

Caregivers' Knowledge and Practice of
Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Young Children

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Abstract

Those who work with young children need to have the knowledge and practices that are in accordance with child development in order to cultivate them to become a good citizen with desirable qualities and complete in body and mind. Caregivers are one of the groups of people that play a significant role in caring and educating young children. The researcher, therefore, was interested in studying the knowledge and practice of caregivers concerning the developmentally appropriate practice in 5 areas: creating appropriate environment for learning, teaching to foster development and learning, developing appropriate curriculum, assessing children's development and learning, and building parent-school relationship. A set of test and a questionnaire form concerning the knowledge and practice of the issue was used to collect data from 223 caregivers under the jurisdiction of the local administrative organization. The data was analyzed using frequency, percentage, and mean and presented by description.

The results indicated that the area that the caregivers were most knowledgeable (94.17%) was building parent-school relationship while the area that they showed the least knowledge (10.76%) was teaching to foster child development and learning. In practice, the area that showed as being practiced the most was creating appropriate environment for learning, specifically in building a good relationship with and among children (91.50%). On the other hand, the area that was being practiced the least was teaching to foster development and learning, specifically in using or providing more complicated experiences or materials and providing an opportunity to review or repeat previous experiences (29.60%).

Findings from the study suggest that a training program which aims to improve both knowledge and practices in all 5 areas of developmentally appropriate practice for young children is crucial for caregivers' professional development.

Key words: Caregiver, Local Administrative Organization, Developmentally Appropriate Practice for

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Introduction

It is crucial for those working with young children to have the knowledge and practices that are in accordance with child development in order to cultivate them to become a good citizen with desirable qualities and complete in body and mind. Bredekamp (2010) defined developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) as a teaching that is compatible with ages, experiences, abilities, and interests of an individual child as well as a group of children, assisting them in overcoming their challenges and achieving goals for continuous learning. An important goal in early childhood teaching is finding a way for children to have an optimum development and learning. Thus, the knowledge and knowhow in the learning and developing of children is vital for early childhood educators. Such information will enable educators to work harmoniously with young children learning and thinking. According to Bredekamp (2010), there are 3 fundamental considerations that guide teachers to DAP for children 1) knowledge of child's learning and development 2) information of each individual child and 3) information concerning social and cultural context of the child. All 3 keystone effects and interact with one another, thus cannot be considered exclusively.

DAP knowledge is based on the accumulation of data and facts about children. Thus, DAP is not a curriculum nor is it a rigid set of standards to be enforced. Rather, it is a framework, a philosophy or an approach for working with young children (Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 1992:4 cited in Gestwicki, 1999).

NAEYC (2009) has given guidelines for appropriate practices for children's optimal development and learning. The guidelines are grounded in studies of child development and learning as well as in the knowledge base on educational effectiveness of caring and teaching young children. The 5 guidelines are:

1. Creating a caring community of learners: Early childhood settings are the first community for children outside the home. How children are taken care of and how they interact with others have a bearing on their development. Accordingly, communities hold an important role in enhancing children's development and learning. Relationship with others is an important context that children use to create an understanding about the world around them through interaction with other members, both peers and adults, in the community. Through play, investigation, and projects, children develop responsibility, self-regulation, and solve problems. The physical environment is designed and maintained for health and safety of the children. Daily timetable is carefully balanced between active and restful activities. Outdoor experiences are provided. General emotional and social atmosphere are positive with all members feeling secure, safe and comfortable. Environments are dynamic. Home language and culture are reflected in daily interactions and classroom activities.

2. Teaching to enhance development and learning: developmentally appropriate teaching need to have a balance between adult-guided and child-guided experiences. Adult-guided experiences derive from teacher's goals with children actively engage. Child-guided experiences, on the other hand, proceed along children's own interests and actions and being supported by teaching strategies. Teacher plans environment, time table, and daily activities that help enhance each child development and learning. The knowledge about each child is gathered employing varied methods that will help children advance. Experiences are planned so that children will accomplish main goals including physical, social, emotional and cognitive domains as well as acquire disciplines as language, mathematics, social studies, science, arts, music, physical education, and health. Teacher provides opportunities for children to make meaningful choices during child-choice activities by assist and guide them during the time periods.

