

**PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' BELIEFS OF
DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE
EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES**

Rose Cheptoo Ruto-Korir

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**PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' BELIEFS
OF DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE
EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES**

by

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PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR
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PRETORIA
2010

DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

I declare that “Preschool teachers’ beliefs of developmentally appropriate educational practices” is my original work and has not been previously submitted by me for a degree in any other university. No part of this work can be copied without the permission of the author and/or the University of Pretoria

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DEDICATION

Primarily, I dedicate this thesis to God almighty, without whose origin of wisdom, knowledge and sustenance, my human pursuits would be in vain.

Secondly, I dedicate this thesis to my late father and cherished friend Moindi Arap Ruto, who believed in me and is ever so perpetually present in spirit to light my life's path.

Thirdly, I dedicate this thesis to you my dearest friend and husband, Eliud Kipkemboi Korir, for your fountain of humour and generosity, which sometimes defies human logic. El, where could I get such a valuable friend as you? You so much dream and support my dreams...our dreams...I cannot ask for more.

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' beliefs are central to determining children's optimal educational experiences. However, some studies related to teachers' beliefs yielded findings that rendered beliefs and practices incongruous. Although the principles of developmentally appropriate practices that synthesize theoretical and empirical research on child development have been adapted to various contexts other than its original United States of America (USA) context, developmentally appropriate practices remain contentious as to its relevance in these contexts. What is appropriate for children's education seems debatable, largely determined by social expectations of childhood and children. Cultural diversity seems to be the new dispensation in this discourse. Fundamentally, research on preschool teachers' beliefs about developmentally appropriate educational practices, adds to literature about cultural context variables in preschool provision from different contexts.

Purpose: This study examined how teachers' practical experiences framed their *beliefs* and understanding of *children's educational experiences* within a developmentally appropriate framework and a bioecological systems theory.

Paradigm/Design/Methods: A constructivist paradigm within the qualitative approach guided this study. Video and photographs became the basis to elicit *teachers' beliefs about children's educational experiences*. Children's educational experiences were analysed along *five constructs* related to the concept of *DAP*; *teaching strategy, use of materials, scheduling* of children's learning, *assessment*, and consideration of *children's individuality*.

Findings: Teachers' beliefs *corroborated* the DAP framework, but their practices that were more *teacher-directed, contrasted* the DAP principles. They used *formally structured* teaching approaches, as *materials* in three-out-of-four classes observed remained '*silenced*'. The schedules were *formally structured*, subject-based, with limited flexibility, as assessment for children's learning focused on *limited* aspects of *the cognitive domain*.

Conclusion: Teachers' beliefs seemed to support educational practices that embrace the principles of DAP. However, some *context-related factors*, which include *pressure from parents, competitive* school environments, preparation for *the interview*, different *transition*

requirements, *peer pressure*, and perceived *lack of time* limited their use of DAP. I extrapolate these factors to the bioecological systems theory, to understand the *dynamics* of early childhood education provision in Kenya.

Practical implications/Originality/Value: This study adds to literature on teachers' beliefs about children's educational experiences from a developing country context, as well as adding to studies that have used visually elicited interviews. It also provides the details of children's educational experiences, in part, to appreciate the current conversation on *the status* and *the nature* of focus on *standards or skills-based* dynamics in preschool provision. Besides, it might be the first study in Kenya to embrace the DAP framework and the bioecological systems theory. The *seesaw model* advanced in this study synthesizes the *originality* of the study by conceptualizing the theoretical as well as empirical literature on developmentally appropriate educational practices, as a valuable framework to *understand and interpret competing priorities* that might affect preschool provision. The seesaw model is also valuable in locating and extending the conversation about different stakeholders' priorities, not only in Kenya, but also in other societies.

KEY WORDS

Teachers' beliefs; developmentally appropriate practices; use/and or silencing of materials; pressure for academics; preschool seesaw model; bioecological systems theory; childhood education and culture.

