

Teaching the Standards is Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Strategies for Incorporating the Sociopolitical Dimension of DAP in Early Childhood Teaching

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Abstract Many early childhood practitioners in the U.S. are experiencing tension between their desire to offer students developmentally appropriate learning experiences and their obligation to teach the academic knowledge and skills mandated by their states. However, careful examination of the DAP guidelines' definition of culturally appropriate practice reveals a significant sociopolitical dimension that has been obscured by the field's tight focus on the sociocultural dimension. Because standards-based education is an explicit feature of the sociopolitical landscape of U. S. public education, teaching the standards is developmentally appropriate practice. Implementation of this broadened understanding of DAP adds new complexity to early childhood teachers' work. This article offers ideas drawn from Bronfenbrenner, Vygotsky, and Dewey as sources of theoretical support and provides examples of strategic decision making—illustrated with examples drawn from Texas kindergartens—that can assist teachers in managing the curricular and instructional complexities that accompany the broadened understanding of DAP.

Keywords Early childhood education · Developmentally appropriate practices · Standards · Teachers' decision making

Since the authorization of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 (No Child 2001), early childhood educators in the United States have been searching for ways to manage the atmosphere of academic intensification that surrounds this powerful legislation (Stipek 2006). The buzz about teaching the standards (French 2004), the ever-increasing emphasis on early development of literacy and mathematics skills (McDaniel et al. 2005), and the pressures of “accountability shovedown” (Hatch 2002, p. 457) have sparked questions, concerns, disagreements, and confusion about the most suitable curriculum content and the most effective instructional strategies for teaching young children in preschool and kindergarten settings.

The challenge currently facing early childhood educators has been presented in the literature as a fundamental conflict between the beliefs and practices associated with NCLB and the beliefs and practices associated with the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) (Bredenkamp and Copple 1997). Publications with titles like “Can You Really Say No? Standards and Good Practices *Can* Work Together” (French 2004), “The Press of Standardized Curriculum: Does a Kindergarten Teacher Instruct With Worksheets or Let Children Play?” (Wien 2002), and “Implementing Developmentally Appropriate Practices in a Developmentally Inappropriate Climate” (Dever et al. 2003) are evidence of this stark either/or contrast and the tension it has created.

Reconciling these opposing sets of requirements and values has been a struggle for many teachers (DeVault 2003; Geist and Baum 2005; Wien 2004). For example, a first grade teacher acknowledged the tension between her obligations and her beliefs, saying, “I was working myself to death trying to keep up with all the standards... [But] I

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believe that teaching only to state standards does not allow me to do what's best for children" (McDaniel et al. 2005, p. 22). Along similar lines, a kindergarten teacher admitted the clash between her commitment to developmentally appropriate practices and her obligation to meet the new expectations for academic outcomes left her feeling "torn between what she knew children needed and the principal's mandates" (Da Ros-Voseles et al. 2003, p. 36). Katz describes the complex professional challenges early childhood teachers are facing:

Every day these teachers' lives present them with a major dilemma: should they focus on satisfying the detailed requirements of the standardized curriculum and risk forfeiting many important aspects of the children's developmental needs? Or should they focus primarily on the children's needs and risk failing to satisfy the regulations that govern their employment? Such is the nature of a dilemma: addressing one of its two horns means neglecting the potential benefits of addressing the other (Katz, quoted in Wien 2004, p. x).

The practical implications of this dilemma have made teaching prekindergarten and kindergarten in public school contexts quite difficult. However, the root cause of the difficulties—the perception of a fundamental tension between DAP and NCLB-informed academic expectations—can be minimized. A careful rereading of the DAP guidelines (Bredekamp and Copple 1997) indicates responding to the curricular demands arising from the implementation of NCLB actually *is* developmentally appropriate practice.

The DAP guidelines explicitly acknowledge "the powerful influence of context on all development and learning" (Bredekamp 1997, p. 41). Because NCLB is a prominent feature of the social and cultural context in which U.S. children are presently living, attending and responding to the demands of NCLB is an important aspect of culturally appropriate practices. In order to be developmentally appropriate, then, teachers' practical decisions must be informed by thoughtful consideration of the demands and expectations associated with NCLB in conjunction with the familiar, well-established dimensions of DAP.

