

YEAH, BUT'S That Keep Teachers from Embracing an Active Curriculum

Overcoming the Resistance



Eugene Geist and Angela C. Baum

Early childhood educators know that curricula for young children should be based on what is known from research about child development and how young children learn (Bredekamp & Copple 1997). This approach, called *developmentally appropriate practice*, offers children engaging classroom experiences that are relevant to their lives *and* based on clear objectives or standards.

Several terms are commonly associated with developmentally appropriate practice, including *hands-on activities*, *in-depth exploration*, *cooperative learning*, *individu-*

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alized instruction, and *project-based curriculum*. Regardless of the chosen strategies, a developmentally appropriate curriculum for young children is child centered, embraces children's individual differences, encourages active learning, and promotes deep understanding.

When you walk into this type of classroom, the first thing you notice is the activity of the children. Perhaps they are working on a project such as learning about the grocery store. Children are talking with each other and discussing and making decisions about their learning. Some may be planning a class trip to a grocery store, while others are building a check-out stand for the store they plan to develop in the classroom. Other children may be researching products and pricing for the classroom store.

The teacher facilitates this active and interactive learning—assisting each of the groups, questioning the children, and guiding their ideas to help them come to fruition. Another of the teacher's roles in this classroom is to set up an environment where children can learn. This shift away from a teaching-centered philosophy toward a learning-centered philosophy is a good way to incorporate the ideals of developmentally appropriate practice into all early childhood classrooms.

Challenges teachers face

Many teachers strive to implement developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms because these strategies support children's learning. Sometimes teachers find it difficult, however, to incorporate teaching methods that allow children to actively engage in investigations (Helm & Katz 2001), construct knowledge and make it meaningful (Kamii & Ewing 1996), and

participate in experiences that are interactive, mentally challenging, child centered, and constructive for children (Bredenkamp & Copple 1997). These goals often seem unattainable today in the face of new demands, requirements, and realities of teaching young children, particularly in the primary grades.

There is also much concern about and research on the impact of the age of accountability on the role of teachers and how their choices and flexibility are diminishing because of the influence of testing and No Child Left Behind (McDaniel et al. 2005). Many teachers of young children feel new pressures associated with standardized testing and a need to make their teaching time cover the breadth of information that children need to know for these tests. To ensure uniformity of the educational experience, some schools or school districts are adopting a standard curriculum, with the hopes that teachers will help children gain the knowledge necessary to achieve satisfactory test scores. This teaching-to-the-test phenomenon, combined with other challenges inherent in early childhood classrooms, often makes it difficult for teachers to implement even some of the essential components of developmentally appropriate practice.

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perform well.” While most early childhood educators strive to implement appropriate teaching methods, balancing the challenges of daily work with young children and their families can create frustrations that turn into resistance—the “Yeah, but’s.”

Can we as teachers overcome our own resistance and help others invested in the education of young children—administrators, policy makers, colleagues, and families—to do so also? The feat is halfway achieved, because early childhood educators already recognize what’s best for young children, and organizations like NAEYC have advocated and documented the benefits of developmentally appropriate education for many years. Now, to support teachers and bolster their continuing efforts to foster developmentally appropriate curricula, we address eight of the most frequently expressed challenges.

YEAH I think a developmentally appropriate curriculum is best, **BUT** the teacher in the next grade is not going to teach that way, and I don’t want to confuse the children.

Positive classroom experience can never be a negative. As teachers, we deal with this concern constantly. We may work to provide relevant and meaningful experiences for children, only to see the child placed in a less developmentally appropriate classroom the next year. While this is disap-

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Strengthening teachers' commitment

This article offers suggestions to help teachers overcome some of today’s teaching challenges. Stumbling blocks often identified by teachers are characterized here in a series of “Yeah, but’s.” We chose this phrase based on our many conversations with teachers about best practices in teaching young children, during which teachers responded with answers such as “Yeah, but I don’t have enough time in my day to implement these strategies” and “Yeah, but proficiency tests are coming up, and I have to make sure the students will

pointing, disheartening, and sometimes angering, we don’t want to use this as an excuse for not doing what we know is best for the children.

Children are not confused by different teaching styles. The high-quality, positive experience that you give a child in your classroom has a lasting effect. Children learn from their experiences in a developmentally appropriate classroom and use them as a foundation for

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experiences in their later schooling and throughout life. As children adapt to other teachers' methods and styles, they carry with them the learning gained through positive, active, and fulfilling educational experience.



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There are, however, some important things early childhood educators can do. We can encourage our colleagues to initiate changes in their practice/approach. By becoming advocates for high-quality instruction, we can offer a model to other teachers and help them introduce more appropriate practices. By being able to address our colleagues' "Yeah, but . . ." comments, we are helping to improve educational settings for children in the future. Our role is to envision not only what we want to happen in our own classroom but also what can happen throughout children's early childhood experience.

