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Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives on Challenges Using Developmentally Appropriate Practices in the Classroom

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Tamesha S. Parris

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives on Challenges Using Developmentally
Appropriate Practices in the Classroom

by

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MS, Walden University, 2016

BS, Walden University, 2014

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

May 2025

Abstract

Early childhood teachers' understanding of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is necessary to support children's development and learning in early childhood settings. The problem was many early childhood teachers experience challenges using DAP to make informed decisions in the classroom to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what was needed to improve their use of DAP. The conceptual framework for this study was the National Association for the Education of Young Children DAP framework. Data were collected from 10 early childhood teachers using semistructured interviews. Data analysis included open coding, axial coding, and thematic analysis. Five themes emerged from the data analysis process: (a) teachers are challenged to teach, (b) teachers are challenged to implement DAP, (c) teachers are challenged to create inclusive and supportive educational environments, (d) teachers need DAP professional development and resources, and (e) teachers need collaboration. These findings may contribute to positive social change in early childhood education by addressing the gap in practice concerning DAP and providing information on DAP strategies and challenges to curriculum designers, professional development coordinators, school psychologists, and early childhood administrators who want to make decisions on the use of DAP. This information may be used by teachers to address and overcome DAP challenges to better support children's development and learning in the birth to three-year-old classroom.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the many hearts and hands that supported me throughout this journey. To my children and grandchildren your love, patience, and sacrifices gave me strength and purpose. You are my inspiration, and your belief in me carried me through the most challenging moments. To my family and friends, thank you for your constant encouragement and for standing by me with love and grace. Your emotional support made all the difference. To my chairs, academic advisors, methodologists, colleagues, and the Walden librarians your guidance, professionalism, and practical support shaped this work in meaningful ways. I am grateful for the time, wisdom, and feedback you poured into my growth. To my parents, children, and colleagues who challenged me to do better and pushed me to grow, thank you for helping me become the scholar and person I am today. To the educators, families, directors, and young children who inspired this research, your voices and experiences are the heartbeat of this study. Finally, to those who once told me, “Trust your instincts and be bold in pursuing innovative ideas, even if they challenge conventional wisdom”—thank you. That advice lit the path forward. Progress is born from the courage to think differently.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In the United States, early childhood teachers are responsible for making decisions to support children's development and learning from birth to age 8 using developmentally appropriate practices (DAP; American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees et al., 2020). Early childhood teachers plan, assess, and teach using various approaches, strategies, and materials to provide children with adaptive services to meet each child's needs in the learning environment (Moses, 2021). The National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC) DAP statement provides a framework consisting of core considerations, principles, and guidelines to support early childhood teachers with evidence-based research on the theoretical foundations of child development and learning, including effective strategies for teachers to foster children to their fullest potential (American Institutes for Research, 2021).

The principles and guidelines for practice are based on three core areas of consideration: commonality, individuality, and context (NAEYC, 2020b). The nine principles are (a) a child's development and learning are influenced by their biological characteristics and their environment; (b) all domains are important because each overlap to support development and learning across competencies; (c) play is necessary to provide fun engaged learning for children from birth to age 8; (d) development and learning occur at a general rate but vary depending on cultural context, experiences, and individual characteristics; (e) active learning begins at birth developed through relationships, the environment, and experiences; (f) children's learning improves when they feel secure in their environment, their identity is cultivated, and opportunities are

provided for choices; (g) academic disciplines or subject areas are integrated into the learning process for children; (h) children need challenging opportunities and time to develop emerging skills to increase development and learning; and (i) developmentally appropriate technology and media are supportive devices for children development and learning (NAEYC, 2020l). The six guidelines are (a) creating an inclusive and equitable learning community; (b) building collaborative partnerships with families and communities; (c) observing, documenting, and evaluating children's development and learning; (d) teaching practices to enhance individual development and learning; (e) curriculum planning for meaningful learning; and (f) demonstrating professionalism through reflection and practice (NAEYC, 2020k).

Early childhood teachers must understand how to apply the three core areas of consideration and the nine principles in practice through the six guidelines (NAEYC, 2020i). Early childhood teachers use the three core areas of consideration, nine principles, and six guidelines for planning and implementing DAP activities that promote each child's developmental domains. Early childhood teachers must understand how to create developmentally appropriate environments that support children's mental, physical, language, aesthetic, and social emotional development (Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez, 2021). Early childhood teachers must understand the complex dynamics of culture and context to create DAP environments that are culturally and linguistically appropriate (NAEYC, 2020b).

An early childhood teacher must use developmentally appropriate methods to enhance children's development and learning by leveraging children's strengths and the

DAP principle of play to engage children in effective learning in the classroom (NAEYC, 2020d). In this approach, early childhood teachers act as facilitators, identifying educational moments and considering the child's interests and abilities to guide their learning. With the adoption of the 2020 NAEYC DAP, early childhood teachers must reject the longstanding concept of children developing along a linear progression and instead adopt the idea of children developing in waves and cycles (Bredekamp & Willer, 2021a). This approach must be responsive to each child's abilities (Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez, 2021).

In the United States, many children from birth to 3 years old participate in classrooms with early childhood teachers who do not appropriately use DAP to provide rich educational experiences that support children's learning and development, allowing them to reach their fullest potential (NAEYC, 2020a). Although professional organizations and accredited bodies regard early childhood teachers as prepared to teach all children, many early childhood teachers experience challenges identifying developmentally appropriate principles to guide their practice, particularly in the context of external constraints such as reduced playtime and the need to support children with diverse needs (Fox et al., 2025; Moore & Zweig, 2022). As a result, some early childhood teachers provide inconsistent DAP, leading to disparities in instruction in the learning environment, especially for Hispanic and Latino children (Kintner-Duffy et al., 2021; Lee & Hickmann, 2022). Furthermore, Chadwell et al. (2020) highlighted that only 19.6% of early childhood teachers consider themselves prepared to teach children with disabilities,

despite the emphasis in DAP on teachers facilitating the learning and development of all children by using appropriate observation and assessment tools.

Understanding early childhood teachers' challenges when using DAP is essential to making informed decisions to support all children's development and learning in the classroom (Lee, 2024). Prior research found that although early childhood teachers believed in the importance of DAP, they struggled to implement it effectively due to external challenges such as resource limitations, large class sizes, and administrative barriers (Mengstie, 2023). Although this finding emerged in Ethiopia, it highlighted a broader challenge in early childhood education, where teachers worldwide experienced difficulties applying DAP within their classrooms (Mengstie, 2023). Further research is needed to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on implementing DAP appropriately in U.S. early childhood settings, particularly with birth to 3-year-olds (Lim & Ridgley, 2021). I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what they believe is needed to improve their use of DAP.

These findings may contribute to positive social change in the field of early childhood education by addressing the gap in practice and providing curriculum designers, professional development coordinators, school psychologists, early childhood leaders, and teachers with information to inform their decision making on using DAP to support children's development and learning. The findings may provide helpful information for early childhood teachers to use when implementing DAP strategies to

foster children's development and learning. Early childhood teachers have valuable perspectives on how best to improve their use of DAP in the classroom. These findings may also provide educational leaders with insights into teachers' perspectives on the strengths and challenges of implementing DAP and help build on those strengths by offering more resources and solutions to existing challenges.

In Chapter 1, I provide background information and the problem statement, including research literature to frame the purpose of my study on early childhood teachers' challenges in using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning. I include the conceptual framework and how I used it to develop the research questions, data collection process, and data analysis plan. The chapter also contains information on the nature of the study, definitions of key terms, assumptions, delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study.

Background

In the 1980s, NAEYC published the DAP statement, which became the accepted practice in early childhood education in the United States and other developed countries (Bredekamp, 1987). Bredekamp (1987) developed the DAP position statement on two critical issues: (a) inappropriate teaching practices and kindergarten readiness and (b) early childhood teachers' inconsistent interpretation of DAP. According to Thompson and Stanković-Ramirez (2021), some early childhood teachers' teaching methods were raising concerns in the education environment. The demand for academic accountability increased. As a result, some early childhood teachers misinterpreted and inappropriately used DAP to meet educational goals. In the following years, NAEYC (2020a) continued

to revise the DAP statement to reflect the content, current research, and correct misunderstandings, resulting in the publication of the second edition in 1996, the third edition in 2009, and the fourth edition in 2022.

Childcare enrollment has quadrupled since 1990, with children from birth to 3 years of age becoming the fastest growing age group (Weglarz-Ward et al., 2019). Additionally, these children are often exposed to teachers who do not provide developmentally appropriate learning environments to nurture children's learning and development (NAEYC, 2020a). Cade et al. (2022) conducted research to examine toddler and preschool teachers' perceptions of DAP and the extent of using K-12 practices to teach children. Cade et al. found that some teachers' perceptions conflicted with using DAP, resulting in developmentally inappropriate practices (DIP) with teacher-imposed academic instructions, minimal focus on whole-child development and learning through play, and pushing children faster through developmental stages.

With the DAP approach, the child is at the center of learning, and teachers use play to engage children in active learning to connect them to their learning experiences while developing their skills. Although early childhood teachers have been trained in DAP, a disconnect exists between their knowledge of DAP and their implementation in the classroom to promote children's individuality and cognitive, physical, and linguistic skills (D'Agostino & Douglas, 2021). According to Kintner-Duffy et al. (2021), early childhood teachers know DAP content but struggle to create culturally and linguistically responsive learning environments that support children's identities and differences.

In the DAP approach, the early childhood teacher focuses on applying knowledge and understanding, recognizing children's individuality and experiences, and considering the children's learning environments (Bredekamp & Willer, 2021a). Anderson et al. (2025) suggested that teachers' educational backgrounds and beliefs shape their self-reported implementation of DAP principles in infant and toddler settings. However, Baumgartner et al. (2020) found that early childhood teachers' beliefs can negatively influence their decision making, leading to challenges and the inappropriate application of DAP, particularly in supporting children's individuality, culture, and race.

Although there is abundant research related to DAP, researchers had not addressed early childhood teachers' perspectives on their challenges in using DAP in the classroom to support all children's development and learning. In the current study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP in the classroom and what is needed to improve their use. The findings may be used to improve professional development and strategies to support teachers' needs to improve their use of DAP.

Problem Statement

The problem is many early childhood teachers are experiencing challenges in using DAP to make informed decisions in the classroom to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning. Despite the increasing emphasis on inclusive environments, only 19.6% of early childhood teachers felt prepared to teach children with disabilities, compared to 68.5% who felt prepared to teach children without disabilities (Chadwell et al., 2020). Lee (2024) further highlighted the issue, noting that early

childhood educators often fail to engage with the complex discourses surrounding disability within DAP. Although DAP frameworks aim to promote inclusivity (NAEYC, 2020i), the persistent tension between medical and social models of disability continues to influence teachers' perceptions, reinforcing traditional views of "normal" development. Lee's (2024) findings suggested that many teachers not only were unprepared to address disability in inclusive contexts but also lacked the tools and understanding needed to navigate the intersection of ableism and racism in their teaching practices.

Although teacher accountability continues to rise, the pressures of accomplishing instructional goals and preparing children for advancement have challenged early childhood teachers in their ability to use DAP within the classroom (Moore & Zweig, 2022). Brown et al. (2024) emphasized that neoliberal policies and standardized reforms restricted early childhood educators' ability to implement DAP effectively, creating tension between policy-driven mandates and developmentally appropriate instructional methods. As a result, many teachers struggled to apply inclusive practices in meaningful ways. Some teachers, influenced by these pressures, believed dittos, worksheets, and rote learning would prepare toddlers and preschool children for success in kindergarten, resulting in anxiety among children (Cade et al., 2022). These external constraints further complicated teachers' engagement with DAP, shaping not only their instructional choices but also their underlying perceptions of developmental norms and inclusivity.

Early childhood teachers need to be aware of the influence of their perceptions, experiences, and contexts on their decision making to prevent negative effects on the

development of children with multiple social identities and different abilities (NAEYC, 2020a). However, some early childhood teachers' personal experiences negatively influenced their beliefs about DAP core criteria (commonality, individuality, and context), leading to subpar DAP learning environments and experiences, predominantly for Hispanic and Black children (Kintner-Duffy et al., 2021). Moore (2019) asserted that early childhood teachers experienced obstacles merging the DAP core consideration of culture with DAP principles to inform their approaches to foster children's emotional and social development through activities that nurtured their culture and identity.

Play-based learning, a fundamental component of DAP, was an area that many early childhood teachers struggled to implement effectively (Piasta et al., 2022). Although early childhood teachers recognized the importance of play-based learning, many experienced challenges in effectively planning and implementing developmentally appropriate play across learning domains (Fox et al., 2025). Additionally, teachers often reported gaps in their knowledge, particularly in integrating movement and play into their classrooms in ways that aligned with developmental goals (Martínez-Bello et al., 2023). Early childhood teachers who do not understand or use DAP do not know how to plan to achieve important developmental goals that support children's learning through play (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2018). These challenges persisted despite professional organizations such as NAEYC (2020h) emphasizing play as a fundamental component of DAP. Fox et al. (2025) and Romijn et al. (2021) further highlighted that teachers may require additional professional development to effectively bridge the gap between DAP principles and practical

implementation. Given these challenges, understanding early childhood teachers' perspectives on their ability to implement DAP could provide insight into the difficulties they experienced in making informed instructional decisions to support children's development and learning (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2021). Understanding what early childhood teachers believed they needed to improve their use of DAP could inform strategies to help them overcome these challenges and better support children's development and learning in the classroom.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what is needed to improve their use of DAP. There is a gap in practice regarding early childhood teachers' challenges using DAP in the classroom (Cade et al., 2022). Research on early childhood teachers using DAP has identified the need for future research on teacher experiences implementing DAP to support children's development and learning (Lim & Ridgley, 2021). Examining early childhood teachers' perspectives in the current study provided personal experiences and research findings on resources needed and strategies for implementing DAP by early childhood teachers and educational stakeholders using a constructivist paradigm. The study also included information on using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom, assisting early childhood teachers.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP in the classroom to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning?

RQ2: What do early childhood teachers believe they need to improve their use of DAP in the classroom?

Conceptual Framework

In this study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what is needed to improve their use of DAP. The conceptual framework that supported this study was the NAEYC (2020j) DAP framework. The DAP framework is grounded in evidence-based core considerations, principles of child development and learning, and what is known about effective teaching methods to support children from birth to age 8 years for optimal development and learning (NAEYC, 2020j).

DAP is the core element of the pedagogy in preparation programs for early childhood teachers (NAEYC, 2020m). The DAP framework is the foundation for teachers' quality practices in early care and education to provide effective instruction to children. The DAP framework includes guidance and recommendations for implementing DAP, establishing a starting point for exploring early childhood teachers' preparedness to use DAP in the classroom to foster children's development and learning.

The DAP framework includes the extensive knowledge and understanding early childhood teachers need in three areas (commonality, individuality, and context) situated within nine principles and six areas for effective practice (NAEYC, 2020l). NAEYC (2020k) provided DAP guidelines and strategies to prepare early childhood teachers to implement DAP in the six key areas to support children in reaching their fullest potential in the classroom environment. In relation to the DAP framework, early childhood teachers must know and understand the three core considerations that relate to every facet of early childhood teaching practice to support children's development and learning in the classroom. Early childhood teachers must also use their understanding of the DAP principles and the implications to inform their decision making in the six related areas of effective practice, to engage children in the learning process and promote developmental progress.

In the current study, the DAP framework was used to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on using DAP principles and the three core considerations to plan, teach, and assess children's development and learning. The DAP framework guided the construction and development of the study, including the research design, the formulation of research questions, the creation of the interview protocol, and the design of the thematic analysis plan. I discuss the DAP framework in more detail in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

I used a basic qualitative design for this study. A researcher uses qualitative methodology to understand how people mentally process what they experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A basic qualitative design is preferred in education to understand how

individuals construct reality as they interact within their social contexts and to uncover effective practices and processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A basic qualitative design was appropriate for the current study because I sought to explore the personal experiences of early childhood teachers and their challenges using DAP to support children's development and learning from birth to age 3 years. I also explored what early childhood teachers believed they needed to improve their use of DAP in the classroom. Exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives of their experiences using DAP in their learning environment was best achieved through a basic qualitative design.

Using in-depth qualitative interviews, researchers can gather rich, detailed information; ask open-ended questions; and follow up on newly discovered information (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I collected data using a semistructured interview protocol with open-ended questions. Interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Although Google Duo and phone calls were originally offered as options for interviews, all participants selected Zoom. Researchers offer Internet and phone interviews to provide flexibility for participants experiencing challenges or time constraints (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). All interviews in the current study were audio recorded for transcription purposes and data analysis accuracy.

The participants in the study were early childhood teachers who taught and cared for children from birth to 3-years old. I selected early childhood teachers who held a child development associate (CDA) certification or provisional credential and a minimum of two years of teaching experience. The CDA consists of a core set of standards that guide early childhood professionals in becoming qualified teachers of young children (Council

for Professional Recognition, 2021). Participants were recruited from the Walden University Participant Pool, early childhood teachers' social media groups, and snowball sampling. I sought to recruit 10–12 early childhood teachers who were currently working and responsible for teaching and caring for children from birth to age 3 years in childcare centers in the United States. The participants' responses were audio recorded for transcription and coding. Researchers use coding to assign meaning to the data they collect (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used the DAP framework (see NAEYC, 2020i) for open coding, axial coding, and identifying emerging themes to answer the research questions.

Definitions

The following definitions of key concepts are presented to assist the reader's understanding of the terms used throughout the study:

Child development associate (CDA): The CDA is the most widely recognized credential in early childhood education. The CDA is based on a set of core competency standards that guide early childhood professionals toward becoming qualified educators of children from birth to age 5 (Council for Professional Recognition, 2021).

Content knowledge: The information on a subject in the early childhood curriculum and the capability to effectively use appropriate instructional strategies (NAEYC, 2020n).

Developmentally appropriate practices (DAP): Approaches used by teachers using sound science on play and skill building to promote a fun and engaging learning that improves children's learning at various stages of growth (NAEYC, 2020d).

Developmentally appropriate practices position statement: The developmentally appropriate practices position statement is a framework of principles that helps to guide teachers in making intentional decisions about their practice. This framework serves as the evidence base for the appropriate educational practices, based on three major components: commonality, individuality, and context (NAEYC, 2020n).

Early childhood: The time in child development, starting with birth. Early childhood is considered to include all children from birth to age 8 years (NAEYC, 2020n).

Early childhood education: This is often known as using the developmental definition of birth through approximately age 8 years, regardless of system, funding, or operational procedures (NAEYC, 2020n).

Early childhood teacher: A trained person who cares for children from birth to age 8 years in all early childhood education settings, while meeting the qualifications required to have mastery of young children's knowledge levels and the ability to support development (NAEYC, 2020n). Although the definition includes the term "early childhood educator," in this study, the terms "early childhood educator" and "early childhood teacher" were used interchangeably.

Evidence-based practice (EBP): The practice of using available research, knowledgeable experts, scientific data, and feedback from students and those caring for them to find and provide services that are evaluated and accepted to derive healthy outcomes for children and their families (Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center [ECTA], 2020).

Assumptions

While exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges using DAP, I made several assumptions in this study. The first assumption was that early childhood teachers would provide honest, detailed responses to all questions about their challenges with using DAP. The second assumption was that participants would be familiar with and knowledgeable about DAP to answer the interview questions. The third assumption was that early childhood teachers use DAP daily to support children's development and learning. The final assumption was that using a basic qualitative design with interviews was the best approach to answer the research questions.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this research was the perspectives of early childhood teachers. I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives by asking them to share thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about challenges using DAP to support children's development and learning and what is needed to improve their use of DAP. I conducted semistructured interviews using Zoom to collect data. Although Google Duo and phone calls were originally offered as options for interviews, all participants selected the Zoom conference. I used only Zoom audio to record the interviews. The participants consisted of 10 early childhood teachers currently teaching children from birth to age 3 years held a CDA or provisional credential and a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience post-CDA in childcare centers in the United States. I selected participants from across the United States because DAP is recognized and used nationwide in childcare centers.

An early childhood teacher is an individual who is responsible for promoting the education, growth, and security of children from birth to age 8 years in all early childhood education settings while meeting the criteria of the profession and mastering its specialized knowledge, abilities, and standards (NAEYC, 2020n). I included only early childhood teachers who were CDA certified or had a provisional certificate and taught children from birth to age 3 years. I chose CDA or provisional credentialing and the specific age group of children because it is uncommon for teachers to teach children from birth to age 3 years with a 2-year degree or higher. I excluded early childhood teachers with a 2-year degree or higher because these teachers typically receive additional training in higher level courses. I excluded early childhood teachers with only a high school diploma due to a lack of additional coursework requirements in early childhood. I also excluded early childhood teachers with less than 2 years of teaching experience post-CDA because they were new to the profession and might have had limited exposure to using DAP and developing strategies. I excluded classroom aides, substitute teachers, or other individuals who were not classroom teachers. The findings from this study may include useful findings for early childhood teachers who want to overcome the challenges of using DAP. This study may also be used to enhance professional development for instructional material to support early childhood teachers with challenges using DAP in the classroom to foster children's development and learning.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this basic qualitative study. The first limitation was the small sample size of early childhood teacher participants. Over 800,000 teachers

have received a CDA since the program's inception (Council for Professional Recognition, 2021); with larger sample sizes, more results could have been generated, but the sample size in my study was sufficient to reach data saturation on early childhood teachers' views. Another limitation was the recruitment of early childhood teachers due to challenges and changes in the classroom caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Jalongo, 2021). The Walden University Participant Pool, early childhood teachers' social media groups, and snowball sampling were used to recruit teachers who were otherwise difficult to locate. Another limitation was early childhood teacher participants could withdraw from the study. To ensure sufficient participation, I recruited more teachers than the required sample size.

Additional limitations included early childhood teachers might not participate based on their education, expertise, or knowledge of DAP. Some teachers may have been reluctant to share their views on challenges using DAP in the classroom to support children's development and learning. To mitigate these recruitment challenges, I adhered to the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) principles, which were integrated into my informed consent practices, ensuring that participants were provided with information about the risks and benefits associated with their participation in the study.

Researcher bias was another potential limitation. Ravitch and Carl (2019) emphasized the importance of researchers continuously reevaluating their positionality and subjectivity. To minimize bias, I maintained a researcher journal to critically reflect on my thoughts and interpretations regarding early childhood teachers' perspectives on

the challenges of implementing DAP in the classroom. This practice helped ensure that my analysis remained objective and grounded in the participants' experiences.

Significance

There is a gap in the research on practice regarding early childhood teachers' challenges using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what is needed to improve their use of DAP. This study explored early childhood teachers' perspectives to better understand the challenges they experienced using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what is needed to improve their use of DAP. This study was intended to fill the gap in research on practice by providing insight into early childhood teachers' perspectives and identifying strategies to help teachers use DAP to support children's developmental domains in various content areas. Educational stakeholders may use the study findings to provide insight for professional development and training information to increase teachers' understanding of DAP principles, core considerations, and guidelines to use DAP to inform their practice and support children's development and learning. Educational stakeholders might also use the study results to examine current practices for implementing DAP to ensure that they meet the needs of all children to achieve optimal learning and development in the classroom.

Summary

The problem explored by this study was that many early childhood teachers experience challenges in using DAP to make informed decisions in the classroom to

support children's development and learning. This basic qualitative study focused on exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges they experienced using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what is needed to improve their use of DAP. The conceptual framework for this basic qualitative study was grounded in the DAP framework (NAEYC, 2021d), with audio-recorded semistructured interviews.

In Chapter 1, I discussed the background of the study, the research questions, definitions of key concepts, the conceptual framework, and the nature of the study. I provided the assumptions, the scope and delimitations, and limitations that might have impacted the study. In Chapter 2, I provide a review of the literature. Chapter 2 also includes the research process used to gather literature and provides an in-depth description of the conceptual framework.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I reviewed research relevant to early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges in using developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in the classroom. Many early childhood teachers have difficulty using DAP to make informed decisions to support children's development and learning in the classroom. Often, early childhood teachers struggle to distinguish between evidence-based practices and DAP, which leads to confusion when determining how to guide children's development and learning (Moore & Zweig, 2022).

DAP is a strength- and play-based approach that early childhood teachers use to support children's development and learning (NAEYC, 2020d). Using DAP has been challenging for early childhood teachers due to the pressures of accountability and achieving instructional goals to prepare children for advancement (Ansari et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2024). Early childhood teachers' lack of understanding of DAP, personal experiences, and teachers' beliefs have led them to provide below average learning environments for children (Baumgartner et al., 2020; Kintner-Duffy et al., 2021).

Given the challenges early childhood teachers have experienced implementing DAP, there continues to be a need to understand teachers' perspectives on their experiences implementing DAP to support children's development and learning (Johnston & Bull, 2022). Exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives was essential to improving their implementation of DAP and assisting them in overcoming challenges associated with using DAP in the classroom. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP to

make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what is needed to improve their use of DAP.

Chapter 2 presents the literature search strategy used for this study, a detailed overview of the conceptual framework, and a literature review of key concepts. I provide an in-depth exploration of the conceptual framework and key concepts central to the study. Additionally, I examine the history and significance of DAP, as well as the barriers to its effective implementation.

Literature Search Strategy

I used a combination of library databases and search engines to identify literature on early childhood teachers' perspectives of challenges in using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning. I accessed the Walden University Library and utilized databases, including Academic Search Complete, APA PsycINFO, Dissertations, Education Source, ERIC, SAGE Journals, Science Direct, SocIndex with full text, Taylor and Francis Teachers Reference Center, and the Thoreau Multi-Database Search. Additionally, I used search engines such as Bing, Google, and Google Scholar.

I used databases and search engines to identify peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and academic studies published within the past 5 years. I searched the databases using a combination of keywords and terms relevant to the study. While reviewing the sources, I evaluated their relevance to the research questions in the study. I also accessed dissertations through Walden University's ProQuest Dissertations database and examined their reference lists to locate additional scholarly literature. Search terms

used to identify the literature in this review included: *developmentally appropriate practices or DAP, DAP principles, DAP core tenets, early childhood education, preschool, teachers, educators, staff, instructor, toddler teacher, infant teacher, perspectives, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, challenges, difficulties, mixed age groups, COVID-19, guidelines, policy constraints, self-efficacy, effective classrooms, play-based learning, child-centered approaches, holistic development, CDA credential, teacher stress, teacher burnout, teaching strategies, instructional approaches, and special needs or disabilities.*

Conceptual Framework

DAP Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was the DAP framework (NAEYC, 2020j). The NAEYC DAP statement is a framework of three core considerations, nine principles, and six guidelines to support early childhood teachers with evidence-based research on the theoretical concepts of child development and learning, including effective educational strategies for teachers to foster children from birth to age 8 years in reaching their fullest potential (American Institutes for Research, 2021; NAEYC, 2020j). The goal of DAP in early childhood is to provide early childhood teachers with guidelines for decision making to support optimal learning and development based on knowledge of individual children, child development principles, and effective learning strategies. The framework was used to develop the study and plan the data analysis, to explore the challenges teachers experience in applying DAP in the classroom.

