

# EARLY EDUCATION—KEY TO POVERTY PREVENTION

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Personal development is a vital ingredient in breaking the poverty cycle. There is little hope for ameliorating the long-term impact of poverty if programs are not geared to promote individualized personal development. Fostering individual development as well as community development must be a major goal if we are to achieve any measure of victory in our war on poverty. Furthermore, personal development needs to be started early. There is grave danger of developing a program of too little, too late, and then generalizing that attempts at fostering personal development are prone to failure. Yet the failure may very well be a consequence of too little, too late.

Programs with a personal development ingredient need also to be sufficiently intensive and extensive to assure abundant reinforcement of positive growth. Research in learning has amply demonstrated that constant reinforcement is essential if initial gains are to become permanent gains. The environment needs to be so developed that a positive home reinforces a positive school and a positive community environment reinforces both the home and the school. Follow through is as important in individual development as it is in golf. Articulation of opportunity for development is a principle of breaking the poverty cycle that is being demonstrated in program after program.

A strong program to provide opportunities for individualized development is needed at all age levels. We can expect greater gains, however, if we begin early. In fact, the most dramatic success comes from programs started at an early age. Head Start has proved this. This is not to say that the programs with older youth and with adults are not important. They are vitally important. They require a tenacity and persistence which we have not often shown in organizing programs of personal development.

Much of what I am going to say is based on data which have been developed in the past decade. Actually some evidence is much older, but its full impact has just recently been recognized. I refer here to some of the early work done by Harold Skeels and others

which supports the idea that environmental influence can be manipulated in the old nature versus nurture concept. Skeels and others have never suggested that nurture is more important than nature, but rather that nurture could be manipulated while nature is relatively free from interference from society. The combination of nature and nurture produces individuals with more or less unique patterns of capabilities and behavioral repertoires.

Data now available indicate that environmental stimuli not only modify overt behavior, but actually modify physiological structure. To put it another way, physiological change takes place when environmental stimuli are stepped up in amount and quality. The implication of these findings is just now being felt by education and society. Certainly a revolution in procedure must follow if we are to take advantage of these findings.

This revolution in procedure would identify the various facets of personal development which are important in helping individuals reach their full potential. This new approach suggests that it is fruitless to search for an ultimate method of personal enhancement for all individuals. In effect, this concept reinforces the need of individualized instruction and programming. It also generates an active concept of development in which a person's inadequate performance is viewed as a failure of society in the broadest context and a failure of the development program in the more specific context. The ultimate objective would be the development of numerous strategies that capitalize on the specific individual patterns of capabilities. Certainly new methods in education and programming will contribute to our understanding of development. We must be alert, however, to the development of more knowledge regarding the fundamental processes involved.

The question now becomes one of how best to develop intervention strategies that are consistent with our attempts to enhance personal development. In view of the fact that, for the most part, intervention procedures are not introduced early enough, the question is really how best to define intervention procedures suited to each developmental level in order to maximize results.

Personal development can be viewed in many ways. I have chosen to touch on nine basic areas of development which seem to be important in equipping a person to function fruitfully in our complex and changing society. These are as follows:

1. Effectiveness in the use of basic cultural tools.
2. Effectiveness in setting appropriate goals.

3. Maximization of interpersonal relationships.
4. Appropriate societal involvement.
5. Skill in decision making.
6. Development of appropriate outlets.
7. Insurance against uneven or disproportionate growth.
8. Creative view of the nature of life and the nature of man.

The basic cultural tools of speaking, listening, enumeration, and manipulation are important not only for themselves, but because they are the keys to the development of the other areas of personal development.

It is important for a person to learn to listen and speak in an expansive way rather than in a restrictive way. The British sociologist, Bernstein, has contributed much to our thinking in this area. He suggests that one of the problems of the disadvantaged is that they learn to speak and listen in a restrictive way, and this leads to restrictive thinking. The work of Hess and others at the University of Chicago has indicated that the model style from the disadvantaged home tends to be restrictive in nature. The child is spoken "at" not "to." He fails then to develop his basic cultural tools so that he views his psychological universe in a restrictive and confining way rather than an expanding, growing fashion.

Opportunities are important to very young children and, for that matter, to people of all ages where we are trying to enhance personal development. The development of skills necessary to communicate with one another and to handle accepted symbols ranks high in an orderly development of maturing experiences. As communication becomes more complex, people who are denied these learning opportunities are left farther and farther behind.

It is important that individuals have an opportunity to develop the ability to set goals. Both short-term and long-term goals are important. A constant repetition of failures teaches the disadvantaged people of our society not to expect successes; consequently, their goal setting becomes tentative and fuzzy in nature and is often not geared to reality. Much difficulty is involved in setting long-term goals. All of us are called upon to modify our long-term goals from time to time, but a modicum of success teaches us that long-term goal setting is worthwhile.

Furthermore, goals have to be tied somehow to a measure of reality. Often the disadvantaged person fails to understand the dynamics of goal setting and is both unrealistic in his attempts and

unaware of the procedures necessary to achieve goals which have been previously established.

Interpersonal relationships become a critical point in personal development. The ability to get along with other people, the ability to influence them, and the ability to be influenced by appropriate people is an important part of personal development. Being always the follower in a social and work situation and consequently subject to manipulation by others does little to develop leadership skills. In fact, very little skill in being a collaborator, the next step in leadership development, is developed in this fashion. There are appropriate procedures in influencing others. These appropriate strategies are tied to understanding something about human relationships. Knowing how to influence others on occasion and knowing when to be influenced by others is a critical component in social interaction. Our objective in personal development would be to facilitate the movement from follower to collaborator to leader so that confidence is developed in each of these areas. Furthermore, understanding the nature of others can lead to compassion and understanding. I have long suggested that "TLC" is not sufficient in working with children; we need "TLUC," tender, loving, understanding care. The development of an effective philosophy and procedure in interpersonal relationships is the key to this tender, loving, understanding care.

