

GUERRILLA TEACHING TACTICS

by Francis Wardle

The most frequent comment I receive from my community college early childhood students is, “But we cannot do what you suggest—we are not allowed to in our programs.”

College classes, journals and trade publications, and in-service teacher training all provide wonderful information to help teachers enhance young children’s learning, encourage play, address discipline issues, design interesting environments and enhance developmentally appropriate activities. As a field we do an excellent job of encouraging age-appropriate activities and best practices by our teachers.

But our teachers live in a world of standards, state guidelines, assessments, developmental milestones and “accountability” rhetoric that in many cases are rigidly applied without a full understanding or consideration of cultural, gender and linguistic differences, natural developmental variability, and normally developing social and emotional challenges.

What is the early childhood teacher supposed to do with these contradictions? All the teaching and advice on developmentally appropriate practice and best practices provided by college instructors is meaningless if the child care center or school where the teacher works does not fully understand and apply them, and does not support teachers struggling to provide the best care and education for their children. When I instructed my college students not to use food as a reinforcer, because of the childhood obesity epidemic, a student responded, “in my program, a special education teacher is using candy to modify the behavior of a four-year-old in my classroom”; when I discussed the need to encourage rough-and-tumble play in all children, several students reported that children in their programs are not allowed to engage in this kind of play; and when I stressed the importance of outdoor play, especially for children who struggle behaviorally and academically in the program, another student commented that in their program these very children are the ones most likely to be

denied outdoor play due to behavioral and academic issues.

Certainly, there are administrators and principals who understand developmentally appropriate practice, and who strive to provide what is best for their young children. And there are also early childhood specialists—behavioral and special education experts—who appreciate the normal cultural, linguistic, and developmental diversity of young children. But too often these administrators and professionals are under great pressure from their own supervisors to implement programs and use activities and assessments that are not appropriate for young children (Wardle, 2018).

It seems to me that the U.S. early childhood field in the early 21st century faces two fundamental challenges: low pay and benefits (which result in teacher shortages, teacher burnout and insecurity, and lack of professionalism, among other issues), and inappropriate behavioral and academic expectations, activities, assessments and practices. Here I address the second challenge, and argue that college early childhood instructors have an ethical imperative to provide our future teachers with ideas and the tools needed to address this conflict between what they are taught about working with young children, and how they are expected to behave and teach in early childhood programs and/or elementary schools.



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*Oh Boy!: Strategies for Teaching Boys
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Teaching Is a Revolutionary Activity

In his book, “Giants in the Nursery: A Biographical History of Developmentally Appropriate Practice,” David Elkind profiles many of the original architects of our field (2015). While many things tie these pioneers together, a major thread is that they all challenged the status quo. Against the beliefs of the Italian government, Montessori proved that poor children from the slums of Rome could be educated. Froebel showed us the value of play and the use of the outdoors for educating young children, when indoor, sedentary expectations were the norm. Erikson stressed the vital importance of social and emotional development, and their direct connection to academic learning. Piaget challenged us to see that children do not learn “like little adults,” contradicting the popular educational beliefs of the time. Dewey, of course, challenged the entire American educational and government establishment with his ideas and beliefs about how all children learn, and the critical importance of classroom communities and meaningful learning.

Closer to home, Head Start was a radical proposal that not only challenged the absolute control of the local public schools, which often excluded poor and minority families, but expressed the radical belief that low-income and minority parents should have a significant role in the education of their children (Greenberg, 1969). The federal law that guarantees children with disabilities the right to a free, public education—Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—was created as the result of several lawsuits by mothers of children with disabilities against state departments of education (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2018). And child care programs—beginning with the Kaiser Child Care Centers that provided 24/7 care for children while their

mothers worked in the shipyards during WWII (Hurwitz, 1998)—have made it much easier for mothers to pursue an education, enter the workforce, and become politically active. Multicultural and anti-bias education are all about challenging how we address racial, ethnic and other differences in our programs. This, by definition, is obviously revolutionary.

We need to instill in our students this revolutionary perspective. We need to empower them to challenge the status quos of their schools, early childhood programs, and state departments of education, when these institutions do not implement programs and provide experiences that these students know are best for young children and their families. It is one thing to teach our students what they should be doing with their children and families; it is another thing to show them how to challenge authority when expectations, assessments, activities and experiences are inappropriate, and even damaging. I call this approach guerilla teaching tactics.

Guerilla Teaching Tactics

Today, there are many early childhood textbooks that show teachers how to implement the latest standards, guidelines and frameworks, and many books that help teachers align activities and learning experiences with these standards (Gronlund, 2006). These books present these learning standards as the defacto curriculum to be followed (Wardle, 2018). Assessments are then used to determine whether our children are meeting these standards.

I teach a curriculum methods and techniques class at my local community college. However, I do not cover the typical early childhood curricula, i.e. High Scope, Tools of the Mind, Creative Curriculum, and so on, and I do not spend time showing my students

how to create activities and learning experiences that align with their state’s early childhood learning standards or guidelines—much to the chagrin of my boss.

Rather, I focus on how all curricula are the manifestation of a specific philosophy that is based on a set of beliefs regarding children, development, learning and teaching. I then describe a variety of curricular development approaches that I believe align well with the developmentally appropriate practices philosophy: webbing content, concepts, and constructs; Dewey’s ideas of child-directed and meaningful learning; emergent curriculum ideas of observing children and directly asking children and parents for input into the curriculum; the Project Approach and Lifelike Pedagogy Approach (Wardle, 2014).

