

Allison McGee

Salt Lake Community College

FHS 2600-001

October 20, 2012

Theory Comparison

Erikson, Maslow, Piaget, Vygotsky, Skinner, and the Reggio Emilia Schools are six of the most influential figures in the field of early childhood education. Their theories vary, but combined provide a comprehensive understanding of the process of the cognitive, physical, and emotional development of young children.

Psychologist Erik Erikson is one of the more influential figures in child development theory. Heavily influenced by cultural anthropologists, he saw culture and social experiences as the primary factors that influence development. Erickson proposed four stages of psychological and social development applicable to young children- Stage 1: Trust versus Mistrust (birth to 18 months), Stage 2: Autonomy versus Doubt (18 months to 3 years), Stage 3: Initiative versus Guilt (3 years to 6 years), and Stage 4: Industry versus Inferiority (6 years to 12 years.)

During Stage 1 the major task of infant development is that infants must develop a sense of trust in the world, and their caregivers. Their physical and emotional needs need to be met by responsive caregivers and if caregivers are not responsive the infant learns that the world is an untrustworthy place. Stage 2 is characterized by a separation from primary caregivers and a desire to do things for themselves. Children in this stage assert their autonomy, often leading to power struggles with caregivers. This phenomenon is often referred to as the “terrible twos.” Although sometimes unpleasant for adults, these power struggles are vital for healthy development and harsh or restrictive caregiving can result in a child’s doubt in their own competence. During Stage 3 children gain a sense of their own capabilities and in turn, a sense of confidence. They begin to initiate their own activities and if their ideas are often punished they can begin to feel guilty and withdraw socially and emotionally. During stage 4 the importance of parents’ opinions lessens as children seek approval from teachers and peers. Children also begin

to master more skills as a part of school and derive satisfaction from their accomplishments. However they also begin to judge themselves against their peers and develop a sense of inferiority. (Bredekamp, 107-108).

Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist, first presented his self-actualization theory in his 1943 paper "*A Theory of Human Motivation.*" (Maslow 370-396) The theory proposes a hierarchy of needs that "*motivate people's behavior and goals that are necessary for healthy personality development.*" (Bredekamp, 109) The hierarchy can be represented in a pyramid demonstrating the needs and goals of development. The two bottom layers represent basic human needs: physical needs (air, water, food, shelter, sex) and psychological safety and security. Maslow proposed that if these basic needs are not met, individuals cannot progress to higher levels of the pyramid. The top three levels depict growth needs: a sense of belonging and love, and self-esteem and respect for others. Unless all of these needs are met, individuals cannot reach the top of the pyramid- self-actualization.

The work of Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget has had a strong influence on the world of early childhood education. He proposed a constructivist learning theory that holds that children build firsthand knowledge from their own experiences. He rejected the idea that children were miniature adults or empty vessels and contended that they learn through active experiences. Piaget saw development as a process of adaptation where children experience new interactions and form an appropriate scheme for those interactions.

Piaget theorized that there are three types of knowledge: physical, loco-mathematical, and social conventional knowledge. These types of knowledge are learned in different ways, but all through interactions and experiences. However Piaget also thought that biology plays an

important role in cognitive development. He proposed 4 Stages of cognitive development: Sensorimotor (birth to 2 years), Preoperational (2 to 7 years), Concrete Operational (7 to 11 years), and Formal Operations (11 years to adulthood). (Bredekamp, 113) The Sensorimotor Stage is characterized by the infant learning *“through senses and physical movement, gradually moving from reflexes and conscious activity.”* (Bredekamp, 113) During this stage children lack understanding of object permanence and see the world and experiences from an egocentric point of view. As they progress into the Preoperational Stage children are able to learn through symbols, developing math and reading abilities, but are still more likely to be influenced by their own perceptions other than logic.

Lev Vygotsky was a Russian born contemporary of Piaget. Vygotsky proposed a sociocultural theory of development that proposed that children learn *“from social interaction within a cultural context.”* (Bredekamp, 115) The key part of this theory is that what children learn is strongly influenced by the cultural context they are raised in. Vygotsky saw development as a *“continuous process driven by learning.”* (Bredekamp, 115) Infants learn through their senses, manipulation of objects, and interactions with adult caregivers. From ages 2 to 5 the process of development is heavily influenced by what children perceive and how they react to it.

