Value-based education for pre-service students in Children and Family Studies

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Abstract

Caregivers' beliefs about the world and about society, children, families and learning influence how they deliver services. Some beliefs are consistent with high quality practice and some are not. Educators have a responsibility to deliver training that will increase the probability that caregivers will deliver high quality services. To achieve this, it is important to not only deliver content, but also to encourage students to adopt the kinds of values consistent with high quality service delivery. In this paper, I examine some of the issues associated with the teaching of values in Children's Services, and propose and evaluate a model for teaching values.

A moral dilemma: a values base for quality practice

There is a moral dilemma regarding the rights of tertiary educators to deliberately plan to influence the direction of students' values. The power imbalance between lecturing staff and students, as well as the right to self-sufficiency, indicate that such an attempt is ethically problematic. However, it is clear that quality practice can only be offered if caregivers operate within a certain range of beliefs and values (Sims 1999). There is evidence that some beliefs and values do allow practice which is considered, in our society, to be of high quality. However, high quality in itself is a value judgement, with different societies having different interpretations.

For example, early childhood programmes in Western society are influenced by Piaget's work (Piaget 1950, 1952, 1985). It is thought that children learn through doing, particularly when their activity is self-selected and fun. Therefore, high quality programmes are defined as those that provide children with a range of choices of activities in which to participate. The role of play in learning is emphasised. In other societies there are different beliefs about how children learn. In many Asian cultures, children are thought to learn best through imitation and memorisation (Hartley 1995). Therefore, in these contexts, high quality programmes

are those which are highly structured, where young children participate in adult-directed rote learning activities.

Also, in the democratic Western world it is believed that the most desirable outcome for development is for children to become independent thinkers; capable of problem solving, of determining their own standards of behaviour and monitoring their own observance to those standards. High quality programmes have caregiver interactions with children which foster independent thinking and independent action. Assertion skills and the ability to question are taught, and children are provided with opportunities to learn the skills needed to rationally determine their own behaviour when faced with a novel situation (National Childcare Accreditation Council 2001).

In autocratic societies, high quality programmes focus on teaching obedience to authority. The most desirable developmental outcomes are believed to be an unquestioning acceptance of authority: children should always do as they are told, and seek answers from authority figures about the rules they should follow in novel situations (Balson 1994).

Beliefs and values influence what is defined as high quality programmes for children. In other words, values and beliefs set the context. Caregivers work within that context.

Caregivers work more effectively when their beliefs and values match those of the context in which they work (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Hasazl et al 1994; O'Loughlin 1989). Bronfenbrenner (1979) claimed that people function more effectively when their values are supported by the microsystems in which they participate. When individuals' values clash with these microsystems, their performance is impaired. This means that when caregivers work in a system that expects behaviours which do not fit with their own personal value systems, they will be less able to deliver quality service. This will not only impair the quality of the service they deliver to children, it will also impact on their personal functioning. They are more likely to experience stress and burnout.

Educators have a responsibility to prepare students to work in a context where certain values define high quality practice. In order for them to function effectively, they require a specific value base. Therefore, following this line of argument, it is appropriate to help them develop such a value base. A fundamental issue is whether there exists a moral right to deliberately set out to influence students' values. A compromise position involves offering students opportunities to become aware of the link between different values and beliefs, and encouraging them to decide for themselves which value positions they wish to hold as practitioners responsible for delivering quality service.

Formation of value

In this paper, I present a theory of the formation and change of values through time which can be used to structure the education of students. The theory is influenced by the concept of schema (Piaget 1952), frames of meaning (Bruner 1990) and

conceptual models (Gelman 1997; Sophian 1997). Schema, or models of the world, are collections of facts and feelings about objects in the world; they represent children's understanding of the world and how it operates.

In addition to direct experiences of the world, models are expanded through interaction. Vygotsky (1962) emphasised the importance of interaction as a crucial aspect of learning about the world. Sophian (1997, p 297) explains:

> … social interactions, which both adapt to the child's capabilities and expand them, lead to the continual emergence of new goals, new learning opportunities, and new knowledge with development.

A remarkably similar sociological line of thought is called Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer 1969). This theory suggests that the information individuals add to their models of the world require attention and interpretation – it has to mean something. A student hears a comment made by a lecturer, interprets it and then fits that comment into her/his existing model of the world (Piaget's concept of assimilation). If that comment does not fit, then the student needs to reshape his/her model of the world to make it fit (Piaget's concept of accommodation). If not motivated to change schema, the student could ignore the comment altogether.

