



THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Vygotsky's name may not be as recognizable as, say, Piaget, Pavlov and Freud, who were his peers when he developed his theory, but ask anyone studying psychology and they are bound to know who he is. He may have died at the relatively young age of 37 in 1934, and it may have taken around 4 decades before his ideas were formally introduced and incorporated in psychology curricula across universities in the Western world, but they have since become integral to the study of psychology, particularly in the field of educational and early childhood psychology.

Among his contemporaries, the one whose theories were scrutinized closely in comparison with Vygotsky's was [Jean Piaget](#), a Swiss child psychologist that came up with his Theory of Cognitive Development. We will try to point out the differences between these two psychologists' works as we move on with the discussion.

Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, or SDT, introduced **two major principles**:

1. Cognitive development is limited up to a certain extent or within a certain range, at any given age of the individual; and
2. An individual's full cognitive development requires social interaction.

These principles are encapsulated in three theories or themes:

- Social Interaction,
- The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) and
- the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

I. Social Interaction

Key concept #1 Social interaction plays a central role in cognitive development.

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 has to 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. Take a 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.

Key concept #2 Social learning precedes development.

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:

1. **Social level, or interpsychological.** The functions 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.
2. **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 (LMFs) are:

- **Sensation.** A child does not need to be taught that something is hot, cold, sweet, or bitter. His senses are will automatically deliver those messages to his brain, so he can react accordingly.
- **Hunger.** 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.** To be more specific, natural or unmediated memory. Young children are able to 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.** As 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 has to 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, include [mind maps](#), memory mnemonics, note-taking, and other visual cues and aids.
- **Voluntary attention.** You may have heard toddlers and small children being described as having short attention span. That is because, at that age, their thought processes aren't stable enough to sustain concentration on one particular 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 learnings 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 is able to recognize a sensory stimuli... 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.

Key concept #3 Language accelerates cognitive development.

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 take a 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 pretty 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, the 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 3 and 7, 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 actually 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 is able to 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.

Learn about the benefits of a bilingual brain in the following video.

Key concept #4 Self-initiated discovery and collaborative dialogue aid in a child's cognitive development.

According to Jean Piaget, the inherent curiosity of young children pushes them to be actively involved in their learning, and motivate them to discover and explore new things by themselves. They are the ones to actively initiate the discovery and development process. For Piaget, this is self-initiated and hands-on approach in discovery learning is the best way for children to learn.

Vygotsky agrees mostly with Piaget, except for the last part. He postulated that the social and cultural settings that children's activities take place in requires social interaction and communication, and that the 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 1 to 10 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.

II. The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)

Meet the MKO, a person with a better understanding and considerably higher or superior level of ability, skill or knowledge about a particular subject, task or process, than the person who is attempting to learn (also called the *learner*).

It is common sense, really. Why would you seek to learn from someone who knows less than you?

The MKO often comes in the person of a teacher, a superior at work, or a peer with more experience. There are instances when he could be someone younger, but with more cultivated knowledge and skill. In this digital age,

the MKO may even be a computer or any intelligent machine. In the eyes of a child, adults are the MKOs.

Take, for example, a father and his little boy headed to their backyard to play catch. He happens to know how to play baseball, and he plans to teach his boy the basics while he is still young. In this case, the MKO is the father, by virtue of his adult status and his knowledge and skills in the sport.

Twenty years later, the son is now a professional baseball player, and his father has just retired. Before a major game, the son hands his father the latest, most advanced camcorder model, so he can film the game from his VIP seat. He sits down with his father and teaches him how to operate the camcorder. This time, the MKO is the son, since he is more knowledgeable about the device.

To prepare for the game, the son had to leave, but before doing so, he downloaded an app on his father's cell phone that will guide him further on how to work the camcorder. The father was then left exploring the features of the camcorder, using the voice prompts from the app on his phone. The MKO is now the electronic device, his cell phone.

While learning and discovery that is self-initiated is effective, learning becomes more productive and contributory to cognitive development when acquired from an MKO.

The concept of the MKO is seen to always go together with his other concept, that of the Zone of Proximal Development.

III. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Imagine a circle divided into three rings. The inner circle or ring represents what the child already knows, while the third, outermost circle or rings represents what he still does not know. Or we could use the inner circle to include those that the child can achieve or discover on his own. The outermost circle or ring includes those that he cannot achieve or discover independently, but can only do so with the help or guidance of someone who is more skilled or knowledgeable.

What about the second, or middle circle?

That gap, or that empty area between the inner and outer circles, is the Zone of Proximal Development. That is where the learning will take place.

Vygotsky said that the ZPD is where the child will be given the most sensitive instruction or guidance, coupled with a lot of encouragement, from the MKO. Take note that the words used were “instruction” and “guidance”, as opposed to outright “full assistance”. This is because the MKO will provide just the right amount of guidance, and then allow the child to learn and develop his skills. By letting him do it independently, the MKO will help the child develop his higher mental functions faster, thereby speeding up cognition.

Let us go back to the father and son example. The first few times, the father taught his son how to catch and throw the ball, holding his hand, teaching how to grip, pull back, and throw. After showing how it’s done several times, he will step back and let his son do it on his own. From time to time, he will give pointers and corrections but, for the most part, he let his son practice on his own.

He did the same thing when teaching the other skills. Soon, the son learned how to figure things out on his own, so he starts practicing how to play ball by himself, not asking for help from his father unless absolutely necessary.

When the son gave his father the camcorder, he showed him how to turn it on, and what buttons to push to record, zoom in, zoom out, pause, and other key features. Then he handed it over to his father, who practiced what he was just taught.

Learning in the ZPD, as mentioned earlier, is facilitated with the help of an MKO, which is precisely why we said that these two often go together. The learning process, in itself, is a social interaction, which could be done directly or indirectly (with the use of technology, perhaps), between the learner and the MKO, who can be a teacher, professor, coach, mentor, or any older adult, or a peer or even someone younger, who happens to be

more skillful, experienced, or knowledgeable in the area, subject or discipline that is being learned.

