Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), a Russian psychologist, is well-known for his Social Development Theory, which is a cornerstone of conservative psychology. His theory asserts three main concepts:

### Social Interaction

Vygotsky believed that social interaction played a fundamental role in cognitive development. He thought social learning preceded development: “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).” (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky believed children were curious and actively involved in learning and understanding the world.

### The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)

The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) refers to someone who possesses more knowledge, a better understanding, or greater ability than the learner in relation to a task, concept, or process. A MKO may be an adult (parent, teacher, coach, grandparent, tutor) or a peer, younger child, or even a piece of technology (smartphone) or media (a how-to video). In social interactions with a MKO (modeling/verbal instructions), individuals seek understanding and internalize information. They then use that understanding/information to guide, change, or regulate their own performance.

### The Zone Of Proximal Development (ZPD)

The Zone Of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the distance between a person’s ability to do something with guidance and/or collaboration from a MKO and their ability to do it independently. Vygotsky believed that learning occurred in this zone and that the role of education is to provide children with experiences within their ZPD. Although he never used the term, the concept of ZPD is seen as scaffolding (a structure of support) for learning that starts at the child’s ability and builds from there.

Based on the works of psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory has had a huge impact on how we educate children, but there are criticisms. For example, some scholars question his informal research methods, think he underemphasized individuals, or question whether his ideas are culturally universal.