

Chapter 4

Perezhivanie and Child Development: Theorising Research in Early Childhood

Marie Hammer

Abstract This chapter will extend on the theoretical perspective of the previous chapter and will explore the connection between perezhivanie and children's development, in particular the development of social competence. The cultural context of social competence is critical to children's successful engagement with their world and this is explored in the context of early childhood educational settings as pivotal to the development of personality. This is a cryptic concept for early childhood teachers, although the emphasis on social skills and development are often emphasised as the key plank of early year's education.

Vygotsky (1994) wrote "...The emotional experience [perezhivanie] arising from any situation or from any aspect of environment, determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child". Therefore, it is not any of the factors in themselves (if taken without reference to the child) which determines how they will influence the future course of his development, but the same factors refracted through the prism of perezhivanie (Vygotsky 1994, p. 342). Hence, this chapter is designed to frame the theoretical into the application for early childhood educators and will draw on current research that explores the diverse elements of emotion and social competence through the environment and the interpersonal relationships of early childhood education settings.

In the previous chapter Veresov draws our attention to Vygotsky's statement about the use of the concept of perezhivanie as "a tool for analyzing the influence of the sociocultural environment not on the individual per se, but on the process of development of the individual through the individual's perezhivanie of the environment" (Vygotsky 1994, p. 294). It is this application of the concept as a tool that takes us to the essence of the work of teachers in synthesising the development and the social situation of the child to engage in meaningful learning. To achieve this it is necessary for teachers to understand the many dimensions of perezhivanie that go

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beyond the emotional experience and incorporate a range of psychological functions such as memory, thinking, imagination and sense of self.

In rethinking the child's *perezhivanie* as a theoretical concept from the teacher's point of view, it can be seen as a prism that refracts every social interaction and influence. Every influence of the teacher is not a direct influence on the child because it is refracted through the child's *perezhivanie*, even though the child is seen to be following the teacher's directions in learning, the child engages in the learning tasks in his/her own way. As every child is unique, the learning is refracted through their own experiences and perspectives of the world.

The notion of child focused learning, and developing the curriculum based on the child's interest is in fact a manifestation of both the child's and the teacher's own *perezhivanie* that is not of itself observable. Whilst it is possible to observe a child's emotional response to a critical event this may give a glimpse of the child's dramatic *perezhivanie*, the dramatic events indicate the turning point in the child's development through which *perezhivanie* can change what the child learns.

For example in their study on children's literacy development, MacKenzie and Veresov (2013) describe an instance where a class of 5-year-old children travelled to a nearby church by bus. On their return from the visit the children were asked to draw the story of their outing. One child drew a quite detailed picture of the church they had visited, stating: "We went to the church on a bus". Another child drew a detailed picture of the bus, stating: "We went on a bus to the church".

Although both children shared the same experience it was their *perezhivanie* that foregrounds their specific interest and the learning they drew from the experience, that is their emotions, memories and the thinking they bring to the experience enables the child to interpret their experience in the framework of their own social situation. The child refracts the environment and the experience, although the teacher is unable to observe all of these elements but it is the refraction rather than a reflection that is most significant. This is best described by Veresov and Fleer (in press, 2016) where Vygotsky's metaphor of a prism is further refined to note that the influences on the child are refracted through the prism to show the movement or processes of the experience. Such a notion challenges the concepts of documenting only what the outcomes are of the experience, but to focus on the actual experience as it occurs.

This gives rise to a new vision of a sociocultural model in education, enmeshed with the social competence of the children as active players in their understanding of the learning environment.

4.1 The Need for New Understandings of Social Competence

The notion of social competence brings with it the sense of belonging or fitting into the social situation of the child. Very often the children who do not easily fit in are regarded as difficult or naughty and are reprimanded and often excluded from the

social situation, the exact opposite of the sort of social situation of development that these children need to develop.

In Vygotsky's original writings he talks about the idea of 'child primitives' to discuss his concept of the cultural development of the child. Translated at a particular period in time, this now politically incorrect term captures some important ideas that are foundational for reconceptualising social competence from the individual to the collective construct. What Vygotsky was talking about at the time were the consequences of cultural deprivation and emotional neglect. At the time of his work, he was writing after the revolution when there were a lot of homeless children and 'street kids' wandering around, unattached, disengaged, without family or other structures.

