

Vygotsky's Theory of Child Development

Talk by Andy Blunden at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, February 2011

The concepts of Vygotsky's periodisation

Vygotsky saw child development as consisting of passing through a series of periods of stable development, namely, infancy, early childhood, pre-school age, (primary) school age and puberty. These periods of stable development are punctuated by periods of crisis: at birth, and at the ages of one, three, seven and 13.

Vygotsky named these stages in terms that evidently made sense in the USSR of the 1920s and 1930s, but his periodisation essentially depended on the occurrence of specific structural transformations in the child's relation to their social environment and correspondingly in their mental life. The timing of these crises is in large measure set by custom and social practice. He claimed that under different social conditions these transformations will still take place, but will happen 'differently', and up to a point, at different ages. For example, when referring to the crisis at age seven, Vygotsky notes:

Facts show that in other conditions of rearing, the crisis occurs differently. In children who go from nursery school to kindergarten, the crisis occurs differently than it does in children who go into kindergarten from the family. However, this crisis occurs in all normally proceeding child development.

Vygotsky, 1934b, p. 295

What is important in every case however, is the *concept* Vygotsky proposes for each of the structures and transformations. Child development takes place differently in different cultural circumstances. This is not just a matter of empirical fact, but rather points to the need for concepts which allow us to understand the route by which cultural factors, which can be determined empirically, are active in shaping the development of the child. This allows us to understand the mechanism whereby the culture and institutions of a society are reproduced from generation to generation. The fundamental character of the structures with which Vygotsky is concerned forces us to consider that the same series of transformations may be experienced by children developing in *any* society, though in every case, they will be experienced differently, at different ages, and the outcomes will be different.

There are several unique concepts which Vygotsky introduced, and understanding them is the main thing we have to look at.

Social situation of development

The first and most important concept is the *social situation of development*.

... at the beginning of each age period, there develops a completely original, exclusive, single, and unique relation, specific to the given age, between the child and reality, mainly the social reality that surrounds him. We call this relation the *social situation of development* at the given age. The social situation of development represents the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given period. It determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality as from the basic source of development, the path along which the social becomes the individual.

op. cit., p. 198

Vygotsky conceived of the social environment in which the child finds itself and the relationship of the child to other people not just as a collection of factors, as influence or resource or context or community, but concretely, as a *predicament*.

The child begins life more or less helpless. Even the cortex of the brain does not yet function sufficiently well to perceive the figure of objects or people, or even distinguish the child's own body from its

background. Aside from some reflexes, the child is unable to contribute to meeting or even determining any of its own needs. At the end of the process when the child enters the world of work, if each of the periods of stable development and crises have been successfully negotiated, the child has become a fully mature member of the wider society, able to determine and meet their own needs in a manner consonant with their social position, aware of other possible social positions, taking moral responsibility for their actions, and participating in the reproduction of the culture and institutions of the society.

At each successive stage in the child's development the child becomes able to perceive that the very situation through which their vital needs are being met, has *ensnared* them in a trap from which the child can emancipate themselves only by *striving* in a way that *stretches* the capacities that they have at the given stage of development. In the case of a stable period of development, this striving helps bring one central function to maturity and eventually makes the social situation of development redundant, bringing into being a new predicament. In the case of the periods of crisis, with their striving, the child forcibly breaks from the predicament and opens the way directly to a new period of stable development in a new mode of behaviour and interaction.

The predicament is therefore contained in the way the child's needs are being met through the adults related to the child, which lock the child into certain modes of activity that they are capable of sensing, at one point as a mark of respect or degree of freedom, but at another, as a limitation, and even come to see as a kind of insult, the transcendence of which becomes a need and a drive in its own right. But they are not yet capable of transcending that limitation, and their efforts to do so are frustrated. The mode of activity through which the child's needs are being met is created in response, on one hand, to the adults' expectations of the child, and the resources acquired from their culture, and on the other hand, to the child's behaviour and age, according to the child's capacities. Numerical age may be a factor, simply because institutional norms impose age level expectations on the child irrespective of the child's actual level of functioning.

