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Shifting Images of Developmentally Appropriate Practice as Seen Through Different Lenses

David K. Dickinson

Despite billions spent, preschool programs such as Headstart have produced disappointing results. A prime reason may be that the nation's largest accreditor of preschool programs has required them to use teaching practices that impede, rather than encourage, school readiness.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is trying to step away from its error and quietly reinterpret the methodology it has championed since 1986. Called “developmentally appropriate practice,” DAP has undermined the effectiveness of preschool programs designed to introduce young children to reading, writing, and arithmetic.

DAP is derived from the doctrine that effective teaching must be fitted to the developmental stage of the child. It holds that failure to respect presumed developmental limitations will damage the child's educational prospects. DAP has been the centerpiece of NAEYC training and accreditation standards and a matter of unquestioned belief among NAEYC members. Many states have written it into policy and law.

In 1986, the NAEYC cautioned teachers against teaching the fundamentals of reading and writing. Their recommendation: Let children explore these skills on their own—if they exhibit an interest. Efforts to instruct, explain, or challenge were said to risk exceeding the child's developmentally governed capacity leading to burnout and failure.

In 1996 it adopted the opposite position. Having children write letters and say the alphabet was now encouraged. A few years later, an authoritative National Academy of Sciences report summarized the cumulated evidence contradicting DAP. Since 1986, however, thousands of preschool programs have been accredited for faulty practices and hundreds of thousands of teachers wrongly trained.

To date, NAEYC has changed only its public position. Its accreditation and research standards have remained unchanged, and its revised teacher training standards have left the door open to DAP's continued use.

NAEYC may be incapable of making a clean break with its faulty recommendations. Predictably, it is not inclined to repudiate its core principles or acknowledge that they may have put millions of children at risk. Yet, if the issue were a poorly tested drug disabling millions of children, public accountability would be demanded.

How Could the Opposite of Good Practice Become a Standard for Good Practice?

The short answer to this question is that NAEYC set its standards on the basis of theory, not scientific evidence. DAP is consistent with widely held educational doctrine. NAEYC adopted it primarily because of its popularity with educators and its distinctive public relations value.

The broader explanation is that NAEYC made a mistake common to groups that aim to help other people's children using other people's money: It assessed cost, risk, and benefit from its own standpoint rather than that of the taxpayers and intended beneficiaries. The result was unintended harm.

NAEYC is comprised primarily of preschool childcare providers, and the DAP doctrine is attractive to them for a number of reasons: It is sufficiently distinctive to require training and certification, and thus serves to restrict entrance to the profession. It requires a cadre of NAEYC recognized experts—also NAEYC members—to screen, train, and certify individuals in DAP. It maximizes individualized attention to children and thus creates demand for trained practitioners. It rejects the notion of normative expectations for child development outcomes and thus minimizes accountability for results.

DAP also has the virtue of being highly marketable to parents and policymakers. It promises to improve a child's readiness for school in a fun and natural way, and without the purported danger of overly ambitious expectations for effort or accomplishment.

DAP's shortcoming is that it succeeds mainly with children who have supportive home environments, substantial exposure to literate adults, and similar advantages, i.e., children already disposed to success. However, with the children most in need of guidance and instruction, it isn't much help. By setting a blanket constraint on intervention, it reduces the influence of responsible, competent adults and expands the influence of peers, television, and commercial interests.

NAEYC Needs to be Accountable

NAEYC has created a “National Commission on Accreditation Reinvention” but the panel has been barred from revising accreditation criteria. Meanwhile, preschool children continue to be taught by faulty methods.

The situation is akin to the events in the financial world that led to the collapse of Enron and Global Crossing. Merrill Lynch and other brokers made bad recommendations by putting self-interest ahead of that of investors. Restoring public confidence has required that they answer hard questions:

Has the past been repudiated? Have the responsible parties been identified and disciplined? Have the costs been tallied? Is the public protected against a recurrence?

These questions need to be answered by NAEYC and by the various individuals, organizations, and agencies that endorsed NAEYC standards. Real change will require an across-the-board commitment. The public will not be served if, for example, the early childhood specialists within state education agencies continue to promote DAP. Policymakers need to know where they stand.

If NAEYC cannot satisfactorily reform itself, policymakers should act to restrict preschool standards to matters of health and safety. Fewer standards would clearly be preferable to faulty standards.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com