Guiding staff training? Vygotsky and Gardner can help

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One key to retaining high quality teachers is to increase their job satisfaction and effectiveness through supportive, in-service training. For me, training is effective only when staff members regularly use what they've learned as part of their repertoire of skills.

When searching for a training model that consistently yields this result, I turned instinctively to the same theorists we use to guide our instruction of young children.

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development
From the theories of L.S. Vygotsky, we learn to assess when learning goals exceed a student's "zone of proximal development" (Brown-DuPaul and Carben, 2001). Put simply, this means "Open your eyes and admit when your training just flew right over their heads!"

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It's common for staff to vary in their ability to grasp new ideas. This is especially true if our first training model encompasses only one or two of the basic "intelligences" identified by Howard Gardner.

Gardner (as quoted in Collins, 1998) would caution us to first decide what the student needs to understand and then "figure out how best to present this information, given the student's strengths and weaknesses."

As trainers, do we pretend our global presentation will fit all our staff equally? I would hope not. Assessing our staff after our initial presentation allows us to understand their learning modalities and to adjust accordingly.

Training teachers in observational assessment
One skill my staff comes to acquire and master at different rates is observational assessment. Knowing this, I throw them straight into the water the first day. I require a minimum of five anecdotal assessments in a four-hour shift.

As part of their two-hour orientation, I give them a one-page handout on writing a good anecdotal note. The handout spells out these guidelines:

1. It must be relevant to the child.
   Not: Cindy can speak in full sentences. (Cindy is a typically developing 4-year-old).
   Write: Cindy took turns talking while having a conversation with Jill. Each girl spoke three times before they returned to focus on their own sorting. Each time Cindy spoke, her comments were relevant to Jill's response.

2. It must detail process as well as a product.
   Not: Jamie can cut.
   Write: Jamie held the scissors in her right hand, thumb down in the small hole and fingers up in the large hole. She snipped fringes all around a 4-inch by 4-inch piece of paper, then tore it in half and left.

3. No judgments!
   Not: Andy is a happy boy.
   Write: Andy entered school this morning with a smile on his face and immediately began the separation routine. After he answered the question of the day and washed his hands, he hugged his
mom and little sister and went straight to the block center and began building. He readily accepted Timothy's help and began talking with him, still with a smile on his face.

The training packet also contains a grid that details development in motor, language, math, social, and science skills. This grid helps clue new staff members into what behaviors might be relevant for a 4-year-old child. (The grid would vary to be appropriate for other age groups of children.)

Wow! I find it a rare new teacher who writes more than one of those five first assessments in a way I find acceptable. But I don't give up.

I take each note and try to figure out where the teacher came close to the mark. Sally, for example, wrote five notes. She remembered to write the child's name, the date, and her own initials. Three notes were relevant; one note had fair detail.

The teachers' assessment of children also allows me to assess my new staff members. I can approximate their ability to recall multiple instructions, to decode print, and to write in a way that communicates. I can tell whether most of their notes are negative or whether they find it easy to identify positive things the children have done.

I can tell by the number of notes I receive whether the new teacher is inclined to follow guidelines precisely (five notes), test the limits (four notes), go the second mile (more than five notes), or falter from being overwhelmed (fewer than four notes).

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Add a little more theory
Now I need to use a little of Gardner and a little of Vygotsky to move my new teacher along in her training. From Gardner, I test which learning style seems to help improve the teacher's skill most quickly.

Joan, for example, might respond quickly to oral feedback. Angelica might show more improvement if I provide written critiques. With Tina, I might need to sit beside her, observe, and talk her through writing an assessment note on our observation. And Jennifer seems to learn best when she documents her observations by talking into a tape recorder.
In determining exactly which type of support, or scaffolding, is most appropriate for an individual teacher, I have begun to use Vygotsky again. I almost always learn that a new teacher cannot succeed in writing consistently meaningful anecdotal notes after a few minutes of oral and written training.

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A teacher’s failure to meet the mark is not my focus. When my training goals exceed the new teacher’s zone of proximal development, I want to learn where to build scaffolding and which type of scaffolding would be most useful.

**Vygotsky’s intersubjectivity**

As the staff gather at the end of a day to review the curriculum and the children’s learning, we are able to apply still another of Vygotsky’s theories. He defined “intersubjectivity” as shared understandings that are constructed in the context of social exchange (Reiber, 1998). In our case, we learn by talking about it.

