Child Development Theories in Practice

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Academic Pledge: I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code. Taylor Bauer

Abstract

This paper attempts to bring child development theories into reality through concrete examples, and make the many theories explored of more practical use. These theories were explored over the three topical areas of development through interviews with three participants in three different age ranges. After reviewing the responses of each participant to the eleven questions, the theories postulated by Piaget, Bronfenbrenner, Vygotsky, and Kohlberg were discussed as offering possible explanations for differences and similarities between answers. Recommendations were then made in regards to John, one of the interviewees, who was suffering from maladjustment after the separation of his parents which became apparent during the interview process. The data gathered from the study served as a valuable source of real-life examples of complex and abstract theories in child development and should serve me well in my pursuit of becoming a teacher.

**Introduction**

**Rationale**

In order to effectively teach my future students in the classroom, I must have an adequate understanding of their developmental processes. I should know how much I can expect from them and when they will be developmentally prepared for more difficult material. Since the science of child development is still a developing field most of the material is presented in various well-accepted theories. These theories postulate how and sometimes why certain behaviors are exhibited following specific life events or at certain times in development. These theories also seek to explain how and why children vary on an individual level and provide valuable insight on the best ways to approach teaching, disciplining or interacting with a child. While these theories can be helpful, they can be difficult to grasp as abstract generalizations. This paper attempts to bring these theories into reality through concrete examples, and make the many theories explored of more practical use.

**Methods**

In order to ascertain real life examples of abstract theories across the span of child development, three children were interviewed each one in a different stage of development.

The first interviewee was a five year old girl referred to as Jane. She was firmly in the early childhood stage of development. She was the youngest participant as a child of less experience would likely have had difficulty answering the interview questions. The next participant was a nine year old boy in middle childhood who will be called John. These two participants were randomly selected through a local elementary school after permission to interview the individuals was obtained. Due to the environmental and time restrictions of conducting the interviews, (while the participants were at school) notes were taken using pen and paper during the interview. The final participant was an eighteen year old girl in adolescence that will be referred to as Jill. This participant was chosen based mainly on proximity and availability. She was interviewed in the comfort of her home. Her auditory responses were recorded in order to keep the interview moving due to time restrictions.

**Predictions**

At the start of the project several predictions were made regarding the qualitative differences between responses. It was expected that the younger children would use more concrete thinking and look to physical concrete solutions to problems. As the answers of the older children were examined it was expected to see a noticeable shift and tendency towards abstract thinking and systematic problem solving. This prediction follows the logic of Piaget’s stages of development (Feldman, 2016). There was specific interest in the area of cognitive problem solving skills and rationalization of decisions. These are areas of particular interest as they are most applicable to my future career as an educator. If I know younger children work and think in terms of concrete differences and base their learning off of spatial and other physical characteristics, I can adjust my teaching methods to these specifications. Considering this expectation, it was also probable that Jill would use hypothetical and abstract reasoning to answer the open-ended questions.

**Interviews**

**Three Areas of Development**

The questions posed to each of the participants during the interviews covered the three areas of development: cognitive, physical, and social and personality. Development in these three areas affects all other aspects of a child’s life. If a child is not cognitively ready to take on more difficult material, their academic performance will be affected. A child performing poorly in school may be under a lot of stress which can cause psychological problems such as the development of anxiety or depression. Long term stress also has repercussions on the physical body as some children eat when stressed becoming obese while others may not eat at all. Not to mention that high levels of stress can long-term affect a child’s base level of stress hormones such as cortisol (Luecken et al., 2015). This could lead to other issues such as social rejection by peers. In turn, every area of development has a profound and distinguishable effect on each other and function together to become a unique individual. The questions in the interview attempt to reveal unique aspects of each area of development over the course of child development from early childhood through adolescence.

**Physical Development.** The first three questions focused on physical development. These questions aimed to uncover how the child’s physical development would affect the way they viewed the world around them. The questions, what makes someone pretty?, how far do you think you could run without stopping?, and if you could go anywhere, where would you go and why? All addressed different aspects of biological growth. The first question related to how the child saw themselves and others based on physical signs of development. The second question focused on increased athletic and endurance abilities that often improve as children develop. The final question alludes to the physical interactions between the child and their environment. For example, a short child may not want to go to an amusement park where they would be unable to enjoy the rides with height restrictions.

**Cognitive Development.** The next four questions focus on cognitive development and how the thought processing capabilities change over the course of development. The questions, if you could travel in time, where would you go and why?, if you were a fruit, what would you be and why?, if you tried to make a game so that you would never lose, what would it be? What would you do in the game? What are the rules and how would you win?, and what makes someone smart?, focus on the participant’s ability to think in both concrete and abstract terms. The first question examines the child’s ability to understand the concept of time and how it passes. If the child is unable to understand the abstract concept of time, this question would be very difficult to answer. The second question asks the child to try imagining an impossible situation, come up with a hypothetical possibility, and then rationalize their choices all processes which require well-developed cognitive abilities. The multipart question on the creation of a game that the child could never lose focused on problem solving ability. I wanted to see how each child chose to solve the open-ended situation. The final question on cognitive development attempted to gauge how children’s thoughts on intelligence changed as they developed more sophisticated thought processes.

**Social and Personality Development.** The final four questions, what constitutes a punishment?, what is your favorite toy/item and what do you do with it?, who is a part of your family? what makes a family?, and if you could redecorate your room any way you wanted, what would it look like?, are under the category of social and personality development. These questions help determine the more constant characteristics that define and differentiate one child from another. The question about punishment revealed how participants thought people should or should not behave in different social situations. The participant’s favorite item and redecoration of their room can both offer insight into how the child’s preferences and how they might behave based on these characteristics. Family is a special kind of relationship. By examining how a child determines who their family is one can make predictions of how they might form other relationships.