Broadening our thinking about culturally appropriate practices to acknowledge the influences of sociopolitical factors as well as sociocultural factors has powerful implications. When satisfying the demands emerging from NCLB is acknowledged as a feature of developmentally appropriate practice, teachers are no longer faced with a conflict between their desire to use DAP and their obligation to respond to the new expectations for curriculum, instruction, and accountability: there is no either/or tension between meeting children's learning needs and satisfying NCLB-related demands when both those factors are

features of developmentally appropriate practice. Early childhood teachers will encounter contradictions within DAP as a result—mastery of certain NCLB-related academic skills may be culturally appropriate but not age appropriate, for example—but resolving contradictions is already an established feature of developmentally appropriate teaching (Bredekamp 1997, p. 45). Teachers' familiarity with the complexities of working within the DAP framework and their facility as professional decision makers will help them determine how to resolve those tensions effectively in relation to the demands of their specific professional contexts.

Sociocultural and Sociopolitical Influences on Young Children's Lives and Learning

The initial DAP guidelines (Bredekamp 1987) were developed in the mid-1980s in response to a growing emphasis on academic instruction in preschool contexts that emerged in the wake of the widely-influential policy document, "A Nation at Risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). In this original version, DAP had only two dimensions—age appropriateness and individual appropriateness—and gave no consideration to the impact of culture on learning beyond mentioning "family background" as a facet of individual appropriateness.

The original DAP guidelines were significantly reworked in the mid-1990s to reflect changes in the field's understanding of young children's learning (Swadener and Kessler 1991). The revised DAP guidelines (Bredekamp and Copple 1997) specified early childhood teachers should not only take the developmental norms established by psychology and the specific strengths, interests, and needs of the children being taught into consideration, but should also incorporate the values, beliefs, priorities, and practices shaping the social and cultural contexts of their students' lives into their instructional decisions. The introduction of culturally appropriate practices to the DAP guidelines prompted many early childhood educators to rethink their programs' attention to the cultures of the families they served and to retool their practices to reflect the diversity in race, ethnicity, language, and other key characteristics found in our multicultural society (Powell 1994).

Culturally appropriate practices' emphasis on the social and cultural contexts of children's lives immediately foregrounded an urgent need to incorporate issues of cultural and linguistic diversity into our field's vision of best practices (Mallory and New 1994). However, these efforts to attend to the sociocultural dimensions of DAP led early childhood educators to overlook other significant dimensions of children's social and cultural contexts that also warrant attention. The definition of culturally appropriate

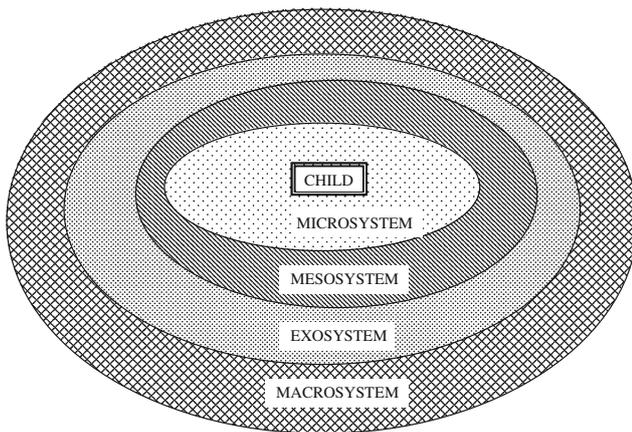


Fig. 1 Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development

practices presented in the DAP guidelines does not focus solely on sociocultural diversity. This can be seen in Bredekamp's statement: "Early childhood programs exist in contexts. Those contexts are influenced by many factors—among them are parents' preferences, community values, societal expectations, demands of institutions at the next level of education, and broadly defined values of American culture" (Bredekamp 1997, p. 43). Sociopolitical factors must also be taken into consideration for practices to be culturally appropriate.

The DAP guidelines' call for attention to the influence of many social and cultural contexts on children evokes Bronfenbrenner's notion of ecological systems of human development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). In this view, children's development is shaped by their interactions with the nested environments in which they live their lives (see Fig. 1). The microsystem is the environment in which children interact, observe, and engage in activities with their family, with their local community, and within the racial, cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups with which the family identifies. The microsystem exists within a mesosystem comprising settings outside the immediate family context in which children are active participants, such as schools. These two systems are located within an exosystem consisting of settings that do not involve the children directly but that still have an impact on their development, such as the parents' workplaces. And all these systems are situated within a macrosystem made up of the larger societal contexts in which the other systems are located.

