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AI Statement

I have not used AI in any way for this assignment.

The Challenges of Implementing Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Welsh Early Years Settings - Literature Review

Developmentally Appropriate Practice [DAP] is a core principle of early years education owing to its focus on the holistic development of children- the principle of developing the child equally in all areas (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC] *et al.*, 2020a)- in contrast to a traditional direct instruction approach which focuses more on the child's academic achievement (National Institute for Direct Instruction, n.d). DAP, as defined by NAEYC (2020a), is an educational framework which emphasises tailoring activities and expectations to the needs of each individual child. It promotes child-led, play-based education for children between birth and seven years of age, this is aligned with recent research (Ali *et al.* 2018, pp. 6808-6811) and established theory (McNair and Powell, 2020, pp. 1175-1185). Additionally, Developmentally Appropriate Practices, such as guided play, have been found to improve young children's grasp of early literacy and numeracy skills- a high priority in early years curricula (Weisberg *et al.* 2015, pp. 8-13).

This review aims to explore the theoretical foundations of DAP, its policy implications, and the challenges faced by practitioners implementing DAP theory in their practice. Although widely endorsed, research suggests that significant variability exists in the quality of DAP implementation across settings and highlights a potential gap around practitioner knowledge and confidence and a misalignment between policy and practice.

DAP's foundation is underpinned by the work of influential theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Erikson.

Piaget's theory of cognitive development- which postulates that the brain undergoes several discrete periods of development, during which knowledge is acquired and subsequently built upon (Richardson, 2019, pp. 94-142) and its focus on child-led, hands-on exploration is at the core of DAP's focus on meeting the child at their current developmental level and its use of exploratory play to improve competency and environmental understanding (Chu and Schulz, 2023, pp. 294-317). However, critics of Piaget's theory suggest that it does not consider strongly enough the role of social learning- learning from one's peers, or else a knowledgeable guide, in a low-pressure or social setting- in cognitive development (Babakr, Mohamedamin and Kakamad, 2019, pp. 517-524), something better explored in Vygotsky's theories.

Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development [ZPD] (Zaretsky, 2024, pp. 45-57) and the notion of scaffolding - responsive education wherein the adult only intervenes when absolutely necessary and only enough to aid the child to be successful independently (Kleppe, 2017, pp. 1487-1501) are a foundational aspect of DAP's core principle of knowledgeable, confident

practitioners in early years education and beyond (NAEYC, 2020b). This view allows for a more interactive model of education which complements and extends Piaget's work. This interactive model is also highlighted in the work of Erik Erickson.

Erikson's theory of psycho-social development- which examines the stages of a child's social and emotional development (Laver-Bradbury *et al.* 2021, pp.82-85)- further emphasises the importance of responsive adults, particularly during what he called the 'shame versus autonomy' and 'initiative versus guilt' periods, typically between the ages of two and five years. Taken together, these theorists provide a solid theoretical foundation for DAP and its application to early years education.

The influence of these theorists is also apparent in Welsh policy documents such as the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings (Welsh Government [WG], 2025) and the broader Curriculum for Wales (WG, 2023). The role of the enabling adult is a key theme throughout both documents, a clear link to Vygotsky's and Erikson's theories. These documents embed the principles of DAP into Welsh legal and regulatory requirements for all early years settings. To support the effective implementation of these policies the Welsh Government also implemented workshops and released guides, aiming to provide clear guidance to practitioners and administrators alike (WG, 2024).

However, despite the guidance available, Estyn reports (Estyn, 2024) indicate some variability in the success of its practical implementation. A particular area of concern noted in the Estyn 2021-2022 report was practitioners' ability to function as enabling adults in early years settings. Their observations found that, while some settings were successfully implementing the principles of the enabling adult, practitioners in other settings were failing to centre their observations of the children in forward planning practices, reducing the beneficial outcomes of the activities (Estyn, 2022).

Recent research into the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales suggests that this variability may be caused by the significant gap in training and development between maintained settings- settings controlled and funded by the local authority- and non-maintained settings- those overseen by a private person or corporation. This variability is evident in the analysis of Stewart, MacDonald, and Waters-Davies (2024) who explored research that found practitioners in maintained settings expressed more confidence in their ability to teach foundational aspects of the Curriculum for Wales than those in non-maintained settings. This inconsistency is theorised to be linked to the non-statutory nature of the Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings, which may be leading to a reduced focus on ensuring that all practitioners within non-maintained settings are sufficiently trained in effective pedagogy (Crellin, 2017).

