

## Preschool Teachers' Professionalism Through Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) Curriculum

*Abdul Halim Masnan<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Haziq Mohd Sharif<sup>2</sup> and Elyssa Heinzie Josin<sup>3</sup>*  
<sup>123</sup>Faculty of Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University,  
35900, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia.

**Abstract:** When discussing the education system quality of a country, the main focus points to teachers' professionalism. Teachers are the foundation to the education system as they are the implementors to the policy, curriculum goal and the government's desires. Professional teachers will always perform the duties and responsibilities assigned to them with full dedication. In formal education in Malaysia, preschool is the most critical period to prepare children with various skills, self-esteem and positive attitudes for the next phase of learning. Even though many efforts have been implemented by the ministry to increase teachers' professionalism, there still exists preschool teachers who failed to implement the curriculum as expected. Thus, this concept paper discusses the concept of Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) to build the professionalism of preschool teachers. DAP is the basic knowledge that needs to be mastered by preschool teachers regarding appropriate teaching and learning strategies for children.

**Key words:** Teacher professionalism, Preschool teacher, Preschool education, Developmentally Appropriate Practices Curriculum

### INTRODUCTION

Many countries now place emphasis on the preparation of the best education opportunities for children, especially for the first three years [1]. The first eight years of a child's life makes up the period of extraordinary growth and development in which brain develops rapidly during the first three years and optimum potential grows until eight years [2]. Thus, in the education world, preschool is a crucial early experience for further learning [3]. An effective, meaningful and enjoyable schooling and learning experience can build skills, confidence and positive attitudes in children in preparation for entering Year 1 and further learning [4]. Therefore, the quality in teaching and learning in preschool education correlates strongly to the quality of the teachers and curriculum used [5].

When viewing education offers, priority is to visit the curriculum and its services [6]. The effectiveness of a curriculum depends on the dedication of a teacher, because teachers or educators are the implementors of the curriculum [7]. In implementing the preschool curriculum, teachers must have knowledge

and skills regarding child development [5]. This is because the curriculum developed for early childhood is not only focused on teaching them reading, writing and counting skills, but rather more importantly to build their potential in all developmental aspects, holistically and in a balanced manner [7]. Due to this, before teaching, teachers must have clear knowledge regarding children [8].

The concept of Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) introduced by the United States by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) addresses the basic knowledge that needs to be mastered by preschool teachers to fulfill the holistic need of children. DAP refers to knowledge regarding the learning and development of children [9]. DAP is also a philosophy to plan a curriculum regarding anything appropriate with the development of children from birth until the age of eight years old [8]. Based on the NAEYC Position Statement, DAP emphasizes the children-centered approach, whereby students are actively involved in the children's learning [10, 11]. Therefore, DAP is something that must be known and understood, not just an expectation or forecast of what

**Corresponding Author:** Abdul Halim Masnan, Muhammad Haziq Mohd Sharif & Elyssa Heinzie Josin, Faculty of Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University, 35900, Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia.

the children would obtain or the goal to shape the future of the children [9].

### **Preschool Teachers' Professionalism**

The teaching profession is the most noble field of work as this profession is a continuation from the task of the Prophets for the Muslims [12]. The career of a teacher is considered professional as it requires the mastery of knowledge, specific professional skills in the education field and the subject taught, and compliance to current laws and codes [13]. Therefore, each teacher plays a role to uphold the teaching profession to a more successful standard for the development of the excellence of the country's education system [14]. In the effort to enhance teachers' professionalism in Malaysia, the Malaysia Teacher's Standard (SGM) document was drafted by the Malaysia Ministry of Education based on: (i) National Mission, (ii) National Education Philosophy, (iii) Teacher's Education Philosophy, (iv) Teaching Profession Mannerisms, and (v) MOE Work Ethics [15]. Efforts to enhance preschool teachers' professionalism also became the government's main agenda as highlighted in the National Key Result Areas (NKRA) [16] and Malaysian Education Blueprint (PPPM) 2013-2025 [17]. SGM outlined the professional competencies that teachers must achieve, which include teachers' professionalism, knowledge and understanding, and teaching and learning skills to develop quality educators [15, 18].