For many of the staff, this is the time they go back to their reminder notes and flesh out assessments in full sentences. As each of the staff, in turn, shares the learning she observed during the day, the staff begin to construct their own understanding of relevant assessment. They begin to comprehend which kinds or parts of curriculum are appropriate and how to scaffold children’s learning.

**Scaffolding learning in the classroom**

In using Vygotsky and Gardner in staff training, we model the application of those theories to our teachers. When we talk about a specific assessment of a child, we relate the process of scaffolding the child’s growth to the scaffolding that has aided our teachers in their own learning.

For example, the first step in constructing scaffolding is to break down the task into its parts (Hart, Burts, and Charlesworth, 1997). In assessing, the teacher needs to do the following:
1. Focus on one child.
2. Observe the specific behaviors.
3. Assess the behaviors in the context of the child’s previous behaviors.
4. Note behaviors that signal improvement for this child.
5. Record the event and the context objectively.
   (Context here refers to the setting, the behaviors that occurred just prior to the observation, or behaviors that occurred immediately after, when notable.)
6. Type the note into the child’s electronic portfolio, checking for spelling or grammatical errors.

The second step in scaffolding is to plan teaching strategies that will help the child improve a skill.

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**Who’s Vygotsky?**

Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, a brilliant Russian scholar from the early 20th century, contributed important theories to how children learn. He was university-educated in law, literature, philosophy, and art and literate in sight languages but then turned his attention to psychology and education. Some speculate that his creative insights were due to his perspective as an outsider to the field.

Unfortunately his life and career were cut short by tuberculosis. In the 12 years before his death in 1934 at age 38, he developed a number of theories that seek to explain how social and cultural influences affect children’s development. He theorized, for example, that language is a primary cultural tool that enables humans to form higher-order thought processes. He took a special interest in children with learning problems, urging that children with disabilities be taught with their peers as much as possible.

His ideas were slow in being recognized because of Stalin’s ban on all scholarly works and the subsequent Cold War. After English translations of his work began to be published in the 1970s, educators began comparing them to those of another great 20th century theorist, Jean Piaget.

After trying a strategy, we can assess the child’s progress and the usefulness of the strategy as well as the need to continue supporting the skill.

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These theories, when understood and applied, can provide a solid framework, or scaffolding, for training our teachers.

One characteristic of scaffolding we often miss is that it is only temporary. A retaining wall is permanent. Scaffolding remains only until the structure is able to stand on its own.

If I truly apply the theories of Vygotsky, I will construct sturdy scaffolding for my new teacher that meets her own learning style. Week by week I will expect her to become increasingly independent in at least one more aspect of the task. Slowly the scaffolding comes down.

When teachers have acquired the skill of observational assessment, we begin to create new scaffolding for another skill that will stretch their competence further.

Too often we give lip service to the theories of Vygotsky and Gardner without understanding how they support our quest for quality in child care staff. These theories, when understood and applied, can provide a solid framework, or scaffolding, for training our teachers. These theories can also provide scaffolding for the development of children in ways that build on their multiple learning modalities.

References

Who’s Gardner?

Howard Gardner, a Harvard University professor of education, has put forth the theory of “multiple intelligences.” He challenges the traditional definition of intelligence as the mental abilities needed for success in school—that is, logical-mathematical reasoning and language. He also disputes the notion that intelligence can be measured only by an IQ test.

He believes there are eight intelligences. In addition to logic and language above, there are physical (bodily kinesthetic), musical, spatial (visual), interpersonal (the ability to understand others), intrapersonal (the ability to understand oneself), and naturalist (the ability to recognize fine distinctions and patterns in the natural world). Everyone is endowed with a blend of these forms of intelligence, but all forms can be strengthened through practice and learning. Which form a person develops and strengthens depends on the culture in which one lives.

Gardner first published his theory in his 1983 book, Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences. He continues to develop his ideas through research projects with schools and is heavily involved in school reform efforts in the United States. Many educators have begun applying his theory as a way of individualizing education to the learning styles of their students.

Sources: www.pz.harvard.edu/Ps/HG.htm, and www.pz.harvard.edu/sumit/MISUMI.HTM.


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