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Critical review of two learning theorists' recommendations, **concepts and ideologies**

Albert Bandura and Lev Vygotsky

Context: Historical Review

Albert Bandura

Bandura's significance sits in the shift he helped initiate from explanations of learning that treated the learner as mainly shaped by reinforcement or stimulus response patterns. Writing in the late twentieth century, he was working in a context where behaviourist views were influential in psychology and education, and his intervention was to argue that learning can occur through observing others rather than through direct reinforcement alone. In *Social Learning Theory*, Bandura (1977) positions modelling as a serious learning mechanism, which matters educationally because classrooms are saturated with social signals and students rarely learn in isolation.

However, Bandura's historical significance is not only that he emphasised the social nature of learning, but that he made the learner an active agent. In *Social Foundations of Thought and Action*, he develops reciprocal determinism, arguing that behaviour, personal factors and environment influence each other rather than operating in a one way direction (Bandura, 1986). This matters for pedagogy because teaching shapes learner beliefs and learner beliefs shape engagement. The emphasis on self-efficacy later strengthened this by showing how students' judgements about their capability can influence persistence and achievement (Bandura, 1997). A limitation, though, is that Bandura's model can be interpreted in ways that push responsibility back onto individual learners, especially if self-efficacy is treated as a personal deficit rather than shaped by structural and relational conditions. This is where more critical perspectives

on pedagogy become necessary to avoid reducing educational inequality to motivation alone (Giroux, 2020).

Lev Vygotsky

Vygotsky's work emerged from an early twentieth century context of rapid social and political change, and his central contribution is the argument that higher psychological functions develop through social relations, culture and language. In *Mind in Society*, he explains learning as mediated, meaning that cognitive development is shaped through interaction with others and through the cultural tools available, particularly language (Vygotsky, 1978). This remains significant for education because it supports structured teaching, dialogue and guided participation rather than treating learning as purely individual discovery. It also shows why pedagogy cannot be separated from context, since knowledge and its expression are culturally situated (Illeris, 2018).

Vygotsky's historical importance is often summarised through the Zone of Proximal Development, where learning is most productive when learners are supported to move beyond what they can do independently (Vygotsky, 1978). This is theoretically and pedagogically significant because it frames teaching as purposeful assistance and explains why learners may manage tasks with support but struggle alone. At the same time, the practical translation of Vygotsky into classroom strategies has sometimes become simplified into a general preference for group work, which risks losing the theory's emphasis on deliberate guidance and the quality of mediation. In other words, sociocultural theory can be used to justify minimal teacher input even though the theory does not require that interpretation, and this remains a live critique in debates about constructivist teaching (Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020).

Exploration of theories or practices

Observational learning and modelling

Bandura's central theoretical contribution is the claim that learning is fundamentally social, not because knowledge is simply co-constructed through dialogue, but because people learn by observing others, forming internal representations of what they see, and regulating their behaviour in relation to anticipated consequences. In *Social Learning Theory*, Bandura (1977) challenges paradigms that reduce learning to direct reinforcement by arguing that individuals can acquire new behaviours and understandings without performing them immediately and without receiving reinforcement themselves. Students often learn routines, attitudes and ways of thinking by watching teachers and peers, so the theory highlights that instruction is always accompanied by social demonstration. This supports modelling strategies such as demonstrating processes, narrating thinking and making success criteria visible. In this sense, Bandura offers a clear explanation for why pedagogy depends not only on what is taught but on how it is embodied in classroom interactions.

However, Bandura's explanatory strength also creates a risk of oversimplification when it is applied as if observation automatically leads to learning. Bandura's own perspective is more careful because he emphasises that observational learning depends on attentional processes, retention, reproduction and motivation, and that these processes can be disrupted by learners' prior beliefs, emotional states and contextual factors (Bandura, 1977). This matters and has an important impact because classroom conditions are not neutral as attention may be limited by anxiety, by prior experiences of failure, or by relational dynamics that make the model less credible. Similarly, retention is shaped by how meaningfully new information connects to what learners already know. A pedagogy that simply assumes that students will learn because the teacher demonstrated something can therefore misread why some learners do not progress, and Bandura's theory, if used properly, does not support that assumption. Instead, it suggests that modelling must be structured and supported, with opportunities for guided rehearsal and feedback, since observation alone does not guarantee mastery.

