

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) as Defined and Interpreted by Early Childhood Preservice Teachers: Beliefs About DAP and Influences of Teacher Education and Field Experience

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This study examines early childhood preservice teachers' beliefs about developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) and how they define DAP and interpret principles and characteristics of DAP. The study shows that early childhood preservice teachers possess relatively strong beliefs about DAP. Preservice teachers who were further along in the teacher training program demonstrated stronger DAP beliefs than teachers who had just begun the teacher training program. Similarly, teachers who had undergone more field placements reported stronger beliefs about DAP. Teachers' own definitions and principles of developmentally appropriate/inappropriate practice were examined. Implications of the findings are discussed for preparing teachers to implement appropriate practice.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) has been considered a key concept in early childhood education. Although the NAEYC DAP guidelines have achieved a canonical place in early childhood education, there are diverse interpretations and understandings what DAP is, how to implement it, and how important it is in relation to overall classroom practice. (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006; Smith, 1997; Shiakou & Belsky, 2009; Swadener & Kessler, 1991). The state of understanding of DAP of teachers is reflected in the variety of teacher beliefs about the importance of DAP.

Among the studies of teacher beliefs about DAP, inservice teachers' beliefs have been emphasized over those of preservice teachers. This may be due to researchers concern with

how teachers' beliefs have impacted their already developed teaching practices. The preservice educational stage, however, is a critical period in which new teachers begin to develop and elaborate upon their own beliefs (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfok Hoy, & Hoy, 1998; Weinstein, 1998). Once beliefs are developed, it is difficult to change them (Smith, 1997).

Teacher education is one of the most important factors in becoming a professional educator and profoundly influences teachers' beliefs and teaching practices (Smith, 1997; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Preservice teachers' beliefs are constructed through both the medium of teacher education programs and through personal and professional experiences (i.e., practicum, internship). Once these beliefs

are shaped, they are difficult to change (Smith, 1997; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Given this background, an examination of preservice teachers' beliefs throughout a range of professional stages can be a powerful diagnostic for understanding the factors that influence beliefs regarding DAP. Furthermore, research that examines different beliefs about the definitions of DAP among early childhood educators is required to encourage understanding among teacher educators and researchers.

Literature review

DAP is a broad, overarching concept that pertains to diverse developmental areas for children in the 0-8 age category. DAP statements were revised in order to adapt to newer educational needs and criteria in 1997 and 2009. Revised statements in 1997 emphasized three kinds of important knowledge for educators - age appropriateness, individual appropriateness, and cultural appropriateness. (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Most recent DAP statements published in 2009 still put three important kinds of information including age, individual, and social and cultural context. In addition, in order to reflect a newer framework for optimal education and critical issues in early childhood education, revised principles and guidelines for decision about DAP were presented including the following five provisions: creating a caring community of learners, teaching to enhance development and learning, planning curriculum to achieve important goals, assessing children's development and learning, and establishing reciprocal relationships with families (Copple, & Bredekamp, 2009). Despite specific guidelines and examples in DAP, there is not a unique concept of developmentally idealistic practice. Teachers from diverse cultural, social, and linguistic background may differently understand, apply, and implement appropriate practice.

The term 'belief' has been defined as "values, which house the evaluative, comparative, and

judgmental functions of beliefs and replace predisposition with an imperative to action" (Pajares, 1992, p.314). Teachers' beliefs are closely related to teachers' thought processes and essential to establishing an emotional attitude (Cassidy & Lawrence, 2000; Clark & Peterson, 1986; K. E. Smith, 1997; Smith & Shepard, 1988). Beliefs may be defined in terms of a disposition that an individual possess regarding the truth of a proposition and represent a teacher's disposition toward action (Brown & Cooney, 1982; Smith & Shepard, 1988). Related to action, beliefs can be inferred from a teacher's behavior. Research has demonstrated that teachers' beliefs and decision-making process are related because daily decisions are based on their beliefs (Piotrkowski, Botsko, & Matthews, 2000).

The emphasis on teachers' beliefs is based on the fact that beliefs are related to and affect teaching practices and interactions with children (File, 1994; McMullen, 1997; Kowalski, Pretti-Frontczak, & Johnson, 2001; Pajares, 1992; Piotrkowski et al., 2000; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Vartuli, 2005). The research involving the relationship between beliefs and practices can be categorized in two ways. First, the relationship that exists between teachers' stated beliefs and observed practice. Second, the relationship between teachers' stated beliefs and self-reported practice.

