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ABSTRACT

Although developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) has gained widespread acceptance within early childhood education, it is not accepted by all. This study examined resistance to the DAP concept among: (1) Head Start and other early childhood teachers; (2) child caregivers; (3) African-American mothers; and (4) masters students in early childhood education. Information on attitudes was obtained through case study, experiences at staff development and parent workshops, and written critiques by graduate students. The findings suggested that because Head Start teachers felt pressure to prepare economically disadvantaged children for academically oriented schools, they divided their day between child-centered and initiated activities and teacher-directed activities. Resistance to DAP among African-American female caregivers was of concern at one of the early childhood sites involved in staff development; this resistance seemed to stem from concerns about its underlying values. African-American parents expressed concern and anger at the notion of culturally appropriate practice. Although graduate students in early childhood education did not often express concerns about DAP, those who had worked with young children in urban settings expressed concerns that DAP was inappropriate for children whose backgrounds have not allowed for maximizing human potential. Further critique was made in two key areas: (1) the 2-column, "appropriate and inappropriate" format used in DAP instructional materials; and (2) the sense of indoctrination felt when materials refer to "proper" habits and "all" settings. Based on these findings, it was concluded that it is crucial to strive for a model of teacher development that views teaching as a complex, challenging, social, and intellectual task. (Contains 17 references.) (KB)

Resistance to "Developmentally Appropriate Practice": Teachers, Graduate Students, & Parents Speak Out

Presented at the Reconceptualizing E.C.E. in Research, Theory & Practice Conference

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I first noted resistance to the implicit belief system of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) when doing research for my doctoral dissertation more than 6 years ago (O'Brien, 1990). In the intervening years I have encountered other instances and it is my intention here to tell the stories of four different sets of people who, for varying though related reasons, resisted "indoctrination" into a DAP mindset. I'm still focusing on resistance to DAP because it's still an issue; indeed, to many practitioners DAP is a new concept, though to some of us a critique of DAP may seem "old hat".

As I've noted before (O'Brien, 1993) my concern is that DAP comes from, and supports, a white middle-class perspective and works best for those children from relatively "advantaged" home environments. Children from non-mainstream and "disadvantaged" backgrounds may not have the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions which would allow them to benefit from the DAP approach. Further, parents and educators of children not from the mainstream culture may have good reason to believe that their children need educational experiences which more directly prepare them for success in mainstream schools and society (see, for example, Delpit, 1986).

I believe many educators have overlooked the need for cultural variation in pedagogy which children may need in order to succeed in school (see, for example, Phillips, 1994). Some early childhood educators (e.g., Greenberg, 1990) have made assumptions about preferred practice(s) based on middle-class experiences and values without explicitly addressing their own, culturally determined, biases. For example, when Greenberg refers to "middle-class parents" and "moderately literate families" as being, as it were, natural practitioners of DAP, warning bells sound for me. And, when I hear an early childhood teacher educator say, at a national conference, that we must "indoctrinate" our students into DAP, flashing lights go off as well.

The field as a whole must draw attention to such issues, and not just as fodder for discussion at the Reconceptualizing ECE conference. If we wish ECE to have the respect we often say we're lacking, we must ensure that teachers are creators of thoughtful, critical curricula, aimed at preparing democratic citizens -- not implementors of a given set of "appropriate practices" with which they have been "indoctrinated" (inoculated?). Each teacher must view each child as a dynamic, culturally contexted being, who needs individualized curriculum if s/he is to be a fully aware and contributing member of our eclectic society. This can be a tall order, for as Delpit (1995) notes, we all have cultural lenses through which we see the world; these lenses operate at the subconscious level, making the way we see the world "just the way it is".

The first set of people I'll discuss are the Head Start teachers who were the subjects of my dissertation case study, then I'll describe the situation of an African American teacher at an urban child care center where I was asked to do "staff development", discuss concerns voiced by parents of young children at a Rochester city school attending a workshop on DAP, and last, share the written critiques of several of my ECE graduate students.

Story 1 Head Start

My experiences in a rural, predominantly white, Head Start program, staffed by women from the surrounding low-income community, forced me to examine my biases and assumptions about appropriate practices for young children. As a white middle-class woman, familiar only with "mainstream" ECE, I initially had trouble understanding the Head Start teachers' rather directive teaching styles and the academic programming implemented, as they had verbally expressed their preference for a child-centered model consistent with DAP. I came to understand the pressure they felt to prepare the children with whom they worked for the academically oriented schools

they would soon enter, a pressure increased due to the "disadvantaged" (read: low-income) homes from which the children came. Hence their use of a dual model of practice: a day evenly divided between child-centered and child-initiated activities and academic, teacher-directed activities (O'Brien, 1993).

