

---

## SPIRITUAL FORMATION AS SOCIAL: TOWARD A VYGOTSKYAN DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

James Riley Estep, Jr.  
*Kentucky Christian College*

---

### Abstract

Spiritual formation is a critical concern for any Christian religious educator. While Scripture provides a depiction of spiritual growth, we have often turned to the developmental theorists to better understand the ecology of spiritual formation. One neglected voice in this instance is the late Russian developmentalist Lev S. Vygotsky. His unique perspective on human cognitive development provides an alternative to traditional developmentalism, and additional insight into the ecology of spiritual formation. This article will endeavor to explain the role of developmental theories in understanding spiritual formation, the developmental theory of Vygotsky, and its implications for our understanding of spiritual formation and Christian religious education as a means of advancing it.

The Christian religious education community has expressed concern for spiritual formation in children, frequently appealing to developmental theories for insight into the formative process (Stonehouse 1998; Cully 1979; Moran 1983). For example, Stonehouse's *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey* (1998) utilizes Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, and Fowler to provide insight into the spiritual formation of children. Developmentalism has had an obvious impact on our conceptualization of spiritual formation, even the terminology of developmentalism has entered our vocabulary, for example, faith *development*, spiritual *development*, use of the term *stages*. The rationale for using developmentalism as a window on spiritual formation comes from the conviction that humans are developmental beings, and their Christian growth occurs *within* that developmental process (Downs 1994, 78–9; Ward 1995). This is not to suggest that the general developmental theories provide stages of spiritual formation. However, it does suggest that since humans are developmental beings, that spirituality may as well be formed by a developmental pro-

cess. The developmental theories provide a conceptual framework through which the Christian educator can approach the subject of spiritual formation.

Ted Ward speaks of a "spiritual ecology" (Figure 1) that is composed of the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral developmental processes of the human being (Ward 1995, 14). He continues by stating that "A developmental perspective invites the educator to see each human life as a unique person emerging through common aspects that can be observed, measured, and evaluated, yet in essence a human soul, a soul with spiritual reality at core, alive through God's redemptive grace or else spiritually dead in sin, unregenerated" (Eph. 2:1; Ward 1995, 16). It is within this ecology that spirituality and spiritual formation occurs.

None of the developmental theories often utilized by Christian educators were formulated with an explicitly Christian worldview. Hence, each of them requires some degree of *baptism*, whether that be a simple sprinkling or a lengthy immersion with an elongated prayer, before they can be integrated with Christian religious education. Developmental theories such as those mentioned above provide a means of (1) framing our description of spiritual formation in general, (2) partially explaining the process of spiritual formation, and (3) prescribing appropriate educational interventions for spiritual formation. The developmental theories cannot provide an adequate definition of

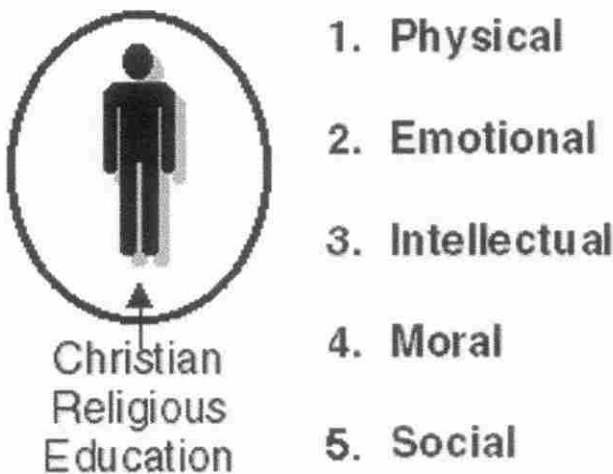


FIGURE 1. Ecology of spiritual formation.

*spirituality*, nor can they provide by themselves a sequential understanding of spiritual formation. However, they can provide approaches to describe the formative process.

Christian religious education, then, is best understood as the environmental protection agency, preserving and promoting an ecology conducive for spiritual formation. Hence, it is essential for Christian educators to make use of the developmental theories available to them so as to better facilitate such an environment.

### VYGOTSKY: A NEGLECTED VOICE

Over the last thirty years, the developmental theory of Lev S. Vygotsky has had an international impact on contemporary approaches to education and psychology (cf. Lima 1995; Elhammoumi 1997), as evidenced by the over seven thousand web sites with significant treatments of his theories. His significance stems from three factors: (1) Vygotsky's emphasis on "the interrelationship between the development of mind and its embodiment in social interaction" (Emihovich and Lima 1995, 375); (2) the relevance of his theory to the fields of psychology, anthropology, literature, sociolinguistics, and art—making it more readily applicable and influential to a variety of academic disciplines; and finally, (3) his definition of thinking as a higher cognitive process and change as nonlinear development, distinguished him from traditional developmental theories (Frawley 1997, 100). More specifically, his theory provides a new perspective that has challenged the current schools of thought on human development (Emihovich and Lima 1995, 376–7; Rio and Alvarez 1995, 385): (1) It addresses the complex relationship between the development of human thought and the material aspect of human culture; (2) his view on pedagogy and learning are more consistent with contemporary discoveries that children learn in a variety of ways rather than by a single path of development, such as Piaget; and (3) his developmental theories also stand in opposition to the reductionism in psychological and educational theory, such as the mind regarded as exclusively rational, individual, internal, and innate.

Yet, why has his significance developed only during the last thirty years? Vygotsky's theory was virtually lost due to his place in the twentieth century. He lived and wrote in the USSR prior to World War II, and his works were later repressed by the Soviet government until the 1960s. It was not until the late 1970s that his works were translated

into English and received any significant attention from the West. (Emihovich and Lima 1995, 375; Hausfather 1996, 2; Wertsch and Tulviste 1992, 548; Saracho and Spodek 1998, 35; Jacobsen 1991, 409). Elhammoumi (1997, iv) has summarized the popularity of Vygotsky in five stages.

1. notoriety in the 1920s
2. total eclipse after his death
3. resurrection in the end of the 1950
4. rehabilitation in the 1980s (which aided his international impact)
5. celebrity in the whole world in the 1990s.

It is obvious that the educational and psychological communities have given significant consideration to Vygotsky's contribution to their fields of study.

