In Praise of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Francis Wardle

Since the publication of the revised edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* (Bredekamp & Copple) in 1997, each of us has had the opportunity to reflect on the relationship of this philosophy to our own teaching beliefs and practices and to examine criticism by detractors of this approach. While the new volume carefully includes input from special educators and cultural context folks, we still hear their concerns (Jipson 1991; Carta et al. 1993; Bowman 1994; Carta 1994; Odom 1994; Phillips 1994). Added to these critics are those who have confused developmentally appropriate practice with antibias curriculum, and the Core curriculum disciples of E.D. Hirsch (1990). A fairly new group of critics are the deconstructionists (Lubeck 1996; O'Brian 1996), who believe established knowledge of raising and teaching children should be rejected because it imposes on everyone dominant ideology about educating children.

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Photos courtesy of the author.

The revised edition, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs,* extends our thinking about and practice of what is appropriate for young children. It also allows—maybe demands—each of us to examine her own philosophy of education in light of her experiences. This article is my attempt to make this careful examination.

Personal and professional experience

I have been involved with young children's programs for more than 25 years. In that time I have struggled to formulate what I believe to be appropriate for our young children. But despite the claim of deconstructionists, I have never viewed myself as part of the mainstream power base that decides what is best for early childhood education (Lubeck 1996; O'Brian 1996). Rather, I view myself as a professional gadfly and irritant who continually challenges the middle-class status quo and power. In fact, as an unemployed "consultant" I do not have the power of those who are attached to a university, government agency, or specific political (special interest) power base. But I sincerely believe that as an educator, parent, and member of society, I have a responsibility to implement what I believe to be best for all of our children. And in my opinion all seasoned early childhood educators should do the same.

My current thinking about developmentally appropriate practice comes from four sources: my childhood, a Ph.D. in early childhood education (with strengths in cognitive development and information processing), diverse experiences in the early childhood field, and the raising of four children.

Childhood

I am culturally the product of a communal religious community with strict religious rules, a heavy German influence, and a Froebel educational philosophy (Wardle 1973, 1995; Arnold 1986). Growing up in that community, I loved the communal singing and dancing, the rolling Shropshire countryside, and the close human contact. As I grew older I gravitated toward the physical activities of hiking over the fields and moors; damming up the cold streams; participating in group games, gardening, and soccer; and caring for the farm animals. I also loved the diversity of guests who visited from all over the world. I hated academic pursuits—especially reading. In fact I struggled with reading throughout my formal schooling and could never read close to my grade level. As a result I was also an atrocious speller.

But because of the approach taken toward education by the Bruderhof school—balancing art, woodwork, gardening, nature studies, physical activities, and outdoor exploration with academics and sedentary activities—and an approach to my needs that included providing individual help, waiting for me to mature, and not labeling or tracking—I later was able to receive a Ph.D. I also became a writer who greatly enjoys writing!

Teaching experience

After college I became part of the radical free-school movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In Taos, New Mexico, I taught at a school that primarily served children from the communes scattered in the mountains around the town. In my two years there, I developed several programs, including a folk dance group that performed at local schools, reservations, and public gatherings. I was exposed to the rich cultural history of the area, including the various Rio Grande Pueblo Nations and the Spanish Americans (they view their heritage as coming directly from Spain) of the Northern New Mexico mountains.

In Kansas City I was a teacher and then the principal of a small free school (Wardle 1976a). During those six years I learned a great amount about choice, child-directed learning, workbooks, field trips, project teaching, group decisionmaking, multiage grouping, home-school relations, and cultural differences (Wardle 1978a, 1978b). I observed our Pueblo Indian children in Taos insisting on creating products to take home at the end of the day and our Black children having difficulty with unstructured environments.

I also observed that teachers seemed to have more problems with many of the free-school concepts (no workbooks, multiage activities, group decisionmaking, no grades) than did children, and while children who came from highly structured environments had difficulty with choice activities, children who graduated to more structured programs had no problem adapting (Wardle 1976a, 1976b).

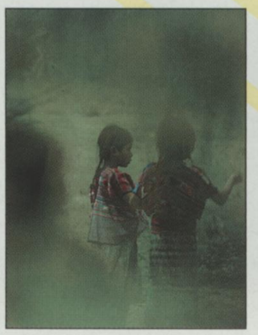
Clearly the free-school philosophy of choice and child-directed learning and rule making is consistent with developmentally appropriate practice, but my observations of Pueblo Indian children and Black children illustrate the developmentally appropriate practice advice to consider cultural context in providing education programs to meet the needs of our children (Bredekamp & Copple 1997).

