
Focus Paper: Vygotsky's Social Cultural Theory

Introduction

Lev Semionov Vygotsky highly believed in the value of a person's surroundings. Whether they were literal surroundings like culture, or learning objective surroundings.

Vygotsky's Approach to Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky believed development was highly based on the world around us. He noted that there were two levels to the Sociocultural Theory; a person's surroundings; and how they perceive them.

a) For example, if a child grows up in a less fortunate family, they may feel hopeless and fall into the stereotype of their surroundings and end up with a similar future. Or, the child may become motivated and work hard to have a completely different outcome.

b) The values taught at home would still be important, but how a person applies them to their lives may differ.

i) For example, say one of the values taught was loyalty. The child who ends up living a similar life to how they were raised may take that as staying with their family and keeping their own family close by. The other child may decide to move away but visit often, and try to help their family have a better quality of life; just without always being there.

Zone of Proximal Development & Scaffolding

A person's Zone of Proximal Development is essentially their area of necessary improvement in order to reach a certain goal or objective. The Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD, is the objective they need to reach, but need assistance of a more informed individual. Vygotsky wanted to, "reveal the child's own thought processes," to see what they already knew in order to find what they need to know. (Miller, 2014, 68). Scaffolding is the technique or techniques used to help them reach that point. If we were to make a diagram, there would be a small circle, showing what the child can do on their own, a larger circle outside, being the ZPD, or what the child can do with help of an adult, and the outermost circle would be what the child cannot do at all. Vygotsky also saw this as a process. He knew it wouldn't happen right away, "learning does not consist of discrete events within a process, but also that knowledge itself is involved a continuing process—that is, it arose in meditation, for nothing is immediate." (Derry, 2013, 48). Learning takes time and practice. Even with the help of an adult, a child still needs time to process the skills and learn to do them on their own.

a) For example, say a child is having trouble in math, and are performing under their grade level. The grade level they should be performing at is their Zone of Proximal Development, and with the help of an instructor or teacher, they can reach that point. This can be achieved by assessing a child's skills and discerning where exactly they will need to improve and which

steps to take to get them there. So, if a child is having trouble with addition, and they know how to add smaller numbers but they need to know how to add larger numbers, I, as the instructor can use what the child already knows to break down the problem and make it easier for them to learn.

b) Scaffolding is the act of teaching the child to break down the numbers to help them understand.

Application I work as a tutor for children grades Kindergarten through grade eight at the Walz Library. I help with homework and projects and I try to use strategies that I know worked for me in the past.

i. A boy named Cedrick was having trouble with reading comprehension. He needed to read a selection about a science experiment and pick out her mistakes. Cedrick read through it multiple times and when I asked him to give me a summary he couldn't. He had no trouble reading through the passage but couldn't remember important parts. I took him to a smaller study area and told him to read the passage aloud slowly, and highlight the parts that seem important; names, tools used, times, etc, and I gave him examples of what to look for. He came back a few minutes later and he was able to tell me a summary, what the girl in the passage was doing wrong and could even tell me why.

ii. The skills I used in this instance, were the Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding. He already knew how to read very well, but he needed to comprehend and isolate certain points. I helped him understand what to look out for and isolate, and he achieved it. His ZPD was reading comprehension, he just needed my help to know what exactly he was reading. I used scaffolding by having him read it aloud and highlight important points.

b) Another example, using the sociocultural theory, would be when I saw a child very withdrawn from the rest of the group. Patience was sitting at a separate table and refusing to do her homework. I asked her why and she gave no answer. I started looking through her folder and showing her that another girl has the same homework. I knew the other girl, Amya, was very organized and studios, so I had them sit together and work. She was beginning to open up and help Amya as well. This applies to the theory, because she felt alone and maybe her parents don't put as much importance on school as Amya's, but once she had the positive influence and a friend she was very productive and excited about learning.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Vygotsky's theories apply to developmentally appropriate practice, because he knows that even if they are given the same task, a three year old and a six year old are not going to give the same results. He thinks in stages, "The four general stages in cognitive development, completed near the end of adolescence, transform the primitive or elementary processes of involuntary attention, simple perception, and natural memory into the highest forms of cognition. They are self-directed attention, categorical perception, thinking in concepts (conceptual thinking), and logical memory." (Salkind, 2008,1012). This means that each stage up until the end of adolescence, were basically involuntary, and from then on a person must be self-

directing in their attention, thinking, and memory. Basically, a person has more control over their thinking after adolescence. For example, they'd need to want to pay attention, think, etc.

Conclusion

Vygotsky's techniques can easily be applied to a classroom setting. The sociocultural theory can be used to motivate others and also understand the attitude towards learning in some children. The Zone of Proximal Development is very helpful to me, especially with tutoring. I can visualize where the child is in their academics versus where they need to be, and I can use Scaffolding, to help them reach where they need to be.

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