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Developmentally Appropriate Practices in the Early Childhood Classroom

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### Abstract

This literature review explores the impact developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) have on social-emotional awareness in early childhood education. Guidelines for DAP were developed over 30 years ago and have been greatly debated amongst early childhood educators, administration, and policymakers ever since. This literature review consists of scholarly-based articles and information from reliable sources to take a detailed look at how developmentally appropriate practices impact early childhood education and social emotional development of young children.

### **Developmentally Appropriate Practices in the Early Childhood Classroom**

In order to understand the importance of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in early childhood education (ECE), one must first understand DAP and its history in ECE. “Developmentally appropriate practices incorporate the belief that young children need to develop positive dispositions and attitudes for learning as well as concepts and skills necessary for success in school and life” (Phillips & Sturm, 2012, p. 466). An early childhood classroom that is considered to be DAP is warm and welcoming; full of bright colors, but not overwhelming; children feel free to explore the materials that are provided. The teacher is not the central part of learning, but the child is. The teacher helps to encourage learning through asking questions and interacting with the students. The students’ thoughts, ideas, and interactions are what develop the lessons throughout the day.

In the mid-1980s the first DAP the National Association of the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) created guidelines. These guidelines were implemented as response to a policy document titled, *A Nation at Risk*. This document brought light to the growing need for academic instruction in preschool. “In this original version, DAP had only two dimensions—age appropriateness and individual appropriateness—and gave no consideration to the impact of culture on learning beyond mentioning ‘family background’ as a facet of individual appropriateness” (Goldstein, 2008, p. 254).

Due to the lack guidance in the original DAP guidelines; revisions were made again in the 1990s. The revision “specified early childhood teachers should not only take the developmental norms established by psychology and the specific strengths, interests, and needs of the children being taught into consideration, but should also incorporate the

values, beliefs, priorities, and practices shaping the social contexts of their students' lives into their instructional decisions" (Goldstein, 2008, p. 254). Teachers began to realize that they needed to refocus the attention to the cultures of the families served. The importance of diversity became a central focus in early childhood education and educators began to examine the importance of the characteristics of a multicultural society such as race, ethnicity, and language.

"Since the 1996 version of this position statement, the landscape of early childhood education in the United States has changed significantly and a number of issues have grown in importance" (The National Association of Education of Young Children, 2009, p. 2). The homes children are growing up in have changed; there are now more single parent homes and more homes where both parents are working. An increase of immigrant families across the nation has led to changes in first language and culture. There has also been an increase in children with special needs; including those with disabilities, challenging behaviors, and those that are at-risk for disabilities. Changes for the family are not the only issues facing early childhood education, but challenges for early childhood educators also factor into the need for the revisions to NAEYC's redevelopment of their DAP position statement. According to NAEYC (2009), "As for teachers, the nation continues to struggle to develop and maintain a qualified teaching force" (p. 2).

NAEYC revised their guidelines and created a position statement to promote excellence in early childhood education in the mid-2000s. Grounded in both the research on child development and learning and in the knowledge base regarding educational effectiveness, the framework outlines practice that promotes young children's optimal learning and development. NAEYC brought together early childhood educators with

experience and expertise, to help develop the framework for developmentally appropriate practice. The most recent DAP guidelines were published in 2009 and address the current context and relevant knowledge for developmentally appropriate practice in the early childhood learning environment.

Developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in the early childhood classroom are greatly debated amongst not only early childhood teachers, but also administrators and elementary teachers. Early childhood teachers differ on the importance of DAP in the classroom, administrators question DAP, and elementary school teachers do not understand the importance of DAP. The impact of developmentally appropriate practices in the early childhood classroom may be far-reaching and long lasting.

### **Literature Review**

Upon reviewing research of developmentally appropriate practices it was found that most research fell into three distinct groups: (1) impact of DAP on the social-emotional development of young children; (2) effects of DAP on early literacy skills; and (3) how educators views of DAP effect classroom teaching strategies. This literature review will focus on the impact of DAP on the social-emotional skills of young children in the early childhood classroom (preschool through third grade).

While searching to determine the effectiveness of developmentally appropriate practice on a child's self-esteem and positive attitude toward learning, Jambunathan, Burts, and Pierce (1999) stated,

“Although the findings of current research are generally supportive of DAP, researchers continue to question the potential positive and negative impacts of practices that are more or less developmentally appropriate on young children's

development. Findings from different populations have indicated that children in less developmentally appropriate classrooms exhibit incidences of stress-related behaviors.” (p. 168)

Jambunathan, Burts, and Pierce (1999) studied if developmentally appropriate practice can be a predictor to self-competence in preschoolers. The researchers looked at seven different early childhood programs that were privately funded in the southern and western regions of the United States (Jambunathan et al., 1999). To assess a preschooler’s perception of self-confidence the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance was used. Classrooms were rated for developmental appropriateness using the Checklist for Rating Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Early Childhood Classrooms. Observations were conducted in each classroom one to two times, with observations lasting between 1.5 hours and 2 hours. All observations were completed during regular center times when children were present; they also completed additional observations during music, outside, lunch and group times. The researchers found that there was a relationship between a classroom that uses developmentally appropriate practices and preschoolers’ perception of self-competence (Jambunathan et al., 1999). “Results from the present study indicate that more developmentally appropriate practices were significant predictors of the peer acceptance dimension of the preschoolers’ perception of self-competence” (Jambunathan et al., 1999, p. 172).