According to Bronfenbrenner's model and the DAP guidelines, children's learning and development are influenced not only by their specific sociocultural milieus, but also by the larger sociopolitical macrosystem in which those sociocultural milieus are embedded. The interplay of the various systems and their influence on children's lives is illustrated by the following story about Jasmine,¹ a

typically-developing kindergartner enrolled in a public school classroom in Texas. I learned about Jasmine from her teacher, Liz Brown, a participant in my recent research study of kindergarten teachers' decision making (Goldstein 2007a, b). Liz, a veteran with 28 years' professional experience in kindergarten, described Jasmine's situation:

I've got a couple of children [including Jasmine] who didn't go to preschool.... They're not behind. Developmentally they're not behind, they're normal five-year-old children. According to the state, though, they're behind. Because of the expectations [in the standards] about what these kids need to know by the end of the year. I mean, it's a sad thing.... Looking at where Jasmine needs to be at the end of the year and where she is now, [I know that] unless we make significant gains she will be doing kindergarten again next year. And, you know, I've never done that, ever.

In Bronfenbrenner's model, Jasmine's early learning experiences prior to kindergarten took place in the microsystem: she spent her days engaging with family members of all ages, participating—peripherally at first and more actively as she matured (Lave and Wegner 1991)—in the daily life of her family. When she reached the age of five, Jasmine began kindergarten and established herself in the mesosystem, in this case, a public elementary school. There are no prerequisites for kindergarten enrollment other than chronological age, so it would be reasonable to assume that Jasmine, a typically developing 5-year-old, was ready for kindergarten and would experience success there. But the mesosystem of public schooling is embedded within and shaped by the macrosystem, the larger social, cultural, and political context of Texas and the United States. And the influence of the macrosystem on school practices was the source of Jasmine's difficulties.

The Texas Accountability System, the comprehensive educational plan implemented in Texas as a response to NCLB, includes a standards-based K-12 curriculum. In a standards-based approach, students are expected to demonstrate mastery of the knowledge and skills specified for their grade level by the end of each school year (Ardovino et al. 2000). After several years of working within the constraints of the Texas Accountability System, Liz determined mastery of the kindergarten learning outcomes, while an appropriate goal for many of her students, was often extremely challenging for children who had not attended preschool programs where they learned basic academic content and practiced tasks like holding pencils and cutting with scissors. Liz felt repeating kindergarten would give Jasmine the opportunity catch up on the basic academic skills she missed by not attending preschool, to master the kindergarten learning objectives, and to begin first grade ready to succeed. To return to Bronfenbrenner's

¹ All names used in the article are pseudonyms.

constructs, it appears that Jasmine was prepared for kindergarten according to the expectations of the microsystem and the mesosystem, but did not have the preparation necessary to achieve the levels of skill demanded by policies enacted in the macrosystem.

Like Bronfenbrenner's model, Vygotsky's conception of learning and development as social processes that take place in specific cultural and historical contexts also acknowledges the significant role played by sociopolitical forces in children's lives (Cole and Wersch 2003). Because young children learn mainly through interactions with other people in their immediate social world, everything they learn is colored by the expectations and norms of the specific social and cultural contexts in which they are situated (Vygotsky 1978). The beliefs and values held by members of those social and cultural contexts determine the knowledge and skills that are worth learning and shape understandings of the most effective instructional experiences and environments for young learners (Rogoff 1990). When children move from their familiar sociocultural context to an unfamiliar context, however, the well-developed capabilities they possess might not be appreciated or considered relevant. Further, they may lack the knowledge, skills, and experiences expected and valued in the new context. These children require focused support to be successful in that new context.

