

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY, SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGY, AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

APPROACH TOWARDS TRANSITION THROUGH SPECIAL EDUCATION
AND THE SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

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Spring 2012

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree in Special Education
with honors in Special Education

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Abstract

As special educators continue to learn new techniques and ways to approach learning in their classrooms to accommodate and reach all of their students many struggle to prepare students for the transition years to help prepare the students for life outside of school. Through the examination of a program known as LifeLink students were able to use this specific structure of a transition program to be immersed in learning avenues that do not completely follow regular special education theories of learning for students ages 5-17. During the time I spent with LifeLink I was able to see learning occurring with the combination of special education theories as well as with theories derived from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to show that learning environments and research based programs can be structured in a way to provide student with the best possible outcomes in learning. This process provides students with the tools they need to become independent and reach transition goals.

Acknowledgement

I would like to take this time to thank those who helped me through the creation and editing of my paper as well as the opportunities to learn and understand the theories driving special education instruction and the sociocultural theory of learning.

Thank you Dr. Patrick Shannon for continually meeting with me and helping me understand and recognize connections of theories through my experiences in my graduate course work and practicums. You have truly been a mentor to me through this process and I am truly grateful for all of your support

Thank you Dr. Richard Kubina for supporting me as an Honors Adviser for the past 3 years. You have supplied me with knowledge and understanding of many of my special education theories through the years. I also want to thank you for always believing in me and knowing that I could achieve my goals.

Thank you to the faculty and staff of the Special Education and the Curriculum and Instruction departments for supplying me with the knowledge to understand theories from both viewpoints and combined them in my understanding of providing learners with knowledge to help them achieve their goals.

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Academic Vita

Introduction

When I entered college in 2007, I knew that I wanted to be a teacher. At first I was unsure of what kind of teaching I wanted to focus my education on, but I soon chose the path of Special Education. Growing up I was able to see first-hand the process that a family and children go through in order to receive special education services because my older sister was diagnosed with a brain tumor on her pineal gland at a young age. This tumor caused her to have cognitive delays and the need for life skills special education services. To some extent, I chose special education in order to repay our family's debt to my sister's teachers.

My special education coursework at Penn State has presented an in depth examination of curriculum, instruction, and assessment that helps students with special needs to succeed. In public school classroom, we were shown and practiced direct instruction lessons, leveled reading materials, and curriculum based assessments to help with individualized education plans. During course and practicum experiences, I became confident that this knowledge and these practices were all I needed to become an effective teacher.

Of particular interest to me were our discussions of IEP students' transitions between school and life after high school graduation. Many students in "life skills" programs continue to attend school until the age of 21, working on transition goals within the confines of the classroom and with their teachers. Transition goal setting begins during IEP meeting each year after students turn 14. Goals are decided among students, parents, and teachers, and then, plans are drawn concerning how students could reach those goals with instruction and opportunities provided in the

classroom and on mini-trips into the community. These approaches towards student's transition seem to be to very effective, and they match much of what I saw my sister participated in with much success when I was young.

For my capstone project for IUG program, I spent a semester in the LifeLink Penn State, a transition program apart for the typical public school transition. In this paper, I describe my semester experiences with three adolescent men enrolled in the LifeLink Penn State transition program during the Fall Semester 2011. In what follows, I describe the program, discuss my systematic and intentional approach to data gathering during the semester, and explain understanding of their development over the three months. What I discovered when examining my data was that the theories from my special education classes were only partially able to explain the results. In order to more fully understand the program and student development I employed socio cultural theory. The combination of theories enabled me to imagine different ways to help special education students.

LifeLink PSU

LifeLink PSU is a program that combines the expertise of Penn State's Rehabilitation Services program, the Special Education department, and the State College Area School District. Mature high school IEP students attend classes and participate in other activities on the Penn State campus. In this way, the high school students have the opportunity to interact with people their own age in an environment that is socially and academically conducive to their transition to life after school. PSU volunteers accompany LifeLink students to appropriate classes, lunch, club meetings and other social events. These courses are carefully selected

support from mentors and teachers. Students attend class, take part in activities on campus, eat lunch in the student union, obtain jobs within the community, and live in an apartment a few times throughout each semester. The academic areas of this program allow for authentic situations and age appropriate goals that will not just teach them skills, but allow them the opportunities to use the to meet independent within their IEPs (Lindner & Salter, 2006).

I wanted to study how students negotiated their lives within the LifeLink Penn State program. Toward that end, I spent six hours a week for 15 weeks as a volunteer/mentor in the program. I shadowed three young men, meeting with them twice a week and helping them with their academic work. I also observed the “coping with college” skills class that began each day. I kept detailed records of my time and talk within the program.

Methods

Selection of Participants

Each of the three participants in this research study was selected because of their first year status as students at Life Link PSU. This criterion allowed me to see how students adapted to a program from the prior high school setting. I selected students with different diagnoses in order to give me a wider view of how the program supported the students learning across difference.

Joey

Joey is an 18-year-old male who is a first year student in the Life Link PSU transition program. Joey’s diagnosis is high functioning Autism. Joey has an interest in the field of science and loves to learn about bugs, weather, the earth, and many other areas of science. Joey was very open to our interview conversations and was very excited too tell me about how his classes were going as well as what he felt he could be better in academically. Joey’s goals for his IEP consisted of working on his social interactions with others to make sure they were age appropriate, hold a steady job, budget his finances, and develop his reading comprehension ability. As you can see by Joey’s academic schedule (provided below) Joey has many classes in the context of science. When Joey is not working on his homework for his other classes he is budgeting with a mentor as well as working on his newspaper articles.

