Emerging Issues in Child and Youth Care Education: A Platform for Planning

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ABSTRACT: The authors explore key ingredients in the preparation of child and youth care workers with a focus on the conceptual and practical interconnectedness required if the workers are to be enabled to work professionally and effectively.

KEY WORDS: professionalization of child and youth care work; education and training for child and youth care workers; staff development in child and youth care work; caring as a career: professional care work; youthwork.

Teachers, practitioners, and researchers concerned with child and youth care and development have talked for a long time about professionalization—what it means, why we need it or why we don't, in what relationship to other professions, and the like (Beker, 1979, pp. 205–230). The differences are important but, at a deeper level, the field shares a commitment to a common effort, a common enterprise. Collectively, we have taken the lead in what Morris (1978) has identified as a broader, emerging professional concern with "caring," the process of caring, or "care work," which views nurturance as a helping modality with appropriate applications to the young, the aging, the disabled, the distressed, the isolated, and people in general (Maier, 1979). In this paper, the authors focus on several critical issues for the continued building of the professional discipline of child and youth care. We are concerned with what preparation for service in child and youth care means and how such preparation can best be conceptualized and delivered.

Interconnectedness

A major theme that the field will need to confront, one that seems poised to take center stage with regard to a host of public issues and private agendas in the 1980s and holds much promise for our work, is interconnectedness. More precisely, what is new is not the fact of interconnectedness but the recognition that it exists and must be harnessed in the service of our work. The old struggle concerned whether collectivism or individualism was the "true" mode of life; attention has more recently shifted to the interconnectedness between individuals and their social as well as physical environment. Ecological phenomena, the mutual relations between persons and their physical and social environments, are the ones that currently receive particular attention for their significance in the development of individuals and the quality of their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

We have merely to remind ourselves of the events in Solzhenitsyn's (1971) *Cancer Ward*, where one person made a difference due to the interconnectedness between his or her actions and the environment when the person refuses to accept the prescribed role of patient; the whole treatment program is jarred as a result. Moreover, it now seems clear that the outcome of residential care is more influenced by the number of visits a child has with a family than by the internal quality of the residential program per se (Taylor & Alpert, 1973). Changes in sex roles impact the labor market; coffee drinking can influence the course of pregnancy; and Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights that the welfare of children may be more intimately intertwined with the community's employment practices and the value systems of the child's life space than with the children's caregivers' direct child caring and child-rearing capacities. In every area, life turns out to be more complex than we had realized.

Multidisciplinary Work

The awareness of interconnectedness is reflected in changing practice expectations and constraints. The focus has shifted from the boundaries between traditional professional disciplines to highlight multidisciplinary or generic approaches that focus on what needs to be done to ease a particular kind of problem or to best serve particular client groups (O'Connor & Martin, 1980). The child care field was out front on this one, and others are catching up. A major challenge will be to establish and maintain connections with allied disciplines so that existing and emerging knowledge and practice wisdom can be broadly applied by the wide variety of helping professionals for whom it may be appropriate.

Community and Family Emphasis

Increasingly, as we learn more about the interconnected sources and conditions of developmental impact, the service arena for child and youth care workers will encompass community and family contexts. This requires new expectations and perspectives, new competencies, and new patterns of staff deployment to enable individuals with varying skills to complement each other's efforts. The implications for the education of practitioners are profound, and we have not yet done enough to meet the need. This is one of the changes that makes it increasingly difficult to view child and youth care work totally as a "craft" enterprise, as it has often been viewed in the past, although craftsmanship is an essential component. We all know good child and youth care craftspeople, and we have all seen some who flounder when more complex expectations are introduced. In the words of Louis Pasteur, "Chance favors the prepared mind."

Social and Political Advocacy

Inevitably, as the locus of child and youth care work shifts to the community (Whittaker, 1979) and as we become increasingly sensitive to the interconnectedness between social conditions and human development, we will become increasingly involved in social and political efforts and issues. Effective advocacy will become crucial, both as a technique to establish social conditions that enhance child and youth development and as a way to model concern and participation to facilitate empowerment of the clientele. Ample precedent for such political involvement on behalf of the clients exists among educators and other youthworkers in Europe (Linton, 1971, 1973) and in some exciting ventures in this country.

