

Learning Theory

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Introduction

The success that an individual attains in adulthood can be influenced by their development as a child. People learn many skills as children, including those in the areas of social, emotional and cognitive development. Children learn through direct instruction, but also through group collaboration. Vygotsky theorized that children can learn from one another through the method of scaffolding, where children receive support in the early stages of learning and that support lessens over time. His theories also support cooperative learning strategies, “in which children work together to help one another learn” (Slavin & Schunk, 2017, p. 39). Although collaboration can be beneficial to student learning, teachers are the ultimate instructors. When students demonstrate delays in learning and academic achievement, it is the job of the educator to understand their learning needs and use the best instructional methods and assessments to overcome skill deficits. Children are all capable learners and should be given the same opportunities and tools to achieve success in their education.

Learning Theory and Its Importance

“Learning involves acquiring and modifying knowledge, skills, strategies, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors” (Slavin & Schunk, 2017, p. 2). It is known that learning is important, however, people have different ideas and opinions about how individuals acquire knowledge and what comes of learning new skills. Theories help us to understand and advance learning, but research is primarily conducted to improve teaching. Learning theories can help educators understand which instructional methods and assessments are the most effective and how to incorporate them into their lessons. Many aspects, including student memory and motivation, can affect the way an individual learns as well. Educators should recognize and consider how they can improve student abilities through their instructional methods and teaching styles. Although

learning theories are essential to enhancing teaching methods and student learning, they are only beneficial through practice and experience.

Learning theories have been found to improve educational practices, nevertheless they do not come without contest. Behavior and cognitive theories stress the importance of other aspects, such as, the role of the environment in learning and the need to make learning meaningful. For example, Jean Piaget believed that a child's cognitive development occurs in stages and depends on their interactions with the environment. Children display schemes, or patterns of behavior, which can be adjusted through accommodating and assimilating to their environments (Slavin & Schunk, 2017). When new events are incorporated into existing schemes, children assimilate. However, when new experiences occur and do not fit existing schemes, children must modify them to accommodate the new. This is one theory of how children develop cognitively, but there are also those behavioral theories. Ivan Pavlov's work in classical conditioning demonstrated how learning can affect our behaviors. Using stimuluses, Pavlov evoked conditioned responses, proving that behaviors can be learned (Slavin & Schunk, 2017). It is necessary to consider these factors in a child's behavioral and cognitive development and how they affect student learning, along with learning theories.

Description of an Effective Teacher

To be an effective teacher, an individual must exhibit several qualities. Not only should teachers have great organizational skills and good instructional methods, but they should also demonstrate positive personal characteristics as well. Elementary teachers play a big role, as the time of child development is so significant to these students. At this age students are self-discovering and often model what is presented to them. Therefore, elementary teachers should not only teach the qualities of respect, compassion and understanding, but should also

demonstrate these qualities themselves. As Jesus has been the ultimate role model, teachers should follow in His example. The Word says, “Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity” (Titus 2:7, English Standard Version). As Christ displayed many good works, effective teachers should as well.

Along with personal qualities, the self-confidence of teachers was found to have a great impact on student learning. When looking at professional characteristics, clarification of doubts was the most important factor (Saini, Sethi, Chauhan, 2019). It is important that teachers make students feel capable of learning and eliminate any uncertainties. Other teacher qualities included respect and fairness to students, along with experience. Students were found to believe that personal, professional and scientific characteristics of teachers were equally important (Saini, Sethi, Chauhan, 2019). These teacher qualities can be universally important, no matter the age group being taught. Children expect teachers to show them respect and compassion, while also being confident leaders and role models. It is important that teachers remove any fear of failure or doubts in a child to improve their self-efficacy as well. “Thus, teachers must work on their characteristics which they feel need improvement, so as to deliver effective teaching” (Saini, Sethi, Chauhan, 2019, p. 94).