Fall 2011 Academic Schedule

Hour	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8-8:50	Transition	Transition	Transition	Transition	Transition
9:05	Classwork		Classwork	Classwork	
9:45		Swimming		Swimming	
9:55					
10:10	Intro to Meteorology		Intro to Meteorology		Intro to Meteorology
11:00					
11:15	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
12:05	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
12:20	Classwork		Classwork		Classwork
1:00		Entomology (insects)		Entomology (insects)	
1:25	Horticulture		Horticulture		Horticulture
2:15					
2:30		Homework		Homework	Budgeting
2:245					

Jamie

Jamie is an 18-year-old male who is a first year student in the Life Link PSU transition program. Jamie’s diagnosis is an Intellectual Disability (Down Syndrome). Jamie is a very thoughtful person who loves helping others and working with children. Although it was harder to keep Jamie on track with our conversation and question in our interviewing process he was able to answer my questions and express his thoughts and feelings about himself as a student. As you can see from Jamie’s academic schedule (provided below) Jamie has a large variety of interest and seems to enjoy science classes as well as history of our country and time periods. When Jamie is not working on his classwork (budgeting/newspaper articles/homework) he volunteers his time at the Children’s Discovery Museum in town.

Fall 2011 Academic Schedule

Hour	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8-8:50	Transition	Transition	Transition	Transition	Transition
9:05		Gym	Classwork	Gym	Classwork
9:45	Speech				
9:55				Budgeting	
10:10	Martin Luther King		Martin Luther King		Martin Luther King
11:00					
11:15	Lunch	Dinosaurs Extinction	Lunch	Dinosaurs Extinction	
12:05	Lunch		Lunch		
12:20	Intro to Meteorology	Lunch	Intro to Meteorology	Lunch	Intro to Meteorology
1:00					
1:25	Homework for Class	Classwork	Homework for Class	Classwork	Homework for Class
2:15					
2:30					
2:245					

Adam

Adam is an 18-year-old male who is a first year student in the Life Link PSU transition program. Adam’s diagnosis is Traumatic Brian Injury. Adam has shown to be a leader in the classroom even as a first year student. He does need to be prompted to stay on task and to complete work instead of chatting with friends, but completes his work successfully. As you can see from his academic schedule (provided below) Adam has many interests in different areas. His biggest areas that he works on per his parents’ request and provided in his IEP transition goals are his abilities to budget and handle his own finances. Adam held a job for several months as a dishwasher at a local restaurant and has just recently changed to a different restaurant due to reduced hours. Adam has many plans for his future and hopes to become independent in the near future.

Fall 2011 Academic Schedule

Hour	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8-8:50	Transition	Transition	Transition	Transition	Transition
9:05	Gym		Gym		Gym
9:45					
9:55					
10:10	Classwork		Classwork		Classwork
11:00					
11:15	Hospitality	Lunch	Hospitality	Lunch	Hospitality
12:05	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
12:20	Lunch		Lunch		Lunch
1:00	Budgeting	History of Rock and Roll	Reading/Math	History of Rock and Roll	Reading/Math
1:25					
2:15					
2:30					
2:245		Criminology			

Interviews

I conducted interviews with each of my participants about once a week (depending on availability) throughout the semester in order to talk to the students about their week, their classes, transition topics, goals they have been working on, things they feel like they are doing well at and things they are struggling with. I had a structured list of questions that I formulated before I started my research, but as I began meeting with the students every week I wanted to make the interviewing process more of a conversational situation with each students, so I would lend questions to the interviews based on their responses and daily events. My final interview was a brief overview of how the students felt they did their first semester in Life Link PSU and what they hoped for their futures. All of my interviews were recorded in order for me to be able transcribe/analysis them as I coded my other data areas I collected.

Observations

For this research, I attended Life Link PSU every Tuesday and Thursday for approximately three hours throughout the fall semester. During this time I observed the students during their morning routines such as transition, classroom work, and interactions with other students. While observing and helping students with their daily tasks, I was able to collect dated daily notes on the participants as well as the curriculum structure of Life Link PSU. I was in attendance of the daily transition meetings, which surrounded pre-determined topics such as appropriate conversations with friends as well as impromptu topics that would arise throughout

the week such as girlfriend and boyfriend issues. When students were finished with transition and not heading to a class, I would work with many of my participants on their weekly article readings and summaries.

Parent Surveys

Before my research began I sent informational packets to my potential participants and their parents giving them the full description of my research. This packet presented the following information about my research: purpose, procedures, duration, confidentiality, sample interview questions, and their rights as participants. Within the packet, I asked parents to complete a survey expressing their child's disability, student current level of independence, goals for the student's transition from both the parents and the students as well as the hopes for their future after Life Link PSU.

Data Analysis

I typed all my notes from interviews and observations each week and read them frequently in order to form ideas about what to expect for each new meeting. I searched for common themes across the times and data types, looking for themes within the individuals' actions and statements. At first, I used a stimulus response format in these analyses. I was looking for the exact stimulus that led to particular responses and sought to locate how the explicit feedback from teachers and mentors shaped students' behaviors (including statements) directly. In certain situations, this method of analysis proved useful because I witnessed direct instruction in which the teacher led students toward a particular outcome and then

rehearsed it. But most of my data suggested that learning and development were more acquired than learned (Gee, 2008). This recognition directed me toward socio cultural theories that I had studied in my graduate courses leading to a reading specialist certification. Although my course work in that program proved useful in these analyses, my participation in the Summer Reading Camp practicum for that program taught me much about socio cultural theory and development.

My Understanding of Sociocultural Theory

My knowledge and understanding of the Sociocultural Theory was gained through my graduate course work, readings, and my experiences with my graduate practicum involving a summer reading camp. Sociocultural theory draws heavily from the work of Vygotsky, showing how as collaborators we learn by working and interacting with experts in the community. Through the graduate practicum experience with reading camp, I was able to take the students' abilities to connect with peers in a co-learning situation using their individual interests to understand the cultural setting. This allowed for an increase in the student's development in learning about the sea as well as heightening their interest and ability in reading. Before these experiences in my program I had little knowledge of Vygotsky's theory of Sociocultural or how it might apply to my prior knowledge of learning through my other special education coursework (Vygotsky, 1978).