As advocates, we will need to take account of the declining proportion of children and youth in our population as is projected for the years immediately ahead. It will not be easy to make arguments for the opportunity this will provide to serve young people more effectively and to arrange to have quality programs and systems ready for expected later increases in the population involved. It will be particularly difficult with decision-makers who seem more concerned with the number of dollars spent. But these are the arguments we must make if we are to be able to do the job. Here, too, the growing awareness of interconnectedness will have an impact, and we cannot know the changes in our service systems that will result. Declining numbers of children and youth may facilitate the earlier and more effective integration of many of them into the adult world. Thus, it may lead to lessened use of programs with which we are associated, even on a per capita basis. To

the extent that this is a positive development, we, as responsible professionals, need to applaud and facilitate it.

Legal Considerations

Another kind of interconnectedness with which the child and youth care field must be concerned is represented by the explosion in the influence of legal considerations in our work. Although we are perhaps most clearly and directly touched by liability issues and the rights of children including the "law guardian" phenomenon, we are also affected by affirmative action provisions, protection of research subjects, and on and on. We need to prepare those entering the field with the means for coping efficiently with such provisions and for effective advocacy to change those that are not consistent with our mission (Koocher, 1976; Rubin, 1972).

Institutional Abuse

One emerging area of concern that bears special mention is institutional abuse. Importantly, attention has now been called to abusive practices that we all know have long existed in many child and youth care settings (Rubin, 1972; Child Abuse . . . , 1978; Hanson, 1981). Unfortunately, we did not act forcefully to eliminate such aberrations, which are really violations of our trust, before they became a public issue. We are now confronted with a public "black eye," one that is not totally unjustified. As a result, we have weakened our ability to deal with foolish nonsense that is being promulgated in the name of institutional abuse—and that obscures some of the more important needs in this area.

What seems most evident—although often not, unfortunately, to some of those who are promoting and funding work in this area—is the need to focus some of our attention on the factors that underlie abuse in institutional settings rather than simply to define and publicize standards and punish those who violate them. This means confronting the implications of the built-in, systemic reality that the work situation—starting with an eight-hour shift with difficult youngsters—often places unrealistic expectations on child and youth care personnel. This reflects the importance not only of preparing workers who will confront and challenge such systemic limitations, but also of providing behavior management alternatives and ways to reduce fear and other stress. Thus, our educational programs should be able to reduce susceptibility to the pressures of children who, frequently, come from abusing homes and who may seek to provoke such responses. Such programs should also enable workers to respond to provocative situations in ways that contribute to the achievement of developmental goals, including the

desire and the capacity to challenge and to change the conditions of the service environment when that is necessary to support sound practice. In other words, frequently one of the most critical variables of abuse is underfunding!

Curricular and Training Issues

These are some of the "new issues" in the field, or at least those that have relatively recently assumed salience. More will undoubtedly arise. Beyond this, even the traditional base of knowledge and understanding has not yet been operationalized in the form of a generally agreed curriculum for preparing child and youth care workers. With these additional inputs, we must again appraise our educational programs for this complex and rapidly changing enterprise.

The more recent, functional awareness of the interconnectedness of events, that life proceeds within open systems, requires us to develop educational programs that reflect holistic perspectives rather than the more traditional, reductionistic ones. Attention will need to shift from a preoccupation with the selection of course content and the constellation of courses to be mastered to an emphasis on patterns of thinking and skills to be acquired in training that will enable workers to interconnect their ongoing experience. How we organize and deliver the material will be as important as what we include.

Such a focus transcends the old tension between "facts" that need to be learned on the one hand and crucial sensitivities and "process skills" on the other. That has ceased to be an issue because we recognize that both are essential. Rather, it speaks to the need for analytic, contextual thinking in place of traditional, linear patterns (Maier, 1978, pp. 1–13). Further, it is increasingly clear that both child care work and preparation for it can no longer meaningfully consider children's life events simply in terms of the child's direct life experience—if they ever could! Child care activities need to be viewed in the context of, in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) terms, micro-mezzo-macro life spheres.

