

Vygotsky and Literacy: Relevance, Application, and Development
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August 20, 2013

Abstract

For many decades, researchers and practitioners have incorporated socio-cultural theory into their studies and pedagogy. The importance of culture, teaching within a context, and understanding the development of children has been pertinent topics within the field of education. In particular, Vygotsky's extensive contributions to such research cannot be overlooked. His theoretical influence has persevered across decades and within various shifting discourses in education. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of his many educational contributions within a literacy framework. For example, this paper discusses the influence of the zone of proximal development, play and imagination, and culture and learning. These three domains, as I will suggest, impact the development of a cultural literacy community. Understanding the zone of proximal development, the relevance of play and imagination, and the interconnectedness of culture and learning it is evident that there is a dynamic progression that provides students with a forum for highly developed cognition and intellectual thinking necessary for a literate cultural community of learners.

Introduction

Lev Semenovich Vygotsky was born in 1896 in a small town in Belorussia. Although not much is known about his personal life, Vygotsky is well known for his mastery of philosophy, education, and literacy. He has published countless articles and books about learning, development, and cognition. In particular, this paper will specifically focus on Vygotsky's *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Process* (1978) and *Thought and Language* (1986) in order to better understand how children develop their thoughts, cognition, and learning. He was greatly influenced by the Soviet Union's sociopolitical situation and worked towards theories in psychology that had both educational and medical relevance. He strongly believed in the importance of developing a better understanding of medical and cognitive problems in children in hopes of creating treatment and remediation. As stated in the introduction of *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Process* (1978) Cole and Scriber state, "...it was consistent with his general theoretical view that his work should be carried out in a society that sought the elimination of illiteracy and the founding of educational programs to maximize the potential of individual children" (p. 9). Today, Vygotsky is still a prominent theorist in psychology, philosophy, and sociology of education. Many of his predecessor continue to develop and expand his ideas on how children learn, taking into account their environment as a stimulus for learning. As such, Vygotsky is an exemplar of socio-cultural theory and his ideas are still incorporated into teacher pedagogies today leaving a theoretical legacy for years to come.

Research Questions

Undoubtedly, Vygotsky's work has had an international impact on educational theories, influencing the work of theorists, researchers, and practitioners. In particular, Vygotsky has also influenced literacy, including how children learn to read, engage in dialogue, make meaning, and think critically. There are many studies that incorporate Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, language learning, and the importance of the environment. The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of Vygotsky's work and its relevance to literacy education. Specifically, how does Vygotsky's theories contribute to an understanding of a literacy community, where students engage in literacy practices to improve higher cognitive processes? In order to properly address this question, several areas of Vygotsky's work will be explained and analyzed including the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the use of imagination and play, connection between culture and learning, and the importance of achieving a cooperative literacy community. There is certainly not a paucity of research that uses Vygotsky's work as a theoretical framework- therefore, this paper aims at addressing only a glimpse of the issues in literacy education in order to assess the relevancy of Vygotsky within a socio-cultural lens.

Significance of Topic

As an educator and researcher, I have come to understand the importance of integrating theory and practice, both constantly informing and supporting the other. As an educator, I strongly believe in the transformative power of an education's cultural setting- its collaborative nature, stimulus for imagination and learning, and heightening of conceptual knowledge- all empowering aspects of literacy practices. As a researcher, I hope to better understand how the social context of a classroom during literacy and the

experiences of an individual can come together to inform how meaning is derived, changed by the social context, and processed for understanding.

Vygotsky and a Literacy Community

The Role of Zone of Proximal Development in Literacy

Currently within education, there is a strong reverence towards meeting specific skills and standards in an assessment-driven climate. However, Vygotsky did not believe that learning and development were based on acquiring specific skills, nor that these skills lead to further learning in other content areas. He contends that we must look at the developmental *levels* to better understand a child's true learning and capabilities, both independently and dependently. As he is notably known, Vygotsky discusses in length the idea of the Zone of Proximal Development. The following is a definition of the Zone of Proximal Development according to Vygotsky (1978):

It 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. (p. 86)

Similar to reading, students vary in their independent reading level. However, they can read and comprehend at a much higher level when supported or guided by an adult and other capable peers. Read alouds are a prime example of how such a Zone of Proximal Development can become part of a child's learning. Through a read aloud, students at all levels, are engaged in simultaneous reading (reading along with a teacher when a story is projected through a projector) and are more importantly engaged in dialogue about the

text, allowing them to understand at a much higher level. More importantly, read alouds enhance the opportunities afforded within the Zone of Proximal Development because it allows students to listen to others while reflecting on their own thinking or metacognition. The dialogical process that occurs during a read aloud undoubtedly widens the Zone of Proximal Development because children are given an opportunity, through guided discussions, to think at a much higher level.