Core Considerations

The DAP framework includes the knowledge early childhood teachers need to implement DAP by applying commonality, individuality, and context to inform their decision making to support children's development and learning (NAEYC, 2020b). These three considerations are the foundation for the NAEYC (2020b) DAP framework.

According to Bredekamp and Willer (2021a), early childhood teachers using DAP must understand (a) commonality in how children develop and learn, (b) individuality in each child's characteristics and life experiences, and (c) the context in which children develop and learn. Although the core considerations are discussed and noted as separate concepts, they are intrinsically linked (NAEYC, 2020b). Bredekamp and Willer (2021b) wrote that making informed decisions about practice in context requires early childhood teachers to use all three considerations simultaneously.

Commonality requires an early childhood teacher to apply current research to understand the processes of how all children develop and learn (NAEYC, 2020b). Using commonality, an early childhood teacher must understand how children's development and learning are influenced by their environment, language, culture, and history (NAEYC, 2020b). Albritton et al. (2021) noted that early childhood teachers need a comprehensive understanding of child development in multiple contexts to understand DAP. According to Brown et al. (2019), a deep understanding of child development helps teachers recognize each child's different learning abilities and developmental needs to plan appropriate instruction, activities, materials, strategies, and approaches to encourage children to become active agents in their learning.

Individuality refers to a child's traits and experiences within their environment and community, which inform methods to foster children's development and learning (NAEYC, 2020b). Hegde and Hewett (2021) argued that understanding these concepts helps teachers set expectations for children's individual needs and as a group. Blewitt et al. (2021) found that teachers' abilities to provide individualized attention, particularly for children with developmental delays and behavioral challenges, are often affected by a lack of time, preventing them from effectively meeting children's individual needs. Baumgartner et al. (2020) stressed that curriculum, assessment, and instruction decisions should be informed by the child, community, and culture to support developmentally appropriate learning. Bredekamp and Willer (2021a) noted that through observations and assessments, teachers can better understand each child's progression of development and learning to make appropriate modifications and accommodations to provide individualized learning to support children. Similarly, Lindner and Schwab (2020) argued that an individualized approach is essential in inclusive education. Lindner and Schwab emphasized that teachers must differentiate instruction according to each child's unique needs, aligning with the individuality component of the DAP framework. Furthermore, Lindner and Schwab highlighted that professional collaboration is key to improving teachers' ability to effectively meet the diverse needs of all children.

Context refers to the implications of how individual experiences, culture, values, and traditions within the immediate family and other essential caregivers impact children's development and learning (NAEYC, 2020b). NAEYC (2020b) described culture in terms of race or ethnicity, gender, class, ability, family structure, and economic

status that affect the development of children. Albritton et al. (2021) noted that early childhood teachers' understanding of DAP is critical to minimizing racial prejudices and misconceptions of developmentally appropriate behaviors. D'Agostino and Douglas (2021) recommended that early childhood teachers become proficient in using DAP to assess children with differences in development. D'Agostino and Douglas suggested that early childhood teachers use DAP to guide their methods to support each child and to help them acquire the necessary skills to meet the needs of all children. Durham et al. (2019) demonstrated how early childhood teachers used DAP strategies to communicate successfully, teach dual language learners (DLLs), and build relationships with DLL children and their families.

Principles of DAP

The foundational principles of DAP emphasize holistic child development across emotional, cognitive, social, and physical domains (NAEYC, 2020l). These principles highlight the importance of balancing developmental support across all areas to foster optimal growth in young children. As Laforett et al. (2023) emphasized, early learning skills are interconnected across cognitive, linguistic, physical, and social-emotional domains, supporting the need for a whole-child approach. This interconnectedness aligns with DAP's core belief that each developmental domain is equally important and mutually supportive. The latest version of DAP has been revised from 12 principles to nine (NAEYC, 2020e). The nine principles are the foundation for the NAEYC's (2020l) guidelines and recommendations for DAP practice and depict the most suitable situations for children to learn (Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez, 2021). NAEYC DAP principles

include that a child's biological characteristics and environment influence their development and learning, that each domain is essential, and that they overlap to support learning across competencies (NAEYC, 2020l). Durham et al. (2019) noted that early childhood teachers used DAP to understand the background of DLLs', support child-initiated activities, and create a progression in children's engagement and learning.

As part of the DAP principles, early childhood teachers are encouraged to recognize play as an essential tool for teaching young children (NAEYC, 2020k). Nilsson et al. (2018) suggested that children learn most effectively when playing and exploring in challenging and engaging indoor and outdoor activities. Lee et al. (2023) and Fox et al. (2025) noted that active play supports children's learning and development throughout the domains. However, Alatalo and Westlund (2021) and Olalowo and Babalola (2024) indicated that teachers often struggle to allocate equal attention to these domains, particularly when addressing contemporary challenges in early childhood education. This challenge is compounded by disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly affected socioemotional development. DAP principles emphasize that there is a general pattern of development and learning for all children, and how and at what rate children learn varies and is influenced by experiences, environment, and characteristics (NAEYC, 2020l). Wardle (2021) highlighted that exposing children to environments that connect to their unique personalities, cognitive development, and learning styles increased their opportunities for success.

The DAP principles state that learning begins for children from birth and develops through relationships, the environment, and interactions (NAEYC, 2020l). Wardle (2021)

argued that children do not begin learning from curriculum but that learning begins at birth. The DAP principles also state that a teacher supports children's progression in learning by establishing safety, nurturing children's identity, and providing various opportunities for choices (NAEYC, 2020). Baumgartner et al. (2020) noted that DAP teacher education is an understanding of child development, assessing children, children's uniqueness, and the effect of community and cultural identity to inform their approach to practice. According to Kinsner (2022), early childhood teachers use DAP to plan their learning environment to support infants and toddlers in making choices that foster their learning and developmental goals.

DAP principles also state that children should have opportunities to develop skills and time to improve their learning in academic disciplines (NAEYC, 2020). Kinsner (2022) noted that early childhood teachers use DAP to understand how and when to provide children with the appropriate support to master skills and challenging tasks to encourage emerging abilities. Cade et al. (2022) applied DAP principles to examine the perceptions and beliefs of early childhood, toddler, and preschool teachers regarding their use of DAP in the classroom to determine the extent to which classroom practices were developmentally appropriate. Cade et al. found that when early childhood teachers understand DAP and how to implement DAP, children are more likely to have a multitude of planned activities based on their interests, assessments, and observations for scaffolding and enhancing teaching in content areas and domains.

The last DAP principle states that early childhood teachers must apply developmentally appropriate methods when using technology and media-supportive

devices to enhance children's development and learning (NAEYC, 2020k). Mourlam et al. (2019) demonstrated how digital technology and media (DTM) were used with preschoolers to discover that children could complete some tasks without support and suggested that child-appropriate DTM is essential for children. According to Mourlam et al., teachers must understand children's abilities in order to offer developmentally appropriate DTM learning opportunities.

Creating an Inclusive and Equitable Learning Community

Early childhood educators create an inclusive and equitable community of learners by helping children understand themselves, others, humanity, and ways to build healthy relationships by recognizing people's strengths regardless of their abilities (NAEYC, 2020c). Albritton et al. (2021) argued that a strength-based approach would help early childhood teachers focus on fostering Black boys' strengths, interests, and needs to support their academic, social, and emotional development. Within this community, early childhood teachers use various approaches to provide opportunities for children to engage, problem solve, and master skills (NAEYC, 2020c). Early childhood teachers also help children develop self-regulation skills and learn how to process challenging situations to support positive behaviors (Iruka, 2024; NAEYC, 2020c). Schaack et al. (2022) noted that managing challenging behaviors in the classroom is a significant aspect of creating an equitable community of learners; teachers struggle with high-needs children, which adds to their stress and workload. This influences their overall job satisfaction and retention, highlighting the importance of supportive environments

and resources to manage these behaviors effectively, and ensure all children can thrive in a community that values equity and inclusion.

Early childhood teachers also support children in the community by ensuring they develop positive relationships in a safe and secure environment (NAEYC, 2020c). Gardner-Neblett et al. (2021) emphasized that early childhood teachers need to provide materials that positively reflect the diversity of families, cultures, races, and languages, allowing children to develop a sense of belonging in relationships and learn about themselves and others. Early childhood teachers also ensure the classroom environment is structured to promote children's learning through play (NAEYC, 2020c). According to Cade et al. (2022), early childhood teachers who understood DAP created defined learning spaces to accommodate children with varied abilities and provided adequate materials and space to foster creativity, play, and choices. Early childhood teachers also provided early interventions to support children and their families (Iruka, 2024; NAEYC, 2020c).

Building Collaborative Partnerships With Families and Communities

Early childhood teachers build collaborative partnerships with families by encouraging participation in their child's classroom and program while using the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct to mitigate misunderstandings (NAEYC, 2020j). Through DAP, teachers foster meaningful connections with families, children, and the broader community (NAEYC, 2020j). Parlakian (2024) emphasized that early childhood teachers partner with families to support accommodations, transitions, and extended learning at home, thereby reinforcing children's developmental goals. Blewitt et al.

(2021) found that teachers often experienced difficulties in establishing strong family partnerships, which could hinder the comprehensive support needed for children's development. Additionally, early childhood teachers must understand how to identify and utilize community resources to support both children's and families' needs (NAEYC, 2020j).

Observing, Documenting, and Evaluating Children's Development and Learning

Observations, documentation, and assessment tools are essential for early childhood teachers' understanding of how best to support children's development and learning. As Parlakian (2024) emphasized, these practices are foundational in infant and toddler classrooms, where they serve as primary tools for assessing developmental progress. According to Parlakian, these observations often occurred organically during daily routines, such as play and mealtimes, thereby providing practical, ongoing insights into each child's unique developmental needs. Chadwell et al. (2020) highlighted that teachers rely on various methods such as observations, surveys, growth measures, and outcome assessments to monitor and evaluate children's progress. The data collected from children is used by early childhood teachers to share with families and to set goals for children to attain developmental milestones (NAEYC, 2020f).

Becker et al. (2023) highlighted observation-based assessments in Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and Waldorf approaches as developmentally appropriate alternatives that prioritize engagement over standardized measures. These approaches emphasize assessing children's learning through artifacts, structured activities, and interactive storytelling, aligning with NAEYC's recommendations. Cade et al. (2022) demonstrated

how early childhood teachers could use observations and appropriate assessments to understand children's interests and prepare a rich learning environment based on children's abilities. Similarly, Meloy et al. (2019) argued that early childhood teachers' observation of children's behavior and analysis of the meaning within the child's social and cultural context is necessary to create individual plans, especially for challenging student behaviors. However, Blewitt et al. (2021) found that the time required to complete documentation for accessing additional support can be substantial, potentially reducing the time available for direct interaction and support from the teacher.

Early childhood teachers use the data to assess and improve their teaching methods, as well as provide early interventions for children (Calo, 2022; NAEYC, 2020f). Meloy et al. (2019) noted that early childhood teachers must understand the influence of the language of DLLs on development and skills and utilize family information, and their culture, to capture all aspects of DLLs' development and learning. Early childhood teachers who use observations, assessments, and documentation tools need to consider developmental, cultural, and linguistic appropriateness to accurately assess children's learning (Head Start ECLKC, n.d.). Olalowo and Babalola (2024) emphasized the importance of adaptable assessment strategies, especially in contexts that reveal developmental differences between rural and urban children, supporting the need for flexible and responsive approaches in diverse settings.

With the increasing use of digital documentation platforms, Stratigos and Fenech (2021) and White et al. (2021) explored how these tools in early childhood education affected early childhood teachers' practices. Both studies highlighted the tension between

the benefits of digital documentation for parental communication and the added time limits on teachers, which conflicted with their ability to create unique learning experiences for each child. They also found that the time-consuming processes of editing, rewriting, and sometimes duplicating paper-based records further increased the workload on teachers. Nordin et al. (2021) identified similar challenges in their study of infant-toddler classrooms, highlighting issues such as lack of teacher competence, insufficient parental cooperation, and time constraints. These barriers further impeded the effective use of assessment tools and meeting children's individual learning needs. Despite these challenges, early childhood teachers follow a systematic approach: they observe children, plan how to utilize the data for teaching (Kinsner, 2022), and evaluate the effectiveness of children's experiences to support their learning (NAEYC, 2020f).

Teaching Practices to Enhance Individual Development and Learning

Early childhood teachers enhance children's development and learning by creating appropriate environments that support children's cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and linguistic domains across subject areas (NAEYC, 2020h). Meloy et al. (2019) noted that early childhood teachers applied their knowledge of child development, pedagogical skills, and comprehensive curriculum to support children's learning and understanding. Additionally, early childhood teachers use children's assessments, age, development, individuality, and family social and cultural contexts to intentionally plan and prepare the learning environment (NAEYC, 2020h).

Blewitt et al. (2021) found that high teacher-to-child ratios negatively affected teachers' abilities to provide individualized attention and support, which could hinder the

effective improvement of children's development and learning. Mahfouz et al. (2024) also identified that early childhood teachers viewed limited time as a major challenge, affecting their ability to integrate social and emotional learning into daily and weekly routines to effectively support children's social and emotional development. This highlights the significant effect time constraints have on teaching and the ability to meet children's developmental needs.

Early childhood teachers also improve children's development and learning by using children's interests and a teacher-facilitated approach to support children's individual learning, needs, and goals (NAEYC, 2020h). Meloy et al. (2019) stated that early childhood teachers who intentionally planned and used DAP for children to master skills used various strategies and approaches to teaching and recognized children's emerging skills, interests, and play as opportunities to foster their development and learning.

Curriculum Planning for Meaningful Learning

Early childhood teachers must understand how to use a developmentally appropriate curriculum to scaffold children's learning and achieve their targeted goals. In a curriculum development that promotes developmentally appropriate practices, early childhood teachers intentionally plan for children, focusing on appropriateness, culture, academics, and development (NAEYC, 2020g). Mourlam et al. (2019) argued that DTM must be combined creatively with DAP in the curriculum to provide children with effective technology-integrated learning experiences to support children's learning across domains.

In a DAP curriculum, the primary instructional method is play, with the child as the central focus; early childhood teachers use play and integrate strategies to help children build upon concepts and master skills (NAEYC, 2020g). Moore (2019) noted that early childhood teachers who appropriately responded to culture within the context of play could foster children's holistic development, including skills related to making friends, working together, and problem solving. Meloy et al. (2019) wrote that activities in the learning environment varied in complexity and ability levels to allow early childhood teachers to scaffold children's different learning styles and skills. Durham et al. (2019) noted that early childhood teachers used children's work, conversations, and interests to adjust their teaching methods, support children's individuality, and provide rich, meaningful learning experiences.

Schaack et al. (2022) found that one of the significant challenges teachers experienced was the high expectations surrounding curricular planning and the extensive paperwork requirements. Schaack et al. noted that teachers often lacked dedicated planning time, making it difficult to focus on daily activities with children. The curriculum should evolve to reflect the children's identities and interests, incorporating a collaboration of assessment types, state learning standards, and targeted learning goals across domains and subject areas to increase learning (NAEYC, 2020g).

Demonstrating Professionalism Through Reflection and Practice

NAEYC (2020e) described an early childhood teacher demonstrating professionalism as adhering to Standard 6 of the Professional Standards and Competencies guidelines. An early childhood teacher is an advocate for children and

families, a facilitator of NAEYC ethics and conduct, a promoter of effective communication strategies with families and other professionals, a lifelong learner, an active contributor to the field, and a self-examiner of decision making based on evidence-based research and professional standards. According to NAEYC (2020m), early childhood teachers should evaluate their daily approaches to practices and activities with children within broader contexts and adjust their strategies to provide better learning experiences for children. Durham et al. (2019) emphasized that teacher self-awareness helps break personal barriers to offer a variety of teaching approaches to support children in meeting their milestones.

However, Blewitt et al. (2021) found that educators often experienced difficulties related to their capability, confidence, and training, which could hinder their ability to effectively support children's learning and development. Iruka et al. (2024) noted that early childhood teachers needed accessible resources for families to advocate for their children's needs. Early childhood teachers must also demonstrate fundamental knowledge, competencies, principles, and dispositions to promote children's development and learning (LaForett et al., 2023; NAEYC, 2020m).

Jung et al. (2021) found that teachers who entered infant and toddler group care settings, despite being well-prepared for primary-grade classrooms, often struggled due to the specific developmental needs of younger children. Over time, through reflection and practice, they gained greater skills and insights in applying DAP. This progression highlights the importance of professional development, self-examination, and adaptability in demonstrating professionalism as early childhood teachers, a perspective also stressed

by Parlakian (2024), who emphasized the value of reflective practices in supporting teachers' growth and improving their ability to meet the diverse needs of young children.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

Historical Review of DAP

In the 1980s, education policymakers were concerned about the quality of education due to the poor performance of students in every subject area (Ravitch, 1990), which led to K-12 pushdown curriculum, filtering the elementary curriculum down into pre-k (Sanders & Farago, 2018). Teachers used inappropriate early-care practices, resulting in teacher-imposed academic instruction in the United States (Coppole & Bredekamp, 2009; Moore & Zweig, 2022). In 1987 NAEYC, the largest professional organization in the field of education, created the DAP position statement, based on over 10 years of research and practice in early care and education (Bredekamp, 1987; Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez, 2021). The initial NAEYC DAP position statement advised against the pressures on teachers to meet academic goals for children (Sanders & Farago, 2018) and cautioned against inappropriate teaching practices (NAEYC, 2020a), as well as included examples of appropriate and improper methods to improve teaching and the learning process to meet children's individual abilities (Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez, 2021). The focus was on two core considerations, commonality and individuality. The NAEYC DAP position statement also introduced the term "developmentally appropriate," which led to mixed perceptions of the concept's meaning and application across different contexts (NAEYC, 2020a).

In 1997, a revised second edition of the NAEYC DAP position statement was published, incorporating research on brain development, early learning, meeting children's individual needs, and strategies for identifying and accommodating children with disabilities (Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez, 2021). The second edition added culture as a third core consideration, highlighting the value and influence of diversity, culture, language, and the family environment on children's development and learning (Sanders & Farago, 2018). The second edition emphasized the importance of early childhood teachers applying knowledge of children's culture and social context to inform their decision making and approach to practice (NAEYC, 2020b).

In 2009, the third edition of the NAEYC DAP position statement was published. The third edition revisited the core considerations of commonality and culture with an emphasis on responsiveness to all children's needs (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The third edition also included best practices in the assessment of instructional practice (Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez, 2021). The 1997 and 2009 DAP position statements were similar including three core considerations, they emphasized the importance of adapting practices to better meet the evolving needs of children and families (Bredekamp & Willer, 2021a).

The fourth edition, the latest version of the DAP position statement published in 2020, included changes in the implications of the three core considerations commonality, individuality, and culture (Bredekamp & Willer, 2021a). In this edition, Bredekamp and Willer noted the term commonality was redefined to emphasize child development as a development that occurs within social, cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts. The

fourth edition also expanded the concept of commonality to include the teacher, child, family, community, program, marginalized populations, and universal norms that influence children's development. According to Bredekamp and Willer, this revision marked a shift from the second and third editions of the DAP position statement, which focused primarily on child development knowledge.

The core consideration of individuality continued to require early childhood teachers to build relationships with children and create lessons based on observations, assessments, and interactions (Bredekamp & Willer, 2021a; Parlakian, 2024). To meet the individual needs of each child, early childhood teachers must also provide accommodations and resources (Bredekamp & Willer, 2021a). In the third core consideration, context, which promotes intentions and decision-making, the greatest development and improvement occurred. As Bredekamp and Willer emphasized, early childhood teachers must consider the social and cultural context of their children and the larger context of the program. Bredekamp and Willer stated early childhood teachers must also consider and understand internal and external factors that influence a child's development and learning, as well as their biases and stereotypes.

The revision process of the DAP position statement emphasized the importance of reflecting on past practices to guide future directions, drawing on the Sankofa philosophy, which encourages revisiting past insights to move forward (Wright et al., 2024). The 2020, fourth edition incorporated extensive research on cultural contexts and equitable practices, urging educators to consider the diverse needs of children and families (NAEYC, 2020). The feedback-driven revision process demonstrated how the

framework evolved in response to research and critiques, ensuring its relevance to changing educational contexts. The ongoing reflection deepened the understanding of how teachers might best support children's learning in diverse cultural and social environments (Wright et al., 2024).

Significance of Successful Use of DAP

The successful use of DAP by early childhood teachers promotes high quality learning and care for young children. Essa and Burnham (2019) found that early childhood teachers' education and ability to use DAP to interact, build relationships with children, and provide emotional support and intentional teaching are directly associated with children's success in learning. For example, Wang et al. (2021) completed a study of an early preschool teacher and three preschoolers to understand how early childhood teachers support children's Computational Thinking (CT) learning in developmentally appropriate ways using a programmable toy. Wang et al. discovered that early childhood teachers used different aspects of the DAP framework. As Wang et al. noted the teachers employed DAP focusing on a multitude of scaffolding strategies and modeling, communication, group collaboration, and instruction for children to achieve problem-solving, goals, and effective positive learning of CT.

Lee et al. (2023) found that early childhood teachers' successful implementation of DAP principal play can support children's positive behavior, attention, self-concept, self-regulation, and long-term health outcomes. For example, Hegde and Hewett (2021) conducted research to examine 85 early childhood teachers' perceptions of online teaching modules on using DAP for guiding infants, toddlers, and preschoolers'

behaviors. Hedge and Hewitt found that teachers used DAP to successfully learn strategies and techniques to set up the classroom environment. Hedge and Hewitt also found that the teachers used their understanding of DAP to implement visual aids to support children with disabilities, provide ESL language support, facilitate learning, and promote prosocial behavior.

Early childhood teachers' successful use of DAP concepts can help them examine their instruction and environment to provide rich, meaningful learning environments for all children. For example, Lim and Ridgley (2021) conducted a study of 13 early childhood teachers and 30 toddlers provided opportunities for teachers to engage in specific practices, reflect, and plan to improve toddlers' engagement during developmentally appropriate free play in the classroom. Lim and Ridgley's found that early childhood teachers who used DAP concepts reflected on their observations and identified areas of practice for improvement. Lim and Ridgley also noted that early childhood teachers adjusted their instruction, room environment, materials, and scaffolding to meet children's interests and needs, increasing their engagement in free play.

Factors That Inhibit Using DAP

Early childhood teachers are often met with factors that limit their use of DAP in the classroom. A review of the literature identified several factors that hindered early childhood teachers' success in implementing DAP in the classroom. These inhibiting factors included—but were not limited to—education reform, curriculum constraints, teacher training, and behavioral challenges (Hegde & Hewett, 2021; Kirby et al. 2022;

Lee & Hickmann, 2022; Moore & Zweig, 2022). In the United States, the shift toward academic achievement, standardized testing, and increased accountability contributed to education reform (Cade et al., 2022; Kessler & Castner, 2024), leading to the establishment of the Common Core Standards (CCS; Council of Chief State School Officers, n.d.). The CCS transformed early childhood environments by shifting the focus from teachers using instructional practices that supported holistic development to teaching approaches that emphasized children acquiring knowledge rather than developing skills (Litkowski et al., 2020). For example, with the introduction of K-12 push-down curricula and high-stakes assessments, many early childhood educators reported feeling pressured to increase teacher-directed instruction, often relying on DIP and rigid learning goals that negatively affected young children's learning (Moore & Zweig, 2022).

Rigid curriculum structures further restricted the implementation of DAP. Administrative policies often enforced inflexible instructional frameworks that limited teachers' autonomy, making it difficult to tailor learning experiences to diverse developmental needs (Alatalo & Westlund, 2021; Kirby et al., 2022; Olalowo & Babalola, 2024). Alatalo and Westlund (2021) emphasized that rigid curricula hindered differentiation, while Olalowo and Babalola (2024) noted that inflexible structures prevented the use of individualized strategies essential for optimal child development. Similarly, Kirby et al. (2022) found that restrictive curricular expectations diminished opportunities for play-based learning and individualized instruction—both core tenets of DAP.

Beyond restricting instructional choices, rigid curricula have reflected broader systemic challenges in early childhood education. Kessler and Castner (2024) argued that prescriptive curriculum models prioritize standardization over adaptability, limiting teachers' ability to make context-specific decisions. Kessler and Castner also emphasized the political dimensions of curriculum development, noting that top-down mandates often undermine teachers' professional agency and weaken their ability to design responsive learning experiences. UNICEF (2018) further noted that many curricula have failed to provide practical strategies for adapting instruction in alignment with DAP principles to meet children's needs. Similarly, some early childhood teachers must adhere to a strict curriculum of prepackaged materials, instruction, and assessments, often disregarding the unique needs of their classroom contexts (Lee & Hickmann, 2022). Brown et al. (2024) found that early childhood teachers experienced difficulties aligning their teaching practices with standardized reforms, which restricted their ability to apply DAP effectively. These rigid curricula have limited teaching approaches and contributed to the establishment of inappropriate learning and development expectations for young children, hindering teachers' ability to modify their instructional methods to address the individual developmental needs of children. Yildirim (2021) found that time constraints further hindered the implementation of DAP, particularly in environments shaped by standardized expectations and rigid schedules.

Another significant barrier was the lack of relevant training and professional development to implement DAP in the classroom. Research indicated that many teachers often lacked sufficient training in content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge

(Dunekacke & Barenthien, 2021; Yildirim, 2021) and also experienced challenges in accessing materials and collaborating with colleagues to implement and strategize DAP principles across different classroom settings (Hegde & Hewett, 2021). Eshelman et al. (2023) further noted that many early childhood teachers lacked access to targeted professional development focused on adapting DAP principles to diverse classroom contexts, leaving them feeling unprepared to adjust instructional methods to meet children's developmental needs. Similarly, Yang (2024) found that insufficient training focused on behavior management within a DAP framework limited teachers' ability to balance individualized support with whole-group instruction, further complicating DAP implementation. This issue was further exacerbated by novice teachers, who often struggled to make informed decisions due to a lack of authentic opportunities to apply DAP strategies (Lee & Hickmann, 2022). Piasta et al. (2022) found that limited preparation in play-based and inquiry-driven instructional strategies resulted in uncertainty about effectively integrating DAP principles. Similarly, Yildirim (2021) noted that many preschool teachers experienced difficulties in lesson planning due to gaps in content knowledge, a lack of resources, and time constraints, particularly when incorporating STEM concepts through playful exploration and inquiry-based learning.

