

# WEARING MANY HATS OR HOW KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS ADORN THEIR HEADS

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This article examines early childhood theoretical “hats” that are possible choices for a kindergarten teacher to wear in the United States. The “hats” represent major theoretical perspectives for early development and education. It is suggested that, through an examination of how these “hats” are translated into classroom practice, a vital and enriched kindergarten experience can become more of a reality. The discussion concludes with examples of how each theoretical hat can become visible in the practice of quality kindergarten teaching.

*A*s kindergarten teachers, we are never hatless in the classroom. We even describe ourselves to others as “wearing many hats.” The ideal of this many-hatted condition is to wear the hats one at a time. However, the reality is that we are often wearing the green eyeshade of the accountant for all the paperwork, while at the same time adorning ourselves with the scholarly mortarboard for our curricular, theory - to - practice planning. In addition, we balance both of these foundational head dresses with a jester’s cap for playfulness, a nurse’s hat for physical emergencies, and a safari helmet for the great unknown adventures that are part of our daily journey into all the uncharted territories found in the classroom.

This article will not discuss those hats. Rather, it focuses on some of

the theoretical hats that we can choose to wear as kindergarten teachers, as we engage in curriculum planning and in teaching. These hats represent (a) what we know and understand about the development of children and (b) how we put this understanding and knowledge into daily practice. I will describe some of the hats that I consider important and conclude the discussion by suggesting opportunities for making each hat visible in the practice of child-centered kindergarten teaching.

To set the stage, I would like to introduce a suitcase containing hats worn by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsy, and Howard Gardner. This selection process represents what Paolo Freire (1970) could be referring to when he spoke of education as “the

practice of freedom" (p. 69). He speaks of a liberating practice of education as the opportunity for authentic reflection, constant inquiry, and reaffirmation within "the process of becoming" (p. 72). As kindergarten teachers, we daily decide on what theories to wear in our classrooms to adorn our thinking as we facilitate the learning of our students. Perhaps we would find a letter from Freire (1996) in the suitcase such as the following that describes this process:

Dear Teacher of Young Children,

*Never does an event, a fact, a deed, a gesture of...love, a poem, a painting, a song, a book, have only one reason behind it. In fact, a deed, a gesture, a poem, a painting, a song, a book are always wrapped in thick wrappers. They have been touched by manifold 'whys.' Only some of these are close enough to the event or the creation to be visible to the 'whys.' And so I have always been more interested in understanding the process and by which things come about than in the product in itself.* (p. 16)

Your friend,  
Paolo Freire

It is my hope that the reading of this article will lead to a further understanding of the "whys" underlying the teaching-learning process and a growing awareness of how our theoretical "heady" adornments enrich practice in kindergarten classrooms. Let us now examine each hat in more detail.

### *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*

The theoretical chapeau of Rousseau is the first hat in the suitcase to be examined. In his book *Emile* (1762), Rousseau pioneered the organized study of children by exploring their need for an active involvement with the environment. Rousseau advanced the idea that children are inquiring human beings who are able to develop and to learn through their interaction with the environment. As a result, he spoke of childhood as a uniquely important time for development, describing both the characteristics of different ages and appropriate education of each.

In his discussion of childhood, Rousseau also pointed out what children were not: They were not the *tabula rasa* or "blank slate" children described by John Locke at about the same time in England, able only to receive messages from the environment as passive beings. Additionally, they were not the miniature adults of Renaissance thought, nor "things" to be abandoned, if not of use economically, as they had formerly been considered. (We shall see Rousseau's view reflected in the theoretical work of John Dewey and Jean Piaget, who are also represented in our suitcase.)

### *John Dewey*

Dewey's hat is important. It has two feathers in its brim - the beginnings of progressive education and the child study movement in the

United States. Dewey examined the work of Friedrich Froebel who had

advanced the ideas of Rousseau's early education in the development of the first kindergarten in Germany in 1837. According to Wortham (1992), "Froebel embraced the active nature of learning and saw play as the educational method whereby the child's inner power could be released" (p. 8).