Values and learning

Students come into the classroom with individual models of the world. Piaget's theory (Piaget 1952) indicates that students learn best when the material presented to them is offered in such as way as to assimilate neatly into their existing models of the world. If information needs to be accommodated, the learning will be more difficult and take more time. Gelman (1997, p 310) explains that:

> … learning about new principles moves forward at a rapid pace when their structure is consistent with the structure of existing conceptual understanding in a domain. If there is inconsistency, then learning depends on the ability to find local structural commensurates between the known and to-be-learned principles.

The challenge for educators is to offer experiences that will meet the assimilation needs of students, or opportunities to accommodate their individual models of the world.

In the face of such a challenge it would be easy to give up: to focus on presenting the necessary content and ignore the need to address underlying values. However, research has demonstrated many times that training does make a difference (Hegler 1995). Caregivers who have undergone appropriate training do deliver better quality services to children and families (White 1993). Thus, a model for teaching values could be of significant benefit to teachers, as it would provide a framework for their teaching and learning activities.

Using the model of values teaching

The model of values teaching is presented in Figure 1. This model has been applied to the teaching of a 'difference and diversity' unit in the Children and Family Studies programme at Edith Cowan University. The aim in this unit is to influence students' models of the world in ways that will make it easier for them to offer high quality services to children and families who are perceived as different. A model of values teaching has been developed which guides the content offered to students in the unit and the teaching strategies used to deliver that content.

Figure 1: Model of values teaching
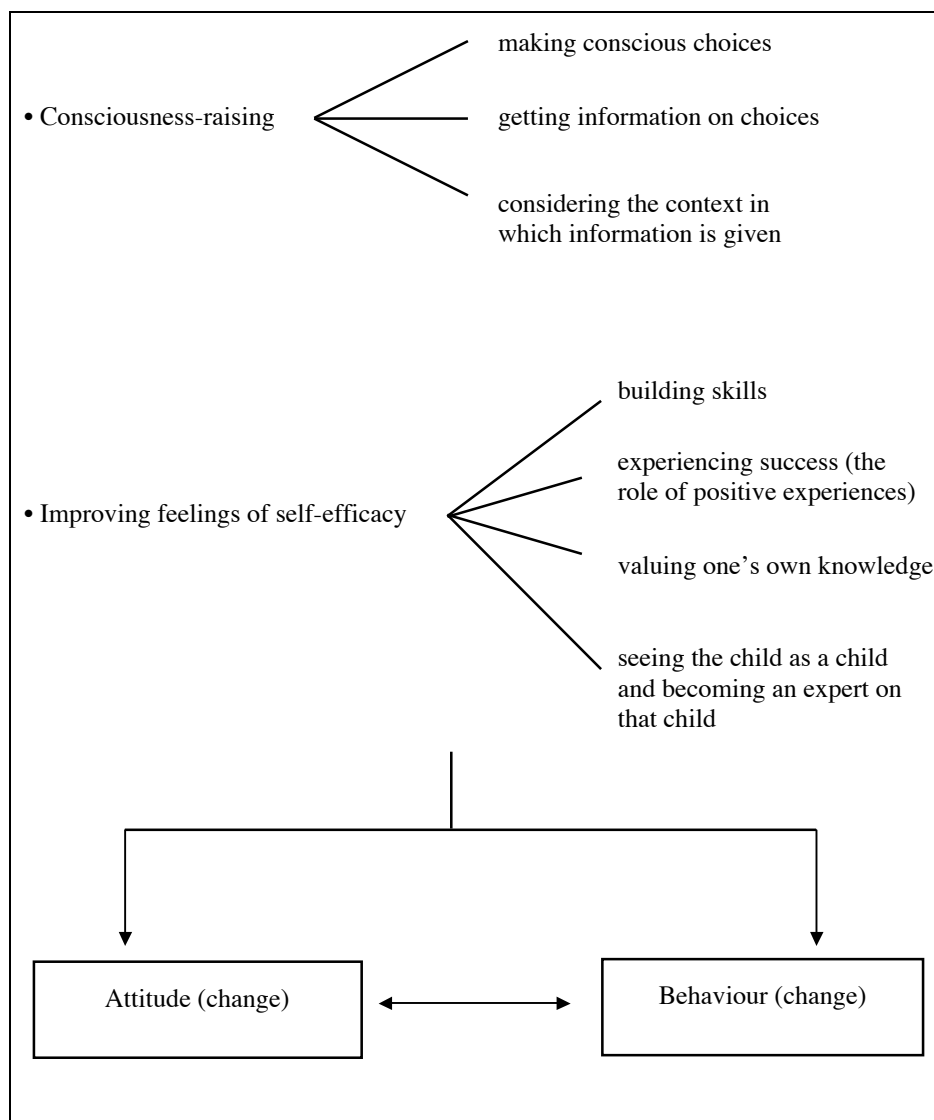
Educators make students aware of the impact of values on practice, and show them the link between particular values and practices (Sims 1999b). In the model, this is called awareness-raising or consciousness-raising. For some examples of the links drawn, see Table 1.

