

Preschool Education Based on Sociocultural Theory: A Pathway Shift from Passive Reception to Active Construction

Bingqian Han, Xuelai Li

Graduate University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, 11000, Mongolia

Abstract: In traditional childhood education models, children are often viewed as passive recipients of knowledge. Contemporary developmental psychology and educational research increasingly emphasize children's role as active meaning constructors. This paper employs Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as its core framework to systematically explore the theoretical foundations and practical pathways for transforming preschool education from a "transmission-reception" paradigm to a "participation-construction" paradigm. Research indicates that children's development occurs within social interactions and cultural contexts, with education's key role being to provide effective support within the "zone of proximal development." This paper proposes and elaborates on four core educational pathways: interactive dialogue as a cognitive tool, scaffolding as developmental support, play as the dominant activity form, and the environment as the third teacher. Together, these pathways form an ecological educational system centered on children's active participation and social interaction, offering a systematic theoretical framework for reconstructing high-quality preschool education practices.

Keywords: Sociocultural Theory, Preschool Education, Zone of Proximal Development, Scaffolding, Active Construction.

1. Introduction

The preschool stage represents a critical period of maximum developmental plasticity, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and psychological qualities. Long influenced by behaviorist and maturational theories, early childhood education practices have exhibited two oversimplified tendencies: first, viewing education as a process of "filling" children with knowledge and skills through behavioral training, positioning children as passive recipients; second, regarding development solely as the result of intrinsic natural maturation, where education merely provides a permissive environment and adopts a "passive waiting" strategy [1]. Neither perspective adequately captures the complex, dynamic process through which children develop by interacting with their environment.

Since the 20th century, the sociocultural-historical school of thought, epitomized by Vygotsky, has offered a revolutionary perspective on understanding child development. This theory posits that higher mental functions do not originate from internal maturation but emerge through social interaction and cultural activities, becoming internalized as part of the individual's psyche [2]. This perspective redefines children as active participants in culture and agents of meaning construction, rather than passive recipients or isolated explorers. It profoundly illuminates that quality education is neither unidirectional transmission nor laissez-faire neglect, but rather a collaborative social process where children, with the assistance of competent others (adults or peers) and mediated by a rich cultural environment, continually transcend their current level toward their potential level.

Based on this, the core question of this paper is: Within the sociocultural theory framework, what is the essential nature of preschool education? How can a systematic educational pathway be constructed to genuinely support children's transition from passive recipients to active constructors,

thereby realizing their maximum developmental potential? This study will thoroughly examine the core educational tenets of sociocultural theory. Building upon this foundation, it will construct a practical pathway system centered on interactive dialogue, scaffolding instruction, play-led activities, and environmental design. This aims to provide a robust theoretical basis for transcending traditional dualistic models and establishing scientifically grounded preschool education practices.

2. Theoretical Core: Sociocultural Theory's Redefinition of the Essence of Childhood Education

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory laid the foundation for understanding the social nature of children's learning and development. Its core concepts profoundly reshaped our understanding of the educational process.

2.1. Zone of Proximal Development: The Psychological Positioning of Education

The "Zone of Proximal Development" stands as the most influential concept in Vygotsky's theory. It refers to "the gap between a child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and their potential developmental level as determined by solving problems with adult guidance or collaboration with more capable peers." The revolutionary significance of this concept lies in shifting education's psychological focus from what children "have already mastered" to what they are "in the process of mastering." The core value of education lies precisely in the social interactions occurring within the Zone of Proximal Development. Effective education does not adapt to a child's past but guides and fosters their future. By establishing collaborative platforms for interaction, it transforms potential levels into new actual levels.

2.2. The Social Origins and Internalization Mechanisms of Higher Psychological Functions

Vygotsky distinguished between lower psychological functions (e.g., natural memory, simple perception) and higher psychological functions (e.g., logical memory, intentional attention, conceptual thinking). He argued that all higher psychological functions first emerge as forms of social relations and collective behavior within a child's interactions with others before being internalized as the child's individual internal psychological functions [3]. For instance, a child's initial self-regulation stems from compliance with adults' external verbal commands. Gradually, these commands are transformed into internal speech, ultimately forming self-control. This "from external to internal" transformation process highlights the decisive role of social interaction and cultural tools—particularly language—in children's cognitive development.

