

SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY

There are a number of theorists who have provided insight into children's learning and being through a socio-cultural perspective. These include, Vygotsky, Malaguzzi and Rogoff. Socio-cultural theory would support the claim that our development including cognitive developmental (the ways in which we learn, and the ways in which we interact in the world) are very much a result of the society and culture we are placed in. Therefore within a socio-cultural theoretical framework, there is acknowledgement of marked differences across cultures including beliefs, values, manners, normative behaviors, and practices. As such socio-cultural theorists maintain that our culture teaches us behavior, which will vary according to our society. Our socialization within a specific culture and society molds our behavior and teaches us right from wrong.

Current educational practices relating to socio-cultural theory draw heavily on the work of Vygotsky. Vygotsky argues that a child's development cannot be understood by a study of the individual, rather attention must be given to the external social world in which the child is located. Vygotsky described learning as "being embedded within social events and occurring as a child interacts with people, objects, and events in the environment". Culture and immersion within culture is therefore important from a socio-cultural perspective. An argument is therefore waged that the more experiences that a child has, the richer their world becomes.

Vygotsky's theory suggests that there are three ways in which learning is passed along to an individual.

- The first is through imitation, where the child simply copies another person in order to learn.
- The second is through instructed learning, where a child recalls direction given by a teacher and then puts it into play, and
- The third is through collaborative learning. Collaborative learning happens when a peer group cooperates to learn or achieve a specific goal while working to understand one another.

Socio-cultural theorists and specifically Vygotsky maintained the belief that learning begins at birth and continues throughout all of life. One of the most important ways that advancements in development are achieved is through what Vygotsky called "the zone of proximal development." Vygotsky described ZPD as "...the distance between the actual development 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."

Educators working to enhance children's learning through the Zone of Proximal Development may choose to employ the following strategies:

- Scaffolding: Scaffolding requires that an educator show by example how to solve a problem, while controlling the learning environment so that children can take things step by step, expanding their base of knowledge.

- Reciprocal Teaching: Reciprocal teaching provides an environment of open dialogue between children and educator which goes beyond a simple question and answer session. By alternating turns leading discussions, children soon find themselves capable of assuming a leadership and instructional role.

Fundamental to the Early Years Learning Framework is a view that children's lives are characterised by belonging, being and becoming. From a socio-cultural perspective:

- Educators take into account the contexts of children's lives in their expectations, planned experiences, resources and materials and in routines such as meals and sleep arrangements.
- Scaffolding by other children or adults are provided to support children's learning. Scaffolds (for example questions, prompts, demonstrations) help children move through learning with assistance to learn new shared or independent understandings or skills.
- Educators use responsive listening in order to understand and respect children's learning.
- Children's diverse ways of learning and expressing that learning is documented in multiple forms in order to ensure those learning's are visible to others.
- Learning stories or narrative notes are used to provide context-rich and respectful accounts of children's learning, strengths and interests.
- Learning experiences connect with and extend children's ways of knowing, skills and understandings which they bring with them from home and community to the early childhood setting (DEEWR, 2009).