

National Development: Conflated Concepts as False Narrative

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Abstract

This article critically analyses national development, a false narrative for the establishment of national literacy, a national math strategy, and national identity plans for student success. The danger and power of false narratives of national development are analysed, especially when subscribed to by formal colonial educational institutions like Bermuda College and the Bermuda Public Education System. The paper characterises the strategies and initiatives that belie island-wide student success. The use of concepts such as national focus, national literacy, national reform, etc. by colonised educational institutions to achieve student success resonates with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory regarding the interaction between developing educational institutions and people within the culture in which they live.

KEY WORDS: *critical analysis, national development, false narratives, Vygotsky*

Introduction

This article discusses the relevance of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory as the basis for a theoretical framework that helps to explain that conflated concepts like national development, national literacy, national math, national identity, and national reform are false narratives used to induce student success. Before we explain the concepts within Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in the context of national development, it is important that we answer the following questions.

What are conflated concepts? What is a false narrative? Conflation occurs when two or more concepts share some characteristics and take on a single identity. The merging of two distinct concepts into one term, national identity, conjures up potential misunderstandings in the relationships between the two concepts and this can in turn lead to the construction of a false narrative.

According to Philips (2014), a false narrative is one in which a complete narrative pattern perceived in a given situation is not an actual narrative at work in the situation. The perception in a false narrative can be due to insufficient or inaccurate information or to insufficient or inaccurate assessment.

The purpose of this article is to describe Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in the context of national development, and to speak to the danger and power of false narratives derived from these conflated concepts. At the same time, questions will be raised as to how insufficient assessments are made in delivering national development towards student success because of the misunderstanding or misuse of the concept "national."

Vygotskianisms

According to Lantolf and Pavlenko (1994), Vygotsky's idea of development occurs with the transformation of inborn capacities entangled with socioculturally constructed mediational means. "Through this transformation or internalisation, an external operation is internally reconstructed" (Blanton et al. 2001: 228). The foundational premise of sociocultural theory is that learning is social in nature and that language plays a key role in learning. Language concepts like national focus, national identity and national culture are what students learn and use as mediators between their thoughts and other's interpretations of their actions. Mediation between education institutions and other's understandings is the function of adult education policymakers and of students. Moreover, this theory emphasises the role of mediation in the interaction between novice and expert in the process of learning (Allahyar and Nazari 2012).

In colonial educational institutions such as Bermuda College and Bermuda public schools, learning plays out on two levels discussed by Vygotsky. Learning is first through interaction with others and then integrated into the individual's mental structure. Currently, Bermuda's education reform places emphasis on the student at the centre of learning. With curricula that are student-centred, cooperative, and collaborative, the learner should be treated as one who brings knowledge and experience. The learner should not be treated like an empty vessel to be filled. Unfortunately, with many educators it is at the first level that conflated concepts like national development, national identity, and national culture are espoused, before the intra-psychological process whereby the individual or student mentally internalises and embraces concepts as part of his/her cultural development. The conflated concepts, in other words, are nothing more than symbolic communicative utterances unravelled and given meaning based upon interactions with teachers, who impose on students their socio-cultural experiences as learners.

With the second Vygotskian process or principle of learning, the "zone of proximal development" facilitates the student's potential for cognitive development and meaning-making of the conflated concepts. This zone is an area of exploration for which the student is cognitively prepared, but requires help and social interaction to develop fully (Briner 1999). The developmental and empowering narrative potential is only there provided education institutions like Bermuda College and Bermuda's public schools and, more specifically, teachers progressively move students towards a stronger understanding of what these concepts mean. Educational exploration should be designed to cultivate in students an empowering narrative towards independent learning of what constitutes national development and national culture. For example, regarding national literacy, the expectation would be for educators and policymakers, as experts, to guide every student during the exploration to successfully collaborate and develop a national literacy plan that engenders a move towards national development. An aspect of this is that students, especially adolescent learners, must have encouragement to develop differentiated literacy skills. Because the best-positioned people to apprentice students in meaning-making within their disciplines are subject specialists like English literature teachers, this literacy development work cannot be the sole purview of the reading or language art teachers. "All teachers need to be able to demonstrate and make visible to students how literacy operates within their disciplines, [thus] helping adolescents learn how content experts use language in characteristic ways to present information, engage in interpretation, and create specialised text" (Fang and Schleppegrell 2010: 591). This quotation helps us understand the detrimental impact of the characteristic usage of conflated terms such as national literacy and national identity. Teachers (educational institutions) may consciously or unconsciously, in a social and cultural context, give different kinds of meanings to conflated concepts like national focus and national culture for different purposes. It is in this sense that we see how easily conflated concepts as false narratives can be present as a danger and power in education and affect student success.

Danger and power of false narratives in education

When we use the concept "national," the explicit meaning is nationhood, nationalism, or a unified body moving towards a common aim and objective. For example, in England they have a national curriculum designed and

developed to convey a common language across all subjects of learning, akin to having everyone communicate the same focus towards learning. In the US, you see a plethora of organisational bodies identified as national associations. With these postcolonial nations come the ascribed and conflated concepts of national identity, national culture, and national development. These are all terms engendering nationalism, engendering nationhood. Worsley (1984: 247) states:

NATIONALISM is also a form of ethnicity, but it is a specific form. It is the institutionalisation of one particular ethnic identity by attaching it to the state. Ethnic groups do not necessarily act together except when they have a special interest to secure. When those interests are to obtain a state of its own (or part of the state) the group becomes a nationality.

