FAITH IN THE CLASSROOM

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Faith in the Classroom: The Ethical Implications of Teaching Adolescent Development of Faith and Spirituality in a Human Behavior and the Social Environment Course

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Abstract

Social work educators and practitioners now recognize the important role of spirituality and religion in work with both students and clients. Educators teach students how to assess for client's development and needs over the life-span and faith development is an important part of this assessment process. Courses in Human Behavior and the Social Environment provide an appropriate venue for providing such education on client spirituality and faith development. Social work educators have a responsibility to teach students how to assess for spiritual and religious beliefs as well as look specifically at the individual's faith and moral development. This paper will address four major themes: 1) What is Human Behavior and the Social Environment? 2) What is happening during adolescent development? 3) What is faith and moral development? 4) How can an educator ethically infuse spirituality and religion into a study on adolescent development?

Curriculum infused with Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HBSE) is

essential in any social work program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education

(CSWE, EP2.1.7). Though no program is required to teach a full course or sequence of courses

specifically on HBSE, many programs opt to dedicate one or two classes on the material. Both Master of Social Work and Bachelor of Social Work programs offer this course though the actual substance of the course may have significant amounts of variety. Some instructors choose to structure their course to look at HBSE from a more macro perspective while others choose to address HBSE from a life-span development perspective. One of the main purposes of a HBSE course is to help students begin to think about assessing the entire individual in order to gain a better understanding of that person's life experiences. Religious involvement and spirituality are important parts of a good client assessment, but previously, social workers have been hesitant to ask about a client's religious or spiritual beliefs considering these issues to be too fraught with controversy or outside the social workers realm of expertise. Social work educators have a responsibility to teach students how to assess for spiritual and religious beliefs as well as look specifically at the individual's faith and moral development. This paper will address four major themes: 1) What is Human Behavior and the Social Environment? 2) What is happening during adolescent development? 3) What is faith and moral development? 4) How can an educator ethically infuse spirituality and religion into a study on adolescent development?

What is HBSE?

This paper will address three main subject areas: HBSE, adolescent development, and faith and moral development. In order to talk about these subjects more deeply, we must first define these subjects and then understand their importance to life-span development.

Person-In-Environment

Person-in-environment is a major theory in social work practice and education. According to Kirst-Ashman and Hull (2012), person-in-environment

"sees the person as constantly interacting with various systems around them. These systems include the family, friends, work, social services, politics, religion, goods and services, and education systems. The person is portrayed as being dynamically involved with each. Social work practice then is directed at improving the interactions between the person and the various systems" (p. 12).

Psychological theories often look specifically at the individual. Theorists like Freud and Carl Rogers looked at the internal feelings, thoughts, and repressions of the individual and how those interacted to shape behavior (Farganis, 55). Sociologists such as Marx, Durkheim, and Weber are concerned with the external structures of society and how these function to shape society as well as how they influence individuals and their behavior (Farganis, 89). Social work is the bridging of these two disciplines and therefore, social workers attempt to utilize both psychological and sociological theories. Person-in-environment theory is a basic integration of these two types of theories. Greene (1999) writes "the person-in-environment perspective has been a central influence on the professions theoretical base and its approach to practice" (p. 17).

Life-Span Assessment

A HBSE course is then an important way to teach the person-in-environment perspective to students and help them integrate it in to their assessment process. HBSE, for the purposes of this paper, is understood as being taught from a life-span development perspective looking at important developmental milestones that occur during infancy and childhood, adolescence, young and middle adulthood, and later adulthood. These assessments are also often called a bio-psycho-social assessment. A life-span assessment recognizes the impact significant events have upon the development of the person. Events such as the death of a parent, a cross-country move,

or early pubescent development continue to have an influence on the person even if those events occurred during adolescence. A life-span assessment provides an overview of the person's life experience and draws the social worker's attention to events that might have significance to the person's current life or behavior.

Adolescent Development

Adolescence is a time, within the life-span, that looms between childhood and adulthood. Adolesence is a fairly new developmental time frame and seems to be expanding as many people pursue higher education and delay marriage. Modern adolescence developed due to a variety of factors, but one major factor was the child-saving era of the early 19th century (Teeter, 1988). Youth were finished with formal schooling and many were on the streets involved in various forms of criminal activity because of the lack of available jobs. These youths and their delinquent behavior became apparent to the people in power which prompted legislative changes to the education system keeping most kids in school until the age of 18. This extension of formal education resulted in a stretching out of the home-leaving age as well (1988).

