

In Conversation: A Love Letter to a Banned Teacher Resource Text

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As book censorship rates continue to spike to unprecedented levels in the United States (American Library Association, 2023), it is not unusual to encounter stories about challenged or banned books in our news cycles. While the majority of censorship activity in the media has focused on texts for young readers (i.e., young adult novels), a recent news story centered around a book that was written for adult professional educators. In April 2023, Alabama Governor Kay Ivey ousted Dr. Barbara Cooper, the Secretary of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, over the use of a teacher resource book in public preschool professional development efforts (Griesbach & Crain, 2023). The book at the center of the incident was the fourth edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs: Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*, the widely-used, cornerstone text of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2021). The *DAP* text, first published in 1986, is a resource book which highlights key principles and practices based on decades of research and voices from the field. Previously, Governor Ivey had extensively praised Dr. Cooper, an esteemed leader of Alabama's award-winning public pre-K programming who she (Ivey) had appointed in 2020. After learning of what she called "woke" concepts in this text, Ivey demanded that Cooper send a memo denouncing the book and removing it from use. Cooper refused.

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Ivey reported to take issue with: (1) the book's attention to equity in early education; (2) excerpts that encourage teachers to be aware of racist structures and implicit bias so as to make students' first foray into the education system an affirming one; and (3) excerpts highlighting that children are most likely to thrive when their families (including single parents, grandparent-led, foster parents, LGBTQIA+ parents) experience messaging that promotes "equality, dignity, and worth" and when families are included as key members of a learning community (Griesbach & Crane, 2023; Moseley, 2023; Stephenson, 2023; Strauss, 2023). Ivey stated that attention to these topics has "no place in a proper education" and that preschool children should be "focused on the fundamentals, such as reading and math" (Moseley, 2023). In a response defending her decision, Ivey said, "The teacher resource book that I looked at had all those references to different kinds of lifestyles and equity and this and that and the other. That's not teaching English. That's not teaching writing. That's not teaching reading. We need to focus on the basics, y'all, and get this right" (AP, 2023).

This incident sparked a fervent response from members of the early childhood education (ECE) community, and particularly from members of NAEYC, the largest early childhood education professional association in the world. In the days and weeks following the ousting and banning, I was struck by a flurry of robust conversations: conversations among early learning teachers, leaders, and teacher educators; conversations in preschool staff rooms, in online platforms, university offices, and research centers. I am a literacy education professor with expertise and interest in early literacy and teacher education, but do not necessarily think of myself as an insider of the early childhood education scholarly community per se at this point, and thus, I learned a lot from listening and reading. For me, one of the most memorable and enlightening conversations during that time was an extended exchange across text messages,

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meetings, and hallway chats with a dear friend and colleague, Dr. Allison Wilson, an associate professor of early childhood education and the Director of the Institute for Early Childhood Education at the University of Montana. Currently the president of Montana's chapter of NAEYC (MAEYC), Allison has been recognized for her work in community-engaged early language development efforts and ECE teacher education research innovation. She counts *DAP* as one of her all-time favorite books.

At one point in our exchange, Allison and I discussed our joint wish that more people could be privy to such conversations and to understand the *DAP* text and its contents and merits, in a way that extends beyond media sound bites. The idea for this article was born. Here, we (humbly) capture and share a conversation, just one snippet of the larger conversation in the field, with *Literacy Voices* readers. This is a conversation between Allison and myself, which we recorded, transcribed, and edited for clarity and length. While there is a vigorous national discussion about the political incident in Alabama and the broader climate in which that incident is oriented, the lens of our relatively brief conversation here is focused mainly on the *DAP* text itself. This particular conversation, at its essence, is Allison's love letter to this book. As humans, we are wired to protect and advocate for what we love; we hope that this conversation might help put media sound bites into a fuller context of this text's contents, and bring to the fore for others what is to appreciate about this book, and accordingly, what is to appreciate about developmentally appropriate practice per se. Ultimately, we hope to help grow the circle of advocates around this text, around early childhood educators who are doing very complex work in a complex time, and around children and families who benefit from high-quality, developmentally appropriate early learning contexts.

