

# Lev Vygotsky

## Exploring the Social Aspects of Development

The ideas of the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky did not make an immediate impact in the West, partly because he wrote in his native Russian language, and partly because his works were suppressed by the Soviet authorities during the middle part of the twentieth century. It was only in the early 1960s, with the publication of his book, *Thought and Language*, that his work came to wider attention, which makes it remarkable that in the present day, he is second only to Piaget in importance as a developmental psychologist.

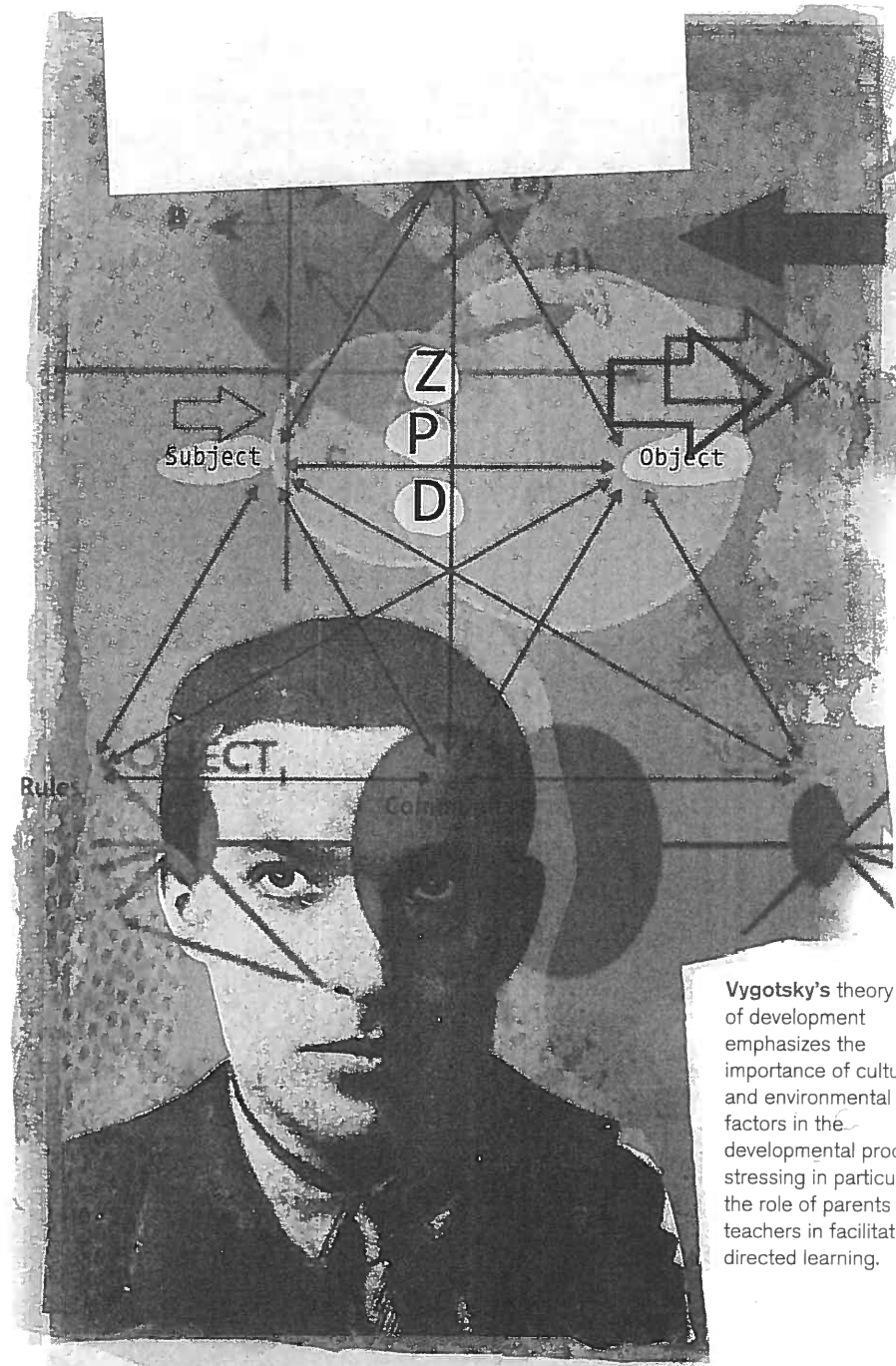
Although Vygotsky's work is fragmented and incomplete—a consequence of his premature death at the age of thirty-seven—it is possible to identify a number of key themes and ideas. Perhaps the most important is the claim that cognitive development is thoroughly social and cultural in nature. In particular, Vygotsky believed that the higher mental functions, such as reasoning and language, emerge out of concrete social experience.

His concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is relevant here. He defined this 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.” This is not as complicated as it sounds. In essence, the ZPD comprises those skills that exist just beyond a child's cognitive ability, but which they are able to master with the help of a more knowledgeable other, such as a parent or teacher. In this sense, development follows learning: with the right guidance, a child can learn skills that are in advance of their current stage of development.

The process of learning is social not only because it occurs within the context of a social exchange, but also because the mechanisms employed to aid learning are thoroughly embedded within the history of a culture. Thus, for example, Vygotsky noted that we make use of a variety of cultural tools in order to develop our intellectual abilities, the most important of which is language. Vygotsky's ideas are frequently contrasted with those of Jean Piaget. Although both agreed that development occurs as a result of a child's active engagement with the environment, Vygotsky allowed a much greater role for directed learning and the influence of cultural factors.

**Born**  
1896, Orsha, Russia

**Died**  
1934, Moscow,  
Russia



Vygotsky's theory of development emphasizes the importance of cultural and environmental factors in the developmental process, stressing in particular the role of parents and teachers in facilitating directed learning.