

## The Role of Teachers of Young Children in ensuring Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Education Curriculum Implementation

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### Abstract

Developmentally appropriate practice demands that teachers meet children where they are developmentally and enable them to reach goals that are both challenging and achievable. In other words, it is the role of the teacher to ensure that goals and experiences are suited to children's learning and development and challenging enough to promote their progress and interest. The purpose of this paper therefore is to examine the role of teachers of young children in ensuring developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education curriculum implementation. This will enable the teachers to be aware of and to ensure developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education, especially in curriculum implementation as this will enhance appropriate learning in children. The paper describes the roles under four primary curriculum areas: methods of teaching, materials and equipment made available for children, arranging play and learning environment and assessment of children. It recommends, among others, that all teaching practices should be appropriate to children's age and developmental status, and that teachers of young children should attend to them as unique individuals and responsive to the social and cultural contexts in which they live.

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**Keywords:** developmentally appropriate, practices, curriculum, implementation and education

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### INTRODUCTION

Early childhood development (ECD) is concerned with the care and education of children aged 0 – 5 years or just before the age of formal schooling (NERDC, 2007). According to the national policy on education (2004), early childhood education is the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. The early years are crucial for the development of an individual. It is the foundation to the success or failure of the whole system of education and any support given at this stage helps to promote development. The role of teachers of young children, therefore, in ensuring developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education curriculum implementation cannot be overemphasized.

At the simplest level, curriculum is defined as a course of study. However, in thinking about curriculum in the broader context, it is everything that is taught and learned. For most early childhood educators (Brewer, 2007 & Estes, 2004), the true definition of curriculum, which lies between these two extremes, includes what is taught, how it is taught, and how it is evaluated. 'What is taught' refers to the content of instruction, while 'how it is taught' refers to the instructional methods teachers use to deliver the content to learners. 'How it is evaluated' relates to assessment strategies that educators use before instruction, throughout the instructional process and at the end of an instructional

process and at the end of an instructional segment. In other words, curriculum involves everything the child does while in an educational institution, involving every aspect of programme from planned activities and lesson to meals and informal conversation. To put it clearer, every experience – how they work with others, the materials available to them, must be thought of as a curriculum, for each contributes to their understanding of the world and their future attitudes about learning and education. That is why Tanner, (1995) defines curriculum as a plan or programme of all experiences which the learner encounters under the direction of a school. This is in line with Gatawa (1990) observation that it is the totality of the experiences of children for which schools are responsible.

Curriculum implementation on the other hand, according to Onwuka, (1984) entails putting into practice the officially prescribed courses of study to help the learner acquire knowledge or experiences. Viewed from this perspective, curriculum implementation can also be referred to the stage when the curriculum itself, as an educational programme, is put into effect. Putting the curriculum into operation requires an implementing agent. Onwuka, (1981) identifies the teacher as the agent in the curriculum implementation process. She argues that implementation is the manner in which the teacher selects and mixes the various aspects of knowledge contained in a curriculum document or syllabus.

According to him, implementation takes place when the teacher-constructed syllabus, the teacher's personality, the teaching materials and the teaching environment interact with the learner and the learner acquires the planned or the intended experiences, knowledge, skills, ideas and attitudes that are aimed at enabling the same learner to function effectively in the society. Curriculum implementation, therefore, refers to how the planned or officially designed course of study is translated by the teacher into learning experiences for the benefit of the learner.

The purpose of this paper therefore is to examine the role of teachers of young children in ensuring developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education curriculum implementation. In other words the paper looks at the developmentally appropriate practice of teachers of young children in implementing early childhood education curriculum. This will enable the teachers to be aware of and to ensure developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education, especially in curriculum implementation as this will enhance appropriate learning in children.

#### **Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

Developmentally appropriate practices according to NAEYC publication, 1997, in Bredekam & Copple, (1997) is described as practices that take into consideration the developmental needs of children. It describes the wide range of factors that impact the care and education of young children. These factors include, but are not limited to, teaching method, room arrangement, care-giving behaviours, child-teacher interactions and equipment and materials.