As the child develops within the social situation of development a contradiction develops. Whereas the child's needs have been satisfied up till now through the existing situation, due to the child's development, the child becomes aware of new needs, new needs which presuppose the child occupying a new role, and a corresponding change in the social situation. An infant may be quite happy having its mouth stuffed with food ... up to a point, but they soon feel the need to have control over what is put in their mouth. They need to disrupt the situation in which absolutely everything is done for them.

This ability to perceive new needs does not yet mean that the child is able to satisfy them. This is both because they do not yet have the ability to do so and because the adult carers do not treat them as a child who has that ability. The child is stuck in this situation and has begun to see it as a restriction, even though it is the situation in which their needs are being met. For example, a child might be angry and want to defy their mother, but at that moment they simply can't overcome their own inclinations. Their mother finds it easy to manipulate them with rewards or distractions and in this circumstance the child may become defiant and refuse to do anything, so as to free themselves from the mother's manipulation by developing their own will and letting their mother know they have a mind of their own.

It is this striving to take on a new role and change the situation which actualises development. The development however can only be actualised if the adult carers respond by entering into the new mode of interaction with the child. The child perceives the situation as a constraint and strives to overcome it. To overcome those constraints which fall within the child's capacity to perceive, is also a key *need* of the child, a drive which is not facilitated, but *frustrated* by the social situation which created it. If the child does not feel a need to overcome these constraints on the determination and satisfaction of their newly perceived needs, or does not strive to overcome these constraints and emancipate themselves, then a pathological situation exists and the child will not develop. For example, a young teenager who *never* feels any need to criticise the views and ways of their own family and their teachers will never fully develop as an adult and take their own position in society.

Notice that the child must become aware (at *whatever level* it is sensible to speak of a child of the given age being aware) of the limitations of their present position. That is, they must in some way be able to imagine a different role for themselves. The conditions for becoming aware of such a role are created by

the current social situation of development, but there are always limitations on the ability of a child to see what could be, but is not yet the case.

Thus we have an abstract definition of the social situation of development which tells us how to understand the multiplicity of relationships around the child so as to grasp concretely, and as a whole, how the social environment both determines and affords development of the child. A culture only offers a finite number of distinct roles for people according to their life course. These will be different in each culture, but every society has such roles each with appropriate rights and expectations for everyone from the maternity ward to the retirement home. Each of these life stages constitutes a viable form of life in the form of specific relationships between the person and those around them.

As a general concept, the driving force of the development is the predicament created by a gap between the child's manifest needs and *the current social means of their satisfaction*. This conception of the social situation of development is *universal*, but in every single case the situation is different because the adults providing for the child's needs do so differently in different cultural circumstances. They have different expectations of the child and will react differently to the child's behaviour, not to mention the indeterminate impact of differences in diet and physical conditions of existence that the adults provide for the child. For example, the infant may grasp for their mother's breast, but the mother may or may not respond; the child's predicament is the same, but the outcome is different. Actualisation of the social situation of development is different in every different social and historical situation, and the course of development is therefore different in each case. In this sense, development is culturally determined. But in each case, to understand the factors that determine the course of development, we should look to the contradiction between the level of the child's development which more or less corresponds to the manner in which the child's needs are being met, and the constraints that this mode of interaction imposes on the child's ability (at their relevant stage of development) to intuit those constraints and overcome them. For example, the child who proudly turns up at school, ready to take on their new role outside the immediate care of their own family, but, unable to distance their consciousness from their behaviour and adopt an intellectual disposition, will not only fail at their schoolwork but may also suffer in the playground. The child will thereby feel an intense need to master strategic behaviour and adapt to the demands of school life. This can be traumatic for any child, but it is only by being thrown out of the nest, so to speak, that this development is made.

Vygotsky gives an example (1934a) of a social situation which demonstrates how one and the same circumstance may bring about different development outcomes according to the child's age. A single mother had three children, but had become dysfunctional due to becoming a drunkard. The oldest child made a development, acting well above his age, taking over the role of head of household and looking after his mother as well; the middle child had been close to her mother and could not adjust to her wild behaviour and her development suffered; the youngest child did not even notice the change, so long as her basic needs were being met. This shows clearly how the *social situation of development* is about the *relationship between a child's felt needs and their circumstances* insofar as they are able to perceive them.