Today, adolescence technically has no beginning or end, but generally extends from 11 or 12 to the late teens or early 20's (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013). Adolescence is a cultural concept and is different from puberty, which refers more specifically to biological changes occurring during the same time frame. Some societies have specific rites of passage which mark the child's entrance into adulthood, but in most Western cultures, these rites of passage such as driver's licenses and graduation from high school move people into young adulthood, but still do not signify full-fledged adulthood. Therefore, it is common for adolescents to struggle with figuring out how they are supposed to behave whether like a child or an adult (2013).

Adolescence is fraught with many changes including biological, sociological, and psychological. The body, like the psyche, is in a place between childhood and adulthood. Puberty occurs during adolescence and the body begins to prepare for reproduction and significant changes start to occur. Adolescents experience a growth spurt during puberty and their bodies begin to resemble adult bodies (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013).

Sociologically, one of the biggest milestones for adolescents is the move from dependence to independence. Parental influence becomes secondary to the role of peers. Adolescents often realize that they depend on their parents for many of their basic needs, but they are also starting to feel a pull to become independent (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013). Rebellion is often a part of the adolescent experience as the young person starts to question their parents' wisdom and wants to test the boundaries for themselves. Parenting styles impact the adolescent transition. Parents who are overly permissive find that their children struggle with the transition because their upbringing has been one without structure or standards. Children raised with an authoritative parenting style tend to learn "self-reliance, responsibility, and self-respect" (p. 355) and therefore transition more smoothly from childhood to adulthood. On the other extreme, children whose parents were overly protective or authoritarian do not have the experience with decision making and can also struggle.

Adolescent biological and sociological changes are further compounded by the important psychological work that is occurring during this stage in the life-course—primarily identity development along with moral and faith development. (Fowler, 1981; Marcia, 1991). Marcia (1991) did significant work on Erik Erikson's theory of identity development looking specifically at adolescent identity development. As adolescents are working through Erikson's stage of Identity vs. Role Confusion (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013) they often fall into one of

four categories of identity formation. An adolescent who has achieved the *formation* of their identity has a set of personalized values and also a fairly clear life trajectory (2013, p. 318). Other adolescents fall in the category of *identity foreclosure*. These individuals do not experience an identity crisis, but instead tend to follow a life course set out for them by someone else usually in response to familial pressure and expectations (2013). *Identity diffusion* is the result when an individual never moves past the identity crisis of adolescence and moves into adulthood without a clear sense of who they are and what they want out of life. Finally, an adolescent who enters *moratorium* experiences a significant amount of anxiety related to their identity and this anxiety spurs them to continually address and wrestle with issues of identity.

These biological, sociological, and psychological developments during adolescence set the stage for the topic of this paper—the faith and spiritual development of individuals. With all the physical changes and identity work adolescents are doing, it is not surprising that adolescence can be a rather turbulent time for many people.

Faith and Moral Development

Faith and Moral Development refers to the way people develop both a worldview and also a perspective on right from wrong. Morality involves a set of principles regarding what is right and what is wrong (Kohlberg, 1981). Faith is how we see the world and how we make sense of and find meaning in the world around us (Fowler, 1981). Developing a worldview as well as ideas on morality is an important part of the developmental processes that occurs during adolescence. Variations of theories explain how this development occurs and theorists have posited different perspectives on faith and moral development (Fowler, 1981; Kohlberg, 1976; Piaget, 1976; Dykstra, 1981).

Fowler's Theory on Faith Development

Fowler (1981) defines faith as:

> "a person's or group's way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose." (p. 4).

Fowler (1981) argues that faith does not have to be connected to a specific religious belief and cites Paul Tillich who argued that our faith is a representation of the "centering power" in our lives and our "ultimate concern" (p. 4). The target of our faith may be a variety of things from our own ego to social structures. "Faith, as a state of being ultimately concerned may or may not find its expression in institutional or cultic religious forms" (Fowler, 1981, p 5). Faith precedes religious or denominational affiliation and precedes belief or unbelief. All people, according to Fowler, are concerned with how we make sense of life and how we determine what make life worth living. We all look for someone to love us as well as something we value which in return gives us value and something that has the "power to sustain our being" (Fowler, 1981, p. 5).

