

SERU International Research Conference, May15-17, 2014

Vygotsky's Theory: Lessons for Student Engagement Research

Natalia Maloshonok

National Research University – Higher School of Economics

E-mail: nmaloshonok@hse.ru

Student Engagement Theory

Authors: *A. Astin, R. Pace, E. Pascarella, P. Terenzini, A. Chickering, Z. Gamson, G. Kuh, K. Krause, H. Coates, P. Ewell, D. Jones, and others.*

- Theory of student engagement is mostly based on the empirical findings that were discovered during decades of the research.
- The student engagement theory emphasizes the role of environment in the learning of students: colleges should encourage student engagement by introducing effective pedagogical practices in the learning process.
- The academic outcomes and development of students is affected by student engagement.

D. Kuh, J. Kinzie, J. Bluckley, B. Bridges, J. Hayek:

“A key element of this approach is adhering to a talent development philosophy throughout the institution. In addition to recognizing that every student can learn under the right conditions, the talent development view requires that the institution organize its resources and create conditions for teaching and learning based on educationally effective practices” [Kuh et al. 2007].

Conceptualization of Student Disengagement

Student Disengagement



```
graph TD; A[Student Disengagement] --> B[Lack of engagement]; A --> C[Has own structure and sources];
```

Lack of engagement

G. Kuh “Disengagement compact”
V. Tinto “Social and academic integration”
S. Mann “Alienation”

Has own structure and sources

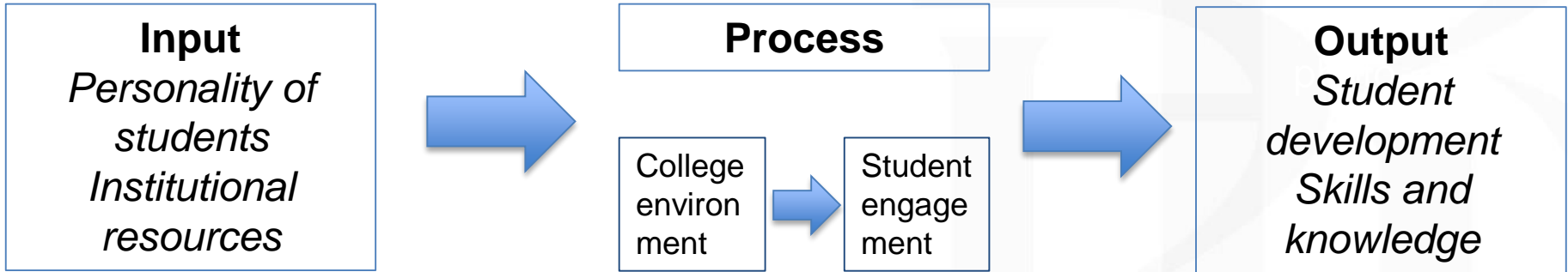
S. Brint and A. Cantwell
Two measures: values disengagement (lack of educational values) and behavioral disengagement (lack of commitment)

Challenges for Student Engagement Studies

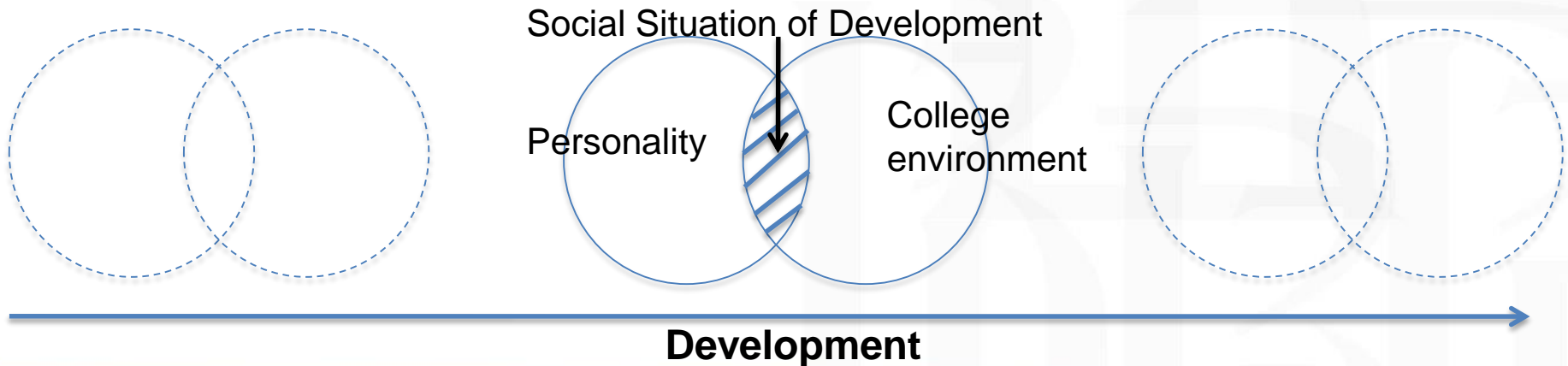
1. Theories of student engagement employ **simplistic understanding of environment as a set of external to students conditions** influenced on student behavior. We think that such definition of institutional environment restricts our insight into internal mechanisms of student engagement. We cannot explain why there is differentiation in engagement of students, who study in one class and have same environment, by these theories.
2. The fact that **student engagement promotes reducing gap between students with different ability level** is considered as an positive effect (ex.: [Carini, Kuh, Klein 2006]). But the student engagement theory don't explain what reasons caused this fact.

