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This paper briefly introduces aspects of two learning theorists’ work, Lev Vygotsky and Paulo Freire, and their connection to forest school pedagogy. Vygotsky focuses on the timing of presenting content, suggesting that a primary challenge for teachers is to discover the appropriate time and way to introduce new material. Paulo Freire’s work demonstrates a dialogical approach to education where teachers and students are co-learners and co-transformers of the world. Taken together, the work of these two theorists proves profoundly compatible with the experiential and discovery-oriented pedagogical approach of forest schools.

**Lev Vygotsky: Scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development**

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Russian educator and psychologist who researched and responded to the work of contemporaries such as Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Maria Montessori. He was keenly interested in the way children learned and why some children advanced with a little help while others did not, and his insights can make a significant contribution to forest school pedagogy.

According to Vygotsky, personal and social experience cannot be separated; environment (including family, community, education, culture, and socioeconomic status) shapes who we are and who we become. Since the values and beliefs of the adults and others around children inform their view of the world, Vygotsky emphasized the importance of interaction with teachers and peers to advance students’ knowledge.

One of Vygotsky’s most important contributions was the concept that he termed the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD). He defined this ‘zone’ as the area between the most difficult task a child can do alone and the most difficult task a child can do with help (Mooney, 2000, p. 83). Vygotsky believed that when children are on the edge of learning a new concept, they can be pushed even further by a teacher or classmate who has mastered this task. By offering timely assistance, a teacher or peer can “scaffold” on existing abilities to enable students to “reach” new concepts or skills (Mooney, 2000, p. 84).

According to Vygotsky, teachers need to keenly observe their students to determine where they are in the learning process and where they are capable of going (developmental readiness). They can plan activities that assess what is within a child’s ZPD, what can stretch children’s emerging abilities and ways that children can learn from each other. In this way, they can scaffold learning, leading to new skills and competences (Mooney, 2000, p. 85).

Vygotsky also sees language as a tool that helps children adjust their thinking and their worldview (Mooney, 2000, p. 90). Teachers need to develop skills of observing, questioning, and encouraging peer interactions that will support children’s growth and development, as well as assessing when to step in with suggestions and ideas, and when to let children proceed on their own. Significant learning takes place through play, when children use language, discuss roles in make-believe, negotiate and correct each other.

In a forest school setting, one of the teacher’s primary tasks to observe, watching and taking note of the conversations, movements, and happenings that occur within each group and individual. From these observations and reflections, teachers can assess when children can best proceed on their own and when it is time to scaffold with new suggestions and ideas. Forest school provides a unique opportunity for children to play, experiment, explore, dialogue, negotiate, and raise each other up. Whether this means learning to identify plants or creatures, building a fire, creating a pine needle basket, or resolving a conflict, children in the forest school setting have many opportunities to experience scaffolding and gentle nudges to master a new skill or concept.

**Paulo Freire: Dialogue and Transformation**

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian educator and philosopher who was concerned with how people interpret their surroundings, “read” their world, and act to change things. The work of Paulo Freire has been particularly influential in adult education in the developing world. His landmark book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was revolutionary in the way that illiterate adults in situations of oppression were encouraged to learn. While the context in Canada is quite different, his views on the role of the teacher and the teacher-student relationship have direct relevance to educating children through forest and nature school programs.

Paulo Freire laments that much of education reflects a vertical, top-down approach that he calls the “banking model.” In this approach, teachers are experts who have knowledge and information (money), which they then ‘deposit’ into students. In this model students are receptacles and the teacher is the authority, and creativity is inhibited because learning is one-directional. As he states: “The more students work at storing deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (Freire, 2004, p. 73).

Rather than adopting a top-down approach, Freire proposes a “dialogical model” where teachers and students are partners in education, functioning as co-learners in critical thinking, dialogue, and growth. Freire describes education as the “practice of freedom” (Freire, 2004, p. 81). For the learning process to be liberating, it must be done in an environment free from domination. Rather than following a set curriculum, Freire encourages a dialogical approach involving conversation and respect between teacher and student. This approach looks horizontal and treats the process of learning as a two way street where teachers and students engage and learn from each other.

Freire argued that learning must be relevant to students’ lives. By posing problems rather than simply acquiring information, his method of education encouraged value-based, informed action (“praxis**”**) where learning led to transformed lives. Freire believed that education should provide tools and practice in critical thinking and should lead to students making a difference in the world by enhancing the community and acting on the side of justice. Thus, the teacher’s main task is to engage students in this process of “conscientization,” developing an informed consciousness that leads to transformation (Freire, 2004, p. 74).

In a similar way, forest and nature schools seek to teach in a way that is dialogical and exploratory. The emphasis on emergent, child-centred, and inquiry-based learning proves remarkably similar. Like Freire, this approach to education seeks to draw out and nurture the knowledge already present in children. This mutual process of discovery is a circular one that moves from questions to investigation to learning new information, which in turn leads to further, deeper questions.

Forest school practitioners can also benefit from Freire’s emphasis on praxis and education as that which leads to justice and freedom. By connecting students to nature, teachers encourage a love for the earth that can lead to transformed relationships with their environment. This wholistic sense of peace through education can extend to healthy relationships with self, others, and the land.

Freire suggests that the banking model of education is inherently oppressive, defining oppression as “overwhelming control” (Freire, 2004, p. 77). This has many implications for forest school in both the way that we teach and the way that we view our environment. Is nature something to colonize and control? Freire’s focus on decolonization raises the issue of how, in Canada specifically, we can make a space in our co-learning for the wisdom that indigenous peoples have to offer about the land. As leaders, we can strive to become part of this decolonization process of our minds, lands, and peoples.

Freire had a vision of universal literacy and empowerment and rejected the notion of a class-based society. In a similar way, the forest school ethos suggests that every child, no matter their economic status or background, should have the opportunity to have positive experiences and connections to nature. Perhaps the biggest challenge for forest school is to reach beyond those families who already have the means and access to time in nature. For instance, how can forest schools reach out to our Canadian public schools, so that they can facilitate regular nature connection time for all children? Or reach children in under-privileged neighborhoods?

While we may not think of life in Canada as “oppressive,” the oppressed in our cities might look like those whose parents are too worried to allow children to play anywhere other than in their own living rooms. They may be those who can only experience nature when it is mediated through a computer screen. They may be those who are constantly “plugged in,” virtually connected to others but alienated from the natural world. This may be a form of modern oppression that is seeking liberation in our time.

**Conclusion**

Freire and Vygotsky agree that learning is an interactive, dialogical experience. Holding Vygotsky and Freire together, education has the potential to be both directive and dialogical, but must also lead to some form of transformation. Even the world “pedagogy” implies direction, with its Greek roots meaning “to lead a child.”

In his introduction to Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull argues that education is not neutral; it either facilitates conformity or encourages the ‘practice of freedom’ where students deal critically with reality and discover how to transform their world (Shaull, 2004, p. 34). Forest schools can be revolutionary in the way that teachers observe, scaffold, and co-learn with children. Perhaps the unique contribution of forest school towards such transformation lies in reconnecting children to the natural world.

**Bibliography**

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