Thinking creatively about our concepts of schooling and grade levels is another way to introduce change. Perhaps your school could initiate a multiage or looping program through which teachers and children share two consecutive years. Multiage programs have a proven record of benefit in promoting positive educational experiences for children (Rathbone 1993; Society for Developmental Education 1993; Chase & Doan 1994, 1996; Bacharach, Hasslen, & Anderson 1995; Grant, Richardson, & Fredenburg 1996; Kasten & Lolli 1998; George & Lounsbury 2000). Not only does a teacher stay with the children through multiple years, but also the groups of children remain together for a longer period. In a multiage group a broad ability range is

common, allowing for both peer-to-peer teaching and older or more advanced students helping those who are younger or less advanced.

Developing the idea of family groups within a school is a way to bring together kindergarten through third-grade teachers who all have similar philosophies about early childhood education. Children in kindergarten proceed through the first, second, and third grades within their family group. The children remain together for four years, and the teachers collaborate in developing a cohesive program spread across these early, vital years of formal schooling. In family groups, teachers may implement collaborative projects between the classrooms. For example,

if the project topic is insects, the family group's teachers work together to develop the topic but create age-specific activities. Interaction across age groups results in invaluable curriculum additions and makes multiage grouping definitely qualify as best practice.

YEAH I would like to teach this way,

BUT my school district requires that I teach using a prepared curriculum.

Make your voice heard! Many teachers are required to use a prepared curriculum consisting primarily of direct instruction, with few other appropriate components. A school directs teachers to use the curriculum usually because it either needs or wants to improve standardized test

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scores. Families, administrators, school board members, and others need to hear from teachers and advocates for children in order to know how and why programs that are standardized rather than tailored to meet children's individual needs are detrimental to children's future academic success (Kelly 1999). A list of resources at the end of this article provides help in educating others about this important issue (Meyer 2005).

If teachers value active learning, as supported by NAEYC and other educational organizations, like National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, National Science Teachers Association, National Council of Social Studies, and International Reading Association, they know the importance of getting the message to others whose voices are central to the decision making about assessment in early childhood programs. Parents' voices count; they elect school boards and state representatives. Through this process of education and the efforts of many, our concerns as teachers will be heard.

Becoming active in your NAEYC Affiliate is a way to develop advocacy skills. By participating with educators statewide and across the country, you add to your effectiveness in influencing those who make decisions about curricula in the schools. In the United States we value our system of local control of schools that ensures responsiveness to local and regional needs. We can provide local input and have an effect.

Standards and benchmarks that most states develop clearly identify what is expected of students at the end of each grade, including preschool.

YEAH adding depth to the curriculum is great,

BUT I have to get through the entire math book by the end of the year.

Textbooks are not the sole basis for learning any subject at any age but are tools designed to support learning. In the United States, textbooks are developed to be broad scope, which ensures their potential adoption in as many states or school districts as possible. Each state and school district develops its own standards, benchmarks, and requirements, and many textbooks may contain material that is not part of a district's plan of study. Textbook companies assume that teachers and administrators will choose to use only the applicable sections of the book.

When school officials treat a textbook as the final word on curriculum development, teachers often feel they must cover all topics from the front of the book to the back. Unfortunately, this leads to a broad curriculum without much depth. A lot of topics get covered, but quickly and shallowly (OERI 1996). Children lack the time to gain any deep understandings.

The textbook does not dictate what should be taught in the classroom. Standards and benchmarks that most states develop clearly identify what is expected of students at the end of each grade, including preschool. Teachers use these standards to develop a plan of study for each age group and then design curricula to meet the goals. Standards do not dictate how goals must be met, but give teachers and schools the freedom to create the curriculum and implement it.

As the developers of curriculum in their classrooms, teachers are the persons most familiar with children's abilities, needs, and interests. They can best create an appropriate course of study that promotes children's active learning and development. A textbook cannot do any of these things; it assumes all children are at the same level at the same time. Following such an assumption, students who are not at the level of the textbook will fall behind, and many who are ahead will become bored or restless (Fosnot 1989).

As noted above, a textbook is a tool and not the curriculum itself. When a teacher uses it to introduce or explain basic knowledge, the lesson is just the beginning of children's in-depth investigation, experimentation, and construction of knowledge.



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YEAH a strategy such as project work seems great,

BUT facilitating it takes too much time and I don't have time left to teach all the subjects necessary for children in my class to perform well on proficiency tests.

