

educators to forge meaningful relationships with children. Understanding of context is also critical in providing learning experiences that reflect a child’s individualized development and abilities and that are socially, linguistically, and culturally appropriate for each child. The position statement calls on educators to intentionally reflect on how social and cultural contexts, which are dynamic and evolving rather than static, impact their teaching, their understanding of children’s development and learning, and the lives and experiences of the children they teach. When educators pay attention to the broader contexts under which children’s growth and development unfold, the decisions they make observe and honor the perspectives, experiences, and realities of children within the context of their families and communities (NAEYC 2020a).

Previous editions of this book and of the position statement on developmentally appropriate practice have highlighted primarily the child’s cultural context; emphasizing that of the educator, program, and larger community requires educators to reflect on the assumptions and biases that can affect decision making and that must be challenged to equitably serve each child. (This is discussed in more depth later in this chapter; see “The Impact of Educator Context” on page 51.) Educators need the support of administrators along with resources and supportive policies to successfully do this, as these issues must also be addressed systemically.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline and bring to life through classroom examples some key ways educators can become more attuned to their own and children’s contexts so they can more effectively understand, assess, and teach the many children they will educate during their careers.

Context and Developmentally Appropriate Practice

No educational practice or learning experience is developmentally appropriate in and of itself in all settings and with all children. Educators make adjustments to planned activities, selected materials,

the environment, and their interactions with children to best meet the individual needs and goals of each child based on the specific circumstances and contexts.

For example, if someone were to ask if planning a pie-making activity for a small group of kindergartners is developmentally appropriate, a number of questions might arise. What are the learning goals? Why did the teacher decide to create a pie-making activity specifically? Answering questions such as these, and the larger one of whether the activity is developmentally appropriate, depends to a large extent on the educator’s understanding of the contexts in which the experience is taking place.

3.1 Making a Pie to Support Vocabulary Development

Ms. Hall observes Paola, a child in her kindergarten class who speaks Spanish at home and is learning English, as she plays with playdough. The child pats a playdough circle and says the words “tarta” in Spanish and “cake” in English. She rolls out small round shapes and places them on top of the circle. Paola then places snakes of playdough in a crisscross pattern over the top and again says, “Cake!” Ms. Hall notices the detail in Paola’s playdough creation and reflects that she is probably making a pie or a fruit tart but does not yet have the expressive language to describe what she is making more specifically in English. She leans over the child and says, “That looks like a delicious pie!”

The teacher thinks about her plans for the next day and adjusts them. Instead of making pretzels at the math center, she will get the ingredients to make a pie. The activity will address all the same concepts as the original learning activity she planned: literacy as they look at the recipe; math concepts such as sequencing, measuring, and counting as they assemble the ingredients; and social and emotional learning as they work together and take turns. Now, however, the activity will also introduce vocabulary words, such as *pie*, *recipe*, *fruit*, *berries*, *ingredients*, *fold*, *top crust*, *bottom crust*, *over*, *under*, and *lattice*, to support Paola’s and the other children’s expressive language development.

(Adapted from Riley-Ayers & Figueras-Daniel 2018)

So is a pie-making activity always developmentally appropriate? Consider some of the particular contexts in relation to children’s development and learning. In the example above, Ms. Hall is carefully observing the children. Through her careful observations, she knows that Paola is making something with a lot of detail. She hears the child use one word repeatedly to describe what she is doing. She understands that Paola does not yet have the vocabulary in English to describe what she has made. Ms. Hall also has an understanding of the language and literacy development knowledge base—that the best way to support the language development of a child is to introduce new vocabulary through meaningful experiences.

Ms. Hall uses her understanding of Paola’s individual context to help support her learning. In determining the appropriateness of a particular learning experience, educators also consider other contexts. What are the contexts of the children’s families? What is the context of the school or program? How might the history of a program’s community, its economic structures, and opportunities be part of context? Are there circumstances that impact the health or well-being of the children and families?

When planning any activity, lesson, or curriculum, consider the following questions:

- › Who are the children involved?
- › Who are the families involved?
- › What are the learning goals?
- › What are the contexts?