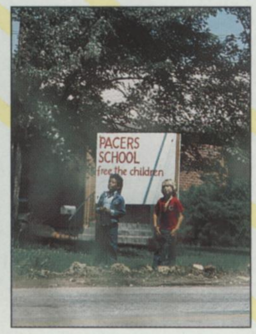
Guatemala earthquake relief

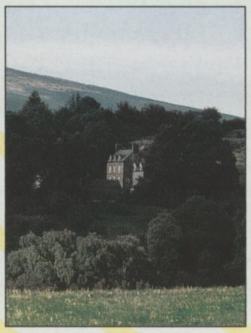
On completion of my free-school experience, I worked with Mayan indigenous people in the highlands of Guatemala. I lived in a mountain village with one family, in their dirt-floor, lamina (corrugated metal) covered adobe store, which had survived the earthquake in 1976. I played soccer with the boys, observed the girls doing the family laundry in the stream, interviewed the village teacher, attended a community fiesta, and observed the relationships between the school, the village, the local culture, and the dominant Hispanic culture of Guatemala (Wardle 1976b).

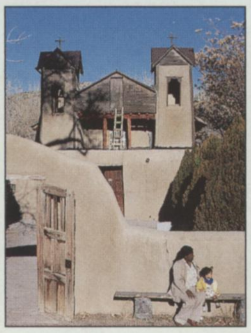
I noticed the use of the family bed by the entire family, including teenagers, and the totally segregated roles of men and women, boys and girls (including the wearing of beautiful traditional garb by females only). First grade was bilingual (Cakchiquel and Spanish), babies and young children were carried on the backs of mothers and older sisters, children invented complex games with bottle caps, and all children exhibited an advanced state of physical development and coordination (Wardle 1976b).

I saw how the numerical majority of the Mayan Indians in Guatemala were oppressed and marginalized by the Latino political ruling class. My friends had to sit in the back of the buses that plied the Pan American High-









way; they hated to go to their capital, Guatemala City, because of the way they were treated there.

From this experience I learned how people of different cultures raise and educate their children. Some of the approaches were consistent with my values; some were not. I liked the family bed (at least for young families), the bilingual approach (especially preserving the local Mayan dialect), the close human contact of babies carried on mothers' and sisters' backs, and the amount of physical activity for young children. While the gender separation bothered me, I could understand it within the cultural framework, and I appreciated the role women played in holding families together and preserving the rich Mayan traditions, such as wearing the traditional clothing unique to each village.

Head Start experience

I then entered a period of more than 10 years working in Head Start programs in Colorado as a volunteer, educational coordinator, and director. Families served included Hispanic (both "natives" and new immigrants), Black, Anglo, Native American, Hmong, and Vietnamese.

Some of the first things I did as director were introduce the High/Scope curriculum (Schweinhart & Weikart 1996), train staff in developmentally appropriate practice, and sever the program's relationship with a local community college, because its CDA program was not developmentally appropriate. What I did not do, but should have, was fire a very authoritarian, dominant teacher.

I worked with local schools who believed Head Start children should be taught only specific school entry-level academic skills and who labeled minority children (partly to get federal funds). I asked a special education consultant to leave the program, because she insisted on instructing our children with special needs in a fashion that was not developmentally appropriate (which had nothing to do with the children's specific disabilities). I curtailed most of our celebrations and eliminated graduation. Later, to the chagrin of the Governor's Office of First Impressions (early childhood), I questioned the wisdom of Goal I of Goals 2000, which I felt would result in more kindergarten-readiness testing and in retaining some of my Head Start children.

Many of my decisions and concerns were not popular with parents, staff, and politicians. Yet I felt I had to make judgments based on my understanding of Head Start philosophy and developmentally appropriate practice. Doing what is required for children is not always easy or popular (Feeney & Kipnis 1998).

Another of my struggles while in Head Start was including all cultural groups we served in our programs. This meant working very closely with Jehovah's Witness parents, whose children were sent home every time the program had a celebration. I felt that their children needed to feel part of the program and that we had a duty to reflect their parents' beliefs.

