

EDF5021

ASSESSMENT TASK 1:

CRITICAL ESSAY ON LENSES ON CHILD
DEVELOPMENT

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Child development has been carefully examined by theorists over the years from different perspectives, leading them to directions that are overlapping, interrelated or sometimes completely different in its essence. In relation, this essay tries to bring into view two different theories, namely, Cultural-historical theory by Vygotsky and Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological theory. The first part discusses the significant aspects of these theories in detail, followed by comparing both of them. Their similarities and differences are illustrated. The last section looks into the implications of these developmental theories in planning teaching practices for the literacy curriculum.

CULTURAL-HISTORICAL THEORY (CHT)

According to Veresov (2010), every aspect and principle of CHT deals with the complex process of development of the higher mental functions a child's brain undergoes. He also states that while lower mental functions are biological and different in origin and nature, higher mental functions are entirely social. Therefore, as claimed by cultural-historical theorists, these developmental processes are not merely biological, but rather a cultural-social process. The environment (parents, teachers, siblings, situations) affects their development and instead of it being one of the two factors (social and psychological), is their source of development (Veresov, 2010). As Vygotsky claims:

The transition from the biological to the social path of development is the central link in the process of development, a cardinal turning point in the history of the child's behavior (Vygotsky, 1999, p.20, cited in Veresov, 2010).

The discussion above brings us to a very important component of CHT, the Social situation of development. Certain communicative actions such as pointing at objects to express interest or nodding our head to agree or accept a request are arguably commonplace in a society. Hence, as Flear (2013) suggests, these concepts that have a common origin in the life of a society, represent a result of a product of history. For an infant, nodding his or her head starts with it being a movement understood by others to becoming part of his or her personality to accommodate what is historically understood by the society. Additionally, in the early stages of

development, every new action or word a child learns by means of social or environmental factors is an event withholding great significance in his or her life. The newly acquired mental function is forming a base for learning higher-order functions in the future.

Ideal and real forms are related to the moving force of development in the view of Veresov (2010). From the source of development, i.e. social environment, ideal and real forms interact for the development process to take place. As a result, it can be concluded that the activities performed in the environment influence this interaction process. While ideal refers to the final stage of an activity or function, real is the situation in its present form. Taking the example mentioned before, nodding head with a 'yes' is the ideal form of communicating with another person. However, an infant's speech capabilities are not developed at an early developmental stage, hence, nodding head to agree to a situation will be considered as the real or rudimentary form. Once the ideal stage is achieved, the infant's speech as well as mental capacity has developed. Thus, as Vygotsky claims, 'something which is supposed to take shape at the very end of development, somehow influences the very first steps in this development' (Vygotsky, 1994b., p.346, cited in Fleer, 2013).

The concept of sign and the principle of mediation is the distinguishing factor of CHT according to the suggestions of many experts. The process of qualitative reorganization of the psychological functions needs cultural signs and sign mediation (Veresov, 2010). Veresov (2010) claims that the sign is a mental tool that is necessary for creating a structural center, which enables separate functions to work together according to their relative importance. Just like a new tool makes basic processes in a workplace perform better, sign inclusion ensures that a new mental function is learnt as a result of its remodeling. On the other hand, sign mediation is a mediating activity that mediated the whole process. In Vygotsky's words, mental development consists in the 'transition from direct, innate, natural forms and methods of behavior (cultural signs – external activity- parents nodding head to agree with each other) to mediated, artificial mental functions that develop in the process of cultural development' (Vygotsky, 1998, p.168, cited in Veresov, 2010).

ECOLOGICAL THEORY

Ecological systems theory was proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) to help explain how children develop within the context of their world. He believed that the environment as well as biological factors are responsible for development and child outcomes. Thus, according to him, development is bio-psychological, it is a combined result of both as they exist within each other.

Before the theory is illustrated in detail, this section explains the concept of 'Activity' as the key process of development according to Bronfenbrenner. He defined human development as 'the phenomenon of continuity and change in the bio-psychological characteristics of human beings over the life course, both as a species and as individuals. What we study and discover are the conditions and processes that produce continuity and change' (Bronfenbrenner, 1980). Urie (1980) further asserts that these processes are contingent upon some conditions and to understand these conditions, processes need to be explained. Activity being the key process here, classical psychological processes such as cognition, emotion and motivation lead to human development. This phenomenon is affected by the context and as a result, the content of this context. Simultaneously, the activities are about the content and this content is independently present in the following systems.

He came up with five systems that influence development, Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, and Macrosystem.

