometimes they give rise to a new social rule, written in the Social Rules Chart. The **social rules chart** is a register of the rules that are agreed to regulate the classroom group. They are always discussed with the group and arise from a real need for the rule. Working in a group is not unproblematic so, some rules have to be explicit in order to help children to work and to solve problems. They are written and illustrated by the children and are fixed upon the wall in order that they are not forgotten. Another instrument used by MEM classrooms is **the responsibilities chart .** Classrooms are places were a lot of work has to be done. The sociocentric approach of the MEM classes gives the children from a very young age the responsibility for certain duties like taking care of materials, preparing meals, watering the plants or feeding the animals, cleaning the tables, etc. These routines are assigned weekly to the children rotatively in the council meeting of Monday morning.

All these tools are part of the group organization and help children to integrate their own experiences into the whole group. It might appears quite complicated to keep all these records and for young children as young as three years old to use them systematically. We cannot forget that the MEM groups are mixed age groups and every year the group has new children as well as children that are already socialized into this organization. The older ones explain the procedures to the new ones which sometimes starts just by imitating the older ones and is eventually integrated in their practice as they come to understand the functions and processes.

These institutionalized tools and times are not a guarantee of a sociocentric approach (Niza, 1991). But they are a way of sharing with children the power of decision making and evaluation. With children as young as 3-6 years old, judgments and decisions are sometimes based on children's own will and perspective. The difficulty children have in understanding the points of view of others has been clearly demonstrated by Piaget. This has to be deal with the teacher who is the mediator of the group. Welcoming what the child has to say, and helping her to communicate with the group, helps the child to decentre and to become more aware of different perspectives. The teacher acts as a model, of listening and accepting children's opinions and suggestions. As in the acquisition of

literacy the sociocentric approach in class life is experienced by the young child before she can produce it or even understand it. This is present in Vygotsky's theory which explain "every function in the child's cultural development appears first on the social level - interpersonal process and later on the individual level - intrapersonal process" (Vygotsky, 1978). For this process to happen the adult has to know the child and to work in her ZPD providing the support (scaffolding) necessary for children to move forward. The teacher must accept the individual child, listening and valuing her but, always assisting the child to communicate with the group, to listen to others and to put their individual experiences into the context of the group.

The MEM classrooms are not moralistic environments where children are always constrained by a sense of right or wrong. On the contrary, free and spontaneous action and communication takes place and are seen as part of being human. As Niza (1995a) says, if a base of free expression is not established there is no real communication. In this sense the teacher has a major role of providing a secure environment where communication can flow naturally.

Literacy as a cultural tool

Acquiring literacy is a long process that starts early on in life and develops by means of the social act of writing (Niza, 1995). This view is very much based on Vygotsky conception of literacy as a cultural tool. Based on Vygotsky's ideas, the MEM conception of acquiring literacy is based on some conditions: 1) Teaching has to be organized in such a way that children "need" reading and writing 2)Written language has to be meaningful to the child and develops an intrinsic need which is incorporated into a task that is relevant to life. 3) It should be thought of as a natural moment in a child's development and not training which is imposed from outside (Niza, 1995).

Vygotsky's understanding of the pre-history of written language from second order symbolism to first order symbolism has been expressed in the MEM model by teachers who function as "secretaries" who can record thoughts and ideas for the children (dictated by the children, in their words). Writing is used as a teaching strategy to facilitate a metacognitive process, from production to comprehension. A writing area with the printing-press (or the computer), a duplicator, and many tools like dictionaries, paper and pens, invite the child to write and to generate hypotheses about written language. The 'free' text can be a starting point for many other activities i.e. drama, music, drawing, painting, etc. All these forms of representation are important in the MEM classes as they are all representations of the world and tools used to communicate.

From production to comprehension - a metacognitive process. From the individual text, children get involved in discovering the written code reproducing it by copying or printing it using the printing press or computer. They start producing texts without being able to write them properly. They understand that every drawing has the name of the author and the date on the top of the sheet of paper and children start doing it as early as three years old. First they begin to use their own idiosyncratic scribbles until they discover that their names have a certain shape that should be respected. In this phase they start to imitate the adult writing until they can memorize it and reproduce it without seeing. It is after this that they start to observe closer, to compare, to make correspondence with sounds and with similar names and generate hypotheses about 'how does it works'. But by this time the child might had written his/her name hundreds of times.