The quality of teachers is important for the education of a student [12]. Referring to PPPM 2013-2025, the involvement of Malaysia in international assessments such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) recorded unsatisfactory resorts. Malaysia's involvement in TIMSS in 2011 reported 35% and 38% of Malaysian students' failure to achieve the minimum skills in Mathematics and Science, which was a drastic decrease of two to four times from 7% and 13% since Malaysia first joined in 1999. The PISA 2009+ results also showed Malaysia at the third lowest group among the 74 participating countries, and this result also places Malaysia below the average international achievement and OECD (Exhibit 3), in which nearly 60% of students aged 15 years old failed to achieve minimum skills in Mathematics, 44% in Reading, and 43% in Sains did not achieve the minimum skills [17]. MOE described the failures as a sign that teachers were not teaching effectively, and students were not hardworking [19]. This clearly shows that teachers are an important component in students' learning [20].

Based on the statement, preschool education is the early process to stimulate children's holistic development in preparation to compete at a higher level. If the students' development were shaped well, they

would be prepared at other stages in education [21]. Early experience whether starting in preschool, home or daycare is crucial as children who go through low quality environment whether at home or outside are not inclined to attain excellence and good achievements when they enter primary school [22]. Research [23] shows that children who have strong cognitive maturity are more prepared in determining their adaptation during formal education compared to physical and socio-emotional maturity. Through nurturing and appropriate education, the mind, attitude and emotion, creativity and critical thinking skills of children can be enhanced because learning and development happens rapidly in the first six years of life [4]. Thus, referring to the NKRA, preschool teachers must ensure that their preschool teaching service is "of quality to ensure the increase of interest and continuity to education at a higher level" [16].

### **Preschool Teachers as Curriculum Implementors**

The effectiveness of the implementation of a curriculum in a classroom depends on the understanding, appreciation and implementation by the teacher [4]. Even though many efforts have been undertaken by the ministry to increase teachers' professionalism, preschool teachers are still weak in curriculum implementation. Research [24] shows that teachers' unclear understanding of knowledge and lack of mastery of the curriculum contents shows the failure of the teacher in implementing the 2010 National Preschool Curriculum Standard (KSPK). Another research [25] found that preschool teachers have good knowledge on assessments, but they have no skill in implementing assessments based on KSPK. This is because the curriculum for early childhood education is not only focused on teaching children to master reading, writing and counting skills; rather, priority is given to increase their potential in all developmental aspects for a holistic and balanced development [7]. Thus, all teachers in the field of early childhood education must understand what happens during the first eight years of a child, and the best strategies to support their growth and development [9]. Therefore, these teachers will be able to implement teaching and learning based on developmentally appropriate practices [4].

The teaching of teachers begins with an understanding of the needs and techniques in teaching [26]. The curriculum for preschool education in Malaysia was shaped based on the National Education Philosophy [7], unlike other curriculums which was drafted with the aim to develop children's holistic potential in their existing environment to prepare them for the challenges in primary school [3]. According to the Professional Circular Letter No. 15/2002, MOE determined that the National Preschool Curriculum (KPK) must be used in public preschools and private

kindergartens [5]. Even though the implementation of additional curriculums is allowed in the private sector through the permission of the MOE Chief Registrar, this sector must still implement the curriculum that was drafted by MOE's Curriculum Development Sector effective January 2003 [27]. Thus, there is no exemption for preschool teachers at public or private levels from mastering the contents of KPK, now known as KSPK Revised 2017. Therefore, preschool teachers need to be given early exposure to the use of KSPK [25].

**Concept of Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP)**

Teaching is an activity that plays the most crucial role in a school [20]. Teachers must have relevant skills and knowledge about children such as psychology, capabilities, interest and background, and be alert of current changes [4]. Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) is an approach that emphasizes teaching and learning methods suitable with the age, self-development, capability, talent and interest of the children [7]. Bradekamp and Rosegrant (1992) said, "DAP is not a curriculum; it is not rigid set of standards that dictate practice. Rather, it is a framework, a philosophy, or an approach to working with young children" [9]. This means that the concept of DAP introduced by NAEYC approximately 20 years ago refers to the philosophy of curriculum planning for early childhood practices that suits the developmental needs of children from birth until the age of eight years old [8].

