The importance of Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory for early childhood educators and early childhood education

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Abstract:

If early childhood educators know and appropriately use just one theory that is relevant to early childhood education, Bronfenbrenner's is the theory for them. As all good teachers know, it is the typically occurring activities in which their children engage, including the interactions that they have with their teachers and their peers inside the classroom and with their friends and family outside the classroom, that are so important for their development. Of course, how those activities occur depends in part on the personal characteristics of all individuals involved: the children, their parents, their friends, and their teachers. Those activities also are heavily influenced by the contexts in which they occur, whether home, child care center, the park, their grandparents' home, or with a child minder or some other type of more informal care. The way in which the children's classroom is organized clearly has an impact on the ways in which the children can engage in activities and interactions. And what happens in one context also influences what goes on in other contexts. Children who arrive at school hungry will engage with their teachers and peers quite differently than will those who arrive well fed; children who come from homes in which parents have time, interest, and energy to invest in them will arrive in school much better prepared than those who do not; children whose language at home is the same as that of the classroom will find interactions much simpler than those for whom this is not the case; children who share the same racial/ethnic background as their peers and teachers will engage differently with them than will children who stand out as being different.

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Chapter:

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This, in brief, captures the essence of Bronfenbrenner's theory, about which we will go into more depth later. First, however: How did he arrive at this theoretical approach? Does it help to answer this question by understanding his personal background? The answer to the second question is "yes!" Providing some biographical details of his life will go some way to explaining why he developed his bioecological theory of human development.

Biographical Details

Urie Bronfenbrenner was born in 1917, in Russia, but his family moved to the United States just six years later, with his father working as a neuropathologist at an institution in upstate New York for persons with mental disabilities. As Bronfenbrenner (19956) wrote, the experiences he had there, talking and walking with his father, made a long-lasting impression. He clearly remembered his father worrying about the self-fulfilling prophecy of his patients being labeled "morons" (the word in vogue at that time) inculcating the belief that there was nothing that could be done to allow them to live any sort of productive life. He also remembered that he first started thinking about the interdependence of the organism and its environment (something that would come to be at the center of his theory) thanks to those walks with his father, "a field naturalist at heart" (Bronfenbrenner, 199 56, p. 602).

After graduating in psychology and music from Cornell University, completing a master's degree and his doctorate at Harvard University, and at the University of Michigan, Bronfenbrenner joined the faculty in Child Development and Family Relations at Cornell, worked there virtually his entire career, and, having by then retired, died in 2005. During his academic career he wrote widely on various subjects: contemporary approaches to child rearing in the Soviet Union, early childhood education in the United States and other Western societies, ways of helping poor families educate their children and adolescents, family policy and the problem of taking a "deficit approach" to the situation of families in poverty; and, of course, he was one of the

scholars who played a major role in the development of the Head Start program (for more details, see Tudge, 2013).

During most of this time he was also developing what started life being called the ecology of human development (during the 1970s and 1980s), was subsequently termed "ecological systems theory" (in the late 1980s and early 1990s), and ended being called "the bioecological theory of human development" (from the mid-1990s) (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). What is quite clear is that his theoretical approach was in no way divorced from his writing on other topics; rather, his thinking about children's development and ways of supporting families were both informed by his theory and served to help him develop it. Consistently, he incorporated an ecological approach into his study of children and families; just as in biology, ecology refers to the relation between organisms and the environments in which they live, so Bronfenbrenner felt that the only way to understand child or family development was to study it within its naturally occurring context.

The Ecological Model

In the final form of Bronfenbrenner's theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Rosa & Tudge, 2013), person and context are thus two of the most important concepts. They are not the most important concepts, however; pride of place is given to what he called "proximal processes" in his process-person-context-time (PPCT) model. Proximal processes are the everyday activities and interactions in which developing individuals engage, and are so important that he named them the "engines of development" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 798). Time is the fourth element, and signifies that in order to study development, one must both collect data over time—during proximal processes themselves (examining the nature of the interactions) and longitudinally (focusing on their frequency and consistency)—and also examine the ways in which the passage of broader sweeps of time is likely to influence the ways in which we think about raising and/or educating our children. All four elements function interdependently rather than independently; that is, one cannot trace the effects of one without considering the others, but here we will describe each of them in turn.

