XAVIER UNIVERSITY of LOUISIANA

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Volume 10 | Issue 1 Article 3

12-1-2012

A Look into the Multiple Aspects of Child Development Using Theories of Moral, Social, and Cognitive Development

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Volume 10, Issue 1, December 2012. Service-Learning Analysis. 27-32.
<http://xulanexus.xula.edu/textpattern/index.php?id=160>

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A Look into the Multiple Aspects of Child Development Using Theories of Moral, Social, and Cognitive Development

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Abstract
This paper examines the social and cognitive development of children using three distinct theories: Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory with emphasis on his concept of zone of proximal development, and Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development. These theories were witnessed while observing the actions and interactions that occurred during the early education of three and four year olds at McMillan's First Step Daycare in New Orleans, Louisiana. This paper's original purpose was to fulfill a final analysis assignment in Psychology 1012: Human Development that combined classroom learning with hands-on training during sixteen hours of service-learning. The names used in this paper are pseudonyms of children to protect their anonymity. While working at McMillan's, I was required to apply theories learned in the classroom and analyze how these theories helped me when working with children. Each theory was identified, applied to a situation, and analyzed. The application of these three theories of child development demonstrated that there are multiple aspects of learning that shape a child's ideas, beliefs, and actions.

Key Terms:
- Theory of Moral Development
- Social Cultural Theory
- Zone of Proximal Development
- Theory of Cognitive Development

Children develop socially and cognitively in many different ways. The way a child absorbs and internalizes information is an amazing process to watch. From a moral to an educational standpoint, how a child develops his or her thinking processes is based upon how and what information is presented to the child. One must present information in a way in which the child can comprehend. When this is done, a child is able to take in new information, commit it to memory, and apply it when necessary. For typical development to occur, a child must learn through experiences beyond what is taught in a classroom. My service-learning experience in Psychology 1012: Human Development granted me the opportunity to take a deeper look into children's minds, while applying theories that were taught throughout the semester. The purpose of the assignment was for students to get a thorough understanding of the theories as well as learn to pay close attention to the ever evolving mind of a child. Through my service-learning site, McMillan's First Step Daycare, I applied three theories, Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development with emphasis on his concept of zone of proximal development, and Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development. These three theories showed me that not only one, but many types of learning shape a child's ideas, beliefs, as well as actions.

Lawrence Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development argues that people pass through different stages of moral development in order to form a basis for just behavior. Kohlberg's theory entails three basic levels of moral development: pre-conventional morality, conventional morality, and post-conventional morality. I will focus on pre-conventional morality; more specifically, as it pertains to the pre-school children with whom I worked. Pre-conventional morality has two sub stages. In stage one, one must conform to socially acceptable norms in order to avoid conflict and punishment. This is the idea that whatever authority says is law, and, if one goes against the law one is subject to punishment. Stage two marks the beginning of one seeing that there are different sides to an issue. Everything is relative, and one is able to pursue self-interest. In this stage, people begin to realize what is right is based on what is in an individual's best interest (Feldman, 2008, p. 241).

The children in the pre-school class I worked with were still in stage one of pre-conventional morality. For example, during one visit I played blocks with a four-year-old boy named William during center time. Center time was the time when the children were able to go to different sections of the room and play. We created all types of buildings and imaginary cities until it was time to put the blocks away and go outside. Unaware of the "law," I neatly stacked the blocks on the shelf. William however, abruptly stopped me. He told me I was putting the blocks away "wrong" and there was a certain way they had to be placed on the shelf. Interested in why Walter had a look of worry and concern on his face I asked him why the blocks had to be placed a certain way. Walter responded, "Because Ms. Beverly said so. If we don't put them back right we can't play with the blocks no more." This was a prime example of Kohlberg's stage one of pre-conventional mortality. Ms. Beverly is the authority in the classroom, and because she told the children there was a certain way blocks had to be put away they were obedient in order to avoid punishment. Punishment, in this case, was not being allowed to play with the blocks.

