

# Situation-based pedagogy and child development in early childhood teacher education

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## *Abstract*

One of the dilemmas currently facing early childhood teacher educators is the need to balance the place of traditional child development and post-modern approaches within the curriculum of teacher education. On the one hand, early childhood teacher educators have traditionally espoused the importance of child development within courses, and the importance of developmentally appropriate practice, which derives from developmental perspectives. On the other hand, there is an increasing level of discomfort with stereotypical descriptions and expectations often found within child development literature and research.

This paper describes an approach to teaching child development which recognises and values diverse perspectives, understandings and expectations, both in theory and practice. Through an adaptation of problem-based pedagogy, the approach described involves students in the identification of issues within a given situation, and in the development of a range of possible explanations for those issues. The construction of an argument to support a particular point of view, and the sharing of this with others who have constructed arguments offering different explanations, presents opportunities to consider the different ‘lenses’ used and the implications of these. Resources developed to support this approach, including a videotape, will form part of the presentation.

## **Introduction**

For many decades, early childhood teacher education programs in the USA, as well as in the UK and Australia, have been dominated by child development theory (Fleer, 1995; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). In several instances, the defining characteristic of an early childhood teacher education program has been noted as its focus on child development and the development of curriculum for children based on this (Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, & DeWolf, 1993; Isenberg, 2000). The advent of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), and its widespread acceptance as a guide to both the nature and quality of early childhood programs has also resulted in an emphasis on developmental psychology as the underpinning of early childhood teacher education programs (Dahlberg, et al., 1999).

Yet, despite the enthusiastic acceptance of DAP in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there has been much criticism of the approach and the implications of it for early childhood programs (Mallory & New, 1994; Woodhead, 1996). Much of the same criticism has been directed towards the traditional developmental psychology base for early childhood teacher education programs. Specifically, the discipline of child development, and its primary research paradigm—developmental psychology—have been under attack. The attack is not new, nor it is sourced entirely from outside the realms of developmental psychology itself. For example, Kessen (1993, p. 226), noted that “[we] are all driven, obsessed even, by the priority of the individual”. Goffin (1996) contends that, as a result of this, developmental psychology has largely ignored the impact of social, economic, cultural and political forces.

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The specific issues of contention with child development theory are that:

- the theoretical base is normative, suggesting that children who do not fit the theory are in some way not normal (Cannella, 1997);
- it privileges particular ways of thinking, for example, logico-mathematical, abstract thought is regarded as an advance over other ways of thinking and understanding. In this sense, development is seen to be ‘progressing’ towards more abstract thought, implying a hierarchical system whereby children progress from a “less to a more adequate way of thinking” (Lubeck, 1996, p. 157);
- the complexities of development are reduced to simplified and quantifiable representations, such as stages (Dahlberg et al., 1999);
- the ‘objective’ is seen to override the subjective, with an assumption that developmental theory is value-free (Dahlberg et al., 1999);
- general laws and universal truths are regarded as the key to understanding children and their development (Dahlberg et al., 1999);
- it focuses on the individual child, rather than the child in a social, cultural, political and economic context (Kessen, 1993); and
- there is no recognition that theory itself is a cultural construction, reflecting the dominant cultural practices of a particular context (Burman, 1994; Woodhead, 1997).

Recent challenges to the role and place of child development within early childhood teacher education (for example, Goffin, 1996; Katz, 1996; Lubeck, 1996; Stott & Bowman, 1996; Cannella, 1997; Jipson, 1998; Dahlberg et al., 1999) have questioned the appropriateness of child development as a framework for early childhood teacher preparation—specifically, its relevance as a guide for teachers in facilitating children’s growth, its role as a determinant of practice and the extent to which it is value-free (Goffin, 1994).

There are concerns that application of child development theory in early childhood education limits teachers’ responsiveness to individual children, particularly those children who seem to fall outside the usual boundaries of expected development. Haberman (1988, p.37) contends that a reliance on child development as a source of educational outcomes “confuses descriptions of what children can do at various ages/stages from what they ought to be doing”. Further, it is contended that teachers

committed to a theory of development will hold expectations of what is normal and typical which they will inevitably transform into what is desirable. They will then develop and hold expectations for preferred behaviour which supports their particular theory and makes them insensitive to other explanations and understandings. (p. 37)

In other words, child development knowledge places limits on how we think about children and how we prepare teachers to think about children (Lubeck, 1996).