Central neoformation

Neoformation. This rather strange word is used by Vygotsky to mean a psychological function, or more precisely a mode of the child's interaction with their social environment, including the specific mode of mental activity implied in the given type of social interaction. A neoformation is so-called because it newly appears at a specific stage of the child's development, differentiating itself from other functions (or combining them) and enabling a new mode of social interaction.

Each age level of development of the child is characterised by a social situation, with its specific predicament, and one neoformation above all others, plays the leading role in restructuring the mental life of the child – the one that Vygotsky calls the *central neoformation*.

In the case of stable periods of development, the central neoformation gradually differentiates itself in the first phase of the period, and then in the latter phase, it drives the restructuring of the child's behaviour and eventually makes the social situation of development redundant by overcoming the former constraints, generating new modes of interaction and setting up a new predicament. The central

neof ormation does not disappear, but continues to develop and play its part in the child's activity, but no longer plays the central driving role in development. Later it will develop along a peripheral line of development.

These neof ormations that characterise the reconstruction of the conscious personality of the child in the first place are not a prerequisite but a result or product of development of the age level. The change in the child's consciousness arises on a certain base specific to the given age, the forms of his social existence. This is why maturation of neof ormations never pertains to the beginning, but always to the end of the given age level.

1934b, p. 198

In the case of the *critical* periods of development which mark the transition from one period of stable development to the next, the central neof ormation forces a break from the old relationships and lays the foundation for a new social situation of development, but it is *transient*. In the normal course of development it *fades away* and will reappear later only under extreme conditions. These are called *transitional neof ormations*.

The most essential content of development at the critical ages consists of the appearance of neof ormations which ... are unique and specific to a high degree. Their main difference from neof ormations of stable ages is that they have a transitional character. This means that in the future, they will not be preserved in the form in which they appear at the critical period and will not enter as a requisite component into the integral structure of the future personality. They die off, ...

op. cit., pp. 194-5

This means that the kind of negativity which children resort to during critical periods in order to break into the new relationship will fade away and generally only reappear in the event of a breakdown in the new situation. Also, during the earliest phases of life, infants and their parents often manifest very advanced modes of interaction, not based on cortical functions of the brain and which will not go on to be the foundations of mature psychological functions, as they fade away in the following critical phase.

Lines of development

In its development from a helpless newborn to a mature and responsible young adult, the child must pass through a series of age levels, each of which constitutes a viable form of social practice, a *Gestalt*. At each point in this development, the child is able to utilise only those neof ormations which have been developed so far, pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps, so to speak. Each chapter in this story involves transformation of the mental life and mode of interaction of the child from one whole, viable form of life to another. At each age-level there is a *central line of development* which is the story of how the central neof ormation of the age level differentiates itself from the psychic structure. This brings about a new constellation of psychological functions, transforms the relationship between functions, and stimulates the development of others, while suppressing still others, transforming cause into effect and effect into cause and turning means into ends and ends into means. The central line of development in each age level is driven by the requirements of development of the central neof ormation. But, at the same time, *peripheral lines of development*, or 'subplots' so to speak, continue. Sometimes these are in support of the central lines of development and at other times they continue the work begun in previous age levels, by refining and strengthening functions which are, however, no longer the driving force of development. The central line of development is the story of how the child overcomes the predicament contained in the social situation of development and leads into a new predicament, and how the central neof ormation restructures the mental life of the child and their relationship to the social environment.

... at each given age level, we always find a central neof ormation seemingly leading the whole process of development and characterising the reconstruction of the whole personality of the child

on a new base. Around the basic or central neoformation of the given age are grouped all the other *partial neoformations* pertaining to separate aspects of the child's personality and the processes of development connected with the neoformations of preceding age levels. The processes of development that are more or less directly connected with the basic neoformation we shall call *central lines of development* at the given age and all other partial processes and changes occurring at the given age, we shall call *peripheral lines of development*. It is understood that processes that are central lines of development at one age become peripheral lines of development at the following age, ..."

op. cit., p. 197

Age levels

Thus, the *age levels* are characterised by the specific mode of interaction which arises on the basis of the social situation thanks to the central neoformation that moves to the fore and matures in the given age period along the central line of development. Each of the phases of development entails biological changes in the organism as well as changes in institutional expectations based on the historical experience and practices of the given society. Consequently, although the age levels entail regular years of age, they are defined not by age, but by the central neoformation of development in the age level.