A major barrier to implementing DAP was the diverse range of developmental and behavioral needs within the classroom, which further complicated teachers' ability to apply DAP principles. Yang et al. (2022) emphasized that when classrooms included children with varying developmental and behavioral needs, teachers often struggled to balance individualized support with whole-group instruction. Research had demonstrated

that disruptive behaviors, such as hyperactivity and restlessness, had interrupted instructional flow and had limited engagement for learning (Doubet et al., 2024; Williford & Vitiello, 2020; Yoder & Williford, 2019). Partee et al. (2020) found that when a significant proportion of children exhibited disruptive behaviors (e.g., above the 90th percentile), it negatively affected the quality of teacher-child interactions, making it more difficult to maintain a productive learning environment. O’Grady and Ostrosky (2024) further noted that hyperactive behaviors considerably strained teacher-child and peer interactions, requiring additional time and effort to manage both individual and group dynamics, which were essential for fostering a collaborative and supportive classroom environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges. Studies indicated that the pandemic disrupted social routines and intensified behavioral challenges, making it more difficult for teachers to implement DAP effectively (Egan, 2021; Swindle, 2024; Watts, 2023). When children’s sensory or behavioral needs remained unmet, the disruption escalated, affecting the overall classroom environment and reducing the effectiveness of teacher-child interactions (Alhassan et al., 2021; Tamblyn et al., 2023). Jamil et al. (2022) noted that unaddressed sensory needs and behavioral challenges led to heightened emotional outbursts, further, complicating behavior management. Teachers who experienced aggressive behaviors needed to intervene promptly to prevent escalation and classroom disruption, ensuring a safe and positive learning environment for all children (Bulotsky Shearer et al., 2020; Savina, 2021).

Cade et al. (2022) found that unrelated qualifications in early childhood education (ECE) hindered early childhood teachers' use of DAP core tenets and principles to support children's development. Henry et al. (2023) emphasized that job strain, whether physical or psychological, further impeded teachers' ability to engage in high-quality, developmentally appropriate interactions with children. However, adequate support from supervisors and co-workers was found to alleviate job strain, which contributed to improved classroom quality and the effective application of DAP principles. By identifying and understanding the factors that inhibited the use of DAP, teachers were able to reflect on their current practices to determine whether any barriers were hindering the use of DAP in early childhood learning environments.

Self-Efficacy and Autonomy in Teaching

Another factor that can inhibit early childhood teachers' ability to implement DAP effectively is self-efficacy and autonomy. Understanding self-efficacy is important for comprehending early childhood teacher motivation and teaching effectiveness in using DAP and its principles to support children's learning in the classroom. Self-efficacy theory, the belief in one's ability to plan and implement actions needed to effectively complete a specific teaching task influences an individual's motivation and behaviors (Bandura, 1977) and also affects the effort they invest in teaching activities (Torres et al., 2023). Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) extended Bandura's theory to the educational context, and defined teacher self-efficacy as teachers' belief in their capability to effectively plan, organize, and follow through with activities required to attain educational goals. Ata-Akturk and Sevimli-Celik (2023) found that teachers often

struggled to incorporate creative and flexible strategies in structured environments, which limited their ability to adapt teaching approaches to meet children's individual needs. This rigidity presented a challenge to teacher autonomy, particularly when addressing behavioral differences. Such limitations undermined teachers' self-efficacy and made effective DAP implementation more difficult.

Barni et al. (2019) found that personal values and motivations play a key role in shaping teachers' self-efficacy. Their research indicated that these intrinsic factors subsequently influence teachers' classroom behavior and their teaching effectiveness. Similarly, Calkins et al. (2024) reported that self-efficacy in teaching domains such as classroom management, pedagogy, student engagement, and multicultural context was positively correlated with teacher motivation. Their significant regression models for these areas (all with $p < .001$) suggested that self-efficacy was both consistently measurable and effective. These findings reinforced the idea that teacher self-efficacy is a central factor in implementing effective teaching practices.

Bandura (1990) emphasized that self-efficacy beliefs influenced behavior and were part of a multifaceted causal structure that included environmental factors, personal characteristics, and social interactions. Gale et al. (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study to explore the origins of self-efficacy and its relationship to teaching experience. Their results indicated that self-efficacy was shaped by factors such as mastery experiences, social persuasion, and physiological conditions. This perspective emphasized the complex nature of self-efficacy and the need to consider multiple influences on teaching effectiveness and child outcomes. The Supporting Physical

Activity in the Childcare Environment (SPACE) study further supported this perspective. The study found that early childhood educators who received physical activity training demonstrated increased self-efficacy to engage preschoolers in daily physical activity and facilitate indoor movement activities when outdoor play was not feasible, compared to those who did not receive training (Bruijns et al., 2021).

Researchers have emphasized that teacher training and preparation are critical for developing self-efficacy, particularly in early childhood education. Gilken et al. (2023) found that early childhood education programs often lacked dedicated coursework and hands-on fieldwork opportunities tailored to infant and toddler education, leaving teachers underprepared to implement DAP effectively in infant and toddler programs. Similarly, Martínez-Bello et al. (2023) explored how teachers and student teachers perceived their ability to incorporate movement into the curriculum. Despite recognizing the importance of physical activity, teachers reported limited knowledge of implementation strategies, suggesting that inadequate training hindered confidence and effectiveness in applying developmentally appropriate methods. These findings highlighted the importance of targeted professional development in building teachers' self-efficacy and improving instructional competence to support young children's development and learning. Although NAEYC emphasizes DAP and early childhood education, its primary publications do not specifically cover teacher self-efficacy in its DAP guidelines (NAEYC, 2020k). According to NAEYC (2020i), DAP refers to methods educators use to support instruction and foster children's development and

learning. These practices help teachers develop the confidence and skills needed to support children's growth, thereby contributing to improved self-efficacy.

An important factor affecting self-efficacy in teaching is feedback, which plays a fundamental role in shaping early childhood teachers' perceptions of their effectiveness and ability to support children's learning. Bray-Clark and Bates (2003) argued that consistent, constructive feedback from supervisors or mentors was essential for building teacher efficacy and improving work engagement (Lipscomb et al., 2022). Raymond (2023) emphasized the effect of social sources such as colleagues and educational leaders on self-efficacy, noting that teachers who received consistent evaluative and supportive feedback felt more confident in using DAP. This feedback strengthened teachers' self-perceptions and encouraged a collaborative environment, which supported autonomy. Through ongoing, constructive feedback, teachers were better equipped to navigate complex classroom dynamics and adapt their practices to meet the diverse needs of young children.

Ryan and Deci (2020) stated that autonomy was a core element of self-determination theory and involved the feeling of being in control of one's actions and decisions, which is crucial for fostering intrinsic motivation and professional well-being. Ryan and Deci also acknowledged that implementing autonomy-supportive teaching practices could be challenging due to constraints such as limited time, scarce resources, and rigid curricula. Moreover, administrative policies and leadership styles could hinder autonomy and lead to controlling, less fulfilling teaching approaches. When early childhood teachers experienced environmental pressures that limited their autonomy, they

were more likely to engage in teacher directed behaviors and interact less positively with children.

According to NAEYC (2020i), DAP supports autonomy by allowing early childhood teachers to adapt their teaching strategies, classroom management, and curriculum to better meet the unique needs of children. Schwarz-Franco (2022) conducted research on the dual nature of freedom for educators, drawing on the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, who proposed that human beings inherently possess freedom and must navigate their lives with personal autonomy. Schwarz-Franco's study incorporated Joseph Schwab's views on the practical nature of teaching, which emphasized that teachers make countless choices daily, necessitating autonomy for effective instruction. These findings supported the broader argument for fostering teacher autonomy in early childhood education, suggesting that greater autonomy helps early childhood teachers to better meet student needs, thereby improving teaching effectiveness and job satisfaction.

Teachers' Perspectives

Teachers' perspectives include their views, beliefs, attitudes, skills, intelligence, pedagogical knowledge, and both internal and external factors (Catalano et al., 2022; Zilka et al., 2022). According to Türkoglu (2019), teachers' perspectives reflect their thoughts about their profession, their students, and self-perception. Teachers' experiences and background knowledge influence both their perspectives and teaching practices (Kintner-Duffy et al., 2021). Understanding teachers' perspectives is important for

identifying the reasoning behind early childhood teachers' decision making and may provide insight into their teaching practices (Johnston & Bull, 2022).

Teachers' perspectives are essential for creating effective learning environments that support children's optimal development and learning in the classroom (Nguyen et al., 2020). Gerde et al. (2019) emphasized that teachers' perspectives are closely connected to their approaches to teaching and learning, which inform their practices, processes, methods, and strategies in the classroom. Gaining insight into teachers' perspectives can benefit policymakers, specialists (Davis & Dunn, 2019), other teachers, and children, ultimately improving children's skills (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2021). Understanding teachers' perspectives is essential, as they are grounded in real classroom experiences and provide valuable insights into the study problem.

Summary and Conclusions

This literature review addressed the challenges early childhood teachers experienced implementing DAP in the classroom. Previous research highlighted that many early childhood teachers struggled to make informed decisions in the classroom to support children's development and learning from birth to 3 years old due to the absence of DAP. Contributing factors included teachers' pedagogical knowledge, their exposure to DAP, and their perspectives on its application. As a result, some teachers resorted to DIP, which can hinder children's progression of development. Additionally, the historical review showed how the gap in using DAP began and continues to be an issue in early childhood education. The push-down curriculum from K-12 education further exacerbates this problem, with increased academic expectations at younger ages creating

additional challenges for teachers, specialists, and policymakers (Cade et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2024).

The challenges that early childhood teachers associated with using DAP may be addressed by understanding their perspectives on its implementation, particularly as these perspectives reflect lived experience in supporting children's development and learning. However, this literature review revealed that little qualitative research has examined these challenges from the viewpoint of teachers working with children from birth to 3-years-old. There is also a gap in qualitative research exploring effective strategies for implementing DAP, particularly from the perspective of early childhood teachers who support the development of birth to 3-year-old children. The findings from this study may be used to provide insights into how teachers can overcome these challenges and more effectively implement DAP. Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of the research methods, including a basic qualitative research design and interviews with early childhood teachers who hold a CDA or provisional credential. This approach was specifically designed to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges teachers experienced in using DAP in classrooms with birth to 3-year-old children.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what is needed to improve their use of DAP. Early childhood teachers use DAP to select effective approaches and practices and plan children's individual development and learning; teachers can identify strategies that support implementing DAP to foster the developing child. By providing an opportunity for teachers to express their perspectives on challenges using DAP, it is possible to identify their understandings, feelings, concerns, and needs regarding using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning. In Chapter 3, I describe the research method for the study. I explain the research design, rationale, and role of the researcher. I also describe the methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures for my study.

Research Design and Rationale

The following research questions guided this basic qualitative study:

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP in the classroom to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning?

RQ2: What do early childhood teachers believe they need to improve their use of DAP in the classroom?

I used a basic qualitative design to answer the research questions. I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what is needed to improve their use of DAP. A researcher uses a qualitative approach to understand how people make sense of what they experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I chose the qualitative approach because it was the most appropriate method to obtain detailed information and an understanding of early childhood teachers' perspectives. Further, the qualitative approach is the most common method used in education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using this approach, researchers gain a deeper understanding of how individuals construct reality as they interact within their social contexts and uncover effective processes and practices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A researcher develops interview questions aligned with the framework, research questions, and literature review to explore participants' responses during semistructured interviews to gather deeper information about the topic of study (Burkholder et al., 2016). A researcher uses in-depth qualitative interviews to collect rich, detailed information, ask open-ended questions, and follow up on newly discovered information (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). By interviewing early childhood teachers, I explored their challenges of using DAP and identified strategies to support its implementation. I collected data using semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to explore teachers' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the topic of study to answer the research questions. Due to limitations in faculty access during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (American Institutes for Research, 2021), I conducted my study online via Zoom, an online

communication platform (audio only). Although Google Duo and phone calls were originally offered as options for interviews, all participants selected the Zoom conference.

Given the focus of this study, I contemplated using other research designs before choosing a basic qualitative design. I considered phenomenology, grounded theory, and quantitative designs, but these methods were not suitable for the scope of my study. A researcher uses phenomenology to explore shared experiences by several individuals on a specific phenomenon (Gary, 2013). The phenomenological design was not appropriate for the current study because the purpose of my research was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP, not understanding teachers' common experiences of an event. In the grounded theory design, the researcher attempts to explain an action to generate a theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The grounded theory design was unsuitable for my study because the goal of my study was to explore teachers' perspectives for further analysis of their challenges using DAP to support children's development and learning and what is needed to improve their use of DAP, not to create a theory from actions. A researcher uses a quantitative approach to collect numerical data that are analyzed using statistical methods (Burkholder et al., 2016). The quantitative approach was not applicable for my study because my goal was to gain in-depth perspectives, not collect numerical data.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher's role in qualitative research is to gain access to the thoughts and feelings of study participants; collect rich, in-depth information; analyze the data; and

present the findings to reflect the participants' views (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For the study, I used semistructured interviews to obtain additional information. As the sole researcher, I was solely responsible for conducting this study. My role included selecting participants based on the study criteria and using Zoom (audio only) to interview participants. Originally Zoom, Google Duo, and phone calls were options for participants interviews; however, all participants chose the Zoom conference. I collected data, transcribed recorded interviews, and analyzed the data to answer the research questions.

I am an education specialist who observes and assesses early childhood teachers and their classroom environments to inform decisions needed by administrators for professional development and training in Georgia. I also have more than 17 years of experience working in various childcare roles. During those 17 years, I served as a lead toddler teacher, Georgia Pre-K assistant teacher, assistant director, director, education specialist, education coordinator, project manager, and childcare consultant. These experiences contributed to my interest in conducting this study.

Due to the nature of the qualitative study and my experiences, there was potential for researcher bias. I addressed potential researcher bias by using systematic, reflective journaling throughout the research process to clarify my thinking, assumptions, experiences, and biases. Reflective journaling allows the researcher to record their ideas, emotions, challenges, questions, beliefs, and experiences at different stages of the research process to decrease the impact of biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I also minimized biases by using open-ended questions and transcribing the data verbatim as they were recorded.

Methodology

Participant Selection

Participants selected for this basic qualitative study were early childhood teachers across the United States. I conducted semistructured interviews with early childhood teachers who teach children from birth to age 3 years and held either a CDA or provisional credential to understand their perspectives on challenges of using DAP and what is needed to improve their use of DAP in the classroom. I used the Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood education social media groups to recruit potential participants who met the selection criteria and expressed interest in the study. Utilizing the global platforms of both the Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood social media groups allowed me to reach prospective early childhood participants across the United States (see Walden University, 2021).

I also used snowball sampling if I could not meet the minimum of 10 participants or needed to replace teachers who withdrew from the study. Snowball sampling is useful in finding participants who are difficult to locate (Babbie, 2017). Using the snowball sampling method allowed me to identify participants who could refer other eligible participants for the study. The selection criteria for the participants in this study were (a) early childhood teachers who held a CDA or provisional credential, (b) a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience, and (c) currently teaching children from birth to 3 years old in a childcare center in the United States. I chose the criteria of birth to 3 years old and the CDA or provisional credential to find early childhood teachers who held the CDA or

provisional credential in the identified age group. I selected the criterion of a minimum of 2 years of teaching to ensure early childhood teachers had adequate exposure to DAP.

The initial criteria for this study were teachers who taught children aged birth to 3 years. However, during data collection, I found that some teachers reported teaching children up to 4 years old but were not in a pre-kindergarten classroom. Typically, children aged 4 years are in a classroom setting with a teacher holding a higher degree, but this was not the case in my study. Additionally, the two teachers involved were not teaching in a pre-kindergarten classroom, yet they met all other criteria, including holding a CDA credential and using DAP. One teacher reported using her CDA at the center for only 8 months. Upon further clarification, I discovered that she had held her CDA for over 2 years but misunderstood the question to mean how long she had been using it at her current job. The inclusion of data from these teachers provided valuable insights into the challenges using DAP in the classroom.

The sample size for my study was expected to be a minimum of 10 participants. In qualitative research, small sample sizes are necessary to gather rich, textured information that supports in-depth analysis, which is fundamental to this research method. The sample size in qualitative research is less important because the goal is not to generalize to the broader population but to achieve data saturation when answering the research question (Burkholder et al., 2016).

Instrumentation

Researchers use in-depth semistructured interviews to narrow the focus using prepared questions, follow-up questions, and prompts that pertain to the research

questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researcher is usually the primary instrument for gathering data in a qualitative study (Butin, 2017). Ravitch and Carl (2016) suggested researchers use semistructured in-depth interviews guided by an interview protocol. In the current basic qualitative study, I used two instruments to collect data: myself and the interview protocol. A researcher uses the semistructured protocol to conduct interviews and collect rich and detailed data to answer the research questions.

In this basic qualitative study, I collected data by conducting one-on-one semistructured interviews with each early childhood teacher participant via Zoom, an online communication platform (audio only). Initially, Zoom, Google Duo, and phone calls were options for participant interviews; however, all participants selected Zoom conferencing. After the invitation to participate was approved by the Walden University IRB (approval number 04-28-23-0315848), prospective participants received the invitation to participate via the Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood social media groups. If the prospective participants were eligible to participate, they received an informed consent form via email. Qualified participants received a thank you letter with an interview schedule to schedule their interview via email. I used the interview protocol guide (see Appendix A) to conduct the interviews and collect data.

The interview protocol was used as the data collection instrument to gather demographic information, record minor details, inform participants of the study expectations, and guide the interview questions. All participants were asked the same interview questions in the same order to ensure consistency. I used the Zoom recording feature to record the audio portion of each interview and collect data on the participant's

responses to the questions. Although Zoom, Google Duo, and the Total Recall phone recording app were initially offered as options, all participants chose to be interviewed via Zoom. Using a recording device during interviews allows researchers to focus on the conversations and the participants' views without the distraction of writing responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Recording interviews also ensures accurate documentation of participant responses.

I created the interview questions (see Appendix B) to answer the research questions. Interview Questions 1–3 were used to answer RQ1, and Interview Questions 4–8 were used to answer RQ2. I used open-ended questions in the interview to encourage participants to discuss their thoughts, beliefs, and values to obtain the most relevant data possible. If necessary, I used prompts during the interview to encourage participants to expand on their responses.

I established content validity by using concepts within the related literature and the conceptual framework to design the interview questions to answer the research questions. I created the interview questions to explore early childhood teachers' challenges using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and to learn what is needed to improve their use of DAP in the classroom. An expert in education research reviewed my interview questions. The expert confirmed that the interview questions were detailed and structured to elicit rich data from participants. The expert is a professor of education and a university methodologist. To further assess the quality of the questions, I conducted a mock interview with an early childhood teacher who fit the study criteria. This process allowed me to evaluate the

flow, clarity of wording, and number of questions, and to determine opportunities for incorporating prompts. I also became familiar with the interview protocol guide through the process. The feedback from both the expert and the mock interview was used to revise the interview protocol guide. The feedback process assisted with ensuring the data collection instrument aligned with the purpose of the study, ensured its suitability for answering the research questions, and contributed to the validity and quality of the data collection process.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I recruited 10 early childhood teachers teaching children from birth to age 3 years who held a CDA or provisional credential and a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience in childcare centers across the United States. Participants were recruited from the Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood social media groups. Using virtual platforms for recruitment helped me to recruit diverse participants. I also used snowball sampling to recruit more participants to meet the minimum requirements and to replace teachers who withdrew from the study.

Once I received approval from the Walden University IRB, I posted the invitation in the Walden University Participant Pool and early childhood teacher social media groups to begin recruitment. The invitation included a description of the study and the participation requirements. When I received information about potential participants from the invitation, I verified that they met the study eligibility and provided the consent form with details about the study for their review before they agreed to participate. Early childhood teachers who agreed to participate replied to the email with the words “I

consent.” I also sent a thank you email to early childhood teachers who agreed to participate with a list of interview appointment options to select from.

Before the interview, I reviewed the consent form and confidentiality terms. The interview proceeded according to the interview protocol guide if participants had no questions. I conducted semistructured interviews and collected data from each participant. All interviews were conducted via Zoom (audio only). Initially Zoom, Google Duo, and phone calls were options for participants interviews; however, all participants selected the Zoom platform. Each interview was expected to last 45–60 minutes, but I allowed extra time, if necessary. I audio recorded all interviews and conducted interviews outside of regular center hours. Questions 1–3 were asked to answer the first research question; Questions 4–8 were asked to answer the second research question. When necessary, I used prompts if additional details were required for clarity. After each interview concluded, I provided the participant with the opportunity to ask questions.

I concluded each interview by thanking the participants for their time and participation in the study, followed by mailing a thank you card. After analyzing the data, I sent each participant a two-page summary of the study findings and asked them for any additional feedback.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis involved examining data for similarities and differences, reading, sorting, organizing, categorizing, reflecting on the study focus, reflective journaling for biases and clarity, identifying themes or patterns, and representing and interpreting

meaning extracted from the data to help answer the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). By closely examining the data, I identified common themes, ideas, topics, and patterns of meaning that appeared repeatedly across participants' responses. After the interviews were completed, I uploaded the audio recordings to TranscribeMe, an online transcription service that converted the audio recordings into written transcripts. Researchers rely primarily on textual data in the data analysis process of qualitative research to help make sense of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). I reviewed the written transcripts and analyzed the data for each participant line by line. I checked the written transcripts to verify the accuracy of the data.

The data analysis began once I received the written transcripts of the participants' audio responses to the interview questions. I analyzed the data using an inductive approach, guided by the conceptual framework, research questions, and literature (Saldaña, 2016). I used the inductive approach as part of the process in open coding to help me organize my data into manageable units or chunks and new codes were added as they emerged from the written transcripts (see Saldaña, 2016).

I used Excel spreadsheets as a tool to organize and analyze the data. I created two Excel workbooks, each containing a research question. Each workbook included columns for the 10 participant ID, time stamp, interview question, participant response, open coding, axial coding, themes, and memos. Additionally, each participant had a dedicated spreadsheet tab.

Initially, I read each transcript two times before coding. I then reread the data line by line, using open coding, and making notations of keywords and phrases potentially relevant to answering the research questions; in open coding, anything that could answer the research question or might be useful is considered (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used color-coded highlights to distinguish the open codes (see Saldaña, 2016). After coding the entire transcript, I moved to the next set of data, reading, rereading, and repeating the open coding process of identifying and highlighting codes.

Once all the transcripts were coded, I reviewed the open codes, looking for similarities and differences to sort and group the open codes, and then labeled them with a category (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Axial coding was used to group and sort the established codes with shared meaning and label them into categories (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I reviewed the data again to ensure the categories accurately reflected the participants' responses to answer the research questions, revising, renaming, or creating subcategories as needed to precisely represent the data, and established a set of categories (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). I used reflexive journaling periodically between open and axial coding to clarify my thinking and minimize potential biases (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The sorting and grouping of the categories helped me discover emerging themes and concepts. I then reread the data set to determine whether my themes accurately supported my data in answering my research questions and renamed themes (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I analyzed my themes by checking and rechecking my interpretations against the data, exploring other explanations and possible misinterpretations (see

Saldaña, 2016). I also explored how the themes connected to each other and how they answered my research questions. I then used this information to discuss my results and findings. I reviewed the data until the point of saturation, which occurred when no new information, insights, understandings, patterns, or themes were discovered in the data (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Burkholder et al. (2016), saturation occurs when the data reinforces what has already been identified from the preliminary data analysis.

I closely examined the data for discrepancies to challenge my expectations or emergent findings. Researchers used discrepant case analysis to search for different explanations, possible misinterpretations, and discrepancies in the findings (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I worked to identify and seek clarification of inconsistencies and discrepancies in the data that did not align with the emerging patterns from the analysis. I used the reflexivity process and evaluated my biases and prejudices that affected the interpretations of the data (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Additionally, I included participants' responses in the results to provide insight into their real-life experiences. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), accurately reporting any inconsistencies or discrepancies in the data is essential for reducing biases and ensuring the credibility of the research. During my analysis, I identified some discrepancies in the data from a single participant, particularly related to challenges with social and emotional development. These discrepancies were addressed through member checking to ensure the credibility of the findings.

I used member checking by having participants review the summary of study findings and provide feedback on the accuracy of my interpretation of the data. Member checking is a technique of exploring other explanations and possible misinterpretations from the participants of the study to ensure validity, assist in making connections between categories, clarify emergent ideas, and uncover potential new insights about the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). Participants received a two-page summary of the study findings via email and were asked to provide feedback within two weeks. However, no feedback was received.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is the researcher's establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To develop trustworthiness, researchers aim to ensure rigor and quality in the design, execution, and presentation of the study so that the findings may be applied to other contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Credibility is achieved by a researcher gathering data from well-informed and experienced individuals with a deep understanding and knowledge of the research topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The credibility of a qualitative study is also achieved by the researcher maintaining the authenticity of participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The credibility of a qualitative study depends on the integrity of the research process. I ensured that participants were informed, experienced, and knowledgeable to participate in the study research by using the study criteria and providing detailed information in the invitation to recruit participants. I designed the interview protocol

guide (see Appendix A) and interview questions (see Appendix B) with open-ended questions and prompts. I used the interview protocol guide (see Appendix A) to collect rich and detailed information, including both participants' responses and background information, to support the credibility of their knowledge and experiences.