3. Planning curriculum to achieve important goals: In DAP, curriculum helps children achieve the goals through learning experiences consist of small and large group play, interest centers, and daily routines while considers the requirements of all children including those with special needs. Clearly specified desirable goals are necessary in the curriculum. Teacher uses the curriculum framework to plan activities that will enhance children experience. He or she collaborates with those teaching the proceeding or same year group, sharing children's information to increase the continuity and coherence across the age groups and ensure appropriate practices in each level.

4. Assessing children's development and learning: Assessment helps teacher in planning, implementing and evaluating the learning experiences provided to children as well as progresses towards desirable goals of the children. Assessment is a continuous process and its outcomes are used to communicate with family and improve teacher, teaching, as well as program effectiveness. Appropriate assessment methods in classroom are observation, clinical interviews, children's work sample, and performance in authentic activities. Information of what children can perform on their own as well as what they can perform with help from peers or adults need to be included in assessment.

5. Establishing reciprocal relationships with families: Building relationship with parents and family help teacher to have a better understanding of children. Such relationships are built with mutual respect, cooperation, shared responsibility and conflict negotiation towards achievement and shared goals. Parents are considered a resource with parents and teacher exchange knowledge of children's development and learning through daily communications as well as planned meetings.

In addition to the 5 guidelines recommended, there are interesting conspectuses for teachers in appropriate practices with preschool children as well. Learning and development occur when the new experiences are based on the children's prior knowledge and abilities and when children have adequate experiences to acquire the new skills, abilities and knowledge. Effective teaching does not occur accidentally but is an intentional teaching that suitable with development. Good teacher is purposeful in actions including classroom arrangement and curriculum planning, teaching strategies, assessments, interactions with children, and working with family. Intentional teacher has goals, aware of their actions, and teach to accomplish the intended goals. Moreover, NAEYC (2009) propose 10 teaching strategies for effective teaching: (1) Acknowledge children's actions and speech. (2) Encourage children to work with persistence and perseverance rather than only praise and assess their work. (3) Give specific feedback rather than general comments. (4) Model attitudes, problem solving techniques, and behaviors towards others rather than giving verbal suggestions. (5) Demonstrate the correct way to do something. (6) Create or add challenges so children can make progress. (7) Ask questions that stimulate children thinking (8) Give assistance by providing guidelines that help children to work from their current competence. (9) Provide information by directly giving facts and other information to children. and (10) Give directions for children's actions or behaviors.

Concerning teachers and those working with young children, Richard, Brown, and Sanders (2002) studied school effectiveness and found that teachers who used varieties of teaching methods were the most effective in enhancing children's skills. Considering children's different experiences, social background and learning styles, a teaching method might be successful with one child but fail with others. Those involve with children education including teachers, administrators, and parents, need to take responsibilities to children development. It is unfortunate, however, that most student teachers are not familiar with DAP. Kishenbaum (2000) made an observation along the same line that comprehending and putting DAP guidelines into practice are still problematic in early childhood education. As a result, a program that aimed to assist preschool teachers in implementing DAP to prepare preschoolers for kindergarten readiness was developed. The participants were 20 teachers who worked at a military child care center in the western United States. The teacher practicum consisted of (1) six training sessions on child development and other subjects, (2) parent education, (3) classroom visits, and (4) classroom environmental evaluation. The expected outcomes for teachers were the abilities to perform developmentally appropriate practices, arrange classroom environment that reflect children's needs and interests, conduct parent involvement activities, and parent education on child development enhancement.

An observation form was used for data collection and the analysis indicated that after the practicum program teachers were able to prepare preschoolers for kindergarten readiness as the preset criteria.

