



# **Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Music Education in the Primary School**

**Benjamin Adjepong<sup>1\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Wesley College of Education, Kumasi, Ghana.*

## **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is an educational approach which refers to teaching strategies that consider children's age, interests, abilities and experiences to help them achieve challenging and achievable goals. The approach which hinges on three pillars: age, individual and culture has gained popularity in countries such as the United States of America, Taiwan and South Korea. DAP underpins National Association for Music Education (NAfME) beliefs about young children's developmentally and individually appropriate musical experiences. The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the relationship between DAP and music education in primary schools. The discussions centred around the following themes: Children's musical potential, children's unique interests and abilities, children's play, an exemplary musical sound, activities and material, performance goals, diverse learning environment, effective adult role models, and a pleasant physical and social environment. It is suggested that training workshops should be organised for teachers for effective integration of DAP in the classroom to optimise children's learning in music. Inclusion of DAP as a theme for study in the music curriculum content in the Universities and Colleges of Education in Ghana for the preparation of primary school teachers is also recommended. Carrying out a real classroom study through observations, questionnaires or interviews is recommended for future researches on related subjects.

*Keywords: Developmentally appropriate practice; primary school; music education; children; learning.*

\*Corresponding author: Email: [ben.adjepong@yahoo.com](mailto:ben.adjepong@yahoo.com);

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The significance of music education in children's overall development has been a subject of debate among scholars, educators and researchers for some time now [1,2,3]. Music is considered as basic, important and a vital part of children's growth and development, hence justifying its value and inclusion in the school curriculum [4-8] assert that children's education is incomplete if they are denied music education. In a study to identify Ghanaian primary school teachers' beliefs and perceptions about the value and importance of music to children's growth and development, all the six participants were of the view that it should form part of the subjects taught in the classroom [9].

Music is a creative and a collaborative activity that builds self-esteem and confidence in children that can lead to a lifetime enjoyment [10]. The American National Association for Music Education (MENC, now NAfME), has noted that "successful experiences in music help all children bond emotionally with others through the creative expression in songs, rhythmic movement and listening experiences" (MENC, n. d., p. 1). According to Rowsell and Vinden [10], music activities among children help them to become creative and develop in them skills such as co-operation and concentration.

Children's understanding of musical concepts can indeed be developed by providing them with the opportunity to learn through participation in various musical activities at levels consistent with their development [11,12]. Dodge and Colker [13] argue and believe that exposing children to varieties of musical activities has a great impact of the three key development areas of cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains. This held belief is very significant for teachers who can deploy developmentally appropriate musical materials and also employ varieties of teaching techniques and strategies (MENC, n. d.) to enhance children's knowledge, skills and understanding in music. A careful planning for an effective teaching constitutes a major feature in a developmentally appropriate environment. The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the relationship between the developmentally appropriate practice and music education in the primary school.

## 2. DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE

The Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is a term coined and adopted by the North American National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) to refer to teaching strategies that consider children's age, interest, abilities and experiences to help them achieve challenging and achievable goals [14,15]. DAP, as an educational approach, hinges on three areas of knowledge: age, individual and culture. In terms of age, teachers must consider knowledge about the characteristics associated with children's age groups in order to predict appropriate experiences that will promote their learning and development [14,15]. The teacher must also understand individual learners' differences "in order to design appropriate teaching strategies to develop the potential of each student" within a particular age group [16]. Knowledge about the core values, behavioural patterns and expectations of the socio-cultural environment within which children live also ensures the selection and adoption of appropriate learning experiences that contribute significantly to children's learning and development [17].

Research indicates that the application of developmentally appropriate practice in the classroom setting through a supportive environment and social interaction enhances children's development and academic performance [18,19,16]. Miranda [20] investigated the connection between the teaching practices of three music teachers and their beliefs about DAP. The result showed a positive link between the ideas used for implementing music activities and DAP beliefs. As an educational approach, DAP is very popular in the United States of America [14] and studies concerning teachers' beliefs regarding DAP are found in some other countries such as Taiwan [16] and South Korea [21].

DAP which hinges on children's age, individual and culture [14] underpins National Association for Music Education (NAfME), the largest American music education association beliefs about young children's developmentally and individually appropriate musical experiences (MENC, n. d.). Some of these beliefs are:

- All children have musical potential.

- Children bring their own unique interest and abilities to the music learning environment.
- Children's play is their work.
- Children should experience exemplary musical sounds, activities, and materials.
- Children should not be encumbered with the need to meet performance goals.
- Diverse learning environments are needed to serve the developmental needs of many individual children.
- Children need effective adult models.
- Children learn best in pleasant physical and social environments.