DAP refers to a practice focused on knowledge regarding the learning and development of children [28]. Early education that suits development is recognized in natural social studies, cultural values and in multiple languages, including the understanding of the needs for children to interact with their surroundings with minimum adult intervention according to their developmental stage [8]. The "appropriate" concept in DAP was mentioned in various dimensions for professionalism development such as appropriateness for age, self, social and culture of children [29, 30]. There are five dimensions in the early childhood practice as the outline from the DAP Position Statement as shown in Figure 1 below:

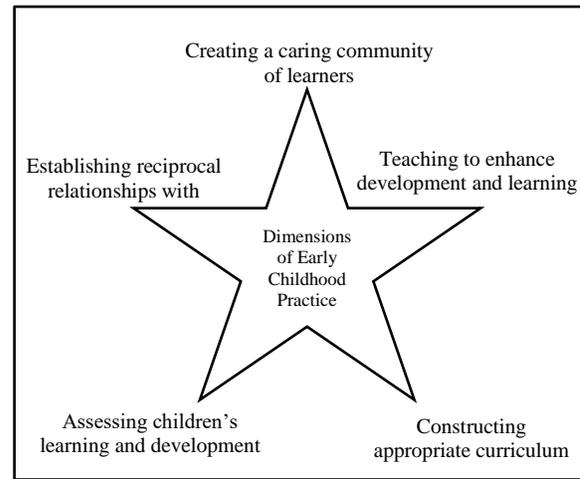


Figure 1: Dimensions of Early Childhood Practice [9]

NAEYC, the main professional body for early childhood, set the standard practice based on research to increase professional knowledge through developmental activities such as workshops, seminars and conferences; provide a source to increase the quality of early childhood education; and help families identify quality educational programs [30]. Based on the research, DAP is identified as a theory on the learning and development of children according to age, level and particular context [9]. Thus, DAP is used as the blueprint to increase the quality of children's learning experience in fulfilling their holistic needs [8].

NAEYC recognized that the concept of DAP is the belief that all teaching activities should be appropriate with the age and developmental level of children; to appreciate children as unique individuals; and to be sensitive towards their social and cultural contexts [29, 30]. In simpler terms, DAP refers to knowledge regarding children's learning and development [9]. This knowledge is the main point in designing quality programs for children [31]. Figure 2 below shows a simple illustration of DAP's concept as the basic knowledge that must be held by preschool teachers:

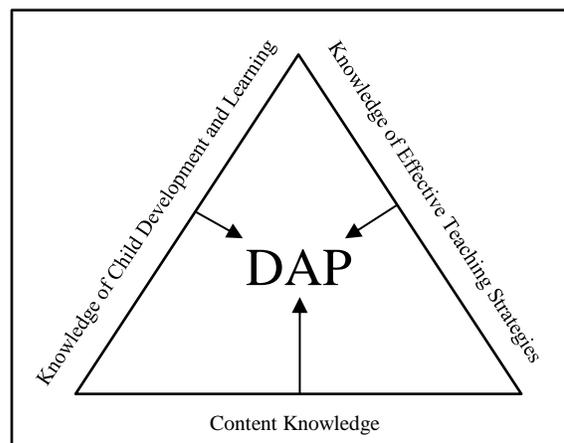


Figure 2: Teacher-Learning Knowledge Base [31]

**Components of Developmentally Appropriate Practices**

The field of early childhood nurturing and education has experienced drastic changes since a few decades ago, parallel to the introduction of standards and guidelines of techniques for teachers [8]. With this awareness, NAEYC designed its own criteria to increase the quality of early childhood education [32]. Based on the DAP Position Statement released by NAEYC in 1986 through a two-year field study [32], the main determinant in the quality of a program depends on the knowledge regarding child development [29, 32]. With the expansion of NAEYC’s National Academy of Early Childhood Programs, the concept of DAP becomes clearer [9].

The DAP Position Statement is a statement and rational discussion by NAEYC towards early childhood education and critical issues related to it [9]. The statement covers the work outline for a curriculum’s appropriateness, teaching and learning activities, interaction between adults and children, the relation between the program and the home, and an assessment on the children’s development from birth until the age of eight years old [32]. Three essential components on information and knowledge important to build a teacher’s professionalism is based on the DAP Position Statement as follows:

Components of DAP	Description
Age appropriate	Should show awareness and understanding of the predictable sequences of growth and change in the children it serves.
Individually appropriate	Should be aware of and respond to individual differences in young children, matching children’s developing abilities with appropriate materials and activities, while challenging them to develop further.
Culturally appropriate	Should recognize the influence of group cultural differences on a child’s development.

Table 1: Essential Components of DAP [29, 9]

**Principles of Children’s Learning and Development**

The development of children particularly at the preschool stage will not be complete at the cognitive and physical level if the children are given formal academic instruction, as children learn through playing [32]. In this case, for 20 years, NAEYC recommends two fundamental commitments, which are: (1) excellence and fairness in early education for all children; and (2) teachers must understand deeply children’s learning and influence their physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development [30]. All developmental

milestones for children are related even though from time to time, one developmental milestone may be more dominant over others; however, in fact, the function of children happens holistically [31].