Learning should not be directed solely on what a child is capable of in their present level because those levels have already been mastered to their potential independently. Instead, it should be directed on advancing those levels by focusing on skills and concepts that children will attain in the future. As Vygotsky (1978) notes, teaching based on a present level does not work towards attaining a new stage of the developmental process; it lags behind this process. Thus, the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development implies that there should be a transformative curriculum and instruction to reach heightened levels of cognition.

The Zone of Proximal Development has been termed as a *third space*. Gutierrez (2008) defines a third space as the space "...where teacher and student scripts- the formal and informal, the official and unofficial spaces of the learning environment- intersect, creating the potential for authentic interaction and a shift in the social organization of learning and what counts as knowledge" (p. 152). A third space provides an opportunity to expand the definition of learning, literacy, development and their various uses. More importantly, a third space provides a powerful and transformative relationship among individuals and their environment. This notion relates to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development because it takes into account the need for a common vision as a means for

attaining a shared understanding of learning and knowledge. In other words, “The curriculum and its pedagogy, then, are grounded in the historical and current particulars of students’ everyday lives, while at the same time oriented toward an imagined but possible future” (Gutierrez, 2008, p. 154). This imagined future within a third space is a product of the possibilities created by working with others and the potential for heightened cognition and learning. Clearly, the Zone of Proximal Development and the third space described by Gutierrez establish a platform for a transformative literacy education that builds a community of learners with a shared goal.

Play and Imagination

There is a common misconception regarding the meaning, value, and purpose of play within education. Play is often seen as uncontrolled activities created by a child’s unrealistic fantasies and imagination. However, Vygotsky offers an alternative interpretation and application of play. According to Vygotsky (1986), thinking takes the form of play or *wishful imagination*, at earlier stages before there is a need for proof of reality. As elaborated in *Thought and Language* (1986), “Up to the age of seven or eight, play dominates in the child’s thought to such an extent that it is very hard for the child to distinguish deliberate invention from fantasy that the child believes to be the truth” (p. 18). The process of imagination and play is an integral part of a child’s personality development, making it central to thinking, cognition, and learning.

Play and imagination are interconnected concepts within cognition- imagination is an important factor influencing a child’s play. According to Gajdamaschko’s (2006) research on the role of imagination in cognitive development, it is argued that

imagination "... does not occupy a separate place in human behavior, but depends directly on other forms of human activity, especially the accrual of experience" (p. 36). Clearly, imagination is a cultural function that is active and part of a child's thinking, intellect, and cultural experience. Therefore, teaching provides the tools to develop imagination. Gajdamaschko quotes Vygotsky and states, "Every construct of the imagination has an effect on our feelings, and if this construct does not in itself correspond to reality, nonetheless the feelings it evokes are real feelings, feelings a person truly experiences" (Vygotsky, 2003, p. 19). Imagination is a powerful cognitive domain, highly associated with emotions and our intellectual capabilities. It is imperative that teachers correct their misconceptions and assess how to integrate imagination and play to support a literacy community.

Within a literacy community, students should be given ample opportunities to build on their creative and imaginative impulses in ways that can heighten their literacy cognition. Story-telling and story-acting are ways for teachers to aide students' imagination and play. Nicolopoulou, Barbosa de Sal, Ilgaz & Brockmeyer (2009) observed 3-5 year old preschool students twice a week during narrative activities, in where students created their own stories and performed them in front of their peers. The idea of rules was an important concept in this study. As compared to Vygotsky's analysis, play is one of the first opportunities for children to creatively enforce rules upon themselves. In other words, play functions as a collaborative tool for children as they attempt to maintain a shared imaginary situation, following rules developed on their own, not given to them by adults. Nicolopoulou et al. (2009) infers, "Vygotsky argued that it is through fantasy play that the child is first able to emancipate his or her thinking from

their constraints of immediate external environment and thus take the first steps toward organizing thought in a coherent and independent way” (p. 45). In turn, this also begins to form the Zone of Proximal Development, expanding the child’s mental capabilities, as discussed by Vygotsky.