An integral part of Vygotsky’s theory is the idea of Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD) *“the distance between the actual development level an individual has achieved (his or her independent level of problem solving) and the level of potential development he or she could achieve with adult guidance or through collaboration with other children.”* (Bredekamp, 117) Understanding of a child’s ZPD is important because it allows teachers and caregivers to scaffold appropriately in order to help children reach their full potential. Self-regulation and private speech are also important aspects of Vygotsky’s theory. He theorized that children need to

master these skills in order to be successful. If children are able to master these skills, they will be able to demonstrate self-discipline and improve their executive function.

Behavioral learning theory is another integral part of understanding our current body of knowledge pertaining to early childhood development and education. Behavioral learning theory suggests that *“learning is a change in behavior that is controlled by the consequences, either positive or negative, that follow the behavior.”* (Bredekamp, 120) A key part of this theory, operant conditioning, was developed by psychologist B.F. Skinner in the mid 1900’s. Operant conditioning is that idea that one can use pleasant or unpleasant consequences to control behavior. Teachers or caregivers can use positive reinforcement in order to encourage positive behaviors and negative reinforcement to discourage negative behaviors. It is important to note that negative reinforcement and punishment are different. A punishment simply stops or reduces a negative behavior, whereas negative reinforcement works to improve the behavior, not just stop it.

The Reggio Emilia approach was developed in city run preschools and toddler/infant centers in Reggio, Emilia, Italy. With the support of area parents Loris Malaguzzi started the program during WWII. The Reggio Emilia approach does not designate a certain curriculum or model. At its core it is the idea that children are *“rich in potential and [are] citizens with rights.”*(Bredekamp, 127) The schools incorporate many of the ideas of Vygotsky and Piaget. The Reggio Emilia approach can be represented in its core values: the image of the child, children’s relationships and interactions, the role of parents, the role of space: an amiable school, teachers and children as partners in learning, curriculum as a process of inviting and sustaining learning, the many languages of children, learning through projects, and the power of documentation.

Overall the work of these scholars as a whole provides a comprehensive understanding of current thinking about early childhood education and development but there are many differences between them. Both Erickson and Piaget saw development as a series of stages, although their stages differed dramatically. Piaget and Vygotsky stressed the importance of children learning through interactions and experiences; however they interpreted them in different ways. Vygotsky and Erickson both saw social interactions and development through a lens of cultural context but views cognitive development differently. The Reggio Emilia schools take many of the ideas of Vygotsky and Piaget and combine them, then add in their own core value of children as citizens with rights. Maslow's theory was not developed to necessarily apply only to young children; however it can be applied in a learning context. Both Vygotsky and behavioral learning theory focus on children learning self-control skills they need to be successful, but they are approached in different ways.

All of these theories help me improve my understanding of the development of young children and I think it is important not to just choose one philosophy to apply to education and ignore all the rest, but to combine them to gain a greater understanding of children. All of these theories have great ideas to offer. I do see stages of development in children as Erikson, Piaget, and Vygotsky with his zones of proximal development presented. However I think what almost all of these theories are missing is seeing children as individuals. These represent generalizations about the development of children, but it is important to see children as individuals who develop on an individual time line. Some children might be able to do certain things at an age Piaget thought impossible, and some will take longer than normal. Maslow's theory is important in education, but it has limited applications. However, while self-actualization may not be a primary goal of early childhood education, it is certainly true that if children's basic physical and

emotional needs are not met, they will be dramatically less likely to be able to learn.

Behaviorism is an important part of encouraging children to engage in more positive behaviors, but they also need to be able to develop the self-regulation skills Vygotsky suggested in order to be successful.

Together these six philosophers provide us with a comprehensive understanding of the field of early childhood development. It is important to take all of these theories and see their real world applications, to see them as a whole instead of individually, and to continue to learn about new research in the field of early childhood education.

Resources

Bredekamp, Sue. *Effective Practices in Early Childhood Education: Building a Foundation*.

Pearson Education, 2011. Print.

Maslow, A.H. "Psychological Review." *Psychological Review*. 50. (1943): 370-396. Web. 20 Oct. 2012.