Dewey believed in the same need for firsthand experiences for young children as Froebel had introduced with his kindergarten concept. However, as a progressive educator, Dewey, along with G. Stanley Hall and others, demonstrated the need to study how better to develop appropriate child-centered curriculum within a community-building environment, rather than in teacher-initiated lessons with prescribed imitation activities for the child as Froebel's curriculum had advocated. In rejecting imitation as a prescription for curriculum, Dewey (1900) stated:

*From the psychological standpoint it may safely be said that when a teacher has to rely upon a series of dictated directions, it is just because the child has no image of his own of what is to be done or why it is to be done. Instead, therefore, of gaining power of control by conforming to directions, he is really losing it – made dependent upon an external source. (p. 151)*

We can also nod our head in agreement when wearing our Dewey hat as we read about his understanding of play, a needed center of kindergarten curriculum planning. He (Dewey, 1900) stated:

*It [play] brings the child in contact with a great variety of material: wood, tin, leather, yarn, etc.; it supplies a motive for using these materials in real ways instead of going through exercises having no meaning except a remote symbolic one; it calls into play alertness of the senses and acuteness of observation; it demands clear-cut imagery of the ends to be accomplished, and requires ingenuity and invention in planning; it makes necessary concentrated attention and personal responsibility in execution, while the results are in such tangible form that the child may be led to judge his own work and improve his standards. (p. 149)*

In this desire to continue exploring his democratic processes for young children, Dewey established the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago in 1896. Discussing Dewey's purpose in establishing this school, Wortham (1992) noted:

*Dewey's goal was to develop a school that could become a cooperative community while developing individual capacities at the same time. Life and its occupations should provide the basis for education, with the main test of success being the ability of individuals to*

*meet new social situations through thoughtful action.* (p. 16)

Dewey's ideas are still actively being pursued by those working in the Laboratory School, such as Vivian Paley, author of books such as *You Can't Say You Can't Play* (1992). Paley explores the social and moral dilemmas of the kindergarten classroom and in this particular work defines the needed role of the teacher to uproot the first weeds of exclusion in the classroom society. In finding her solutions to the dilemmas, Paley's thinking continually returns to Dewey's concern for the importance of developing democratic group processes in early education. Such a concern is expressed when Dewey (1916) wrote: "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of social living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 101).

### *Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky*

It is possible for us to wear the hats of Piaget and Vygotsky at the same time, while also enjoying their individual uniqueness, one at a time. The mutuality of their theories concerns the language of kindergarten children. That is, both Piaget and Vygotsky argued that in infancy, a human's language and thought begin their developmental processes independent of each other. By the age of two, they have become more closely related. In their theories, Piaget and Vygotsky described two-year-old thought as an increasingly verbal expressive process and lan-

guage usage as an intentional practice to influence behavior.

Piaget and Vygotsky can be viewed as complementing each other, thus making it easier to wear both hats at the same time. In relation to this notion, Glassman (1994) stated that within both theories:

- There are two lines of development - natural and social - that interact continuously in the development of children's thinking. Both are important. Both need to be considered to understand cognitive change.
- Children are able to mentally transform their experiences through internal reflection.
- These major transformative changes, in thinking, can be identified by qualitative changes.
- The course of these changes is influenced by the social milieu.

### *The Separate Hats of Piaget and Vygotsky*

As we have just seen there is a great deal of mutuality between Piaget and Vygotsky's theories related to the early development of children, including the idea that children are biological organisms. There was also mutual respect expressed by the theorists for each other's work. Berk and Winsler (1995) discuss this "meeting of the minds" (p. 108) and remind us that Vygotsky gave credit to Piaget for giving him food for thought on his theory of self-directed speech. Similarly, Piaget, in re-

sponding to Vygotsky's critique on his ideas of egocentric speech, placed value in Vygotsky's study of thought and language.