Rethinking Context

The 2020 revision of the position statement on developmentally appropriate practice requires all educators to rethink and approach teaching differently. Context is part of everything they do, but with an emphasis on context woven throughout developmentally appropriate practice, educators will think about it in new ways. All educators are lifelong learners, and both those who are new and those who are experienced have room to grow as they cultivate the habit of reflective and intentional practice in their daily work with young children and as members of the early childhood profession. Reflecting on context is a continuous process with great rewards for children and educators alike, including more

nuanced observations and understanding of children to better support their learning, which results in more equitable teaching practices (NAEYC 2020b).

Why Context Is So Important Now More than Ever

The United States has become more diverse racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically, and so too have the children from birth through age 8 attending early learning programs. Children in these programs come from diverse backgrounds, speak multiple languages, have a variety of abilities and identified disabilities, and have varying experiences impacted by their social identities (race, ethnicity, language, gender, class, ability, family composition, and economic status, among others). Educators who shape schools and classroom learning may be unfamiliar with the traditions, assets, and experiences of many of the children and families they serve, and this mismatch can hinder efforts to provide all children with equitable learning environments. It is a key reason educators need to seek to understand the implications of these contexts by continuously learning from families and communities and becoming aware of and countering their own and larger societal biases that may undermine children’s positive development and well-being.

Educators must pursue understanding of the community as a whole, recognizing who is included and who is routinely excluded, and be committed to developing a deep and nuanced understanding of each specific child and family. The need to bridge cultural knowledge with developmentally appropriate practice is vital to creating a learning community where children and their families are supported, where differences are valued, and where inequity is challenged.

As educators develop ways to consider the many contexts of the diverse children they teach, they seek to ensure that they are not basing assumptions on their own context alone or only that of the dominant culture (White-centered and Westernized). Schools and programs are key in supporting this work; they themselves function within a specific context and can offer professional development to support educators in their acquisition of knowledge and self-reflection. Learning to pay attention to context requires deep work, and educators and school leaders alike are

encouraged to commit to becoming lifelong learners steeped in both developmentally appropriate practice and advancing equity in early childhood education. Although learning about equity in early childhood education is embedded throughout this book, all educators should engage in a more extensive focus through additional coursework, professional development, and further reading.

A Closer Look at Different Contexts

The following example offers a closer look at contexts. “Alonso and Storytelling” illustrates how understanding multiple contexts can increase an educator’s ability to understand how children demonstrate what they know and can do. With this understanding, educators can then adjust the ways they assess a child’s knowledge and skills and provide more appropriate instruction and learning goals based on this more accurate assessment.

3.2 Alonso and Storytelling

Alonso loves the block center, and despite his emerging English-language skills, he engages easily with his peers in play. One day he builds three small structures. When Ms. Blessing asks him about the structures, he says, “They are the pig houses.” Ms. Blessing realizes he is retelling *The Three Little Pigs*, a book the class had been reading together. She sits and observes Alonso as he uses small wolf and pig figurines to act out the story, completely in order, including the beginning, middle, and end.

Alonso uses simple, key phrases from the story and shows an understanding of characters and setting. Ms. Blessing knows in that moment that his receptive language skills are stronger than she had thought and that, while he is not yet able to successfully retell a story orally with many details in English (one thing the early literacy assessment measured), he does in fact understand the story the class had read together and has a concept of story sequence. Ms. Blessing updates Alonso’s learning target to “building vocabulary in order to retell simple stories,” replacing the assumed learning goal of “sequencing stories.” Because of her careful

observations and recordkeeping of Alonso’s engagement in play that is meaningful to him, Ms. Blessing is better able to address his needs.

(Adapted from Blessing 2019)

Let’s examine the contexts at work within this example.

The teacher’s context: In this example, Ms. Blessing, a White, English-speaking teacher, has many years of experience as a kindergarten teacher and has developed and refined ways to assess children’s understanding in a range of areas through observational assessments during children’s play. As a North Carolina Kindergarten Demonstration classroom teacher, her role extends beyond the classroom into providing professional development for other teachers on effective teaching. Her experience and knowledge of practices that are developmentally appropriate enable her to delve deeply into understanding what an assessment shows about a child’s learning and how to gain additional information about the child’s learning needs through observations during play.

