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ARTICULATING PLAY & OTHER DEVELOPMENT ENERGIES To the UNINITIATED or UNINFORMED BUT INFLUENTIAL On Responding to, “The children are JUST playing.”

The classroom is alive with enthusiastic energy. The children are in small clusters. Some are painting with thick rich tempera paint. Several are intensely engaged in a domestic scene with the dress up clothes. Four children are loudly negotiating the castle layout and the storyline around the Legos... “... and then, the dragon flies into the wall...” Three children repeatedly pour sand from small cups and spoons into large bowls in the sand tray. Still other children are making their own books. Four children are in the loft reading to each other. Johnny has joined Sue and Greg with the puzzle they took out. It’s PERFECT! As the teacher, you’re managing the energy and flow, but it’s easy- the children are so involved! Suddenly, your serenity is shattered as an observer (parent, administrator, reporter...) says, **“When are you going to teach something? The children are JUST playing.”**

In the current atmosphere of “Standards” driven curriculum having entered the early elementary and Kindergarten classrooms, many teachers find their intuitive and experience validated methods- that is, validated in the learning and development of hundreds of children over the years, under attack. Rather than “preaching to the choir,” in this article I instead of trying to “convert” readers to the validity of developmentally based early childhood educational theories, I will assume readers who have education, experience, and knowledge of research to already know this. However, many since veteran educators find themselves subject to the pressures and demands of the current political “educational standards” movement, it would be useful to review how to powerfully articulate and advocate the educational integrity of developmental theories, that is to “convert” the uninitiated or uninformed but influential.

Often, individuals follow trends without understanding the theoretical foundations of the trends; whether or not the underlying theory is sound, inappropriately applied, or actually flawed. On the other hand, sometimes excellent, intuitive, and/or experienced teachers can provide outstanding educational environments, stimulating activities, and superb learning opportunities, without necessarily having conceptual clarity as to why their practices are correct and apropos. When that happens, wonderful teachers may have difficulty in successfully advocating their approaches and practices to unsophisticated or cynical others. One way to conceptualize the challenge of early childhood educators as developmentally appropriate principles of education are under attack is that while many are outstanding educators, many unfortunately have trouble articulating (that is, “selling” or “marketing”) the theoretical foundations of their work. In the rest of this article, I will review some of the articulation of these theoretical foundations in the hope that they will empower educators to better advocate for the integrity of their work. Much of the following is from a training, “Just Playing is Just Great,” that I have presented many times to various early childhood education programs and the California Kindergarten Association’s Annual Conference.



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A Strong Academic Program

I often tell to teachers, a (slightly fanciful!) story about the interviews I would conduct with prospective parents when I was the owner/director of my own child development center. A parent may come in and say, “I really want a strong **academic** program for my son. He’s very bright and I want the program to really foster that strong intelligence in him.” I would respond,

“You should send your son here. We have an excellent **academic** program because we play with blocks! You see with blocks there are several levels of play as children progress developmentally (I would then explain these levels to the parent). And, block play involves multiple reading readiness experiences and challenges (I would then mention various vocabularies and concepts such as ‘on,’ ‘near,’ ‘by,’ etc.) and math concepts (I would then explain how since the blocks were constructed in one unit, two unit, and four unit sizes, how number concepts were introduced, and so forth). Yes, for a strong **academic** program, you definitely should consider this program!”

Another parent would come in and say, “I want a good **social-emotional** program for my daughter. She’s quite bright, but I feel that success in society really depends on social-emotional intelligence.” I would respond,

“You should send your daughter here. We have an excellent **social-emotional** program because we play with blocks! You see with blocks play there are multiple social-emotional challenges as children progress developmentally. Block play involves meeting ones own needs in the context of a community of other block players who have needs themselves. We purposefully don’t have enough blocks for each child to have his or her own set. Figuring out how to share, to communicate needs, to establish what is fair, do conflict resolution and also to delay gratification are inherent processes to the block play. Yes, for a strong **social-emotional program**, you definitely should consider this program!”

A third parent might say, “My son is bright and sociable, but my biggest concern is that his creativity be respected and be stimulated in school. It’s the best part of him, so I’m really looking for a highly **stimulating creative** experience for him.” I would respond,

“You should send your son here. We have an excellent very **stimulating creative** program because we play with blocks! You see with blocks play as children gain more mastery manipulating them, they continually explore and experiment with them: stacking them this way or that, lining them up, creating shapes, building environments for imaginative play, integrating them with other toys and people with limitations only for safety. In addition, we have a variety of blocks (small wooden, large cardboard, attribute blocks, Unifix cubes, and so forth), each of which stimulate both intellectually and sensorially in different ways. Sometimes we use ‘blocks’ in our arts and



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crafts activities to create 3D projects. Yes, for a strong stimulating **creative** experience, you definitely should consider this program!”