Another potential factor is the increased focus on school readiness and assessments for pre-school children. The recent introduction of reception-based assessments in England have led to concerns that early years provision may be becoming too focused on academic learning (Perrott, 2022). These concerns are part of a growing concern globally about the 'schoolification' of young children (Ring and O'Sullivan, 2018, pp. 402-410). Schoolification is the term given to the increasing focus on ensuring academic achievement, potentially at the cost of holistic development. Concerns about this aspect of early education are not new, however, with recent research suggesting that many children starting formal education in Wales are unable to carry out basic hygiene tasks independently (Kindred², 2025), focus on the detriments of this approach have been renewed.

Furthermore, practitioners face pressure from parents and guardians to maintain consistency between the home and setting, which can cause tensions when parental expectations conflict with the tenets of best practice (Kambouri *et al.* 2021, pp. 639-661). While practitioners are duty bound to prioritise the best interest of the child in all scenarios (Safeguarding Wales, n.d), these disconnects can cause practitioners to lose confidence in their practice and potentially sacrifice appropriate practice due to fear of repercussions (Patton and Winter, 2022, pp. 647-664). This has the further effect of providing mixed signals for the child and underscores the need for effective partnership between parents and practitioners.

In summary, despite widespread support and Welsh policy backing for Developmentally Appropriate Practice, there is significant variability in its implementation across the early years sector in Wales. Therefore research into the challenges faced by practitioners wishing to implement DAP in Welsh early years settings is required to discover the root cause of this inconsistency and how it may be resolved.

Methodological Considerations

This research will be conducted using a purposive sample of one hundred nurseries across Wales, approximately 10% of the total number of full day care providers registered with Care Inspectorate Wales [CIW] (StatsWales, 2024), this allows enough scope to be representative while keeping data manageable. A purposive sample is a sample selected based on specific criteria which aims to align data collection and research aims (Campbell *et al.* 2020, pp. 652-661). In this instance, the sample will be selected based on a setting's reported ability to implement the enabling adult tenet of the Curriculum for Wales and will be equally split across the fifty highest and fifty lowest rated settings. This purposive sample, selected by contrasting the data pools and including all practitioners in the selected settings, will allow researchers to compare and contrast the practice of settings on either end of the spectrum. This will allow for more confidence in the key conclusions of the research (Yin, 2016, pp. 96).

This study will further improve its validity- how well the results of a study are able to be applied to real world scenarios (Patino and Ferreira, 2018, pp. 183)- by employing triangulation. Triangulation is the practice of using two or more methods, approaches or data sources in a single research project (Roberts-Holmes, 2018). Whilst more resource intensive, triangulated research allows for a more robust study, enables broader collection of information and more impartial analysis (Noble and Heale, 2019, pp. 67-68). In this case it will also enable researchers to identify conflicts between self-reported practice and practice realities. Research has found that people are dishonest or misrepresent themselves multiple times during a typical conversation (Grant, Paglia and Chamberlain, 2019, pp.361-369), potentially skewing the results if one were to rely entirely upon self-reporting. Therefore, in order to gain a complete picture, researchers will collect data using multiple methods.

Questionnaires were considered for this study but were ultimately rejected due to their limitations. This study seeks to acquire in-depth qualitative data- data which focuses more on abstract concepts such as understanding and feelings (National Library of Medicine, n.d)- a purpose for which questionnaires are not best suited. Research conducted by Curran (2016) found that participants are unlikely to write in-depth responses to questionnaires, while Liu and Wronski (2017) found a correlation between the length of a questionnaire and a decline in response rates. This is particularly impactful when one considers that the typical return rate for questionnaires is only 44.1% (Wu, Zhao and Fils-Aime, 2022). Furthermore, questionnaires may lead to confusion from participants who do not understand the phrasing or focus of a question (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018, pp. 577-580), which can lead to inaccurate responses which would limit the efficacy of the study and the validity of its results. Following this reasoning, interviews and observations were selected as the most appropriate methods of data collection.

