Child Development Theories

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1.0 Introduction

Proponents included in this topic of study are explained and coagulated to bring out the relationship of the common terms used in the discussion for better understanding. These include learning and teaching.

Learning: It is a cognitive process of acquiring new skills, knowledge, behaviors, values, preferences or understanding and may involve synthesizing different forms of information.(Halt,1983). B.F. Skinner contributed greatly by looking into the perspective of learning and development and said that "Learning is not doing; it is changing what we do. We may see that behavior has changed, but we do not see the changing.

Teaching: Early childhood teaching may be said to be a strategy. A strategy is defined as, all activities or processes required to pass information to the learner.(Ayot &Patel ,1992). In a classroom, teaching there are two main teaching strategies, namely ,teacher centered teaching and child-centered teaching approaches.

2.0 Theories

Several theories of child development and learning have influenced discussions of school readiness. Three theories have had profound impact on kindergarten readiness practices. These three theories include the maturationists, environmentalist, and constructivist perspectives of development (Powell, 1991).

2.1 Maturationist theory

The maturationist theory was advanced by the work of Arnold Gessell. Maturationists believe that development is a biological process that occurs automatically in predictable, sequential stages over time (Hunt, 1969). This perspective leads many educators and families to assume that young children will acquire knowledge naturally and automatically as they grow physically and become older, provided that they are healthy (Demarest, Reisner, Anderson, Humphrey, Farquhar, & Stein, 1993).

As a psychologist, pediatrician, and educator in the 1940s, was very much interested in child development. From his numerous observations of children, he formulated a theory that stated that developmental changes in a child's body or behavior are a result of the aging process rather than from learning, injury, illness, or some other life experience. His idea of maturation was rooted in the biological, physiological, and evolutionary sciences. As a result, Gesell centered most of his theory on the power of biological forces, which he felt provided momentum for development to occur. He and his contemporaries proposed that development follows an orderly sequence and that the biological and evolutionary history of the species decides the order of this sequence. Maturation supports the idea that each child's unique genetic and biological makeup determines the rate of development regardless of other potential environmental influences.

2.2 Environmentalist Theory

Environment is a child's surroundings and every aspect entailed influences his/her learning. B.F. Skinner and Albert Bandura contributed greatly to the environmentalist perspective of development. Environmentalists believe that the child's environment shapes learning and behavior; in fact, human behavior, development, and learning are thought of as reactions to the environment. This perspective leads many families, schools, and educators to assume that young children develop and acquire new knowledge by reacting to their surroundings.

School readiness, according to the environmentalists, is the age or stage when young children can respond appropriately to the environment of the school and the classroom (e.g., rules and regulations, curriculum activities, positive behavior in group settings, and directions and instructions from teachers and other adults in the school) (Satterly,1987). The ability to respond appropriately to this environment is necessary for young children to participate in teacher-initiated learning activities. Success is dependent on the child following instructions from the teacher or the adult in the learning environment. Many environmentalist-influenced educators and parents believe that young children learn best by rote activities, such as reciting the alphabet over and over, copying letters, and tracing numbers. These viewpoints are evident in kindergarten classrooms where young children are expected to sit at desks arranged in rows and listen attentively to their teachers. At home, parents may provide their young children with workbooks containing such activities as coloring or tracing letters and numbers. When young children are unable to respond appropriately to the classroom and school environment, they often are labeled as having some form of learning disabilities and are tracked in classrooms with curriculum designed to control their behaviors and responses.

There are several factors that were also observed by different theorists. They contribute to development of the child in relation to the behaviors he acquires due to environmental factors.

2.2.1 Cognitive Theory

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a biologist who originally studied molluscs but moved into the study of the development of children's understanding, through observing them and talking and listening to them while they worked on exercises he set (Wood, 1998). Children's minds work and develop enormously influencing educational theory. Their mind grow up and its capacity increases to understand their world. They cannot undertake certain tasks until they are psychologically mature enough to do so. Their thinking does not develop entirely smooth but

instead, there are certain points at which "it takes off" and moves completely into new areas and capability. Piaget's Key Ideas are Assimilation and Accommodation.

a) Assimilation: The process by which a person takes material into their mind from the environment, which may mean changing the evidence of their senses to make it fit.

b) Accommodation: The difference made to one's mind or concepts by the process of assimilation.