The researcher also establishes credibility by assuring multiple ways to compare and cross-check data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used audio recordings of the participants' interviews to ensure that all details were accurately recorded. I also used TranscribeMe software to transcribe the participants' words verbatim, ensuring the accuracy of their experiences. I used a member checking technique for participants to validate, question, or clarify data to reflect the participants' lived experiences. A researcher uses member checking to ensure credibility by soliciting the participants' feedback on interview transcripts, preliminary data analysis, and/or findings for accuracy, clarification, and correcting errors in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In qualitative research, transferability refers to how qualitative studies can broaden the discussion of applicability and transferability to other social settings while maintaining context-specific richness (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). I used rich thick description to achieve transferability in the research study. I provided an extensive description of the data and the context so readers could make comparisons to other contexts based on the information provided (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Dependability refers to obtaining consistent results from the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and documenting and explaining any adjustments (Burkholder et al., 2016). A researcher achieves dependability in qualitative research by accounting

for the process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I maintained dependability through an audit trail and reflexive journal. Throughout the research process, I kept a reflexive journal of my decisions regarding problems, issues, or ideas encountered while collecting data. I also used reflexive journaling to document my analysis and interpretation of the data.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which other researchers can verify the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The researcher's responsibility is to ensure the findings are derived from the perspectives of the participants, not the researcher's biases (Burkholder et al., 2016). Throughout my research process, I used reflexive journaling to examine my background and position, and to analyze my values, interests, and biases that influenced the research process. Using the reflexivity process allowed me to achieve confirmability by exploring biases and prejudices that may have affected the interpretation of the data (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Ethical Procedures

Research ethics are essential in conducting qualitative research. Researchers must follow ethical procedures to gain approval from the IRB and maintain ethical procedures when engaging with participants, obtaining consent, ensuring confidentiality, assigning codes, and addressing ethical concerns. I sought and obtained approval from the IRB to conduct my study. I submitted copies of the invitation to participate, informed consent form, and research proposal for review. The IRB's responsibility is to review proposals and oversee the research process to ensure the safety and well-being of participants' (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

I applied ethical practices by obtaining IRB approval for the invitation letter, which was used to recruit participants through the Walden University Participant Pool, early childhood social media groups, and snowball sampling. I also obtained IRB approval for the consent form to send to potential participants via their email. Participants were adequately informed about the purpose of the research, their right to participate or withdraw at any time, the potential benefits, and risks of the study. I also provided participants with opportunities to receive additional information to make an informed decision before consent was obtained. I provided an explanation of the purpose of the study, confidentiality procedures, and the data collection process in detail and provided ample time to answer questions and concerns from participants. During reviewing of the consent form and interview protocol guide (Appendix A), I reminded participants that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any given point of the study without prejudice or penalty. After providing a thorough explanation of the research process with participants, I obtained written consent in accordance with ethical research standards.

The interview session can be stressful for participants as they express their opinions and feelings. Participants had the option of discontinuing the interview if they believed the interview was harmful to them. Participants also had the option of stopping and continuing their interviews when they were ready. I maintained participant anonymity and confidentiality throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study findings. Interviews were conducted privately via Zoom. During transcription, I used headphones to ensure privacy, and participants' identities were removed and

replaced with identifiers such as A1, A2, or B1. I used the identifiers in verbatim quotes to report the results of the study. No adverse events occurred during the study, and therefore, none were reported to the IRB at Walden University.

I kept the written consent forms and documents containing participants' personal information were stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to me. I securely stored all data on a private, password-protected computer, as required by Walden University. I will use a safe and secure disposal method after this point. I will erase all recorded materials after five years upon approval by the research committee to preserve the confidentiality of the participants and maintain research ethics.

Summary

In this chapter, I explained the research method and the rationale and the rationale for selecting a basic qualitative research design. I described the role of the researcher and the criteria I used to select and recruit participants. I also detailed the data collection and analysis procedures, including the types of data collected. I included strategies to improve the study credibility and outlined measures to protect participants and data ethically. In Chapter 4, I present the data collection process, analysis, results, and evidence of trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what is needed to improve their use of DAP. The research questions that guided this study were the following:

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP in the classroom to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning?

RQ2: What do early childhood teachers believe they need to improve their use of DAP in the classroom?

Chapter 4 includes a detailed description of the study setting, the data collection and analysis procedures, the results of the study, and evidence of trustworthiness.

Setting

There were no conditions that influenced the participants' experiences or affected the interpretation of the results. At the time of the interviews, participants were teaching in childcare settings across various regions of the United States. All 10 participants taught children from birth to 3 years; some children were already 4 but remained in the 3-year-old classroom. All participants held either a CDA or provisional credential. The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least 2 years of teaching experience while holding a CDA or provisional credential. One participant had 8 months of experience at their

current center but had prior relevant experience that satisfied the selection criteria. I assigned each participant an alphanumeric code: T1 through T10. Table 1 summarizes participants' years of teaching while holding a CDA or provisional credential, classroom responsibilities, current age group taught, and years of experience implementing DAP. All participants held the title of lead teacher.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Experience teaching with CDA (years)	Responsibility	Age taught	Time using DAP
T1	3.5–4	Care routines, reading books	3 months to 18 months	3 years
T2	2	Facilitation of developmentally appropriate play, parent communication	2–3 years	8 months
T3	2	Child development, pre-K readiness	3 years	2.5 years
T4	2	Care routines, lesson planning	1 year	2 years
T5	13	Daily activities, curriculum planning	6 weeks to 1 year	6–7 years
T6	10	Recordkeeping, lesson plans, observations, care routine	1.5 to 2.5 years	16 years
T7	6	Tailored lesson plans, special education	Birth to 3 years	5 years
T8	8	Individualized lesson plans, instruction	6 weeks to 3 years	8 years
T9	3	Lesson plans, preparation of learning materials	Birth to 4 years	2 years
T10	26	Communication, curriculum development	6 weeks to 4 years	27 years

Note. CDA = Child Development Associate; DAP = developmentally appropriate practices; pre-K = prekindergarten.

Data Collection

I commenced the data collection process after receiving approval from Walden University's IRB. To recruit participants, I posted an invitation containing information

about the study on the Walden University Participant Pool website and in various early childhood education social media groups. I also used snowball sampling to recruit additional participants to meet the minimum requirements and to replace any teachers who withdrew from the study. Using this approach, I recruited seven participants who met the study inclusion criteria. Once a potential participant expressed interest, I emailed them the consent form to review. I instructed potential participants to respond to my email with the words “I consent” if they chose to move forward with participating in this study. After individuals confirmed their participation, I sent them a schedule of available dates, times, and options to interview via Zoom or telephone. Each participant responded via email with their preferred date and time for the interview.

A total of 10 early childhood teachers participated in this study. All participants selected the Zoom videoconferencing platform. I conducted one-on-one, semistructured interviews via Zoom from my home office. The data collection process took 10 months to complete. I interviewed each participant once for approximately 45–60 minutes. I asked each participant the same interview questions to ensure consistency and dependability. At the beginning of each interview, I welcomed and thanked the participants for participating in the study. I restated the purpose of the study and reviewed the consent form to remind them that participation would not pose any risks to their health or well-being. I reiterated that the information collected would be used solely for this study and that their identities would remain confidential. I also reminded participants of their right to withdraw at any time, skip any questions, and discontinue recording at any time during

the interview. Before beginning the interview questions, I asked the participants if they had any questions.

After addressing any questions participants had, I obtained permission to begin recording and asked four demographic questions to determine participants' years of teaching since obtaining a CDA or provisional credential, current title, classroom responsibilities, age group being taught at the time of the study, and years of using DAP. Then, I asked the eight interview questions. I mitigated potential researcher bias by using systematic reflective journaling throughout the interview process to clarify my thinking, assumptions, and experiences and to monitor potential bias. I used the Zoom recording feature to record all interviews, with the participants' cameras turned off to maintain confidentiality. I concluded each interview session by thanking the participants for their time and participation in the study. I informed the participants that after I analyzed the data, I would send them a two-page summary of the findings and ask them for any additional feedback. I concluded each interview by asking the participants whether they had any questions and informed them that they could contact me anytime if they had further questions about the study. After each interview, I sent a thank you card to each participant.

During data collection, I observed some variations from the initial criteria outlined in Chapter 3. Two participants reported teaching children up to 4 years old, although they were not in a prekindergarten class. These two participants were not teaching in a prekindergarten classroom but met other criteria, including holding a CDA credential and using DAP. One participant reported using her CDA at the center for only

8 months. Upon follow-up, it was clarified that she had held her CDA for over 2 years but misunderstood the question as referring specifically to her current position. Including data from these participants enriched the findings by offering valuable insights into their experiences implementing DAP in the classroom.

Data Analysis

In this basic qualitative study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP in classrooms across the United States. I conducted semistructured interviews, asking participants the same open-ended questions in the same order. After the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were uploaded to TranscribeMe, an online transcription service, to transcribe the audio recordings into written text.

Researchers primarily rely on textual data to interpret and understand the information collected during the data analysis process in qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). I reviewed the written transcripts and analyzed the data for each participant line by line, verifying the accuracy of the data (see Saldaña, 2016). I used Microsoft Excel as a tool to organize and analyze the data. I created two Excel workbooks, one for each RQ. Each workbook included columns for the participant code, time stamp, interview question, response, open coding, axial coding, themes, and memos. Each workbook also contained a separate spreadsheet tab for each participant.

Familiarization

Familiarizing myself with the data was a fundamental step in my qualitative research process, as emphasized by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Saldaña (2016).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) highlighted the importance of repeatedly reading transcripts and other data sources to gain a deep understanding of the content. To achieve this, I reread the transcripts multiple times, taking detailed notes. This process allowed me to identify initial patterns, themes, and key points that informed my subsequent coding and analysis. Repeated readings enabled me to develop a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives and recognize recurring ideas.

Saldaña (2016) highlighted the significance of immersing oneself in the data by reading and rereading transcripts, listening to audio recordings, and taking detailed notes. I also listened to the audio recordings to capture the tone and emphasis behind the participants' words, which allowed me to gain a richer understanding of their perspectives. This thorough engagement with the data helped me capture the nuances of participants' perspectives and develop a comprehensive understanding, which was essential for effective coding and analysis. By following these guidelines, I ensured that my analysis was grounded in a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences, the context, and the narratives.

Generation of Initial Codes

To analyze the interview data, I used open coding techniques. The study conceptual framework, RQs, and literature were used to identify the initial open codes (see Saldaña, 2016). As the inductive analysis of the data progressed, additional codes were identified and added through open coding. During open coding, I read each interview transcript twice. I then reread each participant's data line by line, making

notations of keywords and highlighting phrases that were potentially relevant to answering the RQs or that connected to the conceptual framework and literature review.

I uploaded each transcript to an individual spreadsheet in an Excel workbook, with each spreadsheet and workbook corresponding to a specific RQ. Within each spreadsheet, the data were organized in rows by interview question. The columns included participant identifiers, time stamps of corresponding narrative excerpts, open codes, axial codes, themes, memos for notetaking, and a brief definition of the codes. During the open coding process, 125 open codes were identified. Table 2 displays examples of open codes, participant identifiers, and excerpts from the data.

Table 2*Examples of Open Codes*

Code	Participant	Interview excerpt
Lacking understanding	T8	“Some of those things I don’t know about, as far as you know how to deal with issues, issues of anger that’s, that’s another problem.”
	T5	“You know, because I work with a lot of people that do not understand or don’t even know what DAP [developmentally appropriate practices] is.”
Challenge finding activities	T9	“Infants can’t do what the 3-year-olds can do. So how do you find activities that will keep them not only engaged but educate them also and help them advance and learn about their world and learn how to communicate and socialize better?”
	T3	“How do I find an activity for that specific child to keep their attention long enough to not cause disruptions?”
Time challenge for individualization	T5	“So, I think time, time to lesson plan, and stuff like that. Those are when challenges come into place.”
	T10	“They’re very serious about staying in these boxes of learning in these time frames, so... children are not learning that way... we’re challenged.”
Behavior challenge	T1	“A real challenge you know is hitting each other. Some could start out playing like this one, he plays a lot, he likes to play, he hits you and then runs. The other kid is ready to fight.”
	T3	“So, they kind of bring my other kids to behavior issues because that child there’s not enough in that room just for them to feel like it’s enough stimulation for them.”
Need diverse resources and information	T6	“Give us the tools to be developmentally appropriate for their class.”
	T1	“Oh yes OK I think lots and lots and lots of resources of different around the world resources different nationalities, languages, and customs. You know a lot of information is needed.”
Need to learn about cultures	T7	“I feel like we need to learn more about different cultures or how they do certain things and when we have that understanding we can, it’s easy for us to apply that in the classroom.”
	T9	“Education on cultures. I feel like there’s a big lack of that in our industry.”
Need for varied training	T8	“We need all kinds of training and stuff that helps.”
	T9	“Give more examples of how we can be more successful or how we can aid children in the developmentally appropriate practices.”
Need more support	T8	“More support, I guess. I think if we can get let’s see, I don’t know I know in the classrooms you guys get what are those paras?”
	T10	“I’m not giving my best so more support would be great to have, so that we can do our best and offer our best.”

After completing the open coding process, I conducted axial coding to group the open codes into categories. Using the Excel spreadsheet from the initial coding, I reviewed and organized the open codes to identify connections and relationships among them. If codes conveyed the same meaning, they were merged or consolidated.

Additional codes were added as new insights emerged, until all codes were grouped based on similarities. Through the axial coding process, I generated 18 categories. Table 3 displays some of the categories and open codes derived from the participants' responses.

Table 3*Examples of Open Codes and Categories*

Category	Open code	Participant	Excerpt
Lacking efficacy and knowledge	Lacking understanding	T8	Some of those things I don't know about, as far as you know how to deal with issues, issues of anger that's, that's another problem....
	Doubting actions	T2	So sometimes I wonder if we're even doing the right thing by trying to do something that helps them if they're going to come in and reverse what we've done.
Challenged with creating developmentally appropriate strategies	Struggle developing appropriate lesson plans	T9	Lesson planning is something that I struggle with also even now, when it comes to making sure everything is developmentally appropriate.
	Challenge finding activities	T3	How do I find an activity for that specific child to keep their attention long enough to not cause disruptions?
Lack of time	Time challenge for individualization	T5	So, I think time, time to lesson plan, and stuff like that. Those are when challenges come into place.
	Time restraints on recording	T7	It's a lot of time restraints on recording different things.
Behavioral challenges	Behavior challenge	T1	A real challenge you know is hitting each other. Some could start out playing like this one, he plays a lot, he likes to play, he hits you and then runs. The other kid is ready to fight.
	Behavior issues causing disruptions	T3	I find that sometimes I have behavioral issues that can cause disruptions.
Need access to developmentally appropriate resources	Need developmentally appropriate tools	T6	Give us the tools to be developmentally appropriate for their class.
	Need diverse resources and information	T1	I think lots and lots and lots of resources from around the world of different nationalities, languages, and customs. A lot of information is needed....
Need cultural competence development	Need to learn about cultures	T7	I feel like we need to learn more about different cultures or how they do certain things and when we have that understanding we can, it's easy for us to apply that in the classroom....
	Need more cultural information	T6	I would need more information about the culture at hand.
Need professional development and diverse trainings	Need for varied training	T8	We need all kinds of training and stuff that helps.
	Help developing skills	T1	Help me develop better skills in teaching and in helping the children develop
Need professional support	Need one-on-one support	T9	I think If I have somebody to work one on one with me, maybe for a little while to do lesson plans targeted for zero to three, that would be great.
	Need more support	T10	I'm not giving my best so more support would be great to have, so that we can do our best and offer our best.

Generation of Themes

After completing axial coding, I analyzed the categories and grouped those that shared similar meanings or characteristics. The researcher analyzes their codes and considers how different codes may combine to form a theme (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). The sorting and grouping of the categories helped me discover emerging themes for each group of categories. Five themes emerged from the analysis: (a) teachers are challenged to teach DAP, (b) teachers are challenged to implement DAP, (c) teachers are challenged to create inclusive and supportive educational environments, (d) teachers need professional development and resources, and (e) teachers need collaboration. I used thematic analysis as a guide to identify patterns and emerging themes that answered the research questions.

Review of Themes

I reread the data set to determine whether my themes accurately aligned with the axial codes and renamed the themes when necessary. I analyzed my themes by checking and rechecking my interpretations against the data, exploring other explanations and possible misinterpretations (Saldaña, 2016). I also examined how the themes connected to each other and how they answered my research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This process allowed me to closely examine the data, identify any information that may have been missed in earlier stages of the data analysis, and explore whether the themes fit well. Finally, I compiled a final list of themes in Excel, organizing them according to the research questions, along with the corresponding codes, categories, and data.

Definition and Naming of Themes

Once I compiled and defined the themes, I made revisions as necessary. According to Saldaña (2016), the process of coding and categorizing data is essential for identifying patterns and themes in qualitative research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasized the importance of refining themes by expanding and collapsing them to ensure the most accurate representation of the data. Following this approach, I refined the themes to accurately reflect the participants' experiences and perspectives. Five themes emerged from the data analysis process. Three themes answered RQ1, and two answered RQ2. Table 4 presents a sample of the categories and themes developed during the thematic analysis in relation to the research questions.

Table 4*RQs, Categories, and Themes*

RQ	Category	Theme
RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP in the classroom to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning?	Lacking efficacy and knowledge Lack of time Behavioral challenges Challenge to support individualization	Theme 1: Teachers are challenged to teach
	Challenges supporting the development of all domains Challenged with creating developmentally appropriate strategies Challenges implementing teaching strategies	Theme 2: Teachers are challenged to implement DAP
	Center policies and (DAP) conflict Challenges incorporating cultural context Rigid/non-inclusive curriculum Insufficient resources and support	Theme 3: Teachers are challenged to create inclusive and supportive educational environments
RQ2: What do early childhood teachers believe they need to improve their use of DAP in the classroom?	Need professional development and diverse training Need cultural competence development Need access to developmentally appropriate resources	Theme 4: Teachers need DAP professional development and resources
	Need professional support Need family partnerships	Theme 5: Teachers need collaboration

Treatment of Discrepant Cases

During my analysis, I identified some discrepancies in the data from the single participant, particularly in the challenges related to social and emotional development. Saldaña (2016) emphasized the importance of discussing discrepant cases in detail to provide a thorough understanding of the research context. These discrepancies were discussed in detail in the relevant sections to provide a thorough understanding of the challenges experienced by teachers.

Results

In this basic qualitative study, I used semistructured interviews to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what is needed to improve their use of DAP. This section presents the results of the data collected from 10 interviews with early childhood teachers, who were asked eight open ended questions to answer the RQ's. Interview questions 1 through 3 were designed to understand teachers' perspectives to answer RQ1, and interview questions 4 through 8 were used to answer RQ2.

The focus of RQ1 was: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP in the classroom to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning? Three themes emerged to answer RQ1: (a) teachers are challenged to teach, (b) teachers are challenged to implement DAP, and (c) teachers are challenged to create inclusive and supportive educational environments. The focus of RQ2 was: What do early childhood teachers believe they need to improve

their use of DAP in the classroom? Two themes emerged to answer RQ2: (a) teachers need professional development and resources, and (b) teachers need collaboration.

Theme 1: Teachers Are Challenged to Teach

Participants identified several challenges that impeded their ability to effectively teach and facilitate learning, which affected both their instruction and children's learning. This theme includes lack of efficacy and knowledge, lack of time, behavioral challenges, and challenges to support individualization. The following analysis provides a detailed examination of these challenges, grounded in excerpts from the participants' interview data.

Lack of Efficacy and Knowledge

Lacking efficacy and knowledge describes the perceived inadequacies participants experienced due to a lack of confidence, uncertainty, and insufficient knowledge or expertise in specific areas of instruction. Participants described their lack of confidence, uncertainty, and limited teaching experience in addressing various scenarios. T2 expressed doubt about the effectiveness of their actions: "So sometimes I wonder if we're even doing the right thing by trying to do something that helps them, if they're going to come in and reverse what we've done." T4 also shared uncertainty about supporting children who dislike social interactions: "Now I does be wanting to talk to them. Some kids just really don't like other people, and I just don't know what to do about it." Additionally, T8 highlighted the uncertainty and lack of confidence in supporting a child's feelings:

That's what I feel more comfortable with, because some of those things I don't know about, as far as, you know, how to deal with issues, issues of anger. That's, another problem, with dealing with those types of things in the right way."

Participants also identified a lack of knowledge and understanding in various instructional areas. T5 noted the general lack of understanding of DAP: "You know, because I work with a lot of people that do not understand it, or don't even know what DAP is." Additionally, in response to a follow-up question about challenges in using DAP in cognitive areas, T4 expressed uncertainty about what "cognitive" means: "But like, what is cognitive? Like? What does that mean?" When asked how she used DAP to plan for children with diverse needs, T2 highlighted the challenge of finding effective methods due to a lack of understanding: "I am actually looking for the answer to that myself." T2 also expressed difficulty understanding how to measure the success of their efforts using DAP: "So it's difficult because it's not getting, it's not I'm not getting the results that we're supposed to be getting from it, and it's harder to gauge whether I am doing the correct thing or not."

Participants also identified a lack of autonomy as a factor affecting their efficacy by limiting flexibility in teaching practices. T10 shared:

Your administration doesn't leave room for educators to meet children where they are developmentally to create those DAP opportunities. You have to do it this way, and that's that. So yeah, it's just something it's a risk that an educator has to take.

Additionally, T2 noted the lack of freedom in tailoring their teaching approaches: “We’re not given a lot of freedom and how we’re able to institute DAP.” Participants felt that their lack of confidence, uncertainty, and the necessary knowledge or expertise in specific areas of instruction negatively affected their ability to teach effectively.

Lack of Time

Lack of time, in the context of teaching, addresses the difficulties participants experienced in managing limited time to meet the demands of teaching, planning, assessing, and addressing the diverse needs of their children. Participants discussed various challenges they encountered due to insufficient time to teach. For instance, allocating additional time to a single child sometimes resulted in less time to adequately meet the needs of other children, as T6 explained: “But then you get that one that’s 19 months, 20 months not talking. So, you have to spend extra time with them... you’re spending more time with this child than with them...” Additionally, T5 discussed the challenge of focusing on individual children within tight time constraints: “I think the biggest challenge that I find is time, you know, because when you’re focusing on the individual child, and you’re not just clumping, everybody together.”

Another issue participants identified was the lack of sufficient time for comprehensive lesson planning and implementing activities. T5 noted: “So I think time, time to lesson plan, and stuff like that. Those are when challenges come into place.” Furthermore, T10 emphasized the need for more time and space to implement developmentally appropriate activities:

I think for me I need more time and space to, you know, for implementation of activities that would really help my children learn developmentally. You know, again, I've been written up so many times for not teaching in those boxes and those timeframes, and I took it, I did...

T1 also shared the need for additional time to plan: "If I had more time, you know, let somebody come in the classroom... that can be planning time for me, where I could actually have more time to, you know, for implementation."

Moreover, T10 described how rigid timeframes restricted effective planning and teaching:

They're very serious about staying in these boxes of learning in these timeframes, and often, children are not learning that way. We're challenged and faced with, okay, what do we do? Do we teach the children where they are? Or do we stay in these boxes, and we're only reaching a certain percentage of your class?

The lack of time to conduct assessments was also identified as a challenge. T7 highlighted this difficulty:

It's a lot of time restraints on recording different things, so I'm able to assess and see where they're at, so I can apply, you know, developmentally appropriate lessons and have materials, so like time, I will say, time constraint.

T1 emphasized that additional time is crucial for conducting effective assessments and observations, stating: "If I had more time, ... just to do some assessing and observations." This additional time, according to T1, would significantly improve their ability to understand and support children's developmental needs, which are currently limited by

tight schedules. Participants emphasized that a lack of time negatively affected their ability to individualize, plan, and assess.

Behavior Challenges

Teaching young children presents numerous challenges, particularly in managing behavioral issues. Many participants shared their insights, highlighting the difficulties they experienced with children's disruptive behaviors. For instance, T3 shared:

Some challenges that I've had presented themselves so far in this school year or within my ... teaching career, I find that sometimes I have behavioral issues that can cause disruptions. So, whereas I have a plan for the way the class should flow, sometimes I have disruptions that don't allow it to flow that way.

T8 described the children as being "all over the place," explaining they often had to "grab them" and get them "excited about things," to help calm their little bodies down and support engagement in learning. Additionally, T10 highlighted the difficulty of managing multiple behavioral or sensory needs simultaneously, stating: "But what if I have five children over here that either have behavioral or sensory, or, you know, whatever their issues are? There's no time for me to reach those children. You know, so that's what that looks like." T2 further explained that a lack of sufficient stimulation often contributed to behavior challenges: "Because there's not enough stimulation for that child in the classroom, they sometimes cause behavior issues with the other kids. This results in younger kids trying to act older, or sometimes older kids regressing and imitating younger ones." Participants also described difficulties in managing agitated and aggressive behaviors. T4 shared: "We have a child in our center who's like, won't stay

off a pacifier, but she's very easily agitated and all she does is kick, scream and scream, and cry—she could do it all day.” Similarly, T1 stated:

That's a real challenge, you know, hitting each other. Some could start out playing, like this one kid who plays a lot. He hits you and then runs, but the other kid is ready to fight. I said, “No, he's just playing. OK y'all, let's not play like that. Now let's play with something else. Hey, let's go over here and look at these books. I've got one for everybody.” You know, just kind of take their mind off fighting each other.

Participants collectively described the complexity of managing diverse behavioral issues among young children, particularly in environments that lacked adequate support or individualized behavioral strategies, further hindering effective teaching.

Challenge to Support Individualization

Challenges to support individualization referred to the difficulties participants experienced in tailoring instruction to ensure they meet the unique needs of each child. Participants highlighted several challenges in recognizing and addressing diverse learning styles, developmental stages, and individual needs within their classroom. T9 shared:

So, honestly, this is something that I struggle with, because there are a few different ages and they are at different stages, so I just try my best to keep in mind where each child is developmentally and try to tie it together.

Similarly, T2 explained: “I think my biggest challenge is being able to get on level with each individual child and remember their specific place and all those areas, because I have some that are super high here and some super low here.” T8 noted the difficulty of

supporting individual learning needs and emphasized the challenge of needing patience and understanding to accommodate each child's unique learning process, stating: "I don't know what I would need other than to be patient and understand that each child is different. And they're not going to grasp everything the same way as another child is going to grasp it."

The uniqueness in each child learning process was further highlighted by T8: "I don't think it's necessarily the domains that are the issue; its every child is different." Additionally, participants identified the absence of a one-size-fits-all solution as a challenge. T8 noted:

I don't know if there would be a certain type of thing that would, you know, be the magic trick and it'll work, because all children are different. They don't learn at the same time, a lot of the time, you know, it's just, they're just all different, they have their own little mind.

Participants also shared challenges in accommodating different learning styles that required varied teaching methods. T4 stated: "I feel like they shouldn't force like all the kids to learn the same way. Give them opportunity to learn a different way because they're in school and really that's it though." Additionally, T2 highlighted the difficulty of tailoring instruction to meet children individual needs: "Stop branding, like at two, this is what you do and at three, this is what you do and instead just kind of gauge and work with each kid individually and still provide the tools inside the classroom." T2 emphasized that allowing children to progress at their own pace was important to reducing pressures and supporting individual growth: "I think that would help a lot each

child advance in their own time without feeling like we're choking under the weight of trying to get them where they need to be." Furthermore, meeting individual needs in activities while preventing exclusion was a challenge. T3 stated: "So finding an activity that is just as engaging right for them but seems to be sort of equivalent to what everyone else is doing so that they don't see a big difference and don't feel isolated." Participants' insights revealed the multifaceted challenges of supporting individualization in early childhood settings, particularly in ensuring that each child's unique developmental need is supported within a shared classroom environment.