However, it is in light of the significance attached to Vygotsky by members of the psychological and educational communities that the apparent deficiency of attention paid him by Christian educators is magnified. For example, the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) database contains only two references to Vygotsky and Religious Abstracts database (providing only one additional resource). Similarly, several recent books on developmentalism from within the Christian religious education community exclude Vygotsky from receiving any significant attention. It appears that Elhammoumi's fourth stage in Vygotsky's popularity, "rehabilitation in the 1980's," has not reached the Christian religious education community.

### **VYGOTSKY AND DEVELOPMENTALISM**

The details of Vygotsky's life are well documented in the East, but are relatively unknown in the West. The best biography is still in Russian and not available in English (cf. 1996).

Vygotsky was born into a middle-class Jewish family in November 1896 in Gomel, Byelorussia, which had a large Jewish community. He graduated from Moscow University in 1917 with a law degree and studied philosophy and history at Shanyavsky's Popular University. He joined the faculty at the Moscow University's Psychological Institute in 1924, following the publication of an impressive paper on psychology, and the following year graduated with a Ph.D. His dissertation was on *Values in Art*, noting how artistic works mediate cultural val-

ues to individuals. During the course of his career, he authored over 296 articles and essays. However, his life was tragically cut short due to illness. In June 1934 Vygotsky died of tuberculosis in Moscow at the age of thirty-eight.

Vygotsky attended college in Moscow during the revolutionary period of Russian history, graduating the year of the Bolshevik revolution. Little doubt exists that he was influenced by Marxism (Marx, Engels, Lenin). However, this is *not* to suggest that he was wholly given over to its tenets (Elhammoumi 1997, i–iii; Kozulin 1986, 265; 1998, 119; Emihovich and Lima 1995, 376; Davyov 1995, 14; Wertsch and Tulviste 1992, 549). Duncan (1995, 459) surmises that “Vygotsky’s epistemology was realist, and his ontology, materialist.” It is critical to remember that his works were repressed by the Soviet government during the 1950s and 1960s due to their inconsistency with Marxist dogma. “He did not accept the deterministic reductionism of the behavioral psychology then being articulated in the Soviet Union; and he knew that human personality and character were pliable, but he could not agree with Stalin that human nature was wholly plastic and thoroughly capable of being molded in society” (Jacobsen 1991, 410). Hence, to dismiss Vygotsky’s developmental theories on the basis of his politics or his Marxist leanings is unnecessary since he was never readily identified with it.

## VYGOTSKY’S DEVELOPMENTALISM

Developmentalism is central to Vygotsky’s theory of learning. However, his perspective on human development differs from the traditional developmental theories familiar in the West. Nicolopoulou (1993, 7) describes Vygotsky’s theories as “sketchy and oft times incomplete,” concluding, “Vygotsky, unlike Piaget, thus does not offer a systematic and carefully documented program of research. Rather he offers a set of orienting concepts that, if accepted, foster a new way of viewing the psychological terrain.” It is this new perspective on human development that distinguishes Vygotsky from the traditional developmentalism of Piaget, Erikson, or Kohlberg.

The foundational premise of Vygotsky’s concept of development is that the formation of the mind or cognition is dependent on the social context in which an individual lives (Figure 2). Such an approach is often labeled as sociohistorical, sociocultural, or part of social reconstructionism (Moscovici 1998). As such, Blanck (Moll 1990, 44)



**FIGURE 2.** Vygotsky's sociocultural approach to developmentalism.

identified several assumptions upon which Vygotsky's developmentalism rests: (1) mental activity is uniquely human, (2) cultural is internalized in the form of neuropsychic systems that form part of the physiological activity of the human brain, and (3) the process of internalizing the higher mental functions is historical in nature. Hence, if asked "Where is the mind?" Vygotsky would maintain that it extends beyond the individual, beginning in society.

In essence, Vygotsky maintained that "*Society precedes the individual* and provides the conditions that allow individual thinking to emerge" (Frawley 1997, 89). Thus, "development, far from being teleological or unidirectional, must be viewed as context-dependent" (Tudge in Moll 1990, 158). Development is uneven and contingent on the environment, and hence unlike the genetic developmentalists (e.g., Piaget) who argue for a biological determinant to child development (Frawley 1997, 90–1). Developmental differences within each child are understood as arising from differing social contexts (Neal 1995, 125).

Culture is mediated to the individual through mental tools. Tools are mediators between the individual and "external activity" which develops higher cognitive functions (Flick 1998, 98–9). Mental tools are such sociocultural elements as language, symbols, writing, concepts, or art; all of which provide the necessary means of development. Just as physical tools expand the physical abilities of humanity, so the mental tools expand the mental abilities and capabilities (Kozulin 1990, 110–50). For example, Stetsenko (1995) notes that drawing is an early tool for child development.

### *Development and Learning*

"Vygotsky saw learning not as development but as a process that results in development" (Hausfather 1996, 3). Blanck (in Moll 1990, 49–50) identifies four contributions of Vygotsky to education, one of which was that "pedagogy creates learning processes that *lead* development." Hence, human development does not occur in a vacuum

and is dependent on the sociohistorical context. Frawley (1997, 88) summarizes as follows:

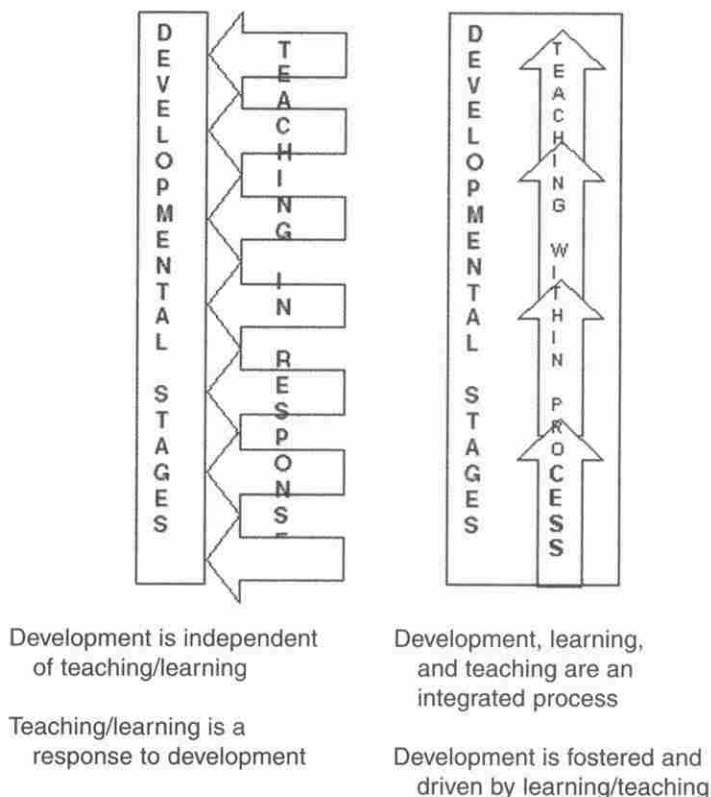
1. Learning "is contingent on both the environmental and individual performance."
2. "Its content lies in the sociocultural information *outside the mind*."
3. Learning is "domain-specific . . . cuts horizontally across cognition."

