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**LEARNING GUIDE**

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**VYGOTSKY'S  
DEVELOPMENTAL  
THEORY:**

**AN INTRODUCTION**

*Narration By*

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and

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(28 Minutes)



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## INTRODUCTION

*The work of Lev Vygotsky is increasingly cited as we reconsider the theory and practice of constructivist education. This program introduces the life, vocabulary and concepts of Lev Vygotsky. The video presents four basic concepts integral to his work: Children construct knowledge, learning can lead development, development cannot be separated from its social context, and language plays a central role in cognitive development. These concepts are illustrated with examples from three classrooms: a Head Start classroom and two multi-aged primary classrooms, one in an urban school and one in an affluent suburb. Archival footage from one of Margaret Mead's trips to Papua New Guinea conveys the importance of social context on individual development.*

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## VYGOTSKY'S LIFE

- Born in 1896 in Orsha, Belarus. Grew up in Gomel in a prosperous Jewish family.
  - Attended Moscow University, majoring in law. Graduated 1918.
  - Returned to Gomel and taught in a variety of situations and pursued the study of psychology.
  - In 1924, Vygotsky moved to Moscow, frenetically working on an amazingly diverse set of projects.
  - Vygotsky died of tuberculosis in 1934, leaving a wealth of work that is still being explored.
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## VYGOTSKY'S KEY CONCEPTS

Vygotsky's theories are compressed into four major ideas for this presentation:

### 1. CHILDREN CONSTRUCT KNOWLEDGE

- Vygotsky read and was influenced by Jean Piaget.
- Like Piaget, he created many of his own testing materials.

- Vygotsky opposed the very behavioral slant of contemporary Russian psychology, but borrowed some ideas from it.

## 2. LEARNING CAN LEAD DEVELOPMENT

- Criticized Piaget on this issue.
- Level of Independent Performance: The best one can do on a given task without help.
- Level of Assisted Performance: The maximum one can achieve with help.
- Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): The area between the Level of Independent Performance and the Level of Assisted Performance.

*Teachers should focus their attention on the Implications of the Zone of Proximal Development for education:*

1. Teachers should think about what interventions will work best to support a child's performance of a task.
  2. Assessment should reflect both the Level of Independent Performance and the Level of Assisted Performance.
- Zone of Proximal Development shifts upwards as learning occurs.

## 3. DEVELOPMENT CANNOT BE SEPARATED FROM SOCIAL CONTEXT

- We are inevitably social creatures and our culture determines both the content and processes of our thought.
- All humans share a similar structure of mind:

<b>LOWER FUNCTIONS</b> Inborn, shared with higher animals	<b>HIGHER FUNCTIONS</b> Unique to humans Passed down by teaching
Reactive attention Associative memory Sensory-motor thought	Focused attention Deliberate memory Symbolic thought

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#### 4. LANGUAGE PLAYS A CENTRAL ROLE IN MENTAL DEVELOPMENT

- It is through language that the higher mental functions are transmitted.
- Learning always involves external experience being transformed into internal processes through the means of language.

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**Some viewers may have difficulty with the Russian accent of Elena Bodrova. We have provided a transcript of her remarks to help clarify them as needed:**

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Has Kristen mastered multiple classification?

The answer depends on what theory of development one ascribes to. According to the theories of Lev Vygotsky, we cannot evaluate the classification behavior of Kristen using just the level of her independent performance OR from seeing how she uses help. Knowing BOTH is necessary for a correct evaluation.

Hello, I am Elena Bodrova. I have worked in the Institute of Preschool Education under Alexander Zaporozhets, who was a student of Lev Vygotsky. And I am currently teaching at the Metropolitan State College of Denver. Here is my colleague, Deborah Leong. She is also teaching here. And we have the pleasure of introducing you to a great theorist whose work we have found very useful for developmental psychology and early childhood education.

Lev Vygotsky was born about a hundred years ago in Czarist Russia. He grew up in Gomel, a midsized city that is in what is now the independent nation of Belorussia, about 400 miles west of Moscow.

As Jews, the Vygotsky family, however prosperous, were outsiders in Russia under Czar Nicholas. There were strict laws of what jobs Jews could hold, what regions of the country they could live in and limits on how many could be formally educated.

The odds were great, but miraculously Vygotsky gained a place.

Almost immediately he changed his major from medicine to law graduating just as the First World War was ending and the Russian Revolution changed all institutions and expectations.

Vygotsky returned to Gomel and taught. Initially he was a literature teacher in a secondary school and after a few years taught teacher education in the local training

institution. Thus, he had much practical experience in the field of education. He also became interested in psychology and began doing research in this field.

He moved to Moscow and entered the heady intellectual life of the pre-Stalin era of the Communist Experiment. It was a time of relative openness for academic freedom. During the almost frenzied last decade of his life, Vygotsky worked in a wide range of arenas. He worked with displaced refugees, with physically and mentally handicapped people, in scientific institutes and universities. He managed to write seven books and dozens of article before dying at age thirty-seven in 1934.

In 1936, psychology became politicized and only certain psychologists were approved by the Stalin regime. It was not until the 1960's that a thaw in political influences on academic life occurred, after the death of Stalin. It was then that Vygotsky's ideas resurfaced in Russia and his commentaries on Piaget were published in the West.

We will use examples from three classrooms in this film: a Head Start and two multi-age primary classrooms. In Russia, I have worked twelve years in early childhood education using Vygotskian ideas. These last two years, Deborah Leong and I have worked in Colorado to implement this approach.

***At the conclusion of the video:***

Isn't it exciting to think that a Russian thinker who was born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century can enrich the intellectual lives of children who will spend the majority of their lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> in a country he never visited?

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## RELATED FILMS

*Also Available from Davidson Films*

*This is one of nine films in the Davidson Films “Giants” series. The other titles in the series are:*

***B. F. SKINNER: A FRESH APPRAISAL*** (1999) 41 minutes

***ERIK H. ERIKSON: A LIFE’S WORK*** (1991) 38 minutes

***PIAGET’S DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY: AN OVERVIEW*** (1989) 25 minutes

***JOHN DEWEY: AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS LIFE AND WORK*** (2001) 40 minutes

***BANDURA’S SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION*** (2003) 38 minutes

***MARIA MONTESSORI: HER LIFE AND LEGACY*** (2004) 35 minutes

***MARY AINSWORTH: ATTACHMENT AND THE GROWTH OF LOVE*** (2005) 38 minutes

***JOHN BOWLBY: ATTACHMENT THEORY ACROSS GENERATIONS*** (2007) 40 minutes

*DAVIDSON FILMS also offers two other videos on the work of Lev Vygotsky:*

***PLAY: A VYGOTSKIAN APPROACH*** (1996) 26 minutes

***SCAFFOLDING SELF-REGULATED LEARNING IN PRIMARY CLASSROOMS***  
(1996) 26 minutes