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A Journey Through Child Development: An Analysis of Child Behavior

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Abstract
This essay examines the inner workings of child development through the application of Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, and Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral development to observations that were made at McMillian’s First Steps Child Care Center. This essay was originally composed to fulfill an assignment in Psychology 1012: Human Development, which was a service-learning class that required volunteer work at a particular field site. I chose to volunteer my service at McMillian’s First Steps Child Care Center. The purpose of this essay is to analyze the inability of young children to think abstractly and how this component affects their behavior. The essay is a result of sixteen hours of service-learning interaction with the children at the child care center. These interactions transpired over a period of three months which allowed for the observation of the consistency, progression, and development of and the above theories. Several students (whose names have been changed for confidentiality purposes) provided support for the claim that young children are unable to think logically therefore affecting their behavior.

Key Terms:
• Theory of Cognitive Development
• Sociocultural Theory
• Theory of moral development
The mind of a child differs greatly from the mind of an adult. The cognitive development of a child’s mental processing is in the earliest stages of development, which is characterized by the inability to think logically and abstractly. For this reason, children are sometimes detached from reality. Some little girls dream of becoming a princess, while some little boys dream of becoming a pirate. Adults, on the other hand, are able to clearly distinguish the difference between fantasy and reality. My service-learning experience in Psychology 1012: Human Development allowed me to take a peek into the imaginative mind of a child, which altered my perception of the mechanisms of a child’s mind. Some psychologists support one particular child development theory, while others blend several theories together in order to explain child development. From my service-learning class, I agree with the latter: the only way to begin to understand and explain the reasoning behind the behavior of a child is through a mixture of several theories. Together they make a perfect recipe for understanding a child’s development. In this paper, I will examine Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, with specific attention to the preoperational stage, Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, with specific attention to the theory’s concept of zone of proximal development, and Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of moral development through the examination of the stage of preconventional morality in children ranging in ages from two to three.

The cognitive perspective examines the roots of understanding how the human mind thinks and develops certain beliefs. The primary focus is on the system that allows people to process, store, utilize, and apply information to everyday problems and tasks. Jean Piaget suggests that everyone travels through a fixed chain of stages of cognitive growth. Each child moves from one stage to the next after reaching a certain maturity level and gaining enough experience pertaining to each stage. Through the movement from stage to stage, a person’s quantity of information as well as quality of knowledge increases (Piaget, 2002). According to Feldman (2009), Piaget’s theory of cognitive development suggests that human thinking is characterized by schemas, which are “organized mental patterns that represent behaviors and actions” (p. 17). For example, infants develop schemas for sucking a bottle, and children develop schemas for riding bikes. Piaget asserts that there are two explanations for the cognitive growth and development of children: assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 2002). Assimilation is the process of using schemas that one has already created to make sense of new incoming information. This is achieved by applying the newly acquired information to patterns and understandings of information that are already known. Accommodation, on the other hand, requires the alteration of previously developed schemas in order to incorporate new information. Altering one’s schema allows an individual to adjust the previous beliefs to fit with the unfamiliar information. Therefore, while assimilation places new information into already formed schemas or belief structures, accommodation allows new information to alter one’s schemas in order to make sense of the new information (Piaget, 2002).

Piaget’s theory describes four stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor stage, preoperational stage, concrete operational stage, and formal operational stage. The sensorimotor stage is the first stage. In this stage (birth to the age of 2) infants begin to process and understand the world through sensory experiences, such as seeing, touching, and hearing their environment and surroundings. According to Feldman (2009), “During the preoperational stage, children’s use of symbolic thinking grows, mental reasoning emerges, and the use of concepts increases” (p. 158). This stage (age 2 to 7) is characterized by
centration and egocentric thought. Centration is the process of focusing only on one aspect of a situation. Egocentric thought is the inability of a child to view the world from any other viewpoint except their own. The concrete operational stage (age 7 to 11) is characterized by the use of logical thinking. The formal operational stage (age 11 to puberty) is the final stage which is characterized by the application of logical thinking to abstract situations (Piaget, 2002). The children at the childcare center were three years old, therefore the focus of this analysis will be on the preoperational stage of cognitive development.