Hence, learning and development are processes of internalization. Vygotsky felt that cognitive development in children proceeded toward the individualization of social and cultural function (Duncan 1995, 460). The process of internalization is explained by Frawley (1997, 91–9): (1) Internalization of social interaction and speech: inner [for self], private [to self], and audible [to others], (2) Mediation, and (3) Control: planning, inhibition, and locus of control. *Hence, it is the process of appropriating to oneself the sociocultural context in which one interacts.*

How then does instruction relate to development and learning? "Child development cannot be seen in isolation from the teaching process, however, since the reason between these two processes is highly complex and is certainly not to be compared to the relation between an object and its shadow" (Veer and Valsimer 1991, 330). Figure 3 illustrates the relationship of teaching-learning in regard to traditional and Vygotskian developmentalism. In essence, traditional developmentalism regards teaching as something done in relation to a predetermined developmental schema, whereas Vygotskian developmentalism regards teaching/instruction as one of the actual factors contributing to the development of the individual. In short, teaching is part of the developmental process, since development is contingent on learning.

*Development of Higher Thought.* What is the *subject* of development? "Metaconsciousness" or "higher thought" (Frawley 1997). Higher thoughts are those that are specifically human and acquired only through interaction within human society (Grigorenko 1998, 202; Subbotsky 1996, 89). Vygotsky considered the *lower* thinking to be genetically instilled and not exclusively human (Subbotsky 1996, 89).

Vygotsky describes two levels of mental concepts: spontaneous and scientific (Figure 4). Spontaneous concepts are unsystematic,

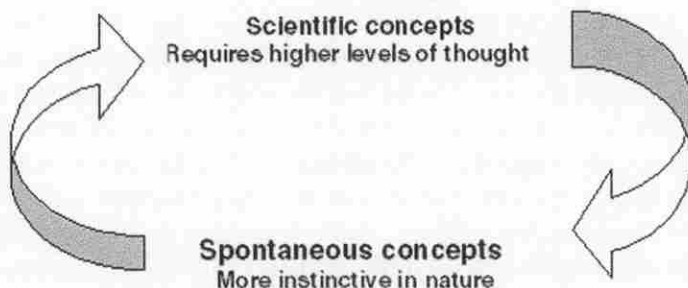


**FIGURE 3.** Developmentalism and instruction.

contextual, reflections on common experience. Scientific concepts, however, are attainable only by learning activities, and are logical, systematic, decontextualized, specialized, and reflective of classroom experience. Hence learning can be either spontaneous or scientific, but scientific learning must be a result of instructional activity (Grigorenko 1998, 203–4; Wertsch 1985, 102–3). “In order to explain the highly complex forms of human consciousness one must go beyond the human organism. One must seek the origins of conscious activity. . . . In the external process of social life within the social and historical forms of human existence” (Wertsch and Tulviste 1992, 548). In so doing, Vygotsky was advocating a formalized experiential learning cycle.

Endeavoring to further define Vygotsky’s concept of higher thought, R. Murray Thomas (1985) identifies three levels of thinking in Vygotsky’s theory. Each level of thinking is depicted as a different





**FIGURE 4.** Two levels of thought. (Based on Vygotsky 1987, 193, 219).

level of complexity and scope. Much like Piaget's use of mathematics to describe cognitive development, Vygotsky used his chosen field of linguistics to describe the development of thought in terms of its relationship to speech development. Thomas's three levels are as follows:

- Level 1: thinking in unorganized congeries or heap, e.g., trial-and-error
- Level 2: thinking in complexes, e.g., associative categories, collections, chains
- Level 3: thinking in concepts," e.g., synthesis and analysis (313-4)

In summary, Wertsch (1991, 87) recognizes in three recurrent themes in Vygotsky's writings: " (1) a reliance on genetic or developmental analysis; (2) a claim that higher mental functioning in the individual derives from social life; and (3) a claim that human activity, on both the social and individual planes, is mediated by tools and signs." Hence, Vygotsky represents a unique approach to human development.

### **COMPARISON WITH TRADITIONAL DEVELOPMENTALISM**

It is unfortunate, to say the least, that Vygotsky and Piaget are often portrayed in an adversarial light. Rarely is the educator presented with the vision of Vygotsky *and* Piaget, but rather with Vygotsky *versus* Piaget. For example, Lipman (1991, 102) concludes that the current tendency toward Vygotsky and Brunner in education and psy-

chology is partially due to a dissatisfaction with "Piagetian orthodoxy." (In fact, Brunner in his *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* [1986] complements Vygotsky's theory as being readily adaptable to his own theory of childhood learning and development [cf. Rieber and Carton 1987, 1-15].) Similarly, Vygotsky is oftentimes used as the representative of criticism against Piaget's "insufficient attention to social and cultural factors" (Nicolopoulou 1993, 2). Table 1 denotes the differences between the developmental theories of Piaget and Vygotsky frequently expressed or exaggerated in the academic literature.

However, such a dichotomy is unnecessary. It is not a matter of Piaget versus Vygotsky, since they are not mutually exclusive, but that they differ on their approach to the subject of developmentalism, and emphasis placed on the influence of social interaction with it. Vygotsky does differ from what has become the traditional approach to human development on two other issues: (1) he addresses the idea of "recovery," meaning the past and future are relevant to the present; and (2) his reliance on the convergence of different lines of development, rather than a singular biological determinant (Frawley 1997, 91). However, do these differences present an irreconcilable theoretical difference?

