Theory to Practice Applied Project

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Introduction

For this project, I chose to apply theoretical perspectives and cognition and motivation theories to the first group of students I ever taught. These students attended school in a suburban community in northeastern Ohio which is also predominately upper class. The school consisted of grades Kindergarten through 4th with a mixed demographic population. There are about 100 students per grade level totaling about 500 for the entire school. About 60% of the population is Caucasian, 30% of the population is African American, and the other 10% is comprised of Indian, Arabic, or Asian/Pacific Islander. Religious beliefs varied from Catholicism, Christian, Mormonism, Judaism, and Buddhism.

As an intervention specialist, I taught a small group of 5 students with special needs in 3rd and 4th grades. Two of the students were white, one male and one female. Two of the students were African American, one male and one female. The fifth female student was Asian/African American. These students were identified as Specific Learning Disabilities in Language Arts and Math, Emotional Disturbance, and Asperger’s Syndrome. Motivation for all these students was extremely low and a major contributor to their productivity (or lack there of) in the classroom setting. I chose this group of students for the Applied Project because they were a very challenging group for me, but together we learned from each other and I feel they grew as individual students as I did as an educator. I have applied much of what I learned in that first year to other students who have exhibited similar characteristics in later years.

As a first year teacher, I wanted everything to be ‘perfect’ and I was willing to do whatever I needed to to make sure my students succeeded. I found myself coming to school an hour and half before the first bell and stayed well into the evening on many occasions preparing lessons that would be interesting for them yet at their learning levels. I had tremendous support from my mentor teacher, principal, and my colleagues who helped my find materials for lessons and discuss classroom management techniques. Even with all the support and encouragement, I still found myself dissatisfied with all I was doing because my students were not really progressing academically or socially and they were exhibiting classroom behaviors that were not conducive to learning. For example students were talking during instructional time,
blurting out inappropriate comments, stealing food and personal items from others, not paying attention/falling asleep in class, and not participating in classroom discussion. On some occasions, students threw items around the classroom. It seems almost daily I would have to review classroom rules and expectations yet students failed to follow them in almost a defiant way.

I believe all student's in my class demonstrated characteristics of cognitive, psychosocial, and moral development. For example, students could somewhat understand themes and concepts around them but frequently did not reason logically in adult like ways or were not able to transfer knowledge and acquired skills into other settings which are classic examples of Piaget's Preoperational and Concrete Operational Stages of Development. Students also exhibited egocentric tendencies regarding taking other's perspectives and in the area of speech (Snowman, McCown, & Biehler, 37-39). The students frequently engaged in negative moral and social behaviors when dealing with feelings of shame, guilt, or empathy which are classic characteristics of Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development.

Additionally, student motivation was a major concern for these students. In the classroom setting as well as in non-academic settings (recess, gym, art, music), students demonstrated a need to out-do or out-perform others which is a trait identified in Entity Theory (Dweck, 74-76). Three of the students in class were living in foster homes – for some, it was the 4th or 5th home in their young lives. This fact gives support to Attribution Theory in that students felt they weren't ever going to do well because no one wanted them in their home or wanted them to succeed (Dweck 139-41). I was even in a conference with one set of parents who told their child to their face, “You are never going to be anything in your life except a problem for others…”

Coinciding with all the motivational Theories, I am a firm believer of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. I strongly feel that if a child’s basic or physiological needs are not met, they will not be able to perform higher order thinking skills and functions (Snowman, McCown, & Biehler, 428-30). Many of these students' basic needs were not met at home by their parents or caregivers, so could I honestly ‘expect’ them to come to school ready to learn? The remainder of this document will explore the possible reasons
for this student behavior and what can be done to improve student cognitive attitudes and motivation towards learning.

**Theoretical Analysis**

**Cognition**

Jean Piaget was an early researcher in the Constructivist View of Learning and how children develop. The main emphasis of his research focused on the internal structures or stages children go through and the changes that occur to children while going through each stage. Piaget believed that there are four main stages children go through even though the rate at which children go through the stages may differ. The stages are Sensorimotor (birth-2 years), Preoperational (2-7 years), Concrete Operational (7-11 years), and Formal Operations (11 years+) (Snowman, McCown, & Biehler, 37).

As previously stated, students in my class could somewhat understand themes and concepts around them but frequently did not reason logically in adult like ways or were not able to transfer knowledge and acquired skills into other settings which are classic characteristics of children in the Preoperational and Concrete Operational stages. I distinctly remember a time when I was teaching my students about fractions. Rather than just discussing the numerator, denominator, parts to whole, etc, I decided to bring in pizza dough that each student could roll out and cut into pieces so they could have more of a hands on experience. I had one student cut their pizza in two pieces and another to cut theirs in 4. I asked the student who cut theirs into 4 pieces if ½ of the pizza is the same or equal to 2/4 of the pizza and she replied, “No, he has less than I do because he has one piece and I have two.” Clearly, even with the concrete model, this student was not yet able to transfer knowledge or visualize that ½ is equal to 2/4 of a pizza.