Table I: Links between values about difference and practice

Value	Practice
Difference is wrong and should be eradicated	People who are different do not deserve to be part of regular society • Aboriginal people can be killed; women raped to breed out Aboriginality; and the race can be left to 'die out' as a weaker strain of human beings • people with disabilities can be killed (Hitler), or locked away in institutions where they are treated like animals • migrants who are not white and who do not speak English can be refused permission to migrate to Australia (White Australia policy) • families that do not consist of a man and a woman (who are married) are not families
Difference is wrong and should be fixed	People who are different have something wrong with them which society should fix • Aboriginal children should be taken from their families and reared in the white Australian world so they can function as white Australians when they grow up • migrants should learn English and learn to behave as white Australians so they become indistinguishable from white Australians • people with a disability should be educated using whatever techniques are necessary to make them appear normal – when necessary, surgery should be used • people with different forms of sexuality should be treated to make them normal
Difference is okay but should not receive attention	People are all people under the skin and it is wrong to focus on the way people are different • Aboriginal people and migrants receive unfair advantages by receiving special services for which white Australians do not qualify • people with disabilities should be in the community just like everyone else and special supports are not needed for them to succeed – they should access and use regular community services

	• sexuality is a private affair and support and information should not be provided to children about contraception, gender identification, sexual preferences etc
Difference is great and should be enjoyed	People who are different are an asset to communities and everyone should focus on working together, emphasising different strengths and abilities • Aboriginal people, people of different gender and/or sexuality, migrants and people with disabilities need additional support to achieve equality of opportunities and have a chance for equality of outcomes • people who are different can be learnt from and their differences should be identified and positively explored whenever possible

The model suggests that the context in which a student is given information will impact on their learning outcomes. Thus, in teaching the unit, it is important to consider the way in which educators provide information. Direct confrontation does not encourage students to explore their own values and thinking; it can threaten students' self-esteem and cause them to erect self-protective barriers that will exclude all further information (Bolton 1979), thus preserving their existing models of the world. Instead, educators can try to draw parallels between what the students already know and the new content, using examples that they are likely to have experienced personally. They can create spaces for students to think and make decisions privately. Above all, educators cannot be judgemental when students express opinions that indicate they hold values incompatible with quality practice.

If students perceive their lecturer as having credibility, they are more likely to make efforts to assimilate or accommodate information presented by that lecturer (Feldman 1995). Lecturers need to establish their credibility in both the academic and proactive arenas. Requiring students to think about and do something with the information also prompts more internalisation. There is a greater chance that students will incorporate information into their models of the world if they perceive that information as directly relevant to them; it comes to them from multiple sources (perhaps from their readings, lecturer and placement); and they are repeatedly exposed to the information. Students are also more likely to internalise information if they are in a good mood (Sims 1999a). The strategies used in the classroom to create a positive and happy learning environment are clearly important.

Raising consciousness in students does not in itself guarantee that they will be capable of delivering high quality practice. Consciousness-raising helps students understand why they have to behave in certain ways, but they still need to learn how to behave in such ways. Assisting students to improve their self-efficacy involves working with them to build their skills and providing them with opportunities to experience success. Educators should monitor students' progress carefully. Some students may cope with the material easily; others may need smaller steps to be taken along the path, with each step representing a small success, leading to the ultimate success at the end of the unit.

Evaluation of the model

Do these strategies actually work? The model has been tested over the past four years. Using questionnaires, educators have assessed students' values in relation to difference and diversity at various times throughout their studies, specifically targeting the beginning and end of the difference and diversity unit.

