

ATF Position Paper on Early Childhood Education

Submitted for consideration to the ATF Fed Rep Council on April 1, 2008

Adopted as the ATF policy on May 6, 2008

Introduction

In the fall of 2007, the Albuquerque Teachers Federation sponsored a symposium entitled, "What Happened to the 'Childhood' in Early Childhood?" The experts presenting were early childhood educators who are also officers of the union. The discussion centered on early childhood practices steeped in experience and research that are rapidly disappearing from our classrooms. The early childhood educators who participated in the audience refused to let the conversation end there. The result is this paper, which is now our union's official position on early childhood education in the Albuquerque Public Schools. Our deepest wish is that this paper will ultimately lead to the restoration of developmentally appropriate practice in APS early childhood classrooms.

What is Early Childhood Education?

According to National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Early Childhood Education spans the human life from birth to age 8. In APS, we define early childhood as pre-K through third grade. Young children experience life more holistically than any other age group. Social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical lessons are learned best through integrated experiences. Early childhood education focuses on learning through many avenues, such as: art, music, dance, movement, puppetry, dramatic play, cooking, games, story time, field trips, investigation and discovery. These are all examples of how children learn through "play". Adults who understand this research-based principle create powerful, learner-centered experiences in their classrooms. (Katz, L., 1993).

Childhood Development

Recent studies on infant brain development show, "early experiences affect the development of the brain and lay the foundation for intelligence, emotional health, and moral development," (Shonkoff, J.P., and Phillips, D., 2000). If a young child receives insufficient nurturing, nutrition, adult interaction, and stimulus during this crucial period, she may exhibit a developmental delay. This can hamper her success later in school.

Researchers (NAEYC, 1998, 2000 and, Shonkoff, J.P. and Phillips, D.,2000) have identified four essential domains that early childhood teaching experts must weave into their classroom practice. These different developmental domains of learning are all interconnected as young children learn. The domains are:

- Physical development
- Social development
- Emotional development
- Cognitive development

Research has provided a great deal of information about the development of children and the distinct stage of life referred to as early childhood. The practice of applying these research principles is called Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). DAP means teaching in ways that match the way children develop and learn. According to the NAEYC, developmentally appropriate practice provides children with opportunities to learn and practice newly acquired skills. It offers challenges just beyond the level of their present mastery and it takes place "in the context of a community where children are safe and valued, where their physical needs are met, and where they feel psychologically secure" (Bredekamp & Copple 1997, pp 14-15).

Theory, Curriculum and Pedagogy

High quality early childhood education classrooms are highly influenced by the constructivist learning theory as put forth by Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget. Constructivism is based on the child's prior knowledge or the knowledge the child brings with them to school. In constructivist's classrooms a teacher's role is to create a learning environment that supports and extends the child's prior knowledge. The teacher ensures that skill acquisition is integrated into the child-centered instructional focus. Teachers build on the discoveries of students, making connections between a student's thinking and learning. Vygotsky's seminal work (Vygotsky, 1962, Doolittle, 1997) on language and thought form the foundation for his theory called the *Zone of Proximal Development*. Using this theory, early childhood teachers tailor their teaching strategies to student responses and encourage students to analyze, interpret, and predict information.

By using this developmentally appropriate practice teachers are always pushing children just beyond their level of comfort in order to help the child obtain the next state of learning. Language development is continuously evident in early childhood classrooms as teachers use open-ended questioning, conversations and spontaneous and modeled written documentation, eg. charting, lists, labeling, signs, narratives to further connect the literacy skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Early Childhood curriculum is designed to emphasize interaction between learners and learning tasks in a manner that ensures long-term skill acquisition.