When we view Jasmine through a Vygotskian lens, we see her early learning experiences mediated by her family and shaped by the norms, values, and priorities in her sociocultural context. She was educated to be a functioning member of her family and her community, and went to kindergarten with many highly developed abilities and skills. While Liz acknowledged and valued Jasmine's capabilities, she was also very aware of the gap between Jasmine's level of academic functioning and the level reflected in the kindergarten learning outcomes in the state standards. Liz's desire for Jasmine to repeat kindergarten was driven by sociopolitical factors: she felt repeating kindergarten would give Jasmine more time to master the skills many of her peers learned in preschool and to solidify her grasp on the academic content prescribed in the kindergarten standards. Liz believed this course of action would enable Jasmine to enter first grade with the necessary knowledge and skills, and to be positioned for continued achievement of the academic outcomes and goals currently valued in the larger context of U.S. society.

Jenny Aster, another participant in the same study, shared professional reflections that highlight the ways in which her instructional decisions were influenced strongly both by sociocultural forces in the microsystem and by sociopolitical forces in the macrosystem. Jenny began her career teaching kindergarten in culturally and linguistically diverse school district that served children from a low-

income community, then took a position teaching kindergarten to children from an affluent, majority-White community in a different district. She recalled the transition from the first district to the second as a shock: kindergarten served different purposes and played out in different ways at the two schools. She explained:

My first year here [in the affluent community] was like starting from scratch, you know? My experience had been with kids who had never been to school before and hadn't been exposed to all these [academics]. The things that I [believed] a kindergartener could do, [pause] the kids [at this new school] were capable of so much more than that. My world was turned upside down. [Materials] that I had made to use in my [previous] kindergarten room were way too babyish: the [se kids] had already been exposed to a lot of that [content], and they could do so much more.

Jenny's first and second kindergarten classrooms were part of the same macrosystem (U.S. society) and mesosystem (Texas public elementary schools). And Jenny's goal was the same in both kindergartens: to provide developmentally appropriate learning opportunities that were challenging and achievable for the individuals in her class. But the learning experiences that were appropriate for Jenny's first group of kindergarteners were not appropriate for the second group because of differences in the children's microsystems. What Jenny taught and how she taught it differed in the two settings not because of inherent differences in the children's cognitive capabilities or potential, but because of differences in the relationship between the children's prior experiences and background knowledge and the expectations for kindergarten in Texas public schools.

Jenny explained that the children in the first district came to kindergarten "not knowing how to hold the scissors... not knowing how to hold a pencil, not knowing how to use glue, not knowing any of that" and were very eager to start learning the knowledge and skills taught at school. By contrast, the children in the second district typically came to kindergarten with fairly advanced academic skills. Jenny gestured to a language arts instructional poster hanging on the wall of her classroom as she offered this example:

I would never have had short and long vowels up in the room that I taught in [in the first district], not even at the end of the year. And I have them up from day one here because so many of the [students] talk about sounding out [words] or [say things like] "that 'a' makes two sounds."

Reflecting on kindergarten teaching in the second district, Jenny concluded, "I feel like these kids have kinda

been to kindergarten already and I am like a pre-first [grade] for them.”

Despite the significant differences between the two districts, Jenny made her instructional decisions in the same manner: she relied upon observation and documentation of her students’ skills, careful attention to their background knowledge and prior experiences, reflection on the state’s kindergarten learning outcomes, thoughtful conversations with the students’ parents, and professional discussions with colleagues to plan responsive, appropriate lessons. In both contexts the learning experiences Jenny provided were designed to move the students forward from their incoming level of academic functioning to more sophisticated understandings and advanced abilities. The opportunity to make curricular and instructional decisions—widely considered to be the signature responsibility of the teaching profession (Hawthorne 1992)—was a crucial factor in Jenny’s ability to create developmentally appropriate learning environments in each setting.

Implications for Classroom Teaching

Resolving contradictions and managing tensions are fundamental features of the process of engaging in developmentally appropriate early childhood education (Bredekamp 1997). Considering the impact of sociopolitical factors when making decisions regarding best practices adds new layers of intricacy to teachers’ work. The various dimensions of DAP—age appropriateness, individual appropriateness, sociocultural appropriateness, and sociopolitical appropriateness—interact with, influence, and contradict each other in an almost infinite variety of ways. There is no single correct response to the question of what curriculum content and which instructional practices are developmentally appropriate for an individual child, a certain classroom full of students, a particular school setting, or a specific sociocultural context: every question has many possible answers. As a result, early childhood educators must continually make curricular and instructional decisions specific to the contours of their particular professional context and strive to manage the “unforgiving complexities of teaching” (Cochran-Smith 2003, p. 3).