Vygotsky did indeed critique Piaget, but Piaget never responded to his critique (Emihovich and Lima 1995, 377-8; Kuhn 1996, 237-42). Despite their differences, they did hold one another in high esteem (Glassman 1994, 187-9; Tryphon and Vonèche 1996, 107-23). The main crux in comparing the developmental theories of Vygotsky and Piaget is that they differ on the value placed on social interaction (Figure 5). Kitchener commented that "Piaget is a biological individualist whereas Vygotsky is a sociocultural collectivist" (Kuhn 1996, 243). More to the point, Cole and Wertsch surmise that for Piaget the

**TABLE 1.** Piaget and Vygotsky Compared

Piaget's Developmentalism	Vygotsky's Developmentalism
Biological	Sociocultural
Individualistic	Collectivist
Singular determinant	Holistic perspective
Units of analysis	Context of analysis
Limits	Possibilities
Mind as private	Mind as public
Mind as internal	Mind as external
Descriptive study	Explanatory study

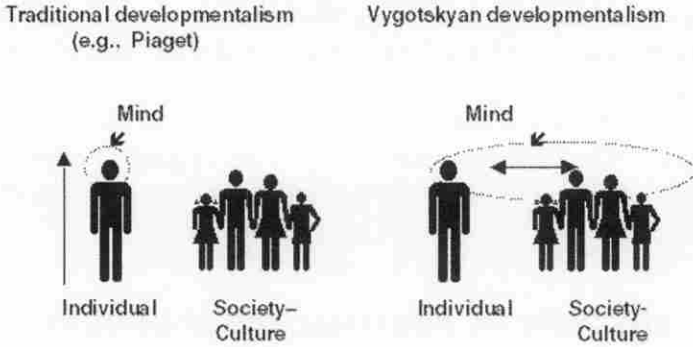


FIGURE 5. Where is the mind?

mind forms within the individual, but for Vygotsky it was a social process of interaction (Kuhn 1996, 250–56). Yet, these are differences in emphasis. However, the emphasis is significant in regard to the educational approach derived from it.

Cole and Wertsch are quick to note that Piaget and Vygotsky are not mutually exclusive, but rather differ on the degree of emphasis (Kuhn 1996). Hence, Valsiner (Kuhn 1996, 295–300) maintains that Piaget and Vygotsky are not far apart, but rather address the same phenomenon of child development from two different perspectives. Similarly, Duveen describes Vygotsky and Piaget's paradox as "more apparent than real," explaining that they are both developing a theory centered on the child "as a single, unified, subject, 'epistemic' for Piaget, 'cultural' for Vygotsky" (Smith, Dockrell, and Tomlinson 1997, 86–7). For example, both Piaget and Vygotsky addressed the development of speech, Duncan (1995, 461) notes that "for Piaget, egocentric speech was speech in the process of being socialized [individual to society], whereas for Vygotsky, it was an originally social phenomenon, in the process of being individualized and internalized [society to individual]."

Michael Shayer describes the developmental perspectives of Piaget and Vygotsky as "a necessary marriage for effective educational intervention" (Smith, Dockrell, and Tomlinson 1997, 36). However, does sufficient common ground exist for such a marriage to survive? Perhaps the common ground is available in Vygotsky's "ontogenetic domain." According to Vygotsky, the ontogenetic domain is the combination of two developmental lines, the cultural and the natural. It is in the natural that room is provided for traditional

developmentalism (e.g., Piaget) and the cultural is unique to Vygotsky and representatives of his school. On a critical note, Vygotsky did not define or address the interaction between the two lines, possibly due to his untimely death (Wertsch and Tulviste 1992, 554–5). Hence, one need not feel the necessity of rejecting Vygotsky's approach to developmentalism since it is compatible with traditional developmental thought.

### THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

Vygotsky maintained that development occurs in a variety of "zones." The term *zone* intentionally implies a nonlinear area of development and *proximal* is limited by behaviors that are development or that will develop soon (Figure 6). He identified three zones of development:

*Zone of Actual Development:* Where the student *actually* is developmentally.

*Zone of Potential Development:* Where the student *potentially* should be.

*Zone of Proximal Development:* The amount of assistance required for a student to move from the Zone of Actual Development and the Zone of Potential Development.

It is this final zone, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), that best captures and represents Vygotsky's contribution to developmen-

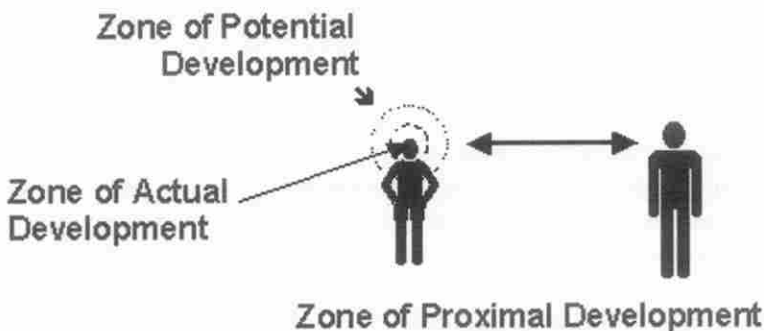


FIGURE 6. Zones of developmental activity.

tal theory. He described the ZPD as a “new approach” (1978, 84), since it explains the interrelatedness of learning, teaching, and development. He defined the ZPD as “the distance between the [child’s] actual developmental 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” (Vygotsky 1978, 87). Hence, the boundaries of the ZPD are contingent upon the child’s (1) ability to perform independently, and (2) performance requiring assistance (Grigorenko 1998, 211). As stated previously, Vygotsky was convinced that development was dependent on learning/instruction. Vygotsky stated:

