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A Vision of Vygotsky: a report of his life and change of educational pedagogy

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist and theorist from the early 20th century. Vygotsky changed educational pedagogy with his sociocultural based theories. The book*, A Vision of Vygotsky*, laid out how his sociocultural approach was developed, how it compares to other approaches in education, the connection between language and thought, and how that relates to the Vygotskian approach, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Funds of Knowledge, children playing and how this shows their development, and how assessment takes place in a Vygotskian approach.

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky was born in Orsha, Russia on November 11th, 1896. He was born to a non-practicing Jewish family. Shortly after his birth, the family moved to Gomel, Russia for his father's job. Vygotsky was homeschooled until 1911, when his studies were moved to a private Jewish gymnasium, a kind of secondary school. In 1913, he was admitted to Moscow University. There he studied medicine after being pressure by his family, but then switched to law. While at Moscow University, Vygotsky also sat in on lectures at Shaniavskii University. In these lectures, he learned about Jewish culture, history, and tradition. He would not get his degree in law. His studies were interrupted in 1917 by the October Bolshevik Revolution in Petrograd and Moscow. Vygotsky moved back to Gomel, which was seized by the Bolshevik Party in 1919. From 1919 to 1923, he was an active participant in and local representative of the Bolshevik Party, helping transform the town (Kurt, 2022).

Vygotsky attended the 1924 Second All-Russian Psychoneurological Congress in Petrograd. Soon after, he was offered a research fellow position at the Psychological Institute in Moscow. He and his wife, Rosa, moved to Moscow together. There he began his career in Psychology, ultimately leading to him changing the thoughts behind educational pedagogy. Vygotsky, however, would not see that come to fruition. Many of his findings were not published during his life. Lev Vygotsky died on June 11, 1934 from tuberculosis at the age of 38 (Kurt, 2022).

During his time at the Psychological Institute, Vygotsky developed his theory of sociocultural pedagogy. Sociocultural theory is the idea that "cognitive development is influenced by cultural and social factors" (Wink & Putney, 2004). This was a revolutionary idea in his time, and there is little to no evidence to disprove this theory. To break it down, Vygotsky theorized that the cultural, social, and historical development of a child needs to be taken into account, just as their curricular development is (Mcleod,

2023). He was also of the mind that learning was aided by development (Wink & Putney, 2004).

There were multiple other theories about education at the time that Vygotsky created his own theory. Progressivism is one example. It was created by Dewey, and focused on the child in an experiential approach. Progressivism emphasized creating a dialogue between students and teachers to problem solve. The classroom was a "learning place, not a workplace" (Wink & Putney, 2004). The idea of Progressivism resulted in other perspectives, like Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Another perspective that was separate from Progressivism was the Scientific Management approach. Scientific Management was focused on the outcome of students, not the process. Students were expected to listen and repeat what the instructor said to memorize what they were going to be assessed on. Behaviorism was similar to Scientific Management. The motivation for learning in a Behaviorism based classroom is the desire for a reward. Vygotsky found a limitation, that being that Behaviorism does not account what students create in their minds, and so ignores what students have experienced outside of a classroom. "Focusing only on a stimulus/response model does not allow the lived social, cultural,historical, and political context of our lives and those of our students to show through" (Wink & Putney, 2004). Vygotsky suggested a transformative approach instead, where students and teachers are both teaching and learning using dialogue and language (Wink & Putney, 2004).

Language was a large part of Vygotsky's theories, paired with thought (Wink & Putney, 2004). He looked at language as both a tool for learning and a psychological function. One of his revolutionary concepts is that of language being a mediational tool(Wink & Putney, 2004). This concept supported his theory that children are social beings from birth, and that they use egocentric speech to solve problems. Egocentric speech was, to Vygotsky, a way of students internalizing knowledge. It was external speech as it moved to internal speech. Language was also how students learned. This included students who were learning English as a second language, which will be approached more in depth later in the paper. What Vygotsky has made clear is that "language must be meaningful for thought development"(Wink & Putney, 2004).

Vygotsky took into account that some students would be in the process of learning a language other than their first at the schools they attended. In a Vygotskian classroom, students would be encouraged to use their native languages along with their new language (Wink & Putney, 2004). The issue with this is that it encourages those with a different native language to only socialize and discuss with the other non-native language children. However, in a Vygotskian classroom, the ideal situation would be to have all students discussing together. Another concern is the teacher perceiving that more assistance is needed than required (Johnson, 2004). By giving too much assistance, teachers "may impede students' and children's linguistic and cognitive development" (Johnson, 2004). This could lead to fossilization in students learning a

new language, or plateauing in their development in regards to the new language (Johnson, 2004). There is a delicate balance that needs to be observed here, and that is one downfall of the Vygotskian method.

On development, Vygotsky created the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD (Wink & Putney, 2004). This is "the distance between the actual developmental 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" (Wink & Putney, 2004). To break down this definition, a child's ZPD is the space between their potential development and their actual level of development. This would be seen in a classroom setting as students "learn best when new material is in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) - not too easy, and just challenging enough that, with a little help from a more learned individual, we can master the material and shift our Zone upward" (Barton, 2022). ZPD introduces scaffolding to students and teachers, which is seen in classrooms around the world. Scaffolding is when teachers teach things closer to a students developmental level, and then builds on them to help them reach their potential (Barton, 2022). This is what teachers strive for. However, students will regress in their development at times. Using the theory of ZPD, regression is seen as a jumping off point back to where a student was developmentally, or to a higher level of development (Wink & Putney, 2004).

In *A Vision of Vygotsky*, the idea of play being a part of learning was touched on, however, this paragraph will go more in depth into the subject. While Vygotsky was not the first to observe the benefits of play-based learning, he was one of the theorists that people base it on today. Vygotsky believed that play-based learning was essential to children's development. Teachers could observe their students play together to understand where they are actually at developmentally. However, he looked at it differently than other theorists. ""Real" play, according to Vygotsky, features three components: children create an imaginary situation, take on and act out roles, and follow a set of rules determined by these specific roles" (Bodrova et al., 2023). Vygotsky believed that imaginary play helped children understand self regulation and display willpower (Bodrova et al., 2023). It also created an opportunity for students to help each other problem solve. These products of play help students rise up in their own ZPDs.

With these concepts, how does a teacher assess their students in a Vygotskian way? Observing students and their interactions is one way to assess. How is that student listening to and discussing with their neighbor? What do students bring to the table during discussion times? Vygotsky "theorized that assessment should focus on what the child is able to do with assistance of an adult when the spontaneous concepts come into contact with the scientific concepts introduced in education" (Wink & Putney, 2004). Spontaneous concepts are everyday occurrences or observation, and scientific concepts are those taught in school (Wink & Putney, 2004). So again, observing children and assessing them while still teaching them.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory was conceptualized nearly a century ago, so why is this still relevant to teachers? Educational pedagogy is ever changing, however, current pedagogy is very similar to sociocultural pedagogy. Many schools and teachers are striving for a student based curriculum that creates participation and instruction. Vygotsky's theory relies on these concepts. In current classrooms, teachers are far more receptive, appreciative, respectful, and open to students of different cultures and backgrounds. Teachers understand that their history and culture affect their teaching, just as it affects the students' learning. This is the root of Vygotsky's theory.

Understanding the different concepts of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory prepares teachers to aid in the development of their students in an informed way. Using his theory, teachers are able to reflect on their own backgrounds, as well as their students'. Vygotsky created a new way for children to be taught, as well as a new understanding of development in children. His theory was a revolutionary idea that is still relevant today, and will continue to remain relevant. *A Vision of Vygotsky* will make sure of that.

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