It is on this premise that the conflated concepts of national identity, national culture and national focus are dangers in the institutionalisation of student participation in their success. Simply stated, if we are to use the concept of national, implying nation, then one would expect we are evoking the concept of nationalism towards your country. That is problematic for Bermuda, as a colony, as an island, and not a nation.

These concepts, when used to advance educational agendas in Bermuda, raise questions in the classroom, during the teaching and learning process, and when we inquire about knowledge and student success deriving from such ascribed concepts. For example, when educational institutions like Bermuda College and Bermuda's public school system disseminate knowledge about having a national focus or a national agenda, is it knowledge as information or as concept formation? When the Department of Education labels a literacy or math initiative (or a blueprint for public education) as "national" for the purpose of communicating a framework, without engaging all the stakeholders in society, then it is merely conveying knowledge as information. The department is telling the public what it wants the public to know about literacy or math. There is no explanation or description to what the concept of national literacy or national mathematics means to all teachers, public or private, or to all persons in Bermuda.

Vygotsky prompts us to inquire into the nature of knowledge used in the classroom, for example, knowledge as information versus knowledge as concept formation. His theory makes us aware of our vision of students – for instance, children defined by their age and IQ versus culturally and socially situated learners. It forces us to formulate our ideal of a teacher, such as role model versus source of knowledge versus mediator, and so on (Kozulin et al. 2003). With the understanding of the teacher as a resource to enhance student success by being a role model and source of knowledge, the expectation is for the teacher to disseminate accurate knowledge. In the Bermuda context of colonial education, conflated concepts espousing "national" anything set up a false narrative for a national focus, therefore communicating inaccurate knowledge and concept formation.

In essence, usage of the conflated concepts of national focus and national reform by colonial educational institutions like Bermuda College and the Bermuda Public School System creates the danger of a false identity. The result is deception of people, who believe there is a unity among and of the people in achieving national student success. It cannot be a national focus if the focus does not include all the nation's peoples. All the nation's educational institutions working towards a common national literacy, national math, and a national focus make for a cultural politics of education towards student academic success. This cultural politics sets up the power of a false narrative.

It is evident that any movement towards a national agenda or national focus, with insufficient information as to the meaning or purpose behind the focus, leads to an inaccurate presentation. Individuals who do not provide sufficient ongoing clarification may unintentionally present a false narrative (Phillips 2013). The same applies to educational institutions. The power of conflation to create a false narrative lies in the perception that the account about national focus or a national agenda also amounts to the politicisation of education. By applying these conflated concepts and attaching meaning to them, you want students to derive meaning from the definitions of these knowledge concepts as a way of controlling the knowledge as information. According to Giroux (2004), "politicising education is grounded in a combination of self-righteousness and ideological purity that silences students [and] imposes

‘correct’ positions” (p.73). Authority in this perspective rarely opens itself to self-criticism or, for that matter, to any criticism, especially by students. Politicising education cannot discern the distinction between critical teaching and pedagogical terrorism. Advocates have no sense of the difference between encouraging human agency and social responsibility and moulding students according to the imperatives of an unquestioned ideological position. Giroux (2004) found that “politicising education is more religious than secular and more about training than educating; it harbors a great dislike for complicating issues, promoting critical dialogue and generating a culture of questioning” (p. 73).

The politicising of educational concepts like national focus and national literacy is a form of language usage that sets up a false narrative when used by educational institutions like Bermuda College and the Bermuda Public School System. The purpose is training students to accept the status quo and not to question the purpose and function of education. For the purposes of training students to see these terms in the context of their academic success, there is power in this false narrative.

The root of the danger and power of the false narrative is in the use of language to shape student thinking and action towards their success. Both narratives are within the zone of proximal development spoken of by Vygotsky. While there is exploration of the conflated concepts, most of it is done by adults, namely teachers in the classroom, as agents of the education institution imposed upon students and their thinking. This power ascribed to teachers creates the danger of a false narrative about what constitutes knowledge as formation and knowledge as concept formation. In other words, there is student subjugation to a politicising pedagogy. Students think as adults do: that is, they think as a teacher tells them to think about what these concepts mean in the context of literacy, mathematics, identity, and culture. The presentation of conflated concepts like national focus and national reform often occurs in classrooms where there is no explanation of the political meaning behind nationalism, nationhood, or national. Student success in the context of engaging with their learning, critically interrogating it, and questioning teachers and the institution is discouraged as a national focus. National development is for students, in this case public education students, to find their “voice.” Public and higher education may be one of the few sites available to learn about the limits of commercial values, address what it means to learn the skills of social citizenship, and learn how to deepen and expand the possibilities of collective agency and democratic life (Giroux 2004: 72).

In a colonial education system, is nationalism to be taught as a statement of loyalty to country, or loyalty to postcolonial influences? When we identify educational initiatives as national, do we genuinely mean this is as initiatives inclusive of all the people’s voices? By communicating national development, are we devising a plan for student success, or student conformity? In a colonial educational construct when we propose a national development towards any educational agenda, the aim should be a collective identity where all the people of the nation are in a position to communicate using a common language with one another. With this purpose, we will produce a national development indicative of a collective identity for student success. The collective identity, as well as the single identity, emanating from a common liberating language of questioning and independent learning experience opens up empowering narratives in schools about learning. Our school leaders, in this case the teacher, must decide whether or not they want democratic and liberating places of learning, or schools that are oppressive, non-critical places of education conformity.

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