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(Note: Henceforth, *DAP* with italics refers to the text *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*. *DAP* without italics refers to developmentally appropriate practice, the pedagogical approach itself.)

KB: In this *Literacy Voices* issue on “The Freedom to Read,” there is a focus on challenged books, and of course we are exploring *this* newly-challenged book, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs: Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8* (or *DAP* for short). Allison, I’ve heard you characterize this book as “more than a book” for the field, and most certainly for you as an individual. Could you say more about that?

AW: For about 20 years now, this book has been what drives my every day. The book is in its fourth edition now. When I think back, the second and third editions are at the core of my training--getting an associate's degree in child development, a bachelor's degree and master's degree, and then ultimately a PhD. It shaped my professional dispositions and ways of reflecting during my practitioner days, and currently, the way I frame conversations with my pre-service early childhood teachers. Overall, it represents the lens through which I see my work and this profession. This is why the Alabama incident left me, like so many others, in shock.

KB: Knowing you well as an academic and educator, I can see how the concepts from this book are embodied in your day-to-day work.

AW: Yes, that’s right. You know, when you see children from our University’s lab school, sometimes in costumes, walking down the halls on a learning expedition, wholly busy doing something and learning something that is engaging, meaningful, and joyful...I think of those daily snapshots as examples of the tenets of this text in action. The principles and practices

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in this text shape how I make intentional decisions about anything that I do professionally in early childhood education—including how I aim to help prepare new teachers.

KB: And that seems to get right at the heart of the very definition of *developmentally appropriate practice* (DAP) per se, the text’s central construct, right? At its core, DAP is an approach that aims to promote optimal, engaged, joyful learning for children by meeting them where they are developmentally and designing and fostering contexts and experiences that nurture growth. I love this term and the intentionality it signals, and I wish there were more widespread and careful attention to development in more K-12 circles. How would you explain developmentally appropriate practice to someone who is unfamiliar with that term?

AW: Great question. I mean, I would start with what you just shared—it is a very intentional approach to teaching based on what scientific research has shown us about how development occurs. I would begin to describe DAP through three core considerations that are foregrounded in the text: *commonality*, *individuality*, and *context*. These are truly considerations for all decisions that you would make across curriculum planning, across selection of assessment tools, ways for engaging and partnering with families, ways for designing a learning environment, ways for strengthening key partnerships with a school organization and, and the idea is to approach all of these with a supportive spirit.

So there is *commonality*: teachers need to be knowledgeable about principles of child development and learning. As we plan, we weigh in what we know about the general processes of child learning and the developmental continuum, and those windows or periods of development where children are typically at, you know, at 18 months of age or 36 months of age.

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These guidelines allow us to predict and be strategic about the types of experiences that are likely to be enriching for certain age groups.

Then there is *individuality*, you know, recognizing the variation, and that each child is going to have their own unique strengths and interests and abilities based on where they're at in their current moment. And of course recognizing the research-backed understanding that for individuals, these things are largely shaped by our respective social *contexts*. You know, each individual child is growing up in a context, surrounded with a family's beliefs, values, practices, language, priorities for what's important to them; and each child brings in experiences that have been consequential for them (both enriching and challenging). Taking all three of those things into consideration is crucial for planning and meeting young children where they are in their social and cognitive development, and accordingly, in a way that promotes learning through a joyful, play-based approach. The NAEYC has a strong position statement on DAP, and it's actually the preface in this text. I recommend it to anyone wanting a solid overview of this approach.

KB: While this book is not a curriculum per se, it is a resource for educators aiming to implement DAP. Part One is comprised of five chapters that explicate the “what” and “why” of DAP—really explaining this approach in depth, what it is, how it is grounded in theory and research, and how it connects to content learning and play-based learning. And then Part Two illuminates the “how,” with a set of chapters on the guidelines for practicing DAP across six areas—from building classroom community to effective assessment.