The interviews will be conducted in a semi-structured manner using open-ended questions. A semi-structured interview consists of both fixed elements and flexible elements (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021, pp.1360). In this context, it means that researchers will ask a set list of open-ended questions- questions which elicit elaborative answers (Albudaiwi, 2017, pp.1716)- designed to gain a clear understanding of the practitioners' knowledge of and confidence in DAP principles, whilst asking follow up questions to clarify information on key themes such as DAP, external pressures on practice and professional development. One of the key benefits of this method, according to Scanlan (2020), is the ability to gain in-depth qualitative data. Interviews provide an opportunity for participants to elaborate their views, experiences and understanding without being constrained by literacy or potentially limiting forms, common issues with attempting to gather written in-depth data (Heinritz, Will and Gentile, 2022, pp.101-126).

Additionally, interviews allow researchers to read physical cues, facial expressions and vocal indicators (Kakilla, 2021). This can allow researchers to better gauge the honesty of participants and to notice instances in which a participant may be censoring themselves or withholding information. This is important because, as previously alluded to, participants can be dishonest or withhold information even after agreeing to participate in research. This happens for a variety of reasons, for example; fear of judgement, retaliation or even financial gain, where studies offer incentives to participate (Chandler and Paolacci, 2017, pp. 500-508). This limitation can be overcome through thorough policies and guidelines to ensure that all personal information is kept confidential, all published data is kept anonymous and any incentives are kept to a minimum (Juniór, 2022, pp. 101). Clearly communicating these protections can promote a sense of comfort, causing the participant to be more forthcoming and honest. Combining this with a strong rapport between researcher and participant can facilitate more accurate data collection (Lancaster, 2016, pp. 93-103).

Another limitation of interviews as a method of data collection is the potential for language barriers. Practitioners with English as an Additional Language [EAL] may struggle to communicate about nuanced topics, like DAP, in a way that truly captures their understanding and interpretation (Al-Amer *et al.* 2016, pp. 150-157). This could cause errors in the data, particularly in settings with a majority EAL population. This limitation could be mitigated by employing interpreters to enable practitioners to converse in their primary language, which would allow for all practitioners to express themselves as clearly as possible (Squires, Sadarangani and Jones, 2019, pp. 706-714). In this way, researchers can gain valuable insight into practitioner views on DAP, regardless of their fluency in English.

Observations have been selected as an additional data collection method in order to complement the data collected during the interviews, providing a practical basis for the theoretical observations from the interviews (Zahle, 2019, pp. 32-39). Observations will follow-on from the interviews and

be conducted regularly over the course of several months. This approach aims to mitigate the data altering effects of the Hawthorne effect. The Hawthorne effect, named for the factory in which it was first observed, is the increase in productivity and improved conduct that results from the participants cognizance of being observed (Oswald, Sherratt and Smith, 2014, pp. 53-57). This effect can skew observations by presenting a false image of practice within a setting, a clear hindrance to gaining objective information from which solutions can be derived. Another potential limitation of observations is the risk of failing to notice or record key details or indicators, particularly in the case of solo researchers (Ellis, 2024), which can significantly diminish the validity of any research findings.

These limitations could be mitigated by maintaining consistency in terms of the researcher and their approach, to reduce the novelty of being observed and to allow a strong relationship to be formed. This will enable observations to yield more accurate and reliable data, which will be more useful in terms of generalising the data further down the line (Dado, Spence and Elliot, 2023). Additionally, this study will utilise video-recorded observations. Recordings will allow observations to be conducted without the presence of the researcher by situating cameras throughout the setting for a period of time; thereby allowing researchers to gather more unfiltered information than might be available during in-person observations (Asan and Montague, 2014, pp. 161-170). Furthermore, recordings of in-person observations can allow researchers to review the situation, outside of the immediate scenario, allowing for more perspective and less emotional involvement in analysis (Golembiewski *et al.* 2023, pp. 42-67). It will also allow additional researchers to review the same interaction, without being informed by the opinions of the initial researcher.