NAEYC realized that as days pass, teachers in early childhood education often make decisions regarding the learning and development of children and planned strategies to help them achieve the desired results [9]. When mentioning DAP, teachers must recognize their students well and practice the knowledge to achieve the teaching and learning objectives [29, 32]. Thus, in the DAP Position Statement, NAEYC stated 12 principles [9] for the learning and development of children based on research, studies, theory and practice since decades ago as follows:

- 1) All the domains of learning and development (physical, social, emotional and cognitive) are important, and they closely interrelated.
- 2) Many aspects of children’s learning and development follow well-documented sequences with later abilities building on earlier ones.
- 3) Learning and development proceeds at varying rates from child to child and in uneven rates in different areas for individuals.
- 4) Learning and development results from a dynamic interaction of biological maturation and experience.
- 5) Early experiences have profound effects and optimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning to occur.
- 6) Developments proceed toward greater complexity, self-regulation and symbolic representational capacities.
- 7) Children develop best when they have secure, consistent relationships with responsive adults and positive relationships with peers.
- 8) Learning and development are influenced by multiple social and cultural context.
- 9) Children learn in a variety of ways such as a wide range of teaching strategies that are effective in supporting all these kinds of learning.
- 10) Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation and promoting language, cognition, and social skills.
- 11) Learning and development advances when children are challenged to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery.
- 12) Children’s experiences shape their motivation and approaches to learning, such as persistence, initiative and flexibility.

**CONCLUSION**

Overall, DAP as a need builds the professionalism of preschool teachers who are involved in early childhood

education. DAP is a concept that must be known by preschool teachers to better understand their students, leading to the application of the knowledge to achieve teaching and learning objectives. Thus, all preschool teachers, whether from the public or private sector, must have the fundamental knowledge regarding children before they begin teaching. This is to ensure the children learn according to their respective level and development. Teachers must also provide meaningful learning opportunities for children to encourage the acquirement of skills, self-confidence and positive attitude in preparation for education at the next level.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the co-authors, En. Muhammad Haziq Mohd Sharif and Miss Elyssa Heinzie Josin for the willingness to cooperate to search for quality and relevant information in writing this concept paper. All information discussed is to development preschool teachers' professionalism for quality early childhood education nation-wide.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Nik Farhanah Nik Azharia, Nurulhusna Qamaruzaman, Anniz Fazli Ibrahim Bajunid & Azman Hassan. 2015. The quality of physical environment in workplace childcare centers. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 202: 15-23.
- [2] UNESCO & UNICEF. 2012. *Asia-Pacific end of decade notes on education for all: Early childhood care and education*. Electronic edition. Asia-Pacific: UNESCO Bangkok, UNICEF EAPRO and UNICEF ROSA.
- [3] Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia. 2017. *Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan: Dokumen standard kurikulum dan pentaksiran*. Putrajaya: Bahagian Pembangunan Kurikulum, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia.
- [4] Rosmah Abd. Ghani & Mariani Md Nor. 2014. Pelaksanaan Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan oleh guru prasekolah. *Jurnal Peradaban* 7: 40-68.
- [5] Mohd Nazri Abdul Rahman & Wan Nurul Baizura Wan Mohamad Noor. 2018. Pelaksanaan Kurikulum Standard Prasekolah Kebangsaan semakan 2017: Retrospeksi guru. *JuPiDi: Jurnal Kepimpinan Pendidikan* 5(3): 59-71.
- [6] Lily Muliana Mustafa, Nek Kamal Yeop Yunus & Mohamed Nor Azhari Azman. 2014. An overview of private preschool in Malaysia: Marketing strategies and challenges. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 130: 105-113.
- [7] Nor Fauzian Kassim & Fauziah Hanim. 2015. Kurikulum pendidikan awal kanak-kanak dan modul pendidikan akhlak: Isu dan cabaran masa kini. *Seminar Penyelidikan Kebangsaan, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris*.
- [8] Jackman, H. L., Beaver, N. H. & Wyatt, S. S. 2015. *Early education curriculum: A child's connection to the world*. Sixth edition. United State, Stamford: Cengage Learning.
- [9] Gestwicki, C. 2014. *Development appropriate practice: Curriculum and development in early education*. Fifth edition. United State, Wadsworth: Cengage Learning.
- [10] Huffman, L. R. & Speer, P. W. 2000. Academic performance among at-risk children: The role of developmentally appropriate practices. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 15: 167-184.
- [11] Hu, B. Y., Fan, X., Yang, Y. & Neitzel, J. 2017. Chinese preschool teachers' knowledge and practice of teacher-child interactions: The mediating role of teachers' beliefs about children. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 63: 137-147.
- [12] Al Muslim Mustapa & Zamri Arifin. 2015. Penentuan dimensi kualiti guru bahasa Arab di Malaysia. *Islāmiyyāt* 37(1): 49-57.
- [13] Muhammad Suhaimi Taaat. 2014. Profesionalisme keguruan. *Utusan Borneo*, 12 November: 4.
- [14] Azahari Ramli, Azizi Abu Bakar & Siti Nur Zahirah Omar. 2015. Perhubungan pekerja antara kompetensi dan prestasi guru. *Journal of Global Business and Social Entrepreneurship (GBSE)* 1(2): 44-51.
- [15] Abd Khalil Adnan. 2017. Reka bentuk model program perkembangan profesionalisme guru Malaysia. Tesis Dr. Fal, Fakulti Pendidikan, University Malaya.
- [16] Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia. 2010a. *Bidang Keberhasilan Utama Nasional (NKRA) Pendidikan*. Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia.
- [17] Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia. 2013. *Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia 2013-2025*. Putrajaya: Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia.
- [18] Norila Md Salleh, Ikhsan Othman & Zaini Abdullah. 2016. Kesiediaan profesionalisme guru pelatih semasa praktikum. *The 1st International Teacher Education Conference on Teaching Practice, Sultan Idris Education University*, hlm. 294-322.
- [19] Rusliza Yahaya, Norsamsinar Samsuddin, Jessnor Elmy Mat Jizat & Hemini Krishnan. 2017. Hubungan antara latihan dalam perkhidmatan dan efikasi sendiri guru. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling* 2(6): 34-45.
- [20] Amirafiza Zaitun Mohd Jackie, Muhammad Faizal A. Ghani & Faisol Elham. 2016. Keberkesanan