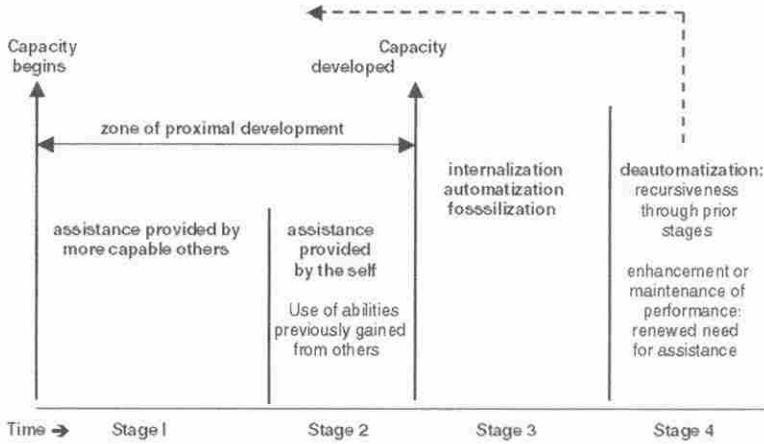
*From this point of view, learning is not development; however, properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning. Thus, learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human, psychological functions. To summarize, the most essential feature of our hypothesis is the notion that developmental processes do not coincide with learning processes.*

*Rather, the developmental process lags behind the learning process; this sequence then results in zones of proximal development. . . . Our hypothesis establishes the unity but not the identity of learning processes and internal developmental processes. . . . A second essential feature of our hypothesis is the notion that, though learning is directly related to the course of child development, the two are never accomplished in equal measure or in parallel [since development is dependent on learning]. (Vygotsky 1978, 90–1 emphasis added)*

The ZPD is not considered as a constant, but interactive with the society and environmental context. Similarly, it can also be positive or negative, and hence development is neither linear or unidirectional. Gallimore and Tharp (Moll 1990, 185–7) identify four stages to the ZPD that further explain Vygotsky’s concept of development (Figure 7):

1. Where performance is assisted by more capable others.
2. Where performance is assisted by the self.
3. Where the performance is developed, automatized, and fossilized.
4. Where deautomatization of performance leads to recursion through the zone of proximal development.

“The theory of activity and the ZPD give us a way of analyzing the



**FIGURE 7.** Stages of the zone of proximal development (Adapted from Gallimore and Tharp in Moll [1990, 185] and Issler and Habermas [1994, 139]).

individuals relations with the world” (Frawley 1997, 102). In Vygotskian developmentalism activity is the source and activator of psychological functions (Grigorenko 1998, 203), and hence serves as a means of instruction (Wertsch 1985, 70–3). *School* is the social context and teachers are the facilitators, not dictators, of learning. Students likewise must be willing participants in the developmental process (Hausfather 1996, 5). Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky regarded development to be contingent on learning, which required a teacher or more advanced peer to instruct the child. Hence, development does not occur, according to Vygotsky, in a classroom of peers, but only if the classroom has an instructor.

### VYGOTSKYAN PERSPECTIVE OF EDUCATION AND INSTRUCTION

Student-centered? Content-centered? Teacher-centered? Vygotsky contends that society/culture are the conduits and contents of learning and development. Vygotsky presents an approach to education that can best be described not as simply student-centered versus content-centered, but as the student-*in-society/culture*-centered. He writes, “Education is realized through the student’s own experience, which is wholly determined by the environment, and the role of the teacher then reduces to directing and directing the environment,” more so “Education may be defined as a systematic, purposeful, in-

tentional, and conscious effort at intervening in and influencing all those processes that are part of the individual's natural growth" (Vygotsky 1997, 50, 58). The student becomes an active agent in the educational process. Vygotsky contended that

From the scientific point of view, therefore, the assumption that the student is simply passive, just like the underestimation of his personal experience, is the greatest of sins, since it takes as its foundation the false rule that the teacher is everything and the student nothing. On the contrary, the psychological point of view forces us to acknowledge that, in the educational process, the student's individual experience is everything. Education should be structured so that it is not that the student is educated, but that the student educates himself. (Vygotsky 1997, 48)

Dixon-Krauss (1996, 15) identifies two basic educational implications of the ZPD: (1) interdependent relationships between instruction and assimilation, and (2) assimilation "while they [students] are engaged in actual instructional activities. However, the student is active within an environment that is established by an instructor. In regard to the environment of education, Vygotsky further commented:

First, education has always had as its goal not adaptation to an already existing environment, which may, in fact, happen anyway in the natural course of events, *but the creation of an adult who will look beyond his own environment*. . . . Second, it must be kept in mind that the elements of the environment may sometimes include effects that are quite harmful and destructive to a young child. (Vygotsky 1997, 50-1 emphasis added)

While these concepts are not unique to Vygotsky, it was Vygotsky who integrated them with a developmental perspective. Blank identifies Vygotsky's four major contributions to education, all of which are connected with his concept of developmentalism (Moll 1990, 49-50):

1. Formal education was an essential tool for enculturation.
2. Acknowledge children as active agents in the educational process.
3. Pedagogy creates learning processes that *lead* development, i.e., zone of proximal development.
4. His ideas regarding play are of vital importance in the preschool educational process.

Vygotsky places a premium on students as an interactive part of the classroom environment, as well as makers of that environment. Education is the natural process of growth within an environment,

which can be either beneficial or detrimental, and even growing beyond the original context in which the student exists. Hence, it is the role of the instructor to provide a context wherein the student's individual growth can be advanced in an environment conducive to such development.

### *Vygotsky and Instruction*

Vygotsky's approach to instruction is reflective of his psychological and sociological understanding of the student in the educational environment. As such, "Vygotsky regarded education not only as central to cognitive development but as the quintessential sociocultural activity. That is, he considered the capacity to teach and to benefit from instruction a fundamental attribute of human beings" (Moll 1990, 1). Hence, Vygotsky places far more emphasis on instruction than the traditional or Western developmentalists, emphasizing also the necessity of the instructor. *Without instruction, children do not develop.* Smith, Dockrell, and Tomlinson summarizes an experiment involving child development and instruction.