Reciprocal determinism and the social regulation of learning

A key extension of Bandura's work is his concept of reciprocal determinism, developed in *Social Foundations of Thought and Action* (Bandura, 1986). Here he argues that behaviour, personal factors such as beliefs and expectations, and environmental influences operate as interacting determinants rather than in a one way sequence. This is valuable for education because it prevents simplistic explanations of achievement that blame either the student or the environment in isolation. It supports the view that teaching practices can shape learner beliefs and behaviours, yet it also recognises that learner beliefs shape how they interpret teaching. In practice, effective pedagogy is not just content delivery, but it must also attend to how classroom environments influence motivation and identity, and how students' prior experiences shape what they are able to take from instruction and as a result, it can support more responsive teaching. The strength of Bandura's work is not that it offers a single technique that can be applied mechanically, but that it highlights key mechanisms that can be examined in practice.

Self-efficacy and inequality in education

Bandura's concept of self-efficacy is often the most directly applied element of his theory in educational contexts. In *Self Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, Bandura (1997) argues that people's beliefs about their capability to succeed in particular tasks influence their effort, resilience and willingness to persist. This is educationally significant because many classroom behaviours that look like lack of ability are more accurately understood as avoidance, disengagement or low confidence shaped by prior experience. Self-efficacy can therefore help explain why two learners with similar prior attainment respond differently to challenge, with one persisting and the other withdrawing. In pedagogy, this supports approaches that build credible success experiences, use feedback that emphasises progress and strategy, and structure tasks so that learners can experience mastery rather than repeated failure. Bandura's emphasis on mastery experiences as a particularly strong source of efficacy beliefs is useful because it suggests that confidence should not be created through vague

encouragement but through genuine learning experiences that shift what students can actually do (Bandura, 1997).

Nonetheless, self-efficacy is also where Bandura's theory is most vulnerable to being used in ways that individualise structural problems. It is possible for self-efficacy to be framed as something learners simply lack, which can lead educators to focus on changing the student's mindset without changing the conditions that undermine confidence. In practice, efficacy discourse can be absorbed into performative cultures where responsibility for success is placed heavily on individuals. Giroux (2020) provides a useful critical lens here, because he argues that education is never only psychological, it is political and cultural, shaped by power, inequality and institutional priorities. From this perspective, the limitation of Bandura in education is not that the theory is wrong, but that it can be too easily aligned with narratives of personal responsibility if it is detached from social critique. A critical application of Bandura therefore needs to hold together both levels. It should recognise the value of efficacy beliefs while also asking how schooling structures, curriculum hierarchies and cultural expectations influence which learners are most likely to develop strong efficacy in the first place.

Bandura's theoretical position and overall contribution

Another issue concerns how Bandura is sometimes placed within a broad label of social constructivism. There is a meaningful difference between Bandura's conceptualisation and Vygotskian sociocultural theory as Bandura focuses heavily on modelling, imitation and cognitive regulation within social contexts, whereas Vygotskian frameworks are centred on mediation through cultural tools, language and the internalisation of socially organised activity. Bandura's view is therefore not primarily about knowledge being constructed through dialogue but about learning being influenced through observation and social experience. A Bandura's approach may prioritise clear modelling, credible exemplars and the management of classroom dynamics that influence engagement, whereas a Vygotskian approach is more directly concerned with dialogue, scaffolding, and how cultural tools shape thinking. Recognising this difference is critical because it shows that describing Bandura as

social constructivist only works at a very general level, and that the mechanisms proposed are highly distinct.

Overall, Bandura's theory remains influential because it offers a plausible and practically relevant framework of learning in social settings, and it highlights mechanisms that educators can deliberately design for, particularly modelling and the development of efficacy. Its main strength is explanatory realism, because it accounts for learning that occurs through social observation and for the interaction between belief, behaviour and environment. Its limitations arise when it is translated into practice without sufficient attention to structural conditions, or when concepts such as self-efficacy are used to place responsibility for educational inequality primarily on learners. A critical engagement with Bandura therefore involves not only applying his concepts but also questioning how those concepts are used within contemporary schooling cultures and what they make visible or obscure about the conditions of learning (Giroux, 2020; Waring & Evans, 2014).

