Chapter 4  Instructional Planning

Concerning Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

Read the following and make a list of circumstances that may inhibit or influence a teacher’s ability or inclination to use DAP in their classroom. Write your own opinion whether you will implement DAP when you have your first (or own) classroom or whether you will respect or agree with professionals who choose not to do so.

Implementing DAP

NAEYC’s National Academy of Early Childhood Programs has denied accreditation to programs in which the curriculum does not meet the criteria for DAP. A DAP approach to early childhood curriculum can run into difficulty when staffing, facility, material resources, and staff preparation time are far from ideal.

Interacting as a partner as DAP suggests, rather than as a presenter, may require that someone else be available in the classroom to supervise the group. Providing a continually interesting, opportunity-rich classroom environment demands storage space, equipment, materials, as well as time to plan, collect, and set up the room and yard activities for child-initiated play and exploration.

Zahorik (1997) believes that in addition to problems of storage, material resources, and preparation time, there are two other dilemmas faced by some preschool and elementary school teachers as they attempt to implement DAP. The first is to err on the side of the students. By that, Zahorik suggests that allowing students to develop their own understandings from their personal constructions may lead them to overlook what research might add to their conceptual understanding. The second error, of course, is to design the curriculum around what experts have already discovered. After students have devised their own constructions and arrived at what they may feel is the correct concept being taught, teachers may be all too quick to present knowledge from the discipline. For example, if the teacher brings in a variety of different types of leaves and asks students, working in small groups, to classify them, it is not important that each group classify the leaves in exactly the same way or in a way that is biologically correct. It is more important that the children justify their classifications. As children grow older, then scientific classifications can be introduced.

Administrators and teachers who believe traditional education has proved its merits over the years, parent groups who want traditional teacher-planned and directed learning activities and curriculum, educators who feel their group of young children is far from mainstream and requires specific experiences before first grade, and centers offering unique or eclectic educational approaches are faced with a decision: Their center’s or school’s curriculum is usually not based only on child interests.

O’Brien (2000) cautions that children from non-mainstream and disadvantaged backgrounds may not have the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions that would allow them to benefit from the DAP approach. She urges teacher training programs to increase the awareness of values and beliefs inherent in DAP, so that teachers might decide for themselves if this approach makes sense to them and suits their teaching situation. O’Brien feels there are rarely right answers in teaching and that teaching should be a highly individual craft involving teachers’ own definitions of problems and ways to resolve them. Curriculum design, in O’Brien’s view, is to be created, rather than implemented based on a given set of someone’s philosophy and guidelines. O’Brien mentions examining cultural contexts and constructs and who teachers are as teachers and learners, providing an expanded world view, and considering a more respectful, thoughtful, and socially conscious practice. She answers the question “For what purpose do we educate?” as follows:

Although we probably cannot answer this question definitively, one possible answer is that we ought to educate students to really see the worlds in which they live, and be willing and able to act to effect change when necessary. This is the essence of democratic schooling and the foundation for democratic
life. This purpose calls for engaged pedagogy and an approach to teaching and learning that supports teachers as reflective practitioners, as transformative intellectuals, and as whole, passionate, caring people. (page 284)

Most states limit the number of preschool children over three years of age in group care centers to 10 to 15 per qualified teacher. Many private schools limit the number of children in kindergarten and primary classrooms, to 20 to 25. In public school kindergarten and primary grade classrooms, the number of children can be as high as 30 to 35 making a DAP approach difficult. A teacher-centered, more authoritarian approach may become necessary.

Wein (1995) points out that problems may exist when early childhood student teacher supervisors encourage DAP and student teachers work in certain field placements:

I could frequently see that carrying out this practice [DAP] was very difficult for teachers. Rather than providing situations where children could engage in child-initiated activity, play freely with friends, and try out absorbing activities in an atmosphere of exploration and a climate of social responsibility (as the ideology suggests), child care centers more frequently operated like miniature factories, with fixed time periods for activities and children moving through them as if they were in an assembly line. (page 157)

Wein also discusses the location of power in contrasting developmentally appropriate instruction and teacher dominion or teacher-directed instruction:

In teacher dominion instruction, the location of power is in the adult. The child is viewed as a container to be filled with knowledge. The adult transmits knowledge through direct instruction.

In developmental appropriateness, the location of power alternates between adults and children, with power shared. Both adults and children are believed to be active agents who seek out and construct knowledge through active interaction with others. (page 183)

Most descriptions of developmentally appropriate practice mention providing learning activities that suit children's age, development, and interests. Developmentally appropriate curriculum is created to promote children's knowledge in physical, social, emotional, and intellectual areas. The curriculum helps children learn how to learn. It encourages the development of a foundation for children's further learning.


Extra Credit Assignment or Discussion Activity

Student teachers who plan activities in the spring semester may be asked to plan activities that aid the older four-year-olds' transition to kindergarten. Going to kindergarten is an important rite of passage in growing up. What issues might preschoolers consider when thinking about their next educational step? Perhaps they are concerned about:

- being small in a large place.
- not knowing what is expected or not knowing the rules.
- the amount of playtime that is allowed.
- going on the bus alone.
- not knowing the people or children who will be there.
- what the room and yard are like.
- an unfamiliar routine.
- what they will learn.
- how nice the teacher will be.

Plan five possible activities for children, one of which probes for more issues that may not have been mentioned above. Omit the kindergarten classroom visit, which is routinely planned by school districts. Consider what might be planned for a school-home meeting in this area. What main ideas would you emphasize?