I have presented the full details of the research elsewhere (Sims 2002). Evidence from statistical analyses of the questionnaire data indicates that students have significantly different attitudes towards difference and diversity from the beginning of the semester in which they study the unit, and the end of that semester. These differences could not be attributed to the number of other units students had done in the course, nor by their age or their experience in working with children (Sims 2002). Data collection is still ongoing, and is being used to ultimately track any changes in the attitudes of students from the start of the course to when they graduate. Follow-up after students graduate is also being attempted. At present, the sample size is too small for statistical analysis of the data.

In addition to the quantitative data, a small, random sample of these students (n=20) were interviewed at the end of the difference and diversity unit, and again six months later. These students ranged in age from 19 to 43 years. Six students were taking Children and Family Studies as their major, 12 as their minor and two took the unit as an elective. Fifteen of the students studied the unit internally, and five externally. As there were very few males in the unit, students were not asked to indicate their gender, for confidentiality reasons.

Consciousness-raising

Students talked about the impact of the unit on their awareness of issues related to difference and diversity. In the first round of interviews, students reported the following:

> … it just helped by making me a lot more tolerant I think, because you're just more broad minded, you understand the situation more. (Student 4)

> I ended up having a better appreciation of difference than when I began. I thought I knew before but I guess I really didn't. (Student 12)

> … learning this unit has just opened my eyes amazingly, the information that I've got now, I can be far less judgemental I suppose, and think before I open my mouth instead of rattling off. (Student 19)

Students remembered a range of different things about the unit six months after completion;

> I guess the way I view people with physical disabilities, that part of the unit had quite an impression on me because as I say I don't normally work with people who have physical disabilities … in the past I might have been more likely to rescue them than I am now to stand back for a minute and observe and then ask whether they want help. (Student 5)

… one thing that's really stuck with me is people's first language … when I watch television or when I'm listening to people speaking and they say "disabled kids" … it's really quite annoying you think "oh you ignorant person, you know this person's a person before a disability". (Student 10)

… with the unit I was quite impressed with the fixing, thinking that professionals can fix things and that's the wrong way of thinking, you shouldn't think that you can fix somebody's difference, to fix it to the way you believe, what makes your belief right … (Student 11)

I really remember her personal examples that she gave about people in society looking at her children … and those images have stayed in my mind and there's no way that I want that to happen to anyone that I know. (Student 18)

Raised awareness of the issues relating to difference and diversity was clearly durable in these students, which suggests that changes in their thinking were maintained beyond the examination period.

Increased efficacy

Awareness of issues must be coupled with feelings of self-efficacy. Students in this unit indicated feelings of increased efficacy, which remained with them at the follow-up interview.

... it's because of that fundamental value change that I feel like I've had that I felt that the unit equipped me to be able to work with any setting, with anybody with some sort of difference and to really value that difference for what it is … the unit has made me feel more comfortable … it's given me the skills that I can really take and use in those settings, which I wouldn't have had before. (Student 10)

And I'd definitely feel more confident to talk to people with disabilities and to people who are different ... I feel more confident to be able to include them and get the other children involved with them (Student 17)

One student describes how her feelings of confidence have influenced the person she worked with at the time of the follow-up interview:

I'm always talking about whatever unit I'm doing and read out bits to her as well so she takes that on as well and changes … she seems to be a bit more aware of it now, not that I criticise or anything but she herself is just aware of what she is doing ... and the things that she says now are probably less critical, or not even critical, less judgemental. (Student 11).

Another student also talks about how she has used what she has learned to teach colleagues at work:

… actually using the book that we got from the unit, to talk about what we need to be doing, how to meet these children's needs and the family's needs.

[Interviewer:] So you are actually imparting what you have learnt to the people you now supervise?

That's right. (Student 16)

Awareness of changes in self

The model proposes that raising awareness and increasing feelings of self-efficacy contribute to attitude change through actually changing the way students perceive the world. Students in this study indicated an awareness of these types of fundamental changes in their models of the world.