Piaget’s theory of cognitive development is of major importance for those working with children because it helps to explain and provide reasoning for certain behavior. Understanding this theory makes it possible to understand the changes children exhibit as they continue to grow from infants to toddlers to preschoolers. This theory can be applied easily to help understand the different ways children play outside on a playground, or the way that they interact with each other in a classroom setting. These two environments require sharing and turn taking which are ideal situations for observing a child’s current stage of cognitive development. After learning and understanding this theory, my view of the behavior of children changed drastically. Prior to learning this theory, I did not understand why children would behave without thinking (or so I thought). After understanding Piaget’s theory, I began to understand that this was not the case. It was not the idea that they were not thinking, but their cognitive abilities had not yet developed to the point of completely logical thinking.

Through my observations at the childcare center there were many instances where Piaget’s theory was demonstrated, but one particular incident stood out. There were four benches placed back-to-back forming a square in the center of the playground. As I sat on one of the benches talking and playing with the children, a few of the other children began to climb over the benches to get into the middle of the square. However, this was dangerous because there was a large drop, and the children were so small. While the other children watched, Christopher fell on his back. He was mortified and began to cry. A few seconds later, another young boy, Thomas, decided to climb over the benches in the exact manner as Christopher although he had just witnessed him fall. He too fell and was mortified. As a logical thinker it would have been smart to avoid doing what was just done unsuccessfully or to do it in a different manner so that it would be successful, but as the preoperational stage suggests, children at this stage are not capable of completely logical thinking. This may have been a defeat for Thomas, but it served as experience that will help him transition on to the next stage.

Vygotsky, a Russian developmentalist, developed the contextual perspective which suggests that development cannot be correctly assessed without evaluating how a person is involved with a rich social and cultural context. His theory differs from Piaget’s theory of cognitive development which suggests that children develop cognitively on their own through experience (Piaget, 2002). Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory is based on development achieved through social experiences (Kozulin, 1990). One’s social environment and culture plays a large role in development. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory suggests that cognitive development is the result of social interactions. As children play together they learn. Two concepts central to Vygotsky’s theory is the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding. ZPD refers to the level at which children can almost, but not completely, perform a task independently, while being capable of performing the task with the help of someone who is more competent (Kozulin, 1990). Scaffolding is the social structure provided by other people involved in a child’s life who support a child’s learning and
problem solving aimed at encouraging the development of cognitive skills (Kozulin, 1990).

Vygotsky’s theory was very easy to identify in the classroom of three year old children. I observed the progression of children’s learning by consciously employing the concept of the zone of proximal development while at the childcare center. During circle time, which is time spent reciting the alphabet, the days of the week, and other important information, Kayla, a three year old student, had no problem reciting the alphabet or the days of the week because she had memorized the information with a catchy song. However, she had not memorized the theme of the month and current day of the week. Memorizing the themes of the days and months were extremely challenging for Kayla. It was only the fourth day of the month, and this made it difficult for her to remember the theme because she had just learned it four days prior to this. It was not until I gave little hints, such as the first letter of the day, that she was able to remember the day of the week and theme of the month. There was a gap between Kayla’s current cognitive ability (struggling to remember and understand the theme of the month and the days of the week) and a more advanced level of cognitive ability (knowing and understanding the theme of the month and the days of the week). This gap, which is ZPD, is characterized by the ability to almost but not completely perform a task independently. Over the next few weeks I assessed her cognitive ability. Through scaffolding I provided support to Kayla which helped her to remember the correct words. I also gave her the first word as a hint for the theme of the month. After I gave Kayla the hints, she was able to tell me all of the information I had asked. Kayla was unable to recite all of the information on her own, but with my support she was able to achieve this task. Over the next three weeks, I continued to assess Kayla’s cognitive development which increased each week narrowing the gap of ZPD. I continued to help Kayla learn this information. As she did so, she required less and less of my assistance until finally, Kayla was able to recite the information without my help. With the support of scaffolding, she had bridged the gap of ZPD.

Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory is extremely vital for those who are working with young children because it explains the importance of how social interaction aids the development of cognitive abilities. Awareness of this theory also forces the instructor or caretaker to pay close attention to the interaction and environment of a child. Before learning and understanding Vygotsky’s theory, I knew from experience that social interaction plays an important role in cognitive development. After understanding the theory, I had an explanation as to why this is so.

Moral development is the process of distinguishing right from wrong. According to Kohlberg, an individual passes through a chain of stages as that person’s sense of justice progresses and the reasoning used to form moral judgment changes (Feldman, 2009). Young children think in terms of concrete rules of society, while adolescents think more abstractly. Moral development is characterized by a three-level succession, each of which is divided into two stages. The lowest level is preconventional morality which refers to following the rules because of certain rewards or punishment. This level consists of stage one, obedience and punishment orientation, and stage two, individualism and exchange. In stage one, children recognize rules as fixed guidelines given by authority that are to be obeyed without question. In this stage, children do right to avoid punishment. In stage two, children become aware that there is not just one correct way to approach an issue. Different children have different viewpoints, and they are free to seek self-interests. The next level is conventional morality which is where individuals resolve moral dilemmas as responsible members of society. This level consists of stage three, good interpersonal
relationships, and stage four, maintaining the social order. In stage three, teens become thinking members of society. Good behavior is reflective of good motive. In stage four, the rules are followed to maintain social order. The condition of society becomes important. The final level is postconventional morality which is the invoking of “universal moral principles that are considered broader than the rules of their particular society” (Feldman, 2009, p. 241). Individuals now view themselves as separate entities of society. This level consists of stage five, social contract and individual rights, and stage six, universal principles. In stage five, laws are viewed as social contracts that are subject to change rather than strict decrees. In stage six, individuals follow the laws because they are based on universal ethical principles, and laws that disrupt these principles are disobeyed (Kohlberg, 1981).

Several examples of the preconventional morality stage were evident at the childcare center, but one example stood out among them all. During snack time at the childcare center, Colby, a three year old student, was enjoying his snack. A boy sitting next to him accidentally knocked the food out of Colby’s hand and onto the floor. Colby reacted by taking the boy’s snack. The other boy began to cry, and Colby was punished by the teacher by losing his recess. It seemed as though Colby was simply getting back what he lost. He was not intentionally trying to hurt the other child. This happened yet again, and this time Colby did not take the other boy’s snack for fear of losing his recess again. According to the obedience and punishment orientation stage (stage one) of the preconventional morality level, Colby refrained from taking the other child’s snack to avoid punishment. The preconventional morality stage suggests that children obey defined rules to gain a particular reward or to avoid punishment, which elucidates why Colby refrained from taking the snack of the other student. The punishment he avoided was a loss of recess.

This theory is important for those working with young children because it clarifies why children obey rules. It is important to explain to a child why they are being punished, because if not, they will not understand what they have done wrong. Before learning this theory I thought the reasons for punishment were evident to children, but now I understand that children in stage one of the postconventional morality level simply follow the rules to avoid the punishment itself.

The theories of Piaget, Vygotsky and Kohlberg clearly and concisely explain the processes of child development from every angle. A combination of Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, and Kohlberg’s theory of moral development efficiently describes the different stages, concepts, and importance of child development.

Observing these theories at my chosen service-learning field site has opened my mind and has helped me to better understand the factors and causes of the behavior of children. Before this experience I thought the mind of a child was simple, but it is in fact more complex than I had realized. These three theories provide a clear breakdown of child development and behavior.

References


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