“Vygotsky and His Effects on the Current Classroom”

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Many Social theorists have impacted teaching practices over the years. Each theorist has distributed a fair amount of information to the classroom practices that are taking place today. One major social theorist was a Russian psychologist named Lev Vygotsky who contributed a large amount of ideas to learning and development. “The interaction between the adult and the child, for Vygotsky, is like a dance – the child leads and the adult follows, always closely in time with the child’s actions” (Berk, 1995, Pg.1).

One of Vygotsky’s most critical theories was the idea of socio-cultural theory. Socio-cultural theory emphasizes role in development of cooperative dialogues between children and more knowledgeable members of society such as teachers other adults. Children learn the culture of their community through these interactions. Vygotsky says that “every function in a child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on a social level and later on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)” (Woolfolk, 2004, pg. 45). For example a child learns how to first order something in a restaurant by letting someone with experience order first, probably their father or mother. Now that the child saw their parents order a meal they follow by picking the meal the way there parent did then requesting the meal from the waiter or waitress the same way their parent did. This example is a co-constructed process which is a social process in which people interact and negotiate to create an understanding or to solve a problem. The end result is shaped by whoever guided the child through his actions, in this case his or her parents. “A basic premise of Vygotsky’s theory is that all uniquely human, higher forms of mental activity are derived from social and cultural contexts and are shared by members of those contexts because these metal processes are adaptive. They lead to knowledge and skills that are essential
for success within a particular culture.” (Berk, 1995, pg. 3). Therefore, all ideas and concepts are learned through the sharing of these ideas with other members in the culture. All ideas are passed on by one member of society to another.

Vygotsky’s theory’s also “concentrated on the manipulation of language as an important characteristic of formal schooling. He thought that formal instruction in writing and grammar, by refocusing attention from the content to the means of communication, provided the foundations for the development of conscious awareness and voluntary control of important aspects speech and language. Educational language is different from everyday language. Teachers focus on definitions and systematic relations with word” (Forman, 1993, pg 20). In other words “teacher language” is the language between a student and adult when it is time to learn. Teachers will, throughout their conversations with the students, define and help students’ process words that are new to them that they may not know. “Vygotsky presented language as a regulatory device that assisted children in sorting and ordering their experiences of the world, enabling them to develop new forms of thought and more complex forms of behavior…Vygotsky’s suggestion that a child’s monologic use of language served as a form of self-orientation with respect to the environment, assisting the internalization of experiences, supporting the promotion of language for learning” (Inghilleri, 2002, pg.8).

When Vygotskian theory enters the classroom one may see the literacies that can be used, understood, and learned by students. “His classrooms reject typical reading and writing practices such as isolated reading (like sitting quietly, follow mundane directions, only read assigned texts, fill out worksheets, and take tests.) Rather, it emphasizes the creation of authentic social contexts in which children use, try out, and manipulate
language as they make sense and create meaning” (Forman, 1993, pg. 22). The teacher’s role is to be a helping hand or a guide through all the children’s social situations so that through their own efforts children assume full control of diverse purposes and uses of oral and written language. Teachers in the Vygotskian classrooms play a role as guide and supporter, active participant in the learning, as evaluator, and as facilitator. All these rules consider the teacher as mediator.

This teaching theory is definitely integrated into classrooms today. It is not the only technique that teachers use to educate children but it is definitely a technique that is used in certain classrooms and in some more than others depending on the grade level and teacher. These types of classrooms allow insights into the social processes of literacy development that are unavailable in more typical settings. The knowledge of the subject matter is learned through different types of social relationships facilitated by the teacher. Makes new aspects of writing and reading and makes future contexts for students to apply new knowledge. Instead of the typical lecture setting where a teacher stands in front of the student and throws all kinds of new ideas at a student and expects them to write them down and remember them the teacher guides the student through the new ideas, assignments, and tasks.

“An essential factor contributing to the success of this classroom and its value for interpreting Vygotskian theory is the reality that children have considerable control over virtually all aspects of their own learning experience. Vygotskian formulations focus on an importance of the sharing of control between teacher and students, the development of mutual trust” (Forman, 1993, pg 24). Without this trust there is no way that this type of classroom would ever work. If the teacher cannot trust the children then the classroom
would have to go back to a lecture format. The teacher has to make sure that the student is not just taking advantage of them and using their time unwisely. The learner has to take advantage of the time that they get to learn self-sufficiently in a way that they feel best suits them. This type of classroom benefits the students in most ways that they may not be able to see. They may think that the teacher is giving them free time to do as they wish. “Vygotsky wrote about the “Unique form of cooperation between the child and the adult that is the central element of the educational process” and how by this interactional process “knowledge is transferred to the child in a definite system.” It is these systematic properties of instruction that Vygotsky thought provided a special socialization of children’s thinking” (Forman, 1993, pp. 19-20)

Drop everything and read or DEAR is a form of Vygotskian classroom learning. DEAR is where schools will choose a time during the day for students to drop whatever they are currently doing and start reading a book either of their choice or of an assigned text. As long as they are reading something they are following the practice. Teachers may use a literature study group to provide social reading experiences to compliment the personal reading experience provided by DEAR. Study groups allow children to share experiences in their reading. They may also ask questions and analyze what they are reading with the other students in the work group.