- pengajaran guru tadika: Satu kajian awal. *Jurnal Kepimpinan Pendidikan* 3(4): 72-95.
- [21] Pekdoğan, S. & Akgül, E. 2017. Preschool children's school readiness. *International Education Studies* 10(1): 144-154.
- [22] Rohaty Mohd Majzub. 2013. Critical issues in preschool education in Malaysia. *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Education and Educational Technologies (EET'13)*, hlm. 150-155.
- [23] Satoria Amiruddin, Agnis, S. & Peter, V. S. K. 2014. Penilaian kesediaan ke sekolah kanak-kanak dan pengaruhnya terhadap penyesuaian di sekolah. *Seminar Kebangsaan Integriti Keluarga*, hlm. 1-8.
- [24] Jain Chee. 2017. Penerokaan Pengetahuan Teknologi, pedagogi dan kandungan dalam kalangan guru prasekolah di daerah Sandakan, Sabah. Tesis Dr. Fal, Fakulti Pendidikan, Universiti Malaya.
- [25] Mardziah Abdullah, Mariani Md Nor, Damaety, F. & M. NA. Rahman. 2017. Students' Assessment Administration among Preschool Teachers. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 7(10): 411-418.
- [26] Norshafinaz Abdul Sani & Faridah Yunus. 2018. Amalan guru terhadap proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran pranumerasi di tadika. *Seminar Antarabangsa Isu-Isu Pendidikan*, hlm. 116-124.
- [27] Kamarulzaman Kamaruddin, Nordin Mamat & Abdul Rahim Razalli. 2017. Parents' choices of preschool for their children: Issues and challenges. *International Journal of Contemporary Applied Researches* 4(8): 62-72.
- [28] Demircan, Ö. & Erden, T. F. 2015. Parental involvement and developmentally appropriate practices: A comparison of parent and teacher beliefs. *Journal of Early Child Development and Care* 185(2): 209-225.
- [29] Copple, C., & Bredekamp, S. 2009. *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- [30] Selmi, A. M., Gallagher, R. J. & Mora-Flores, E. R. 2015. *Early childhood curriculum for all learners: Integrating play and literacy activities*. United State of America: SAGE Publication.
- [31] Kostelnik, M. J. , Soderman, A. K. & Whiren, A. P. 2014. *Developmentally appropriate curriculum best practices early childhood education*. Fifth edition. United State of America: Pearson Education Limited.
- [32] Beaty, J. J. 2019. *Preschool appropriate practice: Environment, curriculum and development*. Fifth edition. United State of America, Boston: Cengage.