The theme teachers are challenged to teach highlights major obstacles experienced by participants in their teaching practices. Participants identified several key challenges, including uncertainty in their actions and understanding, insufficient time for individualization and planning, disruptive behaviors, and difficulties in meeting children's individual needs. These challenges significantly hindered their ability to provide tailored instruction and facilitate learning effectively. Addressing these challenges requires targeted solutions, which are explored in other themes, such as teachers' need for collaboration and teachers' need for DAP professional development and resources.

Theme 2: Teachers Are Challenged to Implement DAP

Participants highlighted difficulties experienced in integrating DAP into their teaching methods and practices. This theme includes challenges supporting the development of all domains, challenges with creating developmentally appropriate strategies, and challenges implementing teaching strategies. The following analysis

provides a detailed examination of these categories, grounded in excerpts from the participants' interview data.

Challenges Supporting the Development of All Domains

Challenges supporting the development of all domains address the difficulties participants experienced in effectively supporting various areas of child development, particularly social-emotional development, within their teaching practices. T7 discussed the challenge of equally supporting the different developmental domains to ensure a well-rounded approach. T7 explained:

And then sometimes it can be, I'm just trying to make sure I address all the developmental domains in a balanced way, so I don't have more of this and less of this. You know, I don't have more physical and less cognitive. You know, I want to have a balanced classroom of learning. So that's kind of the challenges.

Additionally, participants frequently emphasized the critical challenge of supporting social-emotional development among children. T8 emphasized their challenge, stating, "Social and emotional, that is really the toughest developmental skill for me." Similarly, T4 described the challenge of supporting social development:

In the social area too, because, like, like I said, I have kids who don't talk out. But they'll go home and won't stop running their mouths, no matter how comfortable they are. Like I said, those are the ones who dance and respond to the songs with movements, but when they don't want to speak, they don't want to play with other kids. All they do is stick up under me.

T8 also explained difficulties with early toddlers' social skills: "For my early, early toddlers, they tend to "mine, mine, mine." They tend to have a difficult time with that. So social and emotional, I would say, is the toughest skill to get them to master." T9 further described the challenge of supporting social-emotional development, stating: "The challenge is with the social-emotional right now, all the kids are kind of like wound up." T4 discussed the challenge of supporting the extreme emotions of children post-COVID-19:

Okay, like, let's just start with emotional because y'all know kids' emotions are so extreme. They're so sensitive but for summertime these COVID babies, because I guess they were stuck in the house with their parents very clingy, they will showcase extremely anything hurts their feelings effortlessly.

Furthermore, T1 highlighted the challenge of teaching children to be polite: "Even the kids are young, the social challenges are kind of big now because they will get angry with each other... social is challenging sometimes to have everybody be polite to each other." Participants described a variety of challenges in supporting the development of all domains equally, including facilitating social-emotional activities, fostering peer relationships, and managing extreme emotional responses post-COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges With Creating Developmentally Appropriate Strategies

Challenges with creating developmentally appropriate strategies describe the difficulties participants experienced in designing, developing, and implementing teaching methods and activities that were appropriate for maintaining engagement, addressing different developmental stages, and ensuring effective lesson planning for children.

Participants highlighted specific challenges in creating activities that sustained children's attention and interest. T2 described this challenge when discussing the difficulty of finding materials that sparked curiosity beyond familiar toys:

They really like buckets. If I could find a way to use a bucket that's safe for them to use and to be able to play with, they would be really into that. Not just the toys that they know.

Similarly, T3 described the challenge of keeping children engaged: "So how did I find an activity for that specific child where it was going to keep their attention long enough to not want to cause disruptions?" Furthermore, T9 emphasized the difficulty of creating activities that were both engaging and educational:

Younger children couldn't do what the older children could do. So how do you find activities that will keep them not only engaged but educate them also and help them advance and learn about their world and learn how to communicate and socialize better?

Participants also noted the difficulties of creating developmentally appropriate activities for children at different developmental stages. T3 highlighted the challenge of designing activities that met individual cognitive development: "Sometimes I had challenges where I could tell I had a child that's cognitively delayed, so coming up with activities for them where it's on their level, but it's not quite." Additionally, T6 described a challenge with a sensory activity due to varying fine motor skills:

We had an activity where they wanted them to put a pom pom in a water table with water and we got citrus squeezers. They wanted them to pick up the pom

poms, put them in the squeezer and squeeze it. Some of them would just put the pom pom in but would not squeeze it, even if we showed them and guided them, they didn't want to do it. It became challenging because they were getting upset because they couldn't squeeze it down their fine motor skills and I had the littlest ones I could find.

T7 also discussed the challenge of implementing a tie-dyeing activity:

So, I did tie-dye shirts with the three-year-olds. It did not work out so well... it was quite a mess, and that was a learning experience that I did not ever do again.

The three-year-olds... I don't think they grasped the concept, but it was something fun for them to do.

When asked if they would do the activity again, T7 responded: "It kind of seemed like it was too, it was not developmentally appropriate for the children. That's exactly what it was. And I was still, as I am now, learning that."

In addition, T9 described the difficulty of accommodating various developmental stages:

What challenges I faced were trying to make something for the younger children and the older children, because they were developmentally, like, you know, they're two different stages. Younger children couldn't go and paint pictures, but they could maybe finger paint, play and paint. It was the age range that's hard for me. If I had all younger children, I could do that. It's the mixed group.

Finally, another challenge highlighted by a participant was ensuring that lesson plans aligned with children's developmental needs. T9 discussed their struggle with lesson planning: "Um, like, more like with lesson plans, one on one, because lesson

planning was something that I struggled with also even now, when it came to making sure everything was developmentally appropriate.” Participants experienced various challenges in creating developmentally appropriate strategies, including fostering social skills, maintaining engagement, designing activities for different developmental stages, and ensuring effective lesson planning.

Challenges Implementing Teaching Strategies

Challenges implementing teaching strategies describe the difficulties participants experienced when trying to effectively apply their methods and techniques to support learning and development in young children. Participants experienced challenges in both implementing their ideas and adapting their teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of their children. T9 discussed the difficulties in putting ideas into practice: “Um, I get a lot of ideas, but I can’t say that I really found anything to really like, help me be successful to be able to put those practices in place for those age groups.” Similarly, T2 highlighted the challenge of quickly adapting strategies for different children:

So, I think my problem is trying to switch between kids so quickly, and remember who’s where, and how I’m supposed to facilitate the same conversation or the same play or the same lesson to the two different kids while getting the same outcome.

T3 discussed the challenge of implementing ideas due to selecting appropriate materials:

I realized that the brushes I selected were too small for my children’s hands, and so that activity didn’t quite work out. I then went back to the drawing board and

realized that maybe smaller hands and since they are learning and there may be a learning curve, I should have selected maybe medium to larger brushes.

Engagement and communication challenges were also noted by participants. T8 described the difficulty of engaging children to model actions: “Just getting them to slow down and look and watch us model what we’re doing.” Additionally, T4 expressed the struggle in communicating:

I mean, very little. I feel like sometimes when you don’t use the key words that they know, and they be like, “I still don’t understand what you’re saying.” If you don’t say it that one particular way. Sometimes I just be like, “I just don’t get why.” Like I’ve tried using it more than once. More frequently.

T6 discussed the challenges in maintaining children’s engagement during an activity:

It was the process of trying to tear paper using our fine motor skills. I was even going around helping them. Some of them were getting it, and then some of them just were like, “No, I don’t want to do it,” threw the paper on the floor. Everybody started walking away from the table. I said, “Okay, we’re done.” We went and did something else. I didn’t feel it was too hard, but they just weren’t engaging in it, so we left it and came back to it at a later date.

Finally, T8 highlighted the challenge of adjusting to new teaching methods and tools:

And those kids caught on so fast to that, then when I went to the Teaching Strategies, it’s a different way of doing things. So, it took me a little bit more time to grasp how to do the lesson plans.

Participants experienced multifaceted challenges in implementing effective teaching strategies, offering a comprehensive insight into the difficulties of putting methods and techniques into practice. The theme challenges with creating developmentally appropriate strategies address the various challenges participants described in supporting the development of all domains, creating developmentally appropriate strategies, and implementing teaching strategies. These included equally supporting developmental domains, maintaining engagement, adapting strategies for different developmental stages, ensuring effective lesson planning, and selecting appropriate materials. These multifaceted challenges highlight the complexity of aligning teaching methods with the diverse developmental needs of children.

Theme 3: Teachers Are Challenged to Create Inclusive and Supportive Educational Environments

Participants highlighted difficulties experienced in designing and maintaining educational settings that are welcoming, equitable, and supportive for all students, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or needs. This theme includes center policies and DAP conflict, challenged incorporating cultural context, rigid/non-inclusive curriculum, and inadequate support. The following analysis provides a detailed examination of these categories, grounded in excerpts from the participants' interview data.

Center Policies and DAP Conflict

Center policies and DAP conflict describe participants' experiences of the tensions and challenges that arose when the established policies of the educational center

conflicted with the principles of DAP. Participants discussed specific challenges related to inflexible center policies, administrative interference, and misalignment with children's developmental needs. Participants shared challenges with inflexible center policies that impeded their ability to modify teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of their children effectively. T2 highlighted this difficulty:

But noticing something, it's not working for my classroom is not acceptable, so trying to go and find and implement something in our class to kind of work with the new changes doesn't really work in our institute, because they come in and they kind of change that.

Participant T7 stated: "I find myself asking that question every single day, because it seems like what the guidelines that we are given are way off from what the children actually need." Participants emphasized the disparity between inflexible policies and the actual needs of children in their centers.

Participants highlighted the challenge of administrative interference conflicting with DAP. They described how administrative competition and interference hindered DAP. T10 shared: "Sometimes administrators forget their job, their responsibility, and some of them are in competition with the teachers. When that happens, it does not allow DAP culturally for what I need to do with my children." Other participants described how administrative interferences contributed to confusion and conflicted with DAP: T2 mentioned:

Matter of fact, I'm not even supposed to be playing cocoa melon in my classroom. It's something that I have to go against the bounds up and they have, we have

frequent checks, that's kind of like ducking and dodging. The staff will come in and do it the institute's way and it just confuses the kids all the way around.

Participants discussed how administrative decisions limited the creation of broader educational activities, thereby conflicting with DAP: T10 explained: "And then if I could use the school, not just my classroom, then I can create activities and opportunities in other parts of the school as well. But that, but that's an administration issue."

Participants further highlighted the challenges that arose when center guidelines and administrative expectations did not align with the developmental needs of children. These discrepancies between guidelines and the developmental needs of children were difficult to overcome. T2 shared:

So, what the school system deems developmentally appropriate and my opinion, it is not so developmentally appropriate because it seems like the toys yes are appropriate for the kids, but what we're having them do with the toys, in my opinion, are not appropriate and that they don't understand, so I kind of deviate from that little bit to make it easier for them to understand. We may focus on simple things like colors instead of what the system wants us to do.

Participants described the challenge of meeting children's developmental needs within the constraints of administrative expectations: T4 stated:

And it's hard because then like I'm outside with the administrators, they're like, well, what's wrong with them? They need to go and play with the other kids. They can't stay right here; they need to be learning too. But it's like they just don't like that; that's not their seat, and I am not gonna force them to be there.

Participants discussed the conflict between center policies and DAP, specifically highlighting the effects of inflexible policies, administrative interference, and the misalignment of children's developmental needs.

Challenges Incorporating Cultural Context

Challenges incorporating cultural context describe the difficulties participants experienced in integrating and respecting the diverse cultural backgrounds of the children in their care within their teaching practices. They highlighted challenges related to the lack of cultural representation in classroom materials and the integration of multiple languages and customs. T2 described the limited cultural representation in their classroom materials:

We have certain books in ours, so we have some, the language is on the back so that we can properly say the words, but it's of different cultural foods, dishes, African dishes. We have certain children's books that show kids in hijabs or even, you know, Mexican traditions and whatever, but what I did not realize is that in our kitchen alone, right, there's just American food and that's it. You see a big potato with butter on top, classic grilled chicken, things like that, but there are some things that other cultures eat that we could put there. So, if kids kind of see what that is, we can maybe teach that and be like, this is this.

Participants described the lack of cultural representation for the children in their classroom. T4 explained:

I'm just speaking, like, where I am right now, because where I am right now, I feel like they aren't really hip, I guess. I'm where I am now, I have a lot of like,

like Jamaican kids. I have a lot of Caribbean kids in my classroom. I think I feel like the parents would appreciate it if we put that kind of stuff in the classroom.

Participants noted the challenge of ensuring cultural diversity in classroom materials: T5 expressed:

Just, I think the challenge is just being aware of, you know, being aware of our actions and what we do and making sure we're having pictures and books that reflect the cultural diversity of the children in our classroom environment. I think that's important, being intentional.

Participants discussed the challenges they experienced when integrating multiple languages and customs within their classroom. One challenge was integrating multiple languages into the classroom: T1 shared:

You know, it's kind of a challenge because you want understanding. Even babies that are young see that the baby is bilingual. They know their own language and then they come to the classroom, and they know the English language... I wish I could get some information to do a classroom activity and say hello in different languages.

They also emphasized the challenge of understanding and integrating various customs:

T1 shared:

I have different cultures in my classroom, and more information would be good for me. How can I get information on Asian customs? It's different... a lot of different Asian nationalities. I asked the mother, and she said they're from China. It's very different here than where they're from, but in their household, they

probably use a lot of their culture. So, the baby comes to my classroom, and it's really different for the baby because we're speaking English.

Many participants highlighted the challenge of adapting teaching methods to support customs: T7 explained:

Sometimes you have children with different cultural backgrounds, and that affects the way they learn... they do things differently in another culture, it may seem that they're behind when they're not. That is a challenge when using DAP in the classroom.

Participants discussed the challenges of incorporating cultural context into their classrooms, highlighting issues such as the lack of cultural representation in classroom materials and the difficulties of integrating multiple languages and customs.

Rigid/Noninclusive Curriculum

A rigid, noninclusive curriculum describes educational programs and teaching practices that lacked flexibility and failed to accommodate the diverse cultural, linguistic, and developmental needs of all children. Participants described various challenges, including the limitations of standardized corporate-based curricula and the difficulty of individualizing learning within rigid instructional frameworks. Many participants noted that the clarity of instruction within these curricula was often lacking, making it difficult for both teachers and students to grasp the material effectively. T7 highlighted the issue of clarity:

Um, I think a lot. Another thing is the wording, you know how sometimes doctors explain stuff to us, and they have to explain it in a manner to where we

understand it. I kind of sometimes feel like maybe some curriculums can kind of do that as well, they don't explain things in a certain manner.

They noted the rigid nature of standardized curricula: T10 stated:

The curriculum doesn't leave room for variations at all and then if you're not doing what's in that box, you get penalized. You get written up as a teacher. They want to look in your classroom at 10 o'clock, If it says you're supposed to be doing math, and studying blocks, you have to be doing math and studying blocks at 10 o'clock."

Participants also highlighted the challenges of individualizing learning within a standardized curriculum, emphasizing the difficulty of creating tailored educational plans that met the unique needs of each child. When asked, "What challenges you experience when implementing corporate-based curriculum to support DAP?" T10 responded: "Well, in larger chain schools like Primrose or Goddard, the curriculum is corporate-based and created by the corporate office. It's designed for specific age groups without room for variations." They described the challenge of individualizing development plans to meet children's individual needs. T3 discussed: "I think the challenge is for all the children in my classroom to have an individual plan for their specific development, but that fits within my curriculum for the entire classroom." They also discussed the challenge with pre-packaged curricula and children's unique needs: T1 mentioned:

The challenge is often we have a curriculum that we don't create. The curriculum is either corporate-based, or it's because they buy these curriculums in packages

and boxes and oftentimes that curriculum does not meet the children where they are.

Participants highlighted the difficulty of individualizing learning plans within a standardized curriculum, showing how rigid, pre-packaged curricula often failed to meet the diverse needs of students.

Inadequate Support and Resources

Inadequate support and resources describe the lack of staffing and variety of resources that participants experienced in their efforts to create inclusive and developmentally appropriate educational environments. Many participants discussed the effects of staffing challenges and inadequate supervision on classroom support. T5 shared: “So, you know, if we were short staffed, then, you know, I may have people that are just in there temporarily, you know, those kinds of things. Those are when challenges come into place.” They expressed how the challenges of inadequate screening affected staffing. T2 included the following explanation:

I think that more screening should be used within who is left in childcare, because everybody doesn't come in there to help the kids. And a lot of what setting kids back or keeping them in the same spot and leading to lots of overturning rates in childcare. It's just because of who they let walk through the door. Developing the appropriate play doesn't happen with the kids... it's who's facilitating that and especially where I work that is not available.

They described staffing issues that led to inadequate supervision. T2 further explained: “Someone on their phone and can see a child back there and missing all the learning

opportunities about what social functioning is and what physical functioning is, and how you can manage all of those things.”

Participants expressed their experiences with the inconsistency and insufficiency of resources, which hindered their ability to implement effective and engaging learning environments. They highlighted the limited variety of resources available. T2 stated:

“While we do have a science and surgery center, it’s limited to just the institute’s tools.”

Additionally, T4 described the lack of sufficient resources:

Um, as of right here like right here right now, I don’t have a lot of really things for them to play with like, even to sit there and put Legos out there only Legos really for a few kids. Like, they like manipulatives, they love them and we don’t really have a lot of them, there only like, little spare parts around, but I don’t really have a lot of those. I have been asking for them, but she probably got them, but I don’t know.

Participants noted the inconsistency and lack of sufficient resources provided. T2 shared:

I will definitely say that my institute that I currently work at feels as if they provide us enough resources to fix the problems of dealing with problems in the classroom. But I, myself, at least, I have not found that to be true, it’s a lot more difficult to follow what they have, because it’s just so inconsistent.

A lack of cultural and linguistic resources provided by the administration, which hindered their ability to create inclusive learning environments was identified. T10 explained:

As soon as you enroll these children in my classroom, it’s part of the administration’s responsibility to get this information... It’s not my job—that’s

administrative. However, if I do it through relationships and communication with families... I want the word “clock” in Swahili, I want the word “door” so they can have that transition of language... This helps children transition languages while feeling that their family and culture are represented. This kind of support is essential for me to enforce effectively.

Participants experienced significant challenges due to inadequate support and resources in their efforts to create inclusive and developmentally appropriate learning environments. These challenges included several key areas of staffing issues and the inconsistency and insufficiency of resources.

The theme teachers are challenged to create inclusive and supportive educational environments revealed several key issues participants expressed, including center policies and DAP conflict, challenges incorporating cultural context, a rigid/noninclusive curriculum, and inadequate support and resources. These challenges included inflexible policies, a lack of cultural representation in classroom materials, limitations of standardized curricula, and staffing challenges. Participants noted that these challenges led to confusion and inconsistency in implementing DAP. This resulted in the lack of representation of diverse cultural elements, lack of clarity, and penalization within rigid/noninclusive curricula, and insufficient resources and support. Participants emphasized that these issues negatively affected children’s engagement and teachers’ ability to effectively meet their diverse needs.

Theme 4: Teachers Need DAP Professional Development and Resources

The theme teachers need professional development and resources emphasizes the necessity of ongoing training, education, and access to materials that support teachers' professional growth and effectiveness. This theme highlights participants' needs in three key areas: professional development and diverse training, cultural competence development, and access to developmentally appropriate resources. The following analysis provides a detailed examination of these needs, grounded in excerpts from the participants' interview data.

Need Professional Development With Diverse Training

Many participants identified the need for professional development through a variety of training programs within early childhood education. They highlighted several specific areas of training that were essential for improving their skills and effectiveness in supporting and teaching children from diverse backgrounds. The need for training in best practices was mentioned by T5:

If teachers are put in classrooms...they may be trained on just the basic licensing stuff, but sometimes, they may not have had the training on best practices or what is developmentally appropriate. So sometimes training is a big factor in that.

T7 further emphasized the importance of necessary training in assessment and documentation, noting that these skills were foundational for all other aspects of DAP and preventive support and care. T7 explained:

Obviously, I think documentation and assessment is kind of the key in DAP because we need that before, to me personally, we need that before we can do

everything else. We need that before we can screen. We need that before, you know, we could send a child off for early intervention. So, I think that's one of the main things that will help with DAP is learning that assessing and documentation is key.

Both T7 and T8 expressed the need for specific training in brain development. T8 responded to a follow-up question about the training needed for DAP, noting: "Learning about how the brain works and how they make those connections" was an important factor to understand. T7 further explained that training in Conscious Discipline was needed to help teachers see different perspectives and understand brain development: "But you know, "learning" Conscious Discipline makes you see different sides, and you need to learn about, you know, how the brain works..." Participants emphasized that administrators needed to recognize the importance of training and ensure that their staff received adequate and ongoing training. Participant T5 stated "Making sure directors and administrators and owners know the importance of properly training their staff... Making sure that they get the training hours they need... and even when you pass your CDA... continuing to educate themselves." Additionally, other participants emphasized the necessity for comprehensive training programs. As T8 expressed, "I definitely don't know what else I could say. I mean, of course, we need all kinds of trainings and stuff that helps. Absolutely. That helps."

Participants highlighted the need for improving their abilities and refining existing skills to increase proficiency and effectiveness in teaching and supporting children's development. They emphasized the need for skill development. T1 expressed a need for

improving skills and obtaining experience: “Develop better skills—that’s what I just say—help me develop better skills, you know, in teaching and in helping the children develop.” T1 further stated that “just more experience” was needed to improve skills. Additionally, the need for practical application, emphasizing the value of hands-on practice and continuous use of skills was stressed by participants. T3 expressed: “Just everyday practice, practice, practice...instead of just reading about it, take the information and use it...it helps me with my development in my skills.” Similarly, T2 stated “I need more hands-on opportunities” emphasizing the need for practical, experiential learning.

Participants also highlighted the need for effective examples and feedback in their professional development to improve their practice. T9 shared: “So, I guess maybe give examples, give more examples of how we can be more successful or how we can aid children in DAPs.” They requested feedback to improve their practice. T6 stated: “I can only do but so much and if I’m making a mistake, let me know that I’m making a mistake, and I’ll correct it. But if you don’t tell me I’m making a mistake, I can’t fix it.” Similarly, T9 stated: “Even if they had someone just come in and like, watch you to teach, that would be great also, and be able to be like, ‘Hey, let’s try this instead of this,’ or ‘Let’s do this instead of that,’” emphasizing the need for constructive feedback.

Participants expressed a need for ongoing professional development and diverse training programs to improve their skills and effectiveness in early childhood education. They highlighted the need for training in best practices, assessment, documentation, and brain development, as well as the need for administrators to recognize and support professional development. Additionally, participants emphasized the need for practical

applications, hands-on opportunities, and effective examples to promote continuous skill development and professional growth.

Need Cultural Competence Development

The need for cultural competence development describes the knowledge participants expressed they needed to foster awareness and sensitivity to cultural diversity, enabling them to create an inclusive and respectful classroom environment. Participants emphasized the necessity of gaining a thorough understanding of various cultures to effectively support and teach their children. T3 explained their need for cultural development to support the varied needs of their children: “Um, cultural development, I think, I know for myself, and I don’t know, for everyone’s classroom, but I know for myself, based on the demographic that I have in my classroom.” T7 also expressed their feelings about the need to expand opportunities for cultural competence: “So, I feel like also, we need to learn more about different cultures, because, you know, when in early education, we don’t have a lot of culture classes.” Similarly, T9 emphasized the need for comprehensive cultural education, stating: “Education on cultures—There’s a big lack of that in our industry.”

Participants highlighted the need to comprehend different cultural backgrounds to foster an inclusive classroom environment and effectively meet children’s needs. They stressed the foundational importance of understanding people’s culture: T6 explained “Okay, but first you need to understand people’s culture. That’s the first thing.” T6 further noted the necessity of having detailed knowledge about specific cultural backgrounds to effectively support the children in the classroom. T6 stated: “Information

about their culture. I would need more information about the culture at hand.” They elaborated on the need for cultural understanding to improve how teaching methods and practices were applied in the classroom. T7 said:

I feel like we need to learn more about different cultures or how they do certain things... When we have that understanding, it’s easy for us to apply that in the classroom... Instead of us trying to apply something and then not understanding why the child doesn’t get it... we could have addressed it in the first place... and we wouldn’t have to spend so much time with this child learning this if we understood everybody’s background.

Furthermore, participants discussed the need for cultural understanding to visibly represent the cultures of their children beyond the classroom. T10 explained:

However, you know, I think it would be really helpful for other cultures to be able to see their culture represented throughout the school, not just in one particular space, that will be helpful, because it will allow me to create the extension, and the homeschool connection that’s needed.

Participants expressed a need for ongoing cultural competence development to improve their ability to create inclusive and respectful classroom environments. They highlighted the necessity of cultural education, a comprehensive understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds, and visible cultural representation throughout the school. These elements were identified as essential to effectively supporting and teaching children, addressing their unique needs, and fostering a sense of belonging. Participants emphasized that such

knowledge would augment teaching methods and practices, ultimately enriching the learning experience for all children.

Need Access to Developmentally Appropriate Resources

The need for access to developmentally appropriate resources highlights participants' requirement for educational materials and tools that align with children's developmental stages. Participants experienced challenges due to insufficient or inappropriate resources, which failed to meet the developmental needs of their children and thereby hindered the implementation of effective teaching practices. The necessity of DAP resources and tools for children with various challenges, specifically ADHD and physical disabilities, was discussed. T3 explained:

More things to use as far as the DAP when it comes to children with behavioral challenges or children with developmental challenges, children that have ADHD, that's harder to keep their attention on a certain activity, children with physical disabilities, how do we implement DAP for them? I don't know a lot of literature or information on how to implement with that. I think that's definitely something that can be more beneficial in the classroom nowadays.

They emphasized the need for hands-on tools that allow children to experience and learn about different textures and materials. T2 explained:

I think if we provide more tools with more features of diversity.... If we can have, if we're doing clouds, and we have little cotton balls that show this is what clouds feel soft, they look soft. You know, this is what sand feels like; we're able to go outside to even feel like that, or not even in the hot sun, but just to come inside

and have an area where we can specifically be like, yes, this is what we have.

They're really interested in that stuff. And you can foster an actual lesson that if I had the tools to show them, like, hey, this is actually what we do with it. If we were able to use what these things felt like, we could just be like, hey, this is what water feels like, we play with water this way.