Through my experiences of sociocultural theory I have been able to recognize that learning happens everywhere in many different settings. This was displayed in my reading camp experience when students were able to use the

environment as well as the tools provided (books, internet, art, and peers) in order to co-construct meaning about the sea that was unknown to them before they walked through our doors. Furthermore, in my coursework I was able to personally see, through specific assignments, that learning was always occurring whether I recognized it in that moment or not. As I worked as a novice learning on mastering an unknown task I could see learning occurring even in my understanding of the environment and how I was using it to learn the task.

Learning was also expressed in my understanding of sociocultural theory as a relationship between an individual learners and the environment in which they are. For students who attended camp, they arrived with the attitude that they were unable to read or had struggles in reading because they were given those ideas through their school or home environment. This personal understanding that the students had faults or deficits was visible through conversations and body language. At camp we provided an environment where students could show what they could “do” and what they knew about the sea while using the skills to understand/learn through books, art projects, and reading. This connection between both the environment and the learner reflects how learning is always situated and in our case we situated the learning to be successful.

Vygotsky states through his theory that social interactions in learning become connected with the learner’s personal theories of how they learn and can learn (Vygotsky, 1978). The patterns that the students see in their learning environment based on their own theories allow for students to become confident in the environment. Co-constructing with others while learning shows students a

model that the students can be capable of applying ideas of learning in their learning environments. At reading camp students were able to recognize that they were capable of learning about the sea through the use of social interactions with teachers and peers. The interactions allowed the students to think of themselves as learners. When students saw themselves as learners, the students were able to expand their perception learning. This perception showed the students that learning can occur through different tools such as art projects and digital stories created by others, books they might have read, and through searched Internet sites about the topic while using patterns they saw to be useful to learning through peers in order to used those ideas to enhance their own learning.

My graduate experience at reading camp was structured around the theories of sociocultural theory involving co-teaching and collaboration of work. On the first day students were told that through co-teaching and collaboration between students and teachers we were going to use reading, writing, and design to create a museum display about the sea for the Discovery Space children's museum located in town. As teachers, co-learners, and collaborators in this setting we set expectations for the students who attended the camp with the notion that each student could be successful in each of the areas for preparing the museum by building their literacy skills and abilities (Johnston, 2004). Giving the students the encouragement handed them the control for their goals and increased their personal beliefs in their own abilities. In the end we succeed and the museum was completed with proud students ready to display it to the community.

Largely through my reading camp experience, I was able to learn that in the sociocultural learning acts on the learner's own theories. All theories work for someone and levels of sophistication can vary. I had the honor of working with the 4th and 5th grade students at reading camp, where the students used their theories about learning and the sea to co-construct an art project. This art project consisted of a ten-foot octopus. As the students worked on learning about the octopus and the sea they felt no risk about their choices and played out theories of how to approach their ideas. Those ideas however changed as they recognized the need, but they were able to take those patterns and modify their generalizations to produce an end product. As the mediator in this situation the realizations of the theory was pronounced when I saw students over and under generalizing situations to make them work.

Lastly, through my experiences sociocultural theory provided me with the knowledge that feedback on the actions of the learners theory help the student make changes if need be. Although praise is given through this process it is not the only element that pushes students to continue learning. The learners work to meet personal goals based on their theories and environments to make the learning useful and concrete. For instance at reading camp, students needed to revise their understanding and steps taken towards creating their octopus because their theories were not being met. The students saw the need for these changes through recognizing their patterns of learning as co-constructors in the learning process. The students knew the ultimate goal was to create a museum exhibit and through feedback from social interactions and environments learners made changes to meet

their personal theories/expectations, giving them positive “I can do it” relationship with their learning.

I used these sociocultural theories I have acquired to understand patterns I saw in my data I collected when working with the LifeLink program (Hall, 2003). I used Cambourne’s ideas behind “Conditions of Learning” to discuss the environment presented through LifeLink. Lindfor’s viewpoints through this theory helped me make connections with the learners in their environments and Gee led me to understand the policies in which the program allowed in providing transition to the students at LifeLink.

Results

With my prior knowledge of the special education theories and how the theories are related and use to enhance student’s learning, I was able to see aspects of LifeLink program that followed my understanding of special education curriculum. Through the class “Coping with College,” I saw my understanding of the teacher-led learning and structure of knowledge being presented through one knowledge source, the teacher. This idea in special education and the elements of the behaviorist theory, as special educators we have the approach that the teachers hold all of the knowledge and they are the ones who relay it to the learners. Furthermore, I also saw the direct and formatted instruction seen in many special education curriculums displayed during the transition meeting in the morning each day. These meetings allowed for the students to learn from the knowledge source of

the teacher with a uniformed focus surrounded by and structured outcomes to follow.

Although I did see the use of these special education theories in my research, I had many other elements of the LifeLink program in which I saw elements of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory that stood out. The organization of the program itself plays hand in hand with the idea's Cambourne displays in his "Conditions of Learning. My reasons for selecting the participants I used in the LifeLink program shine light on Lindfor's understanding of students using tools for learning. Each of my participants are diagnosed with different disabilities and through Lindfor I could see how the tools they used in order to learn reflected on strengths and weaknesses they were presented with because of their disabilities. Finally, Gee allowed me to look at the policies of the program and how those provided students with the opportunities in the programs structure to help the student's enhance their learning from different points of entry.

Sociocultural Theories

Cambourne

Cambourne describes areas of the socio-cultural theory in his understanding of conditions in which we learn. His "Conditions of Learning" matrix displays a model that applies to the success of student's learning connecting areas of engagement, immersion, demonstration, expectations, responsibility, employment, approximations, and response to make a learning environment rich. As teachers we are responsible for providing an environment that is conducive to students learning.

Cambourne's theories reflex the data I have collected on how the environment of the program allows for those to happen through the sociocultural theory (Cambourne, 1995).

As teachers we have the opportunity to provide our learners with conditions that can enhance their learning. Cambourne designed a model displaying conditions for students learning in the classroom. As noted previously Cambourne's model connects areas of student learning. These intertwined areas include: immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectations, responsibility, employment, approximations, and response.