Applying this theory was quite interesting. I noticed that three- and four-year-old children do not question authority. I asked Ms. Beverly why the blocks had to be put up in a certain way, and there was no special explanation; she just wanted them that way. Instead of asking why the blocks had to be placed a particular way, Walter went along with it because "Ms. Beverly said so." Kohlberg's theory of moral development and stage

one of pre-conventional moral development, in particular, made me realize how important it is to give explanations as to why something should be done. I am not opposed to punishment if rules are broken; however, William was completely unaware as to why the blocks had to be placed in a certain manner. One can only speculate that a child would learn more through reasoning rather than automatic punishment if they do not follow what authority deems right. Could understanding a reason for a rule also help a child move more quickly into the next sub stage of moral development?

Lev Vygotsky viewed cognitive development as the product of social interactions (Zuckerman, 2007). Vygotsky believed that cognition stemmed more from children's social interactions with another person, particularly more knowledgeable peers and adults, than from learning on one's own. Since children are around their parents as well as other adults and peers, they develop intellectually with guidance. With this idea, Vygotsky developed the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD). This theory states that the ZPD is "the level at which a child can almost but not fully perform a task independently, but can do so with the assistance of someone more competent" (Feldman, 2008, 165). What this means is children's cognition increases as they gain exposure and learn new concepts with the help of someone more proficient. It also implies that the child develops faster with the help of someone compared to when the child must figure it out on his/her own.

I observed an example of ZPD during the Halloween season when I coordinated a bat making activity with four children ages three and four. The children were to make bats by placing a template on a piece of paper, tracing, and then cutting out the traced shape. I explained to the four children what to do, then demonstrated how to trace the bat and cut it out. I asked the children if they needed help, but they opted to do it on their own. They understood that they had to trace the bat and attempted to do so, however, none of them were able to trace the bat in a way that was recognizable. I guided each of them by placing my hand on top of theirs, and when they got the idea, I let go. Next, I assumed they would be able to cut out the bats. Yet, they were so eager to have their own bat that they literally cut through the bat tracings instead of cutting along the lines.

We started fresh. This time after I demonstrated what to do, I took away all of the chalk and scissors, except for one. I wanted to see if maybe by watching each other they would get the concept. I then assisted Derrick, a four year old, with tracing and cutting while the other three watched. I asked if they have ever cut before, and they all said that they had. I then explained to them to focus on cutting along the lines. I noticed that one issue that they all had was how they actually held the scissors. I had them each cut one-by-one starting with Derrick, then Lloyd, then the other two. It seemed that after watching the previous child the next person did a better job. After watching me, then Derrick and finally Lloyd, it seemed as if it clicked for the other two children. The last two girls understood that in order for the paper to turn into a bat they must trace properly and cut along the lines.

Since the children were so excited and eager they did not realize that there were actual steps involved in making a bat. It was not a matter of them being physically incapable of completing the task it was a matter of them being able to grasp the concept that things do not just appear because you want them to. By making them work with only one set of scissors and one piece of chalk they were able to watch and process not only my actions but each other's actions as well. They could actually see the steps involved and attempt to do them on their own. The children's actions were shaped by guidance from a more authoritative and competent individual, thus going along with Vygotsky's belief that children develop cognitively with the assistance of someone more knowledgeable.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development opened my eyes to how much of an influence, not only adults, but peers have on a child's learning. Children learn much more quickly with guided help than when left to figure out new concepts on their own. How information is presented, or in this instance demonstrated, is vital to how well a child will understand and use new information.

Finally, Jean Piaget's (1952) theory of cognitive development states that how humans acquire knowledge over a period of time is ever changing, and like Kohlberg, cognitive development occurs in stages. The first stage is the sensory-motor stage; children experience this stage from birth to the age of two. The second stage is preoperational; children are in this stage from two to seven years of age. The third stage of development is concrete operational, which is from seven to eleven years of age. The stage that closely related with the pre-school children with whom I worked was the preoperational stage of cognitive development. During this stage of cognitive development, a child's language and vocabulary rapidly expand. They are still only able to process things from their perspective, and their thought process is limited. They identify everything from living things to inanimate objects as having consciousness. Children are learning new words and exploring new things every day. These new ideas are being committed to memory and will be applied when necessary (Piaget, 1952).