As with research that focuses on early childhood inservice teachers, there has been limited research that centers on preservice teachers. Preservice teachers' beliefs are important because teachers develop their own perspectives and beliefs early in the preservice teaching stage (Smith, 1997; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Coursework has been demonstrated to affect preservice teachers' self-efficacy. However, teaching experience (i.e., internship, apprenticeship) has also a greater influence on self-efficacy for elementary preservice teachers (Housego, 1992; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Specifically,

some preservice teachers' self-efficacy declined with teaching experience resulting from the difficulties and challenges of teaching in actual school settings (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Prospective teachers experience the reality of complex, dynamic situations and make multiple decisions as teachers upon entering a student teaching practicum or internship. Student teachers may negotiate their previous beliefs as they adapt and protect their self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Weinstein, 1998).

Preservice teachers' beliefs may represent a foundation on which professional development begins. Thus, extending the research to include an examination of preservice teachers' beliefs may enhance the professional development of prospective teachers and impact teacher preparation programs. Reflecting upon the needs discussed, research questions are presented.

1. What are the beliefs of early childhood preservice teachers about developmentally appropriate teaching practice (DAP)?
2. What is the relationship between early childhood preservice teachers' beliefs about DAP and length of academic status and field experiences?
3. What are the teachers' own definition and principles of DAP?

Methods

Participants

A total of sixty-five early childhood preservice teachers participated in this study. The participants enrolled in an early childhood education program in a university located in southeastern area in the United States. This teacher education program has a three-year program that students enter as juniors and complete at the end of a masters year. It is a highly structured sequence of courses, through

which students proceed as a cohort. The preservice teachers at each year (e.g., junior, senior, graduate year) had taken the same courses. Regarding field experiences, seniors and juniors complete four different types of pre-internship (pre-K, K, special education, 1st-3rd grade); students in masters' year do one-semester internship. Once they finish master programs, students are given a M.Ed. degree.

Ninety-seven percent of all participants were between the ages of nineteen and twenty four years old ($M=21.85$, $SD=1.82$). The majority of the participants were Caucasian (74 %) and Hispanic (14 %). Twenty-five (38.5 %) of the participants were juniors and twenty four (36.9%) of the participants were seniors. Each junior participant had two practicum experiences, and each senior participant had four practicum experiences. All of the graduate students had completed four practicum experiences and one semester of internship. The average length of time spent in field placements for all participants was about twenty weeks. Three interviewees were twenty-one years old and all were females. Two were in their senior year and one was in her junior year.

Instruments

In order to assess beliefs about DAP, the Teacher Beliefs Scale (TBS) was used. The TBS was developed to assess the early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices about DAP. TBS was originally developed by Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, & Hernandez (1991) based on NAEYC DAP guidelines published in 1986. Then, TBS has been revised based on revised NAEYC guidelines. TBS consists of thirty-seven items including one item that asks the amount of influence in planning and implementing instruction and thirty-six items related to twenty-two developmentally appropriate and fourteen inappropriate beliefs questions. DAP consisted of appropriate social, appropriate individualization, appropriate literacy activities, appropriate integrated curriculum

beliefs, inappropriate activities and materials, and inappropriate structure. Internal consistency was conducted using Cronbach's alpha: developmentally inappropriate activities and materials ($r = .84$), appropriate social item ($r = .77$), appropriate individualization ($r = .70$), appropriate literacy activities ($r = .60$), appropriate integrated curriculum beliefs ($r = .66$), and inappropriate structure ($r = .58$) (Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, Thomasson, Mosley & Fleege, 1993).

Procedure

Teacher information questionnaire and the Teacher Beliefs Scale (TBS) were administered by the researcher in person. Each survey packet was given a number, and these numbers were used instead of names to identify each participant and to maintain confidentiality of participants. After collecting questionnaires, in order to examine in-depth understanding of preservice teachers' beliefs about DAP, individual interviews with open-ended questions were conducted with three preservice teachers. Three of the participants from the larger questionnaire study were randomly contacted to participate in follow-up interviews.

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Interview transcripts were coded from the interviews based on open coding system (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Domain analysis was

used to code protocols (Spradley, 1979). The pseudo names - Kathy, Sera, and Amy - are used to identify each interviewee to protect participant confidentiality. To reduce researcher bias and to support trustworthiness of the study, member checking and peer review techniques were employed.

