

USING SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY FOR STUDENT EMPOWERMENT AND THE CREATION OF A CULTURALLY AND SOCIOECONOMICALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream academic research has largely focused on developmentalism. My research suggests drawbacks to this approach, such as universality of education tied to chronological age, pupil's passive role, culture insensitivity. This article proposes the sociocultural approach as a means to address teacher-student power distribution and create an education that is responsive to national needs and international demands.

Keywords: *developmentalism, sociocultural theory, active learner, empowering education, creativity, flexibility, culturally responsive, sensitive education.*

АННОТАЦИЯ

Основные академические исследования в основном сосредоточены на теории развития. Мое исследование указывает на недостатки этого подхода, такие как универсальность образования, привязанная к хронологическому возрасту, пассивная роль ученика, нечувствительность к культуре. В этой статье предлагается социокультурный подход как средство решения проблемы распределения власти между учителем и учеником и создания образования, отвечающего национальным потребностям и международным требованиям.

Ключевые слова: *девелопментализм, социокультурная теория, активный ученик, расширение прав и возможностей образования, креативность, гибкость, культурное реагирование, чувствительное образование.*

INTRODUCTION

Since declaring independence, Uzbekistan has been working on the educational sector by issuing laws, adopting international and national programs, defining the legal and policy frameworks, and providing students with an opportunity to acquire academic skills, foreign languages, and several professional skills in alignment with the socio-economical needs of the country. Thereby making education more responsive to the global demands, cultural needs, and local labor market. The government has opened specialized secondary and vocational education, modified the educational programs, and improved the professional preparation of educators. However, developmental research was used to inform curriculum development,

school organizations, and professional training. This research was widely criticized due to a lack of sociocultural sensitivity and the ineffective distribution of teacher-student responsibility ^[4].

For many decades the schooling system of Former Soviet Union countries was informed by developmental research and theories proposed by Freud, Piaget, Kohlberg, and others who suggested that the maturation of a person's intellectual structures is identical across the globe. Thus, implying that growing up, all children pass through certain developmental milestones, in similar ways, independently from the context, almost totally ignoring the culture and circumstances children are born and raised in. As a result, children's development was assumed to be linear and universal. ^[8;13;14]

This view of a child's maturation process resulted in a structured curriculum with the ideas of developmentally appropriate learning where formal instruction and activities should be introduced at a timely point in maturation. This led to schools focusing solely on academic skills, limiting the instructional practices of teachers, and causing educational programs to ignore the individual, cultural, and social needs of students. This made teachers an active figure and forcing students to obtain a passive role in their educational process. ^[2;11]

According to the Education Sector plan of Uzbekistan (ESP) 2019-2023 one of the main goals of education is to assist people in acquiring high-quality knowledge in accordance with fast-changing socio-political situations and global demands and to provide an opportunity to become highly qualified, flexible, creative, problem-solving and critically thinking members of society. ^[5] To fulfill these goals the theoretical background of the educational process should be based on a flexible, culturally sensitive student-oriented approach. It should be also acknowledged that the way students see their role in the educational process and their culturally acquired skills should be used as building blocks during their learning journey. ^[4] A sociocultural approach, with its cultural orientation and views of teachers' and students' roles, might help Uzbekistan to create an educational system that is culturally sensitive, highly competitive, and student empowering.

Developmental Approach vs Sociocultural Approach

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1) The Role of a Culture:

Developmentalism.

For many decades the concept of universal development of all children was taken for granted, undermining the importance of culture. For example, the psychosexual developmental theory, proposed by Freud, says that a child's cognition unfolds in five chronological stages, implying that culture and society have no influence on a child's development.^[10] Piaget, with his Cognitive-Developmental theory also described a child's development in four age-appropriate steps, ignoring cultural differences.^[6] Kohlberg, in his theory of Moral Development declares that a maturing person goes through six universally applicable developmental stages, undermining the globally existing variations in language and traditions.^[9]

Moreover, several trends viewed the culture of some stigmatized students as the cause of educational failure.^[7] Wadsworth (1989), reflecting on the works of developmentalism, says that from the developmental approach, the general course of unfolding the intellectual structures is the same for all people, regardless of their cultural heritage, traditions, and socio-economic demands.^[13] Rogoff, reflecting on developmental theory, highlights that it undermined the idea of cultural impact and stressed only the importance of chronological age and developmental milestones describing the development as pre-determined, stage-like, and independent of the context.^[13] MacDonald et al., (2013) mentioned that the previously dominant discourse of the developmental approach supports the idea of age-appropriate learning where formal instruction and activities should be introduced at a timely point in maturation, ignoring the idea of societal expectations and culturally diverse development.^[11]

Sociocultural Theory.

