Maslow’s Hierarchy Of Needs: Its Usage To Understand And Improve Pupil Learning

Abraham Maslow created a hierarchy that he believed, when fulfilled would allow a person to be in the correct mindset in order to achieve their full potential; the mindset Maslow is referring to is labelled as ‘self-actualisation’ and emphasises personal growth with the overall aim being growth towards a person’s best self. Coleman (2015) states that humanistic psychology (which Maslow’s theory falls under) emphasises individuality, free will and the ability to improve upon oneself, this emphasis on individuality and free will in Maslow’s psychological theory can be applied to the education system in many ways to both understand and improve upon the learning experience of pupils which will be discussed and analysed later in this essay. Maslow however also has other theorists who disagree with his hierarchy of needs and instead provide their own idea about how people should learn and be taught which again will be discussed and analysed within this essay.

The ‘hierarchy of needs’ was created by Maslow in the 1940’s which in itself predates the creation of Humanistic Psychology in the mid-20th century and therefore it can be considered that Maslow is one of the founding fathers of humanistic psychology which in turn elevates Maslow’s theories to being core ideals within the field of psychology. Maslow also used Freud and Psychoanalysis as a starting point for his theories which means we can create a close link between Maslow’s theories regarding needs and those concocted by Freud. Maslow’s theory on individual achievement has been known to conflict with a lot of other theories, for example House, Kalisch and Maidman (2018) state that Maslow’s theories favour middle class males; therefore, we can see that Feminists would not inherently agree with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory.

Maslow (1943) theorised that every human being possesses a mental Hierarchy compiled of needs that must be fulfilled, this allows the individual to be able to achieve what Maslow referred to as ‘self-actualisation’; the state of mind that is optimal for someone to achieve their full potential. Maslow also theorised that these needs must be fulfilled in a specific order, this is because the needs are organised in a way that Maslow considered to be the ‘basic’ needs to the ‘being’ needs (For example, Physiological needs are the first to be addressed while esteem is the last to be addressed). It should also be noted This theory on need fulfilment can be called into question however, as it could be argued that people from lower income backgrounds (who according to Van Lethe, Jansen and Kamphuis (2015) are the ones most likely to indulge in less healthy food and drink options) are unable to properly fulfil their physiological needs; however a criticism of this is that a lot of these people have achieved other needs such as Love and Belonging; which is higher up on the hierarchy, and therefore considered impossible to achieve without first fulfilling all the previous needs.

The beginning of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is composed of what Maslow titled the ‘Basic’ needs - consisting of an individual’s ‘Physiological’ and ‘Safety’ needs. The first category on the hierarchy which is the physiological needs of an individual are shown to be our most basic needs in terms of bodily function and upkeep, such as; food intake, hydration, maintaining temperature and adequate sleep according to Maslow (1943). It is understandable why Maslow would place physiological needs as a ‘basic’ need as it is one that every human needs to fulfil

without choice, needs that are unavoidable in everyday life (This links to what Hale et al (2019) dictates as causes of ‘burnout’ such as lack of sleep and bad nutrition, these are basic needs and if a lack of them causes mental exhaustion as dictated by Hale et al then that proves Maslow’s assumption of these being baseline needs of self-actualisation to be correct). The next step Maslow theorised deals with what is referred to as ‘safety’ needs, Maslow (1943) tells us that safety needs are gathered in childhood and that the average adult feels very content in their safety needs (manifesting as feeling safe from animals, crime, extreme temperatures etc…) however people who aren’t satisfied in their safety needs tend to manifest as people who avoid and discourage change or those who are neurotic

Maslow’s second grouping of needs are what he called the ‘Psychological’ needs (consisting of ‘Love and Belonging’ and ‘Self-Esteem’), which Maslow regarded to be less important than the ‘basic’ needs but still an important factor to consider when aiming to self-actualise. The ‘Love and Belonging’ needs according to Maslow (1943) create a yearning for relationships with people and will cause the individual to more keenly notice the absence of relationships such as friendships or romantic relationships; therefore these needs are met through social interaction either recreationally or romantically. Secondly the ‘Self-Esteem’ needs emerge to becoming a person’s top priority; The ‘Self-Esteem’ needs are described by Maslow (1943) to be the need for a stable, high evaluation of the self whether that be from achievement or the support from others. The point could be made however that some people seem to have fulfilled the love and belonging need without having the proper resources in order to satisfy their ‘basic’ needs such as nutrition and safety (E.g., families living on the breadline may not have good nutrition but still feel a sense of love and belonging within the family.), this brings into question the validity of Maslow’s assumptions.

Maslow created the hierarchy of needs to show how somebody reaches ‘self-actualisation’ which according to Jeanes (2019) is the desire to or action of achieving one’s full potential which is also how Maslow envisioned the term while creating his hierarchy. As previously stated Maslow believed that to achieve ‘Self-actualisation’ a person needed to complete the hierarchy of needs in a specific order, after the hierarchy was complete Maslow believed a person was most likely to achieve their full potential and even had the ability to transcend ‘Self-actualisation’. Schneider, Bugenthal and Pierson (2015) present how Maslow found that his ‘Self-Actualising’ individuals had adopted an everyday creativity and that their life had generally elevated to a higher plateau than those who had not ‘Self-Actualised’, this information does present the idea that self-actualisation is something that will better an individual’s life; the education system could benefit by helping pupils fulfil Maslow’s proposed needs, therefore ensuring they are reaching the appropriate mindset that Maslow considers optimal for individual potential.