Fowler's (1981) theory includes seven stage of faith development (six stages, if you don't consider primal faith a formal stage of the theory). These stages progress over the life course and individuals are expected to progress from one stage to another in fairly consistent and regular movement. What follows is a summary of Fowler's stages:

1) Primal Faith (Infancy to Age 2): Fowler technically does not consider this a formal stage in his theory, but considers it, instead, to be a pre-developmental stage. During this period, an infant is learning about the world through interactions with caregivers who

provide for the infants basic needs such as food, shelter, and comfort. Infants need

consistency to develop trust while also receiving stimulation which challenges them to try

new things and to test out their new environment (Roehlkepartain, 2006). "Attachment

between the infant and her or his parent/caregiver is a process with important

implications for the child's future relationships (Roehlkepartain, 2006, p.67) The

successful attachment and relationship with the parent/caregiver sets the stage for

relationships with others and if this attachment does not happen successfully it will have

significant implications for later relationships.

2) Intuitive-Projective Faith (Toddlerhood to Early Childhood): This stage in Fowler's

theory seems to dovetail wellwith Piaget's theories on cognitive development and

Erikson's theory on identity development (Roehlkepartain, 2006). Stage 2 is a time when

children are beginning to develop language and using symbols to represent faith and

religious beliefs to which they are exposed.

3) Mythic-Literal Faith (Middle Childhood and Beyond): According to Piaget, children in

this stage are in the concrete-operations period of cognitive development which allows

them to distinguish between the real and not real (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013).

Stories or dramatic representations along with symbols related to ceremony are powerful

to children in this stage. Beliefs, at this point, however, are "literal and one dimensional"

(Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013, p. 329).

4) Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Adolescence and Beyond): Adolescents are beginning

formal operational thinking which allows them to consider situations from another's

perspective. Adolescents no longer view the world so literally. They are now also able

to consider abstract concepts as well as to name and make sense of their faith experiences (Roehlkepartain, 2006).

Fowler goes on to describe later stage of faith developing as a person moves into adulthood. Because we are primarily concerned with adolescent faith development, those stages will not be discussed in this paper.

The Issues

Infusing Religion and Spirituality into a HBSE Unit

According to Fowler and Kohlberg faith and moral development are important parts of the adolescent experience (Fowler, 1981; Kohlberg, 1981) regardless of the individual's religious beliefs. Fowler (1981) says that faith precedes religion or belief and that all people have a faith orientation which helps them recognize their "ultimate concern" (p. 4). If we accept Fowler and Kohlberg's theories we assume that all students, even those without a specific religious or faith tradition, have undergone some form of faith and moral development. Therefore, professors teaching HBSE courses at either a public or private institution of higher education can, and must, talk about students' experiences with faith development and also how to assess their client's faith development. It seems simple, but the issues are actual more complex than they may first appear.

Clark (1994) argues that the social work profession is making a mistake by renewing a discussion of religion in social work education particularly in relation to biopsychosocial assessment. He asserts that since religion is not our specialty, we should leave religious intervention to pastors or those who are trained theologically. Furthermore, he believes social workers who attempt to help clients address religious issues are overstepping their professional

boundaries. Clark's alternative is for social workers to refer clients with religious issues to a pastor or someone else who has theological training. He argues that we are taking on an additional burden by teaching students about religion or faith beliefs (Clark, 1994). He asserts it is impossible for social work students to have a comprehensive knowledge about all the major world religions and if we attempt to do so the profession will struggle to get beyond a "cookbook approach" (p. 14).

Canda and Furman (1999) disagree with Clark and see spirituality and religion as being an essential piece to effective and appropriate social work practice. Spirituality is the "heart of helping" (Canda & Furman, 1999, p. 5). They see connections between the mission, core values, and resulting ethical standards as reminiscent of liberation theology. The relationship between spirituality and social work practice is common sense and therefore should be an essential piece of social work education. While Clark (1994) recommends a clear division between the realms of spirituality and religion and social work, Canda and Furman (1999) see the two as being inherently intertwined in the work social workers are doing every day with clients.

