Adult Learning Theories: Impacting Professional Development Programs

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In education, change is inevitable. Teachers are constantly learning, growing and adapting to new techniques, new content standards and new curriculums. Adult development theories provide a framework for understanding how adult learners are different from younger learners, while also providing insight into devising better professional development programs to meet the needs of teachers at all phases of their careers. This article will provide an overview of Age and Stage Theory, Cognitive Development Theory and Functional Theory, and how these theories can impact professional development programs.

Each year, school districts are challenged to deliver worthwhile professional development opportunities. With the call for achievement for all students and for leaving no child behind, it is imperative that districts offer programs that recognize the knowledge base of teachers. Being aware of adult learning theories will aid districts in offering effective, sustainable professional development activities.

Age and Stage Theory

One theory of adult development focuses on age. This theory proved that as people aged, they did not stop learning. It recognized first and foremost the contention of lifelong learning. Learning was something that continued throughout the life cycle. The two branches of this study included the stage and age theorists. Stage theorists focused on distinct, qualitative differences in modes of thinking at various points in development that were not necessarily age related.[1] Age theorists, on the other hand, were interested in determining if there were concerns, problems or tasks common to most or all adults at various times in the life cycle.[2] Both of these theories will be discussed.

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Age Theory

The age theorists reported age-related periods of life and focused on the problems and personal issues that affected adults at certain ages. Age theorists contended that the issues adults faced changed with chronological age.

Sheehy[3] reported a mid-life transition period that occurred in the late thirties and early forties. This transition was referred to as the elbow joint of life where the adult reflected upon and evaluated life. Reflection caused the need for wholeness to replace the ideal of perfection.[4] Individuals during this stage were believed to think more about their context and culture, which led them to have a greater sense of membership in the community.

Levinson, et al,[5] believed that by the mid forties and early fifties, adults moved out of what was termed the mid-life wilderness and began building new structures for the rest of their lives. During this time, the adult gave "more lasting meaning to relationships, work, and spiritual commitments."[6] These descriptions pointed to this time of life as one that was crucial to decision making.

> *In effect we grow through engaging in the world, changing and being changed by it. We become ever more discriminating in our ability to see the world on its own terms, or as others see it, and even more able to make sense of it despite its growing complexity—able to make sense of it in ways that both retain our own sense of meaning and yet respect its diversity.[7]*

As individuals age, they become more reflective of their lives and of their careers. They make more informed decisions about their futures. Professional development programs must take into consideration the practical knowledge of the educators. They should include teacher reflections during discussions or through journaling. This enables teachers to express themselves, and through the writing, make meaning of the act of teaching.

Stage Theory

Piaget is accorded the title of fatherhood for the stage theorists. His research was based on the belief that adults passed through distinct and different stages in the ways they constructed childhood experiences. Piaget was less concerned with growing older and was more concerned with the ability to grow wiser. The stage theorists did not see intelligence as a fixed condition, but as something that had the potential to evolve as adults tried to make sense of the world.[8]

The stage-theorists found that adults moved through various stages of development. Daloz[9] grouped the research of these theorists into collective stages: the preconventional stage focused on survival. The conventional stage focused on fitting in, being accepted and conforming. The third and final post-conventional stage focused on thinking things over rather than surviving or conforming; it looked at and evaluated events critically.

Loevinger[10] examined ego development and described how adults passed through stages as they attempted to understand themselves. She contended that adults moved from conformity to emotional independence, and then to a stage where the person reconciled their inner conflicts, renounced the unattainable and cherished their own identity.

Kohlberg[11] studied moral development in adults. He believed that orientations toward authority, others and self changed with different stages in the life cycle. Kegan[12] also found that individuals evolved through stages of development. The beginning stages were self-centered and impulsive. This then evolved into a more "other" centered stage that involved interpersonal relationships. The final stage was evolutionary and involved a birth of a new self that was separate with a clear sense of self and merging with others. Individuals at the final stage were able

to build bridges and make connections with others.

All of these theories could have an impact on teacher professional development, perhaps to improve teacher training throughout the career. Through the understandings of these various stages of development, and the recognition that teachers can, with appropriate professional development activities, move to a higher stage of development, activities for teachers could be structured and presented to increase stage growth, allowing teachers to broaden their techniques and methods to meet more adequately the demands of both students and standards.

Cognitive Development Theory

Another area of adult development focused on cognitive/intellectual development. Hunt[13] described cognitive development as conceptual levels with degrees in abstractness and interpersonal maturity. Hunt's developmental stages had four levels. The low conceptual level was one of concrete negativism, over generalization, and focused on personal need. The second level was that of categorical judgments, acceptance of a single rule, and reliance on external standards. The third level was one of awareness of alternatives and sensitivity to personal feelings. The fourth and final level showed a reliance on internal rather than external standards, working with others, and seeing events from multiple view points.

Perry's[14] research consisted of a progression that also included four levels. Level One, which was titled dualism, was where a person saw the world in polar terms such as right and wrong. Level Two of his theory was termed multiplicity. It accepted diversity and uncertainty. Level Three, relativism, saw knowledge as contextual and relativistic. Level Four, the final level, commitment to relativism, involved a commitment to affirm self and the process of ongoing cycles.

These research models proved that the cognitive/intellectual development of adults

moved from concrete to abstract. The adult moved through stages with the most advanced stage operating from internal rather than external standards. Veteran teachers were more likely than beginning and mid-career teachers to have a commitment to self affirmation rather than to externally generated successes. They had survived changes and reforms and still remained in teaching, perhaps because of the intrinsic satisfaction, despite the negativism of standards and proficiency mandates. Programs of professional development should realize the differing needs of targeted audiences to make the development more meaningful and transferable into the classroom.

