

The Developmental Model

The phrase, the ‘developmental model’ has been used in a variety of contexts such as counselling psychology (Bader and Pearson, 1988), psychosocial stages (Erikson, 1994), and intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 1986). All iterations refer to models built on an assumption of developmental growth possibilities, where individuals incrementally gain knowledge, skills, and self-awareness within particular aspects of their lives.

Early Conceptualizations

Efforts to establish a developmental approach to educating individuals with mental impairments began over two hundred years ago. Based on his work with Victor (the so-called ‘wild boy of Aveyron’, Itard, 1801), Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard (1774-1838) posited that human growth has distinct developmental phases and that children need stimulation in order to develop. Édouard Séguin (1812-1880) studied with Itard and extended his work. Séguin created physical and sensory activities to systematically develop mental processes. He relied on a series of small sequential steps to teach skills to children with developmental and intellectual impairments. Maria Montessori (1870-1952) read Itard’s and Séguin’s works. Combined with her own extensive observations of children, she developed the first model of development pertaining to children with mental impairments.

Montessori articulated a number of principles that summarized her approach. These included the need for stimulating and purposeful activity, utilizing those periods when children were open to learning certain skills, recognizing the inherent willingness of all children to learn, and the potential that each child possesses. She identified the link between emotional development and the child’s ability to learn, and the importance of supporting development in very young children. She also emphasized the prepared environment: teachers set up specified materials and activities for children, and then encouraged and guided the children to explore these materials and activities. Children were encouraged to be independent within a prepared and structured environment that elicited growth.

The Developmental Model in Normalization and Social Role Valorization Theory

All of these elements were incorporated by Wolfensberger into his conceptualization of the Developmental Model. Social Role Valorization Theory (SRV), as described by Thomas (1999), notes that we are affected by what we have learned, both formally and informally, about others and ourselves. We then act on these assumptions and expectations. If we hold positive expectations about the

possibilities for the learning, growth, and adaptation of others, then we are more likely to provide relevant opportunities for them. Conversely, if we hold negative or devaluing expectancies, we are more likely to provide fewer opportunities for growth and development, and more readily accept lower performance and contribution. As demonstrated in the SRV theme of unconsciousness, we may be largely unaware of the expectations we hold of others. Wolfensberger's Developmental Model provides a framework of expectations about the possibilities of growth, development and the capacities of individuals.

A key aspect of the Developmental Model is a belief that, "...all humans possess a tremendous capacity for growth" (Thomas, 1999, p. 154). As Thomas noted, the Developmental Model as such was first highlighted by Bengt Nirje in a 1969 publication edited by Kugel and Wolfensberger. Nirje made the point that normalization¹ means "...an opportunity to undergo normal developmental experiences of the life cycle" (Nirje, 1992, p 49). Children need a warm and nurturing family, with a few significant adults who provide love, security and "opportunities for identification." School-aged children and youth need an education that is challenging and provides opportunities to discover their interests. Growing into adulthood, individuals move away from their parental home, expand their competencies, and take their place in the larger world. Finally, old age "...consists for most people of contacts with the familiar settings and acquaintances that have given life so much of its content and meaning" (Nirje, 1992, p50). In the Kugel and Wolfensberger (1969) text, Wolfensberger provided examples of how the Developmental Model might be enacted within different environments and settings. He included the idea that individuals would also be taught to use typical controls in the environment (e.g., thermostats) and be exposed to typical risks (such as stairs, hot water, or electrical appliances). Reviewing the early work of Wolfensberger in setting up services in Nebraska, the use of the Developmental Model was identified as a key component of service development and delivery (Evans, Stork & Phillips-Stork, 2002).

