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Bringing Vygotskian Approach into Early Childhood Education in Indonesia: Empowering the Daycare

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Article Info

Abstract

Studies and researches revealed the importance of early childhood education. Many theories of early human development have been developed and employed to provide better educational system in those early years. One of the prominent theories comes from Lev S. Vygotsky's work. His theory, which is also known as the sociocultural theory, introduces several powerful ideas for understanding and facilitating young children's development and learning. This paper will examine some of the ideas that have significant impacts on the early childhood educational system. Afterward, the paper will briefly explain about the early childhood system in Indonesia at the present time, including: (1) Short of the government policies and goals; (2) The type of early childhood services; and (3) The new curriculum (known as kurikulum 2013). Based on the examination, it will be evident that the Vygotskian perspectives are basically in accordance with the government's vision. Furthermore, after examining the early childhood system in Indonesia, I suggest that daycare is the most appropriate form of early childhood services for promoting the Vygotskian approach, which will benefit most of the children

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education has had a long history before reaching to the point when the scientists and the policy makers finally realized the importance of it. Huge amount of researches and theories contributed to the recent early childhood education practices.

Along with, constructivism is considered as one of the influential theories among those. There are two important figures within the theory: Jean Piaget and Lev S. Vygotsky. They both have similar ideas regarding children development, even though there are slightly differences on the ideas. Their ideas are widely applied in many early childhood education settings. Various learning/ teaching approaches and methods are adopted or derived from their theories.

The constructivist believes that children actively build their own knowledge. As the consequences, the constructivist educators often act as facilitator and partner to the children rather than a superior person who always tell the children what or how they need to do or learn. The early childhood educators reflect their belief through the way they treat the children and deliver their lessons. Stated simply, constructivism is a student-centered approach in early childhood education practices.

Early childhood education in Indonesia has been receiving serious attention from the government. One of the reasons is the demographic bonus issue. Based on the national census, Indonesia are facing demographic bonus from 2010 to 2045. It is a condition when "100 working age population support less than 50 people aged between 0-14 and > 65. The demographic bonus will become a demographic disaster if those working age population are lacking competence. They will become unemployed and hinder the national development. Therefore, a good education is one important key to optimize the demographic bonus in Indonesia and a good education should be started as early as possible. Theories, researches, and studies are in agreement that early childhood education is the basic foundation that can have long life impact on human development (Department of the Premier and Cabinet, 2008; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2010).

Alongside with that, early childhood education national standard and curriculum were developed to guide the early childhood practices in Indonesia. The latest and current curriculum is called "Kurikulum 2013". The learning principal guideline states that children should be at the center of the curriculum. Moreover, it states that the learning process should facilitate active experience for the children (Kementrian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Republik Indonesia, 2014.). Simply stated, the early childhood education curriculum in Indonesia is in line with the constructivist approach.

According to the new national curriculum document, there are three types of educational services: (1) Daycare and *Satuan PAUD Sejenis* (SPS); (2) Playgroup; and (3) Kindergarten/ preschool. Amongst those three, daycare is the most potential type to apply the constructivist approach, especially the Vygotskian approach which the writer believes will benefit the children the most. The reasons why the daycare is considered as the most potential type will be discussed ahead.

METHOD

This paper is not a research result but a literature study. Various journals discussing Vygotskian approach, spesifically Vygotsky's theory about children's play, within early childhood educational settings will be summed up and presented here.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Early Childhood Education's Long Journey

If we look back to the history of the early childhood education, we will see that children were not treated as they are right now. Firstly, around the sixteenth century, children were treated as they were born evil and stubborn by the Puritan society (Shahar cited in Berk, 2009). During that period, the harsh and restrictive child-rearing practises were carried out to civilized the children.

Thereafter, in the seventeenth century, the child-rearing practices were administered in a moderately different way. The children were treated more humane on account of the philosopers' ideas such as John Locke and Rouseau (Berk, 2009).

Following that, the nineteenth and the early twentienth century marked a new beginning of early childhood education field. The period of the scientific beginnings was emergent. The observations, improved methods, and theories concerning the child development set a firm foundation on the early childhood education field today.

Finally, the child-rearing practices entered the new chapter in the nineteenth and early twen-

tienth century. The field of child development expanded into a legitimate discipline. Massive studies and researches on children's development were conducted. Many theories emerged and are continued to be followed until today, such as the psychoanalytic perspective, the behaviorism and social learning theory, Piaget's cognitive-developmental theory, the information processing, the ethology and evolutionary developmental psychology, Vygotsky's scociocultural theory, the ecological system theory, and the dynamic systems perspective (Berk, 2009).