The Microsystem consists of the child's immediate physical, social and psychological environment (Swick & Williams, 2006). This includes parents, siblings, caregivers, teachers, etc., people whom the child probably shares personal thoughts and experiences with. It is argued that this system, being the most intimate learning setting, provides the child a reference point of the world. Hence, the child's development is directly affected by every facet of this system.

The Mesosystem includes the broader surroundings and influences on the child's development (Department of Community Services, 2002). They help connect two or more systems in which child, parent and family live (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, cited in

Swick & Williams, 2006). It is here that the child's grandparents, neighbours, best friend's father or distant relative have a great influence. Basically, it is the community environment the child is brought up in.

The Exosystem is a broader set of people who indirectly influence the child, which includes the parent's workplace, the services available to the family and the support networks they are involved in (DoCS, 2002). This system could have a severe indirect impact on the child as sometimes many children realise the stress of their parents' workplaces without ever physically being in these places (Galinsky, 1999, cited in Swick & Williams, 2006). The child is not physically present in the workplace but the father's behavior affected by work may affect his behavior with his child positively or negatively.

The final system, the Macrosystem is an even broader system that consists of cultural beliefs, societal values, political trends (DoCS, 2002). As a result, the macrosystems we live in influence what, how, when and where we carry out our relations (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, cited in Swick & Williams, 2006).

The concept of risk and protective factors emerges out of ecological systems theory (Armstrong et al., 2014). These could be prevalent in any of the aforementioned systems. The risk factors are divided into biological such as prenatal exposure to substances, premature birth, chronic medical conditions, and external that include poor education, health, safety, etc. Protective factors on the other hand are thought to improve self-regulation and behavior, and again, may be described as within-child factors and external factors (Armstrong et al., 2014). High cognitive and adaptive skills, good health and wellness support are part of within-child factors, whereas, external protective factors include warm and caregiving relationships, safe experiences and environments, and safe and consistent discipline, as well as community supports, health services, schools, laws, etc.

The next part of the essay, discusses the similarities and differences between the cultural-historical and ecological theory. The significant role played by socio-political forces in children's lives is acknowledged in Bronfenbrenner's model as well as Vygotsky's view of learning and development, taking place in particular cultural and

historical contexts (Cole & Wersch, 2003, cited in Goldstein, 2008). In related combination of both the theories, introduction of culturally appropriate, relevant and practices that fall into the dimension

In addition, for both of them, development is a process that takes place in the brain through internal mental functions – Activity for Bronfrenbrenner and sign and mediation for Vygotsky. The social aspect of transmission of information is common in both the theories. However, the major difference in cultural-historical and ecological theories is that according to Urie, development is also a biological process. This strictly does not fall into Vygotsky's belief system.

This final section of the essay illustrates possible activities taking into consideration the key enduring concepts of the above-mentioned theories. Firstly, an activity accommodating cultural-historical theory views is mentioned and then an activity supporting Urie's beliefs is mentioned.

Application of Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory can be applied in the best way in early childhood education settings in teaching them phonetics through picture cards.

Objective: Oral language development – phonetically correct pronunciation of objects.

Description: The students are made to sit in a circle and the teacher one by one asks each student to pick a random card that has a picture of a bird or animal on it. Taking turns, they are asked to show their card to the teacher and the rest of the class.

When the teacher pronounces the word correctly in front of all of them, the ideal state is shown and the teacher helps them to move from their real state to the ideal state. The cards are cultural signs, promoting mediation process. The teacher as the facilitator of the learning process, involves the social situation aspect of the theory.

Differences in children's microsystems may lead to a simple class essay writing activity about their weekend hold a completely different meaning for different children. Some children have interesting weekends but some might spend them at home. In addition, while some learning experiences are new for some students, some might be extremely good at them because of his or her uncle's interest in oral language development within their mesosystems. Hence, the following activity is

designed to accommodate these elements, in hand with considering the risk and protective factors.

Objective: In terms of the curriculum, semantic and syntactic language development.

Description: Students are asked to pair up and role-play their parents. The students are paired by the teacher after carefully finding out their social and economic backgrounds. The activity has been planned so as to permit free play for individuality of experience and yet is firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of mental functions. The children have to write a conversation between one of their parents in the form of a script and act it out in front of the class. They are also encouraged to dress up according to their characters.

To conclude, this paper has carefully described the social situation of development, ideal and real forms and the sign and mediation concept of the cultural-historical theory. It is these that result in the cognitive development of a child. It also addresses the implication of the above on teaching practices. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory's relevance to create developmentally appropriate practices are discussed effectively. Also, there are quite a lot of similarities observed but these two theories differ in one of the most essential facets of child development – biological.

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