Hae Kyoung Kim (2011) studied pre-service teachers beliefs concerning DAP, particularly in the definitions as well as principles and characteristics of DAP being interpreted. The finding reflected that pre-service teachers believed in DAP and those attended the teacher training program had higher scores than teachers who just started the program. Even though DAP had specific guidelines and example of practices, it was not unique concepts. Teachers from diverse cultural, social, and linguistic background might have different understanding about the adaptation and application of DAP. Teachers' belief influence and relate to their actions and interaction with children.

Oraphan Butkatunyoo (B.E. 2542/1999) studied understandings and practices of teachers and school administrators concerning DAP of preschoolers in 5 domains: creating a caring community of learners, teaching to enhance child development and learning, constructing appropriate curriculum, assessing children's development and learning, and building reciprocal relationship with parents as well as school policy. Samples of the study were 100 administrators and 232 teachers from private and public schools under 4 jurisdictions of 4 provinces from 4 regions of Thailand. Data were collected using a test of DAP, a questionnaire, an interview, and an observation. Most teachers (63.45%) had a degree in early childhood education while half (53.18%) of them reported having 1-3 years of teaching experience. Most (84.17%) attended early childhood education workshops. Most teachers (89.65%) understood assessment of child development and learning domain of DAP, specifically in reporting the outcomes. On the other hand only 21.55 % of teachers reported that they understood teaching to foster development and learning domain, specifically in providing more complicated experiences or materials and giving them opportunities to rehearse. From the score of 32, the mean scores of the teachers was 19.55 (SD =7.32). Regarding the practice of DAP, it was reported that most teachers (93.91%) built a good relationship with and among children. On the other hand, only 46.01 % used the assessment outcomes to improve school quality.

From literatures and research studies mentioned above, it is clear that the cultivation of young children is the heart of the educational development for subsequent levels and the knowledge and practices in DAP are the concepts and principles that are accepted worldwide and appropriate to be used as a guideline in working with young children. Oraphan Butkatunyoo (B.E. 2542/1999) DAP research was conducted in Thailand studying teachers from both private and public schools under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. However, there is another sector namely the local administrative organization, Ministry of Interior which administers childcare centers in every Tumbon in Thailand that

has not been included in the study. Accordingly, it is beneficial to study the knowledge and practices of DAP of caregivers under the jurisdiction in order to gain useful information that can help improve and elevate the quality of the early childhood education to international standards in the future.

Research Framework

The framework for the knowledge and practices that are in accordance with child development consisted of 5 domains that further divided into subcategories as followed:

Domain	Subcategory
1. Creating appropriate environment for learning	1.1. Learning atmosphere
	1.2. Group and individual needs
	1.3. Environment and timetable
2. Teaching to foster development and learning	2.1. Learning experiences
	2.2. Language and communication
	2.3. Teaching strategies
	2.4. Motivation and guidance
3. Developing appropriate curriculum	3.1. Integrated curriculum
	3.2. Curriculum content and concept
	3.3. Continuity of development and learning
	3.4. Curriculum consistency and effectiveness
4. Assessing children's development and learning	4.1. Methods of assessment
	4.2. Reporting outcomes
	4.3. Utilizing outcomes
5. Building parent-school relationship	5.1. Communication
	5.2. Parent involvement
	5.3. Parent education

Objectives

1. To study caregivers' knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice for young children.
2. To study caregivers' practices of developmentally appropriate practice for young children.

Method of Study

1. Participants: Participants in the study were 223 caregivers who worked in childcare centers under the jurisdiction of the local administrative organization from 4 regions of Thailand: 50 participants were from the northern region, 69 were from the central, 56 were from the northeastern, and 48 were from the southern region. All attended a 2014 early childhood in-service training project for caregivers under the jurisdiction of the local administrative organization during 18-22 February, 2014.

2. Research instrument: A knowledge assessment test form to assess developmentally appropriate practice for young children and a questionnaire of developmentally appropriate practices which divided into 3 sections in accordance with the research framework of Oraphan Butkatanyu (B.E. 2542/1999) was used. The instrument quality has previously been confirmed through trial out and statistically tested for its validity and reliability. The details of the instrument were as followed:

Section 1 Demographic data consisted of 10 checklists and open ended questions relating to status, age, gender, educational attainment, working experience, employment, jurisdiction, training program attendance, and attitudes toward early childhood profession.