I also struggled to find resources and training to meet the various needs of our Hmong and Vietnamese families. (Despite my continued requests, the local bilingual organization never broadened their mission beyond the needs of Hispanic children). One of the central challenges of providing an early childhood program sensitive to families' cultural backgrounds is determining how to do so when there are different cultural values represented in the same program (Wardle 1991).

After my Head Start experience, I taught for a year in the early childhood programs of the Bruderhof (Wardle 1995). These programs are Froebel based, with a strong emphasis on reflecting the religious and cultural values (songs, art, communal sharing, modesty, and so on) of the Bruderhof. Then for the following four years, I worked as national educational director for a large child care corporation serving primarily upper-middle-class White children.

As I moved through my professional life, I also progressed through my personal life.

Personal life

I have four children, two of whom are now in college, one in middle school, and one in high school. While I brought to bear my Bruderhof upbringing in rearing our children, my wife brought her experiences and values as an American Black growing up in rural Oklahoma and inner-city Kansas City, Missouri. Her experiences included not being allowed to swim in community swimming pools during hot, humid summers; having no place to eat or go to the bathroom on trips from Kansas City to Oklahoma; and averting her eyes from the movie screen when ushering in White movie theaters.

My wife and I have, of course, melded, compromised, negotiated, and adapted our approaches to rearing our children, who must not only survive as minority members in the larger society but also withstand antagonism from the majority and minority communities (Wardle 1999). Our children have attended family and group child care, been home schooled, attended a truly bilingual French school, and attended religious and public schools. In each case we worked very closely with child care and school teachers to negotiate the best care for our children.

Twelve beliefs in praise of developmentally appropriate practice

Based on my professional and personal development, I have specific beliefs that lead me to praise developmentally appropriate practice.

1. The theoretical foundation of developmentally appropriate practice is valid.

Just because the foundation of developmentally appropriate practice is based on work and practice by White women (Eliot, Johnson, Hill, Pratt, Mitchell) and influenced by White men (Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, Elkind, Bruner) does not mean that by definition developmentally appropriate practice is invalid. Much of modern medicine is based on the work of White researchers and practitioners. Should we reject it? (Certainly the move toward alternative medicine is good, but it does not invalidate the existing body of medical knowledge.)

2. Developmentally appropriate practice encourages academic rigor.

One of the criticisms of developmentally appropriate practice heard most often is that it lacks academic rigor (O'Brian 1995). This criticism comes from both a lack of understanding of developmentally appropriate practice (Kostelnik 1992) and a lack of understanding of what constitutes academic rigor (Barell 1995; Wardle 1996). Clearly a true developmentally appropriate program is far more rigorous academically than is a traditional, teacher-directed program, because it encourages children to be constantly challenged; supports a web approach to information, skills, and content; and facilitates the acquisition of academic knowledge within an integrated, meaningful context for each child. Further, academic skills, concepts, dispositions, and structures learned within a developmentally appropriate classroom are meaningful cognitive and affective gains that will be remembered and that provide for the foundation of future knowledge (Barell 1995; Bredekamp & Copple 1997).

This does not mean, of course, that all developmentally appropriate programs are rigorous. Like any educational philosophy, its implementation is based on the instructional program. Some teachers have been trained in developmentally appropriate curriculum, have frequent inservice training, and are supported by the program (Wiles & Bondi 1998). Others may lack support, resources, and training.

3. All children can benefit from the developmentally appropriate practice philosophy.

The studies by Marcon (1992) clearly show that developmentally appropriate programs raise academic scores of children of minority groups. Hale (1994) argues that an early childhood program for Black children should "offer a balance of child control and teacher direction" (p. 175). Another goal of the Visions of Childhood curriculum (Hale 1994) is to achieve integration in the curriculum. Hale also quotes Boykin (1983), arguing that Black children, because of their home background, have an increased psychological affinity for stimulus change and intensity. Thus Black children need exploration, behavior change, novelty, and variability in their instructional programs (Boykin 1983). Clearly this is developmentally appropriate practice.

Hale is also strongly opposed to the strict rituals around disciplining Black children that exist in many schools and classrooms, where the predominant instruction is skill and drill or drill and practice. "The children do ditto sheets, workbook sheets, and chalkboard work. . . . The reality is that children destined to be leaders of tomorrow are not being educated in skill and drill" (Hale 1994, 207).