According to NAEYC (1997), three categories of information should be considered when determining developmentally appropriate practice. First decide whether a suggested teaching or learning practices is appropriate to the ages of the children in the group; in other words would the behavior in question be a reasonable expectation for a group of typically developing children of this age? If so then the practice is considered age appropriate. For example it would be unreasonable (not age appropriate) to expect two-year old children to sit at a table and put together puzzles with twenty pieces. However, it would be reasonable (age appropriate) to invite them to place one large puzzle piece, like a circle, into a cut-out frame. Secondly, decide whether the behavior in question is appropriate for each specific child. Educator's knowledge of age appropriateness, combined with information about specific children derived from various sources such as observations by classroom teachers and information provided by family members provides specific factors relevant to individual children. If so, then the practice is individually appropriate. The third area to consider when determining developmentally appropriate

practices was based on feedback received in response to the first publication of the NAEYC statement on DAP which includes knowledge about children's families and communities which provides input for practices that is culturally appropriate. Culturally appropriate practice relates to elements of diversity, such as language, religion, ethnicity, and gender. In sum, developmentally appropriate practice incorporates knowledge of and consideration of age, individual, and cultural characteristics of each child in a programme.

Over time, the concept of developmentally appropriate practice has broadened to include most facets of early care and education. DAP is not limited to teaching and learning practices ; it also encompasses practices that make up the total play and learning environment, including organizing learning environments, selecting equipment and materials, planning and implementing curriculum, communicating with and involving families and observing behaviours and assessing development.

For the curriculum to render effectively the services it is expected to deliver, it has to be planned appropriately. Planning a developmentally appropriate curriculum means that teachers have to know, and teach children where they are developmentally, as individuals and as a group. Therefore, the role of teachers of young children, in ensuring developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education curriculum implementation requires that teachers take into account the developmental needs of children and also recognize the practices that make up the total play and learning environment, including organizing learning environments for children.

A developmentally appropriate curriculum therefore should rely on the knowledge of child development theory while at the same time considering information about specific children (Onwuka, 1981). According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children Position Statement (1998), curriculum for young children is developmentally appropriate when it complements their natural learning tendencies and cultural sensibilities as well as individual needs. Included among the natural learning tendencies of children are the inclinations to satisfy their curiosity by asking question and to seek solutions to questions through play. Therefore, for young children, play serves as the primary vehicle through which they explore and discover new objects, events, concepts and relationships. That is why Estes (2004) described play as the most developmental appropriate practice for teaching young people. In other words, play is the best way to deliver curriculum content to young children.

### **The Role of Teachers of Young Children in Ensuring Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Curriculum Implementation**

Teachers play vital roles in the implementation of curriculum by enhancing learning experiences based on the children's interest, needs and abilities. In other words, the teacher is responsible for planning developmentally appropriate daily activities of her class. The teacher plans the lessons and activities carefully with the assistant teachers and includes input from the children as well. Careful consideration ensures that all activities offered reflect the age, developmental levels and interests of children. It is the teacher who integrates all the curriculum areas along with dramatic play, field trips and classroom visitors to fully develop concepts within each theme or project. While most activities are preplanned, it is the responsibility of the teachers to look for teachable moments and also be flexible and willing to change projects direction as needed, to best meet the children's needs and interest.

### **Method of Teaching**

How the teachers deliver curriculum is also paramount in ensuring DAP in curriculum implementation. The how part includes the methods, approaches and strategies teachers use to help children learn. Teachers should always research for methods that are "evidence-based", -- those methods that studies have demonstrated that the approach is effective in helping children learn. These include (but not limited to): play-based activities, developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), intentional teaching, scaffolding, thoughtfully designed learning environments, child initiated activities, teacher-directed activities, parent engagement, modeling, peer-mediated intervention and shared experiences. Central to all these best practices is play-based activities. According to Maduwesi (2005), learning through play is natural for children and it should be the core of children's curriculum. The aim is to support each child's growth and development by providing multiple, extended periods for play throughout the day.

