

## Lev Vygotsky's Revolutionary Socio Cultural Theory of Psychological Development

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### Abstract

This paper focused on Lev Vygotsky's revolutionary socio cultural theory of psychological development. The objective of the study is to examine the challenges of the application of Lev Vygotsky's revolutionary socio cultural theory of psychological development in the classroom criticism of the theory and its implications to Education. This paper is hinged on Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Framework. According to Vygotsky, learning is a social process that is heavily influenced by interactions with peers, teachers, and the broader cultural context. His theory emphasizes the importance of social interactions and cultural tools in shaping an individual's cognitive development. However, despite its significance, there are several challenges and gaps that need to be addressed. One major problem is the limited application of Vygotsky's theory in modern educational systems. While Vygotsky's ideas stress the importance of collaborative learning and guided instruction, many educational practices remain focused on individual learning and standardized testing, which may not fully capitalize on the social nature of cognitive development. This disconnect between theory and practice raises questions about how educational systems can better integrate socio-cultural learning principles to enhance student development. Another issue is the lack of comprehensive research on how Vygotsky's theory applies across diverse cultural contexts. Most studies on the socio-cultural theory have been conducted in Western or urban environments, leaving gaps in understanding how this theory might work in different socio-economic and cultural settings, especially in developing countries. Therefore, the problem lies in the underutilization of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory in education and the need for more culturally inclusive research. Addressing these issues is crucial for making Vygotsky's revolutionary theory more applicable and effective in diverse educational contexts globally. The finding of the paper is that, by applying Vygotsky's insights in educational settings, we can create environments that foster optimal learning and development, empowering learners to reach their full potential.

**Keywords:** Revolutionary socio cultural theory, Psychological development, Learning, Scaffolding

### Introduction

Lev Vygotsky, a renowned Russian psychologist and scholar, developed a revolutionary theory of psychological development that continues to shape our understanding of how individuals learn and develop. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social interactions, cultural context, and language in shaping cognitive development. This explore the key concepts and implications of Vygotsky's theory, highlighting its significance in the field of psychology and education.

Vygotsky's social development theory asserts that a child's cognitive development and learning ability can be guided and mediated by their social interactions. His theory also called

Vygotsky's socio cultural theory states that learning is a crucially social process as opposed to an independent journey of discovery (Robert et al. 2004). He expands on this by stating that a child's learning benefitted greatly from being guided by a more knowledgeable member of the community - such as a parent or teacher. In the same vein Vygotsky's socio cultural theory also suggested that children internalise and learn from the beliefs and attitudes that they witness around them (Carl, 2012). He believed that culture played an important role in shaping cognitive development and therefore that these developmental stages varied across cultures. Vygotsky also stressed the importance of

language as the root of all learning (Katherine & Robyn, 2004).

Moreover, Vygotsky's theory places importance on guiding children's learning through their interaction with a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The MKO other could be anyone with a greater understanding of the task or concept that the child is trying to complete or learn. Most often, this would be a parent, caregiver or teacher, but it could also be a peer or mentor (Offord, 2005). This theory is not limited to academic or educational learning; it can also be applied to recreational learning such as playing games or using technology. In these circumstances, a peer or older child is more likely to be the MKO (Elena & Leong, 2006).

The MKO could also be an electronic tutor, in cases where a programme is set up to guide learning using voice prompts or videos. Vygotsky's theory places importance on guiding children's learning through their interaction with a more knowledgeable other (MKO) (Jeff & Knopp, 2012).

### **Brief Biography of Lev Vygotsky**

Lev Simkhovich Vygotsky (real name – Lev Simkhovich Vygotsky) was born on November 17th, 1896 in Orsha (now the territory of Belarus) to the family of the banker SimkhaLeibovich Vygotskiy. Vygotsky spent his childhood and youth in Gomel, where he received comprehensive education, first at home, then at a private Jewish gymnasium. In (1913) Vygotsky started to study law at Moscow University; he also attended classes at the faculty of history and philology of Shanyavsky People's University, where he wrote the Tragedy of Hamlet as a graduate thesis. At the time he was involved in literature and theater, about which he would publish more than eighty reviews (Elena & Leong, 2006). During this period, he also was in ideological opposition to Marxism and tried to realize himself in essays on Jewish national politics (Zavershneva & Van der Veer, 2018). In the revolutionary years of 1917–1918 he moved from sympathy to Judaism to accepting Marxism, while remaining faithful to the philosophy of Spinoza. Having returned to