A true developmentally appropriate practice philosophy allows the competent teacher to

adjust instruction to match the various individual and cultural learning styles of the children (Gardner 1983).

While Head Start—a program that serves children from low-income families, many of whom are minorities—was originally created by White middle-class professionals (but not educators and not all men) (Greenberg 1969), through its history it has solicited advice from a range of minority experts and responded to input from minority communities. Currently the national director of Head Start, the CEO of the Head Start Association, and the president of Head Start Association are Black (two are women). Head Start's longstanding concept of developing social competence in children, and its comprehensive (not just classroom activities) approach, are highly developmentally appropriate and have been strongly supported throughout the history of Head Start.

4. Developmentally appropriate practice provides an excellent philosophy for our field.

As a field we need a basic philosophy. Lubeck (1996) claims that theory drives practice and that developmentally appropriate practice is a theory universally supported by the child care community. She believes further that developmentally appropriate practice as a White middle-class theory, has become a guise for dominant ideology.

Developmentally appropriate practice is not just a theory. Much of what we know about how children learn best, how children develop through distinct stages, and how we can maximize a child's total (not just academic) development is based on a variety of well-controlled studies (Hirsch-Pasek, Hyson, & Rescorla 1990; Burts et al. 1992; Frede & Barnett 1992; Marcon 1992; Dunn, Beach, & Kontos 1994; Sherman & Mueller 1994; Hart et al. 1996; Schweinhart & Weikart 1996). And as most people know, theories themselves are based on a variety of studies (Creswell 1994).

Theory should drive practice. We need philosophical direction.

Theory should drive practice. Organized early childhood education in the United States is fairly new and desperately needs professional guidelines and direction, which would allow those of us in the early childhood education field to develop professional credibility and philosophical direction. In trying to implement programs that we believe to be best for our children, we must have guidelines to help us withstand the pressures from a number of directions (the current trends of pushing down public school curricula to meet new federal and state educational standards, forcing children into poor-quality custodial care to satisfy social policy mandates, and teaching to politically inspired [to justify funding] measurable goals and objectives [Kagan & Cohen 1997]).

A true developmentally appropriate program is as academically rigorous as a traditional, teacher-directed program.

5. Developmentally appropriate practice is a radical, cutting-edge approach.

In my experience with programs across the country—Head Start, religious programs, independent child care, public school programs, and parent cooperatives—those following developmentally appropriate practice are in the vast minority. Thus it is categorically incorrect to say developmentally appropriate practice is the status quo, and research supports this position (Dunn & Kontos 1997). As little as one-third to one-fifth of the programs studied by Dunn and Kontos were developmentally appropriate.

When I was employed by a national child care chain that targets middle- and upper-middle-income families, I struggled against an anti-developmentally appropriate practice bias that was stronger than any I had encountered in any of the other programs for which I had worked. While much of the resistance came from corporate decisionmakers (who were not educators and who desired to meet their consumers' wishes), they perceived their clients as resisting developmentally appropriate programs.

6. Developmentally appropriate practice should be creatively and sensibly implemented.

A central problem with implementing developmentally appropriate practice is the tendency to have an inflexible interpretation (Kostelnik 1992; Bredekamp & Copple 1997). While this is unfortunate for a philosophy, which should be broad enough to encompass a range of practices, goals, and objectives (Wiles & Bondi 1998), it is not surprising for a new approach.

When I taught for a year in the Bruderhof early childhood programs, we used some practices that I felt were not developmentally appropriate. We created and presented a Christmas program for 300 people based on the Christian Posada celebration (Wardle 1995). The children engaged in many art activities in which each child did the same thing. And kindergarten children copied and illustrated songs and poems. According to a strict interpretation of developmentally appropriate practice, performances by young children for adults are inappropriate because they are adult centered. Making identical art products does not allow children to express themselves individually, and copying prewritten documents is not meaningful to children.

Practices like those, which at first glance appear inconsistent with developmentally appropriate practice, may on reflection satisfy another aspect of developmentally appropriate practice. There are paradoxes in the theory. Performances at the Bruderhof—choir, dance, children's games (German Sing Spiel), sports, and orchestra—are not considered performances in the traditional American sense; rather, they are important collective group experiences designed to enhance the religious group's communal beliefs.