The two theorists differed in how the developmental process continues, particularly after the age of two. It is easy to argue about these differences, especially as we search to discover how children learn literacy. Their separate views of the roles of language in cognitive development are explained by Berk and Winsler (1995):

*According to Vygotsky, language, in the form of private speech, is the centerpiece of development - the pivotal means through which culturally adaptive cognitive strategies are transferred from the social to the psychological plane of functioning. (p. 99)*

*In contrast, Piaget viewed language as a secondary, emergent phenomenon - as an outgrowth of the sensorimotor activity involved in infant's and young children's independent exploration of the physical world. Private speech was seen as a symptom of the preschooler's immaturity, egocentric, nonsocially adapted thought; it served no positive, adaptive purpose in the life of the young child. (p. 100)*

Other differences between the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky include the roles of play and instruction in the development of cognitive structures. These differences are dis-

cussed in the following sections on Piaget and Vygotsky. The discussion of Vygotsky's theory also includes an elaboration of his stages of speech development.

**Piaget's hat.** Piaget examined what occurs within the young child that leads to changes in cognitive processes. Piaget theorized that instruction can refine and improve inner cognitive structures/schemas/concepts, if these processes have already emerged within the individual child's intellectual development. He also set forth the idea that children everywhere move through a series of four stages in this cognitive transformation: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational.

Particularly during the preoperational stage, Piaget regarded play as the dominance of assimilation over accommodation within a young child's psychological adaptation to the environment. The concept of play as the dominance of assimilation over accommodation means that through play, children are able to integrate new thoughts into their existing cognitive structure/schemas/concepts (assimilation) without altering previous mental structures (accommodation). There are clear implications here for teachers of young children. For example, when Sam "makes" a block into a car, he is using the concrete object (block) to conform to his mental idea (car), rather than changing his thinking to conform to the object and having this object stay a block of wood. It is a car for Sam.

Additionally, Piaget found that play consolidates newly learned behavior. That is, through play, children can repeat new learning until it is consolidated into established mental constructs. Such symbolic play of kindergarten children has multiple possibilities for facilitating

significant learning experiences as children connect physical and mental activities of previous learnings with new ideas within the child-centered environment. Thus, children are able to express flexibility, adaptability, and creativity as they become intellectually sophisticated through play. Piaget saw the process of play as a necessary part of intellectual development for the young child - a process for the intellect to continue to adapt more sophisticated strategies to its repertoire. In our classrooms, with our encouragement of the manipulation of real objects, the daily use of symbols of language, the use of imagery in making meaning for the world of the child, we are wearing the quite playful beret of Piaget!

**Vygotsky's hat.** Vygotsky ([1934] 1986) states in *Thought and Language* that the cognitive transformation of children's thought takes place at two important times: (a) at about two when children are able to communicate linguistically and (b) when instruction occurs that helps children give meaning to their own thoughts.

Vygotsky examined how the social environment causes changes in children's thinking and theorizing and how the pace of an individual's

development can be influenced by the social environment. According to Vygotsky, instruction, including the instruction that the social environment offers, can lead to the development of cognitive structures/schemas/concepts.

Our use of developmental curriculum connects us with Vygotsky. His emphasis on the collaboration of the social environment, support from expert partners, and the activities of children leads us to familiarity with his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD or sometimes called, ZOPED). Vygotsky's theory of ZPD is defined by Berk and Winsler (1995) as "the distance between what an individual can accomplish during independent problem solving and what he or she can accomplish with the help of an adult or more competent member of the culture" (p. 171). This approach to learning means the environment supports the concept that learning can lead development. As Dixon-Krauss (1996) explains:

*Instruction within the zone of proximal development begins with the Vygotskyian idea that the path of learning is from social interaction to internalized independent functioning. It is an ongoing progression from other-regulated to self-regulated performance. Social interaction provides the context for guiding the child's learning. During instruction, the teacher mediates or augments the child's ability to perform various learning tasks by providing guidance and sup-*

*port primarily through social dialogue. (p. 15)*

Vygotsky also examined and elaborated the development of speech, which is so important for teachers of young children. The first stage of speech - social or external - does not occur until about three. He described this as speech to control behavior of others and to express thoughts and emotions. Those of us who have been around twos can attest to this...particularly the powerful word, NO!