These beliefs provide guidelines for the selection and creation of appropriate musical learning environment and activities to children in the classroom. In the following paragraphs, I present an overview of each of these beliefs about music education for young children.

## 2.1 Children's Musical Potentials

Access to musical practices such as composition, performance and movement are not just for a few talented and gifted individual children because all children can participate in it meaningfully [22,6]. Children have musical potentials and, therefore, are natural musicians. It is claimed that early exposure to appropriate music at their level enhances their general development and learning [5].

According to Spodek and Saracho [7] children respond to music through play and movement and "are able to organise their perceptions of and responses to music, forming mental structures that become the basis for understanding, remembering, and creating music." [23] describes how children explore music through movement, singing, chanting rhythmic rhymes, clapping, playing simple rhythmic instruments and partaking in other fun-filled musical activities such as clapping and stone-passing games. These capabilities exhibited in the musical learning environment indicate that every primary school child has the potential for a successful and meaningful interaction with music. The development of this potential through numerous encounters with a wide variety of music and opportunities to participate in developmentally appropriate music activities is the right of every child [24]. The varied musical activities provided by the teacher serve as a complement to the different learning abilities of children, which results in those children who may not compose or

perform music to, at least, become good music listeners.

## 2.2 Children's Unique Interests and Abilities

Each child brings his or her ability and interest to the musical learning environment and takes back "knowledge and skills that he or she is uniquely capable of understanding and developing" (MENC, n. d., p. 2). This suggests that the teacher must offer strategic support to children as they are engaged in music, and must also be allowed to take an active and dominant role in their musical learning activities. As noted by Manford [24], children should be provided with a rich and stimulating environment offering many possible routes for them to explore as they grow in awareness and curiosity about music. In agreement with this, Levinowitz [25] states that, "if the music environment is sufficiently rich, there will be a continuous and every richer spiral of exposure to new musical elements followed by the child's playful experiment."

Describing appropriate music centres in schools for children, Isbell and Raines [5] note that such carefully designed centres provide varied opportunities for them (children) to explore sounds through manipulation, comparing, contrasting and creating with varieties of musical materials such as drums, castanets, bells, rhythmic sticks and a collection of African musical instruments. These musical instruments provide variations in sound exploration and experimentation which can contribute significantly to building the concept of tone colour in learners. Children also develop instrumental performing skills as they interact with such musical materials [26].

Furthermore, the musical centre provides an appropriate musical learning environment that is based on a free choice participation that allows for greater involvement and participation, depending on the pupils' needs, interest, experience and abilities as they direct their own musical activities with the teacher's support [5]. Dzansi [27] cautions music educators against imposing on pupils any concept which does not relate to their experience and environment as this can interfere with their musical expressions. The music teacher's most important role in the learning environment is to observe children as they engage in activities to determine and identify their interests, abilities and expressive techniques which will serve as a guide for setting an

appropriate learning environment for their engagements [5].

### 2.3 Children's Play

In describing the role of plays in children's lives and learning, Cohen et al. [28] state:

Play catches and develops children's intrinsic motivation, addresses their self-posed questions, offers the possibility for children to engage in divergent thought in which there is no single right answer, promotes socialisation and creativity, and prompts the development of both the left and right hemispheres of the brain.

Children possess a natural inclination to explore their environment through play and consider it as a very serious activity through which they exert themselves to achieve a goal [24]. Levinowitz [25] has noted that Children primarily learn about the world through the magical process of play, as the substance usually comprised objects in the child's environment and the experiences to which they are exposed. In a similar point, Dzansi [27] has described the learning process in the playground which is a reflection of what transpires among local ensembles in the Ghanaian community. For example, in performing the *Adowa* music and dance type among the Akan ethnic group, the instrumentalists (drummers and bell players) sit in a semi-circle formation with singers standing behind them. A female lead singer begins the performance by singing an introductory song in a free style. The master drummer who plays the *Atumpan* drums and controls the entire performance follows immediately by cueing in the other instrumentalists to join in, after which the chorus enter with a medley of songs. The rest of the members of the music and dance group or the general public then take turns to dance in pairs in the arena.

Children as participants in social events such as festivals [29] where artistic performances are held "study the way experts perform their tasks" [27] and try to practice their observations during their musical-play. Marsh and Young (2006, p. 289, as cited in [30] define musical-play as "everyday forms of musical activity... that children initiate on their own accord and in which they may choose to play with others voluntarily." Countryman continue to explain that a musical-play includes spontaneous acts of chants and games, pre-existing songs and a wide range of improvised songs and dance expressions derived from

popular media and oral traditional sources. By this, pupils negotiate rules which regulate their interaction through play, confirming Vygotskian theory of social interaction [31] which explains how learning and creation of knowledge takes place through a collaboration between the learner and a more experienced, knowledgeable and competent person.