> *… it was a challenge the whole way through, it really was a challenge, personally I feel I've walked out a better person. (Student 3)*

> *… a lot of people say that they are evil and they are blind because their mother has done evil things … and that was my perspective … I am still afraid of them but after I study this course, it turned around, I have turned around from this, I don't feel that way now, it is totally different. (Student 9)*

> *I think it has been absolutely valuable what I have learned and I think I'll be a far better teacher for having done that unit … I'll certainly be more aware of things that other teachers who have not done the course just will not be aware of. (Student 13)*

> *It's completely changed the way I think about other people and I'm always looking now for reasons … why people are like what they are and what sort of things have happened in their life to contribute to what they are today. (Student 15)*

Changes in many cases have been maintained for at least six months after the completion of the unit, which suggest that some students have changed their models of the world.

> *I'm a lot more open minded, more willing to listen to what other people have got to say and their views whereas before it was like really I thought everyone should be the same we're all Australians and we should be equal and stuff. (Student 6)*

> *I still feel that the unit has made me a more tolerant person and less likely to feel that the way I do things or think is the correct way. In everyday life I apply this by being more flexible in the way I deal with situations. (Student 17)*

One student explained how her learning made it easier to cope with the recent diagnosis of her son (she had previously perceived disability as evil – see above):

> *I am glad I studied the unit because I know it is not a disability and I know what his lack of and what I can do with him … I find that it has benefited me a lot … I don't put a title on my son I just treat him normally… so it is a lot easier you know to talk to people now. (Student 9)*

Evidence of behavioural change

The aim of changing attitudes is ultimately to change the way people behave. Students gave examples of occasions when they put their changed attitudes into practice.

> *I'm probably more open, I don't go "sshhh, don't say that, that's nasty", I probably just explain more what the difference is … and in my programming even, I've had to change a bit (to include a child in an electric wheelchair) … and I'm really more conscious of not stereotyping people in front of the children. (Student 6)*

I found myself really annoyed at some of my friends when they made comments about certain people in society, and I wouldn't let them have it, I'd just say "no, don't say those things, don't be like that, you have no idea, wait until you're in a position like that when you're a minority"… and they told me I was just going off the wall and stuff like that, getting too involved in it, but there's no way I'd let comments past about people in society that was degrading them, because they had no idea. (Student 18)

Students indicated behaviour changes were maintained for at least six months beyond the end of the unit.

If they ask a question about something or about somebody perhaps in a wheelchair or whatever and I will now be more likely to say to them "well, why don't you ask the man if he wants you to hold the door open" or I'll be more likely to I guess instil that in them. (Student 5)

I sort of sit there and say "you shouldn't say it like this, you should say it like this, because they are still people" and yeah, they've sort of taken that on board now and they sort of know not to say things around me because otherwise I chuck a tantrum at them … they don't like me nagging them about what they're saying but I think a lot of people don't actually have any interaction with people with disabilities and people with difference and so those sort of in-built prejudices just stay there and they really need something or someone to actually just go up to them and you know, open their eyes …(Student 7)

Again, behavioural changes imply changes in the way students think about the world. Some students have clearly made values shifts which have translated into a change in their practice.

Negative comments

It is just as important to examine the negative comments students made about their learning experiences as to examine comments that support the proposed model of teaching and learning.

I probably could have got more out of the unit if I had more time to pick up on more practical stuff, as in to spend time in a centre, and just see what goes on. (Student 1)

I can't think of anything …. Because I can't say I haven't changed because obviously I have learned things, so obviously I must have … I just want to get it over and done with to be quite honest. (Student 5)

… it was really interesting to see how many people in the course wouldn't change their views ... it was really interesting to see how many people just went "nup" and that was it, just couldn't do it and couldn't change … you were either open to it or you were closed to it. (Student 6)

I found that one a bit hard sort of go into because some of the different values of people towards different things are sort of different to my beliefs, you know what I mean. Some of the values I was brought up in a Christian belief see, and quite a bit of the stuff like differences, like homosexual and that kind of stuff as far as I'm concerned I don't sort of agree with. (Student 14)

These comments indicate that attitude and behaviour shifts have not occurred for all students. Some students clearly found the material confronting and chose not

to engage with it (see Student 6 above). Some distanced themselves from the material by choosing to limit its relevance to particular professional arenas, and not engage with it at a personal level.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed a model that can be used to teach values to students. Values-based education is not easy. The model suggests that offering students consciousness-raising opportunities coupled with opportunities to increase their skills in relevant practice can be effective in changing the way some students think about the world. Changes in models of the world have long-term impact, not only on the way students perceive the world, but how they act in the world. The teaching of values is an important component of educators' work, as they have a responsibility to try and develop practitioners who will deliver high quality services.

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