Immersion

During my time at LifeLink I was able to collect data from interviews and observations that allowed me to see many of Cambourne's conditions used to support the program's goals of preparing students for independence as well as personal IEP goals. For example, Cambourne's condition of immersion or a student being surrounded with learning opportunities was vivid in the model of the program itself. The students at LifeLink PSU were given the opportunity to partake in a college setting by attending classes as a student at Penn State. In this condition of learning the students were given a plethora of opportunities to learn about being a college student and having a daily schedule that many students their age keep. As college students they are given choices on classes they would be interested in taking as well as being involved in other classes such as "Coping with College," that is a mandatory class for student athletes to understand the pressures and

responsibilities one needs to know when becoming independent. Furthermore, LifeLink students obtain jobs in the community as well as on campus to allow them to learn skills of certain jobs, while being faced with customers, co-workers, time conflicts, and decision-making. Lastly, within the structure of LifeLink, students get the opportunity to move into a college apartment complex for a week twice a semester. With support, the students are placed directly in that learning condition allowing for learning to take place. Many curriculums set for students in high school life skills classrooms re-create the outside world with scenarios to allow them to learn the situation without the setting, but LifeLink allows students to be fully immersed in the situations they will need to know to reach their goals. This allows them to learn from their mistakes and develop strategies to overcome obstacles (Lindner & Salter, 2006) (Observation-Fall 2011).

Demonstration

In all learning, modeling and demonstration needs to occur for the learners to construct meaning and mimic the tasks in which they would like to complete. Demonstration is discussed in Cambourne's conditions of learning as needing to be present in order to show how the learner is to act. Through my observations at LifeLink I was able to observe demonstrations of learning presented on many levels in order for the students to be successful in their learning. Within the student's school day, they have a time in which they have "transition" meetings as a group. During transition Michelle (the teacher) presents different situations that follow their transition curriculum or situations that arise during the week that are

important to be discussed to the students. For example, one goal that all LifeLink students have is to increase their social skills with others. In this particular situation Michelle demonstrated what a typical conversation with a peer would look like, while adding important elements highlighted in most special education curriculum (examples and non-examples) of what a conversation should look and sound like (Observation- 9/27/11). This example of demonstration I gave was more directed in a teacher to student teaching model. However, teachers, peers, as well as student mentors who volunteer to attend classes and help students with their classwork throughout the week present demonstrations to the students throughout the day. Because mentors spend a majority of time with the LifeLink students attending class and hanging out around the student union they provide the students with an age appropriate model for how they should behave as a college student.

Engagement

In connecting both immersion and demonstration Cambourne discusses that when learners are convinced that they have the potential for performing tasks they can be engaged in the learning at hand. Some elements of engagement include the student's confidence gained from visual modeling of the task and the student's fear of failure removed from student's perception. While having conversations with students during morning arrival I have discussed with many students their "wants" to do different things they have discussed with mentors (Observation- 10/13/11). Mentors have also encouraged students that even though things might seem hard they can do them. Many times this was followed with a story of how their mentor

overcame something and prevailed to achieving their goal. Furthermore, the LifeLink students are very confident in expressing what their goals are and how they will overcome it even with roadblocks from their disability (Joey/Jamie/Adam-Fall 2011). When the students engage in the learning from demonstrations they can see the strides they are making which in turn provides them with the knowledge that they can succeed.

Expectations

Although the LifeLink program is a fun program that students from the local high school cannot wait to attend, there are many expectations that are upheld to ensure the student's success as well as safety while attending Penn State. As a condition of learning, expectation bonds students to uphold a certain behavior and help them to succeed in their learning goals. The Lifelink program holds an expectation of their students and makes it known that all students will be successful with the support of the teachers and mentors in the program. Cambourne presents expectation as being as little as subtle conversations with learners letting them know what they will do and accomplish. Keeping all of the conversations positive allows the students no room for doubt in their approaches towards learning.

As an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting takes place for students the discussions of the students goals and wants for success after school become an integral part of what LifeLink focuses on in their student learning. These conversations set the expectation of what the students can accomplish in their learning and it is discussed as being a positive. During an IEP meeting I attended for

Adam, many goals were discussed for his money management and budgeting with the supported conversations of how we would help him to work on achieving that goal (Observation 10/6/11). Within a week of that meeting his abilities to change his behaviors and make efforts to be more aware of his spending increased, allowing him to succeed in his learning. With the expectations set the students hold themselves to a higher standard and have the motivation to succeed. One way I have seen expectations help academically is in the need for all students to have student planners to track their school assignments. This expectation is prompted by supports of checking to see if students are using their planner for assignments/scheduling and reminding students to jot down dates that are important for their student life, but it also teaches them time management skills that they need to become successful as independent students and adults (Observation-Fall 2011).

Responsibility

In this setting and more than ever the LifeLink students need to make their own decisions and take responsibility for themselves is apparent. Cambourne highlights that learners need to become responsible for when, how and what “bits” of learning they are going to participate in and what outcomes can stem from those decisions. With the goals of independence, which all my participants have displayed in their parent surveys, the need to offer the student’s personal decisions and responsibility in learning is more important than ever to allow them to make mistakes or triumphs and see how they can affect their learning.

Because the LifeLink students are not in a high school setting classroom (with teachers making the decisions) and attend classes throughout the Penn State campus with their mentors the responsibility of learning has fallen on them to make the choices of learning and keeping track of assignments from their class. Students are given the responsibility (with supports as needed from the mentor) to make decisions about information to take notes on, what to write in their planner, how soon to leave to attend class, and how to prepare for assignments. These responsibilities empower students to see their ability for success and learning which in turn allow for the engagement in the program to help them succeed with their goals.