In some senses, there is an expectation that child development knowledge remains static and unchanging—a body of established, agreed-upon knowledge to be learned and to be used in planning curriculum for young children (Katz, 1996). Yet, much child development knowledge is changing constantly. One consequence is that “much of the current early childhood practice is based on beliefs about the process and outcomes of child development no longer viewed as valid by those in the field of child development” (Goffin, 1996, p. 120).

Traditional child development theory fails to address issues of context, be it cultural, social, political or economic. Moves to redress this have resulted in calls for a stronger interdisciplinary content and focus within teacher preparation programs, where the “question

of *whose* knowledge (in contrast to *what* knowledge) should be used to inform classroom practice” (Goffin 1996, p. 119). Accepting that development cannot be context-free is one step in challenging the traditional theoretical base of early childhood teacher education programs. Another step is to embrace the view that there can be no clear, single endpoint of development to which all individuals aspire, or have access. Similarly, acceptance that there is no one best form of universal practice, based on a universal theory of development, reflects a move towards problematising traditional child development theory.

The inadequacies of a traditional child development focus within teacher education programs seem clear. However, removing any focus on child development doesn't solve the problem of how teachers of young children—and those preparing these teachers—develop a sound basis for understanding children and planning high quality learning environments. In the words of Lubeck (1996, p. 158), “child development knowledge has been so foundational to the field of early childhood education that erasing it would seem to leave us in a mindless limbo.” What are the alternatives?

Alternative approaches recognise that “there are many ways of understanding how children develop and learn, many ways to teach, and a range of curricular options” (Lubeck, 1996, p. 147) and that reflection can play an important role in the consideration of these differences. In particular, reflective practitioners “learn to think deeply about the implications of their choices and may be more likely to tailor their practice to the diverse needs of children in a multicultural society” (Lubeck, 1996, p. 147). Stott and Bowman (1996) contend that child development should not be removed from the early childhood teacher education curriculum. Rather, they urge that the teaching of child development be “grounded in ... ambiguity and supplemented by attention to reflection on practice and self-knowledge” (p. 169). Suggestions as to how this can be achieved include recognising that:

- theories change, as do their implications for practice;
- the usefulness of various theories is largely determined by the purpose of educational arrangements, that is, the context in which they operate;
- children exist within a social context that includes a variety of other people. Efforts to understand children and should therefore include access to other disciplines and perspectives; and
- values underpin all theory and practice (adapted from Stott & Bowman, 1996, p. 171).

Stott and Bowman (1996) recommend the retention of child development, though clearly, with a focus on its subjective and changing nature. They also recommend that access to child development is not sufficient for teachers to get to know the children or families with whom they interact. Child development knowledge, they suggest, can help teachers gain practical wisdom about children and families, if it is coupled with reflection and opportunities to access, question and incorporate the perspectives drawn from many disciplines and experiences.

In summary, if child development is to provide a useful basis for helping early childhood teachers understand children and families, it must be presented in ways which encourage:

- consideration of multiple perspectives;
- incorporation of cross-disciplinary knowledge;
- recognition of the importance of context;
- opportunities for reflection, including self-reflection and reflection on, and with, others;
- continual questioning and challenging of developmental assumptions, such as the
  - universality of development;

- objective nature of developmental descriptors;
- focus on individualistic nature of development;
- normative theories of development; and
- desirability of reducing development to simplistic measures.

The approach to teaching and learning about child development described below is an attempt to incorporate these features into one early childhood teacher education program.

### **A situation-based approach in early childhood teacher education**

Over a number of years, staff teaching child development in the teacher education program at the University of Western Sydney have developed an approach entitled “situation-based learning”. To date, this approach has been used in integrated units encompassing the areas of child development, children’s learning, play, and health, safety and nutrition. The approach adopted is based on a general definition of problem-based learning as “an approach to structuring the curriculum which involves confronting students with problems from practice which provide a stimulus for learning” (Boud & Feletti, 1991, p. 21). The situation-based approach differs from problem-based learning in that the curriculum materials developed focus on situations that are subject to multiple explanations, rather than problems to be solved. This shift from problems to situations has enabled staff and students to regard the situations as dilemmas, where decisions need to be made about the most appropriate alternatives, rather than trying to find a correct solution (Lampert, 1985). Further, the recognition that there is not one problem to be solved by devising one correct solution emphasises the need for students to employ critical and reflective thinking as they consider the situation presented, and a range of perspectives, as well as possible ways to respond (Tegel & Dockett 1994; Dockett & Tegel 1995; 1996).