Students in my class also demonstrated egocentrism and egocentric speech. Egocentrism is an inability for one to view a situation from another’s perspective and egocentric speech occurs when one says something without considering the feelings of the listeners (Snowman, McCown & Biehler, 38). There was another student in the regular education class whose uncle had past away unexpectedly. The student was
very upset and distraught about the situation. One of my students threw a ball at the face of the grieving student during gym class and told her to get over it. Unmistakably, my student exhibited egocentric behavior by not being empathetic to the situation and saying hurtful things to another child. I believe age compounded with having some type of disability, some of these students may need more hands on experience and time in Piaget’s stages of development.

The final cognitive theory to be explored is one of moral development and cognition. Lawrence Kohlberg expanded on the Piagetian concept of moral thinking. After conducting a series of moral dilemma experiments, Kohlberg identified six stages of moral reasoning in three levels including Preconventional Morality (birth to 9 years), Conventional Morality (9 years – adolescence), and Post-Conventional Morality (adulthood – on). Simply a matter of age puts my students in the first level Preconventional Morality. This level includes Stage 1 Punishment-Obedience Orientation and Stage 2 Instrumental Relativist Orientation (Snowman, McCown, & Biehler, 57). Stage 1 encompasses the ideas of ‘goodness’ and ‘badness’ as determined by choices we make and people of authority must be obeyed. Children will typically avoid punishment by not getting into trouble. Stage 2 involves an exchange of ‘goods,’ if you will, if it meets one’s needs, even if the action is maladaptive. In Stage 2, there is a personal reward based on one’s interest in the action.

These stages remind me of two students in particular from my first class. For the purposes of this document, they will be referred to as ‘Jane’ and ‘Tom.’ Jane was a 9 year old African American girl who was living with her adoptive family but had previously lived in three other foster homes. She was identified as Other Health Impaired with learning disabilities in math and reading. Tom was a 9 year old African American boy who was living with his adoptive parents. He was identified as Emotionally Disturbed with learning disabilities in math and reading. Both Jane and Tom exhibited characteristics of moral development – or lack thereof. I distinctly remember a time when I was working one on one with Tom in math. He was really struggling with multi-digit subtraction with regrouping. He told me that he was ‘no good at math.’ I asked him why he would think such a thing and we talked about all he was able to do in math. Tom then said that his parents told him he was bad because he was stupid in math and would never be
anything in life. The self fulfilling prophecy was in motion… Soon after, I had an Individualized Education Program meeting with Tom’s dad. Tom stayed for the meeting and was proud of what goals he actually met. When Tom’s dad and I spoke about future goals, his dad said something along the lines of, “Tom has always been really stupid in math. I wish you could do something to change it…” Tom’s face went to smile to a frown when he heard the words come out of his father’s mouth. Tom looked up to his dad – the authority figure- and when his father said that about him, he felt like he was a bad person.

Jane frequently engaged in activities for personal rewards or satisfaction. Weekly, Jane would steal items from the cafeteria during breakfast and lunch, and steal items from lunches that were in other students’ lockers. When asked if she had taken anything, Jane was quick to respond, “No,” even though her pockets were bulging. I would ask her to empty her pockets and sure enough I would find a handful of melted chocolate or a squished sandwich. Given her history of taking things that were not hers, I made a phone call home. My principal who has known this family for 6 years (older siblings), told me that Jane’s mom will admittedly lock up food at the house and the children can only eat at specific times. So, if they are not done eating within 10 minutes, they will have to wait until the next meal time. I feel this is a strong contributor to Jane’s moral development.

Motivation & Self Regulation

There are countless theories of motivation and self regulation that could apply to the students in this setting. I am going to describe three theories in particular that I feel really apply to the students in my class including Entity and Attribution Theories and Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.

Carol S. Dweck is a Professor of Psychology at Columbia University and a leader in the field of motivation. She has published many books that are widely acknowledged including the book, Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development. In this book, Dweck goes into great detail of incremental and entity theories of intelligence. Incremental theory suggests that intelligence is malleable and something that can be learned over time with effort and guidance. Incremental theorist value the concept of learning and the process in which a task is completed. Conversely,
entity theory suggests that intelligence is a fixed trait and you are born with a certain amount of “smartness” and it cannot change. Entity theorists would much rather take on a task they are familiar doing or know they are good at so they look smart (Dweck, 2-4).

