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## Why Do We Have Theories?

During my career as an educator, I have had the wonderful opportunity to teach in three disciplines of higher education: education, psychology, and music. The exciting part of teaching at the university level is the challenging questions that come from inquisitive students. During lectures and class discussions, students often bring up controversial issues on a great many of subjects. Multiple questions have always kept me "on my toes"; it has been challenging to answer these challenging questions. Students inevitably realize that that the more we delve into controversial issues, more questions invariably arise.

One controversial issue is the "practical use of theories." Although some students want "right answers" and to know which theory I recommend, in reality, we all know that when it comes to theories, there are no completely right theories. That realization is the exciting part about studying and analyzing theories.

Students often ask, "Why do we have theories?" "Why do we use them at all?" In general, a "theory" is an orderly, integrated set of statements that

describes, explains and predicts behavior. Theories are influenced directly by cultural values and belief systems of their times. Theories are vital: they guide and give meaning to what we see. When a researcher investigates and collects information through observation, he needs a clear idea of what information is important to collect. He needs a clear lens in which to look through.

Valid theories are verified by research and serve as a sound basis for practical action. When knowledge precedes action, coherent plans replace floundering and groping attempts at solutions.

In the field of child development, there are multiple theories with different ideas about what children need, need to know, and how they develop.

Investigators do not always agree on the meaning of what they see. As yet, no single theory has been able to explain all behaviors of children. The existence of multiple theories propels the advancement of knowledge; researchers are trying continually to support, contradict and integrate these diverse points of view.

For example, the seventeenth century of the Enlightenment brought new philosophies of reason and fostered ideals of human dignity and respect. There was much more humaneness toward children than in centuries past. The writings of John Locke, a leading British philosopher of the day, served as a forerunner of the important twentieth-century perspective, "Behaviorism". Locke viewed the child as a "blank slate". According to Locke, children were not basically evil. To begin with, they were nothing at all; their characters could be shaped by all kinds of experiences while growing up.

Locke described parents as rational tutors who could mold the child in any way they wished through careful instruction, effective example, and rewards for good behavior. Locke was definitely ahead of his time in recommending to parents child-rearing practices that were eventually supported by twentieth-century research. He suggested that parents not reward children with money or sweets, but rather with praise and approval. Locke also opposed physical punishment; his philosophy led to a change from harshness toward children to kindness and compassion.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a French philosopher of the eighteenth century. By this time corporal punishment had declined. Contrary to Locke, Rousseau thought that children were not blank slates and empty containers to be filled by adult instruction. Instead, they were "noble savages", naturally endowed with a sense of right and wrong and an innate plan for orderly, healthy growth. Unlike Locke, Rousseau thought that children's built-in moral sense and unique ways of thinking and feeling would only be harmed by adult training! Obviously, when students in my classes talk about Rousseau's theory, they become rather enraged at his theory which embraces permissiveness toward the raising of children.

In university classes, students eventually realize that theories are usually extreme in thought and action. For example, most of us don't use only one theory to raise our children. We use a combination of theories that are effective and meet our child's needs. The development of theories is vital, even though many theories are extreme and at opposite poles. It often takes extreme views

to get issues and concerns on the "thinking agenda." Theories, even extreme ones, jolt individuals and groups into change and/or at least evaluation of their preexisting theories.

It is obvious that both theories of Locke and Rousseau were at opposite poles. Locke believed in competent guidance of children and Rousseau believed that children should basically be left alone without much adult interference.

Piaget's and Vygotsky's perspectives, although different, also had some similarities. Both men were born in 1896. Piaget lived in Switzerland and Vygotsky lived in Russia. In their earliest investigations, each addressed the same puzzling issue – the role of language in cognitive development. They considered the questions, "Do children first master ideas and then translate them into words?" ""Does the capacity for language open new cognitive doors, enabling children to think in more advanced ways?" These questions raised the old question, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

To summarize, the basic question was, "Does language precede cognition or does cognition precede language? In his book, "the Language and Thought of the Child', Piaget claimed that language was relatively unimportant in spurring the young child's thinking forward. Instead, he argued that major cognitive advances take place as children act directly on the physical world with direct interactions. A few years later, Vygotsky challenged this conclusion. In his book, Thought and Language", he claimed that human mental activity is the result of social, not independent learning including social interactions. According to Vygotsky, as children master challenging everyday tasks, they engage in

cooperative dialogues with adults and more expert peers, who assist them in their efforts of language interaction. Since language is the primary means through which humans exchange social meanings, Vygotsky viewed language as crucial for cognitive change and growth. Vygotsky regarded the acquisition of language as the most significant moment in the child's development.

Piaget, on the other hand, envisioned the child as an intrinsically motivated learning. He believed that the human mind builds psychological structures which are organized ways of making sense of experiences in life. By making sense, this is the way that children adapt to the real world. In the development of these structures, children are intensely active. They select and interpret experience in terms of their current structures. They are active learners. Piaget believed that active experiences primarily spurred young children's language forward. Both Piaget and Vygotsky obviously had differing theories, yet a balance of both theories is evident in today's American classrooms where there is much guided active discovery and language interaction. Therefore, with these two opposing theories, any classroom teacher can embrace both theories to some degree and have in essence the best of both worlds.

It should be apparent now that theories make us think! New points of view resulting in theories question our commonly held theories. New emerging theories and plans of action are implemented because of new theories (even those old theories that are recycled with a slightly different twist).

Theories definitely have their place in our world. Research, resulting in theories, should not govern everything we do in life; there is a time that common

sense and gut instinct should override theories. However, the open-minded and eclectic individual considers them all.

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