The Prominent Early Childhood Educational Theory: Constructivist Approach

Constructivist approach in early childhood education leaves distinct marks. The fundamental belief of the constructivists is that children are not an empty vessel that has to be filled by adults' guidance and teaching all the time (Woolfolk and Margetts, 2013). That fundamental idea grounds the educators' teaching approaches. Simply stated, the constructivists approaches which more child-initiated are completely opposed the teacher/ adult-directed approach.

The question then, does the child-initiated approach really benefit children's learning process? Various studies and researches answered 'yes' for that posing question. Active learning/ child-initiated learning benefit children's cognitive outcomes in their later schools, even though at some cases the outcomes cannot be seen instantly but several years later (Akpan and Beard, 2016; Marcon, 1999; Marcon, 2002; Pfannenstiel and Schattgen, 1997; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, and Milburn, 1995). Furthermore, child-initiated model also benefit children socio-emotional development. Several longitudinal studies documented that children who had been exposed to that model had higher socio-emotional intelligence (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997; Schweinhart and Weikart, 1998; Tangdhanakanond, Pitiyanuwat, and Archwamety, 2006).

Furthermore, Stephen, Ellis, and Martlew (2010) mentioned that:

"The two theories of leaning that have dominated thinking in the early years literature and in the professional education of teachers – the work of Piaget and Vygotsky – can both be interpreted as offering support for an active learning pedagogy, or at least drawing attention to features of the learning process that require active engagement with the environment and the people in it" (p. 317).

From that excerpt, we can say that both Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories fit in the constructivism framework. Various literature studies discuss the similarities between the two. They both agree that children do not act as passive agents during the learning processes (Bodrova and Leong, 1996). Secondly, their theories describe the construction of knowledge in the mind. As an active agent, a child will independently and actively try to construct their own knowledge. They both agree that experiences and time contribute to the children's understanding acquisition over and over again. Finally, they both discussed the development of children's symbolic thought which holds vital role in the development of children's abstract thinking.

However, there are several main points that distinct Vygotsky's ideas from Piaget's. Piaget's theory stated that children's learning progress is determined by the maturation. It means that children have specific time to master and accomplice their learning; disregarding the role of adults' guidance. On the contrary, Vygotsky believed that children's learning can be extended beyond by the help of adults or more capable peer. This is a well-known theory of Vygotsky which is called as the Zone of Proximal Developmental (ZPD) and scaffolding (Berk, 2009; Winsler, 2003).

Vygotsky's Legacy

Now, I will discuss another powerful idea of Vygotsky but remains unfamiliar in Indonesia's context: the socio-dramatic play/ the make-believe play.

I examined various studies and research papers around early childhood education in Indonesia, specifically papers or studies that were grounded in Vygotsky's theories, the term ZPD or scaffolding had been acknowledged as Vygotsky's work. However, the sample papers or studies around socio-dramatic play were rarely connected to the Vygotsky's work. The papers often mentioned that socio-dramatic play can benefit the children, but the discussion was not deep enough.

Even though the term socio-dramatic play was not solely came from Vygotsky's idea (Piaget mentioned this kind of play as well), Vygotsky was the one who considered the vital role of socio-dramatic play in developing children's cognitive and socio-emotional abilities (Berk, 1998; Berk, 2009). On the contrary, Piaget viewed this kind of play as spontaneously play which arises around the second year of life (Berk, 2009).

It is important to note that the term 'play' used by Vygotsky limited to the socio-dramatic or make-believe play typical for preschoolers. The play that Vygotsky referred to did not include object manipulation or movement activities. Accor-

ding to Vygotsky, play has two distinguish components (Berk, 1998; Bodrova, 2008):

Involving imaginary situation created by the children.

This characteristic significantly serves children's mental ability development. For example, a child using a block as a phone separates the object (the block) from action (using it as a phone). That is a mental action which can develop children's abstract thinking or children's symbolic thoughts. Follow a set of rules determined by specific roles.

Piaget and other common belief assumed play as a release mechanism or "*a way in which children attain immediate fulfillment of desires not satisfied in real life*" (Berk, 1998, p. 228). However, Vygotsky opposed that idea. He argued that in order to succeed the play, children need to follow certain rules. For example, a child pretending to eat follows the rules of mealtime behavior. Another example, a child imagining herself as a mother conforms to the rules of parental behavior (Berk, 1998). In conclusion, the idea that "*play is not totally spontaneous but is instead contingent on players abiding by set of rules was first introduced by Vygotsky*" (Bodrova, 2008, p. 359).

The second characteristic, hence, supports the capacity to renounce impulsive action in favor of deliberate, self regulatory activity. For example, a child pretending as a baby acts against his immediate impulses to talk. He must subjects himself to the rules of a baby who cannot talk. Simply stated, play extensively assists children's self-regulation development, a skill that is crucial in the social world.