Nor can we reasonably continue with the accustomed additive pattern in curriculum-building, that is, simply to add another course when we become aware of another area that needs to be "covered." The crucial question is not simply what content—what course or program—should be included to embrace different and heretofore missing material that seems important. It must be broader. The curriculum and the process of teaching should be arranged so that the learner is required to deal effectively and integratively with the interconnectedness of what he or she is learning, and of life events. Learning to use what one knows

contextually, and how to enhance contextual learning in others, is the most critical learning of all.

The recent expansion of law-related considerations such as efforts to apply due process to student disciplinary procedures provides a good example. Child and youth care workers need to know not only the changing procedures and constraints, but also how these factors affect the development of the young people in their care and how they—the workers—can relate to their clientele most effectively under the new conditions. The same holds for training in a new developmental/therapeutic technique, and in other areas.

Learning and Teaching: A Contextual Approach

A useful corollary in the development of more effective child and youth care education might be that we should focus more on learning than on teaching. We know that not all we teach is learned. Specifically, we have witnessed that child care training courses frequently tend to be mini-exposures to child development, social work, or sociology, much of which may seem largely irrelevant to the work and concerns of practitioners in the field. Therefore, it is not learned, and not used. What is demonstrated to be relevant and essential, on the other hand, is learned, and what is learned is used. We know this from studies in child development. We all crawled and toddled until we learned to walk, then we walked. More to the point, we all used to take comments literally. But since we learned to think conceptually and contextually, we listen no longer to the spoken words but to the message and the questions raised.

How much of what is taught in our many programs is actually used by the presumed learner? And how much is applied contextually? Related to this is the need to focus on learners' ways of thinking about, conceptualizing, and approaching their tasks in learning and in practice, and how knowledge and skill are integrated in this process. If we focus on what is learned and, therefore, applied, we can feel confident that it was taught, although we may not always be sure at this point exactly what in the teaching process was critical. There is an analogy here to our outcome assessments of the young people in our care. We can recognize growth more easily than we can attribute it definitely to specific programmatic or outside influences. Here too, the "answers," if any, must be contextual. Our educational programs need to emphasize such non-linear, ecological thinking—including developmental perspectives—rather than more simplistic, linear modes. We are not, incidentally, alone in this; many allied professions are struggling, more or less effectively, with the same issues, and we have much to learn from, and to teach, our colleagues in this sphere (Kuhn, 1970).

Thus, the conceptualization of the teaching/learning process in our

programs and in child and youth care practice itself should shift from one-dimensional, cause/effect thinking to multi-causal and interactional, that is, ecological or milieu-based concepts.

In the child and youth care field, we are accustomed to this viewpoint; it is no accident that the milieu notion is central in much of what we do within the group care environment. We need to extend this thinking more broadly, beyond the group care setting, into the community and into our thinking about the education of practitioners. In the latter arena, we need to develop programs that go beyond conventional teaching to model in their own operation the interconnectedness of life and the sensitivity to milieu considerations that are organic to the work. Thus, educational programs for child and youth care work needed to model milieu teaching, planful intervention within the flow of life to facilitate growth-enhancing experience. We also need to provide alternative routes to mastery for students whom we expect to be able to recognize and nurture alternative developmental patterns in the young people with whom they work.

This perspective is, of course, in some ways more difficult and less comfortable than more traditional ones. Not only is it somewhat unfamiliar, although our awareness and use of milieu concepts in group care helps on this account, but there are no exact answers that apply "regardless." Instead, as Michael Cole has observed, "It all depends!" (Cole, 1979, p. x). How does one create an educational program to train practitioners if so much is conditional? It all depends!