Description of an Effective Learning Environment

“Although there is a well-known evidence base for teacher use of effective classroom management practices, teacher implementation of these practices varies” (Sebastian, Herman & Reinke, 2019, pg. 134). Some teachers feel they do not have adequate training on classroom management strategies and how to implement them. Benefits of positive classroom management practices include less distractions and disruptions to student learning, promoting on-task behaviors, better student engagement and achievement and higher social and emotional

competence (Sebastian, Herman & Reinke, 2019). Some ways to promote learning environments include keeping to a strict routine, establishing appropriate behaviors and feedback, actively engaging students and providing praise to children.

Building strong relationships between students can also impact a learning environment. Teachers can incorporate group collaboration activities to improve social skills and promote student motivation and engagement. When educators teach through a constructivist approach, “it is expected that the physical environment of schools allow learners to interact, cooperate and share opinions with each other” (Durmus, 2016, p. 184). The physical environment of a classroom is essential to inspire interest, excitement and creativity in learning. The importance of healthy, effective learning environments should be recognized by teachers when working on classroom management.

Actively Including and Engaging Learners with Diverse Needs and Exceptionalities

When educating students with disabilities it is important to provide them with the least restrictive environment possible. For those with exceptionalities in the general classroom, teachers should always follow their accommodations and modifications as needed. Students with exceptionalities often work best in small group settings, so group work can be a great way to include all students. As the Bible says, “So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27, ESV). As all human beings were created in the image of God himself, “all students are able to contribute something to the classroom community as they unfold their particular gift” (Van Brummelen, 2009, p. 237). Students with diverse needs are capable of learning and should be given the same opportunities as typically developing students. It is the job of the educator to teach the way students learn, as children are diverse and learn in many ways.

Addressing Behavior and Character Development

Students learn through observing and modeling behaviors. Albert Bandura notes that behaviors are not only shaped by consequences but can be learned through direct observation and imitation or modeling. Through his analysis of observational learning, he discusses the attentional, retention, reproduction and motivational phases (Slavin & Schunk, 2017). As teachers are models to children, it is important that they always model appropriate and wanted behaviors. Just as Jesus was the ultimate role model to his pupils, teachers should follow in his example.

Through Skinner's work on operant conditioning, we have discovered how immediate consequences, pleasant or unpleasant, can cause behavior changes (Slavin & Schunk, 2017). One great way for teachers to strengthen desired behaviors in the classroom is through reinforcement. When using reinforcement, it is essential to reinforce positive behaviors immediately after they occur. Examples of reinforcers include attention, praise, tangible items and food. Children should also have set behavioral expectations in the classroom. Along with these expectations, children should receive guidance and support from peers and teachers (Day, Gu & Sammons, 2016).

Engaging Students in Learning, Building Self-Efficacy and Motivation

Academic performance can be affected by student engagement and motivation in learning. "Students have a level of motivation that they experience and that influences their choice, effort and persistence regarding a particular activity" (Vrieling, Stijnen & Bastiaens, 2018). Thus, teachers should use instructional methods that keep students interested and engaged in work. Another tool in motivating students is the use of technology. Technology has been found to bring out student interaction, engagement and enjoyment in learning activities

(Florenthal, 2018). Technology, along with group collaboration and organized learning environments, can enhance student learning and academic achievement in school.

Although technology use in education is becoming more prevalent, the role of the teacher is still essential to student learning (Unwin, 2019). Teachers not only provide instruction and content to students; they also play a huge role in character development and self-efficacy. As mentioned, teachers are models to students, and they can influence student efficacy as well. Research found that when students observed a confident, nonpersistent model, their own self-efficacy increased (Slavin & Schunk, 2017).

Personal Reflections/Conclusion

During elementary school, children develop their sense of self-concept and self-esteem (Slavin & Schunk, 2017). This time in an individual's life is one of the most significant, developmentally. During this time, children are at risk of developing poor academic self-concepts, which can affect their performance through elementary and secondary school (Slavin & Schunk, 2017). Because this is such a vital time in a student's life, the role of a teacher becomes that much more important. Giving children choices in their learning will keep them motivated and engaged, which will in turn lead to academic success. As teachers, we should always set an example in the ways of the Lord. "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1, New International Version). Children are easily influenced during this time in their lives and should be taught the characteristics of respect, compassion and kindness. Children should be given opportunities to explore themselves, build their creativity and gain confidence in learning and in life.

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