Section 2 Developmentally appropriate practice for young children knowledge assessment consisted of 32 multiple choice questions. Each question presented a situation then gave the participants 5 possible answers to choose from. The questions included all 5 domain of the developmentally practice as in the research framework. The range of possible scores was 0-32.

Example of the question: Domain 2 -Teaching to foster development and learning

At a block corner, Nut and Non were lining up blocks of all sizes. Vaewta asked them what they were doing. The children told her that they were building a town. If you were the teacher....

(for question 17 and 18)

17. What would you do next?

- a. Praised them that they built beautifully and told them not to build beyond the block corner and moved on to see other children.
- b. Explained what a town should be comprised of, how to build, and what to build next. Suggested that if they wanted, they could bring objects from other play corners to use in their work.
- c. Brought objects from other play corners that you considered appropriated and decorated the “town” nicely.
- d. Suggested that the children should clean up after play.
- e. Told the children to be ready to put the blocks back nicely since play time was almost over and they would be punished if they could not clean up in time.

Section 3 Forty-four-items questionnaire concerning actual practices of developmentally appropriate practice for young children of the caregivers divided into 5 domains as the framework: ten questions each for domain 1 and 2, nine for domain 3, and 7 and 8 questions for domain 4 and 5 respectively. The participants were instructed to choose all the items that corresponded with their actual practice.

Example: Actual practice questionnaires-Domain 1 Creating appropriate environment for learning.

Please write x in the in front of the statement that indicated your practice

- 1.1. Build a good relationship with and among children.
- 1.2. Allow children to converse with peers and teachers during activities.
- 1.3. Provide children with activities that are challenging as well as give them chances to success.
- 1.4. Use individual as well as group abilities, preferences, and interests of children to incorporate in curriculum building, environmental arrangement, as well as daily interactions.
- 1.5. Provide children with opportunities to work in small teacher-assigned or children-choice group.
- 1.6. Bringing in children’s home culture and language to class activities.
- 1.7. Provide varieties of instructional materials that children can choose during learning activities as well as play.
- 1.8. Observe, supervise, and give suggestions during play and activities.
- 1.9. Arrange timetable to alternate between activities and rest.
- 1.10. Children activity time is flexible.

2. Data collection: The researcher distributed and collected the assessment and questionnaire form to 223 caregivers during the 20 February, 2014 training session.

3. Data analysis and presentation: The data was analyzed using frequency, mean, and percentage and presented by description.

Results

The results of the study are presented in 3 sections.

Section 1 Demographic data: The participants were 223 caregivers from all 4 regions of Thailand including 50 caregivers from the northern region (22.42 %), 69 caregivers from the central region (30.94%), 56 caregivers from the northeastern region (25.11%), and 48 caregivers from the southern region (21.52%). Sixty-five (29.14%) were caregivers holding permanent civil servant position while 158 participants (70.85%) were child caregivers. Most (99.60%) were female. Forty one point seventy percents were at the age range between 36-45 years and 41.30 % were at the age range between 26-35 years of age. Most (67.30 %) hold a bachelor degree in early childhood education and worked in this field for 5-10 years (46.60%). Almost half (45.30%) taught 3-4 years old children while 35% taught 2-3 years old. More than half (64.60%) work in childcare center under the jurisdiction of the Tumbon administrative organization. Almost all (99.60%) had attended an early childhood education training program while more than a quarter of them (37.70%) received more than 50 hours of training in a year. Half of the caregiver (51.56%) reported being proud of the teaching profession while 34.97% loved and had faith in the profession. Nine point eighty six percent felt that teacher was a respectable and prestigious profession and were happy to be one.

Section 2: Caregivers' knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice for young children: The data analysis showed that the mean score of the test were 20.27. Caregivers were most knowledgeable (94.17%) in building parent-school relationship specifically in parent involvement while the area that they showed the least knowledge was teaching to foster development and learning specifically in teaching strategies (10.76%). Analysis for each domain indicated that

2.1. Creating appropriate environment for learning: Caregivers were most knowledgeable in environment and timetable (93.72%) and were least knowledgeable (42.60%) in group and individual needs.