The study found that implementing curriculum goals that are appropriate for young children correlates highly with a child’s perception of peer acceptance. These goals meet the needs of the students as individuals, are flexible to stimulate and challenge children as

they develop, as well as promote healthy self-esteem, self-competence, and positive feelings toward learning. Jambunathan, Burts, and Pierce (1999) stated,

“The use of more developmentally appropriate teaching strategies was related to higher perception of peer acceptance. In a more developmentally appropriate classroom, the teacher uses various teaching strategies to promote learning, instead of relying predominately on a didactic approach. The teacher most often has the classroom set up in learning areas, providing the children with opportunities to move from one area to another. The curriculum is integrated, and children are encouraged to question and share ideas. Thus, it can be implied that the use of more developmentally appropriate teaching strategies will encourage the children to feel positively with peers, instead of feeling threatened, competitive, or stressful when trying to accomplish tasks.” (p. 172)

Jambunathan, Burts, and Pierce (1999) found that peer-acceptance among preschoolers was higher when developmentally appropriate strategies were used. The researchers distinguished between DAP classrooms and non-DAP classrooms by stating that developmentally appropriate teachers promoted prosocial behavior that would facilitate peer acceptance and respect (Jambunathan et al., 1999). Whereas in a classroom that would not be considered DAP, the teacher would focus more on rewards and punishments, and the students would be expected to work alone instead of together (Jambunathan et al., 1999). Another important finding of this study also indicated intrinsic motivation correlates with peer acceptance. Jambunathan, Burts, and Pierce stated:

“When children are internally motivated to succeed in tasks, they achieve satisfaction in completing the task itself, rather than deriving satisfaction from

receiving an extrinsic reward on completion of the task. In less developmentally appropriate classrooms, children are frequently motivated extrinsically, and they compete with each other to gain the teacher's approval. As a result, the children might not work together, and one may find lower rates of peer acceptance.

Teachers' encouraging children to have high levels of intrinsic motivation, and to work with their peers to complete a task, appears to enhance peer acceptance and eventually increase the perception of self-competence among young children." (p. 173)

From this study, Jambunathan, Burts, and Pierce discovered that developmentally appropriate practices do have a positive impact on a young child's development, as well as self-competence. The authors of this study noted that more research should be done in this area before any solid conclusions could be reached. Further research could include information from early childhood centers that are both publicly and privately fund, in order to see if there is a difference in developmentally appropriate practices in the different types of early childhood classrooms. Including more participants that are diverse could also impact the findings of this study.

While Jambunathan, Burts, and Pierce's (1999) study looked at the effects of DAP on the social emotional well being of a preschooler in relation to self-competence, Van Horn, Karlin, and Ramey study the effects of DAP on social skills and problem behaviors in first through third graders. The researchers noted that through many studies, few have revealed the importance in DAP in regards to academic skills, but that there was evidence that DAP does have an impact on social skills. "Although there is limited evidence that DAP

has a positive impact on academic outcomes, positives effects on social skills may justify their continued use” (Van Horn, Karlin, & Ramey, 2012, p. 20).

In a study on appropriate practices on social skills and problem behaviors Van Horn, Karlin, and Ramey (2012) stated,

“Although many academics and educators have embraced the DAP guidelines, others have been more critical. There are three major criticisms of DAP: (1) its guidelines purport to provide a set of global best practices yet disregard diversity and cultural differences, (2) limited support exists for its theoretical base, and (3) there is little empirical evidence of its efficacy in improving child outcomes.

Although the revised version of DAP guidelines addresses cultural issues more thoroughly than the initial version, critics argue that the general principles of DAP reflect middle-class White values rather than those of more collective cultures.” (p. 19)

Due to the fact that little research has study the impact of developmentally appropriate practices on children from different cultures, the researchers focused attention to a broader range of ethnic backgrounds in the study put forth. “It is important to learn if different groups of children are affected differentially by exposure to DAP; if so, then some groups may be placed at a disadvantage by its use” (Van Horn, Karlin, & Ramey, 2012, p. 21).

Developmentally appropriate guidelines recommend that classrooms teaching students from birth to the age of eight should implement developmentally appropriate practices. Few studies have looked into the effects of DAP in first through third grades. Van Horn, Karlin, & Ramey (2012) determined that a broad study needed to be done to

focus in on the effects DAP has on children from a variety of backgrounds, as well as children at in the upper age group of early childhood.