I permit myself to explain this in relation to cultural development. Both cultural development and practical development are connected with the use of cultural means of thinking, in particular verbal thinking. In recent times psychologists have discerned a form of child thought which sheds light on the problem of cultural development; this is *child primitiveness*, where the degree of cultural development is minimal. (Vygotsky 1993, p. 147)

It is useful to commence this discussion from the perspective of 'child primitives' or vulnerable children, as we refer to these children today, as it is similar to looking at a photographic negative that allows us to see the points of difference in the development of social competence. That is, we can see more clearly what is not there and bring into sharp relief the essential elements of cultural development that are critical parts of social competence and participation. In particular we are alerted to a disconnect that occurs for these children due to sociocultural deprivation which may on the surface appear to be a form of learning disability (Gindis 2006). The inability of these vulnerable children to use appropriate tools such as cognitive language and social tools often results in these children being positioned as 'naughty' and removed from the social situation, further exacerbating the disconnect and reducing any benefit from participating in social educational environments.

Functional cases of behavioral deviation from normal development must be regarded as problem children in the strict sense of the word. The nature of such cases consists for the most part of a *psychological conflict* between the child and his environment. (Vygotsky 1993, p. 175)

In his discussions around difficult children Vygotsky emphasises the role of development as the 'key to understanding disintegration' and that disintegration is also 'the key to understanding development' (Vygotsky 1993). Through this dialectic we are returned to the notion of 'primitive reactions' as simple revelations of a range of reactions. Vygotsky suggests that these reactions avoid the entity of personality indicating that these are a form of the individual's personal responses and coping mechanisms borne from the child's earlier experiences. This is exhibited in the example Vygotsky cites of the girl of Tartar origin who, when asked if all children at a school can write and draw well, responds that she is unable to know what she cannot see. (ibid). Vygotsky refers to this as 'the underdeveloped personality'. He concludes that this is because a lack of mastery of 'cultural reasoning'. The child is limited to thinking in tangible terms, that is only what she can see.

In this context, perezhivanie as a tool provides the necessary insight for teachers to connect to the child’s cultural context and to provide learning programmes that extend and enhance the child’s ‘cultural reasoning’.

Therefore, it has become evident that a new model of social competence is needed. In the following section a model showing the relations between individual and collective development of social competence is presented in the hope that perezhivanie can be more clearly ascertained as part of the developmental process.

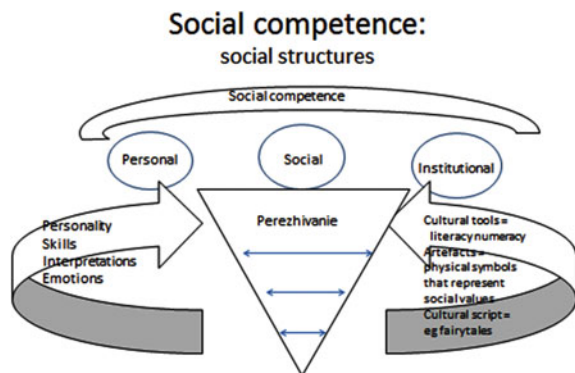
4.2 A New Conception of Social Competence

The metaphysical poet, John Donne, famously wrote: “no man is an island entire of itself”. This strong notion of connectedness is pivotal to the consideration of social competence. Hedegaard (2011) in her introduction to the CHADOC <https://www.iscar.org/organisation/sections/thematic-sections/> seminar held recently in association with the International ISCAR Congress in Sydney,

Developmental psychology has often been characterised historically as the study of ‘the general child’, with a focus on developing a model that can be used to evaluate individual children and their changing relations to society as they grow up. Childhood studies have focused on the study of children anchored in historical times and settings. ... Cultural-Historical approaches seek to unite the general principles in relation to time and place. (Hedergaard 2011)

Hedegaard’s statement aligns the view of children with a notion of social competence as a package rather than a deconstruction of their individual skill elements or component parts. In other words, the child is an intact and complete member of the social group—not as has become the trend a ‘future’ member of the society or worse still a cultural investment of the future. She focuses on the idea of the generalised perception of children as a historical or traditional approach and seeks to unite those general principles in relation to time and place. In repositioning the child as a social being and the learning environment as a social situation it is

Fig. 4.1 Elements of Social Competence



possible for teachers to redefine their role as supporting social competence of children where skills and tools are utilised as part of the social process, to successfully negotiate the structure of the society in which children live (Fig. 4.1).

In unpacking the idea of social competence it is useful to draw from Dewey, and his thinking about what is the purpose of education is it knowledge and understanding, the preservation of the status quo? However, understanding and knowledge of what? It is about being part of the overall social structure to which we belong, being able to participate using a whole collection of skills that are needed. In particular, the manner in which we think about ourselves, how we use tools and skills, personal skills, think about relationships, how to regulate emotions, but also literacy and numeracy.