Another parent looking for a **fine motors skills** emphasis... “... We have little blocks, and we make and manipulate...”

Or, “He’s very **athletic** and...” “... We have **BIG** blocks! And use them for a lot of physical activities: jumping, running, climbing, slaloming, obstacle course...”

And on and on. I am only being slightly facetious as I illustrate my “perfect” early childhood program in terms of “blocks!” Every educator should be able to articulate virtually every aspect of the educational areas (Reading, Math, Science, Language Arts, etc.) not only in terms of “blocks,” but also in terms of every single aspect, toy, equipment, activity, project, display, corner... every element in your program. Many of these components of your program are the same ones that come under attack from the educationally unsophisticated as, “The children are **JUST** playing.” Can you articulate the educational principles being experienced and taught in sand play? water play? doll play? puzzles? dress-ups? Legos? (more blocks!!) finger paint? rhythm sticks? the climber? hopscotch? and so forth? Of course, they are playing! That’s what they are supposed to do! Playing is fundamental to how they learn!! A quick look at the basic rules of development (and developmental theories) would be useful.

BASIC RULES OF DEVELOPMENTAL THEORIES

- 1) Development happens in **STAGES**.
- 2) There are **CRITICAL PERIODS** in development. when the person is more vulnerable to harm or available for growth.
- 3) **QUANTITATIVE** changes lead to **QUALITATIVE** change. Small increases in quantity (amount, frequency, skill, etc.) lead to significant quality differences or movement into another stage.
- 4) Development is **SEQUENTIAL**. There is an order to development... 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.
- 5) Development is **PROGRESSIVE**. The development of the earlier stages set up for the development of later stages.
- 6) **SKIPPING** or **RUSHING** development doesn't work and/or causes harm. The developmental demands that are skipped or rushed will pull the person back for completion or resolution until they are completed. You can get stuck or regress to such stages until they are resolved.
- 7) Excessive **STRESS, ABUSE, or TRAUMA** will get people stuck or to regress at that stage. Such extreme experiences draw a person's energy and attention away from



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dealing with or resolving the developmental needs of the individual's stage. (Skipping or Rushing development creates stress in of itself.)

8) **DEVELOPMENTAL ENERGY** will eventually reassert itself.

9) **RESILIENCY** allows for skipped, rushed, incomplete, stalled, regressed, or suppressed Development to be re-stimulated in the organism.

10) **SATIATION** of developmental needs allows for movement on to the next developmental challenge. Until the developmental needs of the stage are met, an individual will stay in the stage.

Play Connoting and Facilitating Advanced Development

Children in preschool, Kindergarten, and 1st and 2nd grade are in particular stages of development that have their own unique needs and challenges. The developmental energy of every stage continually asserts itself until it is met. The resistance of children to do more formalized instruction (typical of “Standards” driven curriculum), and their continual drive to play indicates that play is the primary developmental energy of that stage. Among animals, mammals who are most cognitively advanced and complex are the ones with the longest childhood. The long childhood allows for the advanced cognitive (as well as social, emotional, and psychological) sophistication of the mammalian brain compared to other genus. Among mammals, humans have the longest childhood, which allows for the development of the complex functioning of the human brain. What distinguishes mammalian and human childhood from the young of other genus is that mammal and human youth PLAY!! And, among present and past societies, the most advanced technological societies are modern American and Western European societies. Compared to other societies, modern American and Western European societies also have the longest childhoods for their youth. Childhood has virtually doubled in length from 13 years to reach adulthood prior to the 1900’s to 25 years or so to be technologically proficient in the modern world. The extended childhood reflect the youth’s need to continue to “play”- that is, continue to experiment and play with the environment as they develop to the advanced managers of our ever more complex technological world. If our society is to be serious about better preparing our youth for their eventual roles in the increasingly complex adult world, then education needs to be serious about making sure that our children PLAY!