From a developmental point of view, what would it be like to live in a society of exact contemporaries, such as children of the same age? Vygotsky's negative answer contrasts with Piaget's more positive one. One reason why their answers diverge is that although transmission and transformation are central processes for both Piaget and Vygotsky, they are differently interpreted in their respective accounts. These differences are apparent in three respects—the preformation of knowledge, the availability of a third alternative to nature and culture, and unity and identity in social interaction. In Vygotsky's account, a central concern is novel transformation of the learner, in Piaget's account, it is the transformation of novel knowledge. (1997, 61)

Vygotsky himself stated, "The teacher is the director of the social environment in the classroom, the governor and guide of the interaction between the educational process and the student. . . . Thus, it is that the teacher educates the student by varying the environment" (Vygotsky 1997, 49). Unlike other developmental theories, learning is the driver of the developmental process, and hence instruction is essential to the process of development. For example, a Vygotskian would argue that "rote skills are meaningless and non-transferable, and pure verbal knowledge is inert," and hence guided discovery or dialogical teaching is highlighted since they move beyond basic levels of instruction (Karpov 1998, 30–1). While other educators may well agree with



this statement as well, it is Vygotsky that would maintain a developmental dimension to the instructional methods.

Vygotsky did not provide an explanation as to how the instructor-student interaction should occur. However, the concept of "scaffolding" does readily lend itself to a Vygotskian approach. A paradigm for instruction can be generated from Vygotsky's work, as depicted in Daniels (1993, 185; cf. Woolfork 1993, 48). Scaffolding refers to the support situations where children can extend their current skills and knowledge. It "develops a system of social interaction and social reorganization that will promote more interpersonal joint activity" (Hausfather 1996, 6).

While the concept of scaffolding was not rooted in Vygotsky's theory, he does provide a developmental and theoretical framework that can explain it, especially in a one-to-one instructional setting (Smith, Dockrell, and Tomlinson 1997, 61). The basic sequence in a scaffolding instructional method is as follows:

1. Recruiting the child's interest;
2. Reducing the number of steps required to solve a problem by simplifying the task so the learner can manage its components and acknowledge achieving intermediate steps;
3. Maintaining the pursuit of the goal by supporting the child's motivation and directing his or her activity;
4. Marking critical characteristics of discrepancies between what a child achieved and what he or she is expected to achieve;
5. Controlling frustration and risk in the child's problem solving;
6. Setting the ideal of performance by demonstrating it (Grigorenko 1998, 213).

Ultimately, the teacher leads or guides the student toward independence, the ability to function without an instructor's input or assistance. "The role of the teacher in these social contexts is to provide the necessary guidance, mediations, in a Vygotskan sense, so that children, through their own efforts, assume full control of diverse purposes and uses of oral and written language" (Moll 1990, 8-9). For example, note the flow of the following hypothetical dialogue between a Sunday school teacher and student.

*Budd:* I can't find John 3:16 (he tries flipping randomly through the Bible).

*Teacher:* Is it in the Old or New Testament? (she points to back of the Bible).

*Budd:* The New (he begins looking at the beginning of the New Testament).

*Teacher:* Well, did you find John's gospel? (she motions for him to keep flipping through pages).

*Budd:* Here it is, I found it. (he tries to flip to the third chapter, thumbing down the verses).

*Teacher:* A little further.

*Budd:* There!

"Budd" will eventually be able to find passages on his own, without the oversight, assistance, or even the encouragement of a teacher. As the teacher becomes increasingly "unnecessary" to perform the task and Budd is able to do it with proficiency, Vygotsky would understand that development has occurred. Vygotskyans perceive "teaching as assisted performance," e.g. modeling, contingency, managing, feedback, instruction, questioning, cognitive structuring via explanation or activity (Gallimore and Tharp in Moll 1990, 176–7). Vygotsky provides a developmental schema that parallels the instructional approach of "scaffolding."

### *Teaching as Mediation*

As previously mentioned, the idea of mediation was essential to Vygotsky's understanding of higher thought, which was the produce of cognitive development. Just as Piaget used mathematics, Vygotsky used language to explain cognitive development. Mediation simply meant that certain signs or symbols aided in mental processing, i.e. speech development and cognitive development were intertwined. Dixon-Krauss (1996, 21) provides a diagram illustrating the concept of mediation (Figure 8). A cyclical development of analyzing a text, making application of it, adjusting ourselves to it, and then returning to the text again is presented. This process has direct application to biblical study in Christian education. While the text may remain the same, as the reader changes new applications are discovered for the same text. For example, Ephesians 5:21–6:6 has always conveyed the same meaning to me ("be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" v. 21—NASB). However, as a child, Ephesians 6:1–3 held particular meaning to me ("Children, obey your parents in the Lord . . ." Later, as a husband, Ephesians 5:25–33 became a particular concern ("Husbands, love your wives . . ."). Now, with three children in my house, 6:4 takes on particular relevance ("Fathers, do not provoke your chil-

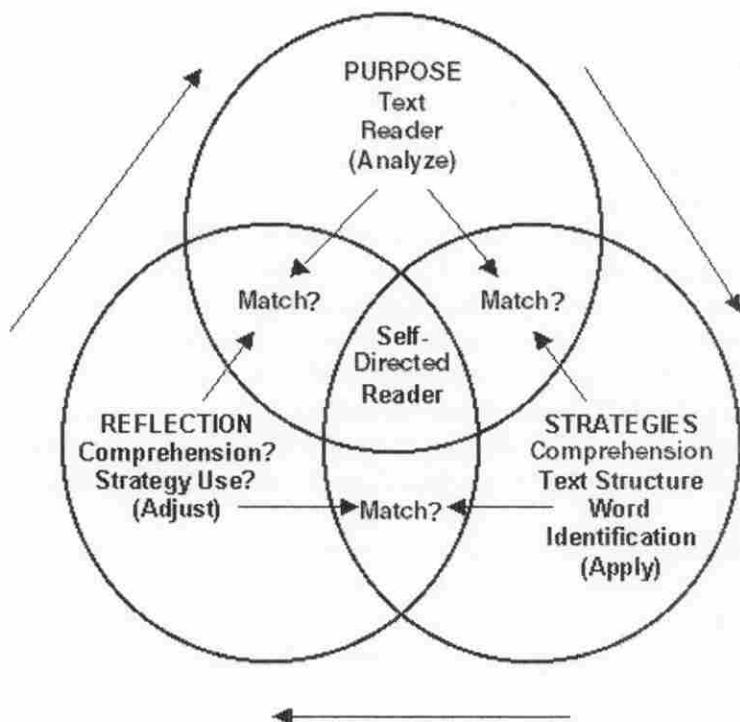


FIGURE 8. Diagram of mediation (Dixon-Krauss 1996).

dren to anger . . . ”). One set up applications gave rise to another as my life situation changed. In essence, the Bible became interactive with my life experience.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND ITS ECOLOGY

As previously mentioned, developmentalism has always influenced our conceptualization of spiritual formation in a variety of ways. Nicolopoulou (1993, 7) stated that Vygotsky provides a new approach to the process of developmentalism, but not many details. How does this new approach influence our understanding of spiritual formation and its ecology? What additional insights into the process of spiritual formation are provided by using Vygotsky’s developmental perspective as a window? As previously stated, Vygotsky did not address spiritual formation or spirituality, however, his theory does raise a new

perspective that can lead the Christian educator toward a new approach to spiritual formation, and the provision of a suitable ecology in which to advance it. Several implications immediately present themselves.