Overall, the narrative activities in this study improved how students listened to each other in order to learn about structure and plot (a form of Zone of Proximal Development- students are expanding their knowledge and expertise through others’ examples), develop plot and action to make stories more interesting, and improve the quality of their stories by adding more themes and sophisticated literary devices. Its implication for future research shows that there is a greater need to look into the power of play and how it can be integrated into the curriculum across grades. Nicolopoulou et al., contends, “Improving our understanding of play and its role in children’s experiences and development is a key production for helping children construct and maintain playworlds that can provide resources and motivations to enhance their cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development” (p. 58). Undoubtedly, these findings relate to critical literacy because these engaging and expressive literary activities are powerful tools that help students embrace multiple perspectives, sympathy towards others, and a supportive learning environment based on trust, justice, and fairness- components of a literacy community.

As stated, imagination and play are highly interconnected concepts of cognitive development. Imagination is a cognitive domain that enables the function of play as a literary tool for higher intellectual thought. In other words, imagination develops as thinking develops. As stated by Gajdamaschko (2006), “Imagination develops as thought

develops, and its development is included in the process of development of the child's thinking and conscious meaning-making" (p. 37). Imagination is an important factor for comprehension and reading skills necessary for literacy achievement. Clearly, imagination is needed to help make connections across texts and visualize scenarios. Imagination is not limited to the definition commonly thought when it comes to play or make-believe. Imagination also consists of a highly developed process of thinking that changes through time, becoming more sophisticated with experience. Undoubtedly, books, reading, and comprehension require imagination. It is a sophisticated thought process and psychological function that enables students to solve problems, expand their thinking, interact with their peers, and visualize their learning and possibilities.

Culture and Learning

Defining culture has never been a straightforward task for researchers and many times, the attempt to define culture has led to an inadequate interpretation with no depth. For example, often times when cultural communities are studied, it leads to an overgeneralization of its members without taking into consideration the variations among individuals and group practices (Gutierrez & Correa-Chavez, 2006, p. 153). This misinterpretation becomes evident especially among non-dominant groups, who are defined as new immigrants or historically marginalized individuals who do not have positions of power economically, socio-politically, and socio-historically (Gutierrez & Correa-Chavez, 2006, p. 153). Culture is not contingent on race or ethnicity, but rather on the practices of the individual, home experience, history, and constant interaction between the learner and their surrounding (Gutierrez & Correa-Chavez, 2006, p. 154).

Paralleling this line of reasoning, Vygotsky (1978) develops the idea of the *general genetic law of cultural development*, which supports the notion that what is learned through social interaction or experiences within a culture is later transferred to the individual for application across other areas. As further defined by Meacham (2001), “Generalization occurs when a spontaneous conceptual understanding is dislodged from its exclusive identification with a specific local context and connected to a more general category of like concepts that integrate multiple contextual domains” (p. 192). In other words, information and concepts can be transferred, applied, and connected to other areas in order to attain a higher order of conceptual understanding. This reinforces the need for teachers to be aware of these past experiences outside of school in order to support students’ connection within content learning. Ultimately, incorporating culture and learning as a framework to study the reading process and the social context of learning, one will realize that the notion and definition of culture lies within the individual learner, reemphasizing the importance of placing the curriculum in the context of an individual’s lived experiences and valuing their differences to create a robust learning environment.

In order to facilitate culture and learning, what becomes the role of the teacher? Teachers are not only facilitators of knowledge, but also inquirers, contributing to the investigation and questioning of past, current, and new knowledge. In other words, teachers need to stretch students’ thinking beyond their current knowledge by challenging, “established beliefs, knowledge, and rules of practice and to generate new knowledge based on exploration, experiments, and collaborative thinking...” (Eun, 2010, p. 406). Read alouds are a dynamic literacy process, one that is based on a shared understanding of co-constructing knowledge together. Teachers must then provide

extended and in-depth instructional conversation, prompting and guiding students within this dialogic process.

