Jerome Seymour Bruner is an American psychologist who has made significant contributions to human cognitive psychology and cognitive learning theory in educational psychology, as well as to history and to the general philosophy of education. There were three main theories that Bruner researched and developed throughout his time as an educational psychologist. These are the stages of intellectual development, personal constructivism and discovery learning.

Constructivism is the “view that knowledge and truth are products of human enquiry and invention rather than given directly by scripture or nature.” (Bankhurst & Shanker, 2001) Bruner’s constructivist theory is when the learner constructs new ideas or concepts based upon current and or past knowledge. Put simply, this is the way that people make meaning of the world through a series of individual constructs. Constructs are the different types of filters we choose to place over our realities in order to successfully change our reality from chaos to order. Fundamentally, constructivism is a learning process which allows for a student to experience an environment first hand, giving that student reliable and trustworthy knowledge. The student is then required to act upon the environment to both acquire and test new knowledge. A strength of this type of learning acquisition is that it allows for children to develop and extend upon what they already know through the linking of new information to previously learned information. One weakness of such a learning style is that if a student lacks motivation to participate within an activity, they are unlikely to think deeply about a task and thus may not be able to make the positive association between new information and previously learned information.

Not only did Bruner develop the concept of constructivism but also that of Discovery Learning. Discovery Learning “...occurs whenever the learner is not provided with the target information or conceptual understanding and must find it independently and with only the provided materials.” (Aldrich, L., Alferi, N., Brooks, P., & Tenenbaum, H. 2011). Discovery Learning is quite simply exactly what its name implies – learning by discovery This means on one’s own, without any extra information provided and with only the material provided. Discovery learning can take place in a number of ways. One way is through investigation and experimentation – this is merely a process of trial and error. Another way for discovery learning to occur is through using previous knowledge or understanding and applying this information to the problem or task being undertaken. A strength of such a type of learning could be that problem solving skills are greatly improved every time a student learns through discovery. One weakness of this type of learning could be that each individual will have a different interpretation of information and that discovery learning can and will
develop very differently in different children owing to a number of factors such as prior knowledge to a given task and intellectual ability.

Bruner also outlined the stages of intellectual development, of which there are three. The Enactive Stage is the first of the intellectual stages that a child will pass through. It involves teaching through an action/s which could be difficult to teach simply through words or with an explanation. The iconic stage is the second stage of intellectual development and it involves the use of images to guide our understanding of action. During the iconic stage information is stored in the brain as a mental picture or image. It is during this time that the use of illustrations can assist in learning. A strength of this would be that it is used as a strong visual aid to help trigger information and a weakness of this stage could be that a child must first know what an image is in order to recognise it or else this foundation for learning is pointless. Lastly is the symbolic stage which involves learning through the form of a code or symbol. This is essential is the learning of the alphabet as well as in mathematics where everything comes from a symbol. The symbolic stage is used to arrange and reorganise previously acquired skills or information and link it to new information. A strength of the symbolic stage is that it can help to acquire new skills such as learning another language, and a weakness of this stage could be that if the child is taught the wrong code to begin with they will consistently be getting the wrong answer.
References


During my time at Wendouree Primary School in the composite grade 4/5/6 classroom I have seen many examples of Bruner’s theories in action. An example of constructivism within my classroom would have been the students’ studies on the 2012 London Olympics. The students first would have watched the Olympics at home on television; this would have assisted them in gaining their initial knowledge of the worldwide event. Later in the classroom the students began their assignments based around the games. Students were able to draw on previously learnt knowledge through watching the games, and make the connections to what they are learning in class. Keeping with the concept of constructivism, the children were eased very gently into the assignment beginning with simple task such as drawing five flags of countries which complete in the Olympics then gradually increasing their knowledge to higher levels of abstraction where students needed to investigate the history of the games. Through this use of step by step analytical thinking, the students were able to work up from a quite basic level of understanding to a much more complex thinking process. This type of learning style proved quite effective for this activity as student behaviour was very positive and learning outcomes were achieved. Through this observation, I have gained the ability to be able to guide children from a basic stage of development to a more complex level of understanding.

Discovery Learning is when a student develops their learning supervised but not guided with only the materials provided. I have observed an example of this at my placement in the 4/5/6 class. I have observed discovery learning through the students’ development of their whole-school showcase. The children are supervised but are still able to work independently to make up their own individual dance moves. Student behaviour can sometime be quite uncontrollable as all students are striving to have the biggest and best dance moves. This theory did not work to its full potential in this given scenario. The effectiveness of discovery learning for children creating their own dance moves was quite poor and student behaviour quickly escalated out of the control of the teacher.

Bruner’s stages of intellectual development consist of Enactive representation, which is action based learning, followed by Iconic representation which consists of image-based learning, then thirdly Symbolic representation which, as the name suggests, is a form of learning based around symbols and language. I have observed many examples each stage of intellectual development within my classroom but I will discuss an example in relation to the Symbolic stage. A clear example of the Symbolic stage within the classroom is mathematics. Symbols are used constantly within mathematics and without these tasks would become tedious and often confusing. In my 4/5/6 classroom, the students were learning their times tables. Of course, this proved effective because as soon as the students knew what the symbol represented, they were able to apply this to any given scenario. A negative application of the Symbolic stage of intellectual development could be if the

Emma Hancock
S00127026
EDFD133
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students misunderstood the symbol to mean something else. It would then be extremely difficult to change the representation of that particular symbol as the association has already been made.