Proximal Processes

Bronfenbrenner defined proximal processes in the same way in several of his publications from 1993 onwards:

> Especially in its early phases, and to a great extent throughout the life course, human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. Such enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment are referred to as *proximal processes*.
>
> (Bronfenbrenner, 1995a, p. 620)

He continued by noting that proximal processes are influenced simultaneously by characteristics of the person, the context, and time:

> The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person; the environment, both immediate and more remote, in which the processes are taking place; and the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration.
>
> (Bronfenbrenner, 1995a, p. 621)

Bronfenbrenner wrote about proximal processes almost exclusively in a positive manner, the "developmental outcomes" being either the promotion of competence or the reduction of what he termed "dysfunction" (that is, by helping individuals do better than would be expected given the situation that they find themselves in). In other words, a child who is expected to do well at school will become increasingly competent by engaging in plenty of positive and challenging activities and interactions with teachers and peers. By contrast, in the case of a child who is struggling with the demands of school, engagement in positive activities, and interactions with teachers and peers will reduce the likelihood of school failure. These proximal processes serve as a means to protect this child from the negative consequences of those early struggles.

Person Characteristics

As Bronfenbrenner noted above, how those regular activities and interactions occur depends, at least in part, on the "characteristics of the developing person." What are these characteristics? He wrote about three types, naming them "demand," "resource," and "force." We will first consider *demand characteristics.* Earlier in his career, Bronfenbrenner had used the phrase "personal stimulus" instead of demand, and in our opinion, the earlier term captured better what he meant by it. A teacher in child care center or school has her first look at some children who are entering her class for the first time. What does she see? (Here, and subsequently, we will treat the teacher as female, as most early childhood teachers are female, despite the fact that some males, the first author included, have worked or do work in early childhood classrooms.) She sees girls and boys, some taller, some shorter, some fatter, some thinner. She sees children of different skin colors, and one who has her head covered. Two children are speaking a language that she doesn't understand. One child quickly goes over to look at a book, another hangs back, a third is crying, and another seems surly. All these initial impressions (that is, personal-stimulus or demand characteristics) can influence the first interactions in which teachers and children engage, and could set the stage for subsequent interactions if these first ones go well or poorly.

At the same time, the teacher's demand characteristics, and those of the other children, are being picked up by the children as they enter the room. Does the teacher look kind, worried, harassed, or threatening to them? They each might be thinking: Does she look anything like my mom looks? Will I be able to understand her? Will I be able to make any friends here, because no one looks like I do? Different answers to these questions, whether expressed consciously or not, are likely to influence the children's first interactions with others in different ways.

By comparison, *resource characteristics* (previous experiences, current abilities, and so on) are not immediately apparent, although sometimes they are inferred from demand characteristics,

e.g., using skin color or gender or other easily noted characteristics to make assumptions about resource characteristics. Assuming that the teacher is not prone to major prejudices, however, no matter what her initial reaction (based on demand characteristics) is to the new children in her class, in the course of observing them engaging in whatever activities are encouraged in the classroom and interacting with them, she will come to know something of their past experiences and current competencies. The child who immediately on entering the classroom went to the book corner is one, it turns out, who cannot read a word and at home only has a few picture books. The proximal processes relevant to books and reading will be quite different than they would have been if she were already reading fluently. The child who appeared to be surly turns out to be one who has had a great deal of experience with mathematical concepts. The teacher, having learned this, interacts in a way quite differently than she had anticipated. The same is true, of course, for the teacher's resource characteristics. The child who worried because the teacher does not look at all like his mother (a demand characteristic) discovers that she has had a lot of experience working with children of a different skin color than her own and she has learned ways of putting at ease all the children in her class. Proximal process that might initially have been difficult because of the child's wariness become warm-hearted and open because of the teacher's particular resource characteristics.

Finally, *force characteristics* are those having to do with things like temperament, motivation, and persistence. The child, mentioned earlier, who only has experience of picture books is, it turns out, desperate to learn how to read "real" books; that drive and determination to read will dramatically affect the proximal processes in which she engages both with books and with those who are helping her learn to read. By contrast, the child who has had a good deal of experience with mathematical concepts and has learned them easily finds that her expectations that everything will be easy to learn are dashed, and has little persistence to learn things that are at all challenging. Children's different degrees of motivation and persistence have profound influences on the relevant proximal processes in which they are engaged. Similarly, teachers' force characteristics can also dramatically affect the proximal processes in which they are engaged. One teacher might have a great deal of experience; another one might be in her first teaching position. If the first teacher's experiences have led to burnout or a belief that no matter what she does the children in her classroom are destined for failure, her motivation to try to ensure success could be far less than that of the second teacher who arrives with little experience but a burning desire to change children's lives for the better.

