

Examining Human Development Themes Through the Electronic Media and Children's Literature

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The study of the human life span is perhaps one of the most interesting and fascinating courses of study in the education curriculum, for it offers an immediate frame of reference: our own lives as well as the lives of family members and close friends. On more than one occasion, a student taking the "Nature and Needs" course (formerly FED 200-Human Growth and Development) has commented to me, "Now I have a better understanding of my two-year old," or "I tested object permanency with my niece," or "My friend's baby showed stranger anxiety when I tried to hold her for the first time." Knowledge of the different developmental stages that human beings go through and their characteristics provide education majors with a foundation for using developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom with children and adolescents. On the first day of class, I literally let the life span pass before the eyes of the students by showing them a videotape that depicts a complete overview of the life span from birth to death.

When I taught the course for the first time two summers ago, I wanted to include a variety of assignments covering the life span and provide for different learning styles and different formats for engaging students in the learning process. To supplement the normal lectures, textbook readings and observation assignments, I turned to children's literature and televised programs.

As an individual project, students were asked to choose one selection from children's literature (a bibliography organized by developmental themes was attached to the course syl-

labus) and do a character analysis, plus a written summary of the book. In the character analysis the student had to identify the developmental stage of the main character and, extrapolating from different developmental theories, explain the conflicts that the main character faced and how he or she dealt with the conflicts. Being able to follow the thoughts, feelings and actions of the

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characters vicariously allowed students to gain a depth of understanding about children and their relationships that they probably would miss in one or two short observations.

Since, at the time, I was reading the *Kitchens God's Wife* by Amy Tan, I also found a passage in that book to read to the class to illustrate one of the theories that we had been discussing and to do a cross-cultural comparison.

For group assignments, one choice was to select any popular television program that was family-oriented and analyze the actions and relationships among the characters, based on developmental theories. Most of the groups selecting this assignment chose sitcoms. Some shows selected were the

Cosby Show, Roseanne, The Andy Griffith Show and *Real People*, to name a few.

The group showed clips from the videotaped episode in class and centered the rest of their presentation around the show. Time was allowed for questions from the group. These televised episodes provided rich contexts for discussing effective ways to deal with conflicts, based on developmental theories. Because these programs were regularly shown on television, most of the students were already familiar with the characters. Groups could also do a research project. One group chose to interview high school teenagers on certain topics and report their findings.

The variety of assignments afforded many unique opportunities to learn the subject matter and the response was great. My philosophy of teaching is to provide a variety of ways for students to experience learning and to make the learning as interesting and as relevant as possible.

Both children's literature and the electronic media offer rich opportunities to supplement or enhance experiential learning, albeit vicariously. I heartily recommend these resources as learning tools. •