In personal interviews with Joey and Jamie, they both expressed their use of their planner and making decisions about class as responsibilities they need take on in order to make the correct decision (Joey- 10/27/11) (Jamie- 11/3/11). I found that they would ask for support or reassurance, especially with Joey that his choices he was making were acceptable, but with the confidence and success he will see throughout the year his decisions seem to become more independent. Jamie would tell me that he is working on his responsibility with completing his classwork when he has free time instead of at home and continues to make progress on noticing that his planner is helpful to him in making decisions about what he should be engaging in (Jamie- 11/3/11).

Not all responsibility is academic in nature for many of these students. Adam, for example, has taken on some personal responsibilities in dating another student who is still attending the high school. Cambourne discusses responsibility as being a

natural learning that is followed by demonstrations. Giving Adam the tools to make responsible decisions and models in which to do so he is able to make smart decisions. As the students grow socially and in age these situations can seem scary for some parents who want their children to be independent but worry about their ability to make decisions, but with the support of the teachers and mentors Adam has been able to learn appropriate dating skills and he continues to make responsible decisions that empower his abilities to be gentleman (Observation- Fall 2011).

Employment

Functional, realistic, and non-artificial ways is how Cambourne believes learners should approach their development in opportunities for employment. In doing so the learners are presented with a learning condition closest to the one they will experience in the real world. In high school life skills transition curriculum many teachers will give students job tasks that they would have to complete if they were working at a hotel, restaurant, or store, but at LifeLink PSU a majority of the students hold jobs throughout the week to give them the functional, realistic, and non-artificial settings that Cambourne suggests is the best for learning.

Two of three of my participants held jobs during the fall 2011 semester, but all have been employed at different jobs at one time or another. Each of my students holding jobs were working in the community at different locations. Adam held a job at a local restaurant washing dishes about 15 hours a week (Adam- 11/3/11).

During our interviews we would discuss how his job was going and his likes and

dislikes about the tasks that he did while there. In the middle of the semester he applied for a new job because of hours being cut at his current employer. He expressed to me that he had to learn to work with others, work diligently in order to get all of the dishes washed before more were given to him, as well as manage his time with work and school. He told me that having this opportunity gives him the ability to have money and work towards being independent and living on his own (Adam 11/3/11). His other goals foreshadow his want to manage money and live on his own. This experience gave him those opportunities to interact and learn jobs tasks at hand to increase his independence.

Jamie also held a small job at the local children's museum in town. His responsibilities of time management, getting to work on time, completing schoolwork and working with others increases by being in an actual setting of employment. Furthermore Jamie's abilities socially increased because of his surroundings with others changing as interactions with students. He would give me examples of things he has learned while at work and ways to overcome those problems. For instance, he would be given tasks to complete while at work that he did not like to do, but make the decisions to complete them. This shows his responsibilities gained in the setting as well as independent opportunities without direct supports from others (Jamie- 10/27/11).

Approximations

In the learning process for all learners' mistakes occur. We have all heard the line "it is what we learn from our mistakes that is important." Cambourne reinforces

that by showing approximations are needed to support learners as they make mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes, but providing support and encouragement towards those attempts of success is important also. Without approximations and encouragement many of us would give up after failures. Making mistakes and it being ok seems to be a harder concept for many LifeLink students to understand. I have had many conversations that have been about their disabilities holding them back from succeeding in their learning or efforts but showing students that it is ok to make those mistakes is important.

Transition meetings each morning with the students is a perfect example of where approximations can be used in a way to help students see mistakes and learn from them as a group. During different transition topics students discuss that making mistakes is ok and learning from them is helpful to their success. In one observation I had during morning transition showed how they would approach a conversation where students were talking badly about someone else. After the student explained their approach, which was not particularly correct, we discussed the good things she did in the situation and congratulating her but then discussed the areas that could be improved by showing students that mistakes occur but are not the worst thing. These encouragements help with the student's engagement and motivation to continue working towards the goal (Observation- Fall 2011).

At the apartment, students work with coaches to help them approximate their independent behavior throughout their time in the program. Joey expressed to me that his first time staying at the apartment was not perfect but he was able to

work on goals with the supports of coaches and then generalize those skills at home as he became better at the tasks given to him (Joey- 10/13/11).

Response

Receiving feedback even as an adult can sometimes be nerve racking but the need for feedback and knowledge of how the learning is proceeding is essential to the success of the learning condition. Furthermore, the clarity of the feedback helps the learner feel empowered in the learning process. Making the response relevant to the situation, appropriate to the learning taking place, available when needed, and nonthreatening to the learners ego increases the likelihood of the learners engagement and success in any learning task.

Feedback and response in the LifeLink program occurs frequently and on many levels of the student's learning. For instance, Joey, Adam, and Jamie receive feedback from their teachers in their classes they attend via email on their assignments they turn in almost weekly. Mentors give the students feedback and praise when they see them making steps towards meeting their goals or making appropriate and responsible decisions. Coaches at the apartment give feedback while students are completing living tasks as well as overall responses at the end of their stay in order to show how their learning or independence has increased since their last visit (Observations- Fall 2011).

In transition meetings teachers, mentors, and students give each other feedback and encouragement in a "shout out" portion of the week to show how students are doing together as a group. In interviews I have seen feedback relayed

to me as an encouragement to the students as reassurance of their gains and success, which shows how it affects the learner perspective of themselves. All of this feedback given allows for the condition in which learning takes place to come together and continue to work as a well-oiled machine toward the success of the students.

Lindfor

Judith Lindfor also reflects on the socio-cultural theory when discussing areas important in learning language for young children. Her connections with the socio-cultural theory apply in allowing students to partake in an apprenticeship by observing experts and actually trying to complete a learning task by themselves within their own ability levels. Other areas show collaboration, meaning-orientation in learning, and individuality in learning. Lindfor's ideas of learning highlight the student's approaches to their own learning development (Lindfor, 2008).

