



## Explorations in Learning & Instruction:

### The Theory Into Practice Database

# Social Development Theory (L. Vygotsky)

#### Overview:

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." (p57).

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.

Vygotsky's theory was an attempt to explain consciousness as the end product of socialization. For example, in the learning of language, our first utterances with peers or adults are for the purpose of communication but once mastered they become internalized and allow "inner speech".

Vygotsky's theory is complementary to the work of [Bandura](#) on social learning and a key component of [situated learning theory](#). Because Vygotsky's focus was on cognitive development, it is interesting to compare his views with those of [Bruner](#) and [Piaget](#).

#### Scope/Application:

This is a general theory of cognitive development. Most of the original work was done in the context of language learning in children (Vygotsky, 1962), although later applications of the framework have been broader (see Wertsch, 1985).

#### Example:

Vygotsky (1978, p56) provides the example of pointing a finger. Initially, this behavior begins as a meaningless grasping motion; however, as people react to the gesture, it becomes a movement that has meaning. In particular, the pointing gesture represents an interpersonal connection between individuals.

**Principles:**

1. Cognitive development is limited to a certain range at any given age.
2. Full cognitive development requires social interaction.

**References:**

Vygotsky, L.S. (1962). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wertsch, J.V. (1985). *Cultural, Communication, and Cognition: Vygotskian Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.

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