

Moving Toward A Relationship-Centered Practice

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In my part of the world, the big push in early childhood education today is to get children ready for school. Policy makers, law makers, and grants foundations tell us we need to improve children's literacy and math skills in order to close the educational achievement gap that plagues the educational system in the United States. Research-based curriculum has become the definition of best practice. This very narrow perspective ignores a very real fact- that social and emotional development is intricately connected to intellectual development.

There are many caregivers and teachers who don't "know" children and youth, who can't just hang-out with children or youth, who can't form deep and meaningful relationships with children or youth. These are attitude, emotional skills, and ways of being that you can't mandate. These are skills that aren't developed by training on a state-approved curriculum. For many prospective child care providers, teachers, and youth workers; it takes a sustained, intentional effort to help them discover that "child inside" and develop a deep respect for the child and the ability to be in relationship with a child and a group of children.

I teach child development at a community college. Our advisory committee, which is made up of local providers, teachers, administrators, and advocates, tell me that the biggest area of concern in their programs is the social- emotional development of the children. Our recent graduates, who are in their first years of caregiving and teaching, echo these sentiments. As a parent, I see it too. In our rural county there are no children's mental health services, few resources for parents, and the children's behavior is out of control. There are issues with anger, respect, self-control, kindness, and empathy. We all know from experience, that it is impossible to

be efficient in your instruction and on-task with your curriculum when children's behavior consistently interrupts the learning experiences.

As a parent, I've tried talking with school administrators whose eyes glaze over when I talk about children's anger, or anxiety, or lack of empathy. They are absolutely clueless when it comes to understanding the emotional life of children. When I talk with teachers, their fear focuses on not meeting the government standards. They have eliminated all play or free choice time from the daily schedule because they have to teach to these standards. They can't imagine how they could meet all of the standards through play and active learning.

Over the past three years, I've been working to redesign our child development training program to be more relationship-focused. My quest has been and continues to be - how to design an early childhood program within a two-year college that creates "a heart for children" in our students. The inspiration for this shift came from our advisory committee and their concerns for children in our region. Now two years later, we are moving toward a relationship-based approach to early childhood care and education.

A typical introductory course would cover career options, roles and responsibilities, types of programs, rules and regulations, the career lattice, working conditions, and professionalism. We manage to weave these topics into our courses, but now the primary focus is on caring and one's "call" to working with children, youth, and families. We read a classic from the 1970's, *On Caring* by Milton Mayerhoff. It is a tough little read written by a philosopher. We tease out the meanings together. Students write an autobiography about their childhood and how their childhood experiences have brought them to this time and place. They grapple with the question, "Who do you want to be in the lives of children?"

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Next we read and discuss *Born For Love* by Maia Szalavitz and Bruce Perry, M.D., Ph.D. Bruce is one of our country's leading experts on child trauma as well as a professor of psychiatry. The first sentence in the introduction is, "So why should I care?" (Szalavitz and Perry, p.1, 2010) The book moves us from the essence of caring to the development of empathy in children. Each chapter presents the story of a child whose experience either enhanced or diminished his or her development of empathy and as a result, life experience. Masterfully, the authors tie these engaging life stories to the latest research on brain development and neurobiology. If that weren't enough, at the end of each chapter they connect these vivid gut-wrenching stories to prevailing social problems. From the very beginning, my students are challenged to see children not just as individuals, but individuals within a family and within a larger social and political context. After finishing *Born For Love*, the students work in small groups to design a program for children or youth and families that places empathy at the core. Then they present their model program to the rest of the class. This exercise gives them an additional opportunity to talk about how things could be different. They discover how individual attitudes and behaviors are good but not nearly enough to make a difference. As future teachers and caregivers, they need to support important ideas like the development of empathy, through structural change.

We finish the semester by reading Karen Sternheimer's *Kids These Days*. It's a sociologists examination of myths about today's youth and how the media distorts and misrepresents the truth and works to distract us from focusing on key issues. As a result, beginning students are learning that what you see on the surface isn't always the whole picture. Often there's more to the story and you need to look deeper. You can't always believe what you hear on the news or read in the newspapers. You have to have other sources of information. Once again they are faced with the reality that children live in families and societies. Programs, communities, media, society, and public policy play a huge role in children's development.