This approach to observations will enable researchers to accurately observe and assess the participants' implementation of DAP theory, whilst the investigator triangulation- the use of two or more researchers- will help to reduce instances of researcher bias- the encroachment of personal opinion on objective analysis (Popovic and Huecker, 2023)- impacting results (Moon, 2019, pp. 103). One example of researcher bias is that of the Halo effect- the term given to the favourable viewing of a participant or research subject due to their status or qualifications (Gabrieli *et al.* 2021). This effect can result in a non-objective analysis of interactions and information, thereby reducing the validity of the research conclusions and recommendations.

In conclusion, this proposed methodology should ensure that information is collected in line with the stated research objectives and help it to withstand critique and generalisation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics- the principle of ensuring that research does the most good and the least harm (Resnik, 2024)- underpins all modern approaches to educational research, particularly as it relates to research with or for young children (Ramrathan, Le Grange and Shawa, 2017, pp. 432-443). This reflects a larger shift towards respecting the autonomy and wellbeing of research participants (Barrow, Brannan and Khandhar, 2022) and the increased focus on safeguarding vulnerable individuals in particular (Shamsad, 2020, pp. 26-33). One aspect of this is the researchers' responsibility to protect the participants' voluntary consent, confidentiality and wellbeing (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2024).

Voluntary consent is an ongoing process, meaning that it can be given or taken freely throughout the research process. It requires that participants are properly informed and able to come to a considered decision (Loughborough University, n.d). To this end, consent will be sought from the settings- where the observations will take place, the parents of the children attending the setting- on behalf of the children and the practitioners- who are the primary focus of this research. This ensures that all participants, whether direct or indirect, are able to seek clarification and give consent to participate in this research study, in line with University of Wales Trinity Saint David's [UWTSD] Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice (2018).

Consent will be obtained through signed consent forms and recorded verbal consent, this redundancy offers additional protection in case of accusations of forced participation or other unethical practice (Xu *et al.* 2020). Included with the consent form will be an information sheet detailing data collection methods, data storage and confidentiality policies, anonymity procedures, their right to withdraw their participation and data at any time, risks to the participant, benefits to wider society and contact information, in case of additional queries or concerns, in clear, accessible language (University of Cambridge, n.d; Ennis and Wykes, 2016, pp. 189-194).

Verbal clarification and explanation will also be available to ensure complete understanding of the information sheet before consent forms are signed or verbal consent is obtained (City St George's University of London, n.d). In order to ensure maximum accessibility, reasonable accommodations will be offered to support participants with disabilities, Additional Learning Needs [ALN], English as an Additional Language [EAL] or low literacy (Rios *et al.* 2016, pp. 2137-2144). These accommodations may include scribes, readers or interpreters, amongst other possibilities. This will help to mitigate the noted underrepresentation of these groups in research.

Consent will be continuously sought to ensure the participants' ongoing comfort and voluntary participation. A participant's ongoing consent will be determined through verbal check-ins and vigilant monitoring of non-verbal cues that may indicate discomfort or reluctance to participate.

Such signs may include withdrawal, reluctance or refusal to answer questions or anxious body language, such as excessive fidgeting (Klykken, 2021, pp. 795-810). Upon a negative check-in, or observation of any indicators of discomfort, the researcher will call for a break and offer to work through any concerns the participant has. If this intervention fails, further support will be offered along with a reminder of the participants right to withdraw at any time without repercussion (King's College London, 2023). Furthermore, in order to support article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, n.d), which enshrines a child's right to speak and be listened to on matters that affect them, attending children's assent will also be sought for all in person observations. The process of seeking assent allows researchers to minimise any distress or harm to the children in the observed setting, in line with UWTSD (2018) guidance.

The participants right to privacy will be respected at all times, through strict adherence to data storage, confidentiality and anonymity policies,

All personal data collected during this study will be stored on encrypted, password protected drives, accessible only to the lead researcher and the relevant participant. This approach is aligned with *Regulation (EU) 2016/679*, more commonly known as the General Data Protection Regulations [GDPR], and the *Data Protection Act 2018*. Participants are entitled to view, amend or remove their data at any time, in line with article 15 of GDPR legislation. However, fully anonymised data will remain the property of the researcher. Fully anonymised data is data that has been stripped of all identifying or personal information, such that it no longer constitutes personal data under the relevant legislation (University of Edinburgh, 2023).

This study will employ robust anonymisation procedures so as to take every precaution to protect the participants' confidentiality and privacy rights. The process of anonymisation removes all possible identifying information, enabling safer research for both participant and researcher (Department for Education, n.d).