Context

As we have just shown, proximal processes are heavily influenced by person characteristics of the developing individuals of interest and of any people with whom they are interacting. But they are also heavily influenced by the context, or, as Bronfenbrenner wrote, "the environment, both immediate and more remote, in which the [proximal] processes are taking place" (1995a, p. 621). It is unfortunate, but Bronfenbrenner is most widely known as a theorist of context. Having used the metaphor of Russian nesting dolls to describe the individual embedded within multiple levels of context, his theory is typically described as being one that deals with the influence of context on the individual (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). In fact, as we have shown, context is merely one of the elements of the PPCT model, a model in which proximal processes are of most importance.

Of the four levels of context about which Bronfenbrenner wrote, the *microsystem* is the most important, as proximal processes only occur within microsystems, "immediate" environments. These are environments in which the developing individuals of interest—young children, in the case of this chapter—have the opportunity for face-to-face contact with others and to be active with objects or symbols for significant portions of time. For early educators, obviously the child care or school classroom is the most important microsystem. How that environment is organized, the types of activities and interactions that are encouraged (and discouraged), how calm or chaotic things are, and so on, all are likely to influence the manner in which children engage in activities and interact both with their peers and their teachers, in other words, are likely to influence proximal processes. It is easy to see how this can be true by thinking about one classroom in which children are expected to sit at individual desks while their teacher talks and occasionally poses questions, and another classroom in which activity areas are set up, with children choosing which of the areas to be in, and the teacher going around to different areas to talk with small groups about what they are learning.

Children develop in more than one microsystem, of course, and Bronfenbrenner used the term *mesosystem* to describe the relations between two or more microsystems. The child's home is the obvious example of a microsystem, but if children spend a good deal of time also at their grandparents' house or with a peer group, these also would count as different microsystems. The home context is most important, assuming the child spends most time there, because how that environment is organized will influence the ease with which children make the transition to a new classroom in a child care center or school. Children coming from homes in which they are expected to carefully follow directions, obey their parents and other adults, and stay neat and clean would be most likely to find it easier fitting into the first classroom described above. By contrast, children who have become used to having to decide many things for themselves and to learn to exercise autonomy are more likely to fit into the second type of classroom. Mesosystem analysis helps us to understand why a child from the first type of home might find it difficult to engage in productive proximal processes in the second type of classroom, and vice versa. This is not to say that Bronfenbrenner thought that there needs to be a close fit between different microsystems in order for children to succeed; in fact, it is clearly helpful for children to learn that different types of environments require different types of behavior and afford the learning of new roles and new ways of acting and interacting.

The *exosystem,* in Bronfenbrenner's typology of contexts, is a setting in which the developing individuals of interest are not situated but which nonetheless has an important indirect effect. In the case of a child, an important exosystem would be a parent's work situation or what is happening in the teacher's home. Think of parents whose job requires them to carefully do all that their immediate supervisors ask them to do, and for whom success at work means being punctual, always looking neat and clean, and following the rules that others have laid down. Given that this type of job typically does not require much, if any, education beyond high school, such parents are likely to have viewed school success also in terms of doing what the teachers want. Given their views of what is necessary for success, whether at school or work, it is not at all surprising to find that they are likely to value obedience in their children as the way to achieve later success. By contrast, parents who during their education have been encouraged to think for themselves (typically in the course of higher education) and whose job also requires

them to exercise self-direction, are more likely to value autonomy in their children (for empirical support for this view, see Kohn, 1995). The experiences that parents have had in their earlier education and are currently having at work (settings in which their children are not situated) are thus likely to have influential indirect effects on the ways in which they typically deal with their children at home—effects, in other words, on proximal processes.

Similarly, if a teacher is facing family problems at home or is getting insufficient sleep because her child is ill or not sleeping well, this will have an influence on the proximal processes in which she is involved with the children at school. If the teacher is the developing individual in whom we are interested, the home-school issues are related to the mesosystem. However, if our developing individuals of interest are the children in her class, the indirect effects on proximal processes related to what is happening in the teacher's home count as an exosystem effect.