T6 also expressed a need for appropriate tools to support their class:

Give us the tools to be developmentally appropriate for their class. And micromanage, don't come in and stand in a corner, just watch me, oh, you need to do this, you need to do that, you need this and that. I'm one person. Give teachers the tools to do their job and not micromanage them.

Participants highlighted the importance of having resources that reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds of students, ensuring an inclusive learning environment. This was stressed by T1:

Oh yes OK I think lots and lots and lots of resources of different around the world resources of different nationalities, different languages, different customs, you know, a lot of information, information is needed. The information is out there is good but even the more information the better.

They also expressed a need for materials and supplies that accommodate the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of children. T10 elaborated:

So that would look like, let's say, for example, this is the top of the year and I, you know, look at my roster, ..., I have five children from India, four children from China, you know, six children from Africa. I need books, I need materials, I

need supplies. I need, once I report back and say these are the languages that are spoken in their homes, I need to have these things translated in these languages. Bring it out for me, especially if I've written it down, and I'm giving you the list, print it out for me and you can go on any, you know, there's language translators all over the internet. So that would be helpful.

Participants emphasized the essential need for comprehensive, developmentally appropriate resources and targeted professional development to support effective teaching practices and foster inclusive learning environments. They highlighted the importance of providing tailored tools, hands-on learning materials, culturally inclusive resources, and ongoing training to meet the diverse needs of children in early childhood education.

Theme 5: Teachers Need Collaboration

The theme teachers need collaboration reflects participants' recognition of the need for cooperative efforts among educators, families, and other professionals to improve the educational experience for children. This theme includes the need for professional support and the need for family partnerships. The following analysis provides a detailed examination of these needs, grounded in excerpts from the participants' interview data.

Need for Professional Support

Participants emphasized the need for professional support in the classroom to improve overall teaching effectiveness and better manage their responsibilities. T10 stated, "Support would be great to have, so that we can do our best and offer our best."

They consistently expressed that additional classroom support would help create a more effective learning environment for everyone. T8 explained:

Because one child can upset the whole class. When a child starts acting up, the others tend to follow. They see the child not paying attention and think, “We don’t want to play or do this activity because he’s doing that.” This behavior can disrupt the entire class, so can we get more help, you know, in the classroom with that?

Furthermore, they emphasized that additional support was necessary to manage and fulfill their responsibilities. T9 stated, “I think if I have somebody to work one on one with me, maybe for a little while to do lesson plans targeted for zero to three, that would be great!” Similarly, T8 expressed, “We need more support! Like how other classrooms have paraprofessionals. They have lots of teaching help.” T10 highlighted the need for support to ensure overall classroom efforts were not limited to their classroom, stating “It would be really great to have support administratively! Whatever I do in the classroom, if the administration doesn’t support it, then it’s limited to my classroom, which isn’t really great.” Additionally, participants shared that professional support should be responsive to the needs of the children in their classrooms. T4 stated, “I feel like they should check in with the teachers and ask, ‘Hey, what do your kids like? How do your kids play? Where are they at developmentally?’ This way, they know what to put in the classroom.” The participants emphasized the necessity for support to address the unique context and experience of their children in the classroom to teach effectively and foster positive learning experiences.

Need for Family Partnerships

Participants highlighted the necessity of family partnerships to foster cooperative efforts between teachers and families to improve the learning experience for children. They emphasized the need for open, continuous, and collaborative communication between teachers and families to support children's educational development. Participants emphasized the necessity for continuous communication between teachers and parents. T2 explained that teachers needed to ask parents questions such as, "Are children learning something from the day they first walked in the door? Are they regressing or are they progressing in that class?" These questions helped establish a partnership with families and track children's progress. T5 also discussed the need for open communication to gather children's developmental progress. T5 explained:

Parents are the children's first teachers, and a lot of times, before children come into care, parents have seen what they're doing developmentally. So, there may be things a child may be doing that I have not seen that child do in the classroom, so I need that communication with my parents. They need to let me know at home if he was pulling up, he started to take steps, those kinds of things, so that open communication with my parents.

Some participants emphasized the need for collaboration with families to improve learning outcomes. Participant T7 stated:

I would say if we can get all of us together using our teachers' skills and the lesson plan, and if we have the parents' support, I think we can make this happen and make the developmental practices work. I think that's what I need.

T10 discussed their need to collaborate with parents to ensure children's educational success:

Parents, not trusting our experience, not trusting our knowledge and our education, not trusting that we understand DAPs, and so they won't partner with us like they should. If we're creating variations of activities and modules in the classroom to prepare them, parents won't partner with us. We need for them to work with us to make sure that their child is prepared for the next level.

They also shared their need to collaborate with parents to provide comprehensive support for children: T8 explained:

I think we need more types of support such as an Occupational Therapist. We have someone who comes over maybe once or twice a week to work with the child, but it will also help the parents. The parents, too, sometimes lack being involved here.

Participants expressed the necessity of family partnerships to improve educational experiences for children. They identified key elements such as continuous communication and collaborative efforts with families for creating an effective and supportive educational environment.

The theme teachers need collaboration highlights the critical importance of cooperative efforts among teachers, families, and other professionals to improve the learning experience for children. Participants stressed the necessity of building strong family partnerships and leveraging professional support to address the diverse needs of students effectively. By fostering collaboration, teachers can create more inclusive and

supportive learning environments that not only benefit children's academic growth but also their overall development. Addressing the needs for professional support and family partnerships is essential to ensure a comprehensive and responsive approach to education, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for all children.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is the researcher's establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To develop trustworthiness in the research, the researcher aimed to ensure rigor and quality in the research study design, execution, and delivery to the extent that the findings could be applied to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To ensure trustworthiness, I implemented strategies focusing on credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Data collection was conducted through semistructured interviews, with an audit trail maintained throughout the study.

Credibility

Credibility was achieved by a researcher gathering data from well-informed and experienced individuals with a deep understanding and knowledge of the research topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The credibility of a qualitative study is also achieved by the researcher maintaining the authenticity of participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Various methodological strategies were utilized to strengthen the credibility of the data collected and the findings presented. These strategies included ensuring participant expertise, audio recording and transcription, and member checking.

I adhered to specific study criteria and provided detailed information included in the invitation to recruit participants. This ensured that participants were well-informed, experienced, and knowledgeable about the research topic. The interview protocol guide and interview questions were designed with open-ended prompts to gather rich, detailed data, aiming to obtain credible insights and background information from the participants. Additionally, I documented the participants' backgrounds and experiences to provide transparency and establish the credibility of the findings.

I used audio recordings of participant interviews to capture all details accurately. The recordings were transcribed verbatim using TranscribeMe an online transcription service, to ensure the precision of the participants' accounts. I listened to the recordings multiple times and reread the transcripts line by line to ensure accurate interpretation of participants' statements and build a robust, coherent narrative. These meticulous processes ensured the credibility of the data by maintaining the authenticity and accuracy of the participants' accounts.

I conducted member checking by presenting the summary of study findings to the participants for their review and feedback. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), accurately reporting any inconsistencies or discrepancies in the data is crucial to reducing biases and supporting the credibility of the research. During my analysis, I identified some discrepancies in the data from a single participant, particularly regarding challenges related to social and emotional development. These discrepancies were addressed through member checking, ensuring that the participants' perspectives were accurately represented. Participants were presented with a two-page summary of the analyzed

interview data and findings. There were no disagreements or remarks from the participants regarding the findings. Member checking contributed to the credibility of the study by allowing participants to verify and confirm the accuracy of the findings.

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other settings or social contexts while maintaining the richness specific to the original context (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). To improve transferability in this research study, I provided detailed descriptions of the research context, participant demographics, and settings. The participants were early childhood teachers who held a CDA or provisional credential, with at least two years of teaching experience, and were currently teaching children from birth to age 3 years in childcare centers in the United States. These rich, contextual details allowed readers to determine whether the findings of this study could be transferred to other similar settings. By offering a comprehensive view of the study environment, I aimed to make the research findings more applicable to various educational contexts. Detailed descriptions of the participants' backgrounds, the study setting, and the nuances of their interactions and experiences were provided, helping readers draw meaningful connections between the findings and other social settings, thereby increasing the transferability of the research.

Participants were recruited through an invitation posted on relevant websites. Additionally, snowball sampling was used to identify more participants who met the study criteria. This approach ensured a diverse and knowledgeable participant pool, enriching the relevance and depth of the data. The insights and experiences of these

participants provided valuable perspectives that may be applicable to other similar educational settings, thereby increasing the transferability of the research.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency of the results with the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and the documentation and explanation of any adjustments made throughout the research process (Burkholder et al., 2016). To achieve dependability in this study, I maintained an audit trail and a reflexive journal. Throughout the research process, I used the reflexive journal to document decisions related to problems, issues, or ideas encountered while collecting data. However, no significant problems or challenges arose during the data collection process. This reflexive journal was also used to record my analysis and interpretation of the data, providing a transparent account of the research process.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the concept that other researchers can verify the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the findings derive from the perspectives of the participants rather than the researcher's biases (Burkholder et al., 2016). To achieve confirmability in this study, I maintained reflexive journaling throughout the research process. I used the journal to examine my positionality, including my background, and to reflect on my values, interests, and biases that could influence the research process. This reflexive journaling was used to document my reflections, decisions, and the rationale behind them, providing a transparent account of the research process. By continually engaging in reflexivity, I aimed to mitigate the influence of my

biases and improve the objectivity of the research findings. The data reflected the participants' perspectives, not my biases, principles, motivations, or interests, thereby maintaining the confirmability of the study.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I described the data analysis process and shared the findings of the study. The study was designed to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of using DAP to make informed decisions to support the development and learning of birth-to-3-year-old children in the classroom and to identify what is needed to improve their use of DAP.

Data collection was conducted from 10 participants through semistructured interviews, and thematic analysis was used to identify the main themes and patterns. Both Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Saldaña (2016) were utilized to guide the analysis process. Five themes were identified: (a) teachers are challenged to teach, (b) teachers are challenged to implement DAP, (c) teachers are challenged to create inclusive and supportive educational environments, (d) teachers need DAP professional development and resources, and (e) teachers need collaboration. Themes 1, 2, and 3 answered RQ1, whereas themes 4 and 5 answered RQ2.

The first theme was teachers are challenged to teach. Many participants identified several key barriers that impeded their ability to teach and facilitate learning. They expressed a lack of confidence and understanding of DAP, along with feeling limited by a lack of autonomy and flexibility in their teaching practices. Insufficient time consistently emerged as a barrier, hindering their ability to meet teaching demands, plan lessons,

conduct assessments, and address the diverse needs of their children. Behavioral challenges also emerged as a major issue, with many participants experiencing difficulties managing disruptive behaviors that affected classroom dynamics and teaching effectiveness. They struggled to address multiple behavioral or sensory needs simultaneously and tailor instruction to meet the unique needs of each child. Participants also described difficulties in supporting children of different ages and developmental stages within the same classroom. Furthermore, the absence of a one-size-fits-all solution in education complicated their efforts to teach effectively.

The second theme was teachers are challenged to implement DAP. Participants experienced numerous difficulties integrating DAP into their teaching methods or pedagogy, particularly in addressing social-emotional development and equally supporting all developmental domains. This was especially difficult in the post-COVID-19 era, when some participants observed children's emotional responses becoming more extreme and attachment behaviors increasing. They also identified that supporting social skills in mixed-age groups was difficult, especially with young toddlers. Participants consistently struggled to create engaging activities that maintained children's attention and interest while supporting varying cognitive and fine motor skills. Many participants experienced difficulties adapting activities for mixed-age groups to ensure all children were engaged and learning according to their developmental levels. Additionally, lesson planning remained an ongoing struggle, with participants finding it challenging to align plans with children's developmental needs.

Implementing teaching strategies effectively was also a challenge for participants. Participants frequently experienced difficulty implementing their ideas, adapting strategies quickly for different children, and selecting appropriate materials that aligned with children's needs and capabilities. They also identified challenges in adapting to new teaching methods and tools, such as different lesson planning approaches, which required additional time and effort, and further reduced their effectiveness. These multifaceted challenges significantly affected participants' ability to implement DAP effectively.

The third theme was teachers are challenged to create inclusive and supportive educational environments. Many participants discussed the ongoing struggle with center policies that often conflicted with DAP. They described these policies as being rigid and unyielding, making it challenging for participants to adapt their teaching strategies to support the diverse needs of children. Additionally, some participants noted that administrative interference posed further challenges by limiting broader learning experiences and hindering efforts to meet children's developmental needs, which hindered their efforts to create an inclusive and supportive environment. Several participants consistently shared that integrating cultural context into their teaching practices was a challenge. They noted a lack of diverse cultural representation in classroom materials and difficulties associated with incorporating multiple languages and customs. This lack of cultural inclusivity, combined with the challenge of adapting teaching methods to respect different customs, created obstacles for providing a genuinely inclusive educational environment.

Additionally, the rigidity and lack of inclusiveness in curriculums further heightened these issues. Participants found that standardized corporate-based curriculums often did not allow for variations or individualized learning plans, resulting in a disconnect between the curriculum and the children's individual learning needs. Inadequate support and resources, including staffing shortages and insufficient supervision, further hindered their ability to create engaging and effective learning environments. The absence of cultural and linguistic resources from the administration also impeded efforts to establish inclusive classrooms.

The fourth theme was teachers need DAP professional development and resources. Some participants identified the need for professional development through various training programs in early childhood education. They expressed specific training needs essential for improving their skills and effectiveness in supporting and teaching children from diverse backgrounds. This included training in best practices, assessment, documentation, and brain development. Participants also emphasized the importance of administrators recognizing and ensuring that staff receive adequate training hours and ongoing education. They further expressed the need for cultural competence development to foster awareness and sensitivity to cultural diversity. They emphasized that understanding various cultures is essential to creating an inclusive and respectful classroom environment.

Additionally, they expressed the need for comprehensive cultural education, detailed knowledge of different cultural backgrounds, and visible cultural representation throughout the center as essential for effectively supporting and teaching children.

Participants also needed access to developmentally appropriate resources that align with children's developmental stages. This included the necessity for resources tailored to children with specific challenges, such as ADHD and physical disabilities. Some participants stressed the importance of having hands-on tools and materials that reflected diverse cultural backgrounds, ensuring an inclusive learning environment. They also emphasized the need for materials and supplies that accommodate the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of children to support effective teaching practices.

The fifth theme was teachers need collaboration. Participants emphasized the need for increased professional support in the classroom to improve teaching effectiveness. They expressed the need for additional classroom support to create a better learning environment and manage responsibilities. Some participants needed assistance managing disruptive behaviors that affected the entire class, while others stressed the importance of administrative support and involving teachers in decisions about classroom needs. Most participants felt that support should address the unique context and experience of children to foster positive learning experiences. Participants also emphasized the need for family partnerships to foster cooperative efforts between teachers and families. They stressed the importance of open, continuous, and collaborative communication to support children's educational development. Numerous participants noted that teachers should communicate with parents to track children's progress and gather developmental information. They consistently emphasized the need for collaboration with families to improve learning outcomes and ensure children's educational success. Many participants also emphasized the need for comprehensive

support for children, including involving parents and external professionals, such as occupational therapists, to provide holistic support.

In Chapter 5, I interpret the study findings presented in Chapter 4, draw conclusions based on the analysis, and provide recommendations for future research and practice. I compare the research findings with existing literature and the conceptual framework from Chapter 2, highlighting how the findings support, confirm, or extend current knowledge. Additionally, the limitations of the study are addressed, the broader implications of the findings are discussed, and areas for further investigation are suggested to advance the field of early childhood education.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of using DAP to make informed decisions that support the development and learning of birth-to-3-year-old children in the classroom. The study also aimed to explore what is needed to improve teachers' use of DAP. Data were collected through semistructured interviews conducted via Zoom with 10 early childhood teachers to gain in-depth insights into their experiences and perspectives. Analysis of the interview data led to the identification of challenges teachers experience and what they believe is necessary to improve the implementation of DAP in early childhood education. Five themes were derived from the analysis: (a) teachers are challenged to teach, (b) teachers are challenged to implement DAP, (c) teachers are challenged to create inclusive and supportive educational environments, (d) teachers need DAP professional development and resources, and (e) teachers need collaboration.

In this chapter, I interpret the findings of the study and explore how the results provide insights into the practical challenges experienced by early childhood teachers in implementing DAP. Additionally, I describe the strategies and resources that participants identified as necessary to improve the use of DAP in early childhood education. I compare the research findings with current literature and the conceptual framework of DAP. I also discuss the limitations of the study and implications of these findings for educational practices and professional development and provide recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of the Findings

After obtaining approval from the Walden University IRB, I began data collection by recruiting 10 participants for one-on-one semistructured interviews. Thematic analysis, guided by the frameworks of Merriam and Tisdell (2016) and Saldaña (2016), was used to identify patterns and themes within the data. My interpretation of the findings was grounded in the literature review and the conceptual framework of DAP. In this section, I describe the five themes that emerged from the analysis. Themes 1, 2, and 3 answered RQ1, which was the following: What are early childhood teachers' perspectives on the challenges of using DAP in the classroom to make informed decisions to support the development and learning of birth-to-3-year-old children? Themes 4 and 5 answered RQ2, which was the following: What do early childhood teachers believe they need to improve their use of DAP in the classroom?

Theme 1: Teachers Are Challenged to Teach

The theme teachers are challenged to teach represented the multifaceted obstacles experienced by participants in their professional practice. This theme included four categories: lack of efficacy and knowledge, lack of time, behavioral challenges, and challenges to support individualization. I discuss these categories in relation to the peer-reviewed literature and the conceptual framework of DAP, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complex and interrelated challenges participants experienced, which impeded their effective use of teaching in their classroom.

Lack of Efficacy and Knowledge

The findings of this study align with recent literature suggesting that teachers' low confidence can limit their capacity to facilitate young children's development (see Blewitt et al., 2021; Gilken et al., 2023; Martínez-Bello et al., 2023). Participants in this study frequently reported a lack of confidence and uncertainty in their teaching practices, particularly when addressing the diverse developmental needs of the children in their classrooms. This finding aligns with Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory, which emphasizes that individuals' beliefs in their abilities directly influence their performance. Several participants expressed doubts about the effectiveness of their strategies, which hindered their ability to meet children's needs effectively. This uncertainty reinforced the essential role of teacher self-efficacy in fostering engagement and managing classroom dynamics, as discussed by Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998).

Many participants struggled to apply DAP due to gaps in foundational knowledge. For example, one participant expressed uncertainty about the meaning of "cognitive" within the context of DAP. This uncertainty regarding pedagogical concepts aligned with the NAEYC (2020m) emphasis on the need for early childhood educators to acquire comprehensive knowledge of pedagogical methods and child development across various academic disciplines. Without a clear understanding of key concepts, teachers struggled to apply DAP effectively. These findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that knowledge gaps hindered teachers' ability to create developmentally appropriate learning experiences (see Baumgartner et al., 2020; Durham et al., 2019; Kintner-Duffy et al., 2021).

Research has demonstrated that diminished self-efficacy contributes to uncertainty regarding individuals' capabilities, increased perceptions of failure, and decline in teaching effectiveness, confidence, and motivation (Bandura, 1977; Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003; Gale et al., 2021). Barni et al. (2019) found that teachers' personal values and motivations significantly affected their self-efficacy, suggesting that external pressures, such as sudden administrative directives, undermined confidence. Similarly, Calkins et al. (2024) demonstrated that intrinsic and altruistic motivations for entering teaching were positively correlated with self-efficacy, further reinforcing the challenges Participants described when their instructional autonomy was restricted.

Participants also identified a lack of autonomy as a barrier to effective teaching. The ability to make instructional decisions was a key component of implementing DAP, requiring teachers to engage in intentional, informed decision making (Bredekamp & Willer, 2021a; NAEYC, 2020b); however, Participants noted that rigid administrative policies limited their flexibility. This finding aligned with self-determination theory, which posited that restricted autonomy negatively affected motivation, performance, and professional efficacy (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

For example, T2 shared "our institute provides us with materials ... if anything changes, we have a meeting about how our institute will handle the changes. So, when a study comes out, we're not allowed to implement it independently." This statement illustrated how institutional constraints hindered teachers from applying new pedagogical knowledge, limited the integration of best practices and reinforced the participants' existing challenges in instructional decision making. D'Agostino and Douglas (2021)

emphasized that using DAP principles is essential for early childhood teachers to support each child's development and meet diverse needs. However, as T2's statement demonstrated, institutional policies prevented teachers from independently adjusting their methods, creating a gap between their professional knowledge and their ability to apply DAP effectively in practice. Similarly, Schwarz-Franco (2022) and Raymond (2023) stressed the importance of professional freedom in enabling teachers to adapt to children's needs and improve instructional effectiveness, reflecting a similar issue experienced by participants who expressed frustration over their inability to modify instructional approaches due to administrative constraints.

DAP is a framework for teaching methods that support children's development and learning (NAEYC, 2022). Early childhood teachers use their knowledge of child development and pedagogical skills to make informed decisions about learning experiences that are stimulating, challenging, and meaningful to each child (LaForett et al., 2023; Meloy et al., 2019; NAEYC, 2020). However, participants' experiences indicated that institutional constraints inhibited their ability to implement DAP effectively. This finding reinforces the importance of addressing gaps in pedagogical knowledge and promoting instructional autonomy to improve teaching practices. Without the ability to apply research-driven strategies independently, teachers struggled to support children's individualized learning, highlighting the need for professional development that not only increases knowledge but also allows for flexibility in instructional decision making. Overall, participants' experiences illustrated the interplay between self-efficacy, knowledge, and autonomy in shaping instructional practices. Their challenges highlighted

the need for targeted professional development to strengthen teachers' confidence and pedagogical understanding, thereby supporting more effective implementation of DAP in early childhood education.

Lack of Time

The lack of time, as reported by participants, emerged as a significant challenge to effective teaching. According to NAEYC's (2020l) DAP principles, children need sufficient opportunities and time to develop skills and improve learning, an issue that participants frequently identified as a major obstacle in their teaching environments. Participants reported that insufficient time to dedicate to individual children, particularly those with greater developmental needs, hindered their ability to implement DAP effectively and provide holistic learning experiences. T10 expressed this challenge, stating "if I had more time, I wouldn't be so rushed to fit everything in. I could spend more time with the children, either one-on-one or in small groups, which is often missing in modern classrooms." The study participants' concerns align with the findings from Blewitt et al. (2021), Mahfouz et al. (2024), and Yildirim (2021), who identified that insufficient time hinders teachers' ability to provide one-on-one support, especially for children requiring additional assistance.

The NAEYC (2020g) DAP principles stress that effective teaching requires thorough planning and preparation to support children's development (see also Bredekamp & Willer, 2021b). However, participants reported significant challenges related to lack of time for planning and implementing developmental activities. This finding aligns with research indicating that time constraints limit teachers' abilities to

design and facilitate meaningful learning experiences (see Schaack et al., 2022). In addition to limiting instructional planning, time constraints also hindered current participants' ability to conduct essential assessments and observations, further restricting their effectiveness in adjusting instruction to children's developmental needs.

Early childhood teachers rely on various methods, such as observations, student surveys, growth measures, and outcome assessments, to monitor children's progress and achievements (Chadwell et al., 2020; Parlakian, 2024). These tools are critical for supporting children with disabilities, ensuring they receive appropriate instruction and interventions (Chadwell et al., 2020). However, some participants reported that limited time hindered their ability to conduct thorough assessments and observations of children, directly affecting their instructional planning. This finding is consistent with the broader literature emphasizing that time constraints limit teachers' ability to analyze and apply assessment data for individualized instruction, thereby undermining the effective application of DAP to improve learning experiences (see Nordin et al., 2021; Schaack et al., 2022; Stratigos & Fenech, 2021; White et al., 2021).

NAEYC (2020f) and Cade et al. (2022) emphasized that assessment tools are essential for fostering learning environments tailored to children's individual needs, reinforcing current participants' concerns about the lack of time for effective instructional implementation. Addressing these time-related barriers is essential to empowering teachers to use assessment tools effectively, refine instructional strategies, and provide timely interventions (Calo, 2022; Kinsner, 2022; NAEYC, 2020f). Additionally, research highlighted that insufficient time for classroom management, lesson planning, and

assessments prevents teachers from effectively meeting the diverse needs of their children and implementing DAP (Blewitt et al., 2021), challenges that were consistently reported by participants in the study.

Behavioral Challenges

Participants identified behavior-related challenges that disrupted the instruction and limited engagement in the classroom. These findings align with research indicating that behavioral issues interfere with instructional flow, reducing learning opportunities for all children (see Doubet et al., 2024; Williford & Vitiello, 2020; Yoder & Williford, 2019). The NAEYC (2020) DAP principles emphasize coordinating focused activities with movement to maintain children's engagement and prevent restlessness. The study participants reported that limited opportunities for movement contributed to disruptive behaviors, complicating classroom management. Highly active children frequently interrupted instruction, making it difficult for teachers to focus on teaching. Research confirmed that hyperactive or restless behaviors in young children hinder peer and teacher engagement, necessitating intentional classroom management strategies (O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2024; Schaack et al., 2022). Participants' experiences align with Partee et al.'s (2020) research, which found that a high proportion of children exhibiting disruptive behaviors (at or above the 90th percentile) negatively affects the quality of teacher-child interactions. Managing these behaviors often takes precedence over instruction, limiting opportunities for meaningful learning interactions.

Participants also described difficulties in managing multiple children with behavioral or sensory challenges simultaneously, noting that a lack of time made it nearly

impossible to provide individualized support. Blewitt et al. (2021) emphasized that time constraints frequently hinder teachers' ability to address the needs of children with developmental delays and behavioral difficulties, reinforcing current participants' concerns about limited opportunities for individualized attention. Additionally, participants noted that inadequate classroom stimulation contributed to behavioral issues, with younger children mimicking the disruptive behaviors of older peers and older children regressing to imitate younger ones. This finding aligns with Alhassan et al. (2021) and Tamblyn et al. (2023), who identified that unmet sensory and behavioral needs escalate disruptions, affecting teacher facilitation and peer interactions. Collectively, these findings support the NAEYC (2020) DAP principles, which emphasize the importance of balancing active and calming activities to sustain engagement and minimize behavioral disruptions.

