

Students learn differently and at different rates

Over the course of the year, the Leadership team will be presenting different ideas, theories and research papers on how we learn? Learning theory is complex, involved and as expected has many points of view. At Ashburton Primary School, as at most schools, we have melded a number of learning theories to develop our beliefs and understandings about how students learn in order to provide the best possible learning outcomes academically, socially and emotionally for your children. Most learning theories abide under three premises;

We learn through social interaction

We all learn in different ways and at different rates

Learning needs to be relevant, meaningful and purposeful

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Russian psychologist and educator, who was developing his theories around the same time as Piaget. His main argument is similar to Piaget but a greater emphasis is placed on the social and cultural context of learning. He would say that students progress through 'stages' of learning but they do so by watching, observing and learning from others rather than just self discovery as Piaget claims. The 'tutor' models appropriate language within a collaborative dialogue as the 'student' watches, learns and asks questions. The 'tutor' can represent a parent, teacher, other student or 'expert'. According to Vygotsky the level of dialogue and interaction helps develop cognitive function.

Vygotsky's work relates equally well to both children and adults. Think about a time when you had to learn something new? Did you work alongside someone to learn, as in an 'apprentice' situation? Have you ever tried to learn something that was delivered to you but was beyond you? Either too hard or too easy? Vygotsky would say that because this was not delivered within your 'zone of proximal development' it would be difficult for you to learn. ZPD is referred to as the area where a 'more knowledgeable other' can guide or instruct you through to learn something new. It is your 'sensitive spot' for optimal learning. Once that learning or skill has been practiced and mastered, a new 'ZPD' is developed for the next step of the learning process. For example, when children are learning to read they are not presented with all possible reading strategies but are guided by the teacher to practice one based on their individual needs and within their ZPD. Once mastered, a new strategy is taught, practiced and learnt.

How does this relate to teaching and learning?

Much of the Early Years Literacy program is based on Vygotsky's theory of the 'zone of proximal development' and the 'more knowledgeable other'. The structure of the program is based on grouping students according to 'like needs' based on rigorous continual assessment. This notion has its roots firmly embedded in Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development. The role of the 'more knowledgeable other' becomes critical during literacy rotations e.g. parents as helpers in the classroom to help guide students through their ZPD. Vygotsky's work also acknowledges that students learn in stages at an individual rate of learning, but learning is enhanced through a social interaction process. Vygotsky acknowledges the role of cultural and social forces impacts significantly on the rate and significance of cognitive development. This has a huge influence on student grouping formations teachers choose based on the outcomes they are wishing to achieve. It has also influenced the manner in which teachers conduct one to one support or conferences always making sure the conversation is pitched to individual students 'zone of proximal development.'

For further information go to <http://www.simplypsychology.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/vygotsky.html> this will give you a broad overview with links to more specific information