Swiss biologist and psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) is renowned for constructing a highly influential model of child development and learning. Piaget's theory is based on the idea that the developing child builds cognitive structures—in other words, mental "maps," schemas, or networked concepts for understanding and responding to physical experiences within his or her environment. Piaget further attested that a child's cognitive structure naturally increases in sophistication with development and experience to include highly complex mental activities. Piaget's theories describe the four developmental

stages of children's cognition. Of particular interest to us are the Preoperational and Concrete Operational stages defined below:

- *Preoperational (ages 2-7)*--The child is not yet able to conceptualize abstractly and needs concrete physical situations.
- *Concrete Operations (ages 7-11)*--As physical experience accumulates, the child starts to conceptualize, creating logical structures that explain his or her physical experiences. Abstract problem solving is also possible at this stage. For example, arithmetic equations can be solved with numbers, not just with objects.

High quality early childhood classrooms are environmentally designed to include concrete experiences that enhance students' logical and conceptual growth moving children to higher levels of thinking.

Constructivism forms the foundation upon which best practices in early childhood education are built.

Addressing Skill Development in Early Childhood

When teachers are allowed to use developmentally appropriate practice, skill development is embedded in the experiences they design for their students. These teachers are able to successfully teach English Language Learners, Developmentally Delayed children, and all students, regardless of where they fall on the continuum of readiness.

The Importance of Play

Quality early childhood education classrooms are child-centered and focus on the importance of play. Play provides children with the opportunity to actively explore, manipulate, and interact with their environment. It encourages children to investigate, create, discover and motivates them to take risks and add to their understanding of the world. It challenges children to achieve new levels of understanding of events, people and the environment by interacting with concrete materials. It encourages children to practice the skills they have learned in other classroom experiences.

For example, when early childhood environments are rich with opportunities for children to role-play and dress-up, young children are able to put into context the language they are learning every day and apply it to “real” life situations. When children play in the block area they work with other children to problem solve, and build geometric shapes and structures. Children incorporate the skills that they learn into their play when drawing letters in the sand tray, or when using skills they have learned in teacher directed activities and then writing freely in the writing center. Games involve the skills of counting, predicting, strategizing, teamwork and problem solving.

Hands-on activities create authentic experiences in which children begin to feel a sense of mastery over their world and a sense of belonging and understanding of what is going on in their environment. This philosophy follows with Piaget's theories that children should actively participate in their world and various environments so as to ensure they are not 'passive' learners but 'little scientists' who are actively engaged (Marzano, R. J., Norford, J. S., Paynter, D. E., Pickering, D. J., & Gaddy, B. B., 2001).

Play is a very important and special part of childhood. It allows a child to experiment with the world around her and the emotional world inside her. To many it might seem like play but there is a lot of work going on behind the scene like skill building, problem solving, mastering physical and mental challenges etc. Play helps a child in building self-confidence, encourages independent learning and concept development. These also aid in the development of fine and gross motor skills and eye-hand coordination.

The Four Components of Literacy: Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening

Children develop literacy skills along a continuum, from infants and toddlers constructing meaning about their world through verbal and nonverbal interactions with adults, to third graders using appropriate vocabulary, reading varied texts fluently and editing their own writing. These skills develop as a result of

early and continued home support and the balanced, systematic reading programs that are provided by our teachers. Research has revealed that no one program or strategy holds the key to guaranteed success in reading and writing. Rather, it is the skillfully planned combination of experiences, programs, strategies, materials and opportunities for learning that make successful readers and writers. In fact, a study by the Albuquerque Public Schools Research, Development and Accountability department found that elementary reading programs that include both core reading programs and balanced literacy/bookroom produce the most gains (*The Impact of Literacy Practices in Elementary Schools*, 2006).

It is important to remember how young children learn—through imitation, investigation, manipulation, participation, self-directed experiences and discovery. When young children are allowed to interact with each other, either through play or directed learning activities, they are developing and connecting the four essential skills of literacy: reading, writing, speaking and listening. Piaget viewed play as the mode by which children understand their experience and development. Simply, children learn through their play.

Seemingly simple, informal activities build the foundation for reading readiness in more formal academic settings. Increasingly, these informal, "play" opportunities are being squeezed from classroom schedules in favor of core program activities and interventions that are intended to bolster the scores of those children labeled "at risk". Not all children have had the benefit of a strong, supportive preschool experience. Some children enter kindergarten not knowing even a few letters of their names, simple nursery rhymes, or able to demonstrate proper book handling behaviors. For these children, additional experiential opportunities, most importantly in listening and speaking, are critical for readiness to develop. Readiness must be evidenced before further literacy instruction and application can take place. Reading and writing can be a natural extension or next step to language development for young children in an environment that is responsive to their development.

