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Lev Vygotsky and Sociocultural Theory

“Lev Vygotsky was born November 17, 1896, in Orsha, a city in the western region of the Russian Empire. He attended Moscow State University, where he graduated with a degree in law in 1917. He studied a range of topics while attending university, including sociology, linguistics, psychology, and philosophy. However, his formal work in psychology did not begin until 1924 when he attended the Institute of Psychology in Moscow. He completed a dissertation in 1925 on the psychology of art but was awarded his degree in absentia due to an acute tuberculosis relapse that left him incapacitated for a year. Following his illness, Vygotsky began researching topics such as language, attention, and memory. Vygotsky’s early career and theories came from being a “prolific writer, publishing six books on psychology topics over a ten-year period. His interests were quite diverse but often centered on issues of child development and education. He also explored such subjects as the psychology of art and language development.” (Kendra Cherry)

“Lev Vygotsky was a seminal Russian psychologist who is best known for his sociocultural theory. He believed that children’s mental, language, and social development is supported by and enhanced through social interaction, which plays a critical role in children's learning. Through such social interactions, children go through a continuous process of learning. Vygotsky noted, however, that culture profoundly influences this process. Imitation, guided learning, and collaborative learning all play a critical part in his theory.” (Kendra Cherry)

“The major theme of Vygotsky’s theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Vygotsky (1978) states: “Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. A second aspect of Vygotsky’s theory is the idea that the potential for cognitive development depends upon the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD): a level of development attained when children engage in social behavior. Full development of the ZPD depends upon full social interaction. The range of skill that can be developed with adult guidance or peer collaboration exceeds what can be attained alone.” (InstructionalDesign.org)

“Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory was introduced by two major principles. Cognitive development is limited up to a certain extent or within a certain range, at any given age of the individual; and an individual’s full cognitive development requires social interaction. These principles are encapsulated in three theories or themes: Social Interaction, The More Knowledgeable and the Zone of Proximal Development. Social interaction plays a central role in cognitive development because it is ingrained in every individual, even as a child, to seek meaning in everything. Curiosity sets in early on during childhood, and you probably noticed how, even from a very young age, a person starts asking questions. He will be looking around, wide-eyed, wonder and interest in his observant eyes. It is safe to say that the individual has started the process of looking for or “making meaning”. And, in order to find or make that meaning, he must look around him, be involved, and play an active role on the “road to

discovery”. Cognitive – and human – development, according to Vygotsky, is a result of a “dynamic” interaction between the individual and the society. This dynamic relationship denotes a relationship of mutuality between the two. Just as society has an impact on the individual, the individual also has an impact on society. Children are unable to learn and develop if they are removed from society or are forbidden to interact with it. Look at the typical development of a child: his first teachers were his parents, who taught him his first words and guided him as he took his first steps, or as he went “potty”. On play dates, he learned how to play with other kids his age, and slowly built a bond with one or two kids that he ended up being the closest to. On the first day of school, he met his teacher, and several other teachers in the following years. The process of learning also required him to work closely with other people besides his teachers, such as older students and classmates. Through these social learning experiences, he was able to gradually develop and grow. And that brings us to the next concept of the Social Interaction.”

“Vygotsky claims that a child will not be able to develop unless he undergoes or experiences social learning first. He identified two areas, or levels, where the functions in a child’s cultural development, appear in: social level, or interpsychological. The functions within the first appear between individuals first. This is where the person will have to interact, connect, and reach out to other people. This is the level where social learning takes place. Individual level, or intrapsychological. This is the area within the child or the individual. Once he has passed the social level, where he acquired social learnings, the functions will appear a second time and, this time, more developed and thus, leading to cognitive development. To put it plainly, without learning, there is no way that that individual will be able to function and become fully developed. However, that does not mean that people are born with absolutely zero abilities.

Vygotsky is quick to point out that everyone is born with basic or elementary functions or abilities that will get them started on the road to their intellectual development. The elementary mental functions include those that come by naturally with birth and growth, without influence by an external stimulus. In other words, these capacities are not learned, involuntary, and often do not really require any thought on the part of the individual. Vygotsky even went so far as saying that most of these elementary mental functions are acquired by a child through genetics. Examples of elementary or lower mental functions include, sensation in which a child does not need to be taught that something is hot, cold, sweet, or bitter. His senses will automatically deliver those messages to his brain, so he can react accordingly. Hunger in which there are bodily processes that are beyond a person's control, and one of them is hunger. When an infant is hungry, he is hungry, and so he will show it by crying or acting restless. He does not need to be told that he is hungry since his body will manifest the fact. Memory in which to be more specific, natural or unmediated memory. Young children can immediately commit things to memory in a natural manner. A baby will instantly recognize the sound of his mother's voice, or the taste of baby food. But that's it. He won't necessarily be able to associate – or subsequently recognize any association – the sound of his mother's voice to those times that she sung him a lullaby to sleep, and he isn't likely to identify that baby food to be the one that he really likes to eat.”