Results and Discussion

Beliefs about DAP

The mean score of TBS items assessing DAP was 57.32 with a standard deviation of 4.8. The scores ranged from 47 to 65 with a possible range of 13 to 65. This study supports the idea that preservice teachers believe that it is important to use practices that are identified as developmentally appropriate. This result is similar to previous studies on preservice teachers (File & Gullo, 2002; Stipek & Byler, 1997).

Relationship between beliefs about DAP and academic status, field experiences

Means (with standard deviations in parenthesis) for groups who are juniors, seniors and graduate students were 54.68(5.45), 59.29(3.09), and 58.50(4.36), respectively. The effect of academic status was statistically significant, $F(2, 62) = 7.40$, $p = .001$. To find

Table 1. Post-hoc comparison tests for academic status in DAP beliefs.

	Groups		Mean Differences	Std. Error	Sig.
DAP	Junior	Senior	-4.61**	1.265	.002
		Graduate	-3.82*	1.417	.032
	Senior	Junior	4.61**	1.265	.002
		Graduate	.79	1.428	.858
	Graduate	Junior	3.82*	1.417	.032
		Senior	-.79	1.428	.858

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .005$, *** $p < .001$

the location of the statistically significant mean differences the Scheffe procedure was implemented. First, the difference between juniors and seniors was statistically significant, $t(62) = 4.61, p = .002$. Secondly, the difference between juniors and graduates was statistically significant, $t(62) = 3.82, p = .032$. Post-hoc comparisons were presented in Table 1.

Seniors and graduate students held more positive beliefs about DAP than did the junior students. This indicates that the length of teacher education and amount of coursework has a positive effect on beliefs about DAP. This is consistent with research on the influence of coursework in teacher education (File & Gullo, 2002; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Smith, 1997).

There was a statistically significant relationship between beliefs about music and number of practicum placements ($n = 65, r = .364, p = .003$). It indicates that beliefs about DAP positively related to numbers of practicum placements. The relationship between beliefs about DAP and length of practicum experience also found statistically significant ($n = 64, r = .384, p = .002$). This implies stronger beliefs about DAP is related to longer field experiences.

Preservice teachers who had more field placements for longer period displayed stronger beliefs about DAP. Previous studies have also demonstrated a relationship between field experience (i.e., internship, apprenticeship) and teacher beliefs (Housego, 1992; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). These studies showed internship or apprenticeship has a significant influence on teacher beliefs. Particularly, the graduate students had completed an internship and had taken more than 60 credits in early childhood education coursework, including early childhood curriculum. Therefore, graduate students had more opportunities to gain DAP related knowledge and develop their own beliefs about DAP than did the juniors and

seniors. Diverse experiences in different settings and length of experience may affect teacher beliefs about DAP because these experiences may offer opportunities to observe DAP and reflect on DAP concepts.

Meaning of DAP defined by teachers

Using qualitative analysis to understand DAP is effective because people have their own relevance structure, and teachers have their own definitions and beliefs with respect to DAP. Kathy was the only participant who mentioned about the three components in DAP. This may indicate that Kathy has correct and sufficient knowledge of DAP. Sera described the components of age and ability level, and Amy did not discuss any of the three components.

Kathy: DAP is all about looking at each child individually and seeing what they need and what their strengths are, what their weaknesses are, what you should focus on? You always hear about that it is needs to be culturally appropriate. You need to look at where they are coming from what their life is like outside of a school. It is age-appropriate. For what level they're at, what their ages- just individually looking at them as a person because no teacher would be at the same place and need to realize that in your classroom."

Kathy: what children are interested in, what they need to focus on, what teachers think it would be important for children as an individual.

Sera and Amy had some similarities in their definition, particularly pertaining to the provision of appropriate activities depending on children's ability through a modification of difficulty level.

Sera: DAP is just a way to have an appropriate practice in your classroom so that you're applying activities and giving activities to students so that they are able to complete that. They are easy enough for them to complete but also difficult enough for them to be challenged

but it's completed successfully, eventually with help of the teacher or help of the students. It's not just academic work and kids need to play and have fun, also to learn also just the activities they're doing appropriate to their age and to their abilities.

Amy: I would define DAP as practices particularly in education that fit the needs of the child and that they fit the needs the child.

