

Teaching and Learning in a Post-DAP World

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Recently a school district colleague recounted a conversation with a young kindergarten teacher that had shaken her to her core. The kindergarten teacher (let's call her Ms. Post) said that nobody talks about developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) anymore—everyone is way past that. My colleague and I, two mature (OK, let's just call it as it is: We're old) early childhood veterans, gasped in recognition of this crystallization of a reality. Kindergarten, which always represents to me a window on early childhood, was evolving in ways that were heart-wrenchingly disturbing.

A good story? Sure. But how is it related to a special issue on teaching in early childhood education (ECE)? I see it as a snapshot of a moment in time—a window into broader issues related to teaching and learning in ECE. In this essay I explore the context for this story, making connections to what I see as the state of our knowledge about ECE. In addition I examine metaphors that have shaped our thinking and therefore our action related to research on ECE teaching. Finally, I suggest what I see as the heart of the matter. But I won't yet tell you what that is. First, I want to put forward the underlying ideas.

THE CONTEXT(S)

I think it is fair to say that kindergarten trends reflect patterns in ECE more generally. There is a feeling that we are moving away from traditionally develop-

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mentalist approaches viewed as child centered to more content-focused perspectives related in linear ways to student outcomes. Decision making and action are now to be guided by overarching goals and ultimately by student outcomes. For some this is terrifying; for others it is a move forward. Whether the cup is half full or half empty depends on how you conceptualize student learning and the teacher's role in that process.

Although we seem to know more and more about education, we seem to understand less and less about teaching. Large-scale data collections focused on children's characteristics and their learning contexts and outcomes give the impression that we know how children are living. But more important, they also imply that we know how we should organize learning experiences to enhance children's lives. Considerable recent investment in large-scale studies has provided the opportunity for researchers to examine all sorts of characteristics and relationships. We know about the number of children who are likely go to the library on a regular basis, correlational relationships between the number of hours in child care and ratings of prosocial behavior, the cost–benefit ratio of high-quality preschool programs, and the estimated number of words children of different economic groups hear in their homes.

Yet, as a field, we still lack consensus on how to teach, what to teach, and when to teach. There are historical clusters of agreement (teaching about the post office in February), correlational clusters (orienting our teaching so that all children can read at grade level by Grade 3), and curious clusters (teaching the calendar to preschool and early elementary students). But our knowledge of teaching, and therefore guidance for policy and practice, is not particularly robust. This lack of certainty, infuriating to so many, comes out of what I see as a metaphoric muddle—our assumptions about how teaching and learning work that drive our measures and understandings of outcomes. In expanding on this idea, I rely on ideas from Lakoff and Johnson's classic 1980 work *Metaphors We Live By* to explore how the metaphors inherent to two major conceptualizations of teaching¹ shape how we do the job, how we research the topic, and how we evaluate the merits of varied teaching practices. Because not everyone uses the same metaphor, the ways they name, describe, and judge the practice of education are often in conflict. Plus, each metaphor has a very different theory of action that propels its users in different ways. To set the stage, I offer the following:

Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature ... Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system

¹In this discussion of metaphors of teaching, I rely on their typical, mainstream instantiations rather than their intended theoretical foundations.

thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3)

DAP

The notion of DAP was a revolutionary move in the history of early childhood curriculum. Motivated by concerns about curriculum escalation, DAP was a stance on professionalism, constructed from empirical knowledge about child development. Teaching was to be guided by what we know about typical development, about an individual child's development, and about the child's culture (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). Powerful ECE groups advocated the position, and it was empirically investigated, with researchers arguing that use of DAP leads to more test-measured learning and to fewer stress-related behaviors (e.g., Burts et al., 1992). Despite the triangulation made possible through the use of the three orienting tools of knowledge of general development, specific individual development, and cultural contexts, DAP proved to be a hard sell, particularly in the elementary grades. It was variously critiqued for being about play, not learning; for being about middle-class norms for development; and for being elitist (e.g., Lubeck, 1998).

I've often wondered why DAP provoked such negative reactions and why it was not ultimately incorporated into practice with children under the age of 9. One hunch is that it is a hard thing to grab onto, particularly for those not steeped in the culture of child development. DAP is caught in a tautology—to be put into practice, it requires knowledge of development; but without knowledge of, and faith in, development, it lacks authority. The metaphor that serves as its engine—development—is so encompassing that it is simultaneously a theoretical frame and the foundation and outcome of practice. In fact, development is such a stand-alone concept that it has been difficult for me to find a metaphor to illustrate it.

