

VOYAGE EIGHT THE SUNSET OF ALL THE VOYAGES



As I come to the sunset of this academic voyage,

I reflect back on the summary of what we saw and heard in the entire journey.

Besides, as we reflect on what we saw, it is worthwhile to note how this journey has contributed in some small way to the practice of early childhood education in Kenya.

I also look back at the possible worth of this voyage

to provide a link to the future

of other possible journeys

that might result from my voyage.

8.1 OVERVIEW

This voyage presents the summary and conclusions of the findings of the study. A section on the recommendations for preschool education in Kenya and for further research follows. A restatement of the questions guiding the study and summary tables of the findings follows:

8.2 THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY RESTATED

The purpose of my research was to explore how preschool teachers' practical experiences frame their beliefs, understanding and interpretation of developmentally appropriate educational practices along five constructs, namely: teaching strategy, use of materials, scheduling, assessment, and consideration for children's individual differences. Further, the study sought to explore how such an interpretation expressed itself in teachers' interaction with children against what I call highly 'academised' expectations of preschools in Kenya. This could enhance our understanding of the factors underlying preschool teachers' decisions within a DAP framework as they interact with children. In addition, it could provide insight to the current role that the preschool environment plays in the child's daily interactions and educational experiences.

8.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS RE-STATED

The research question was framed as:

How do preschool teachers' practical experiences frame their beliefs, understanding, and interpretation of developmentally appropriate educational practices?

To address this question, I posed four sub-questions:

1. How do preschool teachers interpret developmentally appropriate educational practices?
2. How do preschool teachers' interpretations of developmentally appropriate practices express in their interaction with children?
3. What are the beliefs influencing teacher perception and interpretation of developmentally appropriate practices?
4. What are some of the factors influencing such beliefs?

8.4 OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

This section summarises the results of the study, and is organised according to the five constructs that served as the framework of analysis of DAEP. These were: the teaching strategy, use and silence of materials, scheduling, children’s assessment and teachers’ consideration for children’s individuality. A summary of each of these follows.

8.4.1 TEACHING STRATEGY

This study established that although teachers’ expressed child-centred beliefs, they spent most of their time with children doing task-based assignments that used a subject-based, teacher-directed approach. Within this structure, teachers limited the duration of children’s learning activities. A child-centred approach focusing on the use of materials was lacking in all the three classes, except in the DICECE four-year-old class. The teachers’ concerns resulted from the need to prepare the children to fit with the demands of transition to the primary school whose curriculum they perceived as difficult. However, their immediate concern was to facilitate the children’s preparation to pass the standard one interview.

Figure 55 (below) summarises the teaching approach and children’s educational experiences.