While we want to see all children succeed, we also know from years of experience that children learn to read at differing rates. It is critical for early childhood programs to provide a thoughtful, literature-rich environment that promotes the systematic and sequential acquisition of readiness and literacy skills along with the opportunities for children to learn through hands-on exploration, manipulation and play that will lead to further educational successes.

Problem Solving and Critical Thinking in Early Childhood

Problem solving and critical thinking are the foundation of a young child's learning. It must be valued, promoted, provided for, and sustained in the early childhood classroom. Opportunities for problem solving occur in the everyday context of a developmentally appropriate classroom. Participating in hands-on science activities, using manipulatives during math to find ways to solve a problem, and negotiating with peers during cooperative learning activities embed problem solving and critical thinking in a well-rounded classroom. Skilled teachers use the child's social and cognitive experiences to facilitate problem solving and promote strategies useful in the lifelong process of learning (Brizt, J., Richard, N.,1992).

The emphasis on teaching critical thinking skills is not a recent one. Education authorities have called for renewed interest in problem solving for years. As far back as 1967, Rath, Jonas, Rothstein and Wassermann disapproved of the lack of emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking in the schools. They noted, "memorization, drill, and the quiet classroom were rewarded, while inquiry, reflection and consideration of alternatives were frowned upon." Skills taught in isolation do little more than prepare a student for tests of isolated skills (Spache and Spache, 1986). However, when skills are integrated within the context they become more effective tools for attacking real issues.

By exploring social relationships, manipulating objects, and interacting with people, children are able to formulate ideas, try these ideas out, and accept or reject what they learn. Constructing knowledge by

making mistakes is part of the natural process of problem solving. Through exploring, then experimenting, trying out a hypothesis, and finally, solving problems, children make learning personal and meaningful. Piaget (1963) states that children understand only what they discover or invent themselves. It is this discovery within problem solving process that is the vehicle for children's learning.

Problem solving is a way to make sense of the environment and, in fact, control it. The process allows children in an increasingly diverse world to be active participants and to implement changes. By including problem solving in the early childhood classroom, we equip children with a lifelong skill that is useful in all areas of thinking.

There is no doubt that, just as employers and universities are insisting that young adults come ready to solve problems and think critically, we are eliminating these opportunities from our early childhood classrooms, and thereby giving children no foundation on which to build.

The Current Context of Early Childhood Programs

Currently, in many classrooms, all of this rich history and research-based practice has been erased by the pressures of No Child Left Behind and the high-stakes standardized testing that comes with it. For example, children are often drilled on skills out of context. Recess has been drastically reduced, if not eliminated, to make way for programs that demand large blocks of time. Teachers are delivering whole group instruction more often than individualized or small group instruction that is better suited to the way in which young children learn. Creative play, singing, dramatic play, art, block play and the like have given way to seat work, rote memorization, bubble sheet practice, and fidelity to pacing guides that completely undermine what we know about how young children think, develop and learn. Mandates that force fidelity to core reading and math programs have eliminated the time for investigation and discovery essential for understanding the concepts in these programs.

Ironically, there is an increasing amount of research to support developmentally appropriate practice as the best way to meet standards; develop language; form a foundation in math, promote problem solving and critical thinking; and engage children in a lifelong learning process. (International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. <http://www.naeyc.org>). The practices that have replaced developmentally appropriate teaching and learning have been found to produce short-term gains, which are limited to standardized testing formats. Students are not able to take their compartmentalized, discreet knowledge and apply it to the more abstract and global situations they begin to encounter in the intermediate grades.