A useful working definition of social competence is the capacity to be able to successfully negotiate the structure of society, such negotiation includes skills such as:

- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Interpersonal skills
- Empathy
- Emotional self-regulation

Further, these elements underpin Vygotsky's view of personality and help to deconstruct the working parts of social competence which come together in unique and individual forms through perezhivanie

Character is the social imprint on personality. It is the hardened, crystallized, typical behavior of personality; it is the struggle for social position. It is a secession from the primary line, the leading line of development, the unconscious plan of life, from the integral of development of all psychological acts and functions. (Vygotsky 1993, p. 156)

This then is my challenge to educators to bring into position life skills to support the daily programme. We need the skills to function effectively, not indeed just in themselves but in the social situations that bring relevance and meaning to the skill set. Also we need social competence as an overarching goal and purpose of education and there are many underpinning components that I am trying to find, such as the notion of the sense of self, images of ourselves (see Fig. 4.2). Gonzalez-Rey tells us the concept of personal sense is a new pathway that needs to be developed. He says it is an interesting psychological concept but through the emphasis on the process it is a valuable and flexible concept. It is here that the importance of perezhivanie as a conceptual tool for teachers is the key to reframing the learning experience (Gonzalez-Rey 2011).

The second element of the model is the social as the pivotal element of social competence. Again, these contribute to that notion of personal sense, the social condition embodies the notion of personal sense. So how do children indicate this, how do they find it with others and how do they regulate their behaviour. Hedegaard (2011) reminded us that Vygotsky pursued the wholeness approach to the development of child and his concept of the child's social situation of

Fig. 4.2 Personal aspect of social competence

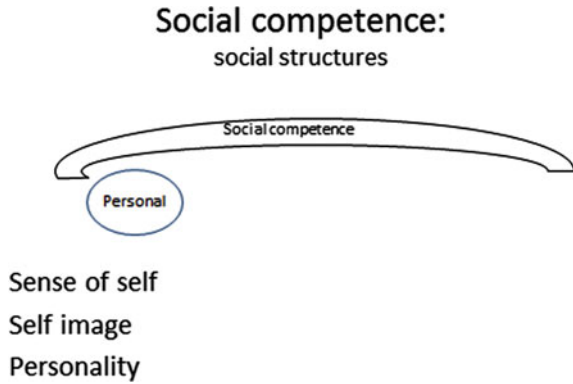


Fig. 4.3 Interpersonal aspect of social competence

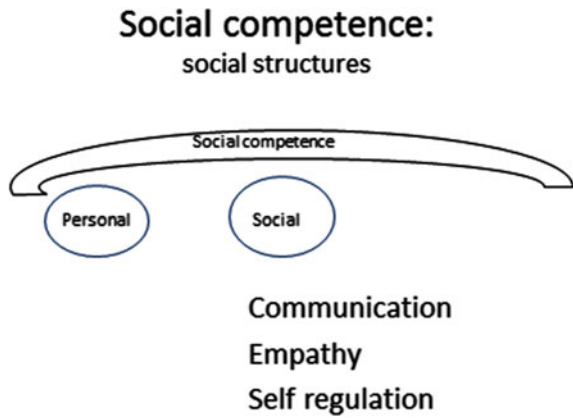
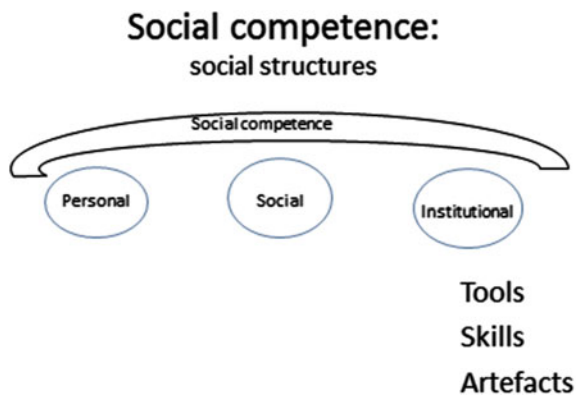


Fig. 4.4 Institutional aspect of social competence



development was a critical component. The social construction and the social development is a critical concept in all these. This goes to the important skills of communication in all its forms and the capacity to read the communications of others, it highlights the two-way interaction of social encounters (Fig. 4.3).