The need for education and knowledge of not only academic knowledge but also that of social and independent knowledge is one that many people take for granted. Judith Lindfor uses her knowledge and research of working with children through the learning process of reading, writing, and language to express five imperative features of learning that allow for students to grow in their knowledge and use it to express themselves as learners. These five areas of learning she discusses in her book "Children's Language" are named: Authenticity, Meaning-Orientation, Collaboration, Apprenticeship, and Individuality. Through her

descriptions and discussion of these areas it is easy to see their connection with the process of learning for every age.

Authenticity

Authenticity for learning is described by Lindfor as a genuine communication, oral or written, that is purposeful. This can include social conversations. The communication can be done for reasons including gaining knowledge, solving a problem, and/or conducting an action either through reading, writing, or an oral context (Lindfor, 2008).

In the setting of LifeLink students are presented with authentic situations such as attending college classes, reading the Penn State newspaper, and obtaining jobs. As students attend college classes with their mentors, communication between the mentors/students and teachers/students are all made in the efforts to help the students to take purposeful meaning out of the situation in order to help them gain knowledge. In a high school life skills curriculum the conversations are controlled by the classroom dynamic where as when students are attending these college classes with mentors their communication and information gained from those experiences lead to the increase of learning and communication with the learner. For example, Joey took a class about bugs in the fall 2011 semester that was highly interesting to him (Joey- 10/13/11). In this class he was placed in an authentic situation being in a college classroom and was given the opportunities to soak up the knowledge through lecture conducted by his professor and use it in

conversations that we had during our interviews as well as gain personal knowledge that was engaging to him.

In many high school curriculums, students use SRA reading materials because of the low reading levels that many of their students possess. These reading curriculums are presented at the student's grade level but are not very age appropriate for the students, especially students 18-21 years of age. LifeLink uses Penn State newspapers to give the students a more authentic and age appropriate reading task (Observation- Fall 2011). Joey and Adam displayed their abilities and use of authentic situation/communications in their academic reading assignments (Joey- 10/27/11). As a part of their academic grade, students were given the assignment of reading a news source during the week and selecting 2 articles in which they would complete summaries for. After reading articles for the week and completing the summaries I would often see Joey and Adam socially interacting with other peers about different details or articles he had read for his reading assignment that week (Observations- October/November 2011). Their ability to generalize the information they have gained and place it into an authentic situation using a social context shows their ability to connect the authentic aspects of the reading and use them in their every day life and conversation.

Lastly, while the students are at their place of employment conversations that are not framed or pre-scripted are occurring. Adam has discussed in his interviews with me that his boss sometimes gives him tasks and need to be able to complete them (Adam- 11/3/11). This communication between Adam's boss and Adam is authentic in nature by providing information to Adam in the hopes of a task

being completed. Without the supports of teachers or mentors Adam takes the information and processes it into actions he takes to abide by the directions.

In all of the situations above, the students were partaking in authentic settings because they were being treated as everyone else and not being stigmatized by coaches or prompts to guide them through the process. The students used their knowledge and actions to complete the task and grow as learners in those situations.

Meaning Orientation

Lindfor discussed the area of Meaning-Orientation in learning as the approach one takes in reading, writing, and conversations. It is stressed that the meaning orientation does pertain to the level of the learner, but that makes it easy to generalize it throughout various learning levels. Not every learner has the same acquisition skills so it is important to remember this for not only in teaching but also in learning. Background knowledge plays a large part in this area of learning and is different for learner. Examples of different ways of learning through Meaning Orientation can be described through the task of reading. You can read for meaning, read because it is assigned, or you can read for pleasure. All of these areas show differences in the meaning that is drawn from their learning (Lindfor, 2008).

Jamie presents a nice example of meaning-orientation in his approach of conversations with others. During transition meetings Jamie struggles with the ability to recognize meaning in conversations between giving a directions or getting yelled at about a particular occurrence. After he apologizes for not doing a task

correctly we explain to him the meaning behind the conversations is not to reprimand him but to guide him through information for a task. We continue to work on his abilities to generalize those skills of recognizing meaning when having conversations (Observation- 11/1/11).

In transition meetings involving social conversations between peers, meaning- orientation is shown at different levels for each learner based on their prior knowledge with experiences such as talking about their weekend, sports, friends, and families. Those students who were more social naturally and have knowledge to connect the conversations with prior knowledge have a better grasp at keeping the conversation flowing, while other who may be lacking that knowledge approach the conversations at a different meaning level. This is all approached by Michelle and the mentors through scaffolding of the task and assigning students with high and low conversation abilities to present a model for the situation. The meaning orientation is shaped in the LifeLink program providing many areas in which it can be used for different students and in different contexts.

Collaboration

Where authenticity describes the setting and meaning-orientations describes how the learner approaches a situation, collaboration brings in the combinations of the learner (novice) and someone to assist with the learning (expert) to help the learner to gain knowledge through the expert's experiences. "What a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow," (Vygotsky, 1978). Lindfor expresses the need for a partnership to allow for the creation of learning

through reading, writing, and language. The model in this partnership can elicit correct learning styles to assist the learner in order to give them comfort for future endeavors in learning (Lindfor, 2008).

At LifeLink everyone can be considered a novice in areas and an expert in others, which allows for learning to occur by many different settings throughout the day. The students are ranging from ages 18-21 years of age, but with varied ability levels. These students work together and collaboratively guide other students in areas that they are strong in.

Collaboration occurs most often between the students and their mentors. I have observed throughout the fall 2011 semester about 4-dozen students come in and out of the third floor of the student union with LifeLink students to head to class or to grab some food. This collaboration with these authentic friendly settings displays the comfort and warmth of the program LifeLink provides for students.

An obvious collaboration that occurs at LifeLink is between Michelle and the students in the program through transition meetings where she asks questions, allows for responses and guides them through personal situations (Observation-Fall 2011). Her ability to support the students in their learning both academic and social through their goals provided in their IEP's shows her knowledge for learner's needs in the classroom.