Vygotsky described the next stage as the development of egocentric speech, prominent in young children's development between the ages of three and seven. The development within these four years is the bridge, Vygotsky says, between social and inner speech that begins at about seven years of age. This important span of four years includes both the preschool and kindergarten years. According to Vygotsky, this time serves children's acquisition of control of their own behavior through expressive language. Those of us involved with the intricacies of providing appropriate classroom experience for all our children, with all their levels of language understanding represented, must keep this sense of Vygotsky and speech on and in our heads.

According to Vygotsky ([1934] 1986), the inner, soundless speech beginning at age seven—that stream of self-talk or stream of consciousness that directs our thinking and behavior for the rest of our lives—is

the source of all higher mental functioning. For our kindergarten children, the magical year of first grade is when this emergence of inner speech becomes inner language and the product exemplifies success in developing concepts for learning in school. In other words, Vygotsky saw this self-regulatory inner language as first a self-talk or private speech in the preschool years, devel-

oping into inner speech or internalized thinking at about the age of seven. We can see this in the kindergarten classroom when a child is processing a difficult task and is verbally sequencing the process. For example, in the block area, our Sam is saying, "I will build a road for my car to get on the freeway. I want to put the street next to the freeway. I'm going to make it so my car doesn't get in an accident. I want to put a light...". By the time Sam leaves us for first grade, this speech will be less inaudible as he internalizes the process.

### *Erik Erikson*

I like to wear Erikson's hat, because he provides a general framework in the kindergarten classroom for interpreting major changes that children are experiencing, particularly within the social environment. Concerned with a healthy personality, Erikson described human development in terms of how children adapt to the social environment, specifically eight conflicts that need to be resolved throughout the life cycle of each human being. The first of

these kindergarten-age crisis resolutions is that of autonomy vs. guilt. According to Erikson, with language ability, physical movement, and active imagination, children are able to discover their sense of self, have a greater sense of initiative, and thus become more responsible for their behavior. It is at this stage that they appear at our kindergarten door. Consequently, it is our awesome task, should we accept it, to continue to develop this sense of self and responsibility. We often call this "being responsible for your own behavior."

The other Erikson phase that we see in the kindergarten year is the child's need to demonstrate competence. We, as their teachers and guides, offer our children multiple opportunities for success in meaningful activities. We constantly reassure them in our supportive environment that they *can* take risks when solving problems and gaining mastery. They want to be some ONE, as viewed by peers and defined by exploration of the child's culture - both the one at school and the one at home. Erikson calls this crisis resolution: industry vs. inferiority. In other words, children are industrious about this exploration, and, with our help as teachers, they will not come to the end of this first year of formal schooling with a feeling of inferiority. Instead, through this inner drive of industry, they will develop a sense of self-worth because of all the exciting social connections, proving indeed some one

lives, leading to the powerful feeling of "Here I come, First Grade!"

### *Howard Gardner*

Gardner's (1983) hat could have seven points representing his original idea of multiple intelligences (or MI) - linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. In these multiple intelligences, Gardner describes the different ways that intelligence can ex-

press itself. Each of these modes has the result, as Bruner (1986) says of "minds which become specialized to deal in verbal or mathematical or spatial forms of word making, supported by symbolic means provided by cultures which themselves specialize in their preference for different kinds of worlds" (p. 103). These multiple intelligences are represented in our kindergarten classroom by our learning centers. Gardner (1995) reflects this approach when he states:

*I have always believed that the heart of the MI perspective- in theory and practice - inheres in taking human differences seriously. At the theoretical level, one acknowledges that all individuals cannot be profitably arrayed on a single intellectual dimension. At the practical level, one acknowledges that any uniform educational approach is likely to serve only a minority of children. (p. 209)*

Here are some examples of activities based on the seven modes that



we naturally plan to help children construct meaning of their world.