Vygotsky's theory about play enriches the early childhood educational field. Studies and researches around socio-dramatic play revealed the benefit of it in many areas of development. Socio-dramatic play benefit children's cognitive development such as the development of problem solving and other cognitive strategies, abstract thinking development, language development, academic skill development such as literacy and numeracy, imagination and creativity skills. Furthermore, socio-dramatic play also promotes high social competencies: the emotion and self regulation development (Bergen, 2002 ; Berk, 1998, Bodrova, 2008)

Considering that socio-dramatic play serves influential developmental process, the early childhood services in Indonesia can adopt and implement this approach. However, some obstacles as we will discuss ahead hamper the development of socio-dramatic play in the preschool or play group services. Therefore, daycare services are the most potential settings for promoting the socio-dramatic play.

The Indonesian Early Childhood Curriculum

Early childhood curriculum has been developed individually since 2009 (Kementrian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2009). Before that year, early childhood education guidance and standard only occupied small parts in global (primary to tertiary) education national standard. Moreover, there was no specific curriculum regulation (Kementrian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2003; Kementrian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2005). From 2003 to 2013, early childhood educational services were grouped into two types. The first one was formal form which was kindergarten/ preschool and the second one was non-formal form which covered the play group and the daycare. However, the term 'non-formal' gave an impression that daycare and play group were less crucial than preschools.

Fortunately, in 2014, the government released a new early childhood curriculum called 'Kurikulum 2013' (Kementrian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2014). The new curriculum is more comprehensive and detailed. Furthermore, in the new curriculum, the term 'formal and non-formal' is removed. According to the new curriculum, there are three types of early childhood educational services which are (1) Daycare and Satuan PAUD Sejenis (SPS) for children aged 0 to 6, (2) Play group for children aged 2 to 4; and (3) Kindergarten for children aged 4 to 6. The 'formal and non-formal' removal brings a new optimism that all types of early childhood educational services are now equally looked after.

However, the society still place high demands and expectations towards kindergarten services and less demands and expectations towards other services, specifically the daycare. The preschool year commonly employ for preparing the children in entering the school. Preparing means that parents and schools put high pressure on the children in mastering reading, writing, and mathematics skills.

On the contrary, daycare services are viewed as the substitution of baby-sitters only. Several studies examining the daycare services reveal poor quality services such as the teachers' qualification which does not meet the national standard, the absence of lesson plans/ daily program, the inappropriate child-adult ratio, the poor learning materials and resources, and the poor condition of the room (Hidayah, 2008; Malinton, 2013). Nevertheless, parents less complain about

the services.

Furthermore, the society expectations and demands on the kindergarten services raise another problem: discouraging play!

As we discussed before, Vygotsky's theory has highlighted importance of play in children's development. Moreover, the new curriculum document is accompanied by one chapter of learning guidance document which mentions about learning through play Therefore, play should be embedded within the curriculum and the lesson plans. Early childhood educational services should leave some spaces so that play, specifically socio-dramatic play, can be carried out.

However, considering several factors, daycare are the most prominent services that can be expected to accomplish the task: bringing high quality play, specifically socio-dramatic play, into the services. Here are some of the main considerations:

The time

Children's learning time in the play group settings is limited from 60 to 70 minutes each day (5 to 6 days attendance). Meanwhile, children's learning time in preschool settings is limited from 150 to 180 minutes each day (5 to 6 days attendance). On the contrary, children's learning time in the daycare services can reach 10 hours a day (for full type services), three times longer than the preschool services or ten times longer than the play group services.

That longer period of time leave large space to carry out play approaches. Sometimes, in the kindergarten services, children's learning is limited with the time arrangement from the teacher. For example, Stephen, Ellis, and Martlew (2006) recorded that during active experiences provided by the teacher, there was one child who started on engaged in one task, yet the teacher said that it was about time for them to move into another table. That kind of scene is predicted to less occur in the daycare settings because of the longer time setting.

The lesson plan

Kindergarten and play group teachers often organize their semester, weekly and daily lesson plans. Even though they usually use one theme within a month and one sub-theme within a week, they normally plan different topic/ lesson plan from day to day. That condition potentially breaks up the children's learning process.

One characteristic of high quality play is deep and meaningful experiences. Deep and meaningful experiences can only be achieved if the lesson plans leave some spaces so that children can carry out the same topic more than just one day.

Here are the examples of deep and meaningful learning experiences from my observation during my study in Australia:

Sample 1: The block area

The kindergarten indoor settings cover several areas such as block area, science area, book/ literacy area, drawing area, and several tables that can be set up according to the lesson plan. Children can freely choose an area that they can engage with. My observation took place on the block area.

One day, I noticed that several children played on the block area. They built something and spend almost the whole day there. I overheard their chat and words such as 'horse' and 'prince' came up.