In addition to the four stages of cognitive development, Piaget used three key concepts to explain how children's cognition develops: schema, assimilation, and accommodation. A schema is a "cognitive structure, a network of associations that organizes and guides an individual's perception" (Brannon, 2011, 121). An example of a schema would be a child associating a dog with being small and furry. When a child sees a large dog with short fur, he may mistake it as a horse. The child is assimilating information of a new creature into a former schema—all large four-legged animals with short hair are horses. In order for the child to not make the same mistake, he would have to take in the new information that all dogs are not small and furry and modify his schema, thereby using Piaget's second concept of assimilation. Piaget's final concept, accommodation, is a part of the adaptation process. Accommodation is the process of transforming the former schema to adjust or accommodate the new information being presented. The preconceived idea has been completely altered and new schemas can now be developed. Piaget believed that children are not necessarily less intelligent than adults, but their thought process is different and not as developed. As a child's cognition develops his or her learning follows.

Another example of Piaget's preoperational stage again occurred during center time, the time when the children are able to go to different sections of the room and play. On one of my visits I played with three year olds Raven, Alley, and Madison in a section called "dramatic play." The dramatic play area contained baby dolls and a play kitchen equipped with food plates and a table setting. There were many different types of play foods for the girls to play with. I found it interesting that most of the foods were the same but they could not understand that if a pepper is cut or is a different color that it is still a pepper. The girls had already developed a schema of what a pepper was: they were spherical and green. When another form of a pepper appeared but did not fit into what they categorized as a pepper, they automatically rejected it as being a pepper. I had to explain peppers come in different sizes, shapes, and colors, and they even tasted differently. At this point the girls were not assimilating other kinds of plastic peppers into their schema about peppers they had developed.

In order for the girls to accommodate their schema about peppers with the new information that I was providing, they asked different questions about the different peppers. They were

processing the new information by adapting it to their preconceived ideas and thus adjusting their schema of peppers to accommodate the new information. By accepting the information that I provided, a new schema on peppers was developed.

I was able to see firsthand the evolution of a child's cognitive development, how children process different vocabulary and new ideas. Originally the girls did not understand the idea there could be more than one type of pepper until I gave enough reasoning. At three and four years old, children are eager to expand their vocabularies, soak up new information, and willingly change their beliefs in order to accept new incoming information. Although it is hard for children to initially grasp new concepts, with examples and explanation they can easily mold their ideas.

The pepper scenario exemplified Piaget's theory. I had the ability to teach and change Raven, Alley, and Madison's perception by simply explaining and answering their questions. I learned from Piaget's theory that I must be conscious of what new information I present to a child. Children are truly like sponges and are in a developmental stage where they are taking in and committing to memory all types of new information so they can apply it in different settings.

I was enlightened this semester and my perception of daycare facilities has been altered. I have never seen such an elaborate daycare as McMillan's. I felt just from the exterior of the school that McMillan's Daycare was very welcoming and enticing. I found it amazing how a place of that magnitude was so child friendly. Everything was made for children—from the table and chairs to the little sinks and paper towel dispensers that were easily accessible for them. Originally I wanted to work with infants, but I am pleased I did not. I have gained more from my hands-on experience working with the three- to four-year-old children. I was able to actually apply theories from the classroom to a real life setting. I was astonished to see the theories come to life through the children. Although the children were in a daycare setting, I was able to see beyond what they were being taught at the daycare. The children's development stemmed from other places such as simple conversation, arts and crafts, and just imaginary play. Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development, and Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development demonstrated that not just one way of learning shapes a child's ideas and beliefs. Watching how eager and receptive the children were to new knowledge was fascinating. We tend to forget how exciting learning new information can be. The children at McMillan's Daycare brought the excitement back into my world. My service-learning experience exceeded my expectations. I did not expect to form bonds with the teacher and children, and I appreciate them for accepting me into their world.

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Acknowledgements

I above all would like to give thanks to God for giving me the opportunity to challenge myself as a student. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their unconditional love and support. Finally I would like to thank Dr. Annette Iskra for her encouraging words and optimistic attitude as well as mentoring and guiding me through this rigorous process.