AW: Yes, I love the dedicated attention to both theory and practice. I appreciate how, straight away, the authors dig into those three considerations, and launch a deeper dive into child

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development, a key part of the *commonality* consideration. An analysis of child development research from a range of fields (neuro and cognitive sciences, psychology, family development, education) highlights nine key principles of child development, which are explained and exemplified in this text. And we won't list all nine, but to give a sense of the principles for *Literacy Voices* readers, an example would be that all domains of child development are important, related, and support one another—this includes cognitive, physical, linguistic, social and emotional development. Another principle is the importance of play for learning self-regulation, language, cognition, social skills, content knowledge, and complex concepts.

KB: And one other is that children's skill learning advances best in that level or zone just beyond their current mastery—that sweet spot beyond what they can already do but not way out of reach—with guidance and lots of opportunities to practice and reflect. The gist is: there are things we know from scientific research on learning that should shape and inform our practice. We see these come up again and again in the other chapters.

AW: Right--the many examples and vignettes in this text are all grounded in the science of learning and development. Part One also includes a chapter that goes deeper into how and why context matters for learning. I personally appreciate the examples of some of the ways that cultural differences can play out at school—recognizing that different families will have different expectations and communication styles. For example, many teachers come from cultures that give directives in the form of questions (“Can you please find your seat?”), which might not be (at least initially) resonant with children who are accustomed to a more direct approach from adults (“Sit down now”). Reflecting on these things helps and empowers teachers. Knowing our learners is fundamental. It is practical.

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KB: I agree—and this science holds true in my personal experiences over the decades, as well. For the vast majority of my K-12 career, I worked in settings with students whose backgrounds were very different from my own. I was certainly most effective—that is, my students’ engagement and achievement was strongest—when I was intentional about holding to that stance and spirit of inquiry about my individual students and their families and communities, as well as about myself. This is still true for me here even in my home state of Montana, especially in the work I’m doing in Indigenous communities and with our growing refugee population locally.

AW: Yes, that self-reflection piece is essential. And related to that-- it is in this chapter on context that the authors discuss recent research on implicit bias, which was a topic that is currently controversial to some and one of the reasons stated for the book’s removal. I just want to say that the main idea of this is that teachers are encouraged to reflect, especially if they are working with children and families whose backgrounds and situations are quite different from their own, on any assumptions or biases they may have. Again—to approach our work with a supportive spirit. This has helped me immensely as an educator.

KB: So--if I were to take on a DAP approach while working with a child with a behavioral disability, for example, and my goal is for her to reach her full potential, I am encouraged to learn a lot about that child, her strengths and interests and challenges, to learn about the particular disability, and to design opportunities that promote rich learning (behavioral, social, academic, etc.) for her and to reflect on their impact. As part of this inquiry, I’m also encouraged to reflect on whether I’m harboring any unspoken assumptions about this child and her family situation that could lead me to unfairly lower expectations for her, or limit effective communication and connection with her or her

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family, or prevent me from successfully supporting the child and her classmates as they learn to become full-fledged members of a community.

AW: Right. The goal is optimal learning for that child, and a teacher has such an influential role in that. So not only would that approach to self-reflection and fostering relationships be enriching for, let's say, a non-Indigenous teacher working with Indigenous students and families (like in your case, Kate), but also for a middle-class teacher working with children living in poverty, or to a politically liberal teacher working with children whose parents are politically conservative, for example. I would want every teacher to bring their very best, supportive spirit to every single child in their care, to make sure they are assuming a strengths-based approach with children and families, to learn about what is meaningful and relevant to them, and to intentionally and effectively foster relationships.

KB: I think it's important to point out that this kind of inquiry and relationship-building is *in the service of* fostering rigorous academic instruction, including reading and writing—not *in contrast to* or *instead of* fostering rigorous academic instruction as was suggested by critics of this text.

AW: Exactly. When children feel like they belong, like they are valued and competent, their brains are much more likely to be in a state of readiness to learn. And when we understand our students' lives and contexts, we are better poised to plan engaging experiences for them, setting the stage for successful development in math, literacy, science, etc.

