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Piaget and Vygotsky's Views on Motivation

Piaget and Vygotsky's theories on motivation have been examined and applied to classrooms all over the world. However, their views concerning motivation are extremely different from one another because Vygotsky believes in extrinsic motivation for children, while Piaget pushes intrinsic motivation. Although each motivation has its strong points, they also falter in several places and should be reevaluated before being used in a classroom. If used correctly, these theories can pertain to classrooms without regards to domain by examining both methods of motivation and their proper means of application.

Jean Piaget was a developmental psychologist who lived between the years 1896 and 1980. Originally studying mollusks, Piaget soon found that his passion was found elsewhere: in studying the way that children learned and developed throughout the course of their lives. Although Piaget had many theories pertaining to various forms of developmental psychology, his theory on motivation in children is to be commended. Piaget believed that the best way to motivate a child was through *intrinsic* means. The Dictionary defines intrinsic motivation as "stimulation that drives an individual to adopt or change a behavior for his or her own internal satisfaction or fulfillment. Intrinsic motivation is usually self-applied, and springs from a direct relationship between the individual and the situation" (www.businessdictionary.com). Essentially, intrinsic motivation comes about when a person does work of some sort simply to gain the

knowledge and experience from it. There is no physical reward associated with intrinsic motivation, and for this reason it is typically the harder motivation to entice people with out of the two options.

The driving force behind Piaget's theory of intrinsic motivation is his concept of assimilation. In a book by Beverly Birns and Mark Golden—both Associate Professors of Education at State University of New York at Stony Brook, Long Island—the authors discuss assimilation by saying it is “the application of an established behavior pattern to a familiar or new situation. If the behavior is successful, the child is not forced to change his behavior in the new situation. However, if the behavior is not successful, the child must adapt or change his behavior to the new situation” (Schwebel and Raph, 1973, 127). Although some critics say that this action is too advanced for some children (namely the very young or mentally or physically handicapped), this is actually not true. Assimilation comes naturally to almost every living being, no matter their mental capacity. Piaget's theory relies heavily on assimilation to intrinsically motivate children to learn. Piaget himself said:

“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).

Assimilation, to Piaget, was imperative to a child's development because it was as essential to the body as an organ functioning properly. People *have* to be intellectually involved simply because it is one of the body's primary functions. Associate Professor of psychology and education at Mount Holyoke College Barry Wadsworth commented on this quote by stating, "the primary motivating force for cognitive activity is the process of assimilation, which, once developed, by its very nature seeks out the environment" (Wadsworth, 1971, 25). When a child is assimilated into an environment- according to Wadsworth- they will *want* (and even *need*) to know more, and thus they become intrinsically motivated.

Piaget also noted that the *amount* that a person is motivated related directly to the person's self-image. If a child's parents look at him/her lovingly and often tell them that they are proud of the child, the child will inevitably see his/herself as a decent person. If they see themselves as a good person, their actions will typically reflect these feelings and more often than not they will be kind towards others. On the other hand, if a child is neglected by his/her parents or they are often told how they are wrong or criticize all of their faults, the child is typically less likely to have a positive self-image (Pulaski, 1980, 37). Piaget argued that this is directly proportional to the amount of motivation the child would have. If they have a poor self-image, the child's first thoughts will not be on gaining more knowledge (although it is still a necessity to them according to Piaget), but rather they will be focusing on how they can change their actions in order to receive some more positive feedback from their friends or family members. If a child holds a high self-image, the opposite will obviously happen and they will be able to focus more on learning instead of how they can improve themselves. Without a positive self-image, a

child's intrinsic motivation slows down until they see themselves as a productive and well-liked member of their family unit.

Lev Vygotsky was another developmental scientist who was actually born in Russia the same year as Piaget (1896), but died about 46 years earlier (1934). After receiving a degree in law from Moscow University, he continued his education, but became more fascinated with literature and linguistics. After receiving his Ph. D., Vygotsky studied the development of children and was able to make several theories pertaining to their learning abilities and standard functions. The theory put forth by Lev Vygotsky concerning the motivation of children is quite different than Piaget's. While Piaget believed that motivation was intrinsic, Vygotsky believed that it was mainly *extrinsic*. Extrinsic motivation is defined as the "drive to action that (as opposed to intrinsic motivation) springs from outside influences instead of from one's own feelings" (www.businessdictionary.com). Essentially, the theory of extrinsic motivation says that if I give a child a piece of candy for doing something good, they will want to repeat that action in hopes of receiving another piece of candy. They will not repeat the action because it is the right thing to do; rather they will repeat the action for their own personal and physical gain.