Play can be defined from Piaget’s perspective as the experimentation and exploration of the world that stimulates cognitive (as well as other kinds of) development. In each stage of development, children have QUANTITATIVE experiences (playing with blocks- being able to stack two blocks, then three blocks, then four...; understanding and speaking one word, then two, then three, then more...; learning social management vocabulary- “please,” then “thank you,” “share,” “turns,” ...) that lead over time and experience to QUALITATIVE change or the movement into higher stages of development (the ability to arrange blocks to create symbolic structures; to put words together to express thoughts; to negotiate complex social interactions). The foundations of life long issues, including attachment, self-esteem, mastery, comfort and skills in reading, eating habits, and so forth are established in early childhood. The early years are CRITICAL PERIODS of development for children.



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Denying them their developmental needs to play can have life long harmful consequences for individuals. As a psychotherapist (Marriage & Family Therapist), I often see people who were unable to address their developmental needs during critical periods because of adverse family and childhood circumstances. Development is also SEQUENTIAL and PROGRESSIVE. Whatever that is not experienced or achieved earlier in life (especially, critical periods) causes subsequent problems- even persistent deficits latter in life. Relative to play, the long term emotional, psychological, relational, and social problems I have encountered as a psychotherapist, with adults range from an inability to play with their own children or to play (relate healthfully) with partners (when a child asks another to play, they are experimenting with initiating and maintaining relationships), difficulty being spontaneous or creative, fear of exploration and experimentation (rigid and overly conservative/cautious behavior). These people were RUSHED or forced to SKIP their formulative developmental processes. Limiting play (and other developmental energies) with children to achieve mandated performance standards risks creating a generation of developmentally incomplete people. Rushing or skipping development, in of itself causes STRESS and TRAUMA, which along with ABUSE experiences, cause individuals to get stuck at or regress to earlier developmental stages- the stages of incomplete developmental processing. Denying children the time and opportunity to play portends continually having to battle with their regression to meeting play needs in subsequent life- in other words, in the next class... in the next grades, in families, and in the workplace.

Developmental energy can be rushed or skipped, repressed or suppressed (with great risk and harm), but it cannot be denied. It will assert itself eventually. Unfortunately, as it expresses eventually, it will do so with a pent up explosive energy that is often undifferentiated, self-destructive, and socially irresponsible. Adolescent rebellion after a childhood of repressed and suppressed developmental needs for autonomy, exploration, and experimentation is a classic example. The teen then “plays” with a desperate intensity, often creating trauma for his/her family and destruction to his/her future opportunities. Adults often “play” with the same desperate intensity from not having been able to play sufficiently when they were younger. The only way to address developmental energy in a healthy manner is to facilitate it’s SATIATION. As the developmental need is identified, allowed to be met (within appropriate boundaries), and satisfied completely, it’s satiation allows for the child to move on to his/her next developmental challenge.

Keith

I once worked with a little boy named Keith, who loved playing in the water... any water! any liquid, for that matter! Of course, this created significant messes in the classroom, and a completely messy Keith, too. In addition, this certainly did not fulfill any “Standards” to speak of. In fact, chasing after him not to make wet messes and cleaning up after him, took away time and energy to teach the curriculum. However, the more we restricted Keith, the more maniacal he became about getting into the water. What was wrong with him? You would think he’s sensory motor or kinesthetic!? Duh! That was exactly what he was! Most of the other children were past that stage. What mattered, however, was that Keith was still in that stage. Once I recognized that it was his developmental energy (which could not be denied), I respected it and moved to allow for its satiation in an appropriate context. Up until then, Keith frustrated the adults in the room and drew extensive negativity upon him.



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We were destroying his self-esteem by not recognizing his energy as developmental. Once we did, it was quite easy to address. Simply put, for the next two weeks, every time I saw Keith I would drop an apron on him, tell him, “Keith, go play in the water,” and send him to play in a sink full of warm sudsy water full of spoons, ladles, cups, bowls, funnels, and colanders. “Keith, go play in the water.” Splish, splash, splish, SPLASH! “Keith, go play in the water.” What a ball he had! “Keith, go play in the water.” He, of course tried to take a bowl full of water to the house play area, but allowance for exploration and experimentation did not mean that there would not be appropriate boundaries for such play. “No Keith, you cannot play with water over there. Only in the sink.” About 10 am each day, he would be satiated for the day and not want to play in the water anymore (I would try to get him to play again in the water, but he’d be adamant that he wanted to do other play instead!). After two weeks, because his need to play with water was recognized and respected as a sensory motor developmental need, and facilitated and allowed to be satiated in an appropriate context, the developmental need was satiated and Keith went on to his next developmental challenges. And, the adults were not frustrated. And, his self-esteem remained intact. AND, as a result, as he moved onto the other developmental tasks, rather than being stuck (being kept stuck by adults!) he achieved performance standards as a natural consequence of healthy development.