One of the key metaphors within DAP—that it is child centered—is an orientational metaphor that organizes a whole system of concepts in relation to one another. Orientational metaphors use spatial relations rooted in our experiences. In the case of DAP, conceptualization of teaching comes primarily *from* the child. It is framed as what the child needs, as responsive, as engaging. In addition, it comes *from* two types of prototypical children: a developmental child, located in norms; and a cultural child, located in knowledge of culture. It is invested with both professional knowledge and a democratic orientation. When conceptualization of teaching comes *from* the child, the child is the organizing metaphor. Thus, within DAP, curriculum is seen as an integrated endeavor, mirroring the integrated conception of development wherein the physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and language dimensions co-occur but not in a lockstep, unified manner. An integrated

curriculum is advocated to meet these developmental needs; the concept of teaching works from an idea-based foundation more than a content-oriented perspective.

One of the key elements within DAP is a concern about a curriculum–child mismatch—harm from exposing children to content and experiences that are too advanced given their developmental level. It is signaled in arguments for why we choose particular activities or content in our teaching and is illustrated in the self-affirming idea that, of course, we wouldn’t teach calculus in kindergarten.² From a child-centered perspective this asserting is more than mere folly; it is seen as potentially damaging to the developing child because it is asking too much of an immature system. Echoing maturationist views of development that are ill fitted to more current developmental theories, the damage metaphor lives in practice that cautions against unduly forcing children into knowledge beyond their capabilities.

But for those outside this developmentalist frame, teaching as DAP lacks directional power; it is seen as teaching without a plan (Goldstein, 2007). It is viewed as soft, lacking rigor, as sorely separate from the rest of the system of schooling. It is an especially difficult practice in the primary grades where class sizes and pressures to accomplish particular goals make the idea of teaching from children’s needs exhausting: How do you teach from 23 different places? Where in the world do you go? This perspective might be most easily seen in relation to one of the other metaphors that shape early childhood teaching in today’s education system—*standards-based teaching and accountability*.

STANDARDS

ECE has recently moved into the era of education through standards-based accountability. The notion of standards, generated in the kindergarten–Grade 12 system and now extended to the pre-kindergarten care and education context, highlights the systemic nature of education. When education is seen as a system guided by explicitly articulated and skillfully aligned standards, it is hoped that all children will be provided with the experiences and knowledge necessary to succeed in a very complex world.

There are multiple metaphors that enliven the idea of standards-based education—metaphors that serve to make this reform idea incredibly powerful in the current education context. One way to conceptualize standards-based education is as a mapping function. Using the orientational frame mentioned earlier, standards-based education suggests that you can’t make real progress if you don’t know where you are going. Highlighting the importance of systemic intentionality in schooling, standards tell where we want children to go in their educational jour-

²How this will stand up in a system that has kindergartners learning algebra is difficult to predict.

ney. They are, as Catherine Scott-Little suggested, “expectations for what we want children to learn and how we want them to develop. As such, they should be the basis for decisions we make about curricula, assessments, professional development, and expectations for teachers’ daily practice” (Scott-Little, 2006, p. 2). This standards-based mapping includes routing through the terrain of particular content, pacing the journey, identifying measures that allow you to know whether you are making good progress on the trip, and ultimately implementing sanctions for not getting to the destination on time.

Standards in ECE take a variety of forms. Barbara Bowman (2006), among others, described four distinct types: (a) *Program standards* define what goes into a learning environment, (b) *content standards* describe the knowledge/concepts/skills taught at each level, (c) *early learning/performance standards* enumerate what children should know and be able to do, and (d) *professional development standards* articulate the skills and knowledge teachers should have. Three of these four standard types are focused on inputs. Program, content, and professional development standards specify the conditions for a trip. The fourth, early learning standards, is focused on outcomes; these standards specify the journey’s destination.

In most of my discussions with early childhood professionals, it is the early learning standards that consume most of their energy. This is because most public systems are pairing their early learning standards with an accountability system that includes sanctions when children do not get to their destination by the end of a particular leg of the journey. The pressure to “get there” is palpable.

