The psychoanalytic kindergarten project in Soviet Russia 1921–1930

Yordanka Valkanova

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Introduction

Imported from abroad, psychoanalytic theory found fertile soil in Russia in the post-revolutionary times, a period when enlightenment absolutism swept the country. During this era, a variety of advocacy groups promoted progressive psychological approaches to the study of early human development. The growing interest in giving scientific accounts of developmental processes to propagandise ideas about societal transformation was prompted by the need to change ‘inherited’ society. Ideas about the transformative power of education were nurtured by modern psychological and pedagogical theories. It is not surprising then that Sigmund Freud’s psychology of unconsciousness sparked interest in Russia both prior to and after the Bolshevik ‘October Revolution’ of 1917.

Psychologists such as Ivan Ermakov (1875–1942), Mosche Wulff (1878–1971), Tatiana Rozental (1884–1921) and Alexander Luria (1902–77) were among the founders of the psychoanalytic movement (Belkin and Litvinov, 1992). In 1921, in an attempt to pursue the political implications of Freud’s thoughts, the Soviet educational authorities initiated a psychoanalytic kindergarten project known as the Children’s Home Laboratory. The idea was backed by Commissar of War, Leon Trotsky, and also generously supported by Nadezhda Alliluyeva, the second wife of Joseph Stalin and the daughter of prominent Bolsheviks.

The project remains perhaps the best known single contribution to psychoanalytic early childhood pedagogy, an object in questioning how Freud’s framework could be incorporated into socialist preschools. Whilst some previous studies (Etkind et al, 1997; Miller, 1998; Angelini, 2008; Valkanova in Maynard, 2014; Gainotti and Schiavulli, 2014) have centred mainly on explorations of how psychoanalysis is interpreted in educational projects, this enquiry, through a framework that derives from Dalibor Vesely’s concept of the divided nature of representation (2004), views the process from both aspects. That is, it aims to give an account of the dialectical relationship between psychoanalytic knowledge and instrumental early childhood education approaches.

Political status

The story of the psychoanalytic kindergarten is ultimately associated with a sense of political interest and obligation. Indeed, for some members of the Russian psychoanalytical network,
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their interest in pursuing the eugenic implications of Freud's thoughts was not just fed by a convergence of pedagogic and political analysis, but was also built on long-standing ties to high-flying members of the Bolshevik elite (Valkanova, 2009). The project was informally led by Vera Schmidt (1889–1937), an educator with an extraordinary career whose work remains far too little known outside the psychoanalytic world. Vera had studied the kindergarten method at the Froebel Institute in Kiev from 1913–16 and was deeply influenced by Friedrich Froebel’s (1782–1852) philosophy (Valkanova and Brehony, 2006).

The Children’s Home Laboratory was an early childhood institution, run as a boarding school. In Vera Schmidt’s words, a key feature was the closeness of the founders of the kindergarten project: ‘in our small circle of people, who were interested in psychoanalysis, has emerged the idea of organising a children’s home that could allow us to seek new education on a basis of psychoanalysis’ (Schmidt, 2011: 11). It is striking how many of the Bolshevik leadership were in the same social and intellectual network. Amusingly, half of the enrolled children came from families of Revolutionary heroes and officials, while half were abandoned or orphaned street children. From the nomenklatura, these included the children of Kursky, Sverdlov, Frunze and Vera herself, as well as Stalin’s birth son Vasily and his adoptive son Artyom Sergeev (Tomik). The latter noted in his memoirs that Stalin and Nadezhda Alliluyeva made only rare visits to the Children’s Home during the 3-year period that both children stayed there (Sergeev and Glushnik, 2006).

Alliluyeva, however, helped the newly established project to find a home in the beautiful Art Nouveau Ryabushinsky House in Moscow (built by the architect Fyodor Schechtel in 1900). The choice of the Ryabushinsky House to develop the new Soviet man and woman is significant. The sculpted staircase, stained-glass windows and painted wall tiles represented the emergence of the unconscious soul and its spiritual evolution.

The kindergarten project was closely monitored by the Russian Psychoanalytic Society, the People’s Commissariat for Education, the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party and the German mine workers’ trade union organisation, ‘Union’.

Scientisation and its power in defining pedagogy

The ‘scientific’ work of Vera Schmidt drew on a normative construct of a child (Valkanova, 2009). Scientisation was perceived as having a special form of social power in defining pedagogy. Norm had to be generated and clearly conveyed to politicians and teachers. This tendency rested on two interrelated premises: that psychoanalysts possessed and exercised power, and that education was an effective device in transforming habits and attitudes.

Psychoanalytic thinking worked with a number of extensive concepts, such as unconsciousness, desire, otherness and drives (Schmidt, 2011). An apprentice-master training model was established, with a special emphasis on analysis, and psychoanalytic knowledge was seen with an ‘uncritical aura’ (Vesely, 2004). In order to cultivate the necessary professional attitude, the trainees had to go through analysis themselves. This training was centred on experiencing the power of sublimation. Trainees were guided towards a cathartic transformation of their professional identity. Indeed, they had to discover the similarities of their own fears and desires to those observable in children. Essentially, children were allowed to express their sexual needs freely. Vera noted in her report to Sigmund Freud (Schmidt, 1924) that the aim was for the trainees to take a professional stance, without disgust, when observing infantile sexual behaviours. However, knowledge of Freud’s approach was taken as a framework that devalued any other professional attributes, such as empathy or efficiency. Moreover, excessive preoccupation with psychoanalytic knowledge generation resulted in high employee turnover and, eventually, along with an
inspector’s report that insisted on children practising masturbation, contributed to the closure of the project in 1925.

**Legacy of Vera Schmidt’s work**

The evaluation of acceptable theories to support the ideological role of education marginalised any positive recognition of the research work done in the Children’s Home. The scientific community vigorously engaged in anti-psychoanalytic campaigns at academic forums, in scholarly journals and professional magazines. The introduction to Pavel Blonsky’s book *Sexual Education* (1935) is a good example of such polemics. Blonsky cited Lenin’s hostile criticism of psychoanalysis (documented in Clara Zetkin’s words): ‘Freud’s theory is a fashionable trick. I do not trust those who are scrupulously engaged with sexual issues’ (p. 7). Trotsky’s involvement was also unfortunate and provoked adverse actions. Soon after Stalin launched a series of attacks on Trotsky in 1924, the project was labelled ‘anti-Marxist’.

Nonetheless, Vera and her fellow psychoanalysts’ claims about children’s sexual emancipation greatly influenced the Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich’s (1897–1957) interest in Marxist psychoanalysis. Reich saw the potential implications of the project findings in the necessity of urgent reforms, not only in terms of simplifying the codification of divorces, legalising abortion and women’s emancipation, but also in terms of shifting the dominant sexual ideology (Reich, 1972).

Since the student revolution in 1968, there has been another veritable explosion of interest in the kind of knowledge the Moscow project produced. Vera Schmidt’s book, published in German in 1924, found a new life in the *Kinderladen* movement in Germany. Members of the movement viewed the psychoanalytical model of education, depicted in Vera’s book, as particularly consistent with their radical left philosophy, offering a mode for escaping from centralised provisions and achieving ‘collectively transformed private lives’ (Baader, 2015).

Ultimately, the case of the Children’s Home Laboratory provides significant insights into the relationship between practice and training, epistemic agency, political demands, leadership work and different professional groupings. Such projects, compared to similar preschool contemporaries documented in early childhood historiography, may help us generate models of how theoretical knowledge has married with practice in the kindergarten milieu. It responds in a notably complex manner to the major themes of early twentieth-century ways of thinking, while distorting them unusually in the process.