2.3. The Mediating Role of Cultural Tools

Human mental activities do not respond directly to external stimuli but operate through the mediation of "cultural tools." These tools encompass material instruments (e.g., pens, building blocks) and mental instruments (e.g., language, symbols, numerical systems), with language being the most crucial mental instrument [4]. Education, at its core, is the process of guiding children to master and internalize these cultural tools, enabling them to perceive the world and regulate their behavior in more sophisticated ways.

In summary, sociocultural theory defines childhood education as: within a prepared sociocultural environment, guided by competent interactors providing scaffolding, children master and utilize cultural tools within their zone of proximal development. This process internalizes socially shared, externally collaborative capacities into individual, independent, higher-level psychological functions. This definition provides clear theoretical coordinates for constructing subsequent educational pathways.

3. Core Pathway One: Interactive Dialogue as a Social Tool for Cognitive Development

Language serves not only as a communication medium but also as a psychological tool that shapes thought. According to Vygotsky's theory, children's self-talk is a key indicator of their developing self-regulation and planning abilities, while adults' pedagogically informed dialogue acts as the core mechanism guiding children's cognitive ascent [5].

3.1. Dialogue Transformation: From "Information Transmission" to "Thought Co-construction"

Traditional teacher-child dialogues often rely on closed-ended questions ("What color is this?") and directive language, resulting in one-way information flow. Dialogue guided by sociocultural theory should evolve into collaborative inquiry for "thought co-construction." This requires adults to:

Employ open-ended questions: Asking "How do you think about this?" "Why do you think that?" "What would happen if...?" to stimulate children's explanation, prediction, and reasoning. Why is that?" "What if...?" to stimulate children's

explanations, predictions, and reasoning.

Serve as an "echo chamber" and 'amplifier' for thinking: Repeat, restructure, or expand children's expressions (e.g., when a child says "The tower fell," the adult responds, "Yes, because the bottom blocks were too small to support the weight of all those big blocks above"). This elevates children's intuitive perceptions to the threshold of conceptual expression.

Introduce thinking vocabulary: Naturally incorporate terms like "compare," "discover," "plan," and "solve" into conversations to label children's cognitive processes.

3.2. Facilitating Positive Shifts from "Self-Talk" to Internal Speech

Preschoolers often vocalize thoughts aloud while problem-solving. Adults should recognize this as externalized thinking tools rather than disruptive behavior. Adults can:

Validate and model: In similar situations, adults can also verbalize their own thought steps aloud ("I think I'll put the big one on the bottom—that should be more stable"), demonstrating how language guides action.

Encourage self-talk during challenging tasks: When children encounter difficulties, gently suggest: "Why don't you try saying out loud what steps you want to take? It might help you see things more clearly." This profound understanding and application of dialogue's function transforms everyday interactions into fertile ground for nurturing children's cognitive development.

4. Core Pathway Two: Scaffolding as Precise Support Within the Zone of Proximal Development

The concept of "scaffolding" originates from Bruner and others' development of Vygotsky's theory. It refers to the temporary, adaptive support adults provide during children's skill-building process, which is gradually withdrawn as children's abilities grow [6].

4.1. The Dynamic Cycle of Scaffolding Instruction

A complete scaffolding process involves several dynamic stages:

Diagnosis: Through observation and interaction, accurately assess a child's current independent level and potential level on a specific task—identifying their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Support: Provide precisely calibrated assistance, including: Demonstration (showing methods), Task simplification (breaking down steps), Interest stimulation (maintaining motivation), Highlighting key features (pointing out focal points), Frustration management (emotional support). Withdrawal: Gradually reduce the level and frequency of support as the child's abilities grow, transferring more responsibility to the child. Evaluation and Rediagnosis: Observe the child's performance at the new level of independence to inform the next cycle of support.

4.2. From "Supporting the Teacher's Instruction" to "Supporting the Child's Learning"

Scaffolding pedagogy demands a fundamental shift in the teacher's role: from an authoritative provider of knowledge to

a keen observer, active collaborator, and flexible supporter of children's learning. For instance, when children are building with blocks, the teacher does not directly instruct, "You should build it this way." Instead, as failure looms, the teacher might ask, "Where do you think it might be unstable?" or offer an alternative approach: "Try placing this long block horizontally—what happens?" This support does not substitute for the child's own efforts but activates their independent thinking and experimentation, precisely targeting the critical points of their developmental progress.

5. Core Pathway Three: Play as the Dominant Activity and Autonomous Domain for Meaning Construction

Vygotsky hailed play as "the primary creator of the zone of proximal development during the preschool years," asserting that children's behaviors in play consistently surpass their everyday actions and average age-level capabilities [7].

