

Extending Developmentalism: Cultural Psychology and Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This article argues that the grand theories of child development of the twentieth century are no longer adequate for understanding young children and their development and learning. A cultural perspective on development is presented, with a brief history and a discussion of culture and its defining characteristics. The authors then explore some implications that a cultural psychology provides for research and practice in early childhood education. Three areas receive attention: cross-cultural studies; the relationship between folk psychology and folk pedagogy on the one hand and early childhood curriculum and teacher education on the other; and dialogue between Western and non-Western scholars.

[M]uch of psychology . . . has envisioned the child as embedded in the atemporal and acontextual realm of abstract developmental theory. This is, to say the least, a curious stance for a field seemingly focused on change. (Lerner, 1998, p. 13)

We should no longer make a priori assumptions about the existence of generic developmental laws or the primacy of such laws, even if they are found to exist, in providing key information about the life of a given person or group. (Lerner, 1998, p. 17)

In this article we discuss developmental theory from a systems perspective, arguing that the grand structural theories of the 20th

century are no longer useful and that if early childhood as a field is to remain truly developmental, it needs to take an up-to-date perspective on development. We explore one such systemic approach, namely, cultural psychology and argue that this perspective is particularly useful for understanding the learning and development of young children.

We begin by briefly discussing the history of early childhood education and developmental theory. We describe the limitations of the grand developmental theories of the 20th century and introduce a systems perspective on development. We then introduce cultural psychology and briefly explore implications of a cultural psychology for research and practice in early childhood education.

EARLY EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

From its beginning two themes have been central to the field of early childhood education (hereafter, the field). The first is that young children learn differently from older children and adults, and, consequently, schooling for young children must differ from schooling for older children and adults. The second is the importance of understanding children's development (Chung & Walsh, 2000). We begin by addressing the second theme. We return to the first theme later in the discussion.

Throughout the twentieth century, developmental psychology strongly influenced the field. From developmental theories came descriptions of human growth as well as norms for children's development and, by implication, learning. Weber (1969), describing training of kindergarten teachers at the end of the 19th century, wrote, it was argued that teachers working with young children needed an extensive understanding of human development. Indeed, Hall maintained the need for psychological knowledge 'increased inversely with the age of the student' (p. 120).

Many dominant figures in the field have been developmental psychologists. The Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) that has been home to early childhood educators for years is called the Early Education/Child Development SIG. A leading journal in the field is titled *Early Education and Development*. In many universities, early childhood education is located in departments with names like Human Development and Family Studies.

Recently, some early childhood educators have begun to question