Performance and learning are reinforced through an active participation [27]. Taking turns to dance hence affords each pupil the opportunity to take part and achieve perfection in the art. Socially, they may be developing the art of cooperation, an attribute of teamwork necessary for learning. Intellectually, they may be exploring sounds and movements which can develop their sense of rhythm, pitch, dynamics, volume, and other related music concepts. Physically, they may be learning fine motor control as they perform on their improvised musical instruments. Morally, pupils may be learning how to tolerate each other as they engage in a musical-play [32,17].

As children observe, improvise and imitate their peers' actions during musical plays, they achieve competence [33]. It is against this backdrop that Manford suggests the introduction of music to pupils through play and emphasised that during musical plays, "children's attention is immediately directed to the object at hand" [24].

Participants in musical-play events appear in a natural state and become their own teacher [27]. In such an environment, socialisation that takes place during a musical learning is effected through "child-to-child and peer education, apprenticeship, and adult-to-child instruction" [34] It is, therefore, necessary for lower primary school teachers to appreciate and take a cue from the practicality and 'playground pedagogy' of children to design developmentally appropriate musical activities to provide musical learning experiences to their children.

### 2.4 Exemplary Musical Sound, Activities and Material

Children should experience exemplary musical sounds, activities and materials (MENC, n. d.). Music forms a natural part of children's environment and a meaningful part of quality childhood formal education [11,12,35] is of the view that it will be unwise to teach music to children without engaging them in practical activities. According to MENC (2000), children can learn to reproduce newly heard melodies in

their singing, and rhythmic patterns with their rhythmic instruments. They should, therefore, be encouraged to see themselves as musicians. In view of this, it is suggested that music should be considered as a fundamental and an integral part of the child's life in school [35] so as to nurture their love of music to enhance their musical knowledge, skills and understanding.

Music is basically an aural art and according to Manford [24], children are likely to retain and utilise their listening experiences during the attendance of events such as musical concerts, listening to iTunes, Spotify, radio and other internet music streaming services in later life more than all the other musical experiences. It is, therefore, very significant to provide a number of developmentally appropriate listening experiences for them to develop their aural acuity. Children should be supported to listen to folk and traditional songs, hymns, and songs about animals and familiar objects that relate to their cultural background [24]. The more music children hear, compose and play, and the richer the musical sound, the more they are likely to develop and create their own musical skills, knowledge and understanding. Teachers are, therefore, required to consider the provision of developmentally appropriate music experiences for their pupils to give them the opportunity to experience exemplary musical sounds, activities and materials.

## 2.5 Performance Goals

In a developmentally appropriate music environment, children should not be burdened with the need to achieve a performance goal [7]. Rather, the appropriate environment with varied opportunities should be created with the aim of developing children's singing skills, rhythmic responses to music, and performance skills on musical instruments [24]. In what seems to be a confirmatory stance, Essa [4] has noted that singing with children should not be based on achieving a musical accuracy, and the teacher's purpose for teaching children to learn music should also not be premised on making the children great musicians. The teacher should rather try to stimulate the musical potential in them and build the foundation for music appreciation. In terms of singing, children in the primary school may perform out of tune. In such an instance, the teacher's duty is to discover the developmental level of each pupil and plan beneficial experiences, avoiding activities that are too complex or frustrating to enable each child to

keep developing at his or her own pace [11]. In Mayesky's (2002, p. 279) words, "children will have more success in movement and music activities if they are not required to synchronise their movements to an external musical source".

An environment that supports vocal development enhances children's singing voices. Teachers are not to emphasise and dominantly focus on achieving a predetermined performance level. Engaging children in the singing of variety of songs leads to development of their singing skills. Levinowitz [25] believes that through continued exposure to spoken chants, songs and vocal plays, children can develop the musical use of their voices during the remaining childhood years.

Rhythmic responses to walking, running, clapping and skipping, listening to choral, traditional and instrumental music and playing available musical instruments in school are all worthwhile developmentally appropriate musical experiences that contribute significantly to children's learning [4,5]. As emphasised by Dzansi [2], the goal of music education for children is to help them (children) value their own creative efforts rather than be concerned about accurate phrasing, correct interpretation of melodic or rhythmic patterns and so forth. Consideration of children's developmental level in planning appropriate musical learning activities that will aid children's learning and development should, therefore, be of paramount concern to teachers.

