THE ROLE OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD TRAINING PROGRAM: A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Christine Jackson

What we, as intelligent, responsible and involved individuals need to be constantly aware of and concerned with, is how to create for ourselves and our children the kind of quality of life where we can express and experience understanding, acceptance, empathy and caring; where we can learn to feel good about ourselves, be able to relate to others in meaningful ways, gain a sense of competency and effectiveness in life, and establish a sense of community among our fellow human beings while respecting their differences and using those differences to enrich and enhance our experience of them. While all of us need to be involved in this process, it is especially important that early childhood educators — a term used in referring, also, to parents of young children — become active participants, for it is they who have a crucial influence on the developing minds of young children, and who can effect the qualitative difference between children who grow up to become angry, frustrated and powerless individuals and those who grow up to become healthy, competent and independent individuals.

What the course in Human Development attempts to do is, (1) provide a sound base in child development, and (2) set that base in the context of information about growth and development from a variety of disciplines. We then have the chance to use this information in ways which will give it more meaning, help us to relate it to our own life experience, and enable us to use the insight gained through this process in our relationship with others.

Because human development curriculum is designed “to provide the student with an interdisciplinary understanding of the dynamics of growth and development over the lifespan,” we must use this information to examine the conditions under which development takes place, and determine which of those conditions enhance and which of those inhibit the full development of the individual and the actualization of his potential.

We look first to the process of socialization and how values are learned, for it is through this process that children learn what is expected of them and what they must be in order to be acceptable to society. We learn that we must be very aware of imposing our own values and prejudices onto our children, because when we do this we are using our power and authority as adults to make them give up their responsibility and right to choose how they will live, think, feel, and function in the world. In providing them with what they should think, feel, and function, we are inhibiting their growth and development in becoming creative, independent and free-thinking persons. What we, as early childhood educators, must first become aware of is what our own values for children are — and this we must do by re-examining our own value systems and keeping only those values which give meaning and fulfillment to our lives and to the lives of our children. Once we have defined these values for ourselves, we need to be able to refrain from imposing from without (so that children will not merely retain introjected values which have no real meaning for their lives), but, rather, to help children become in touch with their own valuing process.

Another issue involved in our understanding of the socialization process is the question of our concept of human nature. For the early childhood educator, the implications for the different points of view are crucial in determining how they will structure the environment in order to deal with (control) the child’s innate aggressive and antisocial tendencies, or structure the environment in order to help enhance the quality of children’s experiences so that pro-social and moral behavior will be elicited. In the first instance, where environments are structured with too many rules,
we see reflected the belief that man is by nature aggressive and that we are powerless to effect the way he will behave in given situations except to prevent him from exhibiting his aggression through repressive measures. In the second instance we see reflected the belief that man is primarily pro-social and that he is able to fully actualize himself once certain basic needs are met. We need to provide the kinds of conditions and environment which enhance this tendency toward caring and responsible behavior.

I have said that human development curriculum provides us with an understanding of how growth and development take place, and what conditions can enhance that maturation process. It also provides us with insights regarding significant relationships and the changing concepts that organize our thinking about them, specifically, the changes in the structure and functioning of the family, changes in the concept of sex roles, changing definitions of intimacy and marriage, and the changes in decisionmaking regarding parenthood and parenting.

We see the family as having undergone tremendous changes during the last few years, such that many of its characteristics and traditions are no longer valid. No longer can we rely on the familiarity and security of predetermined roles between spouses, parents and children, and male/female identities. As early childhood educators we must recognize our responsibility to focus on the dynamics of the family (as the single greatest influence in a child’s socialization) within the classroom; to deal with children’s questions about identity, based on their biological sex, to help them understand that as individuals they have the potential to do and be a variety of things. Their maleness and femaleness should in no way inhibit their involvement and participation in life, instead, it should help them understand the rules and routines of their own families. As early childhood educators, we need to understand those conditions within the child’s environment, be it family or classroom, which enhance his growth and development. We need to involve parents in their child’s learning through active parent-participation programs, so that they too can reinforce, within the home, the concepts and understandings the child gains in school.

We need to help the young child learn to share his thoughts and feelings with others; to develop authentic, intimate relationships with others outside his family. We need to help him understand that being able to relate and communicate with others is essential to the growth of relationships and that this includes a willingness to take risks and become really involved with others. We need to deal with the relationships between mommies and daddies, brothers and sisters, parents and children, in honest and open ways so that we do not create mystery or confusion as to what it means to have an intimate relationship. At the same time we need to recognize that the child, like everyone else, is a person with feelings, and that often these feelings are not pleasant ones to experience. What early childhood educators need to do is help the child recognize and accept whatever feelings he has in any given situation; and, rather than vent them in self-or-other destructive behaviors, to express them through words or to vent them through appropriate channels of play. We need to encourage children to confront one another with their feelings — to exchange “I*messages” when it is needed so that the issue of conflict can be resolved rather than carried around unnecessarily. If a child learns to confront and share feelings in nonjudgmental and nonblaming ways, then he has established the basis and has learned the skills for being able to do this later on in other situations when intimate relationships are perhaps more meaningful to him.

Another component of human development information deals with differences — racial, ethnic, cultural and social-class. We learn that differences need not be cause for stress or conflict if we are willing to engage in the process of coming to know about the differences, to understand the differences, to accept them (by allowing the other person the right to feel, think and act his own way), to empathize with them (another's experience), and to relate to the differences (make connections rather than divisions between people). What we tend to automatically do, rather than engage in this process, is to categorize people (when they have attributes different from us) and these categories tend to become stereotypes upon which we base
our perceptions, interpretations and reactions to another's behavior. We are ethnocentric rather than anthropocentric. The first involves judging others by our group's standards and finding others outside our group inferior. If we were anthropocentric, we could recognize that in spite of our differences we are all united in the common theme of survival and making meaning in our existence. We could appreciate and value those different from ourselves because those differences enhance and enrich the world in which we live.

Again, as early childhood educators, we need to focus on our own values and attitudes regarding this whole issue of racism/classism/culturalism/sextism. We need to recognize whether we are accepting of or discriminate against others different from ourselves. We need to decide whether these are attitudes we would want our children to have and call their own. Hopefully, as people concerned with working with people, we would value acceptance and empathy over rejection and hostility. We would try to help children become aware of the differences in experience between us and others different from ourselves and how these differences in experiences determine the differences in values, goals, and lifestyles that we encounter. We need to focus on these differences rather than deny their existence or overlook them because of their unpleasantness. We need to ask: why do these differences matter in the way we relate to people; why, in the case of racism, classism, and sexism do these differences exist so as to place people within a rigid hierarchical structure of superior-inferior; what are the effects of discrimination on ourselves, as well as on those against whom we discriminate; how can we change the existing structure so that it will no longer ensure and necessitate the concepts of racism, culturalism, classism or sexism?

What the Human Development component does, then, is provide us with an enormous quantity of information and an unlimited number of questions which need to be answered if we are to make sense of the information and be able to apply it in our own lives. As concerned individuals, involved in our own process of growth and development as well as that of our children, we must be willing to engage in some very critical evaluation of what is in the world today — what it is we are offering our young children in this time and place. Some of the more crucial issues are presented in human development information. I feel, as a potential early childhood educator, that the information and understandings I have gained through the Human Development curriculum have made a significant difference in my own life in terms of challenging me to re-examine my own values and the behaviors which manifest them.

Indeed, it seems essential that any concerned individual, particularly those involved in early childhood education, be willing to engage in this process of confronting the issues human development theory offers us, in order to have even the beginning information, skills and resources necessary in working with young children.