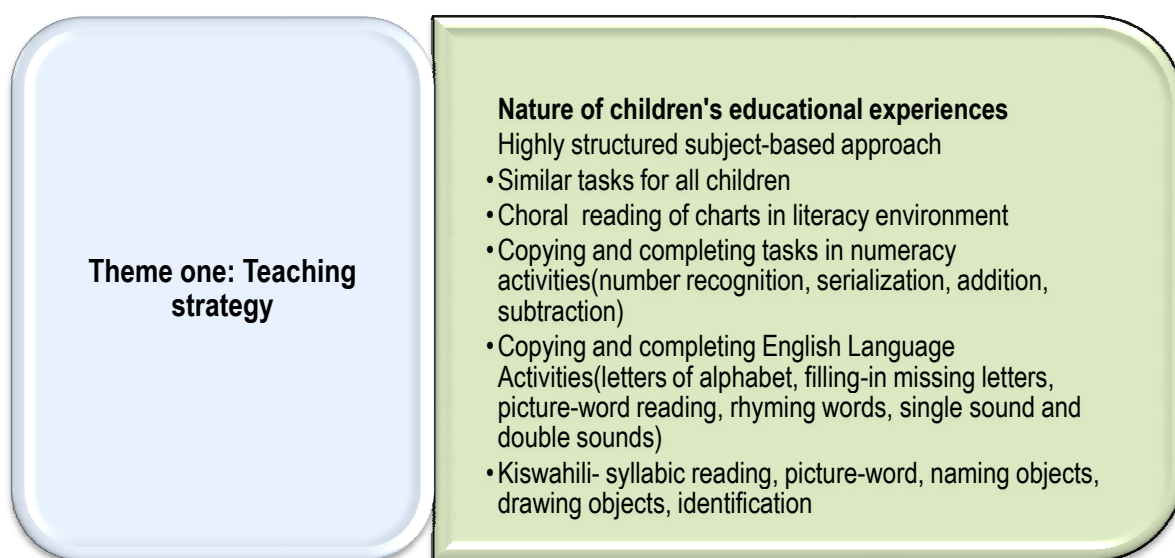


FIGURE 55: A summary of teachers’ interpretation and expression of DAEP

8.4.2 THE USE AND SILENCE OF MATERIALS

Teachers expressed beliefs that favoured the use of materials, for various reasons such as their usefulness in enhancing physical, social and emotional development, or for making learning enjoyable for the children. Figure 56 (below) is a summary of the teachers' beliefs that favour the use of materials.

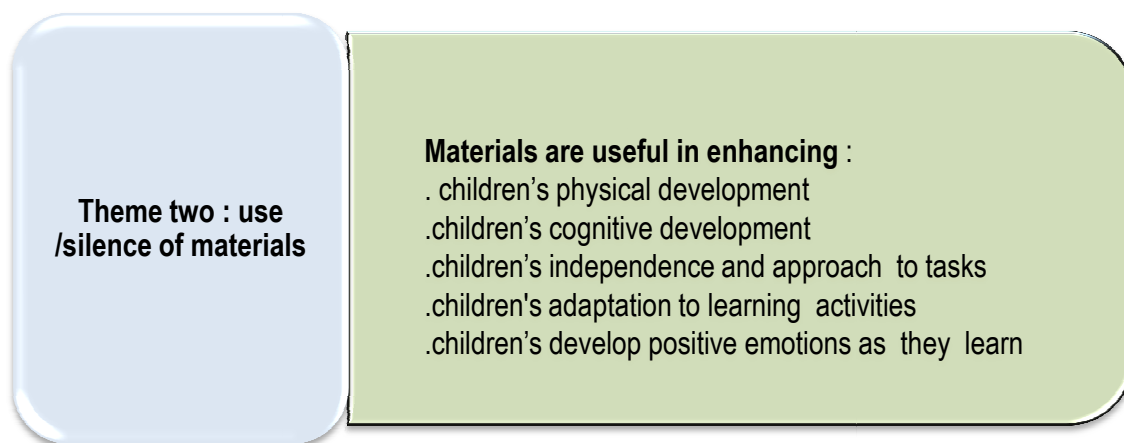


FIGURE 56: A summary of teachers' beliefs about the use/silence of materials

However, the use of materials was anecdotal in the Montessori baby class, and entirely absent in the DICECE and Montessori top classes. It was only in the DICECE baby class where the children engaged with materials. A further analysis through interviews revealed that teachers held various beliefs that inhibited them from using materials. Such beliefs expressed a perceived conflict between formal learning, requiring extensive formal written tasks, and the use of manipulative materials in non-structured child-centred learning. Teachers expressed urgency in task completion. Figure 57 (below) summarises some of the reasons advanced for the silence of the materials.