Studies have shown that research on cultural diversity has been commonly associated with deficits, achievement gaps, and overall academic failure. Teachers, researchers, policy-makers, and all those associated with education reform need to reassess the role of cultural diversity as a learning resource for literacy education. In a study done by Meacham (2001), the researcher contends, “The main argument of this article is that the implications of Vygotsky’s writings support the idea that a culturally diverse learning environment, in contrast to the tradition of deficit, may embody important advantages in higher-order conceptual development” (p. 190). Secondly, the article uses Murray’s research on “blue’s idiom” to show connection between jazz improvisation and higher order thinking. In other words, higher-order thinking occurs when exclusive and limited concepts are applied and connected to other domains. This can be applied to home and school connection to aide higher-level conceptual development. For culturally diverse classrooms, this occurs through *cross-cultural connections*, as exemplified by jazz within the research. Jazz is used to compare intercultural connections because it incorporates *crossroads*, defined as an intersection in jazz composition that forces one beyond the familiar. There are three phases in jazz improvisation that parallels Vygotsky’s higher order processes: Disruption, improvisation, and affirmation. Disruption is a break in the unknown that leads to uncertainty. Improvisation allows one to fill in with the known or to revise and alter the new unknown information, which is the basis of concept formation. The final phase is affirmation, which is a new awareness for future breaks and improvisations (Meacham,

2001). Such new levels of consciousness, which parallel the phases of jazz composition, allow for new connections not thought of previously. By using *cultural difference* research, there is a clear value in cultural diversity and the validation of diverse ways of knowing.

Lastly, as stated by Eun (2010), “Sensitive and compassionate teachers who provide guidance that is attuned to children’s current level of understanding enable them to learn concepts that were initially beyond individual comprehension” (p. 403). This concept reiterates the point of the importance of knowing our students, their lives, experiences, culture, and all that contributes to the construction of their *self*, in order to have a more concrete driving force to the development of their literacy. The importance of being responsive to your students’ cultures, beliefs, and values is also reiterated in and grounded on socio-cultural theory. As Eun (2010) strongly suggests, “Although students may be of same age and grade level, individual students differ tremendously in terms of their social, emotional, and cognitive development” (p. 409). During the read-aloud process, teachers must take into account the complexity of how students make meaning and respond to text, by valuing, validating, and supporting an accepting environment for multiple perspectives to coexist.

Cooperative Literacy Community

A cooperative literacy community is a learning environment in where there is a shared understanding amongst individuals for developing the highest levels of learning. At a younger age, learning is acquired through the maturation of thought, language, communication, and the contextualization of new knowledge. Vygotsky (1986) argues

that thought and language develops separately, but cross paths at various points. He continues his analysis by looking at the development of scientific concepts, which is also known as content specific knowledge. These scientific concepts evolve under the conditions of systematic cooperation between the child and the teacher. “Scientific concepts develop earlier than spontaneous concepts because they benefit from the systematicity of instruction and cooperation” (p. 148). This supports the idea that learning is best accomplished through cooperative instruction between the student, teacher, and other capable peers.

There is a clear correlation between a child’s learning environment and their achievement. Children who are immersed in a culture of learning based on positive cooperation with others are more likely to achieve greater levels of knowledge. In a study done by Damber (2011), in which third grade classrooms were observed to better understand the factors that lead to overachievement in low SES communities, it was concluded that students are able to perform at greater levels when engaged in a cooperative and positive literacy community. As noted, classrooms were characterized as being positive, supportive, acceptant of all peers, encouraging of multiple voices, and self-reliant. There was a strong belief amongst teachers that students should choose books at levels that are higher than their ability in order to set goals for future ability and success. The researcher also references Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development. For example, “Letting the students develop their reading skills within the realms of their own ZPD enabled them to experience the joy of success” (p. 97). Finally, the study discusses the importance of cooperation, not just amongst students, but also amongst teachers and parents. As stated, “Interviews revealed that parents were invited from the start to

participate in the reading communities as collaborators” (p. 98). Therefore, concentrating on building trust, valuing the perspective of others, engaging in supportive book talks, and valuing an empowering community, formed the basis of a literacy community that led to overachievement in learning.

Research on the importance of creating a cooperative learning community in which there is a shared culture amongst peers also lends itself to focusing on specific pedagogical practices. Maurer (2010) studied the impact of literacy centers and peer dialogue to assess its influence on learning and community building. Maurer argues that there are two worlds that coexist for children: the official and unofficial school worlds. As explained in the article, the official school world is standard-driven and scrutinized by adults. The unofficial school world is the one created and sustained by students. The question driving this study is how students intersect and make sense of these two worlds as they coexist in their learning. Specifically, this study looks at the peer dialogue that occurs during the unofficial school world during literacy centers. As stated by Maurer, “This intersection of the official school world with the peer dialogue of the unofficial peer culture often took place at literacy centers and led to an interesting exploration of how the two social worlds can come together to enrich a child’s literacy learning while meeting academic standards” (p. 353). Literacy centers as social spaces with no teacher guidance or supervision provides students a unique learning opportunity to engage in an unofficial school world where concepts, ideas, and learning is created and interpreted. Additionally, literacy centers are tools that extend children’s abilities because it provides a space for lively discussions, interactions amongst peers, and problem solving to take place. Vygotsky suggests that scientific concepts are learned through the application of