Approaches to the creation of balanced practices that meet the divergent and sometimes contradictory demands within this broadened understanding of developmentally appropriate practice include thematic instruction (Neuharth-Pritchett et al. 2003), the project method (Helm 2003), and blending new expectations into existing units and lessons (Gronlund 2001; Seefeldt 2005). In these approaches, assimilating sociopolitically appropriate academic content and skills into larger interdisciplinary units of study and embedding them in existing child-centered

activities allows teachers to respond to the new mandates without significant disruption to established classroom practices. At the same time, teachers who are obligated to adhere to their district’s scope and sequence planning guides or to follow the lessons presented in mandated textbooks can supplement and enrich the lessons presented in the required instructional materials with hands-on activities, kinesthetic experiences, creative play, or other activities that reflect research on how young children learn best.

As our understanding of the range of issues to be taken into consideration when making decisions about DAP expands to include sociopolitical appropriateness, our understanding of the range of instructional strategies that are acknowledged as acceptable practice must also grow. For example, Epstein (2007) asserts teacher-directed learning experiences should not be seen as an inappropriate or questionable practice. In order to “integrate and promote meaningful learning in all domains” (Epstein 2007, p. 1), Epstein argues instructional decisions must be made to reflect the specific goals of a given lesson: teachers should use child-guided experiences to teach certain kinds of content and should use adult-guided experiences when a lesson’s content would be more effectively presented in this manner.

This way of thinking about balanced instructional practices offers teachers greater latitude when making teaching decisions: early childhood educators can choose freely from a wide range of strategies and select without hesitation the instructional approach they believe will be most effective in teaching the lesson’s content to the children in their classes. This stance is particularly useful for teachers who must work with tightly regulated curricular policies or scripted instructional materials. In these cases, the grade-level resources adopted by the state and district can be understood and accepted as age appropriate and sociopolitically appropriate practice and used as a foundation for supplemental learning activities that provide engaging individually and socioculturally appropriate experiences for the students.

This conciliatory approach runs the risk of compromising DAP’s intents and purposes. DAP must not devolve into a form of early childhood education that rationalizes academics and seatwork at the expense of the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development of young children. To guard against this, teachers will need access to robust frameworks to guide their decision making. John Dewey’s representation of the educative process (Dewey 1902/1990) and his understanding of the role of the teacher within that process (Dewey 1938/1963) combine to offer one such source of support. Dewey’s ideas offer a realistic and practical heuristic that can be applied flexibly and authentically as teachers integrate the more comprehensive



Fig. 2 Dewey's conception of the educative process

depiction of DAP into the increasingly complex instructional and curricular demands they face (see Fig. 2).

According to Dewey, learning is the result of interactions between the child and the curriculum: he writes, "the fundamental factors in the educative process are an immature, undeveloped being and certain social aims, meanings, values incarnate in the matured experience of the adult. The educative process is due to an interaction of these forces" (Dewey 1902/1990, p. 182).

Dewey's emphasis on interaction makes his work particularly pertinent to developmentally appropriate early childhood education. In the interactions that constitute the educative process, both the child and the curriculum are changed: the curriculum is adjusted and shaped to connect with the interests and passions of the child, and the child is transformed through meaningful, relevant, engaging interaction with the content of the curriculum. This conception captures the multiple possibilities that characterize developmentally appropriate educational experiences.

Dewey's ideas suggest educative interactions can take place between any children and any curriculum. For this to occur, however, the interaction of the child and the curriculum requires deliberate facilitation and mediation by a teacher (Dewey 1938/1963). Dewey's understanding of the teacher's role in the process of education acknowledges thoughtful, informed curricular and instructional decision making as the central responsibility of the profession (Borko et al. 1979; Feiman-Nemser and Floden 1986). He argues that it is the teacher's duty to use professional knowledge, judgment, and skill to identify the environments and activities that "will interact with the existing capacities and needs of those taught to create a worthwhile experience" (Dewey 1938/1963, p. 45). Dewey says bluntly, "there is no point in [the teacher] being more mature if, instead of using his greater insight to help organize the conditions of the experience of the immature, he throws away his insight" (Dewey 1938/1963, p. 38). Thus, Dewey's perspective suggests that, especially in today's increasingly regulated and standardized climate, the teacher must identify and claim every possible opportunity to make informed, thoughtful decisions regarding the students' learning experiences.