Regarding DAP, all three preservice teachers addressed their own definitions of DAP. The three terms are key concepts in the revised DAP guidelines (Bredcamp & Copple, 1997). Amy, the junior student, was unable to identify any of these concepts. This supports that graduate students and senior students have stronger beliefs about DAP than junior students corresponding to the quantitative results.

Principles to Implement DAP

The participants had similarities and differences in their discussions of important principles and definitions surrounding DAP. Diverse perspectives on the principles of DAP were evident.

Kathy: what children are interested in, what they need to focus on, what you think it would be important for them as an individual. I think they need to be active and involved in learning in to use the term 'hands-on'. There are plans made by the teachers, but the children are involved in making choices about what they learn. I think that the exchange between peers is very valuable.

Sera: it's interactive type of circle time, where kids are communicating and teachers communicating back to them. Interactive type of classroom where the kids feel safe to talk and discuss anything they want to talk about. Like an undefinable structure. There is a rule that are set; you have to take turns, you have to but now everybody can see there is structure.

Amy: making practices that help the child grow particularly in areas that will help them succeed in school. It's to take their potential that they have and to grow that potential and make them be able to do things that they want. Kind of scaffolding them up, so they'll be able to succeed. Whatever the most, it's different for different kids. The practices on that classroom very like specialized to each child because they all were at such different levels.

The most commonly mentioned aspect of all three interviews about DAP principles was the concept of the need for interaction. Kathy primarily focused on the children's perspective, and Sera emphasized classroom structure. Amy focused on helping each individual child's needs. Table 2 shows the comparison of the principles. Description of DAP shows teachers focus more individual child development instead of focusing on development based on socio-cultural context compared with the principles for DAP in NAEYC statements (Bredkamp, 1997).

Implications for Teacher Education

The findings demonstrated that early childhood preservice teachers possess strong

Table 2. Comparison of DAP principles.

Kathy	Sera	Amy
'interest' based 'being active' 'hands-on' 'making choices' 'exchange between peers'	'interactive communicative' 'rules and structure'	'succeed' 'scaffolding' 'interaction' 'specialized to each child'.

beliefs about DAP. The results, however, revealed an imbalance between pedagogical knowledge and subject knowledge among preservice teachers. In the set of interviews, the teachers who held stronger beliefs about DAP demonstrated knowledge about key principles of DAP. They noticed that teachers play a key role in the implementation of DAP. However, their descriptions of DAP and criticisms of inappropriate practice were primarily focused on 'how to teach', not 'what to teach'. The discrepancy between DAP and teaching content has been proposed in terms of how to implement DAP on teaching subjects and learning standards (Da Ros-Voseles, Danyi, & Aurillo, 2003; Goldstein, 2007). Although some teachers strongly supported DAP, they might have faced with difficulties in teaching specific subjects in developmentally appropriate ways because their beliefs about DAP were focused on how to teach rather than what to teach.

The interviewees described inappropriate practice as the utilization of too many worksheets, desk and chair settings, and an insufficient number of learning centers and free choice activities. Most descriptions were not aimed at specific development domains or content. This implies an imbalance in the perception of subject importance. It appeared as though the preservice teachers were knowledgeable in the pedagogical aspects of DAP, but they revealed disagreements and differences in their understandings of the various subjects necessary for a developmentally appropriate classroom. Therefore, teacher educators should focus more on how specific content can be taught within the DAP framework for young children. Preservice teachers need to gain knowledge not only of appropriate practice but also appropriate content to teach.

Research on teacher beliefs in early childhood education needs to be extended to address diverse domain areas and the relationships between specific domains. Many belief studies in early childhood education have been implemented

with a focus on development. Examining domain specific beliefs may offer a better understanding of teachers' belief systems (Fang, 1996). Teacher beliefs develop and change through experiences and learning. Specifically, once the teachers enter the teaching practice as novice teachers, they may encounter different beliefs, conflicts with their own beliefs, or difficulties implementing certain practices. Although preservice teachers possess strong beliefs about DAP, they may have conflicts between their understanding of the importance implementing play-based activities and the pressure of academic achievement. How do early childhood teacher beliefs about DAP change as time progresses? What are the factors that influence this change?

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Appendix

Teacher Beliefs Scale

Charlesworth, R., Hart, C. H., Burts, D.C., Thomasson R. H., Mosley, J., & Fleege, P. O. (1993). Measuring the developmentally appropriateness of kindergarten teachers' beliefs and practices. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 8, 255-276.

1. Rank the following (1-6) by the amount of influence you feel that each has on the way you plan and implement instruction. (Please be sure to use each number only once.)