What makes play the most developmentally appropriate practice for teaching young children? According to Estes, (2004), play is self-directed activity; children engage in play because they want to, not because they are asked to do so by their family members or teachers. Because play is freely chosen, children's attention is more likely to be focused and self-sustaining during play. When children play, they are totally involved -- they are mentally, emotionally, socially and usually physically active; and they pursue learning that is meaningful to them. Therefore, play is holistic -- it supports development of the whole child. In addition, play occurs throughout the course of children's daily activities, so it is naturally integrated and comprehensive

(Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Therefore, it is the caregivers' role to help keep the play productive by carefully setting up environment, adding materials and sometimes joining in.

### **MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT**

In selecting materials and equipments for young children, appropriate selection of toys, supplies and furnishings for early care and education environments requires understanding of how children develop and learn (Bronson, 1995). As one of the more obvious aspects of the physical dimensions of classroom, the materials and equipments made available for children send a clear message to an observer about our views about early childhood education.

Developmentally appropriate materials and equipment entail that teachers use age appropriateness as the baseline for selecting toys, supplies, furnishings and equipment, while also keeping in mind the unique needs of individual children (Dodge, 2002). Toys and equipment that are age appropriate also have less potential for causing injury to children (Bronson, 1995). The safety of toys and equipment is particularly relevant for children because they are more likely to place small items in their mouths and less likely to have the cognitive abilities to be aware of potential hazards.

Additionally, the teacher ensures DAP in children's curriculum implementation when the teacher provides sufficient varieties and quantities of play and learning materials related to each of the developmental domains to support development of the whole child. Materials that can be used in many ways are most suitable to early childhood classrooms, because they make allowances for the range of development represented by the children who use them (Chardler, 1994).

Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood curriculum implementation also demands that the teacher makes appropriate selection of durable classroom equipment furnishings. This begins by considering the ages and developmental levels of the children who will be using the play and learning spaces. For example, classrooms designed for infants and toddlers require specialized equipment -- such as high chairs, cribs, stationary walkers, changing tables and potty chairs -- to accommodate the special feeding, sleeping, diapering, and toileting of children less than three years of age. However, classrooms designed for preschool age children should have fewer custodial requirements but require child-sized table, chairs, shelving, and cubbies that provide open access to supplies and toys to facilitate children's independence (Dodge, 2002) while classrooms for children in kindergarten should have approximately sized-tables, chairs, shelving and some type of storage -- space for personal items. Heavy

pieces of equipment or furniture need to be steady and stable to avoid possible injuries to children, who may lean or climb on these items. Equipment provided for outdoor should also be developmentally appropriate.

Another element of appropriate selection of materials and equipment is how they reflect diversity. Teachers of young children should recognize the uniqueness of children by valuing the diversity of families, cultures and communities (Bank 2002). Culturally appropriate play and learning environments for young children avoid use of materials and practices that show bias related to culture, ethnicity, gender, language or religion. Classrooms reflect cultural sensitivity and respect for diversity when they offer a variety of play and learning materials that are anti-bias in nature (Derma – Sparks & ABC Task Force, 1989). For example, such classrooms include male and female dolls representing many cultures, children's books showing different kinds of families and individuals in non-traditional roles, and dramatic play props or materials for both boys and girls. It is the role of the teacher to see that the materials and equipment selected are developmentally appropriate for the intended audience and function of the equipment.