Lastly, collaboration between students is apparent when students assist one another with different tasks throughout the day and week. For example, Adam was struggling to find a newspaper article that was interesting to him on one particular day and another students brought their paper over and gave them an article. Not

only did that student give them an article but assisted them in writing the summary for the article (Observation- 11/1/11). This student that helped Adam had been at LifeLink for a year longer than Adam and used their expert knowledge of the routine and assignment to assist Adam in the process.

Apprenticeship

Continuing with the partnership needed with collaboration, Lindfor shines light on the need for Apprenticeship so that the learner can not only have the opportunity to observe an expert in the task of learning, but also get a chance to perform the task of learning themselves with the supports from their expert learner.

When LifeLink students stay at the apartment for their assigned turn during the semester, apartment coaches come during meals and other times during their stay to assist in different tasks throughout their stay. The coaches assist in showing the students how to get to the grocery store, how to make a grocery list, how to prepare and make a meal, and how to clean up after that meal. That coach is the expert in this situation. Jamie tells me in his interviews that then after your first visit the coaches allow for you to complete these tasks with their supervision to provide feedback in these areas of independent living (Jamie- 10/18/11). This apprenticeship allows for the authentic situation of a college apartment with the consequences of not eating meals if not completed, as well as collaboration and apprenticeship from the coaches to help the students learn these important tasks for the success of their independence.

Although I was never given the opportunity to attend a shift while one of the LifeLink students was at work, I would assume through my conversations with Jamie and Adam that their bosses and co-workers play the role as an expert while they are at their job placements. As the experts they prove the model for the students in a task to help them learn and succeed in their goals for the day. In an interview with Adam, he said he learned how to run the dishwasher on his first day by his boss while other employees help him with new tasks he is unsure about knowing how to complete (Adam-11/3/11). This model of experts modeling and then supporting the learner mirrors that defined by Lindfor as Apprenticeship.

Individuality

Lastly, Lindfor discusses the difference between learning with groups and learning as individuals or having Individuality. Everyone learns differently and through different ways, which can sometimes not always be seen by those who are teaching the learner. Lindfor stresses the need for that knowledge in the approach of learning that everyone will not be the same and will need different assistance and supports in different areas, but it does not inhibit the ability to learn. This just shows how it can be done differently through the expression of the learners voice and creativity, and giving that opportunity to the learner will show their true potential.

As students with IEP's, their goals are individualized based on their abilities and individual goals they want to complete while they are students that are covered under the laws of IDEA (IDEA, 2004). As you can see from my description of each of

my students they all have very different abilities and goals throughout the day to meet those goals. Furthermore visible through the student's daily schedule shows students choices and interests in what they want to take in college to help support them in their future goals.

Joey, for instance, has chosen entomology and meteorology because of his interest in those areas as well as goals of someday working with as or with a meteorologist. Jamie's classes of extinct dinosaurs and the gym align with his wants to be physically fit because of the effects of having Down syndrome as well as his love for dinosaurs. Finally, Adam chose classes such as criminology and hospitality because of his inability to decide whether he wanted to stay in the food and restaurant business or become a policeman.

Even though all of these students have disabilities and are in the LifeLink program, all of them have dreams of reaching their goals of independence and living life fully. Lindfor, through her areas of learning, was able to show that the individuality that they have shows how they are as learners and provide teachers with ways to help them work towards those goals as learners.

Gee

Gee presented questions of the policies with which the LifeLink program is created and how those policies provide opportunities for students gain knowledge outside of the traditional views of learning (Gee, 2008). In the traditional view of learning, Gee explains that the way in knowledge is viewed in terms of mental representation stored in the head ("mind/brain") (Gee, 2008). An environment such

as a school district displays learning through a teacher providing information, which is absorbed cognitively for later use. In Gee's viewpoint of sociocultural knowledge and learning allows me to look at learning as a "relationship between an individual with both a mind and a body and an environment in which the individual thinks, feels, acts, and interacts," (Gee, 2008). This combination of viewpoints allows the learners to apply their knowledge in the setting in which they are involved such as the LifeLink program.

Gee also believes that without giving opportunities, learning or actions towards learning cannot take place. The quality of an object or an environment, which allows a learner to perform, is known as a student's affordance according to Gee's viewpoints on learning. Affordances for our purposes would be the setting LifeLink program including the Penn State campus, classes the students attend, community surroundings, and the student's job locations. Effectivities are how the learners take advantage of the environments they are given. Effectivities for the students participating in the LifeLink program are how they take the affordances offered to them and use them to accomplish their goals (Gee, 2008).

It is also noteworthy to also discuss Gee's views on learning vs acquisition. Gee defines acquisition as "acquiring something by subconsciously by exposure to models and a process of trial and error, without a process of formal teaching," versus defining learning as "a process that involves conscious knowledge gained through teaching," (Gee, 1987). Through the program of LifeLink students were acquiring knowledge subconsciously in different settings and environments because the opportunities were present. Learning occurred in situations such as transition

meetings and classes such as “Coping with College.” Gee shows that the acquisition in which occurs in these setting can be different for everyone especially because it depends on the exposure and connections the learner make. As for learning students put effort into the outcomes meta-cognitively.

Through the description of each of the students I worked with at LifeLink you can see that although their educational paths and opportunities might have been the same they are not on the same learning or ability levels, but each is using the affordances of what LifeLink provides for them during their experiences in learning to provide them with opportunities to make learning meaningful to them.

For instance, Joey is a first year student at LifeLink and his affordances other than the program include his classes, the apartment, and his peers. The effectivities he has used through his classes include his knowledge he has gain about bugs, meteorology, transition skills, and his peers. In the environment of the apartment Joey has expressed to me his abilities and knowledge gain through making food for his roommates and learning to do his laundry (Joey- 10/13/11). As for learning through his peers Joey has learned to hold conversations with others through transition and work together to live together for a week in an apartment.

Adam, who had been exposed to the same affordances as Joey but adding on his place of employment, has also used the environment to his advantages in learning. Adam uses the setting of his employment to give him the opportunities to make a living and connect in social contexts with other. At school Adam uses his classroom choices to decided what he might want to focus his studies on in the

future as well as to learn social and academic skills to increase his knowledge of reading and how to budget his money (Adam- 11/15/11).