Concept of Development

Student Engagement Theory



Vygotsky's Theory



Social Situation of Development (SSD)

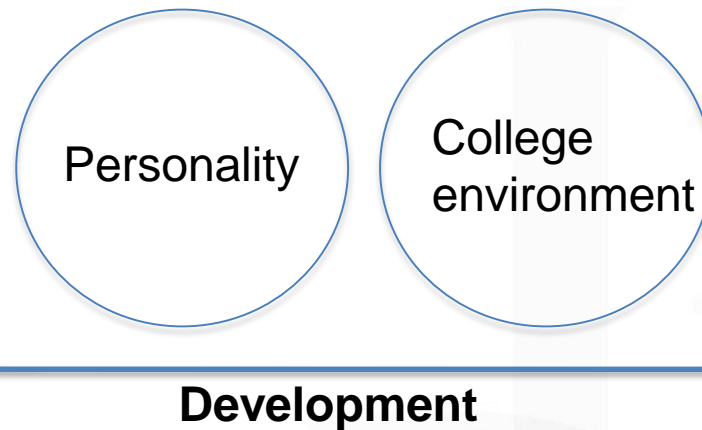
The relations between the personality of the child and his social environment at each development period are mobile.

The environment is not something outside with respect to the child.

L. Vygotsky:

*“We must admit that at the beginning of each age period, there develops a completely original, exclusive, single, and unique relation, specific to the given age, between the child and reality, mainly the social reality, that surrounds him. We call this relation the social situation of development at the given age. **The social situation of development represents the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given period. It determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality as from the basic source of development, the path along which the social becomes the individual**” [Vygotsky 1934].*

Situation of Disengagement



Situation of disengagement arises when SSD of student doesn't include college environment. Student is developing. But college environment and learning don't contribute to his development.

Actual Developmental Level and Zones of Proximal Development

	Theoretical definition	Empirical definition
Actual Developmental Level	The developmental level of the child's psychic functions that are formed as a result of already completed development cycles	The level of difficulty of the problems that child can solve independently
Zone of Proximal Development	The area of maturing intellectual functions that are in the near stage of development	The level of difficulty of the problems that child can solve in cooperation with adults

“The child can always do more in the intellectual sphere than he is capable of doing independently. At the same time, we see that his capability for intellectual imitation is not limitless, but changes absolutely regularly corresponding to the course of his mental development so that at each age level, there is for the child a specific zone of intellectual imitation connected with the actual level of development” [Vygotsky 1934].

Previous theories about relations between learning and development:

- 1) Learning and development are independent processes (learning take a place after development and don't affect it).
- 2) Learning and development are identical processes (they is understood as a acquisition of habits and skills)
- 3) Learning and development are both identical and independent processes (combine two previous approaches)



Vygotsky's theory:

The processes of development and learning don't match. The development process go after the process of learning created zones of proximal development.

Learning is based on the developing aspects of personality, but not on the aspects that had already developed.

Learning and development are directly linked. However, they are not parallel to each other.

There is a complex dynamic bond between learning and development.

Lessons for Student Engagement Research

- *Theories of student engagement imply simplistic understanding of environment as a set of external to students conditions.*

We suggest employing Vygotsky's concept of Social Situation of Development (SSD) in order to get better insight about environment impact on student development.

The environment should be explored only in its relation to student personality.

And the student engagement can be defined as a degree in which college environment corresponds with student's SSD.

- *The student engagement theory don't explain what reasons caused the fact that student engagement promotes reducing gap between students with different ability level.*

According to Vygotsky's theory, the actual developmental level refers to already completed development cycles. They are the prerequisites for functions that are in the process of developing. Therefore, this empirical fact can be explained by hypothesis, that college pedagogical system applied to the students with higher ability level does not keep up with the their zones of proximal development.

Theoretical explanation of student disengagement

Early we demonstrated that existed approaches to conceptualization of student disengagement believe that the determinants of disengagement are external to the student (college environment, faculties expectations) **or** internal to him (absence of educational values, motivation).

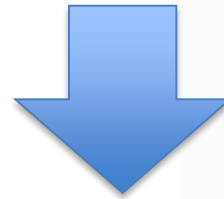
Based on Vygotsky theory, we argue that the ***lack of student engagement is caused by the fact that learning doesn't create zone of proximal development, because pedagogical practices in the college is based on the abilities that had already developed (and included in the actual developmental level) or on the abilities, prerequisites for forming which hadn't been developed.***

Lessons for Student Engagement Research (2)

The SSD of student is unique for each his developmental stage. Therefore we should consider student engagement as dynamic. The change in student engagement is more fruitful index.



The annual surveys measure student engagement as a static phenomenon.



The longitudinal research design can provide more valid information about college impact on students.



NATIONAL RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY

Thank you for your attention!

20, Myasnitskaya str., Moscow, Russia, 101000

Tel.: +7 (495) 628-8829, Fax: +7 (495) 628-7931

www.hse.ru