English Language Learners and Non-academic English

All young children need rich oral language development, coupled with experiential learning, to become academically successful. For English Language Learners (ELL) it is essential. ELL are almost always impacted by poverty as well as language differences and children who live in poverty come to school with significantly smaller vocabularies than their more affluent peers (Hart, B. and Risley, T. , 2003) . An experiential program rich in oral language development in all content areas is vital for developing the skills students need to be successful in learning. Experiences need to be direct, exploratory, based on discovery, physical and hands-on to provide the depth of learning required. In order for ELL students to be successful academically, they need consistent support in ELL strategies that include specific vocabulary development; scaffolding of content; practice in expressing language; and time and opportunity to be successful with their peers.

Prematurely demanding understanding of abstract concepts, or excessively using disconnected skill sheets does not support the ELL student. In fact, the current focus on skills disconnected from context and the emphasis on ELL students receiving developmentally inappropriate interventions often puts them further

behind by robbing them of the precious time that children need to make sense of the academic environment. It is undisputable that developmentally appropriate practice shelters instruction in a manner that best supports English Language Learners.

Assessment in Early Childhood

According to the *Principals and Recommendations for Early Childhood Assessments, National Education Goals Panel* (1998):

- Assessment should bring about benefits for children.
- Assessments should be tailored to a specific purpose and should be reliable, valid, and fair for that purpose.
- Assessment policies should be designed recognizing that reliability and validity of assessments increase with children's age.
- Assessments should be age-appropriate in both content and the method of data collection.
(Methods of assessment should recognize that children need familiar contexts in order to be able to demonstrate their abilities. Abstract paper-and-pencil tasks may make it especially difficult for young children to show what they know.)
- Assessments should be linguistically appropriate, recognizing that to some extent all assessments are measures of language.

Best practices for the assessment of young children include carefully selected informal and formal strategies that measure specific characteristics over several designated periods of time and in many different contexts. Such assessment more accurately provides a broad picture of child growth, development, and learning from which wise decisions regarding the needs of individuals can be made.

Developmentally Appropriate Assessment

Developmentally appropriate assessment most often takes the form of behavior checklists that teachers complete by observing students, or picture matching tasks in a game or activity format rather than standardized, fill in the bubble tests (*National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2004*). Assessments should be a reflection of program and curriculum and based on what children can developmentally be expected to know and do. Authentic assessment is ongoing and natural to the teacher and students and results in an environment that is responsive to real student need. Useful and effective assessments are developed using Early Childhood and State Standards.

If we choose inappropriate assessments, program and curriculum become a reflection of those assessments and children no longer have the benefit of the developmental process they require to be successful learners. The question must be asked: is the assessment goal truly an educational goal or a goal of compliance that has little to do with students? If assessment drives instruction then care must be taken that the assessments used are developmentally appropriate and match Early Childhood standards and curriculum. In reviewing the literature, there is no indication that formal, abstract assessments are appropriate, accurate or useful for young children or their teachers.

Concerns About Group Testing of Young Children

Today mass testing of young children is widespread in early childhood education programs, in spite of the fact that there is no empirical evidence that such testing of young children contributes to their growth, development, learning, or their daily well-being. The inappropriate use of standardized tests or assessment procedures is a breach of professional ethics for those teachers who know and believe that it is their duty to assess students in a developmentally appropriate manner. Under the mandates of NCLB the high stakes testing starts in third grade. Although children in K -2 are not required to take the Standards Based Assessment the high stakes attached to this test have resulted in pushing a great deal of developmentally

inappropriate testing into the lower grades. In addition, it could be argued that the standardized testing of children in grade three is just as developmentally inappropriate since children at this age are just entering the Concrete Operational state in which abstract problem solving begins. Concerns about group testing include, but are not limited to:

- Few, if any, standardized, group administered tests are responsive to the wide range of growth rates and abilities inherent in every age group of children—a biological fact that is independent of predetermined curricula and attainment goals.
- Few standardized, group administered tests are responsive to the attributes and needs of children with disabilities or the wide range of socio-cultural and language diversity characteristics represented in the child population of the United States today.
- Too many formal testing practices require rote memorization activities, paper-and-pencil tasks, and skill-and-drill reviews -- activities that are clearly at odds with what is known about how young children learn, sustain curiosity and interest, and retain information.
- Few standardized tests are designed to take into consideration the young child's limited test-taking ability--handling test booklets, pencils and other test artifacts, following verbal directions, ignoring distractions, adhering to time constraints, making acute visual discriminations, using language efficiently and effectively, or sitting for extended periods of time.
- Children compared to a normative group who fall below the norm on a standardized test are at risk of being misdiagnosed and assigned to inappropriate and ineffective "interventions" or "remediation" when assessment is limited to group score comparisons.