Mediation, cultural tools and language

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is often treated as a foundation for contemporary constructivist pedagogy, yet its core claim is more specific than the idea that students learn through interaction. His central argument is that higher psychological functions develop through socially organised activity and are mediated by cultural tools, with language being particularly important. In *Mind in Society*, Vygotsky (1978) explains that mental processes develop first on the social plane and then on the psychological plane, meaning that what appears to be individual thinking is shaped by the internalisation of social relations and cultural practices. For pedagogy, this implies that teaching is not simply about presenting content but about guiding learners into ways of thinking and communicating that are valued within particular disciplines and communities.

Vygotsky's focus on language and thought deepens his theoretical framework beyond a general claim about social influence. In *Thought and Language*, he argues that language is not simply a way of expressing pre-existing thought but a tool that shapes

and reorganises thinking (Vygotsky, 1986). This has important implications for pedagogy because it suggests that dialogic teaching and classroom talk are not merely engagement strategies, but part of how cognitive development occurs. Educationally, this supports approaches that treat discussion, questioning and explanation as central to learning rather than as optional extras. It also suggests that teachers must be attentive to the quality of language used in classrooms, because the terms and structures learners acquire shape how they conceptualise problems. Additionally, this provides a strong theoretical basis for subject specific talk, academic vocabulary, and explicit teaching of how to argue, explain and justify.

This emphasis on language and culture raises challenging questions about whose language and whose cultural tools are privileged in classrooms. Vygotsky's theory can be used to support inclusive pedagogy by recognising that learners bring different cultural resources and conceptual frameworks. Yet, it can also risk reinforcing dominant norms if the cultural tools valued in school are treated as neutral rather than culturally and historically positioned. This is where Giroux's (2020) critical pedagogy becomes relevant again as he argues that schooling is shaped by power and that curriculum and pedagogy often normalise particular cultural values while marginalising others. A critical application of Vygotsky therefore needs to ask how mediation works in contexts where learners' cultural tools differ from those privileged in schooling. Rather than assuming that all learners have equal access to the forms of language and interaction required for success, sociocultural theory can support a more careful analysis of how schools distribute access to powerful forms of knowledge and talk, and how pedagogy can either widen or reduce inequity.

Zone of Proximal Development and guided participation

A major concept associated with Vygotsky is the Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky describes this as the distance between what a learner can do independently and what they can do with support (Vygotsky, 1978). The educational strength of this concept is that it reframes teaching as deliberate assistance that enables learners to perform beyond their current level, which is a direct challenge to views of learning that rely on waiting for maturation or treating ability as fixed. It also provides a plausible explanation for why learners may succeed in collaborative contexts but struggle alone, since performance is partly dependent on the social resources available. In pedagogy, the Zone of Proximal Development supports structured support, timely feedback, guided practice and gradual withdrawal of assistance.

However, one of the main problems in educational applications of Vygotsky is that the Zone of Proximal Development is frequently reduced to a generic preference for group work or discovery learning. This is a misreading because Vygotsky's framework does not imply that teacher guidance should be minimal. The emphasis is on mediation and purposeful support, not on leaving learners to construct understanding without direction. This is where contemporary critiques of constructivist practice become relevant, for instance Kirschner and Hendrick (2020) highlight the limits of approaches that treat minimal guidance as inherently better, particularly for novices who lack the knowledge structures needed to learn efficiently. While Kirschner and Hendrick are not criticising Vygotsky directly, their argument helps sharpen a critical point, which is that sociocultural theory can be used to justify weak pedagogy if it is detached from its emphasis on structured mediation. To conclude, a Vygotskian classroom is not necessarily one where teachers step back, but one where teaching is deliberately organised to move learners through increasingly complex participation.