KB: Literacy is a great example. It is very relational. When we think about *rigor* in early childhood literacy education—for infants, for toddlers, for preschool children—

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perhaps the most important thing we can do as teachers (and parents or caregivers) is foster really rich language experiences.

AW: Yes! It goes all the way back into infancy and that concept of “serve and return,” right? Communication processes, through gestures, from smiles, and cute coos back and forth, right? And then that develops into, you know, more conversational language, which sparks a lot of important subsequent learning--but it's *always in the context of those strong relationships*.

KB: Yes--interesting, affirming conversations with plenty of back-and-forth turns, conversations with interesting ideas and inquiry, with adults modeling sophisticated vocabulary and a variety of syntactic structures. Through these interactions, young children gain so much cognitive growth, so much background content knowledge, and language knowledge and comprehension. And research shows us that these are absolutely essential components for later reading achievement, especially reading comprehension. **This is academic rigor for very young children.**

AW: I really want to emphasize that these types of enriching conversations can't happen in the absence of reciprocal relationships or in the absence of topics or activities a child cares about—otherwise young children will not engage. By learning about a child and partnering with families, we can better facilitate these robust interactions, and we can do an excellent job of selecting books and curricular topics, which allows for strong dialogic reading (a research-supported shared book reading approach), and engaging dramatic play or writing activities, for further critical thinking and content and skill learning.

KB: So well said. And I appreciate what you said a minute ago about how these strong, trusting relationships impact a child's brain state...this is hugely important for

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children’s code-focused literacy development as well as the language-focused components that we just discussed. The *DAP* text authors highlight findings from neuroimaging research showing how neural circuitry and transmission are (1) compromised by stressful learning environments marked by anxiety, alienation, or even boredom, and (2) enhanced in environments flourishing with positive motivation and engagement. So fostering relationships and spaces where children feel both at ease and engaged...this enhances our effectiveness when we teach things like print concepts, phonological awareness, and the alphabetic principle, and when we facilitate multisensory experiences with letter shapes, names, and sounds (introductory phonics instruction). Ultimately, it enhances children’s learning of the knowledge and skills we know make a difference for eventual foundational reading success in K-3.

AW: Yes, I really appreciate how this fourth edition of *DAP* focuses intently on new findings from neuroscience. This is so helpful for teachers. And I think those research findings and these early literacy examples we are discussing really show how content and skill teaching are connected to a whole host of other sets of teaching practices. Rounding out the *DAP* framework—along with the three considerations (commonality, individuality, context) and nine principles of child development we discussed earlier, there are six *guidelines for practice* in the *DAP* text.

KB: We see these guidelines explained and exemplified in Part Two, “*DAP in Action.*” And again—while the *DAP* text is not, and is not intended to be, a curriculum nor a fine-grained scope and sequence (K-3 teachers would certainly need additional resources and training to implement systematic, explicit phonics instruction, for example), this is

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where authors give sustained attention to the “how” of DAP. Could you share a bit about these guidelines?

AW: Very briefly, the six guidelines for practice are: creating community; engaging in reciprocal partnerships with families; assessing learning; teaching to enhance each child’s development; planning engaging goal-oriented curriculum; and demonstrating professionalism. There is a chapter for each of these, flush with examples of DAP in action and examples of practices to avoid for multiple age groups, from infancy through third grade.

I think that particular set of six practice areas drives home the fact that, yes, reading and math are absolutely fundamentals, *AND there are other fundamentals, very well-established commitments and practices*, in the field of early childhood education. And I’d argue the most important, most foundational one is creating community.

KB: Creating and fostering a community isn’t extra and it isn’t a distraction from great teaching. It is a key element of great teaching. And as you’ve said, it sets the stage, preps the soil, for more great teaching.

AW: Absolutely. This reminds me: one of my favorite parts of this book are the appendices. That’s where there are some real turn-key resources for teachers, and model examples of what DAP looks like in action in different communities and for different audiences. So there’s a specific appendix and resource set especially for each different age group, with case studies and scenarios of teachers, classrooms, and even entire school districts that have adopted DAP. There are additional resources and links and suggested books for a range of issues, as well.