In order to fully understand Vygotsky's theory, his other theories must be accounted for; namely, his theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Fred Newman (who trained in the philosophy of science and teaches at the East Side Institute for Short Term Psychotherapy in New York) and Lois Holzman (a developmental

psychologist who also teaches at the East Side Institute for Short Term Psychotherapy) stated that:

The ZPD was Vygotsky's concern with the character of the relationship between 'matured' and 'maturing' processes and, what seems plainly related (it surely did so to Vygotsky), the relationship between what the child can do independently and in collaboration with others. While recognizing, as some of his contemporaries also did, that a child can accomplish more with collaboration, help or support than she/he can alone, Vygotsky noted that the child's potential – even with help – is not unlimited. (Holzman and Newman, 1993, 56)

In short, Vygotsky's theory on the Zone of Proximal Development says that there is a wide gap between what a child can do alone and what a child can do with assistance.¹ This gap can be narrowed by using extrinsic motivators to entice the child to continue learning and accomplish things independently that in the past would have been extremely difficult or even impossible.

Vygotsky enforced his argument that extrinsic motivation has more of an impact than intrinsic by countering the latter using experiments involving play among children. Holzman and Newman state that, according to Vygotsky's work, "educators and parents... are constantly reminded (scolded) that children must be motivated in order to learn. However, according to Vygotsky (and we agree), children must learn in order to be motivated" (1993, 60). Instead of teaching children the different techniques of being motivated, Vygotsky argues that children should simply learn what there is to learn, and

¹ A picture depicting this theory can be found at the end of the document.

motivation will begin to come naturally to them. Play can be a powerful tool with this, because it is a social exercise. Instead of doing work and receiving a piece of candy for completing the project, friends and peers motivate the children simply by being present and adding that extra amount of support and praise when they complete a task. This can give the child somewhat of an ego-boost, which, as Vygotsky states, will make him feel “as though he were a head taller than himself” (Holzman and Newman, 1993, 107). By playing with school-related tasks, children can feel as if they are already proficient in a task, even if they have never really attempted it before simply by being around people who offer them motivation.

The theories between Piaget and Vygotsky differ in almost every aspect regarding the importance of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. First, Piaget believes that “things do not influence the mind of the child” (Holzman and Newman, 1993, 125); meaning that extrinsic motivations do not influence a child’s behavior. Wadsworth also comments on this theory when he says, “motivation is from within the organism, not from without. This comes about, Piaget says, because cognitive structures, once developed and functioning, perpetuate themselves by more functioning” (1971, 24). Children do not need extrinsic factors in order to continue learning, which is exactly the opposite of what Vygotsky claims. One problem with this is that intrinsic rewards, although they have long-term benefits, do little for short-term rewards. It is because of this that intrinsic motivation will not work for everybody. Not everyone is satisfied by knowing that their work will help them in the future. Many people need to have an immediate reward in order to repeat the task.

Vygotsky believed that intrinsic factors, although they were important, did not motivate children as much as extrinsic factors. Children will want to continue learning if they receive praise or rewards from outside sources; they will not want to learn simply because of their inner feelings. By rewarding the “here and now”, children will remember the prize associated with the work, and will therefore want to repeat the action in hopes of receiving the prize again. Although the prize can eventually be weaned off, the child will remember the right way of completing a task and continue doing it properly. This theory, like Piaget’s, also has some major faults. While the theory that extrinsic motivation will reach people that intrinsic motivations maybe wouldn’t, it often only motivates children for a short amount of time, and could actually harm their motivation to learn in the future. Children see extrinsic motivations as a physical prize for doing something right, and they will often repeat these actions hoping to receive the prize again. However, if, over time, they do not receive these rewards, they will become *unmotivated* to continue doing the task because they began to do the actions only for the rewards whether they meant to or not. Although it reaches a different group than Piaget’s theory of motivation, it still must be used very carefully.

The second way Vygotsky and Piaget’s theories differ is how they view the importance of play with regards to motivation among children. Piaget, who believes that motivation comes from within, sees play among children as important, but not directly related to motivation. It is important for their social growth and it will play a major role in how they fit in with society, but it does not directly motivate them to learn. Granted, they do learn, and can even be motivated to learn more *about* social aspects and

tendencies, but play among children does not typically intrinsically motivate them to learn more about the core subjects in their schools.