As one teacher said, when I asked her what children should get from Head Start

> *That they're sociable...they can sit in a classroom. They're prepared for kindergarten; I think that's important too. In fact, I think that's sometimes more important than what Head Start's philosophy is. Because I don't feel sometimes that we prepare the kids enough for kindergarten, especially knowing the kindergarten curriculum here [in their community]. [It's] real structured...they need to know that kind of stuff.*

Story 2 Community Child Care Center

I began visiting and observing in the center in September of 1994, eventually spending time in each of the 5 classrooms there. As I observed, I began to gather data informally which I and the director then reviewed and discussed. Based on the limited formal education in Early Childhood Education (ECE) most of the staff had, as well as recurrent themes which emerged, we decided that a "Naptime Seminar Series" on Curriculum in the Early Childhood Classroom would be offered, facilitated by me.

Seven participants were invited, and in several cases were requested, by the director to attend what became a nine-week program. Although this program was emergent and responsive to individual needs, reading, discussion, and reflection focused on general philosophical issues as well as specific implementation of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP). At the beginning of the series, each of the seven participating teachers was asked to complete a Pre-K Survey of

Beliefs and Practice; each was asked to review and note any changes in their beliefs or practices at the end of the series. Participating teachers were also asked to do initial individual and classroom goal setting; progress toward attainment of goals was assessed (orally and in writing, by the teachers) at the end of the series. Teacher reflections on the process and content of the seminar series were utilized as a part of the planners' assessment of their effectiveness in meeting teachers' needs.

Ada, an African-American woman, was the only person of color in our group. I noted to myself that she often looked bored or in disagreement with our discussions, though she rarely spoke. I also knew she was viewed by the administrators as being something less than "developmentally appropriate" in her practices with toddlers. After watching the DAP video from NAEYC, she was the only person who expressed real concerns about the values underlying the approach, saying it conflicted with the ways she had learned adults ought to interact with and teach young children. I tried to build on her thoughts, but, as is usually the case when working with white, middle class educators, the others just looked at me blankly, as I would have done had anyone posed a critique of DAP before I did my dissertation research.

I know resistance to DAP from African-American women continues to be an issue at this site, and I imagine, at other sites where teachers are often (underpaid) women from the surrounding community, and the administrators are white women educated in DAP and raised to believe in its underlying values.

Story 3 Rochester City School District Parents Workshop

A similar situation arose a couple of years ago when I was asked to do a workshop for parents, and a few teachers and aides, in a city school which was trying to implement DAP. As

best I can recall, in attendance were: two administrators, one white and one hispanic; several teachers and aides, white and black/hispanic; and a group of predominantly African-American mothers.

My workshop was to provide an overview of DAP, mostly through hands-on activities and discussion, and everything seemed to be going well until I introduced the notion of culturally appropriate practice (see, for example, Hyun, Marshall, and Dana, 1995) and then all hell broke loose. Parents' questions ranged from "Why do you think Black parents do things any differently than white parents?" to "How do I know my child's learning anything with this approach and what happens when s/he moves to another school which doesn't use DAP and then s/he's behind?". At least one parent tuned out the workshop and began looking at something else in the room, several were visibly angry, and one administrator got rather paternalistic suggesting that the parents ought to be polite and pay attention!

Upon reflection, the most interesting things to emerge from the experience were: (1) I had thought I was being culturally sensitive by adding to DAP, and this is when the fur began to fly; and (2) the parents' comments regarding how they reared their children were not the same as my experiences with white, middle-class parents, but the parents saw them as being so, and were offended that I would suggest otherwise. Here I was again, the well-intentioned white educator from the college, taken aback by real concerns and conflicts which I did not anticipate. When I apologized to the (white) administrator for "stirring up a hornet's nest", she said, "the bees were already buzzing", meaning, I assumed, that there were long-standing conflicts in this setting and I was not at fault. I felt, though, that she was not as aware as she might be of the resistance to DAP in her program, and the need to seriously hear and respond to the parents' concerns.

Story 4 Master's Students in Early Childhood Education

Graduate students who have been in my Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum classes (the vast majority of whom are white, middle-class women) have likewise expressed concerns about DAP and its assumptions, though only with some prodding from me, and even then, not too often. For example, one student wrote in reaction to a section of the Developmentally Appropriate Practice book (Bredekamp, 1987): "Again, NAEYC has stressed the integration of learning and maximizing of self choice for students. While these goals may work for children whose backgrounds support these classroom practices, they may be at odds with the needs and abilities of children whose background[s] have not allowed for maximizing human potential" (Tyler-Davis, personal communication, October 21, 1991). The student went on to describe a teacher with whom she had worked in "an inner city, extremely poor and wholly minority setting". The teacher had "held high expectations that [the students'] participation ... would allow her to set up a center-style learning environment with many of the NAEYC prescribed practices" but "she was not able to make the whole thing gel." Said my student, "I respect[ed] her aims, but they were misguided...I have very little faith in self-chosen activities or heterogeneous vs. homogeneous groupings as being the most important issues for these kids. They will succeed as well as their situatedness will allow" (Tyler-Davis, 1991).

Similarly, another student wrote that she had worked with many "angry and disturbed children" in urban settings.