Herein lies the challenge. We must find ways to help students learn how to work creatively and effectively and to stimulate positive growth and development in a world where so much is conditional but where "the Lord doesn't throw dice," as Einstein suggested; a world where events and conditions are systematic rather than chaotic, as chaotic as they may seem at times. Practitioners with a feeling for and an understanding of the systematic essence of their clients' lives despite apparent chaos can then apply their more specific knowledge and skill effectively. Tolerance for uncertainty, the courage to act on inevitably incomplete knowledge, and the strength to retrace and start again when that seems appropriate are all essential. As Michael Baizerman has suggested, we must be able to decide and act on what is indicated "for all practical purposes" at any given time, even though it may not be the final word.

Reliability First—Then Validity

Finally, we are under a great deal of pressure to "demonstrate accountability," to show that our efforts are effective in producing competent workers or healthy development in young people. How can we assess the results of child and youth care education? How do we decide how

good a job we are doing and when we need help? In research terms, the question is posed as one of validity: Do the interventions "work," do they produce the desired effects? And can we connect particular outcomes, specific influence on learners, to particular program elements?

As has frequently been observed in relation to outcome studies in relation to group care and other helping processes, however, we are ill-equipped to answer such questions in a meaningful way (e.g., Durkin & Durkin, 1975). This holds for education in child and youth care work as well. Even the most convincing evidence that students have turned out well, for example, leaves us at a loss when we try to establish reasons definitively. Was the selection process critical? The orientation? Individualized curricular planning? The coursework? Field placements? Relationship with a faculty member? Or the interconnectedness of these elements—and how can we replicate that? We do need to respect our intuitive notions and professional judgment, of course, but these seem somehow inadequate when we are faced with external requirements that we justify, "objectively," our need for support.

The fact is that we do not "know," in the sense that we can demonstrate it statistically, what makes the difference, even though we think we can often recognize it when it occurs. Even then, we cannot really replicate it, except perhaps in ways too gross and too vague to be much help. In research terms we are faced with reliability questions that must be resolved before we can approach questions of validity in a meaningful way. "The basic issue confronting the helping professions," Egan (1975) suggests, "is *reliability*, not validity" (p. 1–2).

It is essential, therefore, that we take the lead in interpreting conscientiously what can and cannot realistically be done as we respond to accountability expectations. We will need to depend on our own professional judgments and those of our colleagues, using more systematic, "objective" approaches where we can. Most important, it is essential that we identify for ourselves and for others why we propose to do what we do, and that we develop a convincingly integrated web of construct validity that will permit us to proceed with confidence and integrity where we cannot adduce systematic evaluative techniques and findings. We know that there are no exact answers, and that we must learn as we move ahead in a series of increasingly accurate "best approximations" that hold "for all practical purposes" until we learn even more.

Summary and Conclusion

The major theme to which we need to attend in planning for enhanced child and youth care work education is that of interconnectedness. Increasingly, effectiveness in working with children alone or in groups will not be enough, as the locus of understanding and effort shifts to

the family, the community, and even broader efforts along advocacy lines. Educational programs for child and youth care workers need to reflect interconnectedness and a rapid rate of change—not only by providing students with appropriate tools, but also by modeling the kinds of approaches that are involved. The milieu concept, so long central in our thinking about our practice in the field, has much to do with the education of child and youth care practitioners as well. Serious and meaningful assessment of our efforts will require a combination of conceptual analysis and qualitative and quantitative techniques, with emphasis on careful attention to reliability in place of premature attempts to establish the trappings of validity.

There are those among our colleagues who view it as a bit too audacious for us to be talking about such changes in curricula at a time when resources for education are declining and support for new and expanded educational programs is hard to find. Many of us have chosen to move ahead anyway, focusing more on the needs of our young people than on the reservations of our contemporaries. The field has been developed and sustained to date through commitment, enthusiasm, adherence to principles in place of expediency and, above all, dogged persistence—all reflected in a great deal of hard work. We believe that if the need and the quality can be demonstrated, we will be able to enlist the necessary support. Our common interest in children and our child welfare programs will be worthwhile if the enthusiasm, the quality, and the intensity of our work can be sustained and directed effectively, even in a period of declining resources.

It all depends . . . on us!

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