Jerome Bruner: Constructivist Theory

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**Introduction**

Jerome Bruner was on the forefront of constructivism. He was also on the forefront of early childhood education, most specifically, the Project Headstart. As authors point out, Bruner made major contributions to cognitivism and constructivism.

One of Bruner’s complaints was that developmental theories all seemed to stop when the individual reached a certain age, such as in their teens. He believed that humans developed throughout their lives. Erickson was another theorist who did carry his stages through retirement. Bruner thought that adults continue to learn and develop throughout their lives.

Bruner contributed greatly to education and psychology. His ideas are very beneficial for early childhood education teachers but they are also helpful to teachers of any grade level.

**Constructivist Theory and Application**

Bruner suggested three stages of cognitive growth. In the enactive stage, children understand the world through their own motor responses. In the iconic stage, children understand that different images represent specific objects. In the symbolic stage, children are capable of abstract thinking, reason and logic (Wragg, 2005). As children transition through these stages, their thinking becomes more complex.

As a constructivist, Bruner emphasizes the act of constructing new knowledge based on prior knowledge. In other words, by using what they know, children are able to construct new ideas. They become more effective with constructing as their thinking abilities become more complex.

There are no age parameters with Bruner’s theory. Consider the iconic stage. This is when knowledge is presented in visual images. When new information is presented, it is useful to provide a visual image when the individual is in the iconic stage. This can be true at any age (Cherry and Overbaugh, 2004). Adults will grasp complicated concepts more easily if they have an illustration. That’s why instructions to assemble objects have diagrams and pictures.

Young children, from the ages of 3 to 5, will gain more sophisticated thinking processes through those years. By age 5, a child has moved to the symbolic stage. He is able to distinguish symbols, such as letters, words and numbers and language. The three-year-old will learn primarily through motor response, the enactive stage, but this child will also be responding to visual cues in pictures. This is why Big Books and other pictures are beneficial to children.

Bruner repeatedly says that the infant’s mother is most important in the child learning language (Levorato, 2008). Language is a key to learning. Bruner was influenced by Vygotsky as well as by Piaget but more strongly by Vygotsky. In the interview with Levorato (2008) Bruner comments on stories and the fact that no one has to tell a child how to tell a story or how to understand a story. This is an important qualification for teachers of young children and even teachers of special needs children to remember. It is always possible to get through to a child through a story.

Teachers of young children and of special needs children need to remember the philosophy of Bruner’s work. The first is that children learn first through experience and through physical interaction with the concepts. Teachers need to provide experiences in contexts that motivate the child to learn. This is referred to as readiness. All instruction needs to be structured in such a way that the child can grasp it easily. Bruner calls this spiral organization. And, instruction needs to be designed so that it fills in the gaps in the child’s knowledge or so that the child can extrapolate from it. Bruner refers to this as going beyond the information given (Kearsley, 2010).

**Conclusion**

Bruner and other Constructivists believe that children learn by actively seeking out and practicing developmental skills in a secure and safe environment. These sound like very simple principles but they are the keys to Bruner’s constructivist theory. Many teachers do these things naturally but if they can remember Bruner’s work and his philosophy and deliberately design instruction in this way, their students will gain more.

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