This is also the most challenging task for teachers to create the space and opportunity for children to engage in meaningful and purposeful activities within a social milieu and this connects with the third element of the model—the institutional. Again, I look to Hedegaard's work to understand the role of the institution in helping child to confirm the everyday. This goes beyond the understanding of culture in its broadest sense to consider tools, or context that includes the activity settings within the institutional practices. Thus the idea of providing the mediating tools/skills in the context of the social is the key role of the teacher (Fig. 4.4).

Hedegaard and Chaiklin (2005) give us an inkling to the role of the institution in conforming the everyday to the social structures; they extend the ideas of Vygotsky and Brofrennbrenner beyond an understanding of culture as meaning mediating tools or as context, to include activity settings within institutional practices.

Children through their motivated activities in different settings in institutional practices acquire culture through competencies with tools but also as values and motives for activities. The personal aspect of knowledge, the everyday concepts, is located in the life setting of a person (sense of self). These personal concepts are the foundation for the child's appropriation of specific syllabus concepts that qualify the child's personal concept so they can function as theoretical concepts. However, subject matter concepts are not universal, they are related to curriculum traditions for example (Hedegaard and Chaiklin 2005). This can also be applied to the practices of other institutions such as religious observances, sporting clubs, etc.

Teachers' sensitivity has been shown to bridge the gap between the cultural practices across institutions, and where an absence of cultural mediation has been noted. It is through children's activities within the institutional settings found in particular communities that children are supported by teachers to develop cultural competence and learn to use the cultural tools of their communities. Through their participation in valued activities found in institutions, such as schools and pre-schools, children develop the values and motives of their communities. For example, personal meaning of everyday knowledge supports the development of everyday concepts (Vygotsky 1994) and this should be dialectically related to valued abstract or school-based concepts. Hedegaard reminds us also that within the syllabus, the subject silos and content concepts of the institutions are not universal, they are related to particular traditions of curriculum. For example, the personal concepts of the child are the basis for the child to function and develop theoretical concepts, which are in some ways met by the specific topics of the educational subjects and the traditional curriculum views of the world. So, there is the constant tension, if you like, between what the child brings, with knowledge traditions found in institutions, alongside their lives and sense of understanding of self.

This does not end with the curriculum in schools. There are practices in other social institutions such as religious practices and religious beliefs and rituals that deliver a set of rules over everyday knowledge and understanding. There are

particular kinds of cultural rules about how you conduct yourself. What are the rules of games and how you work together as a team, all those impose on top of the personal self and insinuate themselves as another layer influencing the child and child's sense of the self. It is the personality, the combination of the sense of the self, the importance of emotions in all these that are fundamental to the individual child and these are adapted and interpreted through the child's *perezhivanie*.

The importance of emotions is fundamental to this sense of self, and again it is particularly highlighted when we look at the photographic negative and consider Vygotsky's work about 'primitives'. When Vygotsky talks about vulnerable children, he highlights a disconnect, where the emotions and the personal sense of the self completely disengage from the social and the institutional. Within that, there is a sense that these children have their own institution and their own perspectives of social competence that stands alongside the general view of such competence. In exploring the issue of the children who are disengaged, there is a strong message about the institution, and the need to develop those communication skills and those connection skills of the personal sense. What practices need to be considered so as to bring the institution into a conceptualisation of the child's social construction and social competence?

Through the cultural context of the child there is an intersection of the demands and defining elements of the child as part of belonging to the social situation.

On the other side, from the individual, there is the whole cultural–societal dimension to consider. What is the richness of the culture? What are the cultural tools, literacy or numeracy? And also the artefacts that are the visible symbols that represent the cultural values. For example, Vygotsky heavily relies on the arts, the theatre, Thomas Merton says “art enables us to find ourselves and to lose ourselves at the same time” (Merton 1955). All these elements represent the cultural values and the social structure. There is also the cultural script, evidenced in the literature, and this is most noted in the literature associated with the oral tradition of fairy tales. For example, fairy tales provide the script through which children play imaginatively, using the various cultural tools, adding the sense of self and how that fits into what is the social and institutional. The drama of the fairytale is a vehicle for children to pull together all the elements of life and put things together. All of these personal, social and institutional dimensions of social competence are shown in the Fig. 4.1 to foreground to early childhood teachers the importance of the practice traditions in which preschool children participate. But also, the model seeks to make visible the dynamic tension found between the richness of what the child brings and the context of the institutions that s/he attends where valued practices in society are enacted. It is these dynamic and dialectic sites which create the conditions for the development of social competence, and it is the early childhood teacher who has a central role in this process best explained by the concept of *perezhivanie*, as will be shown in the next section.