Once we have fully discussed the creation of a curricular approach that aligns with developmentally appropriate practice, we then explore the reality that these ideas simply do not align with the approaches most of them are required to implement in their schools and early childhood programs. We then discuss ways to infiltrate the system, or morph the approach they have developed in the class into the approach they are required to use. For example, if through selecting input from students and parents, and then webbing the information with the children, the decision is to teach a unit on hibernation, it is easy to morph that into the canned curriculum that requires the overly general topic of fall for the thematic unit. Or maybe the perennial canned curriculum topic of pumpkins can be morphed into a more meaningful topic of the cycle of life, or a study of various fruits and seeds.

I then show my students how to create outcomes, objectives, or how to “meet the required standards” by simply taking the curriculum they have

developed and imposing an outcome-based approach to it. These outcomes can then be used to match the required standards, objectives, or outcomes of the required curriculum, and to fill out the required lesson plans.

Working with Parents

One of the rationales many principals and early childhood directors use to support the implementation of developmentally inappropriate curricula and the use of inappropriate activities and learning expectations is that they are under pressure from parents who expect these academic outcomes for their children. I constantly hear the refrain, “but that is what parents want.” In my college classes, we explore ways to help parents understand the critical learning value of play; the value of play, experimentation, risk-taking and hands-on activities; the importance of outdoor exploration, and so on. Ideas include:

- Creating a brochure for parents about the value of play, how play can be encouraged at home and in the community, and local play resources. The content of the brochure details how play helps to develop the fundamental academic outcomes of literacy, math, and science.
- Designing posters to place next to each learning center. These posters list all the outcomes, standards and guidelines taught at the center and used by the program or school as their curricula framework. Parents need direct information about how these activities teach the skills and knowledge they believe their children need, especially so-called school readiness skills.
- Working with parents of children who have developmental delays or who are simply challenging. Parents need to be provided with information about the programs and

resources provided by the school or early childhood program, and community resources and options available to meet the needs of their child. Teachers are encouraged to help parents understand their rights, and how they can address conflicts with the program or school regarding use of specific intervention techniques, suggested program choices, decision-making around medication, and so on. When it comes to the care and education of children with developmental delays, and/or those who struggle in programs, parents have more control than teachers, so teachers need to work very closely with these parents.

Teachers are often pressured by parents—and assumed parent desires—to provide activities and expectations that are developmentally inappropriate. It is our job as college teachers to help our students inform parents of developmentally appropriate practice, and to show them how this approach is best for their children. In my classes, I show my students how to get parents on their side.

Collective Leadership

The new book “Five Elements of Collective Leadership for Early Childhood Professionals” (2018) lays out new approaches for the ECE field. The first element is shared vision: we must co-create the conditions we are working together to achieve (p. 53). The third element says that collective wisdom and intelligence exist “that is deeper than individual intelligence; one person cannot hold all the knowledge” (p. 62). A subcategory of these elements states that we must “rotate and/or share roles and responsibilities” (p. 63). This requires organizations to explore ways to deconstruct the typical hierarchical chains of authority.

While the intent of the book is to address issues of boards and other organizational structures, these ideas can also be used in examining the overall structure of the school or early childhood program. Clearly, these ideas are also revolutionary in the context of contemporary early childhood and school programs. In many of today’s schools and early childhood programs, the standards, state guidelines, curricula outcomes, directives, and the new Head Start outcomes, are all implemented through a top-down process, with teachers viewed as line workers whose role it is to carefully follow these directives—sometimes even word-to-word scripts—carefully developed and field-tested by the all-knowing, highly-educated experts (i.e., Head Start officials, curriculum designers, state early childhood experts, and so on). Many of these requirements are driven by the concept of school readiness, another centrally imposed directive that controls practice.

To implement collective leadership, teachers must be fully involved with others in the school or early childhood program in creating its vision, determining roles, and deciding on the content of what should be taught, and the process of how it should be taught. Unfortunately, those who have traditionally held this power do not let it go easily. Teachers must be directly included in all aspects of the field, including developing state-wide standards, designing appropriate assessments—or recommending the use of more naturalistic evaluation processes—working closely with special education experts, and so on.

Empowering Authentic Teaching

As college instructors, we must insist that early childhood teachers are an essential part of the leadership of our field. It is our job to provide our

teachers with both a sense of empowerment and also with the tools needed to challenge those who think they know what is best for our children, and who believe that they hold all the needed intelligence and vision for their programs. When my students ask me why so much of what they are required to do in their programs is not developmentally appropriate, I point out that the politicians who make decisions about the care and education of our children, along with many of the people who design the curricula, have never actually taken this class—Child Growth and Development—and therefore lack the knowledge that they, the students, possess about how children develop and learn.

In our early childhood programs today, be they community based, Head Start, belonging to a national chain, or embedded within the local public school, there tends to be tension between what teachers and caregivers are taught is the best way to support the optimum development and learning of all young children—including those with various developmental delays—and the expectations and practices of the program. As an early childhood college instructor, it is my job to not only teach teachers what is best for their children and parents, but also to give them advice and techniques on how to survive in a realistic work environment.

We must give our teachers tools to resist inappropriate expectations, to create collaborative learning teams, and to advocate for the needs of their children. It is not good enough just to teach about Piaget, Erikson, Bronfenbrenner, and Vygotsky and to help students understand developmentally appropriate practice. We must also empower them to be able to articulate these views, and to implement them within early childhood programs and schools. Hopefully, this article can be the begin-

ning of a discussion about how to help future teachers with this goal.

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