*Spiritual formation begins outside the individual.* Spiritual formation is not simply an internal process, but is partially an acquisition from the community of faith in which the individual engages. While spirituality is often perceived as an individual or personal quality, it also has a social or cooperate dimension. In short, it is a real *community* of faith. The faith traditions of a given congregation impact the spiritual formation of the individual within it. Faith is a collective as well as individual phenomenon within the Christian community. While a *generic* faith may be common to human experience, a more formalized faith begins when one internalizes the content of their faith community.

*Spiritual formation and its ecology are holistic.* Spiritual formation is not the result of a single factor, but of multiple factors, both individual and social, which coalesce within the individual. Spiritual formation is seen as being more than any single developmental theory can address, since it is the result of multiple factors. Similarly the ecology of spiritual formation must be multifaceted rather than singular in focus to accommodate the numerous factors influencing the formation of spirituality. The concept of spiritual formation and education are in effect singular from this perspective, rather than education being understood as a parallel process to developmentalism.

Christian educators would become *more* concerned about students forming a Christian thought process. Christian learning would be regarded as being more than Bible knowledge, but rather the processing of biblical information into both personal life application and a framework that is continually revised throughout a lifetime as the Bible impacts the student's life and the student's life impacts their understanding and appreciation of the Bible. Christian learning occurs when students *make use of* the Bible, and not simply memorize or passively accept its instruction. Dixon-Krauss's illustration of mediation has already been used to note its possible approach to the Bible's use in Christian Education. While other approaches to education may advocate a more active participation on the part of the student, even inviting of questions and dilemmas, Vygotsky's mediation would attach a developmental perspective to the act of Bible learning and instruction.

*Spiritual formation is not a linear or unidirectional process.* Vygotsky's use of zones of development, rather than linear stages of advancement, adds a new approach to our understanding of spiritual formation. For example, Fowler (1981) presents a paradigm of faith development that uses a pattern similar to traditional developmentalism, that is, linear, stage-by-stage development. Could spiritual formation occur differently than this? The idea of stages as "zones" rather than rungs on a ladder provides an entirely new perspective on the subject of spiritual formation. Such authors as James Loder (1989), in his *The Transforming Moment*, argue that spiritual formation does not occur like other traditional developmental processes. Perhaps Vygotsky's developmental zones is more readily applicable to Loder's idea of spiritual formation. Also, such a developmental perspective would lend itself to explaining how development can also degrade, since development is not unidirectional.

*The community of faith is an essential element for spiritual formation.* More so than in other developmental theories, spiritual formation would require relationships conducive to advancing faith. Vygotsky's developmentalism readily lends itself to better understanding spiritual formation in this regard. Watson (1994) contends that the "Piagetian view underestimates the importance of social influence on growth," favoring the Vygotskian developmental paradigm, even so far as to state that "Vygotsky and the author of the New Testament letter, Hebrews, recognize the importance of appropriate encouragement as the mechanism of human growth." Similarly, Neal (1995, 124, 125) notes that the Christian faith has a relational dynamic, and hence "we cannot understand the developing human person apart from the relationships that help shape that development," noting that faith grows in a context, from macro to micro, paralleling Christianity as a macro-context, to the home, church, classroom as microcontexts of spiritual formation (Neal 1995, 126-9). In the absence of such communities and contexts, spiritual formation is deterred.

*Spiritual formation occurs when faith is mediated between individuals.* Vygotsky spoke of mediation through words, symbols, and images as a means of leading the developmental process. Fowler used Vygotsky in his *Stages of Faith* to explain faith development in the intuitive-projective faith stage (1981, 123), wherein children can begin using language as a means of expressing faith or experiences. What does the classroom, its physical structure, décor, furnishings, convey to the student? What values or hence, spiritual formation occurs when

one's faith is mediated through words, symbols, and images of faith are shared. For example, Nida (1975) uses Vygotsky's ideas on speech development as a means to more adequately address issues in Bible translation. Also, the concept of mentoring is emphasized in Vygotskian educational practices. Hence, the words and symbols association with the Christian faith have a formative impact on spirituality because they enable the individual to appropriate the faith of the community.

*Teachers and deliberate instruction are essential for spiritual formation.* According to Vygotsky, development does not occur on its own; it requires a sociohistorical impetus, which for him was education, specifically schooling or intentional instruction. While all developmental theories place some degree of value on formal education, Vygotsky's perspective requires it. In fact, instruction has a more direct impact on spiritual formation, since learning is the driving force behind the developmental process. Humans develop higher thought in response to learning; hence, learning drives the developmental process. Intentional and unintentional instruction by the church contributes to the spiritual formation of the student. This is not just an appeal to socialization, but instruction by a more mature member of the faith community is required for an individual to reach their formative potential. Hence, small groups cannot be comprised of individuals of an equal spiritual formation if the group is to provide an impetus for further formation. Similarly, Vygotsky may have supplied a developmental rationale for intergenerational education in the Church, wherein the more mature members are placed in a learning context with younger members of the faith community.

## CONCLUSION

What does Vygotsky provide for the Christian educator? First, a new developmental perspective from which to view spiritual formation. As previously expressed, this perspective is quite different from the traditional developmentalism associated with educators in the West. However, it does indeed add a needed social dimension that has been generally underestimated. Second, his theory provides an emphasis on the importance of teaching/learning, the role of the teacher, and education in general as a necessary means human development. In so doing, education is not simply a response to the developmental process, but a component of it. Teaching is for spiritual formation.