Managing children's agitated and aggressive behaviors further complicated classroom dynamics. Participants described incidents of children becoming easily agitated, exhibiting disruptive behaviors such as kicking, screaming, and crying, which significantly disrupted the learning environment. T1 shared "they like to bully, and I have no tolerance for bullying ... Sometimes I just say, 'stop' because we're not supposed to say 'no' in the classroom. I just say 'stop' when they're about to hit or kick someone." These challenges align with findings from Savina (2021), who emphasized the role of self-regulation strategies in reducing disruptive behaviors. Similarly, research indicated that agitated and aggressive behaviors can escalate rapidly, necessitating immediate intervention to maintain a structured and supportive classroom (Bulotsky Shearer et al.,

2020; Jamil et al., 2022). Participants' experiences and existing literature highlighted the importance of fostering emotional regulation because children who struggle with self-regulation may experience greater difficulty engaging in classroom activities. These insights align with the NAEYC (2020) DAP principles, which emphasize the role of consistent guidance, positive reinforcement, and intentional strategies to promote emotional regulation and create a conducive learning environment.

Challenge to Support Individualization

The study participants described the challenges of addressing diverse developmental levels and learning styles within their classrooms. Managing children of varying ages and developmental stages required significant effort to provide appropriate support and tailored learning experiences. T9 and T8 noted that children's developmental progress varied significantly, making it difficult to implement one-size-fits-all instructional approaches. These challenges reflected the difficulties reported by Jung et al. (2021) and Lindner and Schwab (2020), who found that teachers struggle with balancing class management, multitasking, and differentiation when addressing individual learning needs. Both studies emphasized the need for creative adaptations to instructional methods to support children's varied developmental progress.

Bredenkamp and Willer (2021a), NAEYC (2020b), and Thomas and Stankovic-Ramires (2021) highlighted the importance of recognizing children's fluctuating abilities and adopting flexible teaching approaches. Participants' experiences align with this perspective, as they expressed difficulty accommodating individual needs while ensuring that all children remain engaged in classroom activities. For example, T3 discussed the

challenge of designing activities that support individual needs without creating a sense of exclusion, underscoring the importance of inclusive instructional strategies.

Participants described difficulties implementing varied instructional methods to support different learning styles. T4 and T2 emphasized that rigid expectations for age-based learning milestones often hindered their ability to tailor instruction. NAEYC (2020h) discussed the importance of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which promotes inclusive teaching by offering multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. This aligns with the participants' challenges, as they expressed the difficulty of finding adaptable teaching strategies to meet diverse learning needs. Addressing individualization in early childhood classrooms requires balancing individualized attention with effective class management. Current participants' insights highlighted the difficulties in adopting flexible, responsive teaching approaches to support all children's development.

Theme 2: Teachers Are Challenged to Implement DAP

The theme teachers are challenged to implement DAP represents the complex difficulties participants experienced in developing, adapting, and applying DAP principles to support children's learning and development. I identified three categories: challenges supporting the development of all domains, challenges with creating developmentally appropriate strategies, and challenges implementing teaching strategies. These categories are discussed in relation to existing peer-reviewed literature and the DAP framework, providing a deeper understanding of the multifaceted obstacles participants experienced in effectively applying DAP.

Challenges Supporting the Development of All Domains

The challenge of equally supporting all developmental domains, as reported by current participants, is consistent with the findings of Alatalo and Westlund (2021) and Olalowo and Babalola (2024), who identified practical and logistical barriers that hindered teachers' ability to equally support each domain, ultimately limiting children's opportunities for holistic growth. According to the NAEYC (2020), all developmental domains are interconnected and contribute to children's holistic development, underscoring the need for teachers to support learning across all subject areas. Fox et al. (2025) further demonstrated that many early childhood teachers struggled to categorize developmentally appropriate activities across these domains, suggesting that teachers not only experience challenges in equally addressing each domain but also experience difficulties in fully integrating activities into their daily practice, which is essential for supporting children's holistic development.

The extended effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further intensified social-emotional challenges, as noted by the study participants. For instance, some participants observed heightened emotional sensitivity and insecure attachment behaviors, such as clinginess or separation anxiety, among children who spent extended periods isolated at home during the pandemic. These challenges align with findings by Egan et al. (2021), Watts and Pattnaik (2023), and Swindle (2024), who observed that children exhibited increased emotional and social challenges due to prolonged isolation. T4 also highlighted how children's emotions had become more extreme post-pandemic, making it harder for teachers to support emotional needs in the classroom. This heightened emotional

sensitivity, combined with the increased stress experienced by teachers, is similar to the findings of Swigonski et al. (2021) and highlights the multifaceted challenges of supporting children's social-emotional development during the pandemic. As Laforett (2023), Lee et al. (2023), and Fox et al. (2025) note, these disruptions complicate efforts to maintain a holistic approach to development, as all domains of development are interconnected. Thus, the challenges reported by participants aligned with broader research highlighting the complexity of fostering social-emotional development during and after the pandemic.

Challenges With Creating Developmentally Appropriate Strategies

DAP emphasizes that teachers should design activities that extend children's abilities slightly beyond their current skill levels, providing challenges that promote growth (NAEYC, 2020h). According to Meloy et al. (2019), early childhood educators who engage in intentional DAP planning recognize children's emerging skills and interests, using them to design meaningful developmental activities. However, ensuring that activities remain engaging, accessible, and developmentally appropriate requires careful planning and adaptation.

Several of the study participants reported challenges in designing activities that were both engaging and developmentally appropriate. They noted that sustaining children's attention and minimizing disruptive behaviors while meeting their learning needs require intentional planning. T2, T3, and T9 explained that traditional toys and routines were often inadequate, creating a continuous challenge for teachers to develop innovative and safe activities that meet children's developmental needs. This finding

aligns with research by Ata-Akturk and Sevimli-Celik (2020) and Kirby et al. (2023), who found that teachers often encountered obstacles when designing and implementing creative, developmentally appropriate activities due to limited access to resources and materials. Additionally, Ata-Akturk and Sevimli-Celik (2020) emphasized that teachers often lacked experience integrating unfamiliar materials into their teaching strategies, reinforcing the need for training and structured support to foster creativity while ensuring activities remain developmentally appropriate.

Participants also reported challenges in adapting activities for children with differing developmental abilities, particularly in mixed-age classrooms. T5 and T7 described instances where younger children became frustrated or disengaged when activities were not adjusted to their developmental abilities. The study participants' experiences align with Yang et al. (2022), who found that mixed-age classrooms present unique challenges, as younger children often struggle with activities designed for older peers. Participants acknowledged the importance of creating developmentally appropriate activities but expressed uncertainty about how to modify them effectively to meet varying developmental needs. This finding aligned with Durham et al. (2019), who emphasized that while self-awareness allows teachers to recognize barriers to instructional adjustments, effectively implementing these adaptations remains a persistent challenge.

A key concern raised by participants was their limited confidence and training in modifying activities to accommodate individual developmental needs. Some of the study participants reported being unsure how to adjust activities appropriately while maintaining their intended learning objectives. These challenges align with findings from

Blewitt et al. (2021), who noted that teachers lacking sufficient training in DAP often struggle with making modifications to accommodate diverse learners. NAEYC (2020m) highlights that ongoing reflection and adjustment are essential for ensuring that teaching strategies remain aligned with children's developmental needs. The connection between these studies and current participants' experiences suggests that recognizing the value of DAP is only one step; educators require professional development opportunities and institutional support to translate these principles into effective classroom strategies.

Participants' ongoing difficulties in ensuring that lesson plans were developmentally appropriate reflect broader concerns identified in the literature. Many participants reported struggling to modify lessons to address diverse developmental needs, reinforcing research on barriers such as limited resources, insufficient training, and gaps in pedagogical knowledge (Lee & Hickmann, 2022; Yildirim, 2021). These systemic challenges contribute to the difficulties the study participants described when attempting to adapt lesson plans effectively. Bredekamp and Willer (2021a), NAEYC (2020h), and Parlakian (2024) emphasized that individualized instruction should be informed by ongoing observation, assessment, and cultural and family considerations. However, Participants found it difficult to translate these principles into practice, emphasizing the need for professional development initiatives that equip teachers with the skills and strategies necessary for implementing DAP effectively. These findings highlight the importance of providing teachers with adequate resources, training, and flexibility to implement developmentally appropriate strategies. Without such support, the challenges described by the study participants, including sustaining engagement,

creating and adapting activities for mixed-age groups, and effectively modifying lesson plans are likely to persist, ultimately affecting the quality of early childhood education.

Challenges Implementing Teaching Strategies

Participants experienced challenges in translating their ideas into practice and adapting teaching strategies to meet the varied developmental needs of children. These challenges align with findings from Brown et al. (2019) and Cade et al. (2022), who emphasized that teachers with a clear understanding of DAP are more likely to plan and implement activities that are aligned with children's developmental levels and interests. However, as noted by Hegde and Hewett (2021) and UNICEF (2018), many educational frameworks lack explicit guidance on how teachers can effectively implement DAP. Without structured support, teachers often struggle to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, reflecting the difficulties the study participants described in implementing their ideas into practice.

Participants also encountered difficulties in adapting teaching strategies for children at different developmental levels. T2, for example, described the challenge of quickly switching between children's individual needs while facilitating the same activity. This difficulty aligns with Bredekamp and Willer (2021b), who emphasized that early childhood teachers must make real-time, informed decisions that balance individual differences, teaching goals, and contextual constraints. Similarly, Piasta et al. (2021) and Ansari et al. (2022) found that rigid lesson structures and emotional exhaustion hinder teachers' ability to adapt effectively. These findings reflect the study participants' struggles in making necessary instructional adjustments while maintaining engagement.

Engagement challenges were also central to current participants' experiences. T8 described difficulty in modeling actions for children, while T6 noted that some children disengaged from an activity, leading to its abandonment. These challenges reflect findings from Guedes et al. (2020), who found that teacher–child interactions varied significantly across activity types, with higher-quality interactions observed during free play compared to structured activities. This suggests that children may be more engaged in play-based activities, highlighting the difficulties the study participants experienced in maintaining engagement during structured tasks. Similarly, NAEYC (2020h) emphasized the importance of balancing child-directed play with teacher-led instruction to foster meaningful engagement, a balance that Participants struggled to maintain in their classrooms.

Participants also described difficulties in selecting appropriate materials, which hindered their ability to effectively implement teaching strategies in the classroom. T9 noted that while platforms like Pinterest, Google, and educational books provided inspiration, they often presented obstacles due to a lack of specificity in aligning with DAP. These challenges are consistent with findings from Kirby et al. (2023) and Yildirim (2021), who reported that teachers often struggle with selecting materials due to limited access or inadequate guidance, which directly affects their ability to implement effective teaching strategies. Piasta et al. (2021) further emphasized that poorly chosen materials can impede engagement and learning, reinforcing the importance of selecting resources that align with children's developmental needs. NAEYC (2020l) highlighted that well-

designed play environments, enriched with appropriate materials, improve engagement and learning, emphasizing the effect of material selection on teaching effectiveness.

Additionally, Ansari et al. (2022) and Eshelman et al. (2021) suggested that factors such as emotional exhaustion, limited professional development opportunities, and poor material selection further hinder teachers' ability to adapt strategies effectively. These systemic challenges exacerbate the difficulties the study participants experienced in maintaining responsive and flexible teaching approaches. Collectively, the findings indicate that providing teachers with clearer implementation strategies, structured professional development, and better access to appropriate materials is essential in overcoming the challenges teachers experience with implementing developmentally appropriate teaching strategies.

Theme 3: Teachers Are Challenged to Create Inclusive and Supportive Educational Environments

The theme teachers are challenged to create inclusive and supportive educational environments explores the complex challenges participants experienced in creating educational environments that are inclusive and supportive of all children. These struggles highlight the multifaceted task of aligning center policies, cultural contexts, and curricula with the principles of DAP. These challenges are organized into four key categories: center policies and DAP conflict, challenges incorporating cultural context, rigid/noninclusive curriculum, and inadequate support and resources. By analyzing these categories alongside peer-reviewed literature and the DAP framework, this theme offers a

deeper understanding of the systemic barriers participants experienced in promoting inclusivity and fostering developmental growth.

Center Policies and DAP Conflict

Several of the study participants expressed challenges related to the disparity between inflexible center policies and the developmental needs of the children in their classrooms. These misalignments hindered their ability to implement responsive DAP. For example, T2 described their frustration with policies that dictated specific practices misaligned with the individual development needs of their children: “teaching a two-year-old about department stores... isn’t developmentally appropriate for them. But their guidelines say it is.” This disconnect is supported by literature indicating that rigid center policies and standardized practices fail to account for the unique needs of children and their developmental contexts. Baumgartner et al. (2020) emphasized that effective educational practices must be informed by the child’s community and culture to support children’s development appropriately. Similarly, Ryan and Deci (2020) noted that rigid policies undermine autonomy-supportive teaching, while Schwarz-Franco (2022) argued that such constraints limit teachers’ decision making and their ability to address the real time needs of children in classrooms. These findings align with the current participants’ experiences, where restrictive policies limited their flexibility, ultimately interfering with their efforts to implement DAP and meet the diverse needs of the children in their care.

Participants also described how these inflexible policies also negatively affected teacher motivation and self-efficacy. Bandura (1990) argued that self-efficacy — teachers’ confidence in their ability to plan and implement effective practices are

influenced by environmental constraints, including institutional policies. As the study participants struggled to implement practices that felt disconnected from the developmental needs of their children, their sense of professional competence diminished. This reflects Bandura's assertion that environmental constraints can undermine teachers' confidence and effectiveness (Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003; Lipscomb et al., 2022). Participants found it difficult to reconcile institutional mandates with their understanding of DAP, which undermined both teaching effectiveness and teacher satisfaction. Moreover, policies that emphasize standardized approaches often fail to account for the diverse cultural and developmental needs of children. The NAEYC (2020b) noted that DAP requires a nuanced understanding of each child's individual context. However, Participants described center policies that imposed one-size-fits-all approach that overlooked variability, which did not align with the unique developmental needs of the children in their classrooms.

Several of the study participants also expressed concerns about administrative interference disrupting the implementation of DAP and hindering their ability to create developmentally appropriate environments. This finding aligns with Barni et al. (2019) and Ryan and Deci (2020), who found that when administrative policies prioritize compliance over flexibility, they restrict teachers' ability to create responsive learning environments. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) further highlighted that restrictive administrative policies reduce teachers' capacity to make instructional decisions aligned with DAP, while Schwarz-Franco (2022) emphasized that excessive oversight undermines teachers' ability to effectively implement child-centered approaches.

This interference was characterized by rigid oversight and restrictive policies that limited flexibility in classroom practices. T2 and T10 shared those administrative decisions frequently dictated classroom routines and activities without considering children's developmental needs or interests. The current participants' experiences align with findings from Gale et al. (2021) and NAEYC (2020i), who observed that overly standardized policies hinder educators' ability to adapt instruction for individual learners. Additionally, Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) and Schwarz-Franco (2022) stressed that excessive administrative oversight diminishes teachers' autonomy, while Bray-Clark and Bates (2003) reinforced that rigid systems not only reduce flexibility but also weaken the effectiveness of professional development, as teachers struggle to integrate developmentally appropriate strategies within a rigid system.

Participants described feeling constrained by policies that emphasized compliance and uniformity, limiting their ability to use individualized approaches. This aligns with Olalowo and Babalola (2024), who found that rigid educational structures restrict teachers' efforts to implement individualized strategies essential for optimal child development. Barni et al. (2019) and Ryan and Deci (2020) further emphasized how administrative policies prioritizing compliance over professional judgment hinder teachers' capacity to tailor their teaching strategies to meet children's diverse developmental needs. Additionally, Moore and Zweig (2022) discussed how external pressures, such as K -12 push-down curricula and high-stakes assessments, intensify the focus on teacher-directed instruction, leading to practices that conflict with DAP. These findings support current participants' experiences, where an emphasis on rigid,

compliance-driven policies restricted their capacity to adapt teaching strategies to children's individual developmental needs, ultimately undermining the implementation of DAP.

Participants also described challenges in aligning center guidelines and administrative expectations with the developmental needs of children. T4 shared an experience in which administrators directed to implement structured activities, even when children expressed reluctance. T4 explained, "like if you want them to play right here with the cups, that's fine, come play right here with the cups, but... I feel bad." This illustrates the tension between administrative demands and the developmental readiness of the children. Although this concern was reinforced by several current participants, the broader issue of misalignment between administrative expectations and DAP was consistent throughout the study. Raymond (2023) emphasized that feedback from colleagues and educational leaders is essential in building teachers' self-efficacy in implementing DAP. However, when feedback is either insufficient or misaligned with DAP principles as illustrated in the study participants' experiences, it exacerbates the disconnect between policy and children's developmental needs, further limiting teachers' ability to make informed, responsive instructional decisions.

Challenges Incorporating Cultural Context

The NAEYC (2020b) position statement identifies culture as a fundamental component of DAP, emphasizing the role of diversity, language, and family environments in children's learning. However, Participants described challenges in creating culturally inclusive classroom environments due to a lack of reflective materials,

diverse food representation, and resources that authentically reflect children's backgrounds. This aligns with research showing that culturally inclusive materials foster a sense of belonging, support social-emotional development, and improve cultural responsiveness in teaching practices (Cade et al., 2022; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; Schaack et al., 2022).

Cade et al. (2022) found that when children see their cultures reflected in classroom materials, they develop stronger connections to their learning environment, reinforcing current participants' concerns that the absence of these materials limit inclusivity. Similarly, Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023) emphasized that diverse and culturally responsive learning materials help children feel valued and respected, further emphasizing the effect of the challenges reported by current participants. Additionally, Schaack et al. (2022) noted that integrating cultural considerations into teaching practices improves inclusivity by ensuring that children's social and cultural contexts are reflected in their educational experiences.

Beyond materials, broader curriculum and instructional approaches also influence inclusivity. Research stresses that curriculum, assessment, and instruction must be responsive to children's cultural and community contexts to promote meaningful learning experiences (Baumgartner et al., 2020; Parlakian, 2024). However, the study participants indicated that, in practice, the absence of culturally representative resources limited their ability to apply these principles effectively. Furthermore, Kintner-Duffy et al. (2021) found that teachers' beliefs and attitudes can significantly influence the extent to which culturally responsive practices are successfully implemented, suggesting that systemic

barriers and individual perspectives contribute to participants' challenges in fostering inclusivity.

Participants also described difficulties integrating multiple languages and customs into their classrooms, reflecting the complexity of addressing linguistic and cultural diversity while fostering a sense of belonging and inclusion. These struggles were often linked to a lack of training or resources to support teachers' implementation of strategies that accommodate diverse needs. This challenge was also supported by research, emphasizing the importance of adopting interconnected approaches to address linguistic and cultural diversity by considering biological characteristics, environments, and developmental domains (Durham et al., 2019; Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023; NAEYC, 2020b). The study participants also highlighted challenges adapting teaching strategies to reflect the diverse languages spoken in their classrooms, which hindered their ability to create inclusive environments for DLLs and support their engagement and sense of belonging. Literature further reinforced that applying DAP effectively requires understanding DLLs' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, integrating family and community contexts, and fostering ongoing learning progression (Durham et al., 2019; Meloy et al., 2019). This directly connects to current participants' struggles to integrate resources that reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of their classrooms, limiting their ability to support DLLs' inclusion and engagement. These findings reinforce the importance of cultural and linguistic responsiveness in teaching practices, further validating current participants' concerns about the lack of resources to support DLLs effectively (Baumgartner et al., 2020; Meloy et al., 2019).

Some of the study participants also noted that their personal beliefs and experiences influenced their ability to address the cultural needs of children in their classrooms. This aligns with findings by Baumgartner et al. (2020), Kintner-Duffy et al. (2021), and NAEYC (2020b), who emphasized that teachers' beliefs, shaped by their cultural lenses, play a fundamental role in the application of DAP, particularly when navigating the balance between commonality, individuality, and cultural context in diverse early childhood settings. When teachers' beliefs are not aligned with the cultural diversity of the classroom, learning environments often fail to meet the needs of all children (Brown et al., 2019; Essa & Burnham, 2019), especially Hispanic and Black children (Albritton et al., 2021; Kintner-Duffy et al., 2021). Additionally, Participants reported difficulties implementing culturally responsive teaching due to limited use of diverse instructional resources and strategies that integrate linguistic and cultural elements. This aligns with findings by Wright et al. (2024), who emphasized that educators often struggle to effectively support diverse learners when they adopt a color-blind approach to child development, which fails to acknowledge systemic inequalities.

Rigid/Non-inclusive Curriculum

The study participants described standardized curricula as rigid and often written in unclear language, which limited their ability to tailor instruction to children's individual developmental needs. Several participants highlighted the lack of flexibility in pre-packaged or corporate-designed programs, noting that deviations from rigid schedules could lead to administrative consequences. For instance, T10 shared that they had been "written up" for not adhering to scheduled activities, while T3 and T1 expressed

difficulty in creating individualized learning plans within curricula designed for generalized age groups.

These findings align with Baumgartner et al. (2020), Ryan and Deci (2020), and Schaack et al. (2022), who emphasized that curriculum implementation should be grounded in children's developmental stages and sociocultural contexts. When programs rely on rigid structures, teachers are limited in their ability to adjust instruction based on children's individual needs. Moore and Zweig (2022) and NAEYC (2020g) similarly found that standardized curricula tend to prioritize academic content over DAP, constraining teachers' autonomy and ability for meaningful instructional adaptation.

The study participants' frustrations with the inability to personalize instruction also align with findings by Hegde and Hewett (2021) and Lee and Hickman (2022), who observed that standardized curricula often focus on uniform learning outcomes rather than individualized growth. This restricts teachers from responding to children's developmental differences and learning preferences. Bredekamp and Willer (2021a) and Meloy et al. (2019) further supported this perspective, emphasizing that early childhood teachers rely on their knowledge of development and ongoing assessment to guide individualized planning, an approach often constrained by rigid, one-size-fits-all curricula.

NAEYC (2020g) emphasized that intentional planning reflecting children's diversity is essential to high-quality early childhood education. However, current participants' accounts suggested that standardized curricula often prevent this, particularly when administrative policies discourage flexibility. Wardle (2021) and

NAEYC (2020l) also highlighted that learning in the early years is shaped by relationships, environments, and interactions—not solely by pre-determined content. The study participants' experiences illustrated how rigid curricula interfere with the creation of inclusive, identity-affirming environments grounded in DAP principles.

Inadequate Support and Resources

Participants described how staffing shortages, and the lack of adequately screened staff created significant challenges in maintaining stable and supportive learning environments. This aligns with findings by NAEYC (2020j), which emphasized the fundamental role of early childhood teachers in structuring environments that promote children's learning through play while ensuring adequate supervision and engagement. Cade et al. (2022) and Schaack et al. (2022) reinforced this perspective, noting that a lack of qualified staff not only affects classroom quality but also increases teacher stress, making it difficult to create equitable learning environments. T5 shared that temporary or unqualified individuals were often placed in classrooms during staffing shortages, disrupting the continuity of care and making it difficult to meet children's developmental needs effectively. Lee and Hickman (2022) provided further support for this, highlighting that novice teachers or those without appropriate training often struggled to apply DAP strategies and individualize teaching practices effectively. These gaps in preparation and training align with current participants' observations that unqualified or disengaged staff, often distracted by personal activities such as using their phones, hindered their ability to address children's developmental needs. Without consistent and well-trained staffing,

current participants' efforts to support children's learning were compromised, reinforcing the need for systemic improvements in hiring practices and staff training.

Participants also highlighted the challenges of working in environments that lacked sufficient resources, hindering their ability to foster effective learning. T4 noted that repeated requests for essential materials, such as manipulatives for hands-on activities, were often unfulfilled, leaving few options for creating engaging and developmentally appropriate experiences. Similarly, T10 shared that the lack of diverse resources, such as multilingual materials, limited their ability to support children's varied needs and foster inclusivity. These resources and material gaps hindered participants' ability to provide children with meaningful and enriching experiences, reinforcing the importance of adequate classroom materials. These findings align with Ryan and Deci (2020) and NAEYC (2020c), who noted that insufficient resources often impede teachers' ability to implement autonomy-supportive teaching practices and create learning environments that promote play-based learning. Bredekamp and Willer (2021a) emphasized the importance of providing accommodations and materials to meet the diverse needs of children, further reinforcing the study participants' observations. Lim and Ridgley (2021) found that when teachers adjust instruction and materials to align with children's interests and needs, engagement in free play significantly increases—an outcome Participants struggled to achieve due to limited resources. Without sufficient support and materials, participants were unable to create dynamic, inclusive environments that met children's developmental and learning needs, highlighting the importance of well-equipped classrooms in effective early childhood education.

Theme 4: Teachers Need DAP Professional Development and Resources

The theme of teachers need DAP professional development and resources highlights the critical gaps in training and support identified by the study participants. Their experiences emphasize the importance of equipping teachers with the tools and knowledge necessary to address the varied needs of children. This theme is organized into three categories: need professional development with diverse training, need cultural competence development, and need access to developmentally appropriate resources. These categories are discussed with references from peer-reviewed literature and the DAP framework. The findings reveal systemic barriers that impede teachers' ability to implement inclusive and effective educational strategies.

Need Professional Development With Diverse Training

Many of the study participants consistently expressed the need for diverse, comprehensive, and ongoing training to support their development as teachers and effectively implement DAP. T5 noted that while teachers may receive basic licensing training, they often lack specialized training in best practices and DAP, significantly affecting their teaching effectiveness. The current participants' concerns are reflected in the literature review by Hegde and Hewett (2021), Lee and Hickmann (2022), Moore and Zweig (2022), and UNICEF (2018), who identified insufficient teacher training as a major barrier to the successful use of DAP in early childhood classrooms. The study participants struggled with applying DAP aligned with research by D'Agostino and Douglas (2021), who found that teachers often receive theoretical training but lack support in implementing these strategies in practice. Similarly, Dunekacke and

Barenthien (2021) emphasized that bridging this gap requires targeted, hands-on training, reinforcing the need expressed by study participants for more specialized professional development.

Bruijns et al. (2021), Chadwell et al. (2020), and Dunekacke and Barenthien (2021) argued that teachers with specialized training demonstrate greater confidence and competence in supporting children's development across multiple domains. This aligned with current participants' concerns that without access to specialized training, they struggled to implement developmentally appropriate strategies effectively. This confidence allows teachers to implement strategies that foster children's cognitive, physical, and linguistic growth, directly addressing the current participants' concerns about the need for more targeted training. Additionally, Dunekacke and Barenthien (2021) highlighted the importance of subject-specific training in mathematics, science, and literacy, reinforcing current participants' need for professional development in specific content areas.

Several of the study participants emphasized the need for training in foundational skills such as assessment, documentation, and brain development. These areas were identified as essential for implementing DAP, enabling teachers to better understand children's needs, monitor their progress, and make informed decisions to support their learning and development. Cade et al. (2022) and Schachter et al. (2019) identified similar concerns, noting that although teachers recognize the importance of DAP, gaps in professional development limit their ability to align their skills and instructional practices with DAP principles. Their study emphasized the need for targeted training to equip

teachers with the necessary skills and strategies for effective DAP implementation in their classrooms, which is similar to the study participants' requests for more specific foundational training.