Stable age levels are periods during which the growth of a central neoformation takes up a central role in development, through its becoming a mature and continuing part of the child's psyche. In *critical age periods*, the child forcibly breaks away from the former social situation of development by the premature exercise of more developed forms of wilfulness, manifested in forms of *negativism*. It is in traversing these critical periods that the child's will is developed, and they are therefore crucial in shaping the child's personality.

These forms of negativism that rest on the child's striving despite every effort to overcome the frustration of their drive to do that which they cannot do, disrupt their former relations and open up conditions for a new period of stable development. Once new conditions are established, the negativism of the critical period fades away.

Vygotsky says that during the periods of stable development, it is the change in a single neoformation which drives the development of the whole, but during the critical periods of development, it is the change in the *entire structure* of the psyche which determines the changes in the separate neoformations and the *relations* between them.

At each given age period, development occurs in such a way that separate aspects of the child's personality change and as a result of this, there is a reconstruction of the personality as a whole – in development [i.e., during the critical periods] there is just exactly a reverse dependence: the child's personality changes as a whole in its internal structure and the movement of each of its parts is determined by the laws of change of this whole.

op. cit., p. 196

Thus, during the stable periods of development, the child's personality undergoes gradual change along the central line of development. The process is *gradual* because it has the form of maturation of the central neoformation, without disruption to the child's relation to its environment. The central neoformation gradually matures and reorients the entire personality, but as it matures, the personality gradually comes into conflict with the situation, and the child is unable to find satisfactory resolution for this conflict. During the critical periods, the whole personality undergoes a structural transformation and all the psychological functions are rearranged according to the success of this transformation towards a new relationship between the child and their environment. In each stable phase of its development, the child acts out a role defined by a concept specific to the given cultural formation, such as 'toddler' or 'primary school child'.

At the beginning of the critical period, the child exhibits *negativity* in relation to its current role, and then in the latter phase of the critical period, the child exhibits *instability* in adoption of its new role.

Self-relation and the crisis periods

From birth through to the crisis of puberty, the child develops a more and more developed relation-to-self, that is, grades of consciousness or self-consciousness and self-determination. According to Vygotsky, the periods of critical development are marked by transformations in the development of the *will* or capacity for self-determination. We can summarise the changes Vygotsky saw in self-relation through the periods of crisis as shown in the table.

Crisis period	Self-Relation
Birth	The child physically separates themselves from the mother and creates the conditions for the 'front brain' to begin work, through which alone social interaction is possible.
Crisis at 12 months	Still unaware of themselves as a person distinct from those around them (<i>Urwir</i>), the child manifests their own will and their own personality for the first time through interaction with adults.
Crisis at age 3	Having gradually developed a consciousness of themselves as a distinct person, the child separates themselves from the mother psychologically, and by differentiation of behaviour from affect, bringing their behaviour under control of their own will.
Crisis at age 7	Having gradually expanded their radius of activity beyond the family, the child gains control over their relations with others by the differentiation of their internal and external life, manifested in an ability to act strategically
Crisis at age 13	Having acquired knowledge appropriate to their social position, the child distances themselves from their birthright by taking a critical stance toward it. This entails dissociating all conceptions, formerly taken as parts of a single whole, now to be grasped each in itself.

The child begins life totally undifferentiated from their mother, physically, biologically, psychologically, intellectually and socially, and their psychological functions are also undifferentiated. So long as behaviour is not differentiated from affect, the child is a slave to their own feelings. For example, so long as a youth does not differentiate themselves from their social position they are unable to take moral responsibility for their own actions. It is only by the complete differentiation of the various psychological functions that the young person gains control over their own behaviour and participation in society, and differentiates themselves as an individual from those around them. It is only through this complete process of *differentiation* that the individual can actually become a *real part* of their society, and actually contribute to the production, reproduction and transformation of the culture and society.

Thus the process is contradictory in the sense that integration into a truly human society presupposes a process of differentiation of the individual. The whole process of becoming human is driven, from beginning to end, by the striving of the child to overcome the limitations to their self-determination and emancipate themselves from imprisonment by their own drives. This drive for emancipation then proves to be the only genuinely human drive, the drive which knows no end and transcends all barriers.