To succeed in making these responsible decisions, the teacher must have deep understanding of the content being taught, nuanced knowledge of the children as learners, and the disposition to apply these insights in principled ways to determine how best to initiate and sustain interaction between the students and the curriculum. Dewey (1938/1963) writes the teacher

must survey the capacities and need of the particular set of individuals with whom he is dealing and must at the same time arrange the conditions which provide the subject-matter or content for experiences that satisfy these needs and develop these capacities. The planning must be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power. (p. 58)

Further, the teacher must also "know how to utilize the surroundings, physical and social, that exist so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worthwhile" (Dewey 1938/1963, p. 40). Enacting Dewey's ideas requires a commitment to ongoing reflection on practice and critical evaluation of all professional decisions. For example, the responsible teacher must bear in mind instructional plans effective with last year's class might not be best for this year's class, and also acknowledge beloved, tried-and-true activities and lessons might not be interesting, relevant, or thought-provoking for this particular group of children.

Conversely, the responsible teacher must also recognize that students or their parents may prefer or benefit from learning experiences or materials the teacher would prefer to avoid. For instance, Ann Bailey, another participant in my study of kindergarten teachers' decision making, admitted sheepishly that "drill and kill" worksheets were generally part of her instructional repertoire. She said, "I do do worksheets occasionally. The kids like them because they feel like they are big kids when they do them. And the parents like them because they look like real work." Ann's decision to use practice worksheets emerges from her respect for the desires of her students, her regard for the values and interests of their parents, and, ultimately, from a working understanding of DAP that acknowledges the significance of sociopolitical factors.

Ann's decision to use worksheets, John Dewey's conception of responsible teacher decision making, and Epstein's work on intentional teaching suggest that no instructional strategy should be automatically considered off-limits. To be successful in providing developmentally appropriate learning experiences, early childhood educators benefit from the opportunity to use their professional discretion to choose the approaches that will be most effective with the given content and with the specific needs, strengths, interests, and personalities of the children in their classes. Furthermore, the value of each curricular and instructional decision should be assessed and understood in relation to the myriad others that combine to form the fabric of a teacher's daily practice. In Ann's case, for example, worksheets are a single, drab thread in a colorful, child-friendly tapestry of instructional strategies comprising mainly hands on, open-

ended, learning opportunities, engaging whole group songs, stories, games, and activities, and lots of opportunity for teacher–student and student–student conversation. Worksheets serve an important purpose in the big picture of Ann’s practice—namely, accommodating the preferences of the children and their parents—and from Ann’s perspective, the contribution worksheets make outweighs their limited value as an instructional tool. In keeping with Dewey’s ideas, Ann’s decision is principled, deliberate, and reflects a nuanced understanding of both DAP and the needs of her students in its attention to the sociopolitical context of public schooling.

Allowing sociopolitical appropriateness to claim its rightful spot beside sociocultural appropriateness within the definition of culturally appropriate practices increases the complexity of engaging developmentally appropriate practices and creates new tensions and contradictions for teachers. By attending to the policies that will determine academic success in the upper grades, this broadened notion of DAP also accommodates the responsible decisions made by those early childhood practitioners who work in public school settings in which they are required to meet rigid professional obligations. However, acknowledging sociopolitical appropriateness helps to ensure our programs provide young children with an education that will “prepare them for participation in a free and democratic society” (Bredekamp and Copple 1997, p. v)

Recent changes in education policy and shifts in societal expectations for early childhood education present opportunities for reflection and renewal. Early childhood educators must commit to the ongoing work of developing practices that are responsive to all facets of DAP, even those that do not coexist easily, in order to ensure all children are well-prepared for successful academic futures. The ideas presented here—applying Bronfenbrenner and Vygotsky in new ways, using Dewey’s work to re-engage teachers’ sense of responsibility for making curricular and instructional decisions, and replacing existing assumptions about which instructional strategies are considered appropriate with a wider and more open perspective—are offered in the hope of beginning a conversation about how to continue to offer children engaging, meaningful, and enjoyable experiences that reflect both our knowledge about how young people learn and also our knowledge about the current expectations and goals of the public education system in the U. S.

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