THE PROLOGUE

“Our map or representation of the world is also shaped by our personal history-our experiential finger print” (Badenhorst, 2007: xiii).

By linking ECE goals to culture, Klein and Chen (2001:6) acknowledge the dynamism of cultural values, preferences and practices. As part of this social cultural link, in the following section, I position myself and the emerging interest in the study. I juxtapose my own preschool experience many years ago with that of my son years later, to appreciate how the changing social expectations, even within the same social context, is a dynamic process that influences children’s educational experiences. As an academic, I locate the topic that I investigate and myself within the intellectual debates among colleagues, as part of scholastic engagements in academia, to provide a synopsis of how scholarship might be entrenched in personal experiences.

Moreover, through such reflexivity we appreciate how certain practical issues, for example the topic under investigation, can be severely limited if engaged as a theoretical rather than a practical issue that requires tangible solutions to a problem in society. Therefore, the topic of preschool teachers’ beliefs and children’s educational experiences emerged to me as more than an intellectual issue to engage for its own sake. It is a practical problem requiring more than cursory personal experiences or intellectual remarks.

Overall my position in the research as presented in this section is not limited to the genesis of the topic as I present here, but I will also position myself in the next chapters, including locating myself in the paradigm framework, the methods used in the data collection, and the data analysis and interpretation framework. This is not only a significant prerequisite to understand my choice of the research topic, but also the entire research process.



In the beginning

I grew up in a typical rural village where not only was going to nursery school optional, but also where parents could exercise discretion on whether to send their children to school. Growing up in a pastoral community privileged my childhood with opportunities to mind my younger siblings, and to shepherd the family's calves, goats and sheep. I grew up as a "tom boy" sandwiched between three brothers. Although we considered herding a tedious task, it was part of the process of gauging responsibility and readiness for school. This was salient community-prescribed child labour, prior to school enrolment during and beyond childhood.

My memory about my first day at school is vivid. In particular, I recall the intense apprehension that I felt about school. My hesitant moments on my first day, perhaps about meeting new people in a new environment, is equally vivid. I cannot remember the exact reasons for my apprehension; however, I do still remember how one of my elder sisters deposited me in the preschool class, gave me a few directions and orientations and

disappeared. I did not cry, even though the urge to do so was so strong.

What does remain etched in my memory is the attractive classroom with aging red, blue, green, and yellow wooden board chairs and tables that must have been a donation, since this was a public school started by Roman Catholic missionaries. Later, when the furniture aged, locally made wooden ones replaced them. I cannot remember more details about what happened in the few weeks following my entry to school.

Later, as I progressed through the nursery school the detailed level of activities remains equally vivid. Our teacher was so gentle, so understanding and so playful. We enjoyed her company while we played with mud, ostensibly pouring copious amounts of water on the earthen access road to the primary school, which crossed the nursery school compound. However, in my quiet moments, privately, I used to wonder why 'teacher' would play with us. Even though I wondered, I never asked ...but now I know.

Apart from vast playtime, the only writing activity I remember was pattern writing and drawing, which did not require us to take work home. Pattern writing remains an indelible part of my learning journey because I could not turn my hand to write the 'S' pattern. Instead, since they were a series of joint-Ss, I developed a strategy of writing a series of attached number 8888', that I then joined from the base to form a semblance of the 'S' pattern. Although the difference between the conventional 'S' pattern and my invented pattern must have been evident, the teacher accepted

my limitations. For me, these were moments of surrender, when no effort except perhaps maturity or practice would make me write the “S” pattern. For the teacher to accept my limitations at such times it gave me immeasurable relief from inescapable frustration during the learning day.