Due to a number of issues associated with the developmental approach, theoretical discussion about education moved towards the sociocultural approach which emphasized a consideration of the culture on the development of students.^[4]

Sociocultural theory, proposed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, is a relatively new theory that gained popularity within the last 4-5 decades. Vygotsky suggests that learning, development, and culture are interacting interdependent factors that impact a maturing individual's mind formation, knowledge acquisition and psychological development.^[1]

The theory describes a child's development as not an individualistic concept, but a collaborative process triggered by cultural rules, norms, relationships between people, and expectations occurring in culturally valued activities. ^[13]

Rogoff also supports the idea of the cultural nature of development, saying that development occurs in cultural communities and can be understood only through the prism of cultural practices, circumstances, and relationships within their communities. ^[13]

This important shift from the developmental discourse to the sociocultural approach transforms the understanding of children's development and learning and stresses the importance of culture, people's roles, and relationships, thereby informing educators about the possible variance preferential approaches to children's education.

2) Role of a Teacher and an Image of a Student.

Developmentalism.

For a long period of time, educational theoretical research considered the teacher-student relationships through the prism of developmental theory, holding the image of a child as an "empty vessel" in need of being guided and taught, and at the same time positioning adults as an "expert" who are able to fulfill a child's needs. Moreover, industrialization, the exclusion of children from work, and the progress of formal schooling, labeled children as incomplete and in need to be prepared to become adults. ^[11] This perception of an adult as the expert, shared by educators and parents, positioned adults to behave a certain way, making a teacher a powerful and important knowledge holder and informing the educational discourse. ^[11]

Following the developmental stages, a teacher provided students with age-appropriate learning material showing the right way to learn without giving children space to construct their own understanding or draw their own conclusions, which made students passive and disengaged from the learning process. ^[11] Besides that, because of their role and power, and due to the idea about the universality of child maturation, teachers were categorizing and labeling children based on their "mandatory" age-appropriate achievements, marking those students who lacked the expected skills and did not go through "needed" milestones in time, as deficient and in need to be "fixed". ^[1;13]

Sociocultural theory.

With the sociocultural approach, teachers are given a completely different role, the role of a coach and a supporter rather than an expert. With this approach, educators need to consider meaningful ways to engage children, construct a

welcoming environment, and create captivating tasks to trigger children's interest and desire to learn. ^[4;8]

Teachers are no longer expected to follow the chronological development of children by offering them the right and age-appropriate materials and environment. Instead, they should create valued goals which incorporate sociocultural considerations and invite students to actively participate in their learning process. ^[4] Teachers are encouraged to listen, support, extend and challenge children's thoughts and ideas, and engage them in culturally and societally relevant activities. Instead of leaning on academic skills only, teachers should provide students with opportunities to develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally, and grow into competent and successful members of society. ^[2; 8]

Students, in the sociocultural approach, are also presented differently. They are expected to take an active role in the collaborative process where they are learning and thinking together, making valued connections to their background knowledge, constructing new concepts, internalizing culturally important information, and developing socially valued skills. ^[13] This new image of a student helps children to regain their autonomy and power and become responsible for their learning process. The child is no more a passive receiver, but a problem-solver, someone who is capable of participating and contributing to his community using his academic and intellectual skills, cultural background, and sense of self. ^[3]

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

Since declaring its independence, Uzbekistan is working hard on improving the schooling system to make it inclusive, competitive, culturally and socioeconomically responsive, to help Uzbek citizens to grow to their full potential, to become valued and useful citizens, and serve their country.

Stepping away from the idea of the universality of development and making emphasis on the traditions, norms, and needs of the Uzbek community, would redistribute the teacher-student power dynamic and empower students to inquire active and collaborative approach to education.

Embedding sociocultural theory into academic research would help Uzbek education provide children with an opportunity to be responsible for their learning process and the chance of receiving academic, intellectual, and social skills which are in alignment with both international demands and the needs of the national labor market.

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