Scaffolding and sociocultural classroom practice

Another issue concerns the translation of Vygotsky's theory into classroom practice through the concept of scaffolding. While scaffolding is often associated with Vygotskian teaching, it is important to treat it as an applied educational concept rather than something Vygotsky developed in those terms. The risk in practice is that scaffolding becomes a vague term that refers to any support, without attention to the quality of assistance, the timing of withdrawal and the learner's developing independence. A more rigorous approach requires asking what kind of mediation is being provided and whether it is actually enabling conceptual development. Waring and Evans (2014) stress the importance of a critical approach to pedagogy, where theory is used to examine practice rather than to justify it automatically. This is relevant because Vygotsky's popularity in education can lead to superficial usage, where referencing the Zone of Proximal Development or scaffolding functions as a badge of progressive teaching without evidence that learning is being deepened.

Illeris (2018) is useful here because contemporary theories of learning emphasise that learning is multi-dimensional, involving cognitive, emotional and social processes. Vygotsky offers a powerful paradigm of how the social and cultural dimensions shape cognition, but his work can sometimes be read as if social interaction alone is sufficient for learning. A more balanced view recognises that interaction is productive when it is structured, when it engages with the cognitive demands of the task, and when learners have the emotional security to participate and risk being wrong. This strengthens the framework because it avoids the idealisation of social learning, thereby facilitating a more objective analysis of classroom dynamics. In some situations, collaborative learning can enhance development, but in others it can reproduce misunderstandings, reinforce status differences, or allow some learners to disengage. As a result, Vygotsky's theory gives tools for analysing these dynamics, yet it does not automatically resolve them.

Overall, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory remains fundamental to pedagogy because it links learning to social relations, cultural tools and language, and it offers a compelling rationale for guided teaching that moves learners beyond their current independent capability. Its strengths are conceptual depth and direct pedagogical relevance, particularly through mediation and the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky,

1978; 1986). Its limitations arise largely in how it is translated into practice, where complex ideas are sometimes simplified into generic group work or minimal guidance. A critical engagement therefore involves insisting on the specificity of Vygotsky's claims, examining the quality of mediation, and recognising how culture and power shape what counts as valued learning in educational contexts (Giroux, 2020; Kirschner & Hendrick, 2020; Waring & Evans, 2014).

Reviewing the impact

Albert Bandura

Bandura's impact on educational practice lies primarily in how his work reframed learning as something that happens continuously within social environments rather than only through formal instruction. His theory of observational learning provided a powerful explanation for why modelling, classroom environment and peer behaviour matter as much as curriculum content. In everyday teaching, this is visible in the widespread use of demonstration, worked examples and teacher modelling, which reflect Bandura's claim that learners form internal representations of what they observe before they attempt to perform a task themselves (Bandura, 1977). By highlighting that learning can occur without immediate reinforcement, Bandura also helped weaken the dominance of behaviourist approaches that treated learners as passive responders to stimuli.

Self-efficacy has arguably been Bandura's most visible legacy in education. The idea that learners' beliefs about their capability shape their persistence, resilience and engagement has been widely taken up in classroom practice, assessment and pastoral support (Bandura, 1997). Teachers now routinely focus on building confidence through feedback, structuring success and emphasising progress rather than only outcomes. This has practical value, particularly for learners who have experienced repeated failure and who may disengage not because they lack ability, but because they expect to fail. In this sense, Bandura's work has made it harder for

educators to interpret disengagement purely as laziness or low intelligence and has encouraged more psychologically informed approaches to motivation.

However, the educational use of Bandura's theory also has limitations. While self-efficacy helps explain individual differences in persistence, it can easily become detached from the social conditions that shape learners' experiences. In performative school cultures that emphasise testing, competition and individual responsibility, self-efficacy discourse can be absorbed into narratives that place blame on students for not being confident or motivated enough. Giroux's (2020) critique is important here because it highlights how schooling is structured by inequality, cultural capital and institutional priorities. From this perspective, Bandura's concepts are valuable but incomplete when applied without attention to how curriculum hierarchies, classroom tracking and social expectations shape who is most likely to develop strong efficacy beliefs. A student's confidence is not formed in isolation but through repeated encounters with success, recognition and belonging, which are unevenly distributed in many education systems.