The final aspect of context is the *macrosystem,* which Bronfenbrenner conceived of as akin to culture, whether considered as an entire society or a racial, ethnic, regional, or socioeconomic group within a society. A macrosystem includes people who share values, beliefs, practices, access to resources, and a sense of common identity. People living in the United States can be distinguished in these terms from those living in Russia; these two countries constitute two different macrosystems. Within the United States, however, if members of two racial/ethnic groups or two socioeconomic groups or two groups living in different regions can be differentiated in terms of their values, beliefs, practices, and sense of identity, they also count as different macrosystems. One should not be surprised to find, then, that members of these different within-U.S. macrosystems have different child-rearing values, beliefs, and practices.

If middle-class parents are more likely than their working-class counterparts to value the ability of children to make their own decisions—and working-class parents more likely to value following the rules that others have laid down—for the reasons mentioned earlier, and they spend more time in the company of other parents from the same socioeconomic background, it should not be surprising to find that these ideas become more solidified. If their own parents were also from a middle-class background, and this is their experience of being raised, again they may be more likely to have taken on these same values. Then, to the extent to which parental practices (proximal processes, in other words) are in line with their values, middleclass parenting practices should be different from those found among working-class parents. In other words, parents' values are not simply the product of their own personal characteristics, but reflective, in part, of the macrosystems of which they are a part. In this sense, the choice of child care center or type of school is not simply a personal choice but stems, at least in part, from the values and beliefs shared by the cultural group of which the parents are a part.

Access to resources, one of the important components of macrosystems, also is clearly important in this choice. Some child care centers, situated in affluent areas, are able to charge high prices, and thus may have better quality materials and equipment, smaller class sizes, better paid—and thus probably better trained—educators than do child care centers situated in poorer areas. Similarly, school districts in affluent suburbs typically can provide so much more for their children than school districts in run-down areas of cities or in impoverished rural areas. The macrosystem thus influences proximal processes in many ways, including the ways in which

parents interact with their children and, through the choices they make with regard to child care and schooling, how children are likely to interact with teachers and peers in school.

Time

This is the fourth and final aspect of the PPCT model, and can be thought of in two different ways. The first is that cultural values, beliefs, and practices are not static, but change over time. Whether children are expected to go to school at all, the age at which they should go and how long they should stay in school, and the ways in which they should be treated while in school have all changed dramatically over the past several centuries, and changed considerably from one generation to the next. These types of changes clearly have implications for proximal processes, or what is expected to go on in child care or school.

The second way has to do with what is occurring, over time, within any given proximal process, for example, when a teacher and child are interacting, is the farmer's attention completely on the child or is her attention divided between this child and the others in the room? Proximal processes, Bronfenbrenner argued, will be far more effective in the first than the second case. Second, how often does this teacher interact with this child? If the proximal processes are to be effective they must occur regularly and with increasing complexity; a single interaction once a month is unlikely to be helpful.

Bronfenbrenner was also clear that if one wants to study development, one has to do so over time. Cross-sectional studies, while adequate to show that children differ in cognitive abilities or socioemotional understanding at different ages, can never answer the developmental question of how development occurs. Just as teachers see how their children develop over the course of the school year, so researchers need to conduct longitudinal research to understand development.

Putting Bronfenbrenner's Theory into Practice in the Classroom

It would help teachers to think about the proximal processes in which they and the children in their class typically engage. That is, how do the children spend their time, being occupied in what types of activities and interactions? How does the teacher spend her time? To what extent are the children's activities or interactions with other objects and symbols (for example, with blocks or books), with other children, or with the teacher? What is the evidence that the children's activities and interactions become "progressively more complex" (Bronfenbrenner, 1995a, p. 641) over time? To the extent to which they are becoming increasingly complex, Bronfenbrenner would argue that they are likely to be beneficial for children's development.