Standards-based teaching is overlaid with a metaphor of rigor. We want all children to have the opportunity to attain high standards. Standards are written to challenge children and teachers; they are seen as a key to educational equity (Bowman, 2006). In the ECE arena, they are also posed as a tool for promoting professionalism (Scott-Little, 2006). This strategic overlay makes arguing against standards-based approaches an indicator of low expectations, unprofessional behavior, and ultimately a tool for repressing both early childhood teachers and their least powerful students.

One challenge with the mapping metaphor, however, is that it is carried out with a heightened sense of children’s destinations at some later point in time. The practice of educating is shaped intensely through backmapping. Content and early learning standards are often set for third or fourth grade and then extended backwards with those outcomes in mind. Although this structure provides a chance for alignment between levels of education and the potential for teachers to communicate and plan together, it often seems to be the case that expectations of later performance dictate practices in ways that might not be responsive to children in earlier grades.

This is especially true in relation to kindergarten, where the demand to have children emerge as beginning readers by the end of the school year often crowds

out other dimensions of development. In addition, standards are almost always content generated, with subject matter experts articulating their path and pace. This reality results in standards separately articulated by content area. Given the differential power that different content areas have in the school curriculum, some are more and less likely to be addressed in the daily life of a classroom.

WHAT METAPHORS ALLOW, WHAT THEY OBSCURE

In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept, a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 10)

Metaphors are powerful tools in our conceptualizations of and actions within the world. They illuminate key attributes through their links to other experiences, and they form networks of association that strengthen meaning. The metaphors of teaching as DAP or as standards based situate us to think about the act of teaching in particular ways. This essay argues that the metaphor of DAP focuses us on the child, whereas the metaphor of standards-based approaches focuses us on educational ends. Both are important, but neither is complete. I want to be clear that I am not arguing *against* either. Rather, I am examining typical ECE implementation through metaphor to illustrate how the two orientations explored frame our thinking about practice.

What does each metaphor obscure? What is curiously missing in each case is *teaching*, the moment-to-moment, intimate interactions between teachers and children. In focusing on the child as a starting point or on stated outcomes as an orienting goal, we lessen specific attention to the process of teaching. We miss a chance to build powerful metaphors for that central relationship and process. This leaves open a gap that is seen in the silences in our research discourse about teaching in ECE, in the drift in practice, and in the pressures felt by teachers who want to do the best for children. When teachers are missing in the metaphors of teaching, we set up a vacuum that has to be filled with something. Being mindful about how it is filled is a unique responsibility and one that we must take up with care and thought.

There are a number of promising approaches to fill the space so that teaching is at the center of our discussions, and they are different in their perspectives and methods. One is intensive, qualitative research that depicts the experience of teaching young children focused on meaning, on the relation of individual to context, and on power. What this work provides is a reframing of the metaphors of teaching, situating us so that we *must* look at both the micro- and macrolevel forces that shape teaching and therefore learning, through the eyes of those involved in these interactions.

A quite different example is research focused on process variables related to quality in ECE. Rather than examining the inputs into the educational context, this work explores very closely the nature of teacher-child interaction along divergent dimensions of teaching. Based on developmental theories of teaching and learning, this work quantifies quality in ways that are potentially formative and summative evaluation. This approach can provide descriptions of patterns of practice among large numbers of classrooms, it can set up professional development opportunities for teachers who have their classrooms contexts rated, and it focuses attention on the importance of teacher-student interaction in all of its complexity. It serves as a bridge between what children bring to the act of teaching and the system's ultimate goals for learning.

By making teacher-student interaction the focus of teaching metaphors, we have a chance to more fully understand how children's lives are changed through schooling, and we might be more able to make good decisions about resources and opportunities. The metaphor that comes to mind is that of the theater. Staging a play is important, and so is a good script. But it is the actors who bring the theater to life. Focusing on how the actors support one another and create opportunities for creativity and learning is not a deterministic action but is instead a matter of disciplined study. Although metaphor might seem to be a frill in a context full of pressure and change, I hope that this analysis might prompt us to reframe the way we conceptualize teaching, making more central the interactions that occur between teachers and students. They are at the heart of ECE.

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