Gomel in 1917, Vygotsky became one of the central figures of Gomel cultural life and taught the humanities (Anna & Igor, 2004).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of psychological development revolutionized our understanding of how children learn and develop cognitively. According to Vygotsky, learning is a social process that is heavily influenced by interactions with peers, teachers, and the broader cultural context. His theory emphasizes the importance of social interactions and cultural tools in shaping an individual's cognitive development. However, despite its significance, there are several challenges and gaps that need to be addressed. One major problem is the limited application of Vygotsky's theory in modern educational systems. While Vygotsky's ideas stress the importance of collaborative learning and guided instruction, many educational practices remain focused on individual learning and standardized testing, which may not fully capitalize on the social nature of cognitive development. This disconnect between theory and practice raises questions about how educational systems can better integrate socio-cultural learning principles to enhance student development.

Another issue is the lack of comprehensive research on how Vygotsky's theory applies across diverse cultural contexts. Most studies on the socio-cultural theory have been conducted in Western or urban environments, leaving gaps in understanding how this theory might work in different socio-economic and cultural settings, especially in developing countries. Therefore, the problem lies in the underutilization of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory in education and the need for more culturally inclusive research. Addressing these issues is crucial for making Vygotsky's revolutionary theory more applicable and effective in diverse educational contexts globally.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is hinged on Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Framework.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a key concept in Vygotsky's theory, referring to

the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more knowledgeable individual. This framework suggests that effective learning occurs within this zone, where learners are pushed just beyond their current capabilities but are still able to succeed with assistance. The ZPD highlights the importance of scaffolding, where teachers, parents, or peers provide the necessary support to help learners reach their potential. This framework emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning, focusing on collaborative and guided activities to enhance cognitive development.

### Lev Vygotsky Socio-Cultural Theory

A pioneering psychologist with diverse interests, Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was interested in how cultural elements which a particular society deems important – for example, customs, beliefs, skills and values – are passed on to new generations. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory **also known as social constructivism or socio-culturalism** views human development as a socially mediated process in which children acquire cultural values, beliefs, and problem-solving strategies through collaborative dialogues with more knowledgeable members of society (Jaen, & René van der Veer, 2000). Vygotsky's theory comprises of concepts such as Culture-Specific Tools, Private Speech, and the Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky's theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978), as he believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of “making meaning.”

Likewise, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning explains that learning occurs during social interactions between individuals. It is one of the dominant theories of education today and believes that learning happens first through social interaction and second through individual internalization of social behaviors. In the sociocultural theory, students and teachers form relationships in the classroom to help the student learn (Stetsenko, 2008). The relationships help facilitate social interaction and active participation in the learning tasks. Students learn through

observation, listening and talking through their tasks (Rene van der Veer & Anton, 2011).

The sociocultural theory opined that social interaction within the family and with knowledgeable members of the community is the primary means by which children acquire behaviours and cognitive processes relevant to their own society. Adult or peer intervention in this context is thus an essential part of the development process.

The work of Lev Vygotsky (1934) has become the foundation of much research and theory in cognitive development over the past several decades, particularly what has become known as sociocultural theory. Unlike Piaget's notion that children's development must necessarily precede their learning, Vygotsky argued, learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological function (Yuriy, 2005). This theoretical perspective centres the learning process on the cultural, social, institutional, environmental and historical situations rather than individual cognitive abilities as Piaget suggested. As such, it is effective in teaching students with specialized needs particularly vocational training.

Vygotsky claimed that initial development was prompted by the child's immediate social interactions, but that, as learning became internalized, there was a shift to the individual level. For Vygotsky, children were apprentices who learned from and alongside those with greater experience who understood their abilities and needs. Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, also known as the sociocultural perspective, provides a framework for understanding how social interactions, cultural influences, and cognitive development are interconnected. While Vygotsky's primary focus was on general cognitive development, his theories can be applied to various educational contexts, including vocational education programs (Alva, (2009).