Even though I think that everyone should be an incremental theorist, there are many that hold and value entity theory above all. I suppose this would change from person to person dependent on the upbringing and rearing of that certain individual, which brings the discussion back to the focus students in this paper. Sadly, all of my students my first year were entity theorists. They thought that because they earned ‘bad’ grades they were stupid and their peers, who earned ‘good’ grades, were smarter than they were. These students were dramatically impacted by their theory of intelligence and success and failures (Dweck, 74-75). Many times, my students would try to out-do, or out-perform their peers, most often in non-academic settings (recess, gym, art, music) because that is where they were ‘smarter.’ For example, one student named ‘Sophie,’ would constantly talk about what she was doing with her parents over the weekend while talking to peers because that is what they were discussing. Sophie in fact, lived with her grandmother and did not see her parents, yet told outlandish stories about her going to Disneyland for the weekend or going camping. On other occasions, the two boys in my class would try to out perform other boys in gym class by running or engaging in other physical activity because that is what they were good at. For Sophie and both boys, they would verbalize to their peers what they were doing or that they were better than the peers (also showing lack of empathy as previously covered). I was determined to show my students that their performance was not a direct reflection of their intelligence, but that they needed to practice to become better learners.

Dweck also discusses Attribution Theory in relation to motivation in her book. This theory involves how people make sense of the world they live and how they explain things they experience or observe. More specifically, how people attribute their success and failures will have a greater impact on how they feel about their successes and failures. For example, if one of my students attributes their failure to luck or effort, they may be more optimistic in the future the next time they try. At the same time, if the student attributes their failure to their own ability or difficulty of the task, they may not be
as optimistic to try for a second time (Dweck, 139-140). Again and again when one of my students answered a question correctly, I would provide verbal praise for the response. Students would say they were just lucky or got an easy question. So, learning how to engage in appropriate self talk can dramatically affect one’s futuristic outcomes and self efficacy. Moreover, as mentioned in the Introduction, this was the 4th or 5th foster home for some of my students. In one conference a parent actually said to their child, “You are never going to be anything in your life except a problem for others…” In turn, this student attributes activities and what effort they do show in life to be unsuccessful based on what the authority figure in their life is telling them.

Finally, we come to a Humanistic View of Motivation – Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. This theory holds that individuals have an inner drive for motivation and gratification and there is a propensity to fulfill a higher need when a lower need is fulfilled (Snowman, McCown, & Biehler, 428). Maslow’s hierarchy consists of the following five levels in ascending order: physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self actualization. Physiological needs are at the bottom of the hierarchy which represents how much strength this need holds. If one is hungry, thirsty, cannot breath, etc., then they cannot move onto the next level of this hierarchy and so on and so forth. In order to reach the top, self actualization, the preceding four needs must be met. Self actualization is the need for self fulfillment - developing one’s talents and abilities (Snowman, McCown, & Biehler, 428).

Many of the students I had did not even have their physiological needs met. They came to school without eating breakfast or getting enough sleep. What made this more difficult is that we do not allow snacks in our district because of student allergies so I could not even give these students anything. Other students did not have their safety, belongingness, love, or esteem needs met. Students did not know how long they would be living in their house because they ‘moved’ around a lot, did not have enough money to buy lunch, did not feel accepted or loved by family, and did not have much self esteem. How can I honestly expect them to want to do well and reach their true potential if they have all these stronger needs unfulfilled?
Practical Applications

This section is the *Applied* section of the *Theory to Practice Applied Project*. The objective is to create a lesson or activity incorporating what I have learned about student cognition and motivation and Educational Psychology and how this knowledge can be applied in an academic setting. Since the students discussed throughout the document were from my first class, this lesson plan is one I would have liked to have done with my first class, or can be utilized for a similar class setting in the future.

In the beginning the school year, I would like to have a lesson beginning with a discussion of what our classroom rules and consequences should be. Together we can make the rules and consequences that everyone needs to follow and hopefully it will be fair for all. Students will take turns verbalizing their thoughts and ideas as others listen. The intent is if the students help create their rules and consequences, they will be more willing to follow them. It is also the hope that these rules will reduce the everyday classroom interruptions (shouting or talking out at inappropriate times, using kind words with peers, etc.) and increase classroom expectations (completing homework on time, keep hands and feet to self, participating in classroom discussion, etc.) I will write out these rules and expectations and everyone in class will sign the document showing that they will abide by the rules. The document will be sent home so that the parents are also aware of classroom rules and consequences for behavior and actions.