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KB: I can imagine that your ECE teacher candidates and graduate students appreciate those.

AW: Yes, there is a clear and very positive trend in feedback and discussion boards of the ECE courses in which we use this; many preservice teachers and grad students say “this is the best college textbook I’ve ever had.” It’s organized in a way that aligns directly to Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals (NAEYC, 2020), and with standards for educator preparation programs and for school-based programs. It’s an ideal book for new teachers. The authors and editors have done such a fantastic job curating decades of research and theories and voices of families, practitioners, advocates, etc, all into one guiding document that makes very clear the theoretical, the *why* behind what we do, but also offers helpful examples of what this actually looks like in practice. It is a book that they definitely hang on to.

KB: Obviously, you and I live and work in a politically diverse place and we value relationships with politically diverse groups of partners and stakeholders in our work. There is a charged national conversation about educational *equity* right now—certainly in our own state, where this word was recently removed from numerous standards documents. The *DAP* text clearly promotes equitable opportunities and environments. For any, let’s say, prospective PreK parents—perhaps parents with conservative backgrounds—who hear news stories like this one out of Alabama and are feeling worried about some of the things their kids may encounter in early learning spaces that promote equity and *DAP*...what would you want them to know?

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AW: Well, I think describing what we mean, describing the actual practices, rather than relying on the word *equity* can sometimes be helpful these days. Equity signals an element of individualization, while equality signals sameness, right? We want all children to reach their potential, that goal for all children is the same, and a DAP framework would suggest that because children are unique, their learning paths are not identical either. Two things that have always been so clear and simple in my mind, two of the great truths of the early childhood profession...one is the commitment to meeting children where they are on a developmental spectrum. That requires individualized or flexed rather than identical opportunities for every child in every context. And ECE has always been very family centered—child and family-centered practice has been at the core of high-quality early education. So all families, those with two moms, with a single parent or grandparent, with conservative parents, parents of all faiths or no faith--their inclusion and engagement with the school community is critical for their child's learning and wellbeing. This is the heart. I'd want conservative parents to know that this strengths-based approach is about them and their children, too. Every child. Every family.

KB: You know, hearing you say that, reminds me of some of my most treasured moments as a preschool mom. I'm so grateful for all of the invitations and connections, the opportunities to connect with parents and guardians and grandparents. I'm thinking of a time a Salish dad shared a special family song at school and how lovely it was to see his son just absolutely beaming with pride; I got to befriend a ranching family who drove into town for school (and we all enjoyed an exciting trip to their ranch one day), a dad who is a Greek Orthodox priest, a family who is deaf, families with lesbian parents, families with various shared custody parenting plans—I learned so much from them all. We were all present frequently, invited and welcomed and respected. And with our beautiful, curious

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children at the center. In retrospect, this conversation prompts me to see and appreciate with renewed eyes the role of the teachers and preschool director, all ardent advocates of DAP, in fostering an environment like that.

AW: And I think that's just it. It is important to learn about DAP, the what, the why, the how. But to experience it as a member of that learning community...it is profound. And worth advocating for. Here's to more of it.

KB: Here's to more of it. And here's to more teachers reading more, not fewer, resource books. More freedom to read, not less.

AW: And here's to more, not fewer, educators reading and using *this* book,

KB: Any last thoughts to share in this love letter?

AW: I encourage anyone interested in learning more about DAP, this book, or ways to advocate to check out NAEYC's website.

And I also want to say thank you, *DAP* text and authors, for helping to raise me as an educator! I'm forever grateful.

Authors' Note: We would like to acknowledge and thank Kristin Dahl Horejsi, Danielle Bailey, Grace Decker, Tamarack O'Donnell, the Missoula Early Learning Fellows, and the NAEYC leadership team (specifically Dr. Barbara Cooper). Conversations with and insights from these colleagues, collaborators, and DAP advocates shaped and inspired our work on this manuscript.

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