The school’s context: The school is in a rural area and has a diverse student population; many of the children are from families with low incomes who are seasonal migrant workers. Many children speak a language other than English at home. The school has an English as a second language, or ESL, teacher who speaks Spanish and supports many teachers, including Ms. Blessing. All children at the school take a required early literacy assessment in English.

The child’s context: Alonso and his family speak Spanish at home. He is learning English. While he does not yet volunteer to speak often during group times, during self-directed play he often chatters to himself or his peers.

The family’s context: Alonso’s parents are seasonal migrant workers who spend part of the year in the location of this school. Ms. Blessing has worked with families from this community over the years and has developed ways to work in partnership with families. In getting to know Alonso’s family, she has learned that they read to him regularly in Spanish.

Teacher observations: Ms. Blessing observed that Alonso displayed a deeper understanding of book elements during play and informal interactions than

what he demonstrated on the formal assessment. She was motivated to discover what he did know and put effort into supporting a more specific area of need—vocabulary development in English.

Ms. Blessing considers multiple contexts, such as her knowledge of this child’s at-home experiences with read-alouds (family context) and her recognition that he might be able to demonstrate his understandings through play while at the same time needing support to develop the vocabulary to describe his understandings in English (individual contexts).

While the literacy assessment was required, giving Alonso access to play materials and observing his play offered Ms. Blessing the opportunity to observe Alonso demonstrating, in his own way, what he knows and is able to do with the skill of story sequencing despite still actively learning spoken English. It also enabled Ms. Blessing to set individualized goals and plan learning experiences that are appropriate for Alonso.

Every aspect of teaching, including assessment, interactions, and instructional strategies, is affected by specific contexts. As you read the chapters and examples in this book, consider how the multiple contexts of teachers, children, families, communities, and programs intersect to support children’s development and learning needs. Ask yourself: What are my contexts? What are the contexts of the children I teach? Is there anything I would do differently given my contexts? As I think back on my teaching or in classrooms I have observed, what might I have done differently?

The Impact of Educator Context

In learning to understand different contexts, the first step is for teachers to identify their own contexts through an examination of their experiences and beliefs. Educators bring their own experiences and contexts to their decision making, so it is especially important to understand how these contexts impact teaching. Although educators reflect and plan in advance, at times a specific context emerges in the moment that should be taken into consideration. Consider the following scenario.

3.3 A Classroom Conversation About Gender Emerges: A Teacher Reflects on the Terms She Uses

The children in Ms. Joy’s first grade class begin putting away their morning work to make their way to the carpet. They are reminded by their classmate Arie about the personal space rule and to sit on their assigned color circle. As Ms. Joy makes her way to the rug, she announces, “You listened to Arie about personal space, and now we are ready to begin!” Ms. Joy takes her seat, which is a signal for the children to stop talking. On this particular day, the children continue talking to one another, giggling, and fidgeting on the rug. This behavior prompts Kiram to hold up the peace sign to alert his classmates that Ms. Joy is trying to start the class meeting; however, the children continue talking and moving around. Finally, Ms. Joy slightly raises her voice and says, “Hey, you guys, didn’t you see Kiram’s sign to stop talking?” Ms. Joy continues after the group is quieter, and she thanks Kiram. “I want to begin our class meeting a little differently today.” Grace raises her hand, and Ms. Joy calls on her. “Ms. Joy,” says Grace, “why do you call us *guys*? I am not a guy; I’m a girl.”

The discussion by the children and Ms. Joy that ensued was impressive. Grace’s comment prompted the teacher to talk about other ways in which language is not always gender neutral (e.g., *fireman* versus *firefighter*, *mailman* versus *postal worker*).

To many people, including this teacher, the phrase “you guys” is an easygoing way to address a group of people. To others, it is a symbol of exclusion—a word originally referring to males that now is frequently used to refer to people who don’t consider themselves “guys.”

This example highlights the importance of educators being aware of, and countering, their own unconscious and larger societal biases that may undermine a child’s positive development and well-being. Here, Ms. Joy responded in a thoughtful way when her bias was pointed out, resulting in deeper learning both for herself and the children.