In creating the research, Van Horn, Karlin, and Ramey (2012) developed two major objectives for the study,

“(1) to examine the extent to which DAP implemented in first through third grade classrooms is associated with parent ratings of children’s social skills and problem behaviors and (2) to examine the extent to which the effects of classroom DAP on social skills and problem behaviors vary across child ethnicity and gender.” (p. 22)

In order to collect data the researchers used social rating scales from parents instead of teachers. “Theoretically, the use of parent ratings allows for an assessment of whether the effects of DAP generalized beyond the classroom” (Van Horn, Karlin, & Ramey, 2012, p. 22). Using parent ratings versus teacher ratings allows the researchers to see whether or not the effects of a DAP classroom on social skills have an impact on environments outside the classroom. In addition, using parent ratings helps to eliminate potential bias that educators may have toward developmentally appropriate guidelines if they follow the guidelines in their classroom. The parent rating used in this study has been well established as a measure of social skills and problem behavior (Van Horn et al., 2012).

Through the National Head Start Public School Early Childhood Transition Demonstration Project, researchers were able to collect data for the study that followed former Head Start children and classmates from kindergarten through third grade (Van Horn et al., 2012). Van Horn, Karlin, and Ramey (2012) identified participants as,

“1,145 children in first grade, 2,003 children in second grade, and 2,111 children in third grade. Of those, 36% of the children in first grade were White, 33% were

African American, 15% were Hispanic, and most of the remaining specified 'other'.

The sample was 52% male and 48% female." (p. 24)

The students' social skills were measured using parent rating forms of the SSRS (Van Horn et. al., 2012). "The social skills items were administered to parents in all years of the study, but the problem behavior items were only included in second and third grade. Because of concerns about parent literacy, this data was collected through in-person interviews by a trained interviewer with each parent" (Van Horn et. al., 2012, p. 26).

Van Horn, Karlin, and Ramey (2012) found that developmentally appropriate practices might not have a large impact on children's social emotional development:

"Results indicated that attending a school in which teachers' practices are more DAP oriented, or being in a classroom that emphasizes DAP, was not related to better parent ratings of social skills or problem behaviors. In fact, some evidence suggested a negative impact of schools with higher levels of classroom DAP in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, as well as some evidence of negative effects of more social/emotionally focused classrooms for girls. However, the size of both of those effects and the fact that they are not found consistently across years and different outcomes suggests that the emphasis should be on the conclusion that these results find no effects on classroom implementation of DAP." (p. 36)

The researchers found that there is no consistent evidence that indicates that developmentally appropriate practices achieve the intended goal (Van Horn et al., 2012). Further research should be done to determine the impact that developmentally appropriate practices have on the social emotional wellbeing of young children. While this

study may show little evidence of DAP having a positive impact on young children's social skills, it did not look at the long-term impact it may have.

Van Horn, Karlin, and Ramsey (2012) did mention that there were several limitations to this study. The researchers did not measure a broader array of psychosocial outcomes, which could have been affected by the use of developmentally appropriate practices (Van Horn et al., 2012). According to the researchers, "The assessment of DAP was itself limited to those aspects that are easily observable in classroom observations; other aspects, such as assessment of performance, relationships with parents, and school policies, were not assessed and statements cannot be made about them" (Van Horn et al., 2012, p. 36). Further studies on this topic could include a larger variety of schools and classrooms to better determine the impact of DAP on the social emotional skills of students.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The researcher recommends that further research and studies need to be conducted in order to determine the effects that developmentally appropriate practices have on the social emotional development of children in the early childhood education classroom. Research on long-term effects of developmentally appropriate practices would be beneficial to find out if there is a positive correlation to DAP and social emotional skills as children go through the education system beyond early childhood education. The researcher also recommends that further studies should include a wide array of demographics in order to see the impact of developmentally appropriate practices on a variety of young children.

### **Conclusion**

Jambunthan, Burts, and Pierce (1999) conducted a study to find the impact DAP had on self-competence in preschoolers. The researchers found that developmentally

appropriate practices do have a positive impact on a young child's development, as well as self-competence. The authors of this study noted that more research should be done in this area before any solid conclusions could be reached. Van Horn, Karlin, and Ramsey (2012) studied the effects of DAP on social skills and problem behaviors in first through third graders. The researchers found that there is no consistent evidence that indicates that developmentally appropriate practices achieve the intended goal (Van Horn et al., 2012).

Since the creation of developmentally appropriate practices in the mid-1980s parents, teachers, administrators, policymakers have been interested in the effectiveness of DAP. The researcher was interested in discovering the impact developmentally appropriate practices have on the social-emotional development of children in the early childhood classroom (preschool through third grade). Even with a variety of research done on the developmentally appropriate practice more research needs to be completed in order to determine the true effects of DAP on the social-emotional development of children in an early childhood classroom.

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