One proposed anonymisation procedure is the use of pseudonyms in all written observations, documentation or transcriptions. For example, participants may be referred to by a numerical identifier or assigned code name during initial analysis before transitioning to a vague identifier such as- junior or senior early years practitioner, for publication (Data Protection Commission, 2019). Furthermore, all video recordings will be transcribed according to the above pseudonymisation protocol, after which footage and transcription will be verified before the raw footage is destroyed. This enables video recordings to be analysed, while reducing the risk to participants' privacy in the event of a data breach (BERA, 2024). This is of particular importance as the videos will contain identifying footage of children, who are subject to more stringent data protection laws. Finally, researchers will employ vague language, where necessary, to avoid

recording unnecessary personal information and the identification of settings, participants or locales. This reduces the likelihood of privacy breaches or risks to personal safety (UWTSD 2018).

As part of this study's commitment to upholding the ethical standards established in BERA (2024) and UWTSD (2018), several risks to the participants have been identified and consideration given to their mitigation.

One of the most notable concerns that emerged is the risk of harm to participant wellbeing as a result of the power imbalance inherent in the researcher-subject dynamic (Cohen, Manion and Morris, 2018, pp. 176). Participants may experience anxiety regarding the publication of results or feel that the researcher is somehow assessing them, which can have a significant impact on their wellbeing (Tarrant *et al.* 2015, pp. 2042-2053). Additionally, this power imbalance can result in participants that do not feel safe to raise concerns or withdraw consent.

In order to mitigate this, researchers must strive to create an open, trusting environment- in which participants are able to engage in an open dialogue about concerns, knowing they will be met with support and understanding (BERA, 2024). Furthermore, researchers must clearly communicate that their goal is to acquire information about the challenges faced by practitioners, not to assess the participants practice or job performance (Gabarre, Gabarre and Din, pp. 1071-1089).

However, while researchers must cultivate this kind of trusting relationship and strong rapport with the participants, they must also maintain a professional distance to avoid instances of unethical behaviour or skewed perception (Schmid, Garrels and Skåland, 2024, pp. 1253-1271). When the line between professional and personal relationships blurs, it becomes difficult to separate emotion from analysis- leading to concerns of bias or invalidity.

Additionally, researchers must safeguard their own wellbeing and safety whilst conducting research. Overly personal relationships with participants may significantly increase the emotional burden on the researcher, potentially leading to burn-out or a mental health crisis (Zaluski and Makara-Studzińska, 2023, pp. 346-351). This is particularly true of research relating to sensitive or emotional topics, such as job frustrations and challenges.

Furthermore, researchers may face risks to their physical safety, particularly whilst undertaking solo fieldwork in unfamiliar locations (International Science Council, 2017). This is an inherently vulnerable position for the researcher, who may face instances of physical violence or exposure to dangerous environments. Therefore, suitable safeguarding measures must be in place to limit the risk to the researcher (Wolf *et al.* 2024, pp. 204-206).

A possible solution to this risk is the creation of a researcher wellbeing policy, which accounts for the need to provide emotional and wellbeing support to the researchers during the research process and to establish a check-in policy for fieldwork, particularly in rural areas where contact

may be difficult or sporadic (Skinner *et al.* 2023). Additionally, this would help to mitigate any liability the university may face in the event of harm to the researchers.

The university may face serious reputational and legal consequences, if they are considered to be condoning or endorsing unethical practices (University of Essex, n.d). For example, while all possible steps will be taken to mitigate the risks to the participants' confidentiality, due to the individual nature of most childcare settings it remains a possibility that a participant may be identified (Horowicz and Stalford, 2023). This could constitute a serious risk to the university, if correct procedure has not been followed.

In order to avoid this risk, this study will strictly abide by the UWTSD Code of Practice (2018) and would welcome supervision by the university to ensure adherence (University College London Arena, 2019). Additionally, researchers will be able to offer proof that at all stages of the research project a high standard of ethics has been maintained, in line with UWTSD (2018) and BERA (2024) guidelines.

Overall, it is clear that there are many ethical considerations to be assessed during the research design process and proper consideration must be given to their mitigation to ensure a defensible research project.

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