Projects are just one aspect of an appropriate curriculum, but they can be a great incubator for ideas and skills that relate directly to information included on many proficiency tests. Projects and other in-depth investigations allow children to fully explore topics and use skills in math, science, reading, writing, and other curricular areas in integrated and authentic ways. Such child-initiated explorations provide children opportunities to pursue their own interests in a self-directed activity. The benefits of child-initiated activities are well documented. Given the opportunity to thoroughly investigate topics of personal interest, most children grow academically and socially/emotionally (Helm & Katz 2001).

To advocate for project work in the early childhood classroom is not to say that this is the only type of activity that should occur. But projects are compatible with other curricular approaches, can

complement or expand and support other classroom activities, and can be effective in helping children make progress toward the curricular goals and objectives outlined by states and local school boards and assessed in proficiency tests. Children who experience an active curriculum perform as well if not better on such tests as children taught using a "cookbook" curriculum (Heiney 1998; Lai et al. 1998; Cain 2002; Worsley, Beneke, & Helm 2003).

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The project approach lends itself to integrating content goals and assessment into classroom activities (Helm & Katz 2001). Additionally, projects let teachers introduce several curricular areas in an integrated way. In a project approach the curriculum is child centered, a central tenet of developmentally appropriate practice, rather than subject centered.

YEAH I think these approaches sound good,

BUT I am afraid my students' families will be concerned that I am not doing my job, which is to "teach" their children.

The best way to address parents' concerns is through ongoing communication. The more often teachers communicate with families about what children are doing and learning in their classroom, the more likely a family is to understand the value of a developmentally appropriate approach. As teachers, our work with families is just as important as our work with children. Most parents want what is best for their child, and the majority of their questions and concerns can be addressed by providing information, inviting their involvement, and helping to empower them.

Giving families information is the first step in gaining their acceptance and support for the implementation of appropriate practices. Parents can become great allies in teachers' efforts to incorporate best practices into



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their classroom. Teachers gain parents' confidence by explaining how they are meeting state and local standards and also going beyond by teaching children to engage in independent thinking and academic and social problem solving. You can give articles (such as this one) to parents to help them understand child development and the importance of early childhood best practices (see also a useful list of reading materials, p. 7).

Families need to know that implementing developmentally appropriate practices does not mean decreasing the amount of academic rigor in your classroom or neglecting to teach math, reading, science, and other important subjects. The better you communicate that this approach to curriculum development is based on research and knowledge of child development, the more likely families are to support your efforts.

Empower parents to take a hand in their child's education. Work with families to help them continue at home children's investigative work begun at school. Empowering is more than just assigning children homework. Make sure that parents know and understand what is happening in the classroom and how to extend this learning at home. Newsletters, e-mails, and even class Web pages are valuable ways to involve families and help them become partners in their children's education.

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YEAH I believe in an active curriculum approach,

BUT how can I be sure that children are learning?

Assessment is an integral part of an appropriate curriculum. It helps the teacher gauge children's learning and determine how to modify the curriculum for each child. This type of assessment is authentic, individualized, and requires finding out where children are in every aspect of their growth, development, and learning (McAfee, Leong, & Bodrova 2004). It provides more information about children's progress than can be learned in formal testing. Too often assessment is thought of as a test, such as at the end of a chapter, to learn how much information a child has retained. Tests are not the only form of assessment, however, and often are not the most effective. Assessment is an ongoing process and needs to occur every day.

Authentic assessment can include maintaining and reviewing portfolios containing children's work samples and anecdotal and daily records that the teacher collects. A portfolio can collect relevant examples of what the child makes, says, or does. Such a method can help parents gain a picture of and understand their child's development. Traditional report cards with letter grades or their equivalent are not very descriptive. When a teacher collects samples of a child's work over many months, this portfolio can be very informative as parents sit down with their

child and the teacher and review the child's learning and development.

More formal assessments may be appropriate on occasions, but the challenge for us as teachers is to decide when testing is necessary versus when it might be more beneficial to use authentic assessment.

YEAH I think a developmental approach is great,

BUT there are only so many hours in the day, and it seems like a lot of work.

Incorporating appropriate practices into your classroom is a lot of work. It means that the teacher engages in continuous assessment of students, actively develops curricula, and maintains significant ongoing interactions with families. Teachers who implement developmentally

Resources for Families on Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Here are resources to help parents/families understand the important aspects of a developmentally appropriate curriculum.

Alexander, K.K. 1999. Playtime is cancelled. *Parents* (Nov.): 114–18.

This article describes the trend in the United States of reducing the amount of time children are involved in play. While the goal is to improve test scores, early childhood professionals are concerned about the negative effects that less playtime may have on children's development.

Anderson, S.R. 1998. The trouble with testing. *Young Children* 53 (4): 25–29.

The author discusses the problems related to using standardized tests with young children. Many teachers describe standardized testing as disruptive and frustrating, and children and families may experience emotional stress.