Two particular insights drawn from Vygotsky's work have had an important influence on childcare:

- i. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development

- ii. Vygotsky described the zone of proximal development as: ‘... the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.’

Part of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, this accounts for children who appear to lack certain skills when tested yet often perform more competently in the presence of someone who has the necessary

Vygotsky's theory can be related to youth participation in vocational education programs as thus:

- **Scaffolding:** Scaffolding is a teaching technique where a skilled individual provides support to a learner as they engage in a new task. In vocational education programs, educators can apply scaffolding by breaking down complex vocational skills into smaller, manageable steps. As students gain confidence and competence in each step, the support can be gradually reduced, allowing them to take more responsibility for their learning. This gradual release of responsibility encourages youth participation and fosters a sense of accomplishment.
- **Cultural Tools and Artifacts:** Vygotsky emphasized the role of cultural tools, such as language, symbols, and technology, in cognitive development. In vocational education, cultural tools play a significant role in skill acquisition. Students learn to use tools, equipment, and technologies relevant to their chosen vocation. Educators can facilitate learning by incorporating these tools into the teaching process, allowing students to practice and master vocational skills within a culturally relevant context.
- **Social Interaction:** Vygotsky believed that learning is inherently social and that interactions with more knowledgeable individuals contribute to cognitive growth. Vocational

education programs can leverage collaborative learning environments where students work together on projects, share experiences, and provide feedback to one another. Collaborative activities can simulate real-world vocational scenarios and enhance both skill development and social interaction.

- **Cultural and Contextual Factors:** Vygotsky's theory underscores the importance of considering cultural and contextual influences on learning. When designing vocational education programs, educators should take into account the cultural backgrounds, values, and norms of their students. By incorporating culturally relevant content and contextualizing vocational skills within students' lived experiences, programs can enhance engagement and relevance, leading to increased youth participation.
- **Internalization and Externalization:** Vygotsky proposed that learning involves a process of internalizing external knowledge and skills. In vocational education, this process can be observed as student’s transition from observing and practicing skills to independently applying them in real-world contexts. Programs should provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their newly acquired vocational skills through internships, apprenticeships, or work placements, allowing them to externalize what they have learned and integrate it into their personal skillset.

### Challenges to Application of Vygotsky's Theory in the Classroom

Although applications of the zone of proximal development can be beneficial to helping students learn in the classroom, there can be some challenges for teachers. These challenges include:

- Not having enough time or resources to address the needs of each student or help them individually

- The possibility of misjudging a student's ZPD and causing frustration for both the student and teacher
- There might be too many students in the class, with rapidly changing ability levels, to employ this method successfully
- If the lesson plan is not arranged to accommodate scaffolding beforehand, it might be difficult to be flexible enough to follow through with it
- If the teacher is unaware of the student's ZPD, the techniques might not be effective

Vygotsky was of the opinion that exposing a child to a variety of cultures and social environments expands his or her knowledge base. It was the believe of Vygotsky that developmental progressions, dependent upon individuals and cultural tools granted to the child within the social context, will greatly assist him to shape his perceptions of the world (Velenzuela et al, 2000).

According to the theory, it is critically imperative to introduce children within this age-group to individuals and notions that function above their present level of knowledge to effectively open up their thought systems to new ideas and concepts (Edwards, 2005). Through this discussion, it is clear that guiding children within this age-group through imitation, listening to instructions and collaborative learning will inarguably broaden their current base of knowledge.

Equally according to the sociocultural theory, learning can be passed on to individuals using three approaches, namely imitative learning, instructed learning and collaborative learning (Elena & Deborah, 2009). In brief, imitative learning occurs when the child tries to copy or imitate another individual within the social context, while instructed learning occurs when a child recalls the instructions or directions given by an instructor and then puts them into practice.

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory is related with this study for the fact that, offers valuable insights into how youth participation in vocational education programs can be

enhanced by considering the interplay between social interactions, cultural influences, and cognitive development. Moreso, applying his principles, educators can create engaging, supportive, and culturally relevant learning environments that empower young learners to succeed in their chosen vocational paths (Katherine & Robyn, 2004).

