
**Synopsis**

This article focuses on the common misconceptions of Vygotsky’s theory, especially as it pertains to the Zone of Proximal Development, as well as the complications this presents in today’s K-12 school system. Gredler begins this article with an explanation of the origins of these misconceptions. She identifies four factors that have skewed the meaning behind Vygotsky’s thinking. Among these is the inaccurate translation of parts of Vygotsky’s ideas in the 1978 publication of *Mind in Society*, in which the authors admitted to taking “‘significant liberties’ with Vygotsky’s essays” (Gredler, 2012). In addition, much of Vygotsky’s work was not translated into English until after his death much later in the century, and with some of his own definitions undoubtedly unclear, confusion inevitably arose. Finally, Vygotsky placed an emphasis on children creating scientific concepts “as the key to the whole history of the child’s intellectual development”, yet little is known about this aspect of his theory. (Gredler, 2012).

With Gredler’s position that this particular idea directly addresses the importance of the school curriculum in developing the child’s thinking, Gredler identifies this as one problem that has arisen with the misinterpretation of Vygotsky’s work.

Gredler further discusses the four main misconceptions associated with Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD. First, the teacher’s role in determining the ZPD of the child is unclear. Currently Wikipedia defines the ZPD as “the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help” (Gredler, 2012). This description, which has
remained prevalent for many years, fails to truly identify how the teacher determines this. Second, the *Mind in Society* publication put forth the view that Vygotsky encouraged student collaboration among peers to further their intellectual development. However, as Gredler points out, Vygotsky was later quoted as saying that “groups of children are not capable of facilitating their own cognitive development” (2012). The third misconception stems from the widely held belief that any task can be used to address the child’s Zone of Proximal Development, as long as the task is challenging to the child. Vygotsky, however, specifically defined these tasks as those that address internal mental functions, especially problem solving tasks in which the child applies higher cognitive skills. Finally, there is the misconception that the ZPD applies to all children. Gredler points out that because Vygotsky identifies the ZPD as revolving around higher mental functions, preschool age children and younger are not capable of working in the ZPD.

Gredler goes on to discuss the implications of these misconceptions on the education system today. She further details ideas for educational reform in terms of classroom practices and designing effective curriculum by implementing the original ideas of Vygotsky. It is implicated in the article that the current decline in the performance of American students on international assessments is largely due to inappropriate curriculum and ineffective classroom practices.

Theory

Vygotsky’s most widely known theory in the realm of education, the Zone of Proximal Development, is addressed extensively in this article. The author provides detailed accounts of
many of Vygotsky’s translated works to give an insight into his true thinking behind the ZPD. According to the article, the ZPD was one of two levels of cognitive development. The first was problem solving that is able to be completed independently and the second, ZPD, was “assisted problem solving”, where the assistance comes from an adult. The ZPD is defined by Vygotsky as “the higher mental functions of voluntary attention, categorical perception, conceptual thinking, and logical memory” and that interactions with adults is “essential in that development” (Gredler, 2012). Vygotsky also proposed that the purpose of identifying the ZPD is to determine how intellectual functions are maturing in the learner. It is stressed that the ZPD revolves particularly around problem solving and that any task that is used must represent that higher level of thinking. Gredler focuses further on the assumption that although Vygotsky stressed the importance of social interaction among children, it was the interaction between adult and child that aids in the true development of a child’s cognitive thinking. In addition, it is stated that Vygotsky did not intend for the ZPD to be used with children younger than six years old. This is due to the fact that, again, the ZPD focuses on abstract problem solving skills, and these are skills that young children do not yet possess.

Analysis

Gredler identified several problems in today’s school system, including having a vast amount of standards to teach, resulting in the shallow teaching of concepts. In addition, due to the No Child Left Behind Act, early childhood centers and programs are pressured into teaching inappropriate academic skills to young children. For example, one state requires Kindergarteners to master thirty-five reading standards, many of which are too abstract for true
comprehension. Finally, the curriculum is proposed to be largely ineffective, listing standards that have cognitive processes that remain unclear and that are lacking the ability for the child to form a true understanding and generalization of concepts.

Gredler is proposing education reform based on Vygotsky’s true meaning of the ZPD. In the ideal classroom, the ZPD would be used to assess the “cognitive processes essential in mastering subject matter concepts” (2012). The ZPD would also be used to further the cognitive processes of metacognition and understanding the innate psychological nature of the task. When working in the ZPD of a child, the teacher would not simply attempt to implant the knowledge in his/her head in an effort to prepare them for the state mandated test, but would encourage the student to develop his/her own connections between concepts. Furthermore, students would not be pushed to learn concepts that are not developmentally appropriate for the sake of fulfilling the No Child Left Behind Act. Curriculum would be developed that reduced the number of concepts being taught but encouraged the understanding of vertical and parallel relationships between concepts. This becomes a difficult task, however, as it would require school districts to move from focusing on the learning of content to focusing on the student’s mental functions.

Evaluation

This article provides an interesting perspective on a well-used theory in education. Gredler makes many valid points in regards to today’s school curriculum and the developmentally appropriateness of the standards in the younger grades. Her suggestions, in theory, are compelling ways to restructure a curriculum that is in dire need of transformation.
However, Gredler’s ideas would most likely be met with opposition, as the legislature that mandates much of what school districts require from students is unfortunately based around what students are required to know, not how they think. This article, nonetheless, is a good bridge to opening up further discussions and best practices using Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development. Perhaps with more articles like these, true reform can begin to occur.