Challenging Vs. Pushing & Demands

None of these points and examples advocates education and teaching as a passive process. Quite to the contrary, adults including the teacher need to be great activists in children’s developmental processes. Piaget says that growth and development happen with the interaction of an internal maturation process with experiences in the world. The internal timeframe of development cannot be ignored without major harm to the child. While the range wherein children may achieve or accomplish a particular milestone may be approximated between two ages, an individual child may differ significantly from the “norm” without anything being wrong with the child. Developmentally cognizant adults are aware of the normative timeframes of development and are tolerant of variations among children (Keith’s sensory motor timeframe was later than many of his classmates). Educators and other adults’ responsibility are to recognize the critical stages of development as they evolve and then actively create and/or provide the environments and opportunities for the stimulating experiences in the world (the Kindergarten classroom itself, activities, field trips, etc.). While the environment and opportunities (the curriculum) may be standardized to some degree, they also need to be adapted to stimulate each child’s developmental circumstances and timetable. Great teachers actively provide such environments and opportunities.

Adults sometimes push children with demands that can be extremely stressful (for both children and adults!) and sometimes individually and/or developmentally completely inappropriate. This happens when they develop rigid standards of behavior that have little or nothing to do with their children’s actual needs or personality, but that have somehow been raised to a high (often moralistic) level through either personal experiences or the promotion of some authoritative “expert.” The experts may be an author, a teacher, a minister, some political figure, in a book, from a magazine, on TV, and/or the movies. In the case of public education, it may be the “Standards” movement. While many such



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people and sources often give excellent information, they are speaking to generalities and principles about “many” children, “most” children, or “a significant portion” of children. Many of these principles and concepts are excellent and soundly based (some however, are incredibly off the wall, judgmental and moralistic, or archaic!). However, even the soundest theories need to be examined for specific applicability to each specific, individual, unique, one-of-a-kind child! And, even if a theory is applicable to a precious one-and-only, how specifically and variably is it expressed in that child... and when? And for how long? And, under what circumstances? Children, despite the orientation of some people are not inert lumps of clay you can mold in any manner or fashion you wish. Without this awareness, then a child such as Keith becomes easily labeled a “bad kid” or a “slow kid” for being “difficult.”

The foundation of early childhood education and programs need to be derived from behavior and performance expectations based on child-centered appropriateness from research and study, instead of politically motivated arbitrary adult-generated standards, or adult-generated fear of failure. After the foundation (basic curriculum, classroom set up, etc.), appropriate teaching still requires that you individualize for each unique being of a child. Challenging and having expectations of a child differs from pushing and making demands of him/her in the respect for his/her uniqueness. To challenge a child, you need to find the edge of his/her comfort zone and discomfort zone. To challenge someone, you need to find the extreme edge of competence where secure competence moves into uncertainty about one’s ability. When you push someone, you push not matter where they are. Arbitrary performance standards at specific ages often push in this manner. You are pushing them towards what may be highly uncomfortable or even what might be highly dangerous. You may be pushing them well beyond their capacity and competence. Such pushing pushes them into failure. Keith would not- could not be a “good” child or a “good” student because of the mismatch between his developmental stage and such a demand for performance. It also demoralizes conscientious teachers as their educational and professional integrity is compromised. Growth and learning happen at the edge of discomfort—not in the secure comfort zone, but also not in the zone of radically unfamiliar or foreign territory. The simple, familiar, and secure offer no challenge or growth opportunities (is even boring!) and the over-demanding prompts feelings of incompetence and creates overwhelming anxiety. Challenging differs from pushing in that the challenge to go beyond where one is, while pushing is forcing a specific spot no matter how dangerous it is and no matter how unprepared one is.

Expectations, especially expectations to try, to be engaged, to struggle imply encouraging children to be in a process of growth. Demands define the goals explicitly and punish one for not reaching them. Demands are achievement oriented while expectations are developmentally oriented. How is an adult- a teacher or a parent to distinguish between challenging and pushing? Between expectation and demands? To challenge and have expectations, you need to be aware of and respectful of each child’s individuality, developmental stages, and personality. You need to know each child... as completely as possible. Then, you can nudge, encourage, or bring them to their edge of discomfort to conquer new horizons and grow. And, be able to give them the appropriate support to handle the slight (not overwhelming) discomfort. It is very appropriate to challenge



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children and to have expectations. However, these challenges and expectations need to be at their "locus of proximal development." In other words, at the edge of their competency... not where it is easy... and not where it is overwhelming.