2.2. Teaching to foster development and learning: Caregivers were most knowledgeable in motivation and guidance (83.86%) and were least knowledgeable (10.76%) in teaching strategies.

2.3. Developing appropriate curriculum: Caregivers were most knowledgeable (87.89%) in curriculum content and concept/ philosophy and were least knowledgeable (55.60%) in continuity of development and learning.

2.4. Assessing children's development and learning: Caregivers were most knowledgeable (91.48%) in reporting outcomes and were least knowledgeable (30.04%) in utilizing outcomes.

2.5. Building parent-school relationship: Caregivers were most knowledgeable (94.17%) in communicating with parents as well as parent education while were least knowledgeable (52.47%) in parent involvement.

Section 3: Caregivers' practice of developmentally appropriate practice for young children: Data analysis of the questionnaires indicated that the area the caregivers practiced most was in the domain of creating appropriate environment for learning, specifically in building a good relationship with and among children (91.50%). On the other hand, they reported practiced the least in the area of teaching to foster development and learning, specifically in using or providing more complicated experiences or materials and providing an opportunity to review or repeat previous experiences (29.60%). Analysis of each domain indicated that

3.1. Creating appropriate environment for learning: In this domain, the subcategory reported being practice most was learning atmosphere, specifically in building a good relationship with and among children (91.50%). On the other hand, caregivers reported practicing the least in 1) learning atmosphere, specifically provide children with activities that were challenging as well as give them chances to success and 2) environment and timetable, specifically arrange timetable to alternate between activities and rest (41.70% in both).

3.2. Teaching to foster development and learning: The subcategory being practice most (84.80%) was language and communication, particularly in providing opportunities for children to explain their works and exchange opinions. It was also found that caregivers reported practicing the least in teaching strategies (29.60%), specifically in using or providing more complicated experiences or materials and providing an opportunity to review or repeat previous experiences.

3.3. Developing appropriate curriculum: Continuity of development and learning subcategory, specifically in planning activities using exploration, observation, experimentation, and implementation was reported to be practiced the most (78.90%). On the other hand, curriculum content and concept, specifically, teacher being a role model in reading and writing, encouraging children to convey thought

drawing and writing freely, as well as encouraging children to read familiar words and signs that were meaningful to them were being practiced the least (61.40%).

3.4. Assessing children's development and learning: Assessment method, specifically in assessing using observation, interview, and other means to acquire information specified in assessment form was being practiced the most (91%). Conversely, utilizing outcomes, specifically using the outcomes to assessing the program quality was reported being practiced the least (31.40%).

3.5. Building parent-school relationship: The subcategory being reported as having practiced the most was parent involvement, specifically in inviting parents to school-organized activities (89.20%) followed by welcoming and conversing with parents regularly as well as consulting and solving problem together (88.80%). On the other hand, allowing parents to participate in children's daily activities was reported being practiced the least (66.40%).

Discussion

Concerning caregivers' knowledge of DAP for young children, it was reported that caregivers were most knowledgeable in building parent-school relationship. The result is consistent with the context of Thai society where people mostly live in a community with extended family including grandparents, parents, siblings of parents and children. The rural communities are mostly close knitted with plenty of kindness, generosity, and friendliness. Most caregivers are locals who have opportunities to meet the children's families in daily life and regularly converse with them during drop off and pick up, thus make it easy to build relationship with the parents. The opportunities for two-way communications help enhance the understanding and cooperation that assist young children development.

Concerning caregivers' practice of DAP for young children, it was reported that caregivers practiced most in creating appropriate environment for learning, specifically in building a good relationship with and among children. This finding is consistent with the research of Orapan Butkatanyu (B.E. 2542/1999) which found that most teachers (93.91%) practiced in this domain. The data analysis of both knowledge and practices of caregivers indicated that caregivers were outstanding in building relationship which should be beneficial in creating friendly atmosphere and help children to feel secure, safe and comfortable in their care. The encouragement of good relationships among children including individual, small, and large group activities in and outside the classroom should be smoothly operated due to the positive relationship between teacher and children as well as among the children.