“As the child grows older, and as his social learning increased through more social interactions, his elementary mental functions evolved into his “higher mental functions” or HMF. Unlike elementary mental functions, they are stimulated. They are taught, and they are learned in social settings or environments, and they often come with social meanings. The given examples include, language in which a child develops, so does his capacity for languages. The need to

communicate to people around him – whether to express his discontent about something or to inform his parents that he is hungry, or he must go potty – will spur the need to learn languages. As he grows older and undergoes a multitude of other social processes, language learning will also advance, as well as his thought processes. Memory, this refers to what comes after the child has gone past the natural memory stage. This time, his memory can be cultivated and controlled, and he now has access to memory aids and tools. He is now able to make the relevant associations, and he can pick the things that he deems must be memorized, using these tools. Examples of these so-called tools of intellectual adaptation, or tools that allow children to use their elementary mental functions more effectively, including mind maps, memory mnemonics, note-taking, and other visual cues and aids. Voluntary attention, in which you may have heard toddlers and small children being described as having a short attention span. That is because, at that age, their thought processes aren't stable enough to sustain concentration on one object or thought. Sure, they can focus on one thing at one time, but they won't really know what to do with that ability, and so they turn on to something else. Social learning will arm the child with the ability of focus and concentration, and the ability to figure out what to do with it. He gets to decide which objects, actions or thoughts to focus on. Full cognitive development means that, eventually, he will be capable of selective or focused attention and shared or divided attention and sustain it. Perception through sensing, a child can recognize a sensory stimulus, but it ends there. His lack of perception skills will render him unable to interpret the meaning or significance behind it. Social interactions help the child's level of perception, increasing his awareness and capacity to understand why things are as they are.”

“The learning that Vygotsky referred to does not point to a specific type or standard, because he also acknowledged how cultural differences can cause variability when it comes to learning and how culture, in general, is influential and powerful in shaping or molding one’s cognition. It is a given that language is very important in any social interaction, since it is the primary medium of communication in any social setting. But that is not the only reason why language plays a very important role in an individual’s cognitive development. First, let us look at the three stages of speech development, according to Vygotsky. Stage 1 – social or external speech, this covers the preverbal stage, usually under the age of three, when the child is still unable to transcribe his thoughts in complete thought messages. His thoughts are simple, and his emotions basic, and there is no intellectual or thinking exercise involved. However, despite that, he still wants to be able to control others’ behaviors. Therefore, he makes use of his limited speech to express simple thoughts of hunger, pleasure, displeasure, satisfaction and dissatisfaction through crying, laughing, shouting, and gurgling. As he advances in age, he will start to use what we call “baby-speak”, with phrases such as “Want milk” and “Go potty”. Stage 2 – egocentric speech if, in the first stage, the purpose of the child’s speech is to control the behavior of other people, egocentric speech in the second stage is spoken as a way for the child to direct his own behavior. This is usually demonstrated between the ages of three and seven, when the child starts to enunciate words more clearly and form more complete sentences, with more sense or thought. They practice this by talking out loud to themselves. It is normal behavior for them at this stage to do things, even the simple act of playing with a train set, with a running commentary of every little thing that they are doing. Stage 3 – inner speech, the final speech development stage takes place once the child becomes older and starts growing toward

adulthood, and he can use it to direct both his thinking and the resulting behavior or action. This does not require his thoughts to be voiced out loud, with all thinking processes done in his head. He can do mental calculations in his head, analyze a situation from all angles without saying a single word, and form an opinion without verbalizing his arguments. It is during this stage that the individual is now able to engage in all the other higher mental functions. Language involves speech – both its expression and comprehension. The two-way nature of communication requires that the language must be expressed or delivered, and it must also be understood. When expressed differently, or even erroneously, the recipient will receive a different meaning.”

“This essentially means that language can dictate the way people look at things, and how they process information. It is powerful enough to have an impact on the rate or speed of cognitive development, given how it is connected or related to the other cognitive functions. For example, language can affect how a person perceives something. A country with a culture that recognizes only the primary colors and are unaware of the color called “champagne” is likely to perceive the hue as simply “a shade of pink”. In the same manner that an individual is more motivated to memorize something that is in a language he understands and ignore one that is expressed in a language that is completely foreign to him.”

“Vygotsky postulated that the social and cultural settings that children’s activities take place in requires social interaction and communication, and that children learn best through these social interactions. They acquire knowledge and hone skills through these interactions, as well as the culture surrounding them, and these ultimately shape their cognition. Through the concept of “cooperative or collaborative dialogue”, a child may learn his first words, the alphabet, his first nursery rhyme and how to count from one to ten from his parents. As he grows older, he will be

interacting with tutors and teachers, who are likely to provide verbal instructions and model or demonstrate behavior that will, consequently, guide him.” (Anastasia)

I have come to agree with and realize that Vygotsky has recognized the kind of assistance needed to help children develop new skills within the concepts of ZPD which is took in many different forms for children of many different ages. These theory shapes how we work with our children today because Lev Vygotsky has contributed a wealth of ideas to early childhood education. Most important, he has shown us how children's efforts to understand the world around them, working in concert with teachers' sensitive, responsive interactions, rouses their young minds to life. With so many psychological schools of thoughts on cognitive development introduced, it came as no surprise that some concepts in Vygotsky's Social Development Theory are being questioned. Still, no one can deny the influence of his theories, and how they are widely accepted and applied in the field of education, particularly early childhood education.

Work Cited

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