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Piaget and Vygotsky on Motivation

What is a teacher's job? Some would say that it is to teach children, but I would argue that it is to encourage students to learn, and to develop a love of learning. If a teacher views their job as only to teach children, it is easy for them to just give the students information without really thinking about the students and their future learning experiences. On the other hand, if a teacher views their job as encouraging students to love learning, rather than to just fill their heads with facts, the students will feel more confident, and will be more likely to continue to succeed in school and in their future. How to motivate a student to enjoy learning is a bigger issue that many educational psychologists have dealt with over many years. Piaget and Vygotsky are two psychologists that have dealt with this very question. Both have come up with theories based on very different ideas, but both theories have their strengths and weaknesses. If they are examined and evaluated, they can be used in cooperation to create a love of learning in the classroom.

Piaget believes that it is best for students to be motivated intrinsically. That means that students' motivation for learning comes from what they believe about themselves and their situation. The dictionary defines it as a "stimulation that drives an individual to adopt or change a behavior for his or her own internal satisfaction or fulfillment" (Business Dictionary, 2008).

What they believe about themselves can be the stimulation that drives them, and this has a lot to do with what they are told about themselves by their peers, teachers, and parents. For example, if the child is continually told that they will not succeed, they will most likely begin to believe that, and they will quit trying to succeed because, since they are told that they will not succeed, that must really be what they are like (Pulaski, 1980, 37). Because of this fact, it is important for teachers to encourage all students, and to help them develop a positive self image in relation to their learning abilities.

Their situations can also have a huge impact on their intrinsic motivation. Assimilation is the term that is used for the process that a student uses to relate their situation to their motivation. Assimilation is defined as “the application of an established behavior pattern to a familiar or new situation” (Business Dictionary, 2008). Students have previously developed schemas (or ideas of how society works) when they begin to attend school. When they enter a new situation, they try to fit it into one of the preexisting schemas, but if it does not fit, they have to create a new schema based on what they already know (Schwebel and Raph, 1973, 127). This is related to intrinsic motivation because assimilation motivates students to learn unconsciously. They do not really think about how they learn to behave in a new situation, but they are motivated to learn because they unconsciously want to fit the new situation into their previous schemas. Piaget describes the relationship in this way, “in the young child the principal needs are of a functional category. The functioning of the organs engenders, through its very existence...a series of vicarious needs whose complexity transcends, from the very beginning, simple organic satisfaction (primary needs)...the principal motive power of intellectual activity thus becoming the need to incorporate things into the subject’s schemata...the basic fact is not need of such but rather the act of assimilation” (Wadsworth, 1971, 24).

In a way, Piaget's beliefs about motivation and intrinsic motivation are related to constructivism because they both deal with constructing ideas in our minds in order to learn. Constructivism is the belief that students have to construct meaning out of information in our own mind in order to learn (Woolfolk, 2007). This concept also applies the process of assimilation, and so, it also involves the intrinsic motivation that Piaget thought highly of. Although Piaget was not a declared constructivist, their beliefs on motivation are interconnected.

Vygotsky, on the other hand, does not agree with Piaget or Constructivism completely. He did acknowledge that intrinsic motivation did affect students' motivation, but he believed that extrinsic motivation was more effective in motivating students. Extrinsic motivation is defined as "the drive to action that springs from outside influences" (Business Dictionary, 2008). Vygotsky believed that students need outside motivations to push them to succeed at a level that they would not achieve if they were not pushed. Vygotsky's theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development" is key to his ideas about extrinsic motivations. The theory of the ZPD (zone of proximal development) states that students have a gap between what they can do on their own, and what they can do with help, and that gap is the ZPD. This gap is also where students need to be pushed into; they need extrinsic motivators to encourage them to step out of the comfort of what they can do by themselves into that ZPD, which is where they will learn and grow (Holzman and Newman, 1993). What can a teacher use to motivate their students to take that step? Unrelated items such as candy or extra credit can be used, but some more effective options would be using peer play, or encouragement to motivate students. Peer play motivates students because of its social element. The support that is provided by the collaboration is what can give the student's self esteem a boost, and can encourage him that he is not the only student who is

going through that experience. Vygotsky says that the experience will make him feel “as though he were a head taller than himself” (Holzman and Newman, 1993). Because of his belief that extrinsic motivation is more effective, Vygotsky’s theory can be connected to Behaviorism. Behaviorism is the theory that students learn only through external rewards. Although Vygotsky believed that rewards could encourage students to move into their ZPD, he did not believe that they were the end all when it came to education. He believed that it was simply a tool for getting the students to have the courage to move out into learning on their own (Woolfolk, 2007).

Although Piaget and Vygotsky disagreed on what was the most effective method for motivating students to love learning, both of their theories have points of truth. Piaget’s theory of intrinsic motivation is very good because intrinsic motivation has been proven to be the most effective in keeping helping students to love learning enough that they are motivated to continue learning on their own after they are out of the school environment. Vygotsky’s theory’s truth is that sometimes students need extrinsic motivation to push them to go farther than they would have normally felt comfortable going on their own. The caution that needs to be taken when implementing Vygotsky’s theory of motivation is that it is not used as an end in itself. When using Vygotsky’s theory, one needs to keep in mind that it is simply a way to push students, but reliance on it can actually hurt student’s motivation. This is to be used for a short time in order to motivate students, and to work towards an intrinsic motivation that the students will take with them to their future career or schooling. The main way to tell which of these theories is to look at whether or not the students need a short term reward or a long term reward. An extrinsic motivator serves as a short term reward, and can help a student in that way, but an intrinsic

motivator serves as a long term reward which is ultimately the goal in teaching students to love learning.

In my classroom in the future, I plan to use both Piaget and Vygotsky's theories.

Vygotsky's theory is a good way to begin the school year, it will get the students motivated right off of the bat, when intrinsic motivation is more difficult and students are just getting into the routine and mindset of school again. But, I will slowly wean them off of the extrinsic motivators, and move more towards getting them to be intrinsically motivated by the end of the school year. Piaget's theory, since it has more long term benefits in the area of learning motivation, is the end goal. If I can get my students to love learning, and to want to learn on their own, I think that my job as a teacher will be fulfilled. If as a teacher I view my job only as teaching children, it would be too easy to just give the students information without really thinking about the students and their future learning experiences. On the other hand, if I view my job as encouraging students to love learning, rather than to just fill their heads with facts, the students will feel more confident, and will be more likely to continue to succeed in school and in their future.

Both Vygotsky's belief in extrinsic motivation and Piaget's belief in intrinsic motivators were dealing with how to encourage students to love learning. These two psychologists have come up with theories based on very different ideas, but both theories have their strengths and weaknesses. After examining and evaluating them, I have come to the conclusion that they can be used in cooperation to successfully create a love of learning in the classroom.

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