<u>Using examples of children's everyday experiences, consider the role of social influences in the different forms of children's learning that psychological research has identified.</u>

The impact of social influences on children's learning has been explored in different forms by psychologists; recognising children's development as a social journey. This essay aims to initially set the context and define four different forms of learning: behaviourism, social learning theory, constructivism and social constructivism. It will then, in relation to the role of social influences on children's learning, critically consider and compare each form of learning, with reference to examples from children's everyday experiences. The essay will reflect upon key points, highlighting strengths and limitations, before concluding to what extent social influences play a role in different forms of learning.

The theories of behaviourism, social learning theory, constructivism and social constructivism are commonly known as the 'grand theories'; considering child development generically rather than as separate domains (Oates, Sheehy & Wood, 2005). Despite sharing this commonality, the essence of each form of learning differs. Behaviourism believes learning occurs through conditioning; children are passive participants in their own learning. Behaviourists emphasise how forms of reinforcement and punishment affect behaviour. Bandura's social learning theory portrays a more active approach to learning; believing imitation of others is the dominant factor affecting children's development. Piaget's stage theory, known as constructivism, views children driving their own learning forward; focusing on cognitive development through a series of progressive stages. The fourth form of learning, social constructivism, also recognises the active role children play, whilst in addition emphasises the role of formal teacher-orientated forms of learning to development. It is apparent that each of the 'grand theories' considers the role and effects of social influences on children's learning differently.

It is now appropriate to dissect relevant aspects of each theory, with reference to children's everyday learning experiences in the social context. Behaviourism depicts learning 'as any relatively permanent change in behaviour produced by environmental events' (Oates et al., 2005, p.51), achieved through classical or operant conditioning. Operant conditioning, involving different reinforcement and punishment techniques to shape behaviour, is more widely used nowadays. Examples include positive reinforcement, such as a gold star incentive for neat handwriting, and time-out punishment, such as parents ignoring a child's tantrum (Oates et al., 2005). Operant conditioning is also used with autistic children, using applied behavioural analysis (ABA); breaking whole tasks into smaller achievable progressive chunks (Oates et al., 2005). Behaviour therapist Sean Rhodes used ABA on Joe who lacked functional speech, preventing him from interacting socially. ABA involved discovering Joe's interests, for example rugby, and using positive reinforcement, such as being given tokens to work towards a self-selected reward, as a tool to make advancements in his conversational targets. Joe's learning was enhanced by having real-life social situations to relate to, such as playing in the playground with his peers (Media Kit, 2006). These examples illustrate behaviourism's emphasis on the environment as a social influence, and the use of different reinforcement and punishment strategies, in moulding development.

Bandura's social learning theory acknowledged environmental factors as a social influence but placed greater emphasis on children being more active in their learning process; learning through imitation. Children have to be able to 'see' to be able to 'do'. Social learning theorists, for example, query how children could learn linguistic skills if they have no opportunity to hear speech. Crain (2000) refers to an example of Guatemalan girls

successfully learning the new skill of weaving on a first attempt through observation; again highlighting imitation as the predominant social influence triggering the girls' learning. Social influences are apparent in technological societies nowadays, for example through the medium of television. Bandura (1973) undertook research into the effects of television violence on children, exploring how observation and role-models influenced children's learning and behaviour. Findings suggested children were more likely to imitate behaviour from models they could relate to or admired. Television was found to be 'as influential in teaching distinctive forms of aggression as one exhibiting it in real life' (Bandura, 1973, p.86). However, the characters needed to be believable and behaviour was shown to be less likely replicated with cartoons. Another example of social learning theory in modern society is that of young musicians being inspired by their personal role-models to learn instruments. For instance Martin plays the accordion and explains his uncle played it too and he wanted to be like him when he grew up (Media Kit, 2006); again highlighting the social role that other people play in children's learning through imitation.

In strong contrast to behaviourism, Piaget's constructivist theory saw learning as a discovery process where children drive their own learning forward through exploration, leaving little or no place for adult-instruction in the learning process. Discovery learning is evident these days within the Foundation Curriculum in Pre-School and Primary School settings. For example, children are provided with investigative tasks, such as exploring capacity using containers in the sand tray, but are encouraged to investigate these independently, interacting with peers and learning through direct hands-on experience. Piaget believed, despite a lack of direct formal teaching, peer contact can promote cognitive development. Exposing children to different viewpoints and discovering strategies to tackle conflicting views within the social context highlights constructivists' belief that peers are an important social influence in a child's learning process.