As we pointed out earlier, person characteristics modify those proximal processes. Let us first consider the teacher's role. We might assume that teachers reading this text have an interest in applying this theory as a way to help foster children's development. Their willingness to try a new approach is a highly relevant person characteristic. But obviously there is more. All classrooms have a range of objects that are designed to be helpful for the children's learning, relative to their ages. What can teachers do to encourage increasing complexity as the children interact with those objects, with other children, and with the teacher herself? For example, a child should be encouraged to do more than simply build the same structure with blocks, but can

be encouraged to think how to make it taller, stronger, incorporate bridges, and so forth. To the extent to which teachers are motivated to encourage challenges and persistent enough to ensure that it will happen, they are more likely to achieve enhanced development on the children's part. Each of the teachers' three main types of person characteristics is important here. There are the teacher's demand characteristics: those that the children first notice when they enter the classroom for the first time. There are her resource characteristics, such as the extent of experience she has teaching this age group. And there are her force characteristics, such as her motivation to establish positive and developmentally appropriate activities and interactions between her and her children, and among the children themselves.

But the teacher is only one of the persons whose characteristics are relevant to proximal processes. What about the children, and what can teachers do given the wide range of person characteristics that they possess? Given that wide range, a teaching strategy that essentially treats all children in any given classroom as the same (whole-class instruction) is unlikely to be as effective, at least in terms of maximizing proximal processes, as a strategy that takes account of individual differences. Think of the child who is shy (a force characteristic) and finds it difficult to integrate into a small group: How can teachers help that person engage in activities and interactions in developmentally effective ways? What about the child who seems far more capable than or at a different stage from (a resource characteristic) the rest of the class: How can teachers ensure that this one is intellectually stimulated and not bored? Another one comes from an ethnic background quite different from the rest of the class and, thanks to skin color or type of clothing, does not look the same as the others (a demand characteristic). What will teachers do to make this child feel welcomed by the group, and thus be able to engage with it in helpful and appropriate ways? Another child seems to be very bright (a resource characteristic), but is completely unmotivated to engage in any task that is in anyway challenging (a force characteristic). How can teachers interact with this child so as to encourage a different, and more developmentally helpful, approach?

How do teachers deal with the context? One answer to that is quite straightforward, as they have some power to set up their own classroom as they think best. The manner in which the classroom has been set up (for example, the placement of chairs and tables, the choice of objects with which the children play or work, where artwork is displayed, and so on) influences how the children will engage with the materials, with the teacher, and with each other. In other words, teachers have a good deal of control of the microsystem in which proximal processes occur.

However, as Bronfenbrenner made clear, development never occurs simply in one microsystem, no matter how important it is. In the case of the children, their home background is another important microsystem, and how proximal processes proceed within the classroom is highly influenced by proximal processes that occur at home. By the same token, of course, what is going on in the teacher's home microsystem also influences the ways in which she engages in proximal processes within the classroom microsystem. Some children come to school from homes in which they are accustomed to engage and interact with one or more adults around activities such as reading or playing games together. Others interact far less in the course of these activities but spend more of their time engaged with the television, video games, or a variety of "smart" technology. What the teacher should expect from these two groups of children will be, initially at least, quite different; and the ways in which she engages and interacts with them will

also need to be different. In any case, knowing about the children's home microsystem can only help teachers ease children's transition to the classroom microsystem.

Similarly, it may be that in the classroom there are children from different social-class backgrounds. Building on the work of Melvin Kohn (1979, 1995; see also Tudge, Hogan, Snezhkova, Kulakova, & Etz, 2000; Tudge et al., 2013), we might expect that children from middle-class backgrounds have been more often encouraged to decide things for themselves (where possible) whereas their peers from working-class backgrounds will have been more often encouraged to follow the rules that adults establish. Depending on how the classroom is set up, the transition from home to school will be easier for one of those groups of children than for the other. The more teachers want the children to think for themselves, the harder it will be for those who are accustomed to being told what to do. By contrast, the tighter the control exercised over the children in the classroom, the more difficult it will be for those who are less accustomed to being restricted. In both cases there are implications for how proximal processes proceed in the classroom. But knowing about the children's background can help teachers understand the difficulties that some, or all, of the children are experiencing, and plan activities and interactions in a way designed to smooth the transition. As time goes on, those proximal processes will become more complex; as teachers and children become accustomed to each other and the ways in which they are expected to engage with the teachers and with their peers, teachers can have increased expectations of them and, as Bronfenbrenner argued, development will follow.