In practice, Bandura's impact is strongest when his ideas are used to support thoughtful task design, constructive feedback and positive classroom relationships rather than to justify purely individualised explanations of achievement. His work has helped teachers recognise the importance of modelling, social influence and belief, but it does not inherently provide a framework for addressing deeper structural inequalities in education.

Lev Vygotsky

Vygotsky's impact on educational practice has been substantial because his theory offers a direct explanation of why teaching, rather than simply exposure to content, matters for learning. His concept of mediation places teachers, peers and cultural tools at the centre of cognitive development, which provides a strong justification for guided instruction, dialogue and carefully structured tasks (Vygotsky, 1978). In classrooms, this has influenced practices such as dialogic teaching, guided reading, collaborative problem solving and the explicit teaching of academic language. These approaches

reflect Vygotsky's claim that learners develop through participation in shared activity before they can act independently.

The Zone of Proximal Development has been especially influential because it provides a way of thinking about challenge that avoids both rigid ability grouping and the idea that learners must always work independently. Teachers use this concept often implicitly when they pitch tasks just beyond what students can do alone and provide feedback, prompts and worked examples to support progress. This aligns with contemporary ideas about formative assessment and responsive teaching, which depend on understanding where learners are and how support can move them forward. Compared with Piaget's emphasis on developmental readiness and discovery learning (Piaget, 1973), Vygotsky offers a more optimistic and interventionist view of education, where teaching can actively shape what learners are able to achieve rather than simply waiting for maturation.

At the same time, Vygotsky's influence has sometimes been diluted by oversimplified interpretations as the language of scaffolding and collaboration is widely used, but not always in ways that reflect the theory's emphasis on purposeful mediation. Kirschner and Hendrick (2020) show that when sociocultural ideas are translated into minimal guidance approaches, they can disadvantage learners who need structured support. This highlights a tension in Vygotskian pedagogy, which is that social learning is only productive when it is carefully designed, cognitively demanding and supported by knowledgeable guidance.

Nevertheless, Vygotsky's impact remains deeper and more transformative than Bandura's in terms of pedagogy. His theory not only explains how learning occurs in social contexts, but it also provides a framework for designing teaching that actively develops thinking. By linking cognition to language, culture and participation, Vygotsky offers educators tools to understand why some learners struggle and how teaching can address those struggles through structured interaction rather than through motivation alone.

Critical reflection

This review shows that Bandura made an important contribution by drawing attention to the social nature of learning and to the role of belief in shaping engagement and persistence. His theories have helped teachers understand why modelling, feedback and classroom environment matter, and they have encouraged more sensitive interpretations of learner motivation. However, Bandura's work is strongest at the level of individual psychology rather than at the level of pedagogy as a whole. While his ideas are useful for understanding why learners behave and feel as they do, they do not provide a detailed framework for organising teaching, curriculum or progression. In comparison with Piaget and Vygotsky, Bandura explains how learners are influenced by others, but he offers fewer tools for shaping the structure of learning itself. This limits the extent to which his theory can guide decisions about what should be taught, in what sequence, and through which forms of interaction. His impact on education has therefore been important but partial, particularly when his ideas are absorbed into individualised approaches that overlook wider inequalities and the institutional conditions that shape learner experience.

Vygotsky has had the greater impact on education because his theory connects learning, teaching and culture in a way that directly informs pedagogical design. By showing that higher mental processes develop through mediated activity, he provides a foundation for understanding why dialogue, guidance and the use of cultural tools are central to learning. Unlike Bandura, Vygotsky does not simply explain how learners respond to their environments; he explains how teaching can actively transform what learners are able to think and do. Compared with Piaget's emphasis on individual discovery and Bandura's focus on modelling and belief, Vygotsky offers a more systematic approach of how knowledge, language and participation are organised through pedagogy. His influence is visible across contemporary education in practices such as formative assessment, guided instruction and the explicit teaching of academic language. Although his ideas are sometimes misapplied, when used critically they offer a powerful framework for addressing both cognitive development

and educational inequality. For these reasons, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory represents the most significant and lasting influence on modern pedagogy.

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