Vygotsky's theory on extrinsic motivation does not put social aspects and play aside like Piaget's theory, but rather embraces it and claims that it can *help* with motivation in the classroom. By using play among students in the classroom, students become motivated through different forms of peer-pressure. If, in a classroom, one student tells another student that their work is done well or they find something interesting with it, their praise will typically hold more sway than the praise given by the teacher simply because the student does not feel like they *have* to complement them (as students typically believe to be true). This peer pressure can be an *extremely* powerful force with these students and, especially if one student respects another (which is usually gained through playing together), their words will make a major impact on their actions. If their words praise the student's works, the student will be more inclined to continue working hard. On the other hand, if the student uses sarcasm in a mean way or criticizes the student's work, they will be negatively motivated to continue working according to Vygotsky. The importance of play is a major difference between the theories formed between Piaget and Vygotsky, and motivation is, according to these theorists, either greatly affected or not affected at all.

As a teacher, I believe that *both* Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories on motivation should be applied. I would apply Piaget's theory to all of my students in hopes of intrinsically motivating them so they will continue to want to learn in the future, but I believe it would be most effective when applied to the more advanced students in my

various classes. I say this because these students, unlike some of the struggling students, will probably already grasp the importance of the subject, and they will usually just need a little push to become really engrossed in the class topic. They are the ones that are more likely to want to continue learning about the issues in the future, but they often will need some sort of push in order to get started. Of course, the less-advanced students are not forgotten, and I would undoubtedly apply Piaget's theory to them as well. Even though they may not be *as* advanced as some of the other students, many are still willing to learn and even *want* to continue learning in the future. Piaget's theory of intrinsic motivation should not be applied only to the select few, but to everybody because every child has the potential to do great things if given the chance.

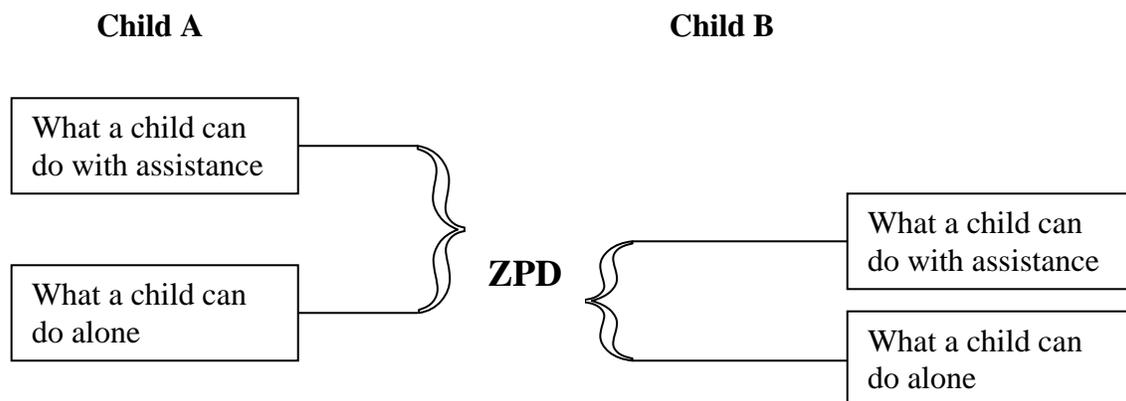
Just as with Piaget's theory, I would apply Vygotsky's theory of extrinsic motivation to my classroom with every student. Although I do not think it would be my focus, I do believe that it could really help students that might be struggling to keep up with the rest of the class. Granted, every student needs to be told they are doing a good job and occasionally receive some kind of reward to let them know they are doing well. However, if a student were really struggling, I would go out of my way to make sure I give them an extra reward for doing something good so that they will stay motivated to learn. Over time, I hope that I could cut down and only give occasional extrinsic rewards, and switch their motivation from one of primarily extrinsic value to one of intrinsic. This would take time, but by *using* extrinsic rewards to accomplish the short-term goal, I could eventually switch them over to learning for intrinsic reasons and therefore accomplish the long-term goal as well. By using both Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories of motivation in my classroom, I believe I can get more and more students

interested in my subject area and make them *want* to actively learn more about it in their free time and even after graduation.

All over the world, Piaget and Vygotsky's theories on intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations have been applied to classrooms in an effort to make students interested in learning. Although both theories are extremely important to take into account, they also each have their own minor setbacks. By examining the theories, finding out how they conflict, and deciding how to use them properly in a classroom setting, both the extrinsic and intrinsic models of motivation can propel students from learning because they have to to learning because they *want* to. This is the ultimate goal of a teacher, and one which I hope to accomplish with the help of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky.

(This is an illustrative model of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development found on page 5)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)



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