Begley, S. 1998. Homework doesn't help. *Newsweek*, 30 March, 50–51.

The argument presented here is that homework has very little value for young children. In fact, research suggests that homework in the early years can be counterproductive.

Bickart, T., D.T. Dodge, & J.R. Jablon. 2004. *What Every Parent*

Needs to Know about 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Grades. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies.

Through this book, parents step inside the classroom, learn what to look for, and see how a great classroom contributes to their child's education. Clear and encouraging, the book is full of vignettes and samples of real classrooms.

Culbertson, L.D., & M.R. Jalongo. 1999. "But what's wrong with letter grades?" Responding to parents' questions about alternative assessment. *Childhood Education* (Spring): 130–35.

Teachers need to educate parents regarding alternative methods of assessment. This article describes the basics and how alternative assessment contributes to children's learning.

Dodge, D.T., & J. Phinney. 2002. *A Parent's Guide to Preschool*. Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies.

This illustrated booklet helps parents learn how to partner with teachers to help their children acquire the skills, attitudes, and habits to do well in school and throughout life. Available in Spanish, Japanese, and English.

Helm, J., S. Beneke, & K. Steinheimer. 1997. Documenting children's learning. *Childhood Education* (Summer): 200–05.

Quality assessment begins with the documentation of children's learning. This article describes how careful documentation of children's work benefits both teachers and children.

Schweinhart, L.J., & D.P. Weikart. 1998. Why curriculum matters in early childhood education. *Educational Leadership* 55 (6): 57–60.

The authors review research completed by them, describing the benefits of a developmentally appropriate curriculum for children who live in poverty.

Tsao, L. 2002. How much do we know about the importance of play in child development? *Childhood Education* 78 (4): 230–33.

This overview of research into the role of play in child development provides insights into the benefits of play in relation to intellectual, language, and social development.

Viadero, D. 1999. Make or break. *Education Week* 18 (34): 24–29.

Transitioning to new schools or new kinds of learning can be difficult for young children. This article discusses why these transitions can be challenging and offers suggestions for helping children transition successfully.

appropriate approaches may do more work than the teacher who chooses to teach from a book or pre-made lesson plan, but the work increases the level of their fulfillment. What happens is that teachers and children are empowered together to shape the curricula and the entire educational experience. In classrooms in which textbooks or standardized curricula dominate, teachers often feel like technicians simply implementing preplanned lessons. What a loss when teachers otherwise can be leaders, developers of curricula, and a creative part of the child's educational experience.

Teachers are highly trained in many aspects of education, including child development, guidance and classroom management, curriculum development, and methods and materials for various curricular areas. Many states require teachers to achieve advanced degrees to continue teaching. Schools are places where we want teachers who use information and the ability to think critically about their profession to design the best experiences possible for children. Filling this role takes more time and effort, but children benefit, teachers gain in job satisfaction, and their years of education find good use.

YEAH children should have many opportunities for choice and exploration,

BUT I am concerned that the lack of structure will lead to behavioral problems in the classroom.

Through careful planning and implementation of a developmentally appropriate curriculum, many behavioral problems common in teacher-centered classrooms may be reduced or avoided (Marion 2003). When children are engaged in a project or activity of personal interest, they are less likely to demonstrate inappropriate behavior. Of course all classrooms need limits and guidelines to ensure the safety of children and positive experiences for everyone involved. But classroom learning environments can encourage flexibility and spontaneity and still model clearly defined behavioral expectations and consequences (Kostelnik et al. 2002). Consistent and predictable environments for children allow them to make informed decisions and appropriate choices.

One goal of early childhood education is to foster the development of social competence in children (Kostelnik et al. 2002). Good teachers view themselves as facilitators of this process as children develop traits of self-discipline, self-control, autonomy, and intrinsic motivation. Thus, behavioral guidance in developmentally appropriate classrooms may look different from discipline in classrooms where teachers regard themselves as authority figures dispensing external rewards and punishments. Many teachers find that thoughtful planning and sensitivity to children's learning needs and interests are the best ways to prevent inappropriate behavior.

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Conclusion

Responding to our own internal "Yeah, but's..." is less difficult if we remember three points:

1. Early childhood education emphasizes what is best for the child. Even though there are many demands on us as teachers, we want to always put the child's needs first.
2. Extra effort pays off. Incorporating developmentally appropriate child-centered approaches requires much preparation and follow-up and may be more difficult than a teacher-centered approach. It takes time to develop a curriculum based on the children's needs and interests, but it is well worth the extra effort.

3. Information, involvement, and empowerment are the best ways to overcome "Yeah, but's." Make your case to yourself and to others by identifying and using research findings and information about children's learning and development. This may be the best way to be convincing about a developmentally appropriate approach being not only feasible but also critical.

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