'Leading activity' and Zone of Proximal Development

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the most widely known and used of Vygotsky's concepts. There are many things that a child may see others around them performing, which no amount of coaching or trying will allow them to even *imitate*. There are a range of psychological functions, however, between those which, on the one hand, the child is able to master even without assistance, but on the other hand, the child cannot manage even if given assistance. The range in between these two limits is called the ZPD, within which the child can manage the activity if given assistance. According to Vygotsky these are the functions which lie within the child's reach and the child can be taught. Trying to teach the child something which lies beyond their ability to achieve even with assistance is a waste of time, and will have to wait until the child has further matured in their current situation. If two children are judged to be at the

same level according to what they are able to do unaided, but one child is able to achieve more than the other when given assistance, this indicates to the teacher the additional potential of the child in terms of their as yet untapped development.

If we know the central line of development at a given stage in the child's development and the identity of the central neoformation, then we may consider what conditions or modes of interaction the child will need in order to promote that line of development and ensure its successful completion. At each level, the child's personality undergoes a reconstruction, and one function above all others is destined to play the leading role in *that* reconstruction. If instruction can bring about development of that function then development of other functions will follow *as a matter of course*. On the other hand, there are always peripheral lines of development which play only a secondary role in the child's overall development, that is, the reconstruction of their personality in preparation for the adoption of a new mode of interaction with their environment.

In such critical phases, the identification of this central neoformation in the ZPD is crucial to the teacher interested in assisting the child in making a critical development, rather than in simply learning to do more things. However, during the long stable periods of development, that is precisely what the child needs. The central line of development then is the maturing and consolidation of the central neoformation which characterises the whole stage of development, and during the early phase of that stage, a child is still stabilising the neoformation of that stage and operating at the higher level is still somewhat beyond the child's imagination and ability. This stability only comes when the child's central neoformation has matured.

Hence, during the stable periods of development, the social situation of development obliges the child to strive to master the psychological functions that lie within limits imposed by their social situation of development, and as a result of this striving, the central neoformation develops and leads the whole process of development. Vygotsky assumes that carers and teachers will be aware of those psychological functions which lie within the ZPD, and which neoformations are central and which are peripheral. Appropriate instruction that promotes the striving of the child and the differentiation and growth of their central neoformation will assist development, whereas efforts to interest the child in other activity, which involves peripheral lines of development or lie beyond the child's age level of ability, will not be expected to bring any significant developmental benefit.

During the latter stages of the stable phase of development the child begins to perceive new possibilities, and by assisting the child, the teacher or carer may be able to see that qualitatively new functions are within the child's reach, and at this time instruction should be directed at encouraging these new forms of activity.

It is here that Vygotsky's concept of the 'Zone of Proximal Development' is relevant. *Instruction may lead development*, if and only if instruction assists the child in promoting the differentiation of the *leading* neoformation. Vygotsky proposed that what the child can do *today with assistance* (for example by asking leading questions, offering suggestions) or *in play* (which allows the child to strive to do what they actually cannot yet do), they will be able to do *tomorrow without assistance*. The desired 'flow over' to different functions that result from success in performing the given activity, will occur *only if the intervention has promoted the central or leading neoformation*. Otherwise, teaching by assisting the child with a task may help them learn that task, but there will be no *flow over* to development. In that sense, we could introduce into the concepts Vygotsky uses in this work the idea of 'leading activity'. The leading activity and the corresponding social interaction is that which promotes the striving of the child in the exercise of central neoformation of the age-period.

For example, a three-year-old showing the first signs of being able to carry out tasks without supervision would be carefully encouraged and supported because the development of this capacity for independent, unsupervised activity is the central line of development, in Vygotsky's view, for the period of middle childhood.

During the periods of critical development, however, the situation is different. The child is trying to rupture the social situation of development and create a social position for themselves in a new social situation. The child's behaviour in these periods of crisis is disruptive of the existing relationships. Here again, instruction can lead development, but in this case, development will entail a 'leap' in the child's

activity into a new relationship to their social environment. The child's carers need to understand what lies behind the child's behaviour and assist the child through to the new social situation. Again, this is a question which will exercise the *skill and art* of the educator and carer, and Vygotsky did not live to offer advice on this matter beyond helping to give us an understanding of the dynamics that underlie the child's behaviour and development.