As the lunch hour beckoned, we all sang our favourite age-old song of faith; ‘Naskia sauti, sauti ya mama, sasa ni saa sita chakula tayari, kwaheri mwalimu, kesho tutaonana’ (I can hear mama’s voice, now it is noon, food is ready, goodbye teacher, we shall see each other tomorrow). For us then, it was all joy as we ran home for more fun as we herded goats and sheep in the plains, eating wild fruits and roots. We also engaged in turns with various simulated roles of ‘mother’, ‘father’, ‘children’, took ‘cattle’ [simulated by labotik- a wild inedible fruit] to the ‘dip’. We also ‘cooked’ using soil and ‘water’ [you can only imagine where the water came from!]. Even though we went to school during morning hours, we had no extra schoolwork at all.

However, that was a long, long time ago ...

My childhood in different times ...Same place...



Then, years later... a wandering spirit

Years later, a personal encounter that made me reflect on early childhood education in Kenya prompted this inquiry. Born out of a personal concern, as I observed and helped our son with assignments at only four years of age, and attending a Montessori preschool, I began an odyssey of self-introspection. I had been teaching a Developmental Psychology course at the University, as

I had also previously been involved in the parents' board of a Montessori preschool. Therefore, my introspection and a critical reflection of what it means to attend preschool in Kenya grew intense with the passage of time.

In my odyssey, more as a parent than as an academic, I consciously sought parents' own opinions and expectations of the role of the preschool. While some parents seemed to argue for an academic focused curriculum to prepare children to pass the entry examination to standard one¹, others seemed to favour a nested approach where the child could engage in skills-based learning, with opportunities to play.

In a University cafeteria, I sat one afternoon for lunch with colleagues, one of whom had just returned from her PhD studies in Germany, with her daughter attending primary school in Kenya. I raised the issue of homework for preschoolers. My colleague had privately been battling over the homework issue for her daughter who was about seven years old attending standard two (the second year of primary school). She could not understand why her daughter came home with so much work at her age. According to her, the Kenya system of education was more demanding than the German school system, which her daughter had first experienced. As we continued to discuss the practices that surround children's education in Kenya, I realized that although we were all parents with children attending different levels of the primary school education system, and all formally educated, the decisions about

¹ Standard one is the first year of primary school in Kenya, graded standard one to eight before children sit for the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (K.C.P.E) which is the examination that marks the end of the primary years.

our children's educational experiences, especially those in early childhood education, was the onus of their teachers.

From these casual encounters, there seemed to emerge discordant voices, some of which resonated with my own, reflecting intense emotions and conflicting value assessments. In particular, the divergent attitude and expectations about the preschool's educational role was apparent. Therefore, it appears that for the parents who objected to play in learning, the earlier the start to academic success and subsequent entry to an excellent primary school the better.

Although entry to standard one in Kenya is presently a requirement for all children, according to the Free Primary Education (henceforth FPE) policy, since 2003, selection to sought after schools, especially those that perform better in the K.C.P.E examinations, is done through an entry interview (Mwaura, Sylva & Malmberg, 2008:238). Even some public schools that traditionally ought to have been open to all children use entry interviews to limit the number of children that the school's facilities can accommodate.

Faced with such opposing demands for the preschool's role, can we access preschool teachers' beliefs about children's Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP²), given such divergent demands? In addition, are teachers facing any conflict, even as they try provide learning within the DAP framework? If so, how does the teacher resolve this conflict in planning for children's learning experiences? If there is conflict between parents and children's

² The definition and further elaboration of the DAP principles follow in voyage one.

(DAP) priorities, how do the teachers resolve such conflicts, especially in contexts where parents employ teachers? What educational opportunities do preschool teachers provide children to engage in activity-based learning? What do they actually teach the children? How do the teacher's practical experiences with the children frame such beliefs? Do they provide children with opportunities to play and learn as they develop holistically? In addition, could preschool teachers be facing pressure to remain developmentally appropriate in the providing for children's learning? What beliefs and rationale motivate their content selection for preschool children?