- the linguistic mode - the language experiences in group time, the library, the storytelling;
- the musical mode - the songs, the available variety of musical instruments;
- the logical-mathematical mode - the number games, the counting, the cause - effect activities, the problem-solving;
- the spatial mode - the puzzles, the blocks;
- the bodily-kinesthetic mode - the physical games, the creative movement;
- the interpersonal mode - the dramatic play, the group time;
- the intrapersonal mode - solitary exploration, reflection times.

Gardner continues to revisit his theory of multiple intelligences in order to inform us of his most current thinking. For example, he has added a naturalist intelligence to the original seven points, so we can now see our science center as being informed by the MI's. In 1994, he proposed that the three most positive ways we can use his theory are to:

- Cultivate capabilities that are valued in the community and a larger society than school - music, art, for example

- Approach concepts and subjects in a variety of ways.
- Personalize education.

### *A Synthesis of the Theoretical Hats*

As we contemplate how best to teach young children and prepare them for lifelong success, let us briefly review our theoretical and pedagogical options as represented by the contents of our suitcase:

- Rousseau and Dewey gave us hats for child-centered active learning.
- Erikson helped us understand the social development of children
- Piaget and Vygotsky challenged us to understand how children learn.
- Gardner encouraged us to continue to look at the multiple ways of knowing.

Many more hats could be considered. Indeed, our heads would probably become a trifle tender if we wore all of them at one time. Instead, we can mix and match, picking what best suits the needs of our students and our own style.

### *Practical Use for the Hats*

So how can we put the theories behind these creative and important hats to practical use in our classrooms for the lifelong benefit of the children we teach? Let us take a brief overview.

### **The Hat of Rousseau in the Classroom.**

1. The teacher is a reflective practitioner.
2. The environment is an interactive and exploratory space.
3. The young child is viewed as having specific developmental needs that are different from those of an adult or older child.

**The Hat of Dewey in the Classroom.**

1. "Learning to do by doing" is our motto.
2. The child and the curriculum are equally important.
3. Responding to the works of Paley in the social world of our classroom allows us to be reflective practitioners in the building of a democratic environment.

**The Hat of Piaget and Vygotsky in the Classroom.**

1. Our knowledge of how young children learn can help enhance the importance of opportunities for social construction.
2. Learning and development are interconnected.

**The Hat of Erikson in the Classroom.**

1. The social development of children at kindergarten age is crucial.
2. What children bring to school from their homes must be a part of the knowledge and understanding of the teacher, so he or she can help the child develop a

strong self-concept. An important part of the kindergarten year is the development of self-worth.

**The Hat of Gardner in the Classroom.**

1. There is more than one way to learn.
2. We need to take into consideration the many ways of constructing meaning when considering classroom planning - the multiple intelligences.

**WEAR THESE HATS PROUDLY!**

These Hats - this chosen wardrobe of theoretical hats - they sparkle; they are comfortable - a fit of theory and practice - and flexible in their ability to change and to relate to each other. As I do, you will continue to have personal experiences, study, and reflection to enhance the use of the theories of Rousseau, Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, and Gardner in your daily practice.

An additional inclusion in the wardrobe will be your selection of a cultural hat. The chosen adornment represents your own journey of study and reflection concerning the issues and gifts of culture that are an integral part of daily experience with the diversity of children in the kindergarten classroom. For example, building the supportive structure between home and school for each child is just one of our cultural obligations and privileges as kindergarten teachers.

All of these hats are valuable to teachers. Wearing them enables us

to enrich the education of young children, thus fulfilling the dream that Freire (1996) expressed when he wrote:

*They (the community) dreamed of an open, democratic education, one that would instill in their*

*children a taste for questioning, a passion for knowledge, a healthy curiosity, a joy of creating, and the pleasure of risk without which there can be no creation.*  
(p. 140)

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