Functional Theory

Eduard C. Lindeman in *The Meaning of Adult Education*[15] contended that teachers and textbooks should play a secondary role with the learner being the primary focus in adult education. Lindeman viewed the learner's experience as paramount. He believed that if education was life, then life was also education. He viewed experience as the adult learner's textbook.

Authoritative teaching, examinations which preclude original thinking, rigid pedagogical formulae—all these have no place in adult education....Small groups of aspiring adults who desire to keep their minds fresh and vigorous; who begin to learn by confronting pertinent situations; who dig down into the reservoirs of their experience before resorting to texts and secondary facts; who are led in the discussion by teachers who are also searchers after wisdom and not oracles: this constitutes the setting for adult education, the modern quest for life's meaning.[16]

In the last twenty-five years, theorists have attempted to identify characteristics of adult learners in order to aid practice.[17] Historically, John Dewey[18] advocated that educa-

tion should be measured by whether or not it created a desire for the learner to continue to grow. Simpson[19] noted two distinguishing traits in adult learners: the autonomy of direction of learning and the use of experience as a resource. Self-directedness was a general focus of adult learners. According to the functional theory, adults preferred to plan their own educational paths, and most generally chose educational topics and subjects that they could directly apply in their own classrooms.

Gibb[20] developed what has been referred to as a functional theory of adult learning. He stated that learning should be problem and experience centered and meaningful to the learner. Similarly, Knox[21] made broad observations about adult learning. He believed that adults learned continually and informally as they adjusted and adapted to changing roles and other conditions in life. Brundage and Mackeracker[22] agreed, stating that adults learned throughout their lifetimes and that it was through experience that learners were able to gain meanings and to create frameworks. These theorists contended that the teachers of adult learners should respect adult experiences and apply them to current situations to produce good educational results. They also believed that adult learners were motivated to learn if the subject matter was relevant to their current role and transition period. Finally, they found that for the most effective learning to occur, participation in learning should be voluntary.

Smith[23] wrote of six observations of adult learning:
- it was lifelong,
- it is personal,
- it involved change,
- it was part of human development,
- it involved experience, and
- it was partly intuitive.

Smith further contended that the developmental stages of the students generated different conditions for learning, and that what was learned should be related to the students' developmental changes and life roles.

He added that the climate of learning should be non-threatening, recognizing various styles of learning. Other researchers have studied the adult learner, each in an attempt to improve the education of these learners.

Adult Development and Professional Development

Knowles[24] referred to the adult learner as a "neglected species." When viewing adult development and professional development, he listed five key assumptions about adult learners:
- adults were motivated to learn as they experienced needs and interests that the learning would satisfy,
- learning for adults was lifelong,
- experience was the main resource for adult learning,
- adults had a need to be self-directed in their learning, and
- individual differences among people increased with age.

Gessner, in *The Democratic Man: Selected Writings of Eduard C. Lindeman*, quoted Lindeman as he addressed the need for self-directed learning and how it was played out in the classroom:

> *None but the humble become good teachers of adults. In an adult class the student's experience counts for much of the teacher's knowledge… shared authority. In conventional education, the pupils adapt themselves to the curriculum offered, but in adult education the pupils aid in formulating the curricula…under democratic conditions authority is of the group.*[25]

Teachers should be given latitude to form their own professional development. What interests them? What would they like to delve into more deeply? What do they feel they need to learn? Allowing the teachers to determine what direction their professional development will take will greatly increase the success of the teachers in their journey to be lifelong learners.

Research in the area of adult development included the work of another researcher, Oja,[26] who studied adult learning as it applied to teacher inservice education by identifying four key ingredients for successful adult learning:

- use of concrete experiences,
- continuously available supervision and advising,
- encouragement of adults to take on new and complex roles, and
- the use of support and feedback when implementing new techniques.

Teachers wanted learning experiences that they could immediately practice in their classrooms. They liked to discuss practices with others and problem-solve classroom situations. Through these interactive situations, adults were able to reflect, grow and adapt throughout their teaching careers.

Daloz stated that

The proper aim of education is to promote significant learning. Significant learning entails development. Development means successively asking broader and deeper questions of the relationship between oneself and the world...Education should promote development. A good education ought to help people to become both more receptive and more discriminating about the world: seeing, feeling, and understanding more, yet sorting the pertinent from the irrelevant with ever finer touch, increasingly able to integrate what they see and to make meaning of it in ways that enhance their ability to go on growing....we develop by progressively taking apart and putting together the structures that give our lives meaning.[27]

Through the review of adult development research, and the research of effective techniques of instruction with adult learners, there were several key themes:

- adults used experience as a resource and it cannot be ignored,
- adults needed to plan their own educational paths based on their interests and their classrooms, and
- the aim of adult education should be to promote individual development by encouraging reflection and inquiry.

The data found in adult development research can be used when planning professional development activities for teachers. Research also demonstrated that teachers, too, go through developmental stages during their teaching careers. Professional development programs need to consider these stages when planning activities.   Δ

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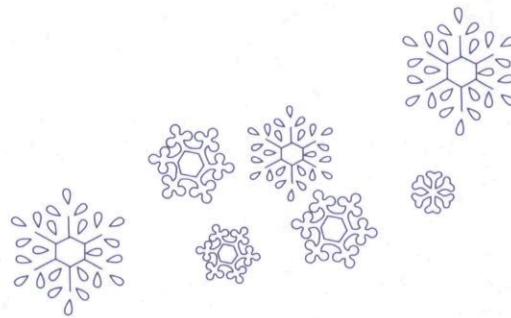
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