Despite all these questions that I think require answers for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of preschool education in Kenya, little research has focused on teachers' beliefs about DAP. Besides, there seems to be limited research into the nature of preschool children's educational experiences in contexts where the preschool's definition might be synonymous with preparation for school (Prochner & Kabiru, 2008:128), in the face of such conflicting demands. Therefore, my earlier introspective experience raised questions that I continue to ponder, most of which remain unanswered to date, and the possibility of taking up a researcher's role to examine some of the dynamics that shape teachers' beliefs and their decisions for children's educational experiences. This was the beginning of my inquiry.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE JOURNEY

1. DAP as a template recommended for early child development and learning

The DAP framework that is consolidated into twelve principles guides this study. The National Association for the Education for Young Children, NAEYC (2009:10) policy position affirms that the origin of DAP “Developmentally appropriate practice as defined...is not based on what we think might be true or what we want to believe about young children. Developmentally appropriate practice is informed by what we know from theory and literature about how children develop and learn’

Framed from an international perspective of the concept of DAP that might have shaped ECE guidelines in Kenya (Swadener, Wachira, Kabiru & Njenga 2008:414), I situate my inquiry within the ECE educational experiences of four preschool teachers and children in a peri-urban University context in Kenya. In the study, I seek to embrace five theoretical constructs related to DAP that I juxtaposed with the observed children’s educational experiences to give it structure, form and meaning; teaching strategy, use of learning materials, scheduling of children’s educational experiences, assessment and consideration for children’s individuality.

2. DAEP as a specific framework for this study.

In addition to adopting the ‘universal’ DAP template as espoused in early childhood development literature as the study’s conceptual framework, I also use the term ‘developmentally appropriate educational practices’ (DAEP) specifically in my study to stress the educational components; content and process inherent in the DAP framework. Therefore, while DAP stresses child development and learning consolidated into 12 principles, DAEP specifically refers to my study’s discussion of the five constructs that I consider in this study:- teaching strategy, use if materials, scheduling, assessment and consideration of children’s assessment, all of which are related to DAP. As I begin my academic journey, I present a general background to the study.

PREPARING YOU TO NAVIGATE THE JOURNEY

1. You will meet voyages instead of chapters

Dispensing with the conventional academic nomenclature, I have elected to refer to ‘chapters’ in this thesis as ‘voyages’. In this research, I visualised the entire doctoral experience as a metaphorical journey for four reasons: firstly, any journey has an entry point with a purpose; secondly, there are various detours along the way posed by challenges encountered at various phases in the journey. Thirdly, there are memories of adventure along the journey because of new experiences and new knowledge, and fourthly and last, the possibility that both the academic and non-academic experiences of the doctoral journey lead to new growth as the journey ends. For all these reasons, I fit my doctoral journey into the metaphor of a journey, with several voyages encountered. I have planned eight voyages for this journey, each briefly summarised at the end of the first voyage.

2. The organisation of the thesis and structure of each voyage

You will see pictures at the beginning of each voyage and a brief sojourn at the end of each voyage in this journey. The inserts at the beginning of each voyage are pictures encased in a page border with introductory remarks to herald entry and each provides an overview of what to expect in the voyage. Another insert at the end of the voyage heralds a sojourn that summarises a voyage’s experiences.

ACRONYMS COMMONLY USED IN THIS THESIS

CRC	:	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DAEP	:	Developmentally appropriate educational practices
DAP	:	Developmentally appropriate practices
DICECE	:	District Centres of Early Childhood Education (Kenya)
ECE	:	Early Childhood Education
ECD	:	Early Child Development
ECDE	:	Early childhood development and Education
EFA	:	Education for all
FPE	:	Free primary education
GOK	:	Government of Kenya
KHA	:	Kenya Headmistress' Association
K.I.E	:	Kenya Institute of Education
MOE	:	Ministry of Education (Kenya)
NACECE	:	National Centre for Early Childhood Education (Kenya)
UNICEF	:	United Nations Children Education Fund
UN	:	United Nations
USA	:	United States of America



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