The same is of course as true of ethnic/racial differences as of social-class differences. It is equally or more important for the teacher to understand something about the home experiences of children who come from a different ethnic or racial group than that of her own. It is not simply skin color, appearance, or style of dress (i.e., demand characteristics) that influence, initially at least, proximal processes, but the values, beliefs, and practices commonly held by groups of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

As noted earlier, both social class and racial/ethnic group are examples of what Bronfenbrenner termed the macrosystem, which is the level of context in which values, beliefs, practices, access to resources, and a sense of identity are most relevant. However, the macrosystem only exerts its influence within microsystems, via proximal processes. As Kohn (1995) argued, there is good reason to believe that working-class parents typically stress obedience to adults as the best way to ensure their children's success; whereas middle-class parents see the exercise of autonomy and self-direction as more relevant to success. These beliefs may be widespread within these two social classes, but the effect of these beliefs can only occur by parents typically encouraging obedience or autonomy with their children. To the extent to which either of these practices typically occurs in the home we are, of course, considering proximal processes.

The other thing to remember about macrosystems is that they are always undergoing change. All one has to do is think about values and beliefs about early childhood education and how they have changed, even within the same society. How people thought about formal settings for young children 50, 100, or 200 years ago, and how they thought children should be educated are so very different. Similarly, the values, beliefs, and practices that distinguish one cultural group from another (even within the same society) change over time. Although Bronfenbrenner wrote about time in a number of ways, as pointed out earlier, macrosystem change over time (macro-

time) must always be considered, calling into question the unfortunate habit of using a child's membership in one or other cultural group as the reason to try to explain his or her behavior.

Putting Bronfenbrenner's Theory into Practice in Research

The theory may appear to be far too complex to use either in research or in the classroom. The PPCT model, after all, specifies that proximal processes are simultaneously influenced by three types of person characteristics (demand, resource, and force) for each of the individuals involved in the proximal process of interest, four levels of context (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem), and time. Perhaps this is one reason why so many researchers seem content to think of the theory as something much simpler, one that deals just with contextual influence on development.

However, as we have made clear in some of our writing about Bronfenbrenner's theory (see, for example, Tudge et al., 2009; Tudge et al., 2016), there is absolutely no requirement to include all types of person characteristics and all levels of context in any study. The one essential component to include in any research based on his theory is proximal processes. That is, the study must focus on the typically occurring everyday activities in which the developing individual of interest is involved. Because the theory specifies that proximal processes are influenced by person characteristics, the study has to include at least individuals who differ on at least one (but not necessarily more than one) of the characteristics viewed as most relevant. Similarly, as the theory states that proximal processes are also influenced by context, the study has to include variation in at least one level of context. So long as data are gathered over time (by studying what is going on during proximal processes and by gathering data at least at two points in time), the minimum requirement for including time in the model will have been satisfied. It is also helpful, however, to specify the historical time within which the research is being conducted. Data gathered during a period of rapid economic growth or during peacetime may very well not be replicable should a similar study be conducted during a period of worsening recession or in the middle of a war. It is in fact possible to loosen these minimum requirements a little more. If a study were only conducted in a single type of context (just in school, or only with children from a working-class background, for example) and thus could not show how context influenced proximal processes, it would be sufficient to acknowledge the lacuna and point out that another study would need to be done in a different context in order to compare contextual influences on those proximal processes.

Conclusion

Early childhood educators might think that a theory of human development may be important in terms of research, but is not particularly relevant to their practical work with young children. Bronfenbrenner, however, was fond of quoting Kurt Lewin: "There is nothing more practical than a good theory" (Lewin, 1952, p. 169). That quote is exemplified by Bronfenbrenner's theory that allows teachers to think more clearly about the different, often interrelated, factors that influence how they work and succeed with the children in their class. A word of caution is in order, as most brief discussions of his theory describe it as a theory that only deals with different layers of context and how they each influence development. As we have shown in this chapter, that is far from the case.

Teachers know well that it is the school-related activities in which their students engage and the interactions that they have with their teachers and their peers (proximal processes, in other words) that are so important for their development, particularly in the early years of schooling. How these activities and interactions unfold is obviously dependent partly on the personal characteristics of the individuals (students and teachers alike) involved and partly by the context, of the classroom, the home, and the broader socioeconomic and racial/ethnic background of the family. Helping children learn is facilitated when teachers are mindful of the interplay among these factors. By contrast, when educators attend solely to the children's personal qualities, or to how they have set up their classroom, or only to their home backgrounds, the children's education and development will be hampered. The insights provided by Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, as we hope to have shown in this chapter, can help teachers ensure that their students flourish.

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