The child development program emphasizes relationships in other ways as well. There is another new first-semester course entitled, Guidance and Group Dynamics. Rather than adopting a traditional textbook, we use *Positive Discipline* by Jane Nelson and *Reaching All by Creating Tribes Learning Communities* by Jeanne Gibbs. Tribes is a curriculum that spans early childhood through adolescence. It promotes social development and academic achievement through building and sustaining a sense of community through small groups (tribes). Once again, the focus is on the positive social and emotional development of children and the creation of community within a classroom.

As you can see, one way to inspire future caregivers and teachers to build relationships with children and families is to incorporate thought-provoking, illuminating, and inspirational books as classroom texts. One afternoon I was looking through the website of a favorite magazine, *Child Care Information Exchange*. The editors were compiling a list of the most inspirational books in early childhood. In other words, they were asking readers, "What books have most inspired you or had the biggest impact on you and your work with children?" Isn't that a great question? What a wonderful way to approach selecting textbooks to preparing individuals to work with children. Just ask the elders and current leaders which books were pivotal in their professional development.

As you might expect, Margie Carter and Deb Curtis' books were high on the list. They are so skilled at keeping the focus on the child, teaching through meaningful relationships, and being fully present in the moment. Practicum courses often require students to journal about their experience. As an instructor, I can only tolerate reading the same student journal entries week after week. "Today was a good day. The children ate snack and played outside. There weren't any problems." An assignment that is intended to promote reflection and deep learning becomes a mundane task to please the instructor. Now child development students read, "*Reflecting Children's Lives*." They love it and their journal entries are much deeper. Just yesterday I received this e-mail from a student.

"I just finished reading chapter 3 in *Reflecting Children's Lives* ... and I knew this book was going to be deep but I did not realize how deep until I read this chapter. My own son, the oldest, is one of my most challenging students here. He makes me loose it in front of all the kids. I am usually not a person who resorts to yelling. But that is what he drives me to. He throws toys, pushes or picks on other students. He hits them. He yells in their faces. I have tried time out. I have even tried talking with him in a calm voice I yell and tell him to go to his room and that we will talk about his choice of behavior later. He brings out the worst in me... I don't want this. It's not healthy for me or him. I need help."

It is a realization that what she's doing isn't working for herself or her son. She's acknowledging that she's not the mother or the family child care provider that she wants to be. It's plea for help. All of this raw emotion bubbled to the surface in part because we are intentionally introducing our students to texts that masterfully put the child at the center and keep the focus on the adult-child relationship. We are there for her, providing her support, guidance, and resources

Curriculum Planning is one of the last classes students take before earning their degree. It was the first course to undergo revision. At this point it is very effective in teaching students how to plan curriculum. Margie and Deb's *Learning Together with Young Children* and *Designs for Living and Learning* are the texts. Students conduct a contextual analysis. They facilitate a discussion with children to uncover project ideas and ask them what they know and what they want to know about the topic. Then they develop a curriculum project based on the children's interests. They create meaningful displays and documentation panels. Best of all, after completing their curriculum plan, they fill out a rubric that shows them that they have met many, if not all of the government standards. Aha! They have proven to themselves that they can create curriculum from the ground up that is based on children's interests, grounded in play and active learning, supports meaningful relationships, and meets state standards. It doesn't get much better than that.

Students complete their A.A.S. degree much like they begin it...by focusing on relationships. Students work together to help each other with their electronic portfolios. They examine relationships they have with children, co-workers, parents, and the community through the lens of the NAEYC code of ethical conduct. They reflect on these multiple relationships, the relationship of social justice to their work, as well as their values and vision for children as they reflect on the articles in Ann Pelo's, *Rethinking Early Childhood*.

We work in a climate in which the child has become standardized and something that only has value when measured. Political decision-makers and leaders in the field of early childhood care and education equate quality with research-based curriculum, finding no place in their model for the Reggio, the project approach, Montessori education, or emergent curriculum. We need early childhood caregivers and teachers who can connect in meaningful ways with children, families, and their communities. We need early childhood professionals who are inspired, visionary, and passionate about their calling to work with and on behalf of children, youth, and families. The way that we frame our courses or training and the resources we select to introduce beginning practitioners to the field makes a difference. By selecting emotionally as well as intellectually engaging resources that get at the heart of working with children, colleges can provide a humanizing educational experience so that child development graduates can truly empathize with and care for children, youth, and families.

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