4.3 A Case Example to Illustrate a Cultural–Historical Model of Social Competence

And so to return to perezhivanie and introduce the idea of the unity of the personal and social, best explained through the story of Billy, a four-and-half-year-old child. Billy is a tall child for his age and had been in short-term emergency care since he was 6 months of age because of his mother's addiction to heroin and consequent inability to care for Billy. She had attended a number of rehabilitation centres but had been unable to achieve an extended period of being drug-free that would be necessary to care for a young child. The placement where Billy had been cared for was a short-term emergency accommodation facility where children generally did not stay for more than 8 weeks at a time, however, because of a number of legal impediments and his mother refusing to relinquish his care, Billy had remained at the service for 4 years. During this time, he had witnessed the coming and going of many children, throughout this time Billy had continued to attend an early childhood centre on a daily basis in an effort to provide some stability and predictable routine in his life. Following a court order to revoke his mother's guardianship of Billy he was eventually able to be placed in a foster care home with a family unit (two parents and other children as well as several pets were all part of this new household). This was an exciting time for Billy and he began to bring objects from the house to kindergarten, usually household effects such as cutlery, etc. The case workers expressed concern that Billy had become institutionalised and was now stealing from the family with whom he had been placed.

At kindergarten, Billy held onto a spoon refusing to relinquish it to staff or to store it in his locker. On one occasion, Billy was trying to climb the apparatus at the kindergarten but was finding it difficult as he had a spoon from the home in his hand. The teacher offered to hold the spoon while he was climbing and he agreed after stating that he had to have it to take back to the foster home.

This was an insight into Billy's perezhivanie, the teacher needed to view how the child is interpreting his situation and environment in a way that transforms the earlier negative judgements into a positive understanding of Billy's need for a tangible link to the security of the foster home. Billy has demonstrated a process that analyses his situation and made decisions to problem solve.

In this scenario the child's thinking is not just emotional but a complete process of psychological functions to ensure his need for security. In light of the earlier discussion of 'primitives' it would have been easy to reprimand Billy and admonish him for stealing property, however by taking time to listen to Billy and seek to understand his perezhivanie it became possible for the teacher to ensure there were opportunities to strengthen Billy's position and sense of belonging to this new social situation in his life. Perezhivanie is not internalised rather it is produced by the child. The production of personality of the child, the production of the human being in the social context. "Perezhivanie represents the unity between the child and their engagement with their social and material environment" (Vygotsky 1994, p. 343).

Thus the teacher needs to be aware that there is a different *perezhivanie* for the child and the adult. Each individual goes into the same situation but comes away with different feelings creating a connection that assists teachers to take on-board what is happening and add to that sense of self and that relationship between the self and the broader community in the social situation. The mechanism that is taken away changes how individuals react to particular situations.

This becomes the kernel of planning for future learning and development by the teacher. Billy's need for security and to continue in this new place led him to develop his own independent strategy to maintain his security. His need to be part of a family structure and to have the predictability of being able to return to his safe home was paramount for him and overshadowed his engagement in the learning experiences and interactions with his preschool peers. The teacher in understanding Billy's *perezhivanie* must adapt her planning to acknowledge Billy's need and to incorporate this in the approaches to including Billy in learning activities. This might be as simplistic as helping Billy to create a pouch or pocket that will hold his security object on his person (connected to a belt or similar) but can be extended to further enhance his problem-solving skills through discussion, art expression and dramatic play opportunities where the teacher asks questions, poses problem situations and supports Billy as he works through these activities. Individualised dramatic play opportunities using puppets or small figurines are ideal in such circumstances. The key element here is not to impose the adult interpretation of events but to acknowledge and respect the child's *perezhivanie*.

In order for teachers to achieve high quality, meaningful education programmes for children, the importance of *perezhivanie* as a tool of analysis of the sociocultural environment cannot be understated. *Perezhivanie* is the very essence of the social interactions in the learning environment and provides insight into the children's cultural context and cultural reasoning. Through this approach of analysis teachers are able to determine not just what the children know and understand but also why they know in a particular way, thus enabling teachers to refine their educational approaches in a targeted and specific way to the children in a particular class.

Billy's case stands as a reminder of the importance for teachers to be aware of all children's emotional experiences that come from many aspects of their sociocultural environment and that this extends beyond the learning situation. *Perezhivanie* is a tool for teachers to achieve new and deeper insight of the children and to develop educational programmes that build and extend on the children's everyday experiences to underpin meaningful learning.

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