Part of the Bruderhof tradition is folk crafts—from Germany, England, and Paraguay. Making craft items involves a certain similarity of product but an individuality of execution (Amish quilts are an example). The process also exhibits the value of the individual's role in supporting the group. My students were learning craft making as part of their culture.

Finally, the Bruderhof is a Christian community in which all families support the same beliefs and where singing songs is a meaningful activity that starts at a very early age.

My experience teaching at the Bruderhof helped me come to terms with my own values and preferences as a teacher. Every teacher has a unique way of teaching—a set of values and beliefs about teaching. She needs to be aware of these and be able to articulate them.

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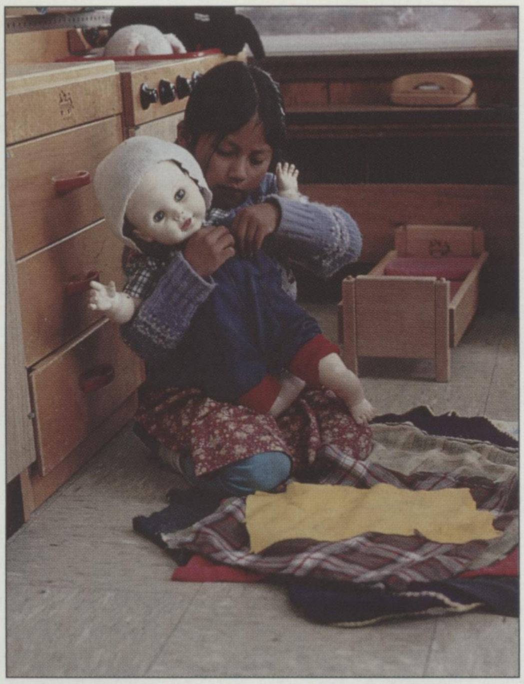
7. Developmentally appropriate practices are best for our children.

There is no question that there are different approaches to raising children within the United States and throughout the world. As an educator I am always comparing these approaches, with the desire to adopt and use those that are best for our children and families.

I believe that some approaches I have seen could improve our approach. I like the idea of the family bed used in Guatemala and most non-Western countries. We should study the approaches of the Amish, Hutterites, and Bruderhof in curtailing the destructive influences of excessive TV watching on our children (the violent subject matter and the passive activity of viewing) (NAEYC 1994; Levin 1998). And I like the Guatemalan way (and past tradition of many American Indian nations) of carrying infants on the back to go to work and community events.

In examining alternative approaches, we have a moral obligation to adopt those we believe to be best for our children and families. We can argue forever about the cultural value of a practice (although it is sometimes difficult to determine a unique cultural practice as opposed to an idea assimilated from the majority culture—for example, the hat traditionally worn by women in Bolivia, which comes from the bowler hat worn by the British builders of the railroads in Bolivia).

In Denver a group of Black activists proclaimed recently that the majority culture's attitudes against physical punishment of children prevents them from appropriately rearing their children, which results in gangs and other problems. How should we as early childhood professionals respond to this accusation?



Personally, I don't believe authoritarian childrearing practices work in preparing children to be successful in today's society (they do not maximize emotional and cognitive development). Professionally, I don't believe we can even remotely appear to support parenting and teacher behaviors—by anyone—that could in any way increase the disgracefully high occurrence of child abuse that kills and harms so many children under age five in the United States (Department of Health and Human Services 1998).

8. Developmentally appropriate practice reflects my educational values.

I believe all educational philosophies are based on values (Wiles & Bondi 1998). The values of early childhood education are the foundation of our profession. What makes our profession such a challenge is that we are so close to the family, and in some cases we are substitutes for the family. This requires us to be very sensitive to each family's cultural values. We must find ways to support the family and its reference community. But we should not do this at the expense of what we believe, through careful thought and introspection, to be important for all children.

My own educational values include

- gender equity
- respect for children, parents, and teachers
- equity, regardless of income
- respect for religious choices
- democracy
- support of identity development
- support of self-esteem and self-control development
- development of people who can make intelligent choices
- support for young children's exploration, risk taking, and active learning

Because many new immigrants to the United States come from cultures farther removed from our own, in our programs we face challenges to our basic beliefs. Some cultures may use the practice of prearranged marriages (often at an early age), have very strict gender roles, or practice female genital mutilation (King 1999). Some parents may not want their boys to play in the housekeeping area or assist in cleaning up after themselves (too feminine); others parents believe in physical punishment; still others have children whose family bed experience (cosleeping) makes them resistant to sleeping in cribs or who need to be swaddled beyond infancy.