everyday concepts. In connection, the findings of this study showed that students were able to apply such *scientific concepts* in novice ways and across different domains to support not only their learning, but also that of their peers. For example, in one of the observations students were seen helping others decode words from books that were written by other students in the classroom. More capable students were seen leading others towards understanding in a way that parallels Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. As stated in the article, "With freedom to talk, discuss, and work together, peers are able to practice and assist each other in developing word recognition and fluency" (p. 358). In addition, when children have differing perspectives, it creates conflict, but this leads to heightened knowledge, new information, and other ways of knowing.

Within peer dialogue, students were seen supporting each others' learning through examples and application, while also experimenting with new words for vocabulary acquisition. Mauruer suggests, "An environment that allows children to ask about and discuss concepts provides opportunities for them to learn, practice, expand, and strengthen their budding vocabulary" (p. 359). Overall, Maurer argues that "By providing opportunities for children to work on self-selected activities in the context of literacy centers, various strategies to support the reading process are practiced and utilized, not because it is the skill of the day, but because it is a necessary component of creating meaning while engaged in a literacy event such as reading" (p. 360). In other words, learning is relevant, natural, purposeful, and creates opportunities for the joint construction of meaning, necessary for the official school world and the unofficial social world. In this study, it is clear that literacy centers provide a rich learning environment

for students to construct knowledge, make meaning, and build a cooperative and positive literacy community.

Implications for Future Research

A teacher is not simply an individual who transmits information through an organized set of lessons, moving progressively in a rigid sequential order in order to *cover* all required standards before the long awaited standardized tests. As teachers, we must also inform our practice with research and theory in order to consistently change, supplement, and recreate the activities we engage our students in on a daily basis to move them beyond testing preparation. As reiterated by Larson (2009):

Professional reading in the literacy field may be a valuable resource for teachers to be aware of new research or emerging practices that ought to be taken into account when developing curriculum and may help avoid reducing literacy practices to simplistic school lessons. (p. 20).

Future research should not simply be based on *how* to base curriculum on socio-cultural theory or how to engage students in a way that validates their cultural knowledge and experiences. By doing so, we are simply recreating what basal readers do by giving teachers a scripted curriculum on *how to* integrate theories into their teaching. Instead, research should focus on *why* it is necessary for this shift to occur, in hopes of informing political decision-making within education. Change must occur within the political realm, where decisions about the priorities of education are decided upon. It is at this point where teachers can then be supported in their own instruction, inform their teaching practices through professional literature, become empowered to learn about who their

students are and the repertoire of literacy practices they bring in, and make changes necessary to provide students with an education that will prepare them to be critical citizens of our increasingly globalized world. Simply stated, “Not only do children benefit from mastering school literacies but also our work as teachers can benefit from the lessons we learn from our students about their literacy practices” (Larson, 2009, p. 22). Clearly, future research must take the direction of informing teachers why these measures are necessary, provide examples, and empower teachers to make those necessary steps to create a profound change in literacy instruction that best fits their students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to analyze the application of Vygotsky on current educational practices, especially in terms of developing a literacy community. Through reading *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (1978) and *Thought and Language* (1986) as a researcher and teacher I was able to better understand the implications of these two works on today’s literacy practices and the social context of literacy learning. I argue that the Zone of Proximal Development, the influence of play and imagination, and the connection between culture and learning have a cumulative effect on building a literacy community. As I define, a literacy community is one that is based on continual positive interactions, a shared understanding for literacy goals, and an appreciation for the dialogic process of student conversations as they connect and make-meaning within literacy. Understanding the Zone of Proximal Development allows teachers to structure their literacy activities in a way that supports

reciprocal learning, where students are guided to think in higher levels through peer interaction. Play and imagination are tools that allow students to expand their thoughts, build on their own learning, and create their own *rules* for learning and thought development. Validating the connection between culture and learning creates an educational space that utilizes culture as a resource for student learning, as opposed to a deficit. Finally, these domains contribute to the aforementioned literacy community enabling a rich, productive, and just context for intellectual growth.

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