Building relationship with parents and children appear to be a dominant ability of the caregivers in both knowledge and practices. When probing further, however, it was found that parent involvement subcategory, specifically in giving parents opportunities to participate in children's daily activities could still be improved. NAEYC (2009) suggested that family should be included in decision making as well as in caring and education program. Teachers should regard family as a resource and exchange information concerning children development and learning with them through daily communications as well as planned meeting. The Thailand National Education Act B.E. 2542/1999 has also specified such actions but the practice is still limited. It might be due to the unpreparedness of the schools in opening up to parent involvement. It might also be possible that parents might not want to interfere with classroom work feeling that it is not in their place/role or unable to find the time to do so. Regardless, parent education or orientation and encourage collaboration with family and communities are one of the subjects that needed to be discussed.

The data analysis of both knowledge and practices that caregivers showed the least was teaching to enhance learning and development with the subcategory of teaching strategy, specifically in providing more complex experiences or materials to children and giving them opportunity to rehearse. The finding is also consistent with Orphan Butkatunyoo (B.E. 2542/1999) study which found that only 22.55% of teachers had this specific knowledge. It is crucial to find out the factors that effects caregivers limited knowledge and practice of such subject since most caregivers hold a bachelor degree in early childhood education. Such degree should ensure caregivers to have the knowledge and knowhow of DAP from the course of the study. If the deficiency was caused by flaws in the professional development process, the curriculum should be reevaluated and revised since ability to use a variety of teaching strategies are crucial in enhancing and challenging children's ideas and actions. Richard, Brown, and Sanders (2002) suggested that using varieties of teaching strategies helps develop children skills most effectively and that it is unfortunate that educators are not familiar with DAP. NAEYC (2009) also summarized that learning and development occur when the new experiences are based on the children's prior knowledge and abilities and when children have adequate experiences to acquire the new skills, abilities and knowledge. Effective teaching does not occur accidentally but is an intentional process with planned goals. NAEYC also presents 10 teaching strategies for effective teaching that will help develop children to their full potential with DAP.

Suggestion

1. Workshops for caregivers which cover all the DAP domains that the study found teachers to have limited knowledge and practices should be provided along with internal and external supervisions for sustainable development. As most caregivers stated that they were proud of, loved and had faith in the early childhood professions, workshops and systematic supervisions that help intrinsic motivation to work with efficiency and effectiveness for children using DAP should work well with such positive attitudes towards the profession.

2. Curriculums and educational procedures of the early childhood bachelor programs that caregivers had attended should be analyzed to pinpoint the strength and weakness of the curriculum. The information can then be used for curriculum development. The results of this study indicated that caregivers had least knowledge and practices in curriculum, teaching strategies, continuities of development and learning, using assessment outcomes to evaluate program quality and parent involvement. These practices are all crucial in caring and educating young children and also play an important role in decision making for DAP.

3. Educational and classroom research should be encouraged since they can lead to learning and teaching development that originated from caregivers themselves. An advisor who can help guiding the research topics, methodology and process might be helpful to caregivers.

Conclusion

The developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is a framework for working with children by giving guidelines of how to best enhance young children learning and development. Children will flourish when attend program that value and encourage age-appropriate, individual-appropriate, and cultural – appropriate practices. The results of the present study indicated a pathway in developing early childhood education curriculum that should provide both early childhood education contents and a practicum that aids understanding in DAP. Students in early childhood education profession should have experiences working with children to have a better understanding of all age groups of children. The student teachers should have opportunities to work with children from infant, toddler, and preschool age groups to learn about the continuity and connectivity of the age groups. The experiences will aid them when graduated to be able to work with a wider population. For teachers/caregivers, there should be an ongoing/annual developmental program provided to ensure practices that are appropriate with child development. Workshops and classroom supervisions that build on teachers' prior knowledge would help ensure sustainable learning of the teaching profession.

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