Teaching is...

Piaget basically says that growth and learning happens in the INTERACTION between maturation and experience (experimentation and exploration) in the environment. From that perspective, teachers and parents do not TEACH things like conservation, but provide the opportunity and environment for them to experience, experiment, and explore concrete expressions of such concepts. Child development theory, for example, says conservation per se cannot be taught. "Teaching" may be considered helping a child ACQUIRE knowledge or become proficient in a skill; many aspects of education fall under this principle. There is a greater implication of "giving" knowledge or skills. However, "teaching" at times, needs to be considered helping a child DEVELOP or PROGRESS in their own processes. Developmental processes are not "taught" or "given"... they are allowed to... supported to... facilitated to... aided to... develop. Among the current concerns for teachers of "Standards" driven curriculums are

- 1) whether the "pushed down (from traditionally older classes)" curriculum is still in the locus of proximal development or well beyond (as opposed to slightly above) their capacities, and
- 2) how to present experiences of concepts (such as conservation) in developmentally appropriate contexts (physically, socially, emotionally, etc.).

The problem is that Standards "push" and "demand" PERFORMANCE as opposed to DEVELOPMENT, PROCESS, AND GROWTH. In fact, Standards can be distorted to mean pushing and demanding performance while ignoring developmental appropriateness, processes, and growth principles and realities. Take out the rigid time frames (deadlines) of the Standards and they become good guidelines and goals for development. You probably can be very successful in helping facilitate the children's progression and movement toward these guidelines and goals; however, the performance criteria of the Standards can often be unreasonable. What allows a child or person to finally perform some task (representative of growth)? Is there NO growth until the performance is achieved? Or, w/ proper education, stimulation, and opportunity, a child can be 99% prepared to meet the milestone (often arbitrarily so designated), still be not ready to perform it. By the rigidity of Standards expectations (including their deadlines), both the child and the teacher would be determined to have failed. And, when that final 1% is complete, now he/she is a success? and the teacher too? or perhaps, the NEXT teacher gets the credit (financial bonus even, perhaps?).

What can you do? What should you do? In the classroom, striving towards the Standards can have integrity as you focus on the fostering the developmental process taking the children inevitably toward the guidelines and goals of the Standards. Their performance will arrive. Unfortunately, not necessarily according to other's schedules but to their own developmental schedule. For specific Standards concerns such as math concepts requiring conservation, teachers still need to focus on providing the experiences



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with the concepts that will make the math concepts real to the children. Performance will come out of that. It is doubtful, they can otherwise perform as required without that... certainly not perform from actual learning and growth, but rather perform from rote mechanical memory without understanding... without actual growth.

On the political end, with other educators, parents, administrators, board members, and even the media, you need to advocate for the integrity of education and child development. Examining the conceptual foundation of your good work so you can soundly articulate it will help “convert” others to the integrity of developmentally appropriate curriculum. Otherwise, they will never understand the depth and sophistication of quality early childhood education teaching techniques and practice. The classroom does not exist in isolation. Political and social factors affect educators’ ability to work with integrity. “Selling” or “marketing” what, how, and why developmental processes express in children influences those who influence and/or control the educators’ societies, cultures, and circumstances. “Darn right, they’re **JUST** playing! Just playing **is** just great! Let me explain...” And, I’m not playing! Good luck!



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Biography

Ronald Mah, therapist and educator, combines concepts, principles, and philosophy with practical techniques and guidelines for effective and productive results. He uses humor and stories from his many experiences to illustrate important points in a stimulating and highly motivating and engaging style.

A Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, his experiences include: Asian-American community mental health, Severely Emotionally Disturbed mental health & school partnership programs, vocational programs for at risk youth, welfare to work programs, clinical consulting & cross and multi-cultural training for Head Start, other early childhood education programs, social services organizations, & mental health agencies, supervising a high school mental health clinic, training and supervising therapists, private practice in Castro Valley, author of the Asian Pacific Islander Parent Education Support curriculum.

Professional Education experiences include: 16 years in ECE, including owning and running a child development center for 11 years, Kindergarten, elementary, & secondary teaching credentials and experience, ethnic studies curriculum writer, community college instructor, Masters of Psychology instructor, and former member Board of Directors of the California Kindergarten Association and of the California Association of Marriage & Family Therapists.