Stages of Cognitive Development

Key ideas that are developed by the stages in cognitive theory which will support assimilation and accommodation in relation to learning are:

Pre-operational (2-7 years): Here the child learns to use language and to represent objects by images and words. Thinking is still egocentric: has difficulty taking the viewpoint of others. It classifies objects by a single feature: e.g. groups together all the red blocks regardless of shape or all the square blocks regardless of colour.

Concrete operational (7-11 years): Can think logically about objects and events.

Classifies objects according to several features and can order them in series along a single dimension such as size.

Formal operational (**11 years and up**)**:** Can think logically about abstract propositions and test hypotheses systematically. Becomes concerned with the hypothetical, the future, and ideological problems.

Piaget's approach is central to the school of cognitive theory known as "cognitive constructivism": other scholars, known as "social constructivists",suchas **Vygotsky** and **Bruner**, have laid more emphasis on the part played by language and other people in enabling children to learn.

2.2.2 Behaviorist Theory

Skinner also identified the reactions of a learner in a given type of environment and drew conclusions. He states that pleasant experiences (reward) are positive reinforces because they

make desired connections between stimuli and response unlike unpleasant experience (punishment) are negative reinforces because they make learners to avoid undesirable responses to stimuli. Further he states that continuous reinforcement increases rate of learning and lack of any also shapes. Intermittent reinforcement retains what is learned for long while both pleasant and unpleasant shape behavior. Lack of acknowledgement of their behavior, they will likely receive some kind of reinforcement.

2.3 Constructivism

The constructivist perspective of readiness and development was advanced by theorists such as Jean Piaget, Maria Montessori, and Lev Vygotsky. Although their work varies greatly, each articulates a similar context of learning and development. They are consistent in their belief that learning and development occur when young children interact with the environment and people around them (Hunt, 1969). Constructivists view young children as active participants in the learning process. In addition, constructivists believe young children initiate most of the activities required for learning and development. Because active interaction with the environment and people are necessary for learning and development, constructivists believe that children are ready for school when they can initiate many of the interactions they have with the environment and people around them. Influenced schools and educators pay a lot of attention to the physical environmental and the curriculum of early childhood classroom. Kindergarten classrooms are divided into different learning centers and fitted with environmentally appropriate materials for young children. Teacher and adult converse directly with children, meaningful activities are incorporated into curriculum through children experience, children are engaged by parents in reading and storytelling activities.

Maria Montessori developed an educational theory where she combined ideas of scholars with methods she had found in medicine, education, and anthropology. "We should really find the way to teach the child how, before, before making him execute a task." She suggested that

teachers see themselves as social engineers; she enhanced the scientific qualities of education-the Montessori Method (kilpatric, 1971).

In 1907, she started directing a system of daycare centers for working class children in one of romes worst neighborhood. The children entered her program as "wild and unruly". Much to her surprise they began to respond to her teaching methods. She always held them in the highest regard and taught her teachers to do likewise. She believed that the learning environment was just as important as the learning itself. Because of this belief her schools were often peaceful, orderly places, were the children valued their space for concentration and the process of learning.she trained thousands of teachers the Montessori curriculum and methodology around the world (Bentley, 1964).

Today, most researchers have come to understand child development and the learning process as articulated by the constructivists. However, this view has not been widely translated into practice. Many kindergarten teachers and parents still believe that young children are not ready for school unless they can recite the alphabet, count, and have the ability to follow instructions from adults.

3.0 Conclusion

These theories explain deeply on how teaching and learning in Early Childhood Education is effective and the better understanding of one another. The results when incorporated will definitely bring out a perfect score ever which is helpful to the learner in his/her entire life.

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