5.1. "Imagined Situations" and "Rules" in Play

Vygotsky specifically analyzed the developmental value of role-playing games (pretend play). In play, children create an "imagined situation" and voluntarily adhere to the "rules" inherent within it. For instance, a child playing "doctor" must adhere to the behavioral norms of a physician. This process significantly fosters the development of symbolic abilities (using objects to represent things, actions to represent events), self-regulation skills (inhibiting immediate impulses to comply with role demands), and social understanding (grasping the perspectives and relationships of different social roles).

5.2. From "Free Play" to "Prepared Play Environments"

Emphasizing the value of play does not mean teachers should completely step back. Support for play from a sociocultural perspective involves creating a "prepared environment": providing low-structure, multi-functional play materials that spark children's imagination and creativity rather than limiting play to a single approach. Teachers should keenly identify "teachable moments" during play—such as when children encounter cognitive or social conflicts (e.g., disputes over role assignments, plot stagnation)—, educators can intervene as "players" or "advisors," deepening play and expanding learning through questioning, information sharing, or suggesting new approaches. Facilitating the sharing and reflection of play experiences: Post-play group discussions guide children to revisit the play process, articulate encountered challenges and solutions, and organize and conceptualize fragmented experiences gained during play.

6. Core Pathway Four: The Physical and Human Environment as the "Third Teacher"

Inspired by Italy's Reggio Emilia approach, the concept of "the environment as the third teacher" aligns closely with sociocultural theory [8]. The environment is not merely a backdrop but an active educational element that carries culture, sparks interaction, and supports exploration.

6.1. Environment as Cultural Mirror and Invitation to Interaction

The environment should reflect children's cultural backgrounds, interests, and ongoing learning projects, making learning "visible." Theme exploration walls, photographs and texts documenting children's ideas and creations, and "treasure boxes" displaying natural objects and cultural artifacts silently convey cultural meanings, inviting children to engage in dialogue and form connections.

6.2. The Environment as a Platform for Cognitive Challenges and Social Collaboration

Environmental planning should naturally prompt problem-solving and social cooperation. Examples include:

Creating collaborative project zones: Large construction areas, sand and water stations requiring multiple operators.

Designing cognitively challenging corners: Puzzle stations with cards of varying difficulty, science exploration areas requiring recording and comparison. Balance privacy and public space: provide quiet corners for individual reflection alongside open areas that encourage group discussions. A thoughtfully designed environment continuously invites children to explore, interact, and think, silently supporting the entire process of social collaboration and individual internalization.

7. Conclusion

Guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the landscape of early childhood education has undergone a fundamental restructuring. Children are no longer blank slates awaiting "shaping" or "filling." Instead, they are "little philosophers" and "cultural participants" who actively construct knowledge and self-identity through deep engagement with people, objects, and environments, aided by cultural tools within rich sociocultural contexts. Education's mission has thus shifted from mere knowledge transmission to creating conditions and providing support that maximize this constructive process.

The four pathways outlined in this paper—transforming everyday dialogue into tools for co-constructing thought, providing dynamic scaffolding support within the zone of proximal development, deeply understanding and empowering children's self-directed play activities, and shaping the physical and humanistic environment into an active "third teacher"—form an interconnected, mutually reinforcing ecosystem. Together, they point toward a new teacher-child relationship: the teacher as a keen observer, a wise interactor, a resource provider, and a cultural coordinator.

Transitioning to this "participation-construction" paradigm in education demands profound theoretical awakening and practical transformation from educators. This is not merely an update of methods and techniques, but a holistic shift in perspectives on children, development, and education itself. Only thus can we pave a solid path for children toward active learning, collaborative inquiry, and lifelong development, truly unleashing each child's innate potential.

References

- [1] Berk, L. E., & Winsler, A. (1995). Scaffolding children's learning: Vygotsky and early childhood education. National Association for the Education of Young Children.

- [2] Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- [3] Wertsch, J. V. (1985). *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind*. Harvard University Press.
- [4] Kozulin, A. (1998). *Psychological tools: A sociocultural approach to education*. Harvard University Press.
- [5] Smagorinsky, P. (2018). *Vygotsky and literacy research: A methodological framework*. Brill.
- [6] Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 17(2), 89-100.
- [7] Bodrova, E., & Leong, D. J. (2007). *Tools of the mind: The Vygotskian approach to early childhood education* (2nd ed.). Pearson.
- [8] Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (Eds.). (2012). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia experience in transformation* (3rd ed.). Praeger.