Participants also stressed the need for administrative support in prioritizing professional development. They suggested that administrators should ensure teachers receive training beyond initial certification to maintain instructional practices and effectively support children's developmental needs. This finding aligns with Kintner-Duffy et al. (2021), NAEYC (2020m), and Parlakian (2024), who emphasized that ongoing, comprehensive professional development is essential for refining teaching practices, meeting children's developmental needs, and creating inclusive learning environments that support children diverse backgrounds.

Many participants consistently emphasized the need to apply theoretical knowledge through ongoing hands-on experience in classroom settings to effectively implement DAP. While foundational training is important, participants noted that it is insufficient without opportunities to practice and refine their skills in real-world teaching environments. For instance, T3 and T2 highlighted the need for additional experience in developing personal teaching skills, particularly in supporting children's development. This concern aligned with findings from Lee and Hickmann (2022) and Romijn et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of providing teachers with authentic, in-context opportunities to apply their knowledge. Lee and Hickman (2022) found that teachers who receive both coursework and practical experiences to implement DAP strategies demonstrate greater confidence and effectiveness. Similarly, Romijn et al. (2021)

highlighted that professional development programs embedded in teachers' everyday teaching contexts, supported by reflective, hands-on experiences, are more likely to improve their competencies. Without these practical experiences, novice teachers struggle to translate theoretical knowledge into meaningful classroom practices, limiting their ability to support children's development. Similarly, Cade et al. (2022) found that a lack of relevant qualifications in early childhood education prevents teachers from applying DAP principles effectively, reinforcing current participants' need for training that directly aligned with DAP.

Participants consistently emphasized the need for ongoing constructive feedback and classroom observations to improve their teaching practices and implement DAP effectively. For instance, T6 noted that without corrective feedback, improving teaching strategies becomes challenging. They stressed the need for feedback that is not only constructive but also supportive, providing actionable steps to help refine their teaching and foster professional growth. Research by Bray-Clark and Bates (2003) and Lipscomb et al. (2022) suggested that constructive feedback and guidance from supervisors or mentors are essential for improving teachers' self-efficacy, increasing work engagement, and effectively supporting children's development. Schachter et al. (2019) reinforced this understanding, arguing that professional learning communities should extend beyond one-time training sessions and incorporate mentorship into ongoing professional development. This aligned with current participants' concerns that consistent, relevant feedback is essential for refining teaching strategies and strengthening confidence in

implementing DAP. Such feedback, combined with practical examples, is essential for helping teachers refine their practices and effectively implement DAP strategies.

Need Cultural Competence Development

Several participants emphasized the necessity of ongoing cultural development to effectively support the diverse needs of children, enhance their professional growth, and improve classroom practices. They noted that the insufficient and often unavailable cultural education for teachers limited their ability to meet children's needs. This highlighted the need for more comprehensive training that includes cultural competence, which they identified as essential for fostering an inclusive classroom environment. NAEYC (2020n) supported this finding, emphasizing the need for mastery of specialized knowledge, including cultural awareness, which is essential for teachers to understand and address the diverse needs of their children effectively. Albritton et al. (2021), Brown et al. (2019), and Essa and Burnham (2019) further reinforce this, arguing that teachers must gain a comprehensive understanding of child development across cultural contexts to recognize and address each child's unique learning needs. This is aligned with the study participants' views on the need for ongoing professional development that includes cultural competence to help teachers understand cultural differences and implement more inclusive classroom practices.

Participants also stressed the need to gain a deeper understanding of their children's cultural backgrounds to develop effective and inclusive teaching approaches. For instance, T6 and T7 highlighted the need for a clear understanding of cultural differences to help teachers individualize their approaches and prevent

miscommunication related to broader cultural nuances, thereby improving learning outcomes. This aligns with research by Baumgartner et al. (2020), Bredekamp and Willer (2021a), and NAEYC (2020b), which emphasizes the need for teachers to reflect on how their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences, if not informed by cultural competence influence decision making and lead to challenges in effectively supporting children with diverse social identities and abilities. Additionally, Meloy et al. (2019) highlighted the need for teachers to observe children's behavior within their social and cultural contexts to develop individualized plans that support each child's development. This reinforced current participants' perspectives on the necessity of broader cultural awareness to implement responsive, inclusive classroom practices.

T10 emphasized that cultural representation should extend beyond the classroom to strengthen home-school connections, suggesting that visibility of diverse cultures throughout the school would improve inclusivity. Although this perspective was shared by only one participant, it highlights the broader need for cultural understanding to create more supportive and representative learning environments.

Need Access to Developmentally Appropriate Resources

Several participants emphasized the need for access to developmentally appropriate tools and resources to support the diverse needs of children in their classrooms. This perspective aligns with the 2020 NAEYC DAP guidelines, which encourage teachers to move away from a linear developmental trajectory and instead adopt a cyclical view of development—one that is responsive to the unique and evolving needs of each child, requiring adaptable resources (Bredekamp & Willer, 2021a).

T3 highlighted the gap in resources for effectively supporting children with developmental challenges, including strategies for maintaining the attention of children with ADHD and adapting materials for children with physical disabilities. This gap highlights the need for adaptable tools that can accommodate diverse developmental needs, a principle emphasized by NAEYC (2020c) and Thompson and Stanković-Ramirez (2021), who stress that practices should be responsive to each child's individual developmental trajectory. Chadwell (2020) reinforced this need for access to tools, noting that many early childhood teachers report insufficient access to the necessary resources for effectively teaching children with disabilities, despite DAP emphasis on using appropriate tools to support diverse learners.

Participants also emphasized the need for hands-on tools that help children explore different textures and materials, fostering engagement and learning. This aligns with the findings of Hegde and Hewett (2021) and Yildirim (2021), who the importance of providing materials for play-based exploration, inquiry-based learning, and STEM integration, to effectively implement DAP. Additionally, participants stressed that having these tools is essential for addressing the diverse developmental needs of children and creating a dynamic, individualized learning environment. T6 further noted the need for sufficient resources to implement DAP effectively, without being hindered by micromanagement. This aligns with Ryan and Deci (2020), who assert that autonomy-supportive teaching, which promotes children's independence and motivation, depends on access to flexible tools and materials. Constraints like limited resources can hinder such practices, reinforcing the study participants' need for adaptable resources.

Several participants also emphasized their need for educational materials that reflect their students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They emphasized the importance of having resources that expose children to diverse languages, nationalities, and customs to create an inclusive environment and build stronger connections between the classroom and children's families. Some participants specifically expressed the need for books, materials, and supplies in children's home languages to foster inclusivity and ensure children feel seen and represented. This finding aligns with Gardner-Neblett et al. (2023) and Schaack et al. (2022), who reinforced the need for cultural inclusivity in early childhood education, emphasizing that teachers should provide materials that reflect the diversity of families, cultures, races, and languages. These findings highlight the importance of resources that promote equity and cultural inclusivity, ensuring that children feel integrated into a community of learners where their diverse identities are recognized and valued. Additionally, they emphasized the necessity of resources that celebrate cultural diversity such as customs, traditions, and global perspectives—to broaden children's worldviews and enhance classroom practices.

Theme 5: Teachers Need Collaboration

The theme teachers need collaboration highlights the essential role of professional and family partnerships in supporting effective teaching practices. Participants emphasized the need for collaboration among teachers, administrators, and families to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. This theme is organized into two categories: need for professional support and need for family partnerships, which reflect participants' perspectives on collegial support, mentorship, and family engagement to

improve children's learning experiences. These categories are discussed with references from peer-reviewed literature and the DAP framework. The findings revealed structural and relational barriers that hinder meaningful collaboration, limiting teachers' ability to provide well-rounded and developmentally appropriate instruction.

Need for Professional Support

Many participants emphasized the need for additional classroom support, such as paraprofessionals and one-on-one assistance, to manage classroom demands, address behavioral issues, and implement developmentally appropriate lesson plans. This need for support is reflected in the research by Clayback and Williford (2022), Lipscomb et al. (2022) and Schaack et al. (2021), who found that classroom management and teacher stress were directly linked to the availability of support. These studies indicated that teachers who received adequate support whether in the form of additional staffing, professional development, or social support from colleagues and supervisors were better able to meet classroom demands, reduce stress, and improve their interactions with children. This finding emphasizes the needs expressed by the study participants for more consistent access to professional support to effectively meet children's developmental needs.

Henry et al. (2023) identified that social support from co-workers and supervisors contributed to better classroom quality, even when teachers experienced significant job strain. This finding aligns with study participants, as many emphasized that ongoing support from their colleagues and supervisors was essential for reducing stress and improving the overall learning environment. These studies and the perspectives of

participants in this study highlight the essential role of adequate professional support in staffing and professional development, in fostering an effective and supportive classroom environment. The study participants consistently stressed that such support was necessary to meet children's developmental needs and manage their roles effectively.

Need for Family Partnerships

Many participants emphasized the need for effective communication with families to foster collaborative relationships and support children's developmental progress. This aligns with Nordin et al. (2021), who identified parental involvement as essential for creating a supportive learning environment. Their findings reinforce the current participants' need for improving family engagement to optimize children's learning and development. Participants highlighted the importance of regular check-ins with families to monitor children's progress and address concerns, emphasizing that collaboration, combining teachers' expertise with parents' insights, is essential for improving learning outcomes. This aligns with research by NAEYC (2020c) and Parlakian (2024), which recognized early childhood teachers as pivotal in providing early interventions and facilitating partnerships with families. Similarly, Calo (2022) and NAEYC (2020f) emphasized the role of teachers in using data to set developmental goals, track milestones, and keep families informed. These studies support the study participants' views on the need for ongoing communication and collaboration to effectively support children's developmental progress.

Some participants noted the need for more consistent specialist support, such as from occupational therapists, to provide comprehensive developmental support for

children and their families. This aligns with Durham et al. (2019), which highlighted how teachers use DAP to foster relationships with children and their families, particularly for DLLs. Meloy et al. (2019) and Iruka et al. (2024) also stressed the need to ensure families have access to resources to advocate for their children's needs, a point further supported by NAEYC (2020j), which emphasized utilizing community supports to meet the needs of both children and families. These findings align with the current participants' perspectives, reinforcing the need for teachers to facilitate access to resources and community support. This is supported by Blewitt et al. (2021), who highlighted that strong family involvement is essential for ensuring children receive the developmental support they need. The study participants consistently emphasized the need for ongoing family engagement to provide comprehensive support for children's development.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations influenced the study recruitment process, data collection, and overall timeline. One significant challenge was the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on participant recruitment. Initially, the study was intended to be conducted on-site at local early childhood centers; however, due to pandemic restrictions, recruitment had to shift to online platforms, specifically early childhood social media groups. Although this approach was expected to expand the participant pool, it ultimately extended the recruitment timeline. Additionally, the study began during the summer, a period when many early childhood teachers were on break, which further delayed participant enrollment.

The reliance on social media for recruitment introduced unexpected challenges. Participants were more reluctant to engage without an established relationship with the researcher, and the snowball sampling method became essential for identifying qualified participants. Furthermore, fraudulent responses from scammers on certain websites also delayed the process. To mitigate this, the researcher systematically and carefully reviewed content from different social media groups, discontinued recruitment from unreliable sites, and sought recommendations from verified participants regarding alternative groups where early childhood teachers were active. Despite these efforts, these limitations prolonged the recruitment process and ultimately required an extension to the study timeline.

Technology barriers also posed challenges in data collection. While multiple interview options were offered, including Zoom, Google Duo, and phone calls, many participants were unfamiliar with or hesitant to use certain platforms. Some were reluctant to install new applications on their devices, making Zoom the most widely accepted option. However, even with Zoom, several participants required guidance to navigate the platform, adding additional complexity to the data collection process. Although these technical challenges did not result in missing or incomplete data, they contributed to the overall time needed to conduct the interviews.

Another limitation involved the classification of age groups in early childhood settings. While the study focused on recruiting teachers working exclusively with children birth to age 3, it became evident that some early childhood programs grouped 3- and 4-year-olds. As a result, some participants worked with both age groups, slightly

expanding the study scope beyond its initial intent. Additionally, while over 800,000 teachers have received a CDA credential (Council for Professional Recognition, 2021), the sample size for this study was 10 participants. Data saturation was achieved within the sample size. It is important to note that qualitative research does not rely on large samples to achieve generalizability, as the objective is to generate rich, contextual insights and gain an in-depth understanding of the research question (Burkholder et al., 2016). Some participants withdrew from the study, which was anticipated and mitigated by recruiting more teachers than the required sample size.

One of the limitations of this study was the limited availability of literature specifically focused on DAP implementation for children from birth to three years old. While substantial research exists on DAP for preschool-aged children, particularly in publicly funded programs serving children aged four and older, there is a noticeable gap in studies exploring strategies and challenges specific to infants and toddlers. The research that does exist on birth-to-three DAP often comes from funded programs, such as Early Head Start, whereas privately funded childcare centers where many infants and toddlers are enrolled are less frequently represented in the literature. This limitation affected the depth of comparison and contextualization of the study findings, particularly in addressing how teachers navigate DAP implementation in diverse early childhood settings.

Despite these limitations, the study was used to successfully gather perspectives on the challenges teachers experience in implementing DAP. The adaptations made

throughout the research process ensured that the data collected remained relevant and aligned with the study objectives.

Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the challenges early childhood teachers experience in implementing DAP for birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning and what is needed to improve their use of DAP. The findings revealed key barriers related to creating developmentally appropriate strategies, aligning teaching with center policies, and fostering inclusive learning environments. These findings align with existing research emphasizing that early childhood teachers often lack sufficient guidance, resources, and institutional support to effectively implement DAP (Lindner & Schwab, 2020; Yildirim, 2021). Based on these findings, this section includes recommendations for addressing the challenges and needs identified by participants. Each recommendation is connected to the study limitations, relevant literature, and overall study goals, ensuring alignment with empirical research and the broader field of early childhood education.

One of the primary challenges participants described was difficulty adapting activities to meet the diverse developmental needs of young children, reflecting a lack of formal training on modifying activities for infants and toddlers. To address this, early childhood education programs should integrate targeted professional development focused specifically on DAP for birth to age 3. This training should include structured workshops on adapting activities for mixed-age groups, as well as strategies for individualizing instruction for children with varying developmental abilities.

Mentorship programs and peer support networks should also be established to help teachers refine their instructional strategies over time. Research by Hegde and Hewett (2021), Lee and Hickmann (2022), and Yildirim (2021) emphasized that while teachers conceptually support DAP, they often lack the practical knowledge and ongoing opportunities for hands-on experience to apply DAP effectively in the classroom. Lindner and Schwab (2020) further asserted that professional development must be ongoing and embedded within real-world teaching contexts to be truly effective.

One limitation of this study was the limited literature on DAP implementation for children from birth to three years old, especially in privately funded childcare centers. Much of the existing research is centered on funded programs like Early Head Start. Future research should prioritize exploring strategies and challenges in non-funded settings to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of DAP implementation. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine the long-term effectiveness of DAP implementation in infant and toddler classrooms, where research is particularly scarce. UNICEF (2018) highlighted the lack of available resources to support DAP outside funded programs.

Another challenge identified was the disparity in research comparing publicly and privately funded childcare programs. To address this, more funding opportunities should be established to support research on privately funded childcare centers, ensuring these settings are included in studies on DAP implementation. Moore and Zweig (2022) explored how educational reforms, related to high-stakes testing, often divert attention from the developmental needs of young children, highlighting the importance of

expanding funding for research that includes both developmental and academic outcomes. Furthermore, collaboration between universities and early childhood centers should be encouraged to facilitate research in non-funded settings and provide a broader perspective on DAP implementation challenges.

A significant challenge identified was the misalignment between center policies and DAP. Participants described situations where administrative expectations prioritized rigid instructional methods over play-based learning, a core component of DAP. To address this, early childhood centers should conduct regular policy audits to assess whether their guidelines align with NAEYC's DAP principles. Additionally, teachers should have a more active role in developing and revising center policies to ensure that institutional guidelines support best practices in early childhood education. Greater flexibility in curriculum implementation is also necessary, particularly for infants and toddlers, to give teachers the autonomy needed to modify instructional approaches based on developmental appropriateness. This recommendation aligns with the findings of Ansari et al. (2022), who noted that early childhood policies often emphasized academic standards over developmentally appropriate teaching strategies, thereby creating structural barriers for teachers, and reinforcing the call for policy changes that support flexible, child-centered learning environments. Additionally, UNICEF (2018) and Kessler and Castner (2024) highlighted that many policy frameworks do not address the unique needs of young children, leading to a disconnect between expectations and classroom realities.

Participants expressed a strong need for greater access to developmentally appropriate materials. Many teachers described challenges in creating engaging activities due to a lack of age-appropriate teaching resources. To address this challenge, early childhood centers should allocate funding specifically for DAP aligned materials, including open-ended play resources and curriculum support tailored to the developmental needs of children from birth to age 3. Resource-sharing networks could be established among educators to facilitate the exchange of ideas, materials, and effective strategies, while online repositories could provide adaptable lesson plans and training modules to support teachers in real-time. The need for such resources is supported by UNICEF (2018) and Yildirim (2021), emphasizing the importance of providing teachers with appropriate resources to support DAP implementation.

Participants described challenges in incorporating children's cultural backgrounds into their teaching due to a lack of center guidance. To improve cultural responsiveness in early childhood education, professional development opportunities should be expanded to include training on culturally responsive teaching strategies. Further research is needed to explore specific strategies that help educators integrate diverse cultural perspectives into DAP. NAEYC (2020b) highlights the role of family engagement in early learning, and future studies could explore how teacher-family collaboration strengthens cultural responsiveness. Investigating how curriculum frameworks and policies support or hinder culturally responsive teaching may provide valuable insights for improving early childhood education practices.

Participants emphasized the need for stronger collaboration between teachers and specialists, such as child development experts and speech-language pathologists, to better support children's developmental needs. Schools and early childhood centers should establish interdisciplinary collaboration frameworks to facilitate regular consultations between teachers and specialists, providing teachers with access to expert guidance. Creating professional learning communities can also offer teachers a space to share strategies, receive peer support, and collectively troubleshoot instructional challenges. Mentorship programs pairing novice teachers with experienced teachers may further improve professional growth and DAP implementation. Lindner and Schwab (2020) support this recommendation, indicating that collaboration with specialists improves teachers' confidence and ability to implement DAP effectively. Additionally, Cade et al. (2022) highlighted that interdisciplinary teamwork improves developmental support for young children by ensuring that instruction is informed by multiple areas of expertise.

While this study provides valuable insights into teachers' perspectives of the challenges early childhood teachers experience in implementing DAP for children birth to age 3, future research should build on these findings by exploring additional areas. For example, future studies should examine how administrators' perspectives on policy revisions affect DAP implementation. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to investigate the long-term effects of professional development and policy changes from birth to age 3 settings. Researchers should also assess the effectiveness of these recommendations across various childcare environments, including funded and non-funded programs, to ensure their adaptability and sustainability.

Implications

The findings from this study highlight several key implications for positive social change, particularly in early childhood education policies and practices. Participants expressed concerns that existing policies often conflicted with DAP principles, limiting their ability to implement inclusive and developmentally appropriate strategies. Specifically, rigid curricula and insufficient resources for children with special needs created barriers to meeting the diverse needs of young learners. Addressing these policy limitations could lead to more flexible teaching environments, where educators have greater autonomy to adapt instruction based on children's developmental stages. Research emphasizes that policies supporting individualized instruction, increased access to special education resources, and culturally responsive teaching led to improved learning experiences for all children (Hegde & Hewett, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2021; NAEYC, 2020). Implementing policies that provide targeted support for diverse learners and integrate cultural responsiveness into curricula would promote more equitable educational opportunities while aligning with best practices in early childhood education (Essa & Burnham, 2019; Wang et al., 2021).

This study emphasizes the importance of professional development in fostering high-quality early childhood education. Participants highlighted the need for training that focuses on developmental milestones, social-emotional learning (SEL), and strategies for working with diverse populations. Research supports the effectiveness of ongoing professional development in improving teachers' ability to implement DAP, particularly when training includes SEL strategies, brain development research, and individualized

instructional approaches (Bredekamp, 2016; Essa & Burnham, 2019; NAEYC, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Additionally, collaborative planning among teachers such as peer discussions, shared lesson development, and reflective practices have been found to improve instructional quality and promote effective adaptation of teaching strategies to meet children's needs (Lee et al., 2023; Lim & Ridgley, 2021; NAEYC, 2020). Early childhood centers that prioritize structured professional learning communities not only strengthen educator confidence but also contribute to more developmentally responsive classrooms, leading to improved outcomes for both teachers and children.

These findings also have broader implications for early childhood education research. Given that much of the existing literature focuses on preschool-aged children, this study helps fill a gap by examining the challenges experienced by teachers working with children from birth to three years old. Expanding research in this area is essential, as studies indicate that early childhood teachers working with infants and toddlers require specific training and support to implement DAP effectively (Bredekamp, 2016; Hegde & Hewett, 2021; NAEYC, 2020). Further exploration of this underrepresented age group could inform future policy decisions, professional development initiatives, and curriculum reforms, ultimately improving the quality of early childhood education for the youngest learners. By addressing the systemic barriers identified in this study, early childhood education stakeholders—including policymakers, administrators, and teacher educators can work toward more inclusive, flexible, and developmentally appropriate learning environments that support the diverse needs of young children (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Wang et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on challenges of using DAP to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning in the classroom and what is needed to improve their use of DAP. The findings reveal that while teachers understood the importance of DAP, they experienced barriers in applying it, including a lack of efficacy and knowledge, time constraints, behavioral challenges, and difficulty in supporting individualization for young learners. Many teachers highlighted struggles posed by rigid curricula, insufficient resources, and policies that conflicted with DAP principles. These challenges hinder their ability to support the diverse needs of children and create developmentally appropriate, inclusive learning environments.

Teachers emphasized the need for more focused DAP professional development, including training on developmental milestones, social-emotional learning, cultural competence, and strategies for adapting to the diverse needs of children. Access to developmentally appropriate resources, along with professional support and family partnerships, emerged as essential factors for improving teachers' ability to implement DAP. Collaborative efforts within teaching teams and with families were emphasized as essential for creating supportive educational environments where all children can achieve their optimal learning and development.

This study emphasizes the need to address the systemic challenges teachers experience in implementing DAP. The findings highlight the urgent need for policies that

prioritize professional development, flexible curricula, and adequate resources. By addressing the specific needs of early childhood teachers, policymakers, administrators, and teacher preparation programs can establish more effective support systems to improve DAP implementation. Ultimately, this can promote more inclusive, responsive, and equitable educational practices that benefit young children and support their diverse developmental needs.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol Guide

Interviewee: _____ Location: _____

Date: _____ Time: _____

The data provided in several studies indicate that early childhood teachers often struggle with implementing Developmentally Appropriate Practices in the classroom to support children's learning and development. Understanding teacher challenges using Developmentally Appropriate Practices and what they believe is needed to improve their use of DAP may provide teachers with information and strategies to improve their utilization.

The results of this study may contribute to positive social change by providing early childhood teachers with information they might use to inform their decision-making on using Developmentally Appropriate Practices to support children's development and learning. The result of this study may include information that could benefit young children, early childhood teachers, and instructional coordinators experiencing challenges in using Developmentally Appropriate Practices to make informed decisions to support birth to 3-year-old children's development and learning. My goal is to understand teacher perspectives on challenges of using Developmentally Appropriate Practices and what is needed to improve their use of DAP.

You have been identified as someone with valuable insight to share about the perspectives of challenges using Developmentally Appropriate Practices to support children's development and learning in the classroom. Your participation in this interview is essential and completely voluntary. Thus, I will respect your decision to participate or not participate. If you decide to take part now, you can still withdraw later. If you wish to discontinue the use of the recorder or the interview itself at any time during the interview, please feel free to let me know. If any questions seem too personal, you may skip them. I do not intend to inflict any harm. During this audio-recorded interview, you will be asked 8 questions regarding your challenges using developmentally appropriate practices and what you believe is needed to improve your use of DAP. The interview will last for approximately 45-60 minutes. What questions or concerns do you have before we begin? Then with your permission, we will start the interview.

Introduction and Background Information: Thank you for volunteering to share your insights and experiences concerning challenges on using developmentally appropriate practices to support children's development and learning in the classroom. Let me begin by asking you some questions about your background to get to know you better.

A. Participant's Background

Since you received your Child Development Associate (CDA) or provisional credential, how long have you been teaching? _____

What is your current title in the classroom and what are some of your responsibilities? _____

What is the current age group that you teach? _____

How long have you been using DAP? _____

B. Interview Questions

1. What is your understanding of using developmentally appropriate practices to support children's development and learning in the classroom?
2. How do you use developmentally appropriate practices to plan for children's different learning styles and abilities to support their development and learning in the classroom?
3. What challenges do you have using developmentally appropriate practices to support children's developmental domains (e.g., social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and physical)?
4. What resources have you used to improve your use of developmentally appropriate practices? How were these resources helpful for you?
5. How do you stay informed with current changes of developmentally appropriate practice to support children's development and learning?
6. What do you believe is needed to improve your use of developmentally appropriate practices to support children's development and learning in the classroom?

7. What do you believe is needed to improve your use of DAP to create culturally responsive environments to support children's development and learning?
8. What other information would you like to share on using developmentally appropriate practices to support children's development and learning in the classroom?

Possible follow up prompts that I will keep visible as I interview each participant:

What did you mean by.....?

Tell me more about.....

You mentioned.....

What do you mean by.....?

Please give me an example of when that.... worked/did not work.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. What is your understanding of using developmentally appropriate practices to support children's development and learning in the classroom?
2. How do you use developmentally appropriate practices to plan for children's different learning styles and abilities to support their development and learning in the classroom?
3. What challenges do you have using developmentally appropriate practices to support children's developmental domains (e.g., social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and physical)?
4. What resources have you used to improve your use of developmentally appropriate practices? How were these resources helpful for you?
5. How do you stay informed with current changes of developmentally appropriate practice to support children's development and learning?
6. What do you believe is needed to improve your use of developmentally appropriate practices to support children's development and learning in the classroom?
7. What do you believe is needed to improve your use of DAP to create culturally responsive environments to support children's development and learning?

8. What other information would you like to share on using developmentally appropriate practices to support children's development and learning in the classroom?

Possible follow up prompts that I will keep visible as I interview each participant:

What did you mean by.....?

Tell me more about.....

You mentioned.....

What do you mean by.....?

Please give me an example of when that.... worked/did not work.