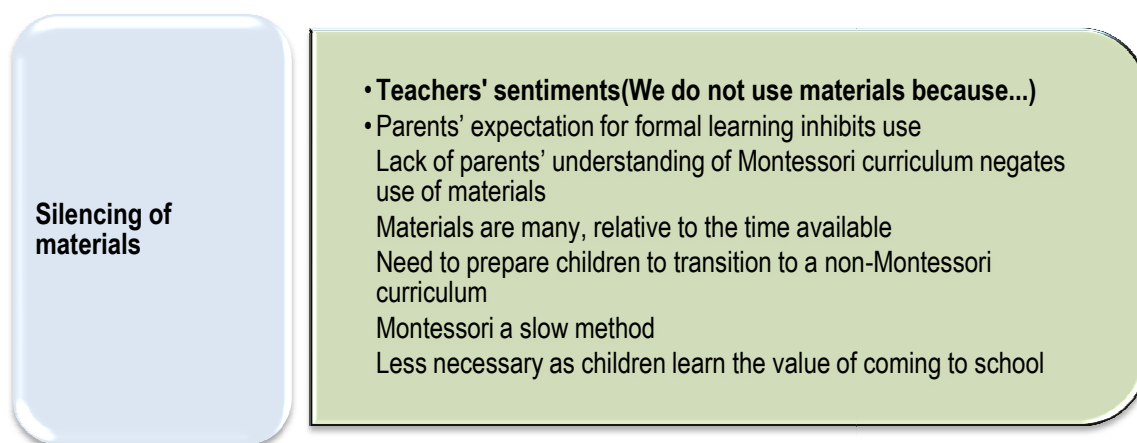


FIGURE 57: A summary of teachers' beliefs about the silence of materials

The teachers' training in different types of curriculum did not alter their approach to children's educational experiences in either teaching method or content. In spite of the numerous teaching materials available for children in the Montessori class, there was little use or reference to them by teachers dealing with either the baby or top class. Their confirmed haste reflected a belief that the Montessori approach uses elaborate materials that require more time than available in their circumstance. Therefore, both teachers suggested that they put the Montessori materials aside to concentrate on academic content favoured by parents.

8.4.3 BELIEFS ABOUT SCHEDULING OF CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

All the teachers in the study were independent to plan and implement their teaching schedules. Teachers used a general as well as a schedule approach to implement the children's educational experiences. In all the cases except Belinda, the teachers used a subject-based approach without use of materials. In the predominantly written activities, the children with a fast tempo dictated the pace of the task completions. Figure 58 (below) is a summary of the general approach to scheduling used by the teachers in the study.

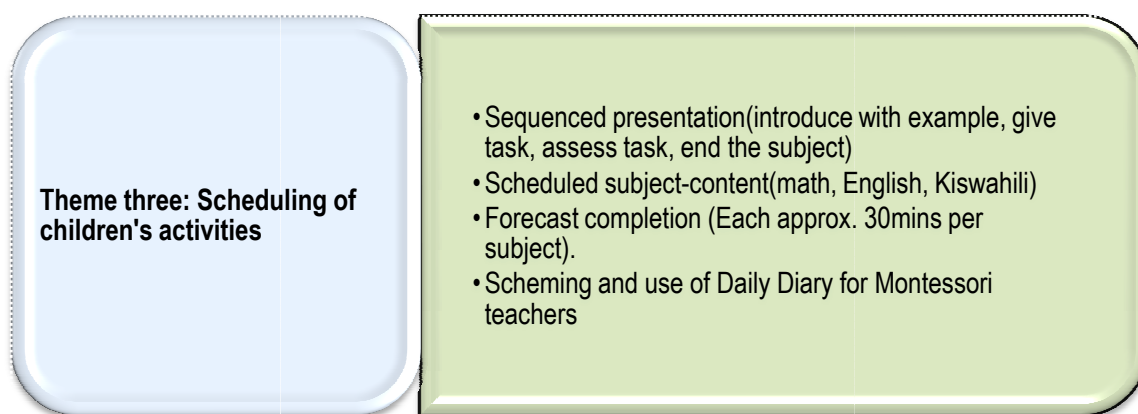


FIGURE 58: A summary of teachers' beliefs about scheduling of children's tasks

8.4.4 BELIEFS ABOUT ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

Teachers in this study believed that assessment of children was necessary to help them plan for children's learning, and to provide feedback to parents about their children's progress. Three of the four teachers in the study supported class retention for children who had learning difficulties. Therefore, assessment focused on formal learning tasks

such as whole group choral reading, copying and task completion. Overall, a cognitive emphasis in assessment emerged in the study. Figure 59 below summarises the assessment approach used by the teachers.