However there has been opposition to Maslow’s hierarchy such as from conflict theories Marxism and feminism. Pearson and Podeschi (1999) give an example of this by stating how Marxism views Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as being naïve when it comes to the elitist elements that influenced its creation, This means that Marxists view Maslow and his psychology as favouring those with power and damning those without (E.g. favouring the rich and not the poor) which is put best in the quote ‘What real individuals, living in what real societies, working in what real jobs and earning what real income have any chance at all of becoming self-actualisers?’ (Lethbridge, 1986: 90). Regarding feminism, they hold very similar ideas about Maslow’s hierarchy to the Marxists however they believe that instead of being inherently elitist they believe that Maslow is inherently patriarchal. Feminists hold the belief that Maslow as a

theorist is subconsciously patriarchal with House, Kalisch and Maidman (2018) presenting the idea that most if not all of Maslow's theories end up benefitting middle class white males the most. Regarding education both Marxism and Feminism find the education system to be highly oppressive towards the working class and females respectively, therefore we can safely assume that both Marxists and feminists would disparage the use of Maslow's hierarchy of needs within the school system due to how oppressive they find both the theory and the educational system to be; they would be more likely to adopt a system that focuses on helping proletariats and women respectively and exclusively.

Maslow has also faced opposing viewpoints from other theorists in his field such as Bruner (1963) who proposes that children only learn through categorising information into three categories known as iconic, enactive and symbolic; the best way to develop a coding system according to Bruner is to discover it individually, not to be told by the teacher. This theory implies that Maslow's hierarchy has no effect on the efficiency of a pupils learning and that instead of human needs dictating whether a pupil has the potential to learn effectively it is instead if they have individually discovered how to categorise information. If Bruner's theory were to be applied in education then it would be able to promote independence more effectively than if Maslow's theory were to be implemented, alternatively if Maslow's theory is applied in an educational setting then you are more likely to see strong teacher-pupil bonds as teachers try to aid pupils in achieving their full potential compared to Bruner's theory where you are more likely to witness little to no teacher input in order to promote independence.

As alluded to previously Maslow's hierarchy of needs has many practical applications in the classroom. For example, Maslow's hierarchy can be applied to behavioural issues from pupils within the classroom in order to help the teacher both better understand the reasons behind the behaviour and how to more effectively reduce levels of bad behaviour in the future. Maslow (1943) dictates that although motivation theory and behaviour are not synonymous, motivation theory does play a part in determining someone's behaviour, along with social, biological and cultural influences as well, it is evident here that Maslow is presenting his hierarchy and its fulfilment as an influence on behaviour. Costa and Maddi (1972) state that in Maslow's framework every need is present within all of us although expression varies from person to person, if one was to apply this to a classroom environment then it allows a teacher to more effectively deal with behavioural issues by identifying not only pre-existing influences on a child's behaviour but also what need fulfilment that child is missing that is holding them back from their full potential. If this is properly used in the classroom then teachers will be able to help pupils who are currently not in the right mindset for education, reach that higher plateau and creativity that comes with self-actualisation presented by Schneider, Bugenthal and Pierson (2015) thereby improving the quality of learning for the whole class.

Furthermore, Maslow's hierarchy of needs can also be applied to education in a way that can help children who come from a disadvantaged background who may be limited in their learning capabilities due to their home life. Van Lenthe, Jansen and Kamphuis (2015) state that people who hold a lower income are the ones more likely to have an unbalanced diet and bad nutrition which according to Maslow (1943) would mean that lower income people are unable to progress up the hierarchy of needs due to being unable to properly fulfil their 'physiological' needs; something Maslow considered to be 'basic' in terms of human needs. This could be overcome through teacher intervention such as setting up 'Breakfast clubs' for those that aren't able to eat breakfast and offering a safe place to talk should they need to discuss any problems they feel are impeding their learning; seeing to it that pupils receive adequate fulfilment of both their

‘basic’ needs and any needs they struggle to fulfil higher up the hierarchy will benefit both the pupil themselves and the school as a whole. By ensuring that they are reaching their full learning potential and understanding any knowledge presented to them clearly pupils receive a multitude of benefits from implementing Maslow’s theory into the education system, The school will also benefit from this as the better grades gathered by pupils due to teachers managing their needs will garner more funding and attention for the school, this in turn will allow the school to better accommodate itself to attend to pupils needs.

In Conclusion Maslow’s theory is a core ideal within psychology and is very useful when applied when applied to education however it shares both strengths and weaknesses in its use, for example it can be said that Maslow’s theory will allow teachers to better accommodate for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in terms of academic success, however Maslow has received criticism from conflict theories such as feminism and Marxism regarding his theories as patriarchal (House, Kalisch and Maidman, 2018) and elitist (Pearson and Podeschi, 1999) respectfully, suggesting the theory is more oppressive than accommodating.

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