Situation-based learning has been introduced to students in their initial semester of the four-year, pre-service early childhood course since 1992. It involves a scenario, or situation, related to early childhood education. To date, the delivery of the units in which situation-based learning has occurred has involved six hours of contact per week (a double unit), devoted to two, one-hour lectures and two, two-hour tutorials. Lecture input and situations are complementary, for example, so that the lectures relating to infants, families and child care precede a situation incorporating these areas. At least one tutorial session has been devoted to situations, with lecturers holding discussions with students, students having time to consult other staff, or time to work together as a group.

The situation is described, in writing or visually, and students are asked to explain what they think is happening and why. In the example used in this presentation, students are shown the video *I had no idea: Parents and childcare* (Dockett & Tegel, 2001). This video follows a couple through their pregnancy as they debate issues such as returning to work, child care options and ways to involve grandparents in child care. The couple explore various child care options—family day care, long day care—and consider implications of child care for the young child as well as the family. Early childhood educators have the opportunity to explore issues such as the nature of child care provided for infants, expectations of parents using child care, pressures and dilemmas faced by families as they choose care, access and availability of high quality child care, as well as what actually constitutes high quality care.

### **Using situations**

A series of steps has been devised as a guide to working through the situation. Working in small groups, students:

**1. Collect relevant data from the situation package.**

The package could consist of materials likely to be present in the setting of the situation. In this example, the materials consist of a brief background for the people in the situation, and the materials they have access to, such as information about different forms of care.

**2. Identify significant issues within the situation.**

In this context, such issues could include: babies in child care; mothers returning to work after the birth of a baby; grandparents and child care; family roles and responsibilities in child care.

**3. Seek information about the identified issues.**

This involves a general search of relevant literature, discussions with people who have experienced similar situations, or who interact with people who have. In this situation, students are encouraged to talk with their own parents, friends and educators they meet during professional experience visits, and any other people who have a view on the issues that have been identified.

**4. Formulate some explanations relating to the issues.**

A variety of explanations is expected from the small group. These may be different explanations of the same issue, or explanations of different issues raised within the situation. For example, different explanations for why parents wish to have their babies attend child care settings could be explored, as could explanations for the views expressed by the grandparents.

**5. Request additional information or input.**

Students are encouraged to identify their own learning needs, as well as any aspects of the situations which are problematic for them. In some case, additional information relating to the situation is available, and in other cases, input about a specific issue can be arranged.

**6. Undertake research.**

Wide consultation with early childhood educators and other professionals as well as a wide reading of the relevant research literature is encouraged. Students research at least two of the issues they have identified as relevant.

**7. Draw conclusions.**

These are to be based on the results of the research.

**8. Write an essay.**

Students select one conclusion and, in essay form, analyse their supporting research and relate this to the situation.

**9. Formulate a goal and some strategies .**

Based on the research and the links between this and the situation, students formulate goals and strategies that could be implemented in this situation. The emphasis here is on how what has been learned will influence practice.

**10. Reflect.**

Students are encouraged to reflect on the group processes in which they have engaged as well as their learning.

#### 11. Identify remaining questions or issues.

Students are asked to comment on issues or questions that they do not feel they have resolved, or understood.

Working through these steps facilitates an in-depth analysis of one situation. Within this, several traditional developmental areas and the inter-relation of these may be addressed. There is a strong focus on developing a range of possible explanations and grounding these firmly in the context of the situation. Within this, there is opportunity to reflect upon and question what may be presented as 'fact', different interpretations of what is considered relevant information and the ways in which this can be used to support or challenge particular theoretical perspectives or explanations. In other words, students are encouraged to question not only what has been presented or researched, but also whose voice/s that represents and the ways in which this affects the explanations offered. Once the situations have been completed, a session in which all share their various explanations helps to emphasise that there are many possible perspectives to take into account. There are no 'right' answers in this process. However, it is important that students link the information and the context with their research. Assessment is based on how well they develop an argument linking these aspects, rather than how well they can recite a particular theory of development.

Using situations to consider child development facilitates the incorporation of multiple perspectives and sets up the expectation among students that understanding children and families, and making effective judgements in early childhood education, relies on much more than an awareness of universal, context-free, Western notions of child development. Students are encouraged to don different lenses—to conceptualise and reconceptualise—much as MacNaughton (2000) suggests in relation to gender issues:

a reconceptualised gaze in early childhood could be built from multiple lenses, each with the power to see ... from many perspectives ... The artful early childhood teacher could have a wide repertoire of lenses that were put on, used and discarded as more powerful ones became available. (p. 236)

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