> *Their lives seem to be in constant conflict. They* ***aren't*** *innocent and inquisitive and eager to learn. Their first instinct is to fight and they lack self-control. It seems as though their basic needs must be met before they will be able to benefit from self-*

directed experiences and exploration.

With regard to programs for young children with special needs, Tyler-Davis wrote,

I wonder if there are not many other children whose needs are not best met by the loose guidelines suggested here [in the DAP book]. [Children with behavioral and developmental disabilities] have needs not always best met by a loosely structured program with premiums on free choice and self-direction.

She continues her critique with reference to children entering city school kindergartens, noting that "many children need to be taught how to do things which will allow them to have a successful first grade experience." Echoing the concerns of the Head Start teacher above she writes, "To leave them unprepared is to invite them to be labeled as less able, or to be covertly thought of as such" (Tyler-Davis, 1991). Another student sums up the DAP critique well.

Reflecting on the statement concerning curriculum being derived from many sources, such as the knowledge base of various disciplines, society, culture, and parents' desires: This would be the ideal for the white, middle-class child. For the inner-city and/or minority children, this statement does not seem to apply. In fact, [they] are judged by ...the white, middle-class standards.

Again, these statements of resistance were the exception, not the rule. With a population reflective of the mainstream, a critique of the values inherent in DAP is a critique of all they hold dear about child rearing and early childhood education. It seems that since the field of ECE is dominated by white, middle-class women, who will be working with diverse populations not always sharing the same value set, it is crucial that we do **not** "indoctrinate" our students, but instead work to increase awareness of the values and beliefs inherent in DAP.

There have been a number of students, however, who have made important points about the **delivery** of the DAP message. Their critique has been in two key areas: (1) the two column, DAP and DIP (Developmentally Inappropriate Practice), right or wrong, format used in both the "green bible" and the video put out by NAEYC, "Developmentally appropriate practices for children birth through five", and (2) the sense of indoctrination felt when watching a film or reading a book which refers to, for instance, "proper" habits, and "all" settings. It is, at best, problematic to present synopses of research and theory translated into "teachers should" statements as these two sources do.

And this is not to mention the condescending tone of both book and film. Several of my students have asked, "who is this [video] for?", and noted that they were insulted by the superior attitude and simplistic presentation. For example, they've noted that most choices are not either/or in life and teaching, and that a continuum of choices, based on the teacher's understanding of her classroom realities, seems a more reasonable approach to any curriculum.

To these last concerns, I say, exactly! It is contradictory and even hypocritical to promote a model of practice with young children which invites them to interact with people and materials so that they might construct their own understandings (though certainly critiques can and have been made of the narrow, Piagetian constructivism utilized, e.g., O'Brien, 1991; O'Loughlin, 1991), and then to give teachers of young children the knowledge they should have in order to do "appropriate practice". As with young children, teachers bring to their teaching and learning a wealth of diverse experiences which inform their knowing and their practices. Darla Ferris Miller puts it this way: "...intervention programs must not be aimed at changing individual children in spite of their presenting cultures, but instead must focus on helping [adults] think through the

long-term implications of various child care ideologies, and on helping them consequently develop ideologies that they perceive to make sense and to be functional and compatible with cultural values" (1989, p. 104).

Some Conclusions

O'Loughlin (1991), Walsh (1991), Jipson (1991), and New and Mallory (1994), as well as others, have critiqued -- for diverse reasons -- the unquestioning acceptance of DAP, but we are still expecting teachers and parents, regardless of their concerns, to buy into this approach. Although I think DAP has merits, and was needed as an antidote to behavioristic, teacher- and curriculum-driven models of practice, there are issues pertaining to its development, dissemination, purposes, and implementation which must be raised.

If we wish to support teachers in their work of raising and teaching young children to be vital contributors to our democracy, we must strive for a model of teacher development which calls for their potential to be realized, which asks them to think of teaching as a complex, challenging, social and intellectual task (see, for example, Giroux, 1988). Good teacher education prepares "teachers to be observers and documenters of children and researchers of learning rather than consumers of dicta for practice". This kind of preparation "also helps teachers learn how to look at the world from multiple perspectives, including those which may be quite different from the teacher's, and to use this knowledge in developing pedagogies that can reach diverse learners" (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 12). This is the essence of democratic schooling and the foundation for democratic life.

The methods described above obviously are in conflict with an approach to ECE which dictates "appropriate practice" and with teacher education which calls for "indoctrination". The

methods above are **consistent with** the call Dewey made almost a century ago for democratic education, a call which we still have not heeded. Of course questions arise: Is an approach which calls for early childhood educators to "do" democratic teaching reasonable given the economic constraints on the profession? Can teachers, often with very limited educational preparation, be expected to utilize the often subtle and highly sophisticated pedagogy which this approach calls for? Maybe not, for many teachers, at this time. But this an approach to teaching and learning which we should strive for, one which supports the notions of cultural diversity and teachers as reflective practitioners and transformative intellectuals.

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