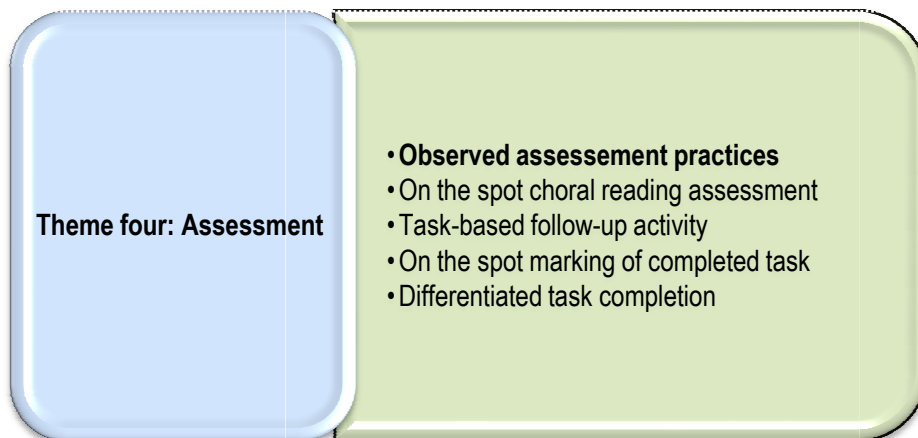


FIGURE 59: A summary of the teachers' approach to assessment

8.4.5 BELIEFS ABOUT CHILDREN'S INDIVIDUALITY

The teachers acknowledged that children expressed individuality in their cognitive abilities, approach to learning, tempo, and differences that arose from their social backgrounds. Consequently, teachers believed that planning for their learning should embrace these individual differences through differentiated tasks. It emerged that teachers in both baby classes gave the children differentiated tasks for completion. However, such differentiation among children in the top classes in both the Montessori and DICECE top classes was lacking, as all children engaged in a similar activity for similar duration of time. This was perhaps explained by the need to prepare the children for the transition interview, since these were the classes soon set to transition to the primary school. Figure 60 (below) illustrates the group rather than individualized approach to tasks.

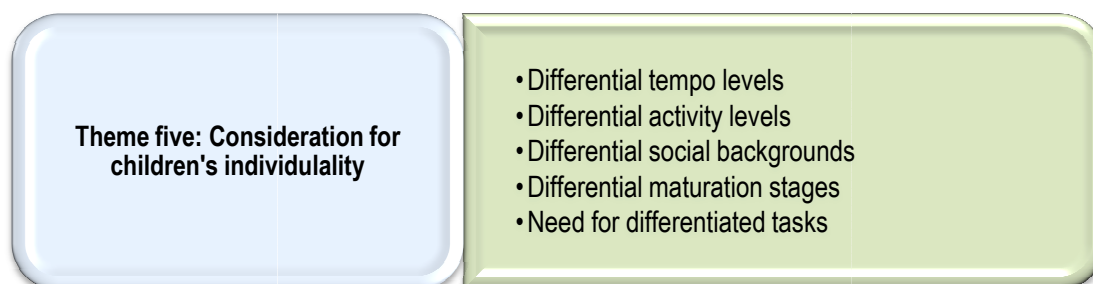


FIGURE 60: Teachers' approach to children's individuality

This study found that there was not necessarily a universal approach to teaching children, but rather a modified approach based on the unique characteristics of particular social demands of the main role of the preschool. For example, despite the study set-up being university-based preschools, and therefore assuming an elite parent clientele, the parents might not have insight about DAP. They still pressurised teachers to engage children with task-based content. In conclusion, the study found that the teachers contextualised the concept of DAP within their own unique experiences. According to each teacher, their unique circumstances (teaching and employment) dictated how they structured children's educational experiences.

8.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study concludes that teachers held beliefs that favour a DAP template, as reflected in early childhood literature on developmentally appropriate practices. The beliefs that emerged relate to each of the themes in the study. For example, all teachers favoured the use of materials because they help in the overall development of the child, besides making learning interesting. However, for reasons discussed in voyage five, and summarized in section 8.4.2, teachers' beliefs did not translate into the use of materials among the children. Moreover, the teachers expressed a belief in considering children's individuality in their learning styles and assessment because of the differences inherent among children. However, in their actual practices, which were in opposition to their beliefs, expressed in whole group teacher-directed, formally structured learning tasks within strict schedules. Assessment also reflected this subject-based approach, mainly focusing on recall, recognition and identification of objects in addition to simple math tasks.

8.6 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN KENYA

The following are recommendation arising from my study, for preschool education in Kenya:

- There is need for preschools to have field supervisors, just as there are teacher advisory centres in every Divisional Education office for primary school quality control, as part of quality assurance for the preschools. By strengthening

and refocusing attention to the policy of running preschools using the recommended curriculum, teachers' roles might shift to balance between child-centred learning for the overall development of children and formal educational activities necessary for school transition.