Unlike behaviourism and social learning theory, cognitive development was rooted in Piaget's constructivist approach through the building of mental representations in stages. These progressive stages included sensori-motor, pre-operational, concrete operational and formal operations (Oates et al., 2005). Piaget believed pre-operational children found difficulty in focusing on perspectives different to their own, designing the 'Three Mountains' experiment to prove his theory. Still used nowadays, it involves children looking at three three-dimensional paper-mache mountains from a certain position and identifying the picture card representing the same perspective, before putting Dolly in a different position and asking the child what Dolly can see from her viewpoint. Results indicated younger children were more ego-centric and were only able to express correctly their own viewpoint, and in contrast children at the concrete operational stage were able to see Dolly's perspective as well as their own. These findings demonstrated Piaget's belief that children's performance changed with age and experience (Media Kit, 2006). Piaget's research was, however, criticised by Donaldson for underestimating children's abilities and for the abstract, rather than real-life, tasks. Subsequently, Donaldson and Hughes designed an experiment to also investigate children's egocentricity using a series of Lego walls, people and police characters. Children were asked where a suitable hiding place would be for the person if the policeperson was in a particular position. India, aged 5, who was unable to identify the correct viewpoint of Dolly in the 'Three Mountains' experiment was able to suggest an appropriate hiding place from the policeperson because she could relate to the social context (Media Kit, 2006). This is also a similar stance that social constructivists, such as Vygotsky, adopt; believing the more meaningful the social context the greater the learning.

Vygotsky, extended Piaget's theory; believing more attention needed to be placed upon social and cultural influences when exploring child cognitive learning. He emphasised the use of cultural tools, such as language and social interactions, in the learning process. Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky believed in the influence of teaching impacting directly on learning, seeing learning 'best supported when there is a degree of inequality in skills and understanding between two people' (Oates et al., 2005, p.73); which he termed as zone of proximal development (ZPD). For example, this scaffolding technique is used in schools when children work in mixed-ability pairs for some tasks. Social constructivists believe learning takes place through the 'internalization of social interactions with others' (The Open University, 2006, p.16); demonstrating how both more able peers and adults can influence children's learning. Deaf-blind education is an example of how social constructivism is applied nowadays to promote children's learning through the use of direct teaching of social language, such as sign language. Children are taught skills in a progressive order with the final aim to provide them with tools to interact socially and more independently. Social constructivists believe the teacher's and/or more able peers' role is 'essential in passing on the cultural tools that the child needs' (The Open University, 2006, p.19) to be able to cope and interact within society. Therefore social constructivists place a strong influential social emphasis on the role of more knowledgeable others to a child's development.

Having discussed, using everyday examples, the role of social influences in the 'grand theories', strengths and limitations are evident in all four forms of learning. Behaviourism's operant conditioning, in the form of ABA uses reinforcement and punishment as strategies to assist learning and has demonstrated its effectiveness, for example with autistic children. Nevertheless, behaviourism is viewed by social learning theorists to be too simple because it takes more than 'direct experience and contingent rewards' (Oates et al., 2005, p.72) to develop an array of learning areas. In addition, behaviourism neglects the importance of cognitive abilities in the learning process.

The social learning theory, like behaviourism, lacks understanding as to WHY a social behaviour is important in the development of cognitive abilities. In addition, although children take an active role in imitating others to promote learning, the social learning theory still focuses on external elements, highlighting the influence of others on the learner. Controversially, social learning theorists have shown social influences can play both positive and negative roles in children's learning, for example through the medium of television. This demonstrates that regardless of whether someone is displaying 'good' or 'bad' behaviour children do learn through observation and role-models.

Unlike behaviourism and social learning theory, constructivism develops cognitive abilities, for example through discovery learning. Behaviourists, social learning theorists and social constructivists believe the social influence adults offer to children's learning is invaluable so the lack of adult instruction present within constructivism could be seen to limit children's learning. However, with a provision of stimulating learning opportunities, the child is encouraged to take ownership of his/her learning, engage in play with other children and learn new skills through active experience. The lack of direct teaching could, therefore, be considered a strength and a positive social influence, promoting children's learning.

Social constructivists have criticised the other theories for neglecting the influence of social and cultural contexts. The example of Donaldson's police person experiment questioned Piaget's learning stages; demonstrating pre-operational children could consider another viewpoint if the task was presented within a relevant social context. In contrast to

constructivism, and despite adults being a predominant social influence, a limitation of social constructivism is its formal and adult-driven nature. Vygotsky 'did not consider the 'inside out' forces from the child's point of view' (Oates et al., 2005, p.74); thereby restricting the child's involvement in directing his/her own learning. An example of this restriction was present in the Soviet Union schools that undertook Vygotsky's model as teachers' were the primary communicators and children were not given the opportunity to engage in conversation with their peers. Crain (2000) supported this criticism, believing children should be allowed to BE children and interact with peers rather than being pushed into formal education before they are ready. However, when is the right time? Some children with special educational needs may never be ready 'and would therefore remain locked out of the world without the tools to access it' (Oates et al., 2005, p.75).

In conclusion, the society in which we live requires a balance of social influences, from different perspectives, in order to maximise children's learning. From exploring social influences, drawing upon examples from children's everyday experiences, in behaviourism, social learning theory, constructivism and social constructivism it is apparent that the environment, peers, adults, role-models and observation can all play important social roles in contributing towards children's learning. It is important to consider however, that all societies are different and every child is different and therefore perhaps the social influences emphasised in one form of learning will cater for the learning needs and styles of one child more than another.

<div align="right">Written by Sarah McKinlay, 2010.</div>

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