Functional aspect of literacy. As Vygotsky points out, "reading and writing must be something the child needs... writing must be relevant to life". This functional aspect of writing is central in the MEM pedagogy of acquisition of literacy. Children write what

they say, what they do, what they agree as a group and what is planned. The teacher's role is to provide an environment were writing has a function so that children will progressively discover and get curious to understand it. Apart from the tools used in the classroom to register the life of the group and document activities and processes, writing also appears with a function of communicating with the outside world. Sometimes children want to tell other people what they have done or what they discovered and sometimes they want information that is not available in the school. By using the classroom journal and correspondence, writing expands communication with the outside world. The classroom journal is printed monthly and is a collection of children's texts, events, projects that are sent to other classrooms, to parents and to the correspondents. Correspondence with other schools is also a way that the MEM classes experience written language with its communicative and cultural power. When a package from the correspondents arrive, a new wave of interests, information and excitement brings life to the classroom and provokes an immense amount of new ideas and work.

An understanding of what writing and reading is about is essential for the child to engage a process of discovering how it is done. This is not simple to do and sometimes does not happen as naturally as we would like, especially in communities where written language is not the most important cultural tool in use.

In an action research project about the acquisition of written language in a very deprived area of Lisbon, Manuela Neves and Margarida Martins (1994) tell us about how difficult it was when children were asked to bring to school something with a written message from home. Children could not find any printing at home. The few children who brought something, were the ones with the most structured family environment, they brought pieces of paper with written messages for the teacher. For this group, written language is a school matter and school is a separate world (sometimes lack of success) from their every day life. The teacher decided then to ask them directly to bring empty boxes of food or any house-hold products. When they discovered in the class that they could read the labels and that those written words were part of their every day life, they changed their attitude completely towards written messages. Written language became after all something that was already part of their worlds (although in a limited way) and a code about which they already knew something. "Beyond the function of expression, communication and information we consider the use of writing as a way of registering a memory of the group, organizing the class and the activities." (Almeida, 1987)

The role of the teachers
Teachers in the MEM classes have an active and central roles. They are civic and moral agents that demonstrate living in a democracy. The teacher's role is to promote a participatory organization, to promote cooperative, democratic citizenship, to listen and encourage free expression and critical attitudes. Teachers in the MEM early childhood classrooms model support and stimulate each child's autonomy and responsibility within a cooperative educational group.

Conclusions
The MEM curriculum for Early Childhood Education states that pre-school child development goes beyond the individual's activities of making sense of the world. The child also develops by means of social contacts with peers of different ages and adults who introduce her to the cultural inheritance of humanity. In this sense pre-school has a fundamental role to reinstate a cultural community which uses the cultural tools that enable humans to advance in their development. As literacy is of central value as a cultural tool it should be integrated into children's lives from their earliest experiences .

A fundamental aspect of the MEM model is that **the child** is the starting point for all learning to occur. Not only the child's psychological development but the **whole** child within a cultural and social/emotional continuum of experience. If education neglects children's backgrounds, it hinders children from learning (Niza in Graves Resendes, 1989). The child's free expression, experiences outside the school and motivations are brought into the classroom and become the starting point of studies and projects. The family and the community are sources of information and knowledge that is practical, scientific, or historical. They either come into the classroom or the children go out to meet them in the community. In this way, children can question people in the community, talk with them and participate in their cultural life.

This **functional aspect** of MEM model is a source of motivation, purpose and social meaning, as Vygotsky reiterated in his writings. Education for democratic living (Kessler, 1991) is practiced in the MEM schools where the citizenship of the child is a fundamental area of education. Therefore a **sociocentric approach** rather than an adult or child centered one is central for learning and development.