Social work students must be aware of their own faith and how their faith developed in order to help clients more effectively. Self-assessment is essential in good social work education. How can we help students assess their faith development in the classroom while being respectful of the variety of perspectives and faiths represented? How can a professor also be respectful of a student's preference not to share their own faith experience while still ensuring that students have appropriate considered it throughout the course? Should a professor refer the student to campus counseling or if on a Christian campus, to the campus pastor for religious direction?

The Integration of Faith and Social Work Education

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics states that self-determination is a key ethical obligation social workers must provide their clients (NASW Code of Ethics, 1996). If we view the relationship between a social work educator and her student as a helper-client relationship, the ethical principle of self-determination applies to this relationship as well. Taking into consideration the power differential in this unique helper-client relationship, self-determination needs to be of primary concern. A social work professor will inherently be considered the expert on issues of faith and development and therefore is in a position of influence in relation to the students he or she is teaching. In this regard, social work educators must be especially cautious in the way all subject material is presented. It is especially important to consider all of these dynamics when dealing with a very unique and personal topic such as faith development.

The issue is even more complicated when we consider the institution in which the social work education is taking place. In public institutions, we expect to find a very diverse student body representing many faiths and religions. As a Christian educator in a public, secular setting an expectation exists that the instructor will teach about faith development from a general perspective, not focusing on one religion or faith orientation, but on how faith development applies to all faiths including agnosticism or atheism (Sherr, 2010). In a private, or more specifically, a Christian institution this issue may be more complicated. Can we assume that all students in our courses are Christian? More than likely, we cannot. How then should we teach about the development of faith? Should we integrate Christian faith into our HBSE curriculum? And if so, how do we do this while being fair to a student's decision to not share their beliefs and also not offend someone who is not a Christian?

Van Dyk (2000) writes about the integration of Christian faith into a variety of disciplines, specifically focusing on teaching. Van Dyk argues that Christian teachers are called by God to teach and to bring about his redemptive work on Earth through our teaching practices. He calls teaching a "divine assignment" (p. 33) and we must respond faithfully to our assignment. Teaching is our way of fulfilling the cultural mandate given to us in Day 5 of creation where God called us to be fruitful and multiply. Van Dyk cites Wolterstorff who says that as humans we should interpret the mandate as an invitation to flourish (2000).

Van Dyk (2000) also maintains that all of life is religious in nature. He explains this by stating that "all of our activities are (1) driven by faith commitments, (2) headed in a certain direction, and (3) performed in (worshipful) service" (p. 37). Our teaching is driven by our beliefs which formulate our values and this is true regardless of the faith orientation or religious beliefs of the educator. Our relationship with God is a very personal one where he invites us into the classroom where we are called to show "his Kingdom rule" (p. 37). With the Lord, "together we will turn our classrooms into manifestations of God's Kingdom of love and righteousness and power" (p. 38).

Second, our teaching is always headed in a certain direction depending on the subject matter we teach (Van Dyk, 2000). We, as Christian teachers, help to shape our students for "knowledgeable and competent discipleship" (p. 38). Third, Van Dyk (2000) says our teaching is carried through our service. Everyone worships one god or another, whether that be the Almighty, Triune God or the god of materialism and wealth. If the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is who we worship and serve, then we should order our teaching accordingly (2000).

Faith and religion can be integrating into all disciplines and the teaching of all disciplines, according to Van Dyk (2000). We are concerned particularly, however, with the integration of faith into social work education.

Sherr (2010), in his book *On Becoming a Christian Social Work Educator*, cites an article by Alvin Plantinga called "On Christian Scholarship". According to Sherr, Plantinga states that there are" two distinct functions of Christian scholarship—to provide a credible Christian critique of modern intellectual thought and culture and [also] to work in the various areas of science and scholarship in a distinctive way consistent with a Christian point of view" (p. 77). Sherr argues that we, as Christian scholars and educators, must weave together our discipline and our beliefs with what we teach.

Sherr (2010) goes on to give three examples of how this integration can take place. First, he references was he calls Personal Faith Integration Experiences (PFIEs). Using a PFIE in a course is not about proving to students that the instructor has mastered the integration of faith and social work practice, but is more a way to share personal struggles in the journey toward clarity on this issue. Sharing a PFIE requires instructors share their vulnerabilities and uncertainties, but also a revelation of how the instructor themselves read scripture, prayed, and researched the area with which they were struggling. Although I was not calling it a PFIE, I have utilized this practice in my own HBSE course as students have struggled with the integration of their beliefs on things like homosexuality or abortion with the NASW Code of Ethics.