It has been suggested that one of the ills of modern man is his lack of involvement or his sense of isolation. We have been called the society of the lonely crowd. Possibly this is one of the net results of urbanization, man needing to protect himself so that he may have some sense of self-communication. The problem has gone beyond this, however, to the point where isolation or encapsulation has been the result. Man tends to build a wall around himself. This wall can protect him from being hurt; it can also prevent him from becoming involved in the problems of others. This is all happening at a time when solutions to interpersonal relations problems are so hard to come by.

Appropriate involvement is the hallmark of modern creative man. He needs to be involved in society's problems. Appropriate involvement is an aspect of personal development which we need to encourage.

When people are constantly hurt by society and feel little esteem from others, they lack motivation for involvement. When they can expect to receive a measure of return from actively participating in

society's problems and rewards, then involvement may be expected to become a reality.

Skill in decision making is an appropriate part of personal development. How does a person actively consider all of the alternatives and make a decision appropriate to the task at hand? This competence comes through practice, but it also comes from understanding the dynamics of decision making. It also occurs from having experiences in decision making. We learned long ago that an abundance of opportunities to make decisions is needed at all levels in childhood if such competence is desired in the adult. If I were asked for a "quickie" formula for appropriate decision areas, possibly I would put it like this: It is appropriate for a person to make a decision when he can take the consequences of success or failure of that decision. This means that we need to encourage some decision making at all levels of development. If we do not allow people to take the consequences of their decision, however, or if the consequences are beyond their strength to bear them, then we have prostituted this concept. Viewed in its developmental context, decision making is an increasingly complex task which requires roots at a very early level. Furthermore, practice, constant practice, is critical.

A sixth element of personal development is creative outlets. Here I refer to the development of means of self-expression, an outlet for the urge to achieve, to have joy, to be aggressive. Again, I must go back to my constant theme that this is a developmental factor and needs a program designed over time. It means that a young child should have an opportunity to achieve, and certainly this opportunity must be in keeping with his developmental level.

On the other end of the scale is the development of appropriate patterns for expressing aggression. Bottled up aggression becomes rage which ultimately leads to mass-diffused destruction. With our increasing tempo of living and the concomitant crowded conditions, opportunities and outlets grow fewer and fewer. Effective programming and community planning require that we work harder and harder to provide healthy outlets. We must see these as an important part of personal development.

Uneven and disproportionate growth leads to situations which are not constructive. An opportunity for balanced development in all areas is important. Each individual not only needs to learn the skills to live in our society, but also needs to develop a philosophy of compassion and of creativity. Erik Erikson refers to this as a sense of generativity. That is, a person has the opportunity not only to learn

ways of expressing love, ways of achieving, but also to develop appropriate safeguards so that he is not "undone" by failure. If we develop educational programs which are geared to the needs of disadvantaged youth, then we must also develop community programs which will reinforce the educational programs.

There is a need for family building programs so that the small nuclear family, which is emerging as the model in our society, can find help when it runs afoul of destructive forces. Family building programs are more than family maintenance programs. Welfare programs for families, if only maintenance oriented, do little to mitigate problems. The circumstances which brought about the condition in the first place are often only aggravated. This calls for new and creative approaches to deal effectively with modern family and societal problems. Much could be said here about the problems the nuclear family faces today, but suffice it to say that we have just scratched the surface in this area. Family sciences have a long way to go.

A productive and constructive view of the nature of life and the nature of man's development is critical in personal development. We might suggest that the nature of man's development is somewhat like an inverted triangle. The basic assumptions are at the peak of this inverted triangle. If these assumptions are grossly incorrect, then all that is developed thereafter is in error.

This means that ways have to be found to develop a sense of being "today oriented" and "tomorrow oriented" which allows us to enjoy and produce today, but also build for tomorrow. Personal development carries little as an insurance against a sick society unless people are geared to solve today's problems as well as to build for tomorrow's problems. A philosophy of life, if you will, is important. This undoubtedly should be highly personalized and highly individualized. This does not say anything, however, in relation to its lack of value. A creative, productive philosophy of life can develop only when a person is able to build over time. The developmental approach to this constructive building is critical.

One of the most tragic and yet interesting illustrations of the ultimate consequences of lack of personal development was highlighted in a recent column by Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Constitution*. The shipyard at Pasacagoula, Mississippi, needed 1,000 welders because of its government contract. It was necessary to go out of the state to find these welders in spite of the fact that unemployment in the area was over 64 percent of both white and colored people. The educational and developmental level of many of these people was so low that it

was impossible even to train them for the welding task. They did not have the basic skills on which to build a training program.

The problem of personal development is paramount in breaking the cycle of poverty. Poverty, delinquency, unemployment, illiteracy, school dropouts, and the necessity of public assistance are not new to American society. What is new is the vigorous national effort to abolish these social pathologies. I have been suggesting to you that personal development is one of the master keys to the abolishment of these social pathologies.

Certainly one method of attacking the problem is through rehabilitation programs for adults; but from a long-term point of view, prevention is a sounder approach and the prescription for prevention is undoubtedly education which leads to maximum personal development. Maximum personal development can only occur when we begin with something different than too little, too late.