## **Criticisms of Lev Vygotsky Socio cultural Theory**

### **Lack of experimental tests**

Vygotsky mostly used observation methods to support his theories, which has invited criticism about the validity of his findings. He also only vaguely defined social interaction and never stated the best method for engagement.

### **Active participation in learning**

Vygotsky's theory about active participation in learning does not account for some circumstances in which children experience slower cognitive growth. Other experts, researchers and psychologists have suggested that genetics should be factored in and that the results of passive learning should not be negated.

### **Social interaction**

Some psychologists and philosophers are critical of Vygotsky's determination that socialisation was key to learning language and culture. This theory does not explain why some children learn and develop slowly, despite having strong social support. The vagueness of his theories has been criticised, with some suggesting that they were underdeveloped.

### **Language as the foundation of learning**

Vygotsky's theory that language was a crucial tool of social interaction and therefore a crucial tool for learning has also been questioned. Some activities can be taught or learned using physical actions, hands-on processes, observational techniques or more creative methods, suggesting that language is not always the foundation of learning.

### **The zone of proximal development**

The concept of the zone of proximal development is criticized for being unspecific and is sometimes viewed as a general term that encapsulates various models of cognitive

development. It is also not a foolproof theory, because it doesn't explain why some students cannot perform certain tasks, even with help.

### Implications for Education

Vygotsky's theory has profound implications for educational practices. It emphasizes the importance of creating a supportive and collaborative learning environment where students can engage in social interaction and receive appropriate guidance and scaffolding. Teachers should design activities and lessons that promote active engagement, peer collaboration, and the development of higher-order thinking skills (Daniel, 2008). Furthermore, Vygotsky's theory highlights the significance of language development, emphasizing the need for rich language experiences and meaningful dialogue in the classroom.

### Conclusion

Lev Vygotsky's theory of psychological development revolutionized our understanding of how individuals learn and develop. His emphasis on the Zone of Proximal Development, scaffolding, social interaction, language, and cultural context has had a profound impact on the field of psychology and education. By applying Vygotsky's insights in educational settings, we can create environments that foster optimal learning and development, empowering learners to reach their full potential.

### Suggestions

Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of psychological development offers valuable insights that can significantly enhance educational practices and support the overall development of individuals. Based on his revolutionary ideas, here are some key suggestions for applying his theory in various educational and developmental contexts are provided below:

1. Create opportunities for collaborative learning and peer interaction. Group activities, discussions, and collaborative projects enable students to learn from one another and fostering cognitive development within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

2. Teachers should provide structured support (scaffolding) to students within their ZPD. This guidance should gradually decrease as students gain competence, empowering them to take on more complex tasks independently.
3. Teachers and policy makers should recognize the crucial role of language in learning. Encourage language-rich environments, promote discussions, and provide opportunities for students to express themselves verbally and in writing. This aids in the internalisation of knowledge and the development of critical thinking skills.
4. Teachers and curriculum developers should acknowledge and respect the cultural backgrounds of students. Incorporate diverse perspectives and cultural examples in the curriculum, making learning relevant and meaningful to all learners. Culturally responsive curriculum and teaching fosters inclusivity and a positive learning environment.
5. Relate learning materials to real-life situations by connecting abstract concepts to practical experiences, learners can grasp complex ideas more effectively, making learning engaging and meaningful.
6. Teachers should identify each student's Zone of Proximal Development and tailor instruction accordingly. Individualized learning plans that challenge students appropriately while providing necessary support can optimize their developmental progress.
7. Teachers should promote a learning environment where students can teach and learn from each other. Peer teaching not only reinforces their understanding but also enhances their social and communication skills.
8. Teachers should integrate technology as a tool for learning, ensuring that it complements and enhances social interaction and collaborative learning. Interactive educational software and online platforms can facilitate collaborative problem-solving and knowledge sharing.
9. Teachers should be provided with training and professional development opportunities for understanding and implementing

Vygotsky's theories effectively. Equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to apply socio-cultural principles in the classroom is vital for successful implementation

10. Educational policy makers should encourage ongoing research to explore the effectiveness of socio-cultural approaches in diverse educational settings. Regular evaluation and adaptation of teaching methods based on research findings ensure continuous improvement and innovation in educational practice

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