In addition, a fundamental aspect of this model emphasizes that children are asked to become conscious of their learning processes by means of organizational strategies and communication channels. Spoken and written language are central to this process which enhances cognitive development but always within the social context (Vygotsky, 1987).
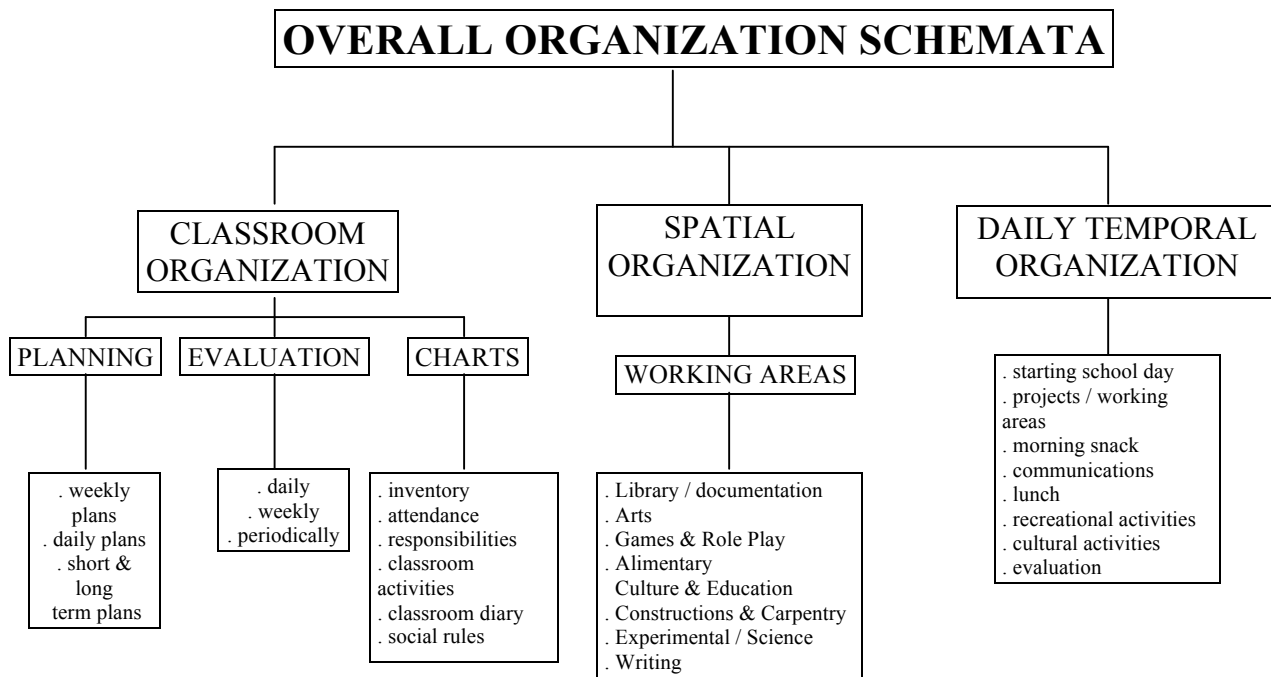
Finally, the importance of the group in providing the individual child with meaningful, useful and challenging learning which advances children beyond their zone of proximal development through social interactions, remains a genuine challenge to early childhood educators and their programs.

Editor's Note: A pedagogical movement was created in France based upon the ideas of the teacher, Celestin Freinet (1896-1966). He was often called "The French Dewey" with a program based on placing the greatest value in school on "democracy, freedom of expression, communication, and meaningful work." The Portuguese MEM was strongly influenced by these ideas for early childhood educators.

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OVERALL ORGANIZATION SCHEMATA

CLASSROOM ORGANIZATION

- PLANNING
  - . weekly plans
  - . daily plans
  - . short & long term plans
- EVALUATION
  - . daily
  - . weekly
  - . periodically
- CHARTS
  - . inventory
  - . attendance
  - . responsibilities
  - . classroom activities
  - . classroom diary
  - . social rules

SPATIAL ORGANIZATION

- WORKING AREAS
  - . Library / documentation
  - . Arts
  - . Games & Role Play
  - . Alimentary Culture & Education
  - . Constructions & Carpentry
  - . Experimental / Science
  - . Writing

DAILY TEMPORAL ORGANIZATION

- . starting school day
- . projects / working areas
- . morning snack
- . communications
- . lunch
- . recreational activities
- . cultural activities
- . evaluation

Niza, (1996)

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