Young children are not particularly interested in assessment. Assessment is an adult agenda. When assessing young children, it is important to make the activities as authentic and natural as possible. Children are most likely to perform to the best of their ability in a familiar setting with known and trusted adults in an activity they find interesting. Until recently, the APS Kindergarten Developmental Progress Report Kindergarten (KDPR) has been an example of an individualized assessment that was a formative and designed to be embedded into developmentally appropriate practices.

Concerns about the KDPR

Previously, the APS Kindergarten Developmental Progress Report was research based and allowed for authentic assessment throughout the school year. Teachers used observation, work samples, and student interviews to determine the students' level of proficiency over time, not at one specific point in time. This allowed the teacher to use the information from the assessment to plan instruction and assure that students were working towards proficiency of the standards. The KDPR showed the progression and growth of student skills and was also designed to inform parents of their children's progress.

Recent changes to the KDPR that have moved it away from being a developmentally appropriate assessment include:

- Omitting the writing continuum;
- Omitting the basic skills checklist such as colors, body parts, oral language development;
- Omitting the alphabet and phonemic awareness checklist, replacing it with DIBELS scores.

Young children do not develop and mature at the same rate and a typical kindergarten class can have a developmental range of 5 years (*IRA and NEAYC, 1998*). This developmental range should be distinguished from academic progress or reading levels in later grades. A kindergarten student who is not

able to hold a pencil or write his name may have exceptional oral language and become an accomplished writer given the time and supportive experiences necessary to develop writing skills. Uneven development is the norm for young children and curriculum should be varied and open ended rather than formal and standardized to allow for the fullest engagement for all students. It is destructive to a child's development to label them as deficient and implement interventions that are inappropriate and take time away from the school day.

Concerns About the DIBELS

The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) was developed and published by the Institute for the Development of Educational Achievements. In APS it is the assessment tool currently mandated for all Kindergarten children and for 1st - 3rd graders at Reading First schools and participants in the Extended School Year program. Nationally, it is administered to over 1.7 million kindergarten students.

The DIBELS website states, "The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) are a set of standardized, individually administered measures of early literacy development. They are designed to be short (one minute) fluency measures used to regularly monitor the development of pre-reading and early reading skills". It consists of 7 subtests which are administered 3 times a year: Letter Naming Fluency (LNF) for use in K and beginning 1st, Initial Sound Fluency (LSF) for preschool – middle K, Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF) for middle K – 1st, Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) for middle K – 1st, Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) for mid-1st – 3rd with an optional ORF Retell Fluency, and an optional Word Use Fluency (WUF) for all levels.

The DIBELS has achieved great acceptance for a number of reasons:

- With almost 2 million students using DIBELS nationally, the publicly accessible website at the University of Oregon has a tremendous amount of data showing their reliability indices, validity indicators, and numbers of students using DIBELS. Districts that participate pay a fee for each student who is then entered into the national database, making quantitative reports readily available.
- The DIBELS is to be used as a reliable, quick and easy tool for identifying students who are in danger of academic failure and in need of additional, intensive instruction, with additional progress monitoring administered as much as weekly for some students.
- The DIBELS links itself to the 5 features of literacy identified by the National Reading Panel (NRP) report of 2000: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

While these are positive features in the highly political world of No Child Left Behind, Reading First, and schools that are challenged with the increasing pressure of high-stakes testing, for the professional practitioner – the early childhood teacher -- and for a large number of reading specialists and researchers, there is cause for concern:

- The reliability of the DIBELS, when compared to other assessments (e.g., the Woodcock-Johnson, the Slosson Oral Reading Test, a variety of authentic writing assessments), does not hold up as an indicator of long-term literacy acquisition. There is not sufficient data to show that reading success is based on a sequential, hierarchical set of sub-skills.
- While the DIBELS claims to be aligned with the “Big Five” features of reading as identified by the NRP, the complex, and most critical aspects of vocabulary and comprehension are measured as optional, one-minute subtests based on rate of utterance.