In addition to the assumption about capacity for growth, the Developmental Model provides a framework, or conceptual schema, that clarifies assumptions about what the world and human nature are like, a way to formulate problems, and approaches that can be taken to effectively address those issues or problems. Through the Developmental Model, (Wolfensberger, 2013, Wolfensberger & Thomas, 2015) suggest that human beings achieve greater well-being when engaged in meaningful and relevant activity, and have more growth potential than is apparent in any one person, or elicited by others. This means that the full growth potential of any person cannot be predicted, especially if the person has not had optimal opportunities for learning and growth. Development must be facilitated,

¹ The Principle of Normalization, first discussed by Nirje and others in the Nordic countries, was expanded by Wolfensberger in 1972. He subsequently revised and renamed it as Social Role Valorization (SRV) Theory.

elicited, and fostered. The importance of the environment in communicating what is expected of individuals, and facilitating learning, is also stressed by Wolfensberger (2013) and Wolfensberger & Thomas (2015). The physical settings, schedules, routines, activities and interactions, the equipment that is available can all contribute to growth of the individuals who are served. The groupings of service recipients and staff, and the preparedness of the staff to teach valued skills, are also crucial for development. Further, a service, program or intervention will have a greater impact when it is started as early as possible, and as soon after an impairment has manifested or been recognized. When relieved from long term trauma and fear, individuals can make dramatic leaps in their growth. Individuals benefit if they receive instruction through the least restrictive service or setting possible. Finally, no matter how effective a pedagogy or intervention, there will always be a better way, waiting to be identified.

Implementation of the Developmental Model

The Developmental Model is equally relevant to individuals of all ages and abilities. For those who have faced lowered expectations and opportunities to be challenged to grow and develop, it takes on additional significance. As the growth potential of certain groups of people is so often underestimated, an implication of the Developmental Model is to be assertive in our expectations of what people can learn. Wolfensberger suggests two broad strategies for action that may be taken when trying to implement the Developmental Model: the reduction of obstacles to competent functioning, and increasing the individual's repertoire of functional skills and capacities.

Reduce obstacles. Reducing or removing obstacles to an individual's competent functioning might include:

- (re-)structuring the physical environment so as to enable or facilitate adaptive behaviour (e.g., physical accessibility);
- (re-)structuring the social environment (e.g., clarify expected behaviours, provide adaptive models for imitation);
- Reducing bodily obstacles (e.g., positioning, expand range of motion, etc.);
- supplying appropriate prosthetics and other adaptive devices; and
- addressing motivation.

Increase functional repertoire. Actively teach individuals relevant and valued skills, knowledge, habits and disciplines that will serve them well for valued social roles.

With the emphasis in SRV on social roles, and how social roles can affect the perceptions of others, which in turn affects the opportunities that individuals might or might not have, the Developmental Model guides both what individuals

need to learn and how they might learn the various skills needed to competently get and keep valued social roles (Wolfensberger, 2013).

In order to help people get and keep relevant valued social roles, ensuring that they have enough relevant and challenging opportunities to develop the competencies needed for these social roles becomes essential. Wolfensberger (2013) provides the following points regarding the implementation of the Developmental Model.

1. Consciously examine one's own assumptions/expectations/beliefs about the individuals one is concerned about.
2. Encourage and support others (service providers, family members, and the individuals themselves) to do the same.
3. Consciously adopt mind sets and expectations of possibility, growth, and learning for those one is concerned about. Wolfensberger famously exemplified this personally by holding consistently high and challenging expectations for the staff, associates, and students who worked with him.
4. Acknowledge that we are not easily able to predict the potential of any one person until all avenues for growth and development have been assertively pursued with and on behalf of an individual.
5. Ensure that individuals receive the best possible opportunities for growth and learning.

Conclusion

The Developmental Model is applicable to any and all people, no matter their type or degree of impairment or apparent capacity: it is optimistic, but realistically so, about human potential and possibility. While others highlighted the importance of high expectations of individuals with disabilities, and subsequently developed a variety of effective and relevant pedagogical approaches and strategies, Wolfensberger demonstrated how the use of the Developmental Model could enable, establish, enhance, maintain and/or defend valued social roles for anyone, but would be especially relevant for people who are at value-risk which is the penultimate goal of Social Role Valorization towards realizing the 'good things in life' (Wolfensberger, Thomas, and Caruso, 1996).

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