Vygotsky and Piaget have been compared over and over again and there are many similarities between the two. Vygotsky is similar when compared to Piaget because they both emphasized the importance of social interactions in cognitive development. One way they differ is that Piaget believed that interaction encouraged development by creating disequilibrium that motivated change. Piaget believed that the most helpful
interactions were those between peers because peers are on an equal basis and can challenge each others thinking. Vygotsky on the other hand, suggested that children’s cognitive development is fostered by interactions with people who are more capable or advanced in their thinking; perhaps with people such as parents and teachers. Some more differences between the two theorists are their ideas on language and private speech. Piaget believes that children talk to themselves as an indication that young children can’t see the world through the eyes of others. They talk about what matters to them, without taking in account the needs and interests of their listeners. As they mature, and especially as they have disagreements with peers, Piaget believed, children develop socialized speech. They learn to listen and exchange ideas.

Vygotsky says that “there are at least three ways that cultural tools can be passed from one individual to another: imitative learning (where one person tries to imitate the other), instructed learning (where learners internalize the instructions of the teacher and use these instructions to self-regulate), and collaborative learning (where a group of peers strives to understand each other and learning occurs in the process)” (Woolfolk, 2004, pg 50). Vygotsky mostly focused on instructed learning though direct teaching or through structured experiences that support another’s learning. His ideas are more relevant for educators who teach directly and also create learning environments. His theories suggest more than just changing the environment around in order for children to discover on their own. “Children cannot and should not be expected to reinvent or rediscover knowledge already available in their cultures. Rather, they should be guided and assisted in their learning – so Vygotsky saw teachers, parents, and others as central to the child’s learning and development” (Woolfolk, 2004, pg 51). This form of teaching is considered assisted
learning which provides strategic help in the initial stages of learning, gradually
diminishing as students gain independence. Assisted learning involves scaffolding or
giving information, prompts, reminders, and encouragement at the right time then
allowing the student to gradually do more and more on their own.

Vygostky also spoke about the zone of proximal development which is a phase in
which a child can master a task if given appropriate help and support. This is where a
child is on the verge of being able to solve a problem but just needs a little extra help or
guidance and they can solve the problem. “The socio-cultural model of mind, searching
the environment for possibilities for action, allows us to see the zone of proximal
development as more open-ended than many recent educational interpretations have done”
(Edwards, 2001, 10). Woolfolk also discusses in Educational Psychology “We can see
how Vygotsky’s beliefs about the role of private speech in cognitive development fit with
the notion of the zone of proximal development. Often, an adult helps a child to solve a
problem or accomplish a task using verbal prompts and structuring. This scaffolding may
be gradually reduced as the child takes over the guidance, perhaps first by giving the
prompts as private speech and finally as inner speech” (Woolfolk, 2004, pg. 52).
Scaffolding is support for learning and problem solving. The support could be clues,
reminders, encouragement, breaking the problem down into steps, providing and
example, or anything else that allows the student to grow in independence as a learner.
Guidance can also be beneficial if it is another student in the class guiding them.
Sometimes the best teacher is a student in the classroom who just figured out a problem.
That breakthrough student can then teach the student on the verge of figuring out the
problem instead of the teacher. Sometimes that is the best way for a child to learn. Other
times having a student just simply work with another student who is a slight bit better than them is also a good idea. “Evidence of the power of social engagement to transform children’s thinking is another body of research that has attracted psychologists and educators to Vygotsky’s socio-cultural perspective. [This idea] dates back to the early work of Piaget in 1926” (Berk, 1995, pg. 5). So this plan of putting two children together to learn from each other has been looked at for many years

As one can see Vygotsky’s ideas are very influential on today’s classrooms. Depending on how much one may use his ideas classrooms may flourish with the right amounts of Vygotskian practice. Again, this practice will not work without a trusting relationship with the teacher and the student. Their needs to be an understanding between both that the teacher will give proper guidance and come in at the right times to provide information and the student will use their time wisely and apply themselves accordingly depending on the problem. I see Vygotkian theory as strong stepping stone that will help teachers get through to children who just cannot learn in the standard lecture setting classroom. His ideas make the learning seem fun to students who don’t like to sit and listen. I also believe that students who are borderline ADHD will also flourish from this because it keeps them choosing things that they want to do, not just what the teacher wants to do. They just need a little more guidance.

Vygotsky’s writing did not only deal with cognition but also with the emotions, motives, and personality. Vygotskian ideas also focus on students with disabilities. One disability that it focuses on is students with ADHD. ADHD children need more adult-to-student interactions. A teacher may first help them complete a task so they can later complete the task alone.
All in all the Vygotskian theories seem to be a great idea for the classrooms. They are already at work many classrooms today. Some may believe that this practice is a bit too radical and gives young irresponsible children too much power to decide what they want to learn, but that is the chance one needs to take in order to provide students with at maximum learning environment. With a perfect blend of Vygotsky’s teaching and the typical classroom lecture child should be able to thrive in knowledge.
Works Cited