The second activity I would like to engage the students in is one of goal setting. We will have discussion of what goals are and how to pick goals to work towards. In order to do this, the students will have to discuss what they are good at and what they need to improve in. This might be difficult for some considering the various backgrounds they may be coming from, but I could use myself as a model. I can write down things I am good at and other things I am not as good at. Hopefully students will recognize that even an adult and their teacher is far from perfect and that I even have to work hard to get things. During the discussion, we will also talk about proximal and distal goals (short term and long term goals), personal versus academic goals, and how to choose which goals to work towards at first. After the discussion, I will demonstrate to students how I would fill out a Goal planning document which will include the following information to be filled out:
1. What short term goal do I want to reach this week?
2. What actions or steps will I need to take to reach my goal?
3. How will I know when I have accomplished my goal?
4. What problems do I think I will run into trying to reach my goal?
5. Who can I go to for help if I get stuck or have a hard time completing my goal?
6. How confident am I that I will reach my goals?

** 7. & 8. after the goal is completed**

7. How satisfied I am with my previous goal accomplishment?

8. What are the reasons for reaching my goal or not reaching my goal?

Initially I would like to focus on proximal and attainable goals so students can actually feel their success and be proud of their accomplishments. As the school year progresses and students get more practice working towards proximal goals, they can also work on distal goals.

For a final activity, I would like to engage the students in a role playing activity. I will have predetermined scripts of what students will say and all they will have to do is read them and ‘play the part.’ These scripts will include topics such as bullying, being a good friend, being respectful, being honest, etc. There will be two role plays per topic – one negative and one positive way to handle a situation. The negative way will be presented and read first followed by the positive. We will have a discussion about what the students observed and how they could handle the situation if they found themselves in a similar circumstance.

It is the intent that the opening rule and consequence activity will provide students a concrete reality of what is expected in the classroom moving them closer to Piaget’s Concrete Operational Stage of Development. By taking turns, allowing others to verbalize thoughts, and discussion of what rules and consequences to include will offer me the opportunity for guided discussion with students and modeling of how agree
or disagree with someone on an issue. I can model appropriate ways to participate in conversation without being egocentric. In addition, if students have the ownership of creating their rules and consequences and feel their successes, they may attribute their behavior and actions differently touching on Attribution and Entity Theories along with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Engaging in this activity from the start will set the standard of how to treat others the rest of the year.

The second activity is multifaceted in desired outcomes. Much of intent is similar to the above outcomes for the initial rules and consequences activity. I may not be able to do much about Maslow’s physiological need for food, but I am able to provide students with water, a healthy, loving, nurturing, and stimulating learning environment. Hopefully in time, students will learn to trust me as their teacher and they will consider the praise I give them genuine resulting in higher self esteem. In addition, as students set goals and reach them, they will hopefully start believing more in what they are capable of if they really try, versus what they can not do. Students will attribute their hard work and practice to their successes in the academic setting and they will realize they too can be the “smart” kids if they try their best.

The role playing activity will allow students to become a character and act out a certain role. When the group goes to discuss how an individual acted negatively, it really won’t be that child, but it was the child’s character. Hopefully, students will gain a better understanding of how to act in a more appropriate way by considering all the sides of a situation and how to respond accordingly whether the correct response is to show empathy, comfort, ownership, and the like.

To evaluate the effectiveness of these planned lessons, I will use direct observation, anecdotal records, and collect/copy goal planning documents. Direct observation of students will be conducted in the classroom setting as well as non-academic setting and documented by means anecdotal recordings. Observations made will provide some evidence as to whether or not students are internalizing social and motivational strategies and techniques learned in the classroom setting and if the students are able to generalize what they’ve learned in other settings. The goal planning documents will be collected and copied before handed back to students. Goals will be
measured weekly by the teacher as well as the students and modified accordingly to goal achievement.

**Reflection & Conclusion**

There are some projects that are assigned and it seems like busy work just to put another grade in the grade book. Being completely honest, I thought this project was going to be one just like that. I could not have been more wrong. Educational Psychology and the content I have learned in this class has been enlightening and inspiring at the same time. Before, I did not think about incremental and entity theories of intelligence and how these two concepts can completely change one’s mindset and thinking. The content I have learned in this course and how to apply it to my classroom setting has been profound. The classroom implications I have learned based on motivational and learning theories, teachers’ emotions, and intelligence and the achievement gap have been many. It has also been refreshing to further explore Piagetian and Vygotskian theories of development along with the work of Kohlberg, Locke, and Maslow. After revisiting these theories with a few years of being an educator behind me, puts a fresh look on what I could potentially be doing in my classroom which is so inspiring!

My only regret at this point is that I feel like I should have done more with my first class. I could have made rules and consequences with the students, developed proximal and distal goals, and engaged in appropriate role playing activities. Perhaps we all might have had a better year. I just hope I did not serve as a disadvantage to them in their years to come. On a positive note, this assignment has allowed me to bridge the gap between theoretical perspectives and classroom application. With the knowledge I have learned, I will be better equipped to teach my students in a richer learning environment providing each one the individual supports and motivation they need to reach their fullest potential.
References