- The establishment of an employment body for preschool teachers might assure them of employment stability, because teachers could be more concerned about keeping their jobs than by teaching at the preschool rather than facilitating child exploration and development.
- Although there has been piecemeal implementation of the Koech Education Commission of 2000, about some of the areas that require reinforcement of quality, there is an urgent need to attach each preschool to a primary school such that admission into the primary school is compulsory. This might ensure automatic admission for all children who transition from the preschool to the primary school, without admission through an interview. Although there will always be more preschools than primary schools, this might foster interaction between preschool teachers and their primary school colleagues, where they can share ideas about areas to emphasize at preschool.
- A more unified and supervised implementation of the early childhood curriculum might ensure that preschool teachers use the recommended syllabus in a more developmentally and culturally responsive way.
- The Ministry of Education might mandate field officers to supervise preschool curriculum implementation to ensure that learners are not confronted with academic-oriented tasks. Rather than use the current standards guideline (NACECE, 1999), which only outlines expected skills index for different age groups, the curriculum can be truncated into the nine terms of the preschool education duration with specific content coverage for each term to facilitate concise planning and content coverage by the preschool teachers.
- There is a need to assess the training of preschool teachers to ensure that only credible institutions offer early childhood education. Moreover, a uniform curriculum for preschool training that facilitate parity in preschool provision might ensure that some teachers do not seem more qualified than others do.
- There might be need to revise the entire primary school curriculum to reduce the number and scope of coverage of subjects offered that stakeholders do not feel

the need to prepare the children early to fit into the current highly competitive school demands.

- The development parent-school relationships might enhance communication and assessment of values for preschool education and care. With such links, parents can benefit from a needs assessment based education that addresses the challenges posed when they do not understand particular teaching philosophies.
- In order to harmonize shared expectations between preschool and primary schools workshops can be held where stakeholders can have a common platform to discuss concerns and to clarify curriculum issues. This will ensure continuity of curriculum between preschool and preschool education.

8.7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study focused on the preschool teacher's beliefs of developmentally appropriate educational practices and how this plays out in their interaction with children in their teaching among Montessori and DICECE trained teachers in a University setting in Kenya. This is limited in scope. Consequently, from the experiences of this study, future research could:

1. Focus on teachers trained in other preschool curricula to find out whether the teachers would echo similar sentiments.
2. Endeavour to conduct a study among parents of preschool going-children, taking up the issues raised by the teachers, using maybe for example focus group discussions.
3. Carry out a study to assess the role of private schools in the emphasis for worksheet based learning.
4. Develop the actual moderating activities for different age groups in trying to balance out the preschool seesaw in different cultural set-ups (because education objectives and indeed social values differ in different contexts).
5. Conduct research in a different cultural set-up, using DAP framework, and see how it is different from or similar to the current study.
6. There is need for research that assesses the long-term impact of the children's engagement in highly structured academic tasks that give little room for play.

7. There is need to explore the views among several stakeholders about the standard one interview and to recommend a possible consensus about the nature and purpose of the interview.

8.8 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE CURRENT RESEARCH

Regardless of the limitations identified in voyage 3 (refer back to section 3.6), the study contributes to early childhood education research focusing in a developing country context, as part of a holistic perspective to understand different early childhood education contexts other than those of the Western world.

8.8.1 USE OF PHOTO-ELICITATION IN THE CONTEXT

The use of visual (both video and audio) elicitation is yet to be widely embraced in ECE studies, and in the developing world contexts. By using both visuals (photographs and video) concurrently, the study had ‘total’ information captured that was available for later analysis. This way, the researcher did not rely on memory that is sometimes fallible, thus making the information readily available. In addition, there seems to be no study in the developing world context that has utilized photo-elicitation. Visual research is relatively flexible in these contexts where mutual trust appears to underlie the relationship between participants and the researcher. This privilege can provide an advantage to understand early learning contexts in detail, without much mistrust or anxiety.

8.8.2 ACCOUNT OF CHILDREN’S DETAILED EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

This study illustrates details of the nature of children’s educational experiences in two contexts. It has included a substantive amount of children’s actual written and read work as part of the details of children’s learning experiences, which largely lack in other studies. By focusing on particular educational experiences and the actual content of these experiences, it strengthens on previous studies that report either teacher-centred or child-centred approaches. By so doing, it makes a major contribution to understanding how teachers *interpret* children’s educational experiences, besides showing varying content and processes of children’s *educational experiences* in the context of the study.