The second example of integration Sherr (2010) gives is "guided contemplation with scripture infusion" and students are encouraged, through various assignments as well as course readings, to find and reflect on certain scripture passages they find particularly applicable to that

unit or subject area. Sherr (2010) briefly comments about the fact that there are often diverse life

experiences and religions within even a Christian college classroom. His response to this is

allowing students to integrate readings from their own faith traditions rather than the Christian

sciprtures (p.89).

The third example of integration Sherr (2010) calls "truth in the context of appreciating

complexity and diversity".   Students often come to a Christian college expecting that faculty

members will share similar beliefs with each other and also with them. In the classroom,

however, as students and instructors dive deeper into theology and the scriptures as well as the

theories and Code of Ethics around social work, they begin to realize that Christian faith and

belief are much more nuanced than they previously recognized. Instructors can help students

become more competent in working with the diversity of worldviews that exists outside the

classroom by beginning this discussion within the classroom.

Practical Implications

So what does this mean for those teaching a HBSE course in the social work curriculum?

How do we explore adolescent development as it relates to faith in a HBSE course? And should

that course look different depending on whether it's in a public or private university or in a

Christian institution?

Van Dyk (2000) gives broader more philosophical and theological implications for all

disciplines, but these implications can apply directly to the HBSE course. Perhaps the

integration of faith and social work education doesn't always have to be explicit. Van Dyk

(2000) would argue that even someone teaching geometry can do so "Christianly" without ever

using the word God or faith within the classroom. One can teach about structures or theories and

implicitly be teaching about the created structure ordained by God. Therefore, our discussions on adolescent development in the classroom and specifically on adolescent faith development do not necessarily have to be explicitly Christian.

Sherr (2010) gives three ways we can integrate faith and social work education. These suggested activities provide a unique way to discuss faith in any curricular context, but would be particularly helpful in a HBSE discussion on adolescent faith development.

Another activity used to explore identity and faith development and one perhaps less threatening to a diverse classroom is given by Zastrow, Kirst-Ashman, and Vogel (2010) in their *Student Manual for Understanding Human Behavior and the Social Environment*. In this activity, students are asked to explore how they developed their own sense of purpose and meaning as well as their spiritual beliefs. After students write the answers to the questions given to them by the instructor, the instructor asks them to share some of their answers and also describe which questions were most difficult. Students are also asked to share what they learned through the process answering the questions and assessing them. These specific questions can be found in the Appendix.

Conclusion

Everyone experiences a faith development process even if their faith rests outside the major religious traditions. Adolescents, along with going through significant psychological, biological, and sociological changes, also experience important developmental milestones in regards to faith. Social workers must be aware how faith development and crises of faith impact their clients. Social work educators use courses in Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HBSE) to teach students how to conduct competent assessments and how to note special

circumstances or complications with specific milestones. Christians in many disciplines have developed theories on how to integrate their faith with their specific disciplines. Social work educators and scholars, too, develop theories around this topic and wide variations exist on the best way to accomplish this integration. Ethical issues exist around the way social work educators integrate their faith and beliefs into their curriculum and courses, specifically in adolescent development. Educators with experience in teaching both in public and private institutions have given other educators specific examples on how to practically integrate faith discussions in social work education.

Appendix
Classroom Activity
1. What do I find satisfying, meaningful, and enjoyable?
2. What is my moral code? (One possible code is to seek to fulfill your needs and to do what you find enjoyable in a way that does not deprive others of the ability to fulfill their needs.)
3. What are my spiritual beliefs?
4. What kind of image do I want to project to others?
5. What type of people do I enjoy being with and why?
6. Do I desire to improve the quality of my life and that of others? If yes, in what ways? How do you hope to achieve these goals?
7. What types of relationships do I desire to have with relatives, friends, neighbors, and people I meet for the first time?
8. What are my thoughts on death and dying?
9. What gives you stress? How do you handle that stress?

10. What do I want to accomplish in the next 5 years? What are your plans for accomplishing these goals?

Discussion Questions:
1. What questions caused you the most struggle?
2. What do you see as being the purpose of this exercise?
3. What do you feel you learned from the process?

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