

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES

How much do you care for our children, for their well-being, for their education? We could say we do care and that's why there are schools in every district, where every child has access to free education. Yet, this education does not reach the students in a proper way and therefore they cannot fully benefit from it. Our students cannot reach their potential because they might have other needs that have not been met. These needs are not taken into consideration when creating the curriculums taught in their classrooms. They are expected to follow a curriculum that they are not ready for and it interferes with their socio-emotional development.

Each day we seem to learn more and understand more about education, however, many times we fail when it comes to how to teach children. The most affected one is the child whose individual needs are not being taken into consideration when preparing a curriculum. We see children failing every day and more often than not we assume they are lazy, not smart enough or simply they are trouble makers. The fact is that behind the behavior of every child there is a motive, a reason and we need to find out what this reason is so we can work on it and help children reach their potential. Often, we might have a child who is irritable, doesn't want to participate in classroom activities or is aggressive towards his peers, the most common response is to rebuke or redirect the child to other activities. Sometimes he is just asked to have some quiet time and join the class when he is ready to listen. This student cannot keep up with the classroom's dynamics, he can't focus and he is falling behind in his development. His needs are not being met and the behavior continues because it has not been addressed, therefore, the child will be considered a problem child, a disruptive child. We would say he is not interested in learning.

There is a possibility that this child is going through some negative experiences at home or at school. Perhaps he doesn't understand the material and his response is to shut down. There are many situations that can be affecting the child, but looking into it is not a priority for some educators. In some educational settings the goal is to have children learn what's specified in the curriculum, and the teachers might have outdated teaching approaches where they just want to complete the work neglecting the child's interest. They focus on the product instead of how the child is learning and pressure the child to complete a project even if they are not interested in it. A study focused on DAP in communities of black and brown students found that directors, teachers and families seem to prefer a setting where the focus is literacy and basic skills. Low income families tend to prefer a curriculum that emphasizes reading, writing and math. (1) The importance of a socio-emotional development is not a priority, and activities such as dramatic play, manipulatives, exploring, singing, building etc., are considered "just playing" and a waste of time. In these communities, childcare is seen as an educational setting not as a place where their children attend for social interaction purposes. The study adds that:

"A lot of times teachers really get into their projects and they try to get the children to complete it, or to color within the lines, it's not about that, it's about what's going on in the child's mind and how you are connecting with that child while you are doing a project" (1)

The article also points out that the use of Developmentally Appropriate Practices is seen by minority communities as more of a wealthier community practice and don't see the need to apply it in low-income communities. This point of view sets our black and brown children at a disadvantage educationally and emotionally and this issue needs to be addressed now, while the child is still young and he is building a base for his education. Improving the teaching methods while taking the whole child into consideration when creating curriculums can help him develop

a love and interest for learning, and prevent future failures in his educational and emotional development.

This deficiency in our Early Childhood classrooms can be improved by adapting

Developmentally Appropriate Practices, which simply means making decisions about what and when to teach a child, depending on their age, interest, ability and needs. NAEYC defines

Developmentally appropriate practices as:

“Methods that promote each child’s optimal development and learning through a strengths- based, play-based approach to joyful, engage learning. Educators implement developmentally appropriate practice by recognizing the multiple assets all young children bring to the early learning programs as unique individuals and as members of families and communities. Building on each child’s strengths- and taking care to not harm any aspect of each child’s physical, cognitive, social, or emotional well-being. Educators design and implement learning environments to help all children achieve their full potential across all domains of development and across all content areas. Developmentally Appropriate Practice recognizes and supports each individual as a valued member of the learning community. As a result, to be developmentally appropriate, practices must also be culturally, linguistically, and ability appropriate for each child.”(2)

When implementing this approach, the child is seen as an individual, his physical, emotional and socio-economic development is taken into consideration when preparing the curriculum which should be appropriate for the child’s age and needs. Although, relying on Developmentally Appropriate Practices is not a newly discovered approach, it is not widely used in preschools. In a study by “The Whole Child Blog” about literacy in Early Childhood we can observe how important Developmentally Appropriate Practices are in the early years. The blog states that Early Childhood has become very popular in the last several years, getting the attention of political figures and institutions. They recognize the impact early education has on a student’s future success in school and it points out that the focus should be on DAP. Basic skills start in the Early Childhood classroom and within these skills, literacy is the core and foundation level

of teaching. For educators to effectively plan this literacy instruction, they need to reflect on the developmental stages of the children, and their interests. Furthermore, the study shows that:

“Early childhood professionals that employ a literacy-engaging atmosphere where DAP is used prove to have thriving and successful students. When DAP is employed in classroom environments, lessons are more successful, highly effective, and all students benefit throughout each learning domain in relation to literacy instruction” (2)

To start correcting this deficiency in the education that we are delivering our children, we can start by assessing the child, his life at home, his interest, his health, is there something troubling him that keeps him from focusing? Are there any cultural differences that prevent the child from engaging in certain activities? Does he understand the material? Is the material age appropriate? etc. Once we know the child’s state, then we can implement DAP, where the child will not be forced or expected to follow a curriculum, he is not ready for. Also, more DAP information needs to be included in teacher’s professional development so that they can learn of new teaching practices and more ways to incorporate Developmentally Appropriate Practices with their students. Meanwhile, Early Childhood classrooms need to be closely supervised to ensure that DAP is not being ignored and that teachers are responsibly following this practice in their curriculum. Directors should supervise that this is being followed in their classrooms and the Department of Education along with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene need to conduct routine inspections evaluating the Early Childhood centers curriculum and the projects the students are working on, and hold the directors accountable.

This topic is very important to me because as a child I found myself being scared to go to school. I was insecure about my academic performance and I fell behind in my education, I was afraid of the teacher's reactions and to be ridiculed in front of my peers. This could have been resolved if

my teachers had the training necessary to understand why I was struggling with learning and liking school. I went straight to first grade without having exposure to a preschool environment and the material was overwhelming to me. Applying DAP in my situation could have provided me with tools to develop the skills that were never taught to me in the first place. Also giving me time to adapt to a new environment could have helped me appreciate the experience of being in school.

This issue didn't just affect me but also my peers and instead of finding a developmentally appropriate practice that suited me or my classmates, we were punished for not keeping up with the work or just ignored and not promoted to the next grade. My goal is to spare my students from this negative experience and apply DAP in my classroom so that they may build a solid foundation for their educational and emotional development. The ultimate goal is to make DAP an essential component in the curriculum of every Early Childhood classroom in the city, state and eventually the country, regardless of the social level in which the child is learning. I invite the parent community to get informed about DAP so that they can understand the benefits of this practice. I ask school directors to ensure that DAP is being included in teacher's professional development, and that they are applying it in the classroom. Lastly, I urge the Department of Health and the Department of Education to assure DAP is being implemented in every Early Childhood classroom by making routine inspections to the schools.

For the well-being and success of our children, we can do this together.

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