8.8.3 HOLISTIC APPROACH TO DAP PRINCIPLES

This study took a holistic approach to understand how teachers' beliefs expressed in their interactions with the children. By focusing on themes: teaching strategy, use/silencing of materials, scheduling, assessment and children's individuality, it provides a holistic overview of the interrelationships among these DAP constructs in a single study. Therefore, it provides a broad understanding of how the teachers' beliefs about these themes cohere with the holistic picture of DAP. This information is necessary in interpreting how the various facets of DAP are reflected in the teachers' beliefs and their practices that translate into children's educational experiences.

8.8.4 INFORMATION ON EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES IN TWO PRESCHOOL CURRICULA

Although this study did not seek to make a comparative analysis, it provides information about how experiences of children of variable ages and curriculum philosophies differ or are similar to each other. In addition, the availability of information on both Montessori and eclectically trained teachers provide additional information of how curriculum philosophies might be similar or different from each other. This provides insight to understand teacher practices across age groups and contexts.

8.8.5 QUALITATIVE DAP STUDY

Studies of teachers' beliefs of developmentally appropriate practices have largely taken a quantitative approach, so this study complements other qualitative studies. In addition, it contributes to knowledge of DAP in a developing country context, where research on teachers' beliefs of DAP are limited.

8.8.6 A SEESAW MODEL AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO EXPLAIN DYNAMICS OF TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND DAP

By adopting the seesaw theory from physics, the current study has attempted to provide a context-specific interpretation of DAP, which attracts a diverse approach in its interpretation. Therefore, to cater for the relativistic nature of DAP, the seesaw model, as a model malleable to context reality and circumstances, offers a baseline for moderating children's differences, social context dynamics and values as they relate to children's education.

8.9 A CONCLUSION TO THE STUDY

This study sought to explore how preschool teachers' practical experiences frame their beliefs, understanding and interpretation of children's developmentally appropriate educational practice. Although the DAP framework guides teacher-training and the development of preschool curriculum in many contexts including Kenya, there is little literature from Kenya, or Africa for that matter to provide insight about how the framework has been adapted into these settings. The current dispensation is that to understand childhood and children's experiences, not only in school or child-care, but also in their lived world, their cultural milieu and values needs to be considered. This view motivated this study, to explore preschool teachers' beliefs, understanding and interpretation of DAEP in Kenya.

In the study, the *educational* component, implied in the DAP framework is emphasized to provide a rationale that not only develops children holistically, but which also prepares them to succeed in their academic tasks. Therefore, in this study, the rationale for choosing the DAP framework was motivated by the need to explore how the principles entrenched in this framework have been adapted to other cultural settings, especially the understanding of its educational component, beyond its USA origins. By analysing and interpreting the findings within the DAP and the bioecological systems theory, this study contributes literature that provides insight into the social, cultural, economic and political dynamics of preschool provision in Kenya.

To understand the teacher' practical experiences, non-participant observations captured through photographs and video was done. By using the visuals captured in each teacher' class to explore their beliefs, this study located each teacher's beliefs within their own experiences of children's educational experiences as well as their understanding of the dynamics that relate to their use of DAP.

The DAP framework emphasizes, through twelve principles, the various ways in which childhood is a unique period, which requires children to develop in all domains; physical, social, emotional and cognitive. Therefore, early childhood learning should emphasize these domains through strategic means, which include active manipulation of learning materials in a blend of both teacher-directed and child-centred approaches.

However, although teachers held beliefs that corroborate the DAP framework, in the observations, it emerged that their practice with children did not match their beliefs. In most instances, teachers engaged children with whole group task-based copying and task-completion activities. Foremost, teachers felt that they needed to prepare children to successfully transition to the primary school through a written interview. Other concerns included their perceived need to provide feedback to parents about their children's writing and academic abilities, different transition requirements/curriculum, a competitive school environment, colleague influence.

Apparently, the teachers' interpretation of these activities, which might seem inappropriate according to the DAP principles, are appropriate if they are interpreted within the study context. For example, considering the limited primary school vacancies and the need to prepare children to succeed in the primary school, in addition to provide feedback to parents, among other factors make these practices appropriate in context.

The study concludes that teachers hold beliefs that reflect the developmentally appropriate principles, but their practices, which contrast the principles, are considered as appropriate in the research context.