## REFERENCES

- Bruner, Jerome. 1986. *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Cully, I. 1979. *Christian child development*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Daniels, Harry ed. 1993. *Charting the agenda: Educational activity after Vygotsky*. New York: Routledge Publishers.
- Davydov, V. P. 1995. The Influence of L. S. Vygotsky on Education Theory Research. *Education Research* 24(3):12-21.
- Dixon-Krauss, Lisbeth. 1996. *Vygotsky in the classroom: Mediated literacy instruction an assessment*. White Plains, N.Y.: Longman Publishing.
- Downs, Perry G. 1994. *Teaching for spiritual growth*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Duncan, Robert M. 1995. Piaget and Vygotsky revisited: Dialogue or assimilation? *Developmental Review* 15(2):458-72.
- Elhammoumi, Mohamed. 1997. *Socio-historical psychology: Lev Semenovitch Vygotsky (1896-934)*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.
- Emihovich, Catherine, and Elvira Souza Lima. 1995. The many faces of Vygotsky: A cultural historical voice from the future." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 26(4):375-383.
- Feldman, David Henry, and R. Clarke Fowler. 1997. The nature(s) of developmental change: Piaget, Vygotsky, and the transition process. *New Ideas in Psychology* 15(3):195-210.
- Fowler, James W. 1981. *Stages of faith*. San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers.
- Frawley, William. 1997. *Vygotsky and cognitive science: Language and the unification of the social and computational mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Glassman, Michael. 1994. All things being equal: The two roads of Piaget and Vygotsky. *Developmental Review* 14(2):186-214.
- Grigorenko, Elena L. 1998. Mastering tools of the mind in school (Trying out Vygotsky's ideas in classrooms). Pp. 201-31 in *Intelligence, instruction, and assessment: Theory into practice*, edited by Robert J. Sternberg. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University.
- Hausfather, Samuel J. 1996. "Vygotsky and Schooling: Creating a social context for learning. *Action in Teacher Education* 18(2):1-10.
- Jacobsen, Rhonda Hustedt. 1991. Reviews: L. S. Vygotsky. *Mind in society. Christian Scholar's Review* 20(4):409-411.
- Karpov, Yuriy V. and Carl H. Haywood. 1998. Two ways to elaborate Vygotsky's concept of mediation. *American Psychologist* 51(1):27-36.
- Kozulin, Alex. 1990. *Vygotsky's psychology: A biography of Ideas*. New York: Harvester-Wheatsheaf.
- . 1986. The concept of activity in Soviet psychology. *American Psychologist* 41(3):264-74.
- Kuhn, Deanna, ed. 1996. *Where is mind? Building on Piaget and Vygotsky*. New York: Karger.
- Lima, Elvira Souza. 1995. "Vygotsky in the international scene: A brief overview. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 26(4):490-99.
- Lipman, Matthew. 1991. *Thinking in education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Loder, James E. 1989. *The transforming moment*. Colorado Springs, Colo.: Helmers and Howard.
- Moll, Luis C., ed. 1990. *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of sociohistorical psychology*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Moran, Gabriel. 1983. *Religious educational development*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Winston Press.
- Moscovici, Serge. 1998. The history and actuality of social representations. Pp. 209-47. *The psychology of the social*, edited by Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Neal, Cynthia Jones. 1995. The power of Vygotsky. Pp. 123-137 in *Nurture that is Christian*, edited by James C. Wilhoit and John M. Dettoni. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- Nicolopoulou, Ageliki. 1993. Play, cognitive development, the social world: Piaget, Vygotsky, and beyond. *Human Development* (36):1-23.
- Nida, Eugene A. 1975. Language and psychology. *The Bible Translator* 26(3):308-313.
- Rieber, Robert W., and Aaron S. Carton, eds. 1987. *The collected works of L. S. Vygotsky*, vols. 1-5. New York: Plenum Press.

- Rio, Pablo del, and Amelia Alvarez. 1995. Directivity: The cultural and educational construction of morality and agency. Some questions arising from the legacy of Vygotsky. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 26(4):384-409.
- Saracho, Olivia N., and Bernard Spodek, eds. 1998. *Multiple perspectives on play in early childhood education*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York.
- Smith, Leslie, Julie Dockrell, and Peter Tomlinson, eds. 1997. *Piaget, Vygotsky and beyond: Future issues for developmental psychology and education*. New York: Routledge Publishers.
- Stetsenko, Anna. 1995. The psychological function of children's drawing: A Vygotskian perspective. Pp.147-58 in *Drawing and looking: Theoretical approaches to ictoral representation in children*, edited by Christiane Lange-Küttner and Glyn V. Thomas. New York: Harvester-Wheatsheaf.
- Stonehouse, Catherine. 1998. *Joining children on the spiritual journey*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.
- Subbotsky, Eugene. 1996. Vygotsky's distinction between lower and higher mental functions and recent studies on infant cognitive development. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* 34(2):61-66.
- Thomas, R. Murray. 1985. *Comparing theories of child development*. Second edition. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Tryphon, Anastasia, and Jacques Vonèche eds. 1996. *Piaget-Vygotsky: The social genesis of thought*. East Sussex, U. K.: Psychology Press.
- Veer, René van der, and Jaan Valsiner. 1991. *Understanding Vygotsky: A quest for synthesis*. 1996. (Available only in Russian: Vygotskaya, G. L., and Lifanova, T. M. 1996. *Lev Semonovich Vygotsky: Life, activities, sketches to the portrait*. Moscow: Smysl.
- Vygotsky, L. S. 1997. *Educational psychology*. Boca Raton, Fla.: St. Lucie Press.
- . 1986. *Thought and language*, edited by Alex Kozulin. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- . 1978. *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Ward, Ted. 1995. Forward. Pp. 7-17 in *Nurture that is Christian*, edited by James C. Wilhoit and John M. Dettoni. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- Wertsch, James V. and Peter Tulviste. 1992. L. S. Vygotsky and contemporary developmental psychology. *Developmental Psychology* 28(4):548-57.
- . 1985. *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Woolfolk, Anita E. 1993. *Educational psychology*. Fifth ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Submitted: November 1999

Accepted: September 2000