#### **Arranging Play and Learning Environment**

After selecting developmentally appropriate materials and equipment, teachers should turn their attention to the arrangements of those items within early childhood settings. Developmentally appropriate learning environments are prepared to foster positive development of the whole child through self-directed activity and play, which is facilitated not only by the materials and equipment selected, but also by the way these items are set up and distributed throughout the classroom. Room arrangement is the term used to describe the organization of materials and equipment within the learning environment. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the caregivers and providers to provide developmentally appropriate room arrangements that invite children to investigate and actively engage in learning experiences as they interact with others (Isbell & Exelby, 2001). Most programmes for infants, toddlers and preschool age children and some kindergarten develop areas designated for particular type of activities. These centers are called learning centers or activity centers. They are centers where relevant materials and equipment are grouped together to facilitate self-directed activity and play. The centers include (but not limited to) blocks and construction centers, manipulative centers, arts, literacy areas, puppetry corners, math, science and technology and dramatic centers. A well planned assortment of learning centers can easily support all of the developmental domains as children move from one centre location to another during the day. This is well established in typical Montessori classrooms. Although learning

centers may be geared primarily to support one particular developmental domain, they will likely support the other domains as well.

For example, in a study of plants, materials such as flowers (not poisonous), leaves and seed pots could be placed in the art centers; books and computer software about plants could be available in the library; puzzles with plant content could be available in the manipulative area; and accessories could be added to the blocks area so that the children could create a farm. Enhancing learning areas in these ways does not mean that children will be assigned to do certain tasks in the area; rather, materials will be available to help children complete their investigations or follow up on their interests.

#### **Assessment of Children**

Another area the caregiver has a role to play is in the area of assessment. Assessment refers to the collection of information or data collecting. Assessment is the process of observing, recording and otherwise documenting the work children do and how they do it, as a basis for a variety of educational decisions that affect the child (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE, 2003). Assessment is integral to curriculum and instruction and must serve in ways that enhance opportunities for optimal growth, development and learning (SECA, 2000a). As they observe children to glean information about curriculum, caregivers should simultaneously and systematically observe and record children's behaviours. The focus of the observations is to document and collect evidence of children's current levels of functioning. The gathered data are used to organize learning environments, plan and implement curriculum, and communicate with family members about their children.

Assessment that is ethical, appropriate, valid and reliable should be the central part of all early childhood programme. According to NAEYC/SDE (2003) caregivers should assess young children's strengths; progress and needs using assessment methods that are developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, tied to children's daily activities. One method that has been shown to be very valuable is play-based assessment. Play-based assessment according to Ahola & Kovacik (2007) is a form of developmental assessment especially for 0 – 3 age group, that involves observation of how a child plays alone with peers or with parents or other families, caregivers, in free play or in special games. This type of assessment can be helpful because play is a natural way for children to show what they can do, how they feel, how they learn new things, and how they behave with familiar people.

In other words, assessment should be natural and authentic i.e. observation of children's day-to-day behaviours in their natural settings. An effective assessment should collect information necessary to make important decisions about a child's developmental and educational needs. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the teacher to appropriately observe record and document the work children do and how they do it for appropriate developmental and educational decisions on children.

### CONCLUSION

Developmentally appropriate practice requires knowing and teaching children where they are developmentally, as individuals and as a group, and helping each child reach challenging but achievable goals. In other words, ensuring developmentally appropriate practices in the implementation of early childhood education curriculum, teachers of young children have the responsibility to understand the cultural influences and developmental characteristics of young children, to extend and support children's ideas and interests and to provide appropriate learning activities and guidance techniques to meet their needs through play. The children acquire the skills, concepts, and knowledge of the curriculum through a rich and varied interaction with peers, teachers and materials. Teachers of young children therefore, have the duty to prepare and organize developmentally, individually and culturally appropriate classrooms to provide children with a range of high-quality learning experiences irrespective of the current focus on content and accountability.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made:

1. Since developmentally appropriate practice demands that teachers of young children meet them both where they are and enabling them to reach goals that are both challenging and achievable, they should endeavour to get to know their children's interests, talents and dispositions.
2. All teaching practices should be appropriate to children's age and developmental status, and teachers should attend to them as unique individuals and responsive to the social and cultural contexts in which they live.
3. Teachers of young children should ensure that goals and experiences are suited to children's learning and development and challenging enough to promote their progress and interest.
4. Teachers of young children should endeavour to use best practices in their daily instructions. This is because these practices along with evidence about curriculum and teaching effectiveness form a solid basis for decision making in early care and education

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