- Parents _____
- Parish or school system policy _____
- Principal _____
- Teacher (yourself) _____
- State regulation _____
- Other teachers _____

Directions: please respond to the following items by circling the number that most nearly represents YOUR PERSONAL BELIEFS about the importance of that item in a kindergarten program.

	Item	1 - Not important at all	2 - Not Very Important	3 - Fairly Important	4 - Very Important	5 - Extremely Important
2	As an evaluation technique in the kindergarten program, standardized group tests are _____.	1	2	3	4	5
3	As an evaluation technique in the kindergarten program, teacher observation is _____.	1	2	3	4	5

	Item	1 - Not important at all	2 - Not Very Important	3 - Fairly Important	4 - Very Important	5 - Extremely Important
4	As an evaluation technique in the kindergarten program, performance on worksheets and workbooks is	1	2	3	4	5
5	It is _____ for kindergarten activities to be responsive to individual differences in interest.	1	2	3	4	5
6	It is _____ for kindergarten activities to be responsive to individual differences in development.	1	2	3	4	5
7	It is _____ that each curriculum area be taught as separate subjects at separate times.	1	2	3	4	5
8	It is _____ for teacher-pupil interactions in kindergarten to help develop children's self-esteem and positive feelings toward learning.	1	2	3	4	5
9	It is _____ for children to be allowed to select many of their own activities from a variety of learning areas that the teacher has prepared (blocks, science center, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
10	It is _____ for children to be allowed to cut their own shapes, perform their own steps in an experiment, and plan their own creative drama, art, and writing activities.	1	2	3	4	5
11	It is _____ for students to work silently and alone on seatwork.	1	2	3	4	5
12	It is _____ for kindergarteners to learn through active exploration.	1	2	3	4	5
13	It is _____ for kindergarteners to learn through interaction with other children.	1	2	3	4	5
14	Workbooks and/or ditto sheets are _____ to the kindergarten program.	1	2	3	4	5
15	Flashcards (numbers, letters, and/or words) are _____ to the kindergarten program for instructional purposes.	1	2	3	4	5
16	The basal reader is _____ to the kindergarten reading program.	1	2	3	4	5
17	In terms of effectiveness, it is _____ for the teacher to talk to the whole group and make sure everyone participates in the same activity.	1	2	3	4	5
18	In terms of effectiveness, it is _____ for the teacher to move among groups and individuals, offering suggestions, asking questions, and facilitating children's involvement with materials and activities.	1	2	3	4	5

	Item	1 - Not important at all	2 - Not Very Important	3 - Fairly Important	4 - Very Important	5 - Extremely Important
19	It is _____ for teachers to use their authority through treats, stickers, and/or stars to encourage appropriate behavior.	1	2	3	4	5
20	It is _____ for teachers to use their authority through punishments and/or reprimands to encourage appropriate behavior.	1	2	3	4	5
21	It is _____ for children to be involved in establishing rules for the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
22	It is _____ for children to be instructed in recognizing the single letters of the alphabet, isolated from words.	1	2	3	4	5
23	It is _____ for children to color within predefined lines.	1	2	3	4	5
24	It is _____ for children in kindergarten to form letters correctly on a printed line.	1	2	3	4	5
25	It is _____ for children to have stories read to them individually and/or on a group basis.	1	2	3	4	5
26	It is _____ for children to dictate stories to the teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
27	It is _____ for children to see and use functional print (telephone books, magazines, etc.) and environmental print (cereal boxes, potato chip bags, etc.) in the kindergarten classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
28	It is _____ for children to participate in dramatic play.	1	2	3	4	5
29	It is _____ for children to talk informally with adults.	1	2	3	4	5
30	It is _____ for children to experiment with writing by inventing their own spelling.	1	2	3	4	5
31	It is _____ to provide many opportunities to develop social skills with peers in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
32	It is _____ for kindergarteners to learn to read.	1	2	3	4	5
33	In the kindergarten program, it is _____ that math be integrated with all other curriculum areas.	1	2	3	4	5
34	In teaching health and safety, it is _____ to include a variety of activities throughout the school year.	1	2	3	4	5
35	In the classroom setting, it is _____ for the children to be exposed to multicultural and nonsexist activities.	1	2	3	4	5
36	It is _____ that outdoor time has planned activities.	1	2	3	4	5
37	Input from parents is _____.	1	2	3	4	5