They apparently made up a big horse from the blocks. The figure below was taken in the early phase of their playing. The children on the pictures built the horse together. They negotiated and aimed to achieve the same goal.

Their play lasted for more than 3 days. Their horse construction got bigger and complex. Some other children joined to the play and brought complexity to story: the horse, the king, the prince, and the princess.

Figure 1. The beginning of the horse construction

The flexible time and loose structured lesson plan allows the socio-dramatic play there. The children experienced a deep and meaningful learning. It was deep because they engage in long period of time, developing the initial theme into more complex story. Moreover, it was meaningful for them. They construct their knowledge about collaboration, negotiation, building construction, and spatial concepts.

That kind of experience will be hard to happen if the teachers plan fragmented and different topic from day to day. Children's learning

process then will be shallow and limited. Daycare services teacher have not been mandated to prepare semester, weekly, and daily lesson plans; even though that is basically inappropriate according to the new curriculum.

Sample 2: The tent area

The kindergarten outdoor settings cover the sand pit area, the tent area, the Bali hut, the craft area, the painting area, the green field, the swing area, and the physical activity area.

During my block, I was assigned to work in the tent area. At the beginning of my planning, I set up nothing in the tent area.
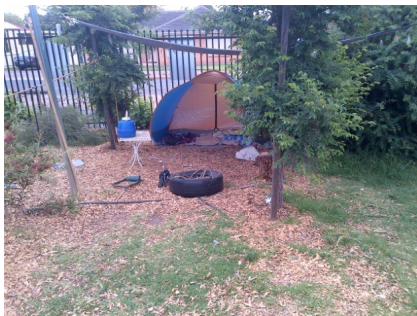

Figure 2. The beginning of the tent setting.

When children played around the tent, I overheard their conversation. Most of them had had a tent experience with their parents before the play. During the play, the enacted their previous experiences such as sleep, eat, and drink.

On the next day, I set up a circle stones as if it was the fire place.

Figure 3. Children pretending to boil the water

Then for the rest five days, I extended their play by arranging various materials to enhance their play story. For example, when they discussed about the adventure they could have during the camping, we explored the idea of treasure hunt. We discussed, browsed in the internet, and made maps. When the children made their own maps, it was evident that they incorporated spatial awareness, numbers, and language into their play.

Figure 4. The exploration journey: making a map

Those two samples indicate the same characteristic of deep and meaningful learning: children engaged in the same topic. They worked within the area for long period of time and the teacher extended their experiences from time to time. The unrestricted time gave them opportunities to explore various concepts such as language, problem solving, cooperation, numeracy, science, and even arts

The pressure on academic achievements

As we discussed before, parents put high pressure on the kindergarten services regarding children's academic achievement. Therefore, play is discouraged from the settings because play is considered unbeneficial for children's academic achievements. Nevertheless, we know that is not true. Vygotsky's theory points the vital role of play in children's development. In that case, daycare services are the best chance to carry out the high quality play experiences because people still assume that children's academic achievements and school preparation are not the duty of the daycare services.

CONCLUSION

Early childhood education field is growing perpetually. Continuous studies and researches have been contributing in producing various theories that help optimizing the early childhood

educational services. Among the theorists, Lev Vygotsky has left his remarkable ideas in early childhood educational practices.

Vygotsky's famous theories cover Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), scaffolding, and the role of language, play, and adults in children's learning. Unlike other constructivists, his theories balance the children's ability to actively construct their own knowledge and the significant roles of the teacher. Therefore, his theories are fit well in Indonesia early educational settings. As Indonesian education traditions and cultures believe that teachers play vital roles in children's life achievements.

Among the three early childhood educational types in Indonesia, daycare service leaves potential space to adopt and apply Vygotskian approaches. Unlike other two services (the play group and the kindergarten), daycare usually serves children for longer period of time while the children attend the play group and kindergarten for short period of time in a day.

Furthermore, daycare services encounter minimum intervention from parents and public's expectation. Parents commonly expect structured lessons that have actual results by the end of the day. Kindergarten services, specifically, face high pressures to get the children ready for the school. The preschool and the parents want to make sure that their children master reading, writing, and math skills by the end of their preschool time. Therefore, even though the early childhood national educational standard has regard play as the leaning approach, the implementation face various complexities.

Finally, I insist more researches to be done in the daycare services. Even though the early childhood national curriculum has regulated the daycare services too, the implementation has numerous shortages. For example, the teacher qualification has been set up the same as the kindergarten but the control system has left a big hole there.

Moreover, the community also put the daycare services as the nanny substitution only. As long as somebody supervises the children, it is considered enough. The daily programs, the room - material management, the learning experiences, and the holistic curriculum are not established as well as the play group or the kindergarten, despite the fact that the children spend more time in the daycare services rather than other services.

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