When such conflicts arise, each of us must carefully examine them in relation to our own values regarding children and education. I am opposed to child labor, genital mutilation, selling of children, child abuse and neglect, child prostitution, and limiting children's choices (prearranged marriage, societal and cultural roles, gender roles, not learning English). And my values lead me to oppose authoritarian child rearing practices, including verbal putdowns and punitive discipline.

Regardless of how sensitive I try to be to each family's values, these are practices I cannot support. Each of us must carefully and continually compare our values with the values reflected by developmentally appropriate practice.

9. Developmentally appropriate curriculum prepares children of minority groups for success in the larger society.

In my part of the world, Denver, Colorado, we lose far more minority students through suspension and dropping out of school due to social and behavior issues than we lose because of academic deficiencies. In my daughter's middle school, only 18.8% of the students are Black, yet 32% of the students suspended in 1996 were Black (Denver Public Schools 1997).

One of the strengths of developmentally appropriate practice is the emphasis on self-directed learning, cooperative activities, and conflict resolution. These approaches enable minority children to feel good about themselves, learn prosocial skills, and build complex cognitive structures.

10. Developmentally appropriate practice philosophy encourages cooperative and collective learning.

Developmentally appropriate practice has been accused of emphasizing individual learning at the expense of group and cooperative learning. This accusation is another misinterpretation of the philosophy.

With the popularity of Vygotsky in the early childhood field, there is a strong belief in the effect of social and cultural learning. Reggio Emilia practices (Katz & Cesarone 1984) also emphasize group and project learning. Developmentally appropriate practice encourages cooperative learning, the project approach, multiage groupings, group decisionmaking, and group rules (Bredekamp & Copple 1997).

11. Developmentally appropriate practice encourages cooperation between home and program.

We all struggle with specific parenting habits we don't like that we learned from our parents. Most of us have also developed culturally appropriate eating habits that we must change as we get older and more health conscious. As professionals we must work very closely with parents to help them develop the best way to raise their children and to help us provide the best programs for their children.

I remember a Hispanic male student from one of my classes who talked about how his parenting style changed when he married a Korean woman. He had been raised in a home in which adults were highly respected and children were expected to show that respect, especially in social settings. He was surprised to find in Korean extended-family gatherings that the children were allowed to freely and noisily run around and play with each other. With open communication these two parents from different backgrounds were able to develop a consistent approach to raising their children. This is how parents and child care programs should work together.

12. Developmentally appropriate practice encourages meaningful learning.

Integrated, meaningful, worthwhile learning projects teach young children discipline, perseverance, persistence, high-level thinking skills, and integrated concepts that provide a solid foundation for future school success and provide information that is easily and effectively recalled from the memory (Barell 1995; Ormond 1996). The more we learn about how children's brains develop and how meaningful academic learning occurs, the more I am convinced that developmentally appropriate practice matches up with this knowledge.

Conclusion

I write in praise of developmentally appropriate practice because, based on my upbringing, years of experience with young children, formal education, and rearing of my own four children, I believe the developmentally appropriate early childhood philosophy is the best framework for continuing to meet the diverse needs of all the young children we serve. I believe it provides protection from the continual assaults on our children—programs that are too academic, pushing down curricula, forcing children into custodial child care so parents can work, inappropriate TV and computer programs, and politically motivated outcome-based programs.

Developmentally appropriate practice is a set of guidelines designed to further our practice and discussion; it is not a set of rigid rules carved in stone. We need to commit ourselves to a greater implementation of the philosophy and develop nuances and variability within it.

Developmentally appropriate practice is applying a certain set of guiding principles creatively and sensibly.

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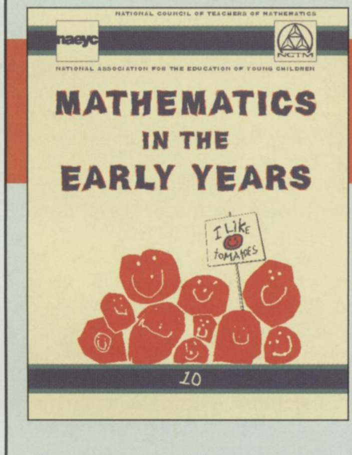
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