Finally Jamie has the same affordances as the other students and uses his time at work to interact with other employees and children socially. He also uses his time at Penn State to learn socially appropriate behaviors within transition meetings to make his deficits in those areas improve with scaffolding and support. In interview with Jamie he has told me that staying at the apartment has given him the ability to take on more responsibilities at home and he continues to work on becoming independent (Jamie- 10/18/11).

Even though all of these students have different prior learning experiences, different acquisition abilities and different learning goals through the theory present through Gee they were able to use those learning opportunities and succeed with their goals because they put them into action. The traditional view of learning which occurs many times in a regular school setting allows students to gain information cognitively, but change in environment for the students in the LifeLink program allow for more opportunities to learn and use the relationships they have been presented with through the environment to ease their transition into society.

Conclusions

When I was first presented with my knowledge of the sociocultural theory in my graduate work I had no reason to compare it with my knowledge gained from my undergraduate studies as a special educator. It was not until I began looking at the theories and ideas that make up the LifeLink program that the connection

between my two theories of knowledge were combined. At first Vygotsky's theory disrupted many of my prior knowledge beliefs in for special education but not in a negative way.

Through the analysis of my data collected from my experiences with the LifeLink program I have been able to appreciate the knowledge from both theories and how they allow for different levels and environments of learning to take place for the learner's best outcomes. As we look at the LifeLink program we can see that learning occurs as well as acquisition. Learning in the way my special education knowledge has shown was through a teacher or expert in areas such as transition meeting and the "coping with college" class, but acquisition (sociocultural theory) was occurring in every area of the program with students acquiring knowledge in the experiences they were introduced to on their levels of understanding. With a population such as special education Gee's theories of the traditional view show that the structure of direct instruction classroom allows for the modeling and demonstration needed to build on knowledge in situations such as transition meetings and the classroom. The need for experts in those environments also shows to be important in order to provide the students with errorless learning for certain situation. I was able to see the theories highlighted from my special education knowledge of research-based instruction and structured lessons in the LifeLink program with success. Furthermore, I was also able to see that with the combination of sociocultural theory elements the environment provided students with opportunities on a variety of levels for success.

Cambourne, Lindfor, and Gee's theories connecting with the sociocultural theory and allowed me to see how learning occurred in many environments for the students involved with LifeLink. These environments were presented and prepared through the expert in each of the situations by giving models and demonstrations in the transition meetings, in classes, at their jobs, and in social contexts with other peers. The ability for these environments to be presented allowed for students to learn all the time lies heavily on the sociocultural theory. Learner's working together in order to co-construct meaning with others showed that all the knowledge is not always with the teacher but with anyone who is an expert in an area. This allowed for students to learn from one another based off of experience and confidence in their personal learning. Lindfor showed this through collaboration and apprenticeship in her theories of learning. Finally Gee highlighted that viewpoints of a traditional environment such as the classroom and show through the program that giving students a nontraditional setting allowed for a more authentic setting which helped prepare students transitioning in a way that slowing immersed them into a real world context (Gee, 1987). Furthermore, Gee showed the differences between learning and acquisition providing understanding for how the students of LifeLink approach learning and have many different acquisition levels based on their exposure and understanding.

Through my research with the program and my connections I have made with both my knowledge from my special education course work and my knowledge from my curriculum and instruction course work. In turn it has allowed me increase my understanding of learning, learners, environments for learning, and ways to

present learning to others with an understanding that it does not need to be one viewpoint over the other but a combination of the two theories. Recognizing that the theories can be combined presented me with the understanding of the tools to provide students with the best opportunities to learn. This knowledge will allow transition planning to be more helpful for those students with goals of independence in their personal environments.

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Approach towards transition through Special Education and the Sociocultural Theory

Thesis Supervisor:

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Related Experience:

Altoona Area Elementary (Juniata) School

Student Teacher, 5th-6th grade Itinerant Learning Support
Spring 2012

- Utilized 5th and 6^h grade general education curriculum to allow for a learning environment conducive for student's abilities
- Facilitated differentiated instruction in the general education classroom
- Modified assessments to allow students to succeed
- Co-taught with 5th and 6th grade general education teachers
- Designed and implemented 2 data-based interventions in both reading and behavior domains
- Received PSSA and Promethean Board trainings

Penn State Summer Reading Camp

Teacher, Elementary Students (4 days per week)
Summer 2011

- Taught students using a multimodal approach to literacy in order to create a museum exhibit
- Conducted Running Records and Informal Reading Inventories for 2 student
- Analyzed miscue analysis' to find students' needs

Radio Park Elementary

Pre Student Teacher, 1st grade Inclusion (4 mornings per week)
Fall 2011

- Designed and implemented direct instruction math, reading, writing and behavior interventions & monitored student progress for each w/graphs
- Assisted with instruction for *Read Naturally*, writing, *Investigations* math, and science
- Devised a token economy system and individual contract to motivate students

Tyrone Middle School

Pre Student Teacher, 6th grade Learning Support (2 mornings per week)
Fall 2010

- Scripted and taught 3 direct instruction lessons to ~5 students (1 rule, 1 concept, and 1 strategy)

Easter Seals- State College

Personal Care Aide, 4 year old with Autism (5 day per week)
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- Supported creative curriculum in the pre-school setting
- Assisted with language and social development with peers

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Awards:

Deans List (2007-present)

William Lonnie Memorial Scholarship (2 years)

Alumni Society Pi Lambda Theta Scholarship

Hintz Trustee Student Philanthropist Leader Scholarship

Society of Distinguished Alumni Trustee Scholarship

Bardine Education Trustee Scholarship

Undergraduate Student Leadership Scholarship

Barley Achievers Endowment

Internal Commonwealth Grant

Port Family Public Service Award

Presentations/Activities:

LifeLink PSU- Mentor/Research