## 2.6 Diverse Learning Environment

Levinowitz [25] has identified childhood as the most critical stage of children's musical growth. However, individual children within the same age bracket may learn, develop and grow at their own individual pace [12] and each child learns something different in a music learning environment (MENC, n. d.). Creating a diverse musical learning environment to serve the developmental needs of many individual children is, therefore, crucial [36].

Music consists of varied activities of singing, creating, improvisation, playing musical instruments, movement, and other related activities [11]. These provide wide and varied opportunities for every child to succeed in at least one of these musical activities regardless of their academic achievements or mental abilities. Manford [24] has argued that even if a child cannot sing well, he or she may be able to play a musical instrument, read music, move in

response to rhythmic patterns created by peers or even create rhythmic pieces on his or her own. Other children may also be guided to enjoy such musical achievements through well-planned listening experiences [4,11].

As discussed earlier, children interact with musical materials in their own way based on their unique experiences and developmental levels [11]. A child who is in a group participating in a musical activity in the same setting at the same time may exhibit different responses. While one may respond through a display of sophistication and confidence in creating rhythms and songs, another may simply move in response to rhythms being created by others or just listen to the sound being created in a learning environment [12]. The various manners through which pupils respond to music signify that the art does different things to different children and for that reason, it is the responsibility of the teacher to set up a developmentally appropriate music learning environment to develop an enthusiasm for music learning in children, which can last the rest of their lives.

## **2.7 Effective Adult Role Models**

Children love and enjoy adults who joyfully participate in their music making activities. MENC (n. d., p. 1) states that “parents and teachers who provide music in their child’s life are creating the most powerful route to the child’s successful involvement in the art”. Modelling is an essential teaching activity that aids a pupil’s learning [37] [38]. Pupils love music passed on to them from someone special in their life and, therefore, learn quickly through modelling. Adult role models, especially primary school teachers, can plan opportunities for musical knowledge and skills developments while encouraging spontaneous musical responses that pupils produce each day and also focus on a divergent thinking that allows for the varied musical responses. The different levels of background experiences, abilities, needs and interests that pupils bring to the music learning setting cause this divergent thinking and result in each pupil responding to the artistic material in his or her own way [24,39]. As adults’ model a musical activity, pupils observe, imitate and practise to achieve success in learning [1].

According to MENC (n. d.), effective adult role models should value music and recognise that an early introduction to music is important in children’s lives. Effective adult models for children’s musical experiences are very crucial for

their learning and development. Teachers and parents must understand the importance of including appropriate musical activities in children’s lives through modelling which is likely to motivate them to engage in music making to learn and develop their musical knowledge, skills and understanding.

## **2.8 Pleasant Physical and Social Environment**

According to MENC (n. d.), children’s learning is very effective in a pleasant physical and social environment. By nature, they are very curious and investigative, with the aim of finding out how things work around them. Children normally do this through games, plays and other related activities [5,26] Jackman [11] intimates that children learn best through acting upon what they experience. It is, therefore, very significant to provide many kinds of music-related physical and social opportunities for them. Such opportunities in music learning contexts for children will be more effective when they include musical plays, musical games, conversation about music elements, pictorial imagery of musical concepts, stories about musical events, shared reflections on life events and family activities, and personal and group involvement in social tasks (MENC, n. d.).

The playground environment is a perfect example that provides physical and social experiences that are related to children’s musical engagement. Dzansi [27] has alluded to how children participate actively during playground music performances through which they learn by imitation as they express themselves through dancing, jumping, clapping and singing. A pleasant physical and social environment for music education can ensure that children are successful and appropriately challenged as they participate in meaningful musical activities (MENC, n. d.).

## **3. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Practising as a music and a teacher educator for the past sixteen years in Ghana, I have observed and come to the conclusion that although DAP as an educational approach is expressed in all music teaching and learning activities, much effort is needed to make its use very dominant in the primary schools. It will therefore not be out of place for Ghanaian tertiary music and teacher educators to consider

its inclusion as one of the thematic areas of a formal music study in the Universities and Colleges of Education to equip pre-service primary school teachers with knowledge, understanding and skills of this educational approach to improve upon the practice in the provision of effective learning experiences to pupils in their future music classrooms. It is also recommended that in-service training be organised for practicing teachers in primary schools to gain better knowledge and understanding of the approach to enable them integrate it effectively in teaching music.

This article is limited to theoretical study and discussion of beliefs that provide guidelines for the creation of developmentally appropriate musical learning environment and activities to children in the classroom. Carrying out a real classroom study through observation, questionnaire or interview is recommended for future research on related subjects.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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