- Fluency in the DIBELS is equated with rapid response, something that can be measured with a stopwatch on an isolated skill. Measuring reading success as the rate of response, rather than accuracy, assumes that a successful outcome for a reader is quickness in isolated skills rather than the complex processes that integrate all the features of reading for comprehension. Rate may be linked to some aspects of neurological processes, but is not the best indicator of successful reading.
- The DIBELS is not aligned with the NM and APS standards for kindergarten. The demands of the NWF subtest in particular is aligned with 1st grade standards.
- The DIBELS tends to over-identify students as at-risk, due to the previously cited concerns. This over-identification means that those students receive interventions that take them from more appropriate instruction in their classroom, absorb resources from students that are in fact more highly at risk, and, most importantly for children, identify them as not successful before they have even had a chance to experience life at school.

Finally, and of greatest concern to the practitioners in the classroom, is the impact of the DIBELS on curriculum. Curricular decisions are increasingly based on programs that will show growth on the sub-skills tested by the DIBELS rather than on the practical and *research-based* knowledge of how children learn and how to support their growth as excited, curious, engaged and successful learners.

Concerns About the NMELPA

The New Mexico English Language Proficiency Assessment (NMELPA) is a paper and pencil test that is inappropriate for any young child and is as much a reading test as an indicator of language proficiency. It

requires skills that 5 year-olds don't normally possess, nor should they. The directions are abstract and incomprehensible for young children. Children are required to fill in bubbles at the beginning of kindergarten, when they do not possess the fine motor skills or experience to be able to complete the task. Developmentally delayed children who are not true second language learners score poorly, and thus are often misplaced with the wrong services. Tests like the NMELPA push schools and teachers to move their curriculum away from appropriate child centered activity learning and towards paper and pencil, rote memorization and drill activities. This kind of program denies young children the opportunity to participate in a rich linguistic environment that they need to become successful learners.

Recommendations

It is the position of the Albuquerque Teachers Federation that the students in APS early childhood classrooms would benefit socially, emotionally, cognitively and physically by returning to developmentally appropriate practices. We request that the administration of APS support early childhood educators by

Move Away from....	Return to DAP
Rigid adherence to a core-reading program	Literacy programs that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include the use of rich children's literature in a balanced reading program • Integrates the literacy skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening
Next-grade expectations of mastery of basic skills pushed down to the previous grade prematurely demanding understanding of abstract concepts.	Skill development is embedded in the age-appropriate integrated experiences.
Skills taught in isolation.	A balance between learning skills and applying skills in context.
Whole group and teacher-led instruction is the dominant teaching strategy.	Hands-on small-group activities that are designed to develop rich teacher-student and student-to-student language.

Over-emphasis on reading and math to the exclusion of other subjects.	Learner centered programs that include: science, social studies, art, music, dance, movement, puppetry, dramatic play, cooking, games, story time and field trips.
Reduced/no time for recess and classroom play	Adequate time for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unstructured play at recess • Classroom time that provides children with the opportunity to actively explore, manipulate, and interact with their environment.
Seat work, rote memorization, bubble sheet practice, and fidelity to pacing guides.	Individual and small group opportunities for problem solving and an emphasis on critical thinking through hands-on exploration, manipulation and play.
Content is compartmentalized.	Content is integrated.
Assessments that are de-contextualized, abstract and take large amounts of instructional time.	Assessment that is embedded in instructional time, active and based on demonstration.
Curriculum is based solely on pre-packaged programs.	Curriculum provides opportunities to support children's home culture and language while also developing all children's abilities to participate in the shared culture of the program and the community.

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