**Discussion**

**Characteristics of Responses**

As the interviews were conducted with Jill, John, and Jane several differences apparent. Most notable among these were the differences in answer lengths. Jane gave short concise answers sometimes in the form of holophrases. One such answer was to the initial question of what makes someone beautiful to which Jane answered “necklace” meaning of course that wearing a necklace made someone pretty. On the other hand, John greatly elaborated on certain answers such as his favorite toy. He gave an entire story about his Go-Kart he made with his mother. He went on to explain how he used to tear up the grass doing donuts in his yard and how fast he sped down the large hill just a few blocks down from his house. However, when asked what made someone pretty he became increasingly fidgety, avoided eye contact, and shrugged without saying a word. Finally Jill’s answers were concise full explanations. They were generally shorter than John’s stories, and contained more detailed information than Jane’s short phrases. Jill often placed conditions on her answers such as being able to run forever “if on a beach” and stating that a person is pretty based on their attitude specifically “towards life problems”.

These differences could be due to disparities in verbal communication abilities. Jane was still physically developing at a typical age when children begin to lose teeth which can make speech difficult. John had a more fully developed sense of communication, but lacked experience in using his new found skills to explain complex ideas. He was still in Piaget’s concrete operations stage, so trying to think about and then explain an abstract concept could be difficult for him. Jill was in the formal operational stage and had far more time to experiment with language (Feldman, 2016). Another possible explanation lies in the interactions between cognitive and physical development. As the brain physically develops through myelination and synaptic pruning children can begin to process more information faster and make greater strides cognitively as is stated in the information processing theory (Feldman, 2016). This would prevent Jane from being able to process the vast amount of information in time to give an elaborate response while assisting Jill and John to give fuller explanations.

Similarly, when asked what constitutes a punishment interpreted as what is worthy of punishment, every participant’s answer was qualitatively different. Jane responded that one should have to “hit somebody” before they are punished. John answered more generally stating that “doing stuff without your parents knowing” is worthy of punishment while Jill went even more general and replied that punishments should only be used when “drastic actions are taken” which “cannot be resolved by talking or working something out”. These differences can be attributed to children’s theory of mind and development of morality. Jane was in Kohlberg’s pre-conventional morality. She worried about what would happen to her is she hit someone else. John thought about how his parents might view him if he started keeping secrets from them. He looked from their point of view and saw how they might view him as a “bad boy” for keeping things from them which is characteristic of conventional morality. Jill responded with a hypothetical situation based on her overarching value of moderation in which punishment would be viewed as an extreme. While this view is not consistently held throughout western culture, her answer suggests that she has moved beyond cultural norms into post conventional morality (Feldman, 2016).

**Participant Descriptions**

Some contrasting answers could be the result of the uniqueness of each participant. For example, John had the misfortune of being the only participant with a separated family. Due to confidentiality, no official background information was gathered; however, it was determined that he lived almost entirely with his mother. These assumptions were supported by his response to questions about family members in which he solely named his mother. He also was very anxious to move on without attempting to say what makes a family. This nervous response is characteristic of children with separated or divorced parents as their stress levels increase(Cherlin, 1991). When boys have high levels of stress, they are more likely to respond with physical restlessness and high emotional levels often seen chronically in students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (Lewis, Wheeler, Carter, 2017).Jane was from a nuclear family of four, and Jill was one of four children in her nuclear family. Both girls replied that families consist of people who help and love each other. According to Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theories, the children’s microsystem and mesosystem would determine their answers. Therefore the girls from loving nuclear families would base their answers on that environment; whereas, a child from a divorced family might find their experience at odds with the macrosystem and exosystem which display ideal nuclear families and have difficulty answering the question (Feldman, 2016).

All three participants were from the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia and came from the middle class. All three students were also Caucasian. Their similar backgrounds are best seen in their opinions in what makes someone smart. All three participants proposed an answer about having a willingness to learn. This could be the result of interactions with similar groups of people from the same community. This explanation works off of Vygotsky’s theories on cultural and social interactions (Feldman, 2016). If each participant is subject to the expectations and values of the same people and therefore culture then it would be expected that they may respond to a question which is culturally based, such as a definition of intelligence, similarly.

**Recommendations**

While each interviewee had the potential for further growth, I would specifically focus on helping John improve. Due to his current situation many parts of John’s life are out of his control and the stress from his family situation does seem to come through quite strongly. I would therefore suggest that his parents try their best to help him visit each other and place extra emphasis on how loved he is by both of them. I believe that this reassurance of unconditional love would reassure John of his place in the family dynamic and could help ease him into whatever remains of the transition to a separated family. It may also help relieve the stress of feeling like he has to choose while improving his physical state which has been degraded by long-term stress.

**Conclusion**

Over the course of the study, it was discovered that older children, particularly adolescents, tend to think more abstractly in relation to solving problems and tend to think through their actions more thoroughly. On the other hand, one’s physical and social state can greatly affect cognitive abilities and vice versa as seen with John’s nervous answers and physical state of agitation. It is clearly no one area of development which determines exactly how a child will behave or rationalize their decisions. Each area works in tandem with the others in order to fully explain an individual’s characteristics and actions. Any imbalance in one area is likely to affect the others and the